In recent decades several conspiracy theories became prominent topics of Polish public debate: the Smoleńsk catastrophe, “gender conspiracy” and “Jewish conspiracy” are some examples of such theories. These conspiracy theories can be viewed as manifestations of a collective conspiracy mentality, a collective mental state in which other groups, nations, or institutions are viewed as ill-intended and willing to conspire against the in-group. This state is instigated by salient historical representations of one’s own group (e.g., nation), viewing the in-group as a victim of others. It is boosted by a special kind of defensive in-group identity—collective narcissism. Finally, it bears negative consequences for inter-group relations.
conspiracy theory, conspiracy mentality, collective threat, in-group victimization, collective narcissism, Jewish conspiracy theory, gender conspiracy

Chapter 25

The Collective Conspiracy Mentality in Poland

Wiktor Soral, Aleksandra Cichocka, Michał Bilewicz, and Marta Marchlewska

Poland is a country in which conspiracy beliefs seem ubiquitous in social and political life.[1] Major political debates surround issues of potential foreign involvement in the death of the former president, liberal powers threatening the Catholic Church, or the Jewish conspiracy. One common thread is that they usually touch on how people perceive members of other groups. They are at the heart of one particular type of Polish national identity and are strongly related to the perceived role of Poles both in history and on the contemporary international stage. Therefore, work on conspiracy theories in Poland sheds light on the inter-group dimensions of conspiracy theories.

Introduction

Although past research does not necessarily neglect the importance of group identification in forming support for conspiracy theories, its specific role in driving conspiracy beliefs requires more in-depth theoretical understanding. Conspiracy theories are an inseparable part of political and inter-group conflicts. Group members are often involved in clandestine actions directed against enemy groups, and expect that the enemy groups will act the same way. Thus, group members may cast unjustified accusations of alleged hostile plots, and detect real conspiracies as well. Whether justified or not, conspiracy theories are one of the main determinants of inter-group relations, peaceful or violent, especially in countries driven by the irresistible winds of history. Conspiracy

theories influence not only how the out-group image is shaped but also how the collective self is construed.

Poland is a country with a long history of fights against foreign powers and struggles for sovereignty, a country whose fate was determined by agreements of neighboring empires and global superpowers: in Petersburg in 1772, in Paris in 1919, in Moscow in 1939, and in Yalta in 1945.[2] A brief look at Polish history and literature shows that many famous Poles were personally involved in some sort of clandestine plot of Polish patriots aimed at fighting the occupying forces. Yet, the majority of Poles tend to ascribe conspiratorial intrigues to members of disliked out-groups: Jews, Germans, or Russians.[3] This tendency seems relatively stable over time. Such a form of *collective conspiracy mentality* can be considered a typical instance of siege mentality, a more general collective mental state in which other nations are viewed as hostile and negatively intended toward one's own nation.[4]

In this chapter we will cover different factors that can add up to forming a collective conspiracy mentality. Classical and recent studies conducted in Poland establish the contextual and personality-related factors triggering conspiracy theories popular among Poles. Particularly, belief in conspiracy theories can be regarded as a kind of defensive response to threats, which is observed especially at the level of relations between the in-group and the out-group. Conspiracy theories and in-group image are mutually related, and endorsement of conspiracy theories can affect attitudes toward others: out-group members, foreign institutions and authorities, and internal political actors and decisions they take.

Threat, Uncertainty, and Belief in Conspiracy Theories

Belief in conspiracy theories is frequently linked to perception that the social world is a dangerous, uncontrollable, and unpredictable place. General state anxiety—evoked simply by waiting for an examination—can lead to greater endorsement of conspiracy theories.[5] Moreover, endorsement of conspiracy theories correlates positively with symptoms of paranoia, such as self-centered thought, suspiciousness, and assumptions of ill will and hostility.[6] Given these findings, belief in conspiracies can be understood as one of the ways individuals use to manage their everyday fears and restore feelings of control and certainty.[7] In line with this reasoning, Marchlewska, Cichocka, and Kossowska found in two studies conducted among Polish participants that people who are motivated to reduce feelings of uncertainty (i.e., those high in need for cognitive closure) rely on temporarily salient conspiracy theories, especially when they refer to mysterious events with unknown official explanations.[8] This is probably an attempt to retain a sense of safety and predictability.

However, reducing perceptions of threats or dangers via the endorsement of conspiracy theories seems to be ineffective in the long run.[9] Rather than restoring a sense of control, the individual's feelings of (political) powerlessness seem to increase after exposure to conspiracy theories.[10] This reveals the paradoxical nature of conspiracy theories: On the one hand they can provide individuals with a sense of meaning and predictability, but on the other hand, conspiracy theories point to causal factors that by nature are unpredictable, uncontrollable, and hostile. Thus, exposure to conspiracy theories can actually increase perceptions of threats and dangers. For example, exposure to anti-vaccine conspiracy theories increases the belief that vaccines are dangerous to children.[11] All this by no means indicates that individuals who endorse conspiracy

theories inevitably end up in a state of hopelessness and alienation. Rather, they seem to be pushed toward extremist views, radical authoritarian leaders, and fundamentalist groups.[12]

The link between the belief in a dangerous world and the endorsement of conspiracy theories is particularly evident among individuals with high levels of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). According to recent reformulations of the classical concept of authoritarianism, the belief in a dangerous world is one of the main characteristics of individuals with high RWA.[13] Driven by this belief, individuals scoring high on RWA tend to adopt positive attitudes toward coercive social control, obedience and respect for existing authorities, and conforming to traditional and religious norms and values. These solutions allow for establishing and maintaining collective security, order, cohesion, and stability. Presumably, a conviction about the ubiquity of conspiracies is a part of a worldview maintained by individuals high in RWA. Indeed, studies by Grzesiak-Feldman and colleagues conducted in the Polish context consistently demonstrated positive correlations between RWA and beliefs in conspiratorial intentions of out-groups that tend to be considered threatening by Poles: Jews, Arabs, Germans, and Russians.[14]

Therefore, the role of conspiracy theories in restoring feelings of certainty, predictability, and personal control seems to be palliative at best.[15] These negative feelings seem to trigger belief in conspiratorial intentions of out-groups, but the mechanism does not provide the ultimate solution to everyday fears.

Conspiracy Theories and In-Group Image

While the individual has no chance in confrontation with hidden plots, there is a chance that powerful and united *collective* can effectively face its enemies. This means that ultimately conspiracy theories should be regarded as collective phenomena, and more attention should be devoted to the relation between conspiracy theories and how in-group and out-group representations are construed. Particularly, historical representations of Poles as victims versus dissidents, as well as a defensive type of national identification, are known to be related to the belief in conspiracy theories.

In-Group as a Shield against Conspiracies: The Role of In-Group Victimhood

On April 10, 2010, a plane crashed in Smoleńsk (Russia) a kilometer short of the runway in foggy weather conditions, killing all passengers including Polish president Lech Kaczynski and 95 other important political figures. Since then, Polish society has been regularly confronted with a multitude of conspiracy explanations for the catastrophe.[16] Among numerous theories the most prominent were those of artificial fog supposedly cast by Russians around the Smoleńsk airport, but also unconfirmed reports of possible use of a fuel-air bomb on the deck of the airplane.[17] According to these conspiracy theories both Polish and Russian authorities were responsible for the Smoleńsk crash—which, according to official explanations, resulted from bad planning and pure coincidence.

In 2013, 25% of Poles believed that the catastrophe was a result of a conspiracy of Polish and Russian authorities, and nearly 50% believed that Polish and Russian authorities are trying to conceal the true cause of the catastrophe. According to a very recent survey conducted by the Center for Research on Prejudice, the percent of Poles

endorsing Smoleńsk conspiracy in 2017 is almost unchanged, with 28% of Poles believing in it.[18] Soral and Grzesiak-Feldman pointed that even those individuals that do not believe in the assassination attempt are distrustful toward the authorities with respect to the official explanations of the catastrophe.[19] Interestingly, conspiracy theories of the Smoleńsk catastrophe seem to be endorsed especially by those at the conservative end of political spectrum, but also by those with liberal views, albeit to smaller degree. In general, the conspiracy theories of Smoleńsk are endorsed by those at the extremes of the political spectrum rather by those with centrist views.[20]

In popular discourse, the Smoleńsk catastrophe is often viewed as a breaking point that was followed by a significant change in the Polish society. The Smoleńsk catastrophe and related conspiracy theories have raised questions about who controls world events. They have diminished trust in the efficacy of the ruling party and highlighted the possibility of hidden, hostile out-groups lurking nearby. Such challenges were likely to increase strivings to obtain information that would allow people to see the in-group as a "shield" protecting them from threats. Studies by Soral and Kofta provide initial support for this hypothesis, suggesting that perception of collective threats increases cognitive accessibility of traits related to in-group agency.[21]

Hence, the conservative shift observed—especially among Polish youths—after the rise of conspiracy theories of the Smoleńsk catastrophe is likely a result of a more basic striving to restore safety and control through collective means.[22] A recent small study by Soral traced the Internet popularity of topics that would present Poles as actively resisting enemy forces, prior to and after the Smoleńsk catastrophe.[23] Two such topics were selected: the "cursed soldiers" and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. The term *cursed*

soldiers refers commonly to guerrilla movements that operated in Poland right after World War II, and actively resisted the communist authorities supported by the Soviet Union. These partisan movements are nowadays one of the most controversial symbols of a Polish fight for sovereignty and against the oppressing forces. In turn, the Warsaw Uprising was a major WWII operation of Polish resistance to liberate the Polish capital from German occupation. Figure 25.1 depicts annual trends of the popularity of these topics on Polish Wikipedia.[24] The trends clearly depict the date of April 10, 2010 as a tipping point, followed by an exponential growth of popularity of both topics on the Wikipedia website.

[Insert Figure 25.1 about here]

This rapid increase in popularity of these topics is not solely an aftermath of the Smoleńsk catastrophe, depicted frequently as an example of collective trauma. Rather, we would argue, it is strictly related to growing levels of distrust and anxiety driven by ubiquitous conspiracy theories surrounding the Smoleńsk catastrophe. Conspiracy theories, presented as threatening narratives, deprive the individual of very basic needs for security and control. In such instances individuals are more prone to look for agentic groups and leaders who might promise to act as a buffer against the overwhelming threat and fight fire with fire.[25]

The Smoleńsk catastrophe took place on the exact anniversary of another well-known national trauma, the assassination of Polish military officers in the Katyń forest in 1940. Passengers of 2010 flight were traveling to attend anniversary commemorations in the Katyń forest. This context stresses another important component of Polish in-group image: perception of in-group victimization. Studies conducted in Poland after the Smoleńsk catastrophe found that a focus on the in-group's victimhood (either measured

or experimentally induced) increased Poles' support for conspiracy explanation of the Smoleńsk catastrophe, and this was particularly true among participants highly identified as Poles.[26] This suggests that the narratives of past group victimhood create a propensity for interpreting current events in a conspiratorial way. Hence, the need to interpret political events in conspiratorial way might be especially strong for those with chronic beliefs that the in-group is threatened or victimized.

In-Group Positivity and Conspiracy Beliefs

A threatened sense of Polish national identity predicts belief in conspiracy theories about out-group members. One line of research focuses on the associations between the endorsement of conspiracy theories and collective narcissism—an unrealistic belief in the greatness of an in-group, associated with the need to validate the in-group image in the eyes of others.[27] Collective narcissism is a defensive type of in-group identification, linked to an increased sensitivity to inter-group threats.[28]

Cichocka et al. examined the links between national collective narcissism and beliefs that other groups are purposefully conspiring against the Polish people.[29] In one study, Polish collective narcissism was associated with the endorsement of conspiracy theories about the Smoleńsk crash. This relationship was driven by the perception that the fate of the Polish nation was threatened. Another study examined people's reactions to the celebration of the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany on November 9, 1989. Although for other nations the demolition of the Berlin Wall often serves as the symbol of the fall of the Iron Curtain, Polish people tend to take pride in the role played by the Solidarity movement and the partially free elections of June 4, 1989 in fighting the communist regime. Indeed, some people seem to believe there is an international conspiracy aimed at

undermining Polish achievements in combating communism, and this belief was stronger for those high in national collective narcissism.

The links between national collective narcissism and beliefs in out-group conspiracies were originally derived from the observation of Polish political rhetoric. However, further research demonstrated that they extend beyond the Polish context. For example, another study by Cichocka et al. was conducted in the United States and examined beliefs about conspiratorial actions of foreign (out-group) versus one's own (in-group) governments.[30] While American collective narcissism was associated with a belief that foreign governments were involved in conspiratorial actions, it was unrelated to the endorsement of conspiracy theories that assumed involvement of the American government.[31]

Overall, research shows that conspiratorial explanations of inter-group events are linked to the need to defend the undermined or victimized in-group image. However, not all forms of in-group identity are necessarily threatened or defensive. In all three studies by Cichocka et al., national identification without the defensive, narcissistic component was associated with lower endorsement of out-group conspiracy theories.[32] This effect was especially clear once the variance shared between collective narcissism and in-group identification was accounted for. Such non-narcissistic national in-group positivity was a negative predictor of out-group conspiracy beliefs, due to lower perceptions of threat to the in-group.

In general, research conducted in the Polish context and beyond indicates that conspiracy theories are linked to the way the in-group image is construed. This is probably not surprising if we consider that conspiracy theories are often defined as

beliefs about hostile actions of out-group members that plot to harm the in-group.[33] In the next section we review work examining ways in which the conspiring out-groups are portrayed and what kind of action against the conspiring out-group the threatened in-group is ready to take.

Conspiracy Theories and Out-Group Image

Although conspiracy theories are certainly driven by in-group-based motivations and image concerns, their content is mostly devoted to ill-intended out-group members. Kofta and Sędek coined the term *conspiracy stereotypes* to denote perceptions of conspiring out-groups.[34] Conspiracies attributed to out-groups have detrimental consequences for inter-group relations, leading to prejudice, animosity, and conflict. Two such conspiracy stereotypes play a crucial role in Polish discourse: Jewish conspiracy theories and the gender conspiracy theory.

Jewish Conspiracy Theories

Although Jewish conspiracy theories date back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, they are still endorsed by almost half of Polish society. Figure 25.2 shows the results of a survey conducted on a representative sample of Polish adults in 2017 by the Center for Research on Prejudice.[35] Among other topics, participants in the survey were asked about their attitudes toward different claims related to Jewish conspiracy theories. Almost half of the sample (a plurality) agreed with such statements (see Figure 25.1).

[Insert Figure 25.2 about here]

Beliefs in Jewish conspiracy are rooted in the same identity structures as other forms of conspiracy beliefs. They are more often observed among people high in national collective narcissism, with a strong sense of victimhood and group deprivation.[36]

Additionally, there are clear situational triggers of such beliefs. The effects on prejudice of conspiracy stereotypes about Jews are stronger in times of parliamentary elections—that is, when feelings of uncertainty and lack of control seem to be on the rise—an effect found both in longitudinal studies using student samples and in nationwide representative sample studies.[37]

The effects of conspiracy stereotypes on hostile intentions, prejudice, and discrimination are particularly evident if we look at those who believe in the Jewish conspiracy theory. For example, Golec de Zavala and Cichocka conducted a survey examining the psychological concomitants of anti-Semitism in Poland.[38] They found that endorsing the conspiracy stereotype of Jews was associated with higher anti-Semitic prejudice (expressed for example in higher social distance toward Jews). Furthermore, both the conspiracy stereotype and anti-Semitic beliefs were predicted by national collective narcissism. In a more detailed study of prejudicial consequences of such beliefs, Bilewicz et al. found that belief in Jewish conspiracy theory predicts support for the enforcement of discriminatory laws against Jews, an unwillingness to accept Jews as neighbors or co-workers, and biases in donations to Jews.[39] Further studies showed that even in a behavioral decision-making task, participants who believed in Jewish conspiracy theory distributed less money to Jewish organizations. The belief in Jewish conspiracy theory has clearly the strongest discriminatory consequence.

The Gender Conspiracy

Belief in the "gender conspiracy" is a relatively recent phenomenon in Polish public discourse, visible mostly in the Catholic media and among far-right-wing political movements.[40] According to this belief, gender theory or gender studies—officially

presented as transdisciplinary areas of research that engage critically with gender norms, relations, or identities—are not what they seem to be.[41] This "is a classic example of an ideology, it is a tool in a ruthless fight for benefits for the atheistic gender and homo-lobby," said Catholic priest DariuszOko, the leading proponent of this conspiracy theory, in one of his interviews. He also claimed that gender studies will destroy the Catholic Church and introduce a totalitarian regime controling all aspects of human life and promoting "sex mania, genocide, destruction of the family and brutal sexualization of children."[42] In line with this theory, Catholics are under threat and should prepare themselves to fight against the ruthless representatives of gender studies.

Slogans proclaimed by gender conspiracy believers, such as ". . . gender is supported by all enemies of God and religion" or "defend the homeland against totalitarian genderism," were endorsed by many Poles.[43] Research conducted by Marchlewska et al. showed that the likelihood of endorsing the "gender conspiracy" theory was positively predicted by Catholic collective narcissism but not religiosity per se, replicating the pattern of results obtained in the previous studies on defensive (narcissistic)in-group positivity as a positive predictor of belief in out-group conspiracies.[44] Furthermore, Marchlewska et al. showed that adopting gender conspiracy beliefs was positively related to hostile intentions toward non-Catholics. For example, people high in gender conspiracy beliefs declared that "they would not hesitate to fight against those who undermine the positive image of Catholicism," indicating that conspiracy theories lead not only to individual maladaptiveness but also to inter-group aggression.

Conspiracy theories about out-groups—conspiracy stereotypes—are not merely beliefs about ill-intended out-group members, but rather they are perceptions of *other groups* understood as ontologically separate, agentic forces.[45] The Jewish and gender conspiracy theories not only target out-group members but also artificial social constructs. Both refer to some sinister powers whose sole purpose is bringing chaos and harm to the in-group, whether it is through destroying traditional Catholic values or controling the world's economy.

The overarching concept of collective conspiracy mentality helps to explain why group members tend to endorse various logically unrelated conspiracy beliefs. Their primary role is to point to other groups, nations, or institutions as ill-intended and willing to conspire against the in-group. This urge stems from a threatened or victimized sense of national identity and may be motivated by group defensive mechanisms.

How to Overcome the Collective Conspiracy Mentality?

In this chapter we aimed to describe the most popular contemporary conspiracy theories in Poland: the Smoleńsk catastrophe conspiracy theories and the "gender conspiracy" theories, as well as the historical (yet still endorsed by the majority of the Polish society) Jewish conspiracy theory. The common basis of Polish conspiracy beliefs seems to be the presence of a strong collective component. The conspiracy theories can be viewed as a manifestation of more general collective mentality in which other nations are viewed as hostile toward one's own nation. Inspired by works on siege mentality, we name such a mental state *collective conspiracy mentality*.[46]

Future work should focus on further examining these processes both from the theoretical and applied perspective. A key theoretical challenge is to investigate the

causal mechanisms linking identity, conspiracy theories, and inter-group relations as well as the long-term consequences of the collective conspiracy mentality. The collective conspiracy mentality involves intra-group motivations instigated by feelings of existential threats and (realistic or fictitious) beliefs about in-group victimization. These motivations are likely to occur among those vigilant to social or inter-group threats. Driven by the threats, some individuals tend to construct the social world, and out-groups more specifically, as hostile and untrustworthy. At the same time, these individuals might construct their in-group as a shield protecting them from external threats and dangers. It is easy to see, however, that the role of such social representations seems to be palliative at best. In fact, the process resembles a sort of vicious circle resulting in (often transgenerational) maintenance of conspiracy beliefs, inter-group suspicion, and conflict. Future work should then also focus on identifying ways in which these processes can be attenuated. Developing interventions that could decrease the defensiveness associated with collective conspiracy mentality would likely contribute to more constructive inter-group relations both within the Polish society and in other contexts where suspicion and threat drive inter-group attitudes.

Notes

[1] Wiktor Soral's contribution to the project was financed with a Preludium grant by the National Science Center (no 2014/13/N/HS6/03766). Marta Marchlewska's contribution to the project was financed with an ETIUDA scholarship from the National Science Center (no 2016/20/T/HS6/00039).

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