



This paper is taken from

*Identities and Citizenship Education: Controversy, crisis and challenges. Selected papers from the fifteenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2013

**Edited by Peter Cunningham**

**Technical Editor: Angela Kamara and published in London by CiCe,  
ISBN 978-1-907675-20-1**

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

## Consensus and differences in the judgment of historical events

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### **Abstract**

*Our research aim was to examine whether the homogeneity/heterogeneity of the representations of history is influenced by national identification; and additionally, what kind of national identity state emerges in the light of historical representations. We conducted three questionnaire studies (N=145) and we found high consensus both in the selection and in the evaluation of the most important historical events. However, consistent differences were found in the intensity of evaluation of events depending on the national identification: negative events were evaluated more negatively and positive events were evaluated more positively by subjects with strong identification. This is especially true for subjects who glorify the Hungarian nation.*

**Keywords:** *historical representations, national identification, collective victimhood*

This research was realized in the frames of TÁMOP 4.2.4. A/2-11-1-2012-0001 'National Excellence Program – Elaborating and operating an inland student and researcher personal support system convergence program' The project was subsidized by the European Union and co-financed by the European Social Fund.

### **Introduction**

Relationship between the representation of events and identity is a two-way process: not only socially shared representations of history are important in creating and changing social identity, but identification can play a role in the interpretations of events (Hilton, Erb, Dermot and Molian, 1996). Collective memory plays a decisive role in construction of national identity (Halbwachs, 1950). Studying historical representations, Pennebaker, Paez, Deschamps, Rentfrow, Davis, Techio, Slawuta, Zlobina and Zubieta (2006), Liu, Wilson, McClure and Higgins (1999) and László, Ehmann and Imre (2002) found high consensus in the events and persons nominated as the most important in national histories as well as in world history. The type of historical events considered to be significant in the national history, i.e. peace or war, victory or defeat, and the narratives of events provides an opportunity to draw conclusions about the construction of the national identity (László, 2012).

However, the judgement of past in-group events depends on various factors. The representations of historical events can be simultaneously characterized by consensus and differences. The consensus is determined basically by the reality of events, or with other words the ambition of historical accuracy. Doosje, Branscombe, Spears and

Manstead (1998) showed that even in-group biases (which are manifested in most cases serving the need for a positive social identity) cannot completely overwrite reality. They found that a clearly negative (or positive) description of a historical event (i.e. Dutch colonization) presented as objective fact leads to clearly negative (or positive) evaluations. Another important source of agreement is that group members learn about the group's history in the same way, they receive similar information during the socialization into the group (e.g. learn from the same history books; see e.g. Bar-Tal and Antebi, 1992; Bar-Tal, 2001). In addition, to create a unified representation of an event, it must be in an appropriate emotional and temporal distance (e.g. Fülöp, 2010; Fülöp, Csertő, Ilg, Szabó, Slugoski and László, in press).

The unified representations of historical events have been shown in the study of László et al (2002) where eleven events emerged as the main core of the Hungarian national history, and there was a high degree of agreement both in nomination and in evaluation. The sequences of positively and negatively evaluated historical events form the so-called 'historical trajectory' of the Hungarian nation (László, 2008; László and Fülöp, 2010). As Fülöp, Csertő, Ilg, Szabó, Slugoski and László (in press, p. 3) formulate:

In the Hungarian collective memory, positively evaluated events belong to the medieval period. Those having occurred in later centuries, e.g. local victories against the Ottoman Empire, wars of freedom and revolutions against the Habsburg Empire and the Soviet Union (1848, 1956), were always followed by defeats and repression. The pattern reoccurred in the world wars and is preserved in collective memory in this form.

This and other previous studies (see László, 2008; 2012) on characteristics of Hungarian national identity showed that extreme negative events of the nation's history had influenced substantively the construction of the group's identity. Exploratory studies on the Hungarian historical trajectory revealed that victimization by out-groups (such as occupation, repression of revolutions or detachment of territory) as repetitive experience of the Hungarian nation is central element of the collective representation of the history hereby it is a significant determinant of the group's identity.

In summary, we find that usually there is a high degree of consensus among group members regarding the history of their group.

However, despite the socially shared representations of history, considerable differences can be found in the interpretations and judgments of historical events. For instance, different eras of identity politics can cause some events to be faded while emphasizing others. Zerubavel (1997) notes that one of the least significant and least successful events in the ancient Jewish history, the battle of Masada in 73. A.D. was transformed after two thousand years into a central heroic myth and symbol of national revival. The aforementioned study of Doosje et al (1998) about the Dutch colonization showed that ambiguously described events combining negative and positive aspects (i.e. by highlighting achievements under Dutch colonial rule as well as mentioning exploitation and massacres), leaving more scope for interpretations, had been judged differently depending on the level of identification. High identifiers rather than low identifiers focused more on positive information about the in-group exonerating them from past misdeeds, experiencing less collective guilt and showing less willingness to compensate the out-group. Doosje et al (1998) argue that people with strong identification are more

motivated to maintain a positive social identity. Facing with not sufficiently clear information about an event, different level of identification can lead to different interpretations of the same event.

However, things are not as clear as it seems from Doosje et al's (1998) study when it comes to the relationship between in-group identification and group-related phenomena (such as collective memory, group-related emotions and behavioural intentions). Unitary scales of in-group identification, which tries to relate identification to intergroup processes, led to contradictory results (see identification/guilt paradox; Doosje, Branscombe, Spears and Manstead, 2006; Roccas, Klar and Liviatan, 2006). Based on Roccas, Klar and Liviatan's (2006) bi-dimensional model of identification, Szabo and Laszlo (in press) developed a Hungarian national identification questionnaire, which differentiates between two modes of identification: attachment and glorification. The former means an emotional bond to the nation and the latter is defined by viewing the national in-group as superior to other groups, the belief that the in-group is better and more worthy than other groups. It has been proved that the different modes of identification lead to different judgments of various group-based phenomena. In case of in-group aggression subjects with high glorification, rather than attachment scores use alternative interpretations of the events (most importantly various types of moral justifications), deny the experience of self-critical group-based emotions (such as guilt, shame, regret, in-group directed anger) and as a consequence they refuse to compensate the victims (Roccas et al, 2006; Szabó, 2013).

Based on these considerations, we conducted three differently designed studies to examine to what extent homogeneous or rather diverse the selection and judgment of significant Hungarian historical events. Do the strengths and even more the modes of identification influence the evaluation of events?

We hypothesised that although there will be a certain degree of consensus in the events nominated as the most important, identification can be an influencing factor in the homogeneity/heterogeneity of the judgments of historical representations, i.e. strong identification, and more specifically attachment and glorification may lead to different evaluations of the same historical events.

We carried out three questionnaire studies for the same purpose but with different study design, i.e. free choice versus restricted choice. Below is a brief description of each of the three studies.

## **Study1**

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

Fifty undergraduate students (18 males, 32 females; mean age: 23,4, Std: 4,01) at the University of Pécs participated in the first study. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Subjects received no reward in return to completing the questionnaire.

#### *Design*

Participants received a booklet containing Hungarian national identification questionnaire (Szabó and László, in press) and a question whereby the ten most important events in Hungarian history had to be nominated. The instruction was: 'Please nominate ten events from the Hungarian history considered to be the most important by you'. These events had to be evaluated on a 7-point scale ranging from very negative (1) to very positive (7). Questionnaire completion took about 10 minutes.

### Results

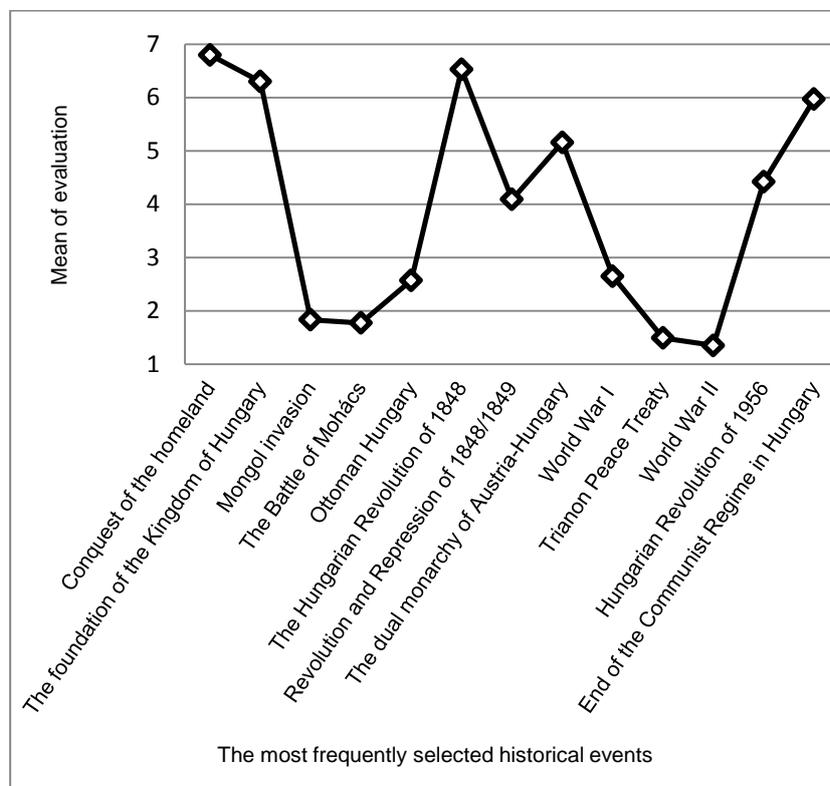
13 events emerged from the nominated 62 types of events. Each one of them was nominated by more than 15 subjects. Specifically, 67,5 % of all choices (326 nominations from the total of 483) mentioned the same 13 events. The 13 most frequently selected historical events with the means of evaluations and standard deviations are shown in Table 1. The means of evaluations of the events are also illustrated visually in Diagram1.

**Table 1: The 13 most important Hungarian historical events (in chronological order), the number of people who chose them, the means of evaluations and the standard deviations**

Historical event	Frequency of choice (number of people who chose it)	Means of evaluation (7-point scale; 1 very negative, 7 very positive)	Standard deviation
Conquest of the homeland (895-896)	30	6,80	0,55
King St Stephen I (1000-1038) and the foundation of the Christian monarchy/the Kingdom of Hungary	33	6,30	1,24
Mongol invasion of the Kingdom of Hungary (1241-42)	18	1,83	1,25
The Battle of <i>Mohács</i> (1526 – Decisive Ottoman victory)	26	1,77	1,37
Ottoman Hungary (1541-1699)	21	2,57	1,86
The outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 against the Habsburg Empire (15 <sup>th</sup> March 1848) (separate code)	17	6,53	0,72
The Revolution and the Repression of the Revolution of 1848/1849.	23	4,09	1,93
The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 and The dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary (1867-1918)	19	5,16	1,73
World War I	17	2,65	1,93

Trianon Peace Treaty (separate code)	35	1,49	1,14
World War II	20	1,35	0,59
Hungarian Revolution of 1956 against the Soviet Union	36	4,42	1,84
End of the Communist Regime in Hungary (1989)	31	5,97	1,25

**Diagram1: The means of evaluations of the 13 most important Hungarian historical events (in chronological order)**



As for the evaluation of events, from these 13 selected historical events six are evaluated positively, six negatively, and the remaining event of the Revolution of 1848 and the repression of the revolution in 1849 (usually treated together in Hungary) was evaluated close to neutral (presumably due to the 'first victory, then failure' nature of the event). Despite the equal distribution, after some calculations we find that events evaluated positively are preferred to choose. While the six positive events have a total of 166 nominations, the six negative events have a total of 137 nominations.

To examine the impact of the mode of identification on evaluation of historical events, we used regression analysis where attachment and glorification were predictor variables

and the evaluation of events were dependent variables. We found two events where the evaluation of that certain event was significantly or marginally significantly influenced by the identification: the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution of 1848 [ $F(2,14)=5,97$ ,  $p<.05$ ,  $R^2=.459$ ] which was a war of freedom against the Habsburg Empire; and the Trianon Peace Treaty [ $F(2,32)=2,89$ ,  $p<.07$ ,  $R^2=.153$ ] which officially ended the World War I for Hungary where the country had lost over two-thirds of its territory and about two-thirds of its inhabitants. In case of the former the higher the attachment scores a subject had the more positively he/she evaluated the Revolution of 1848 ( $\beta=.046$ , standardized  $\beta=.510$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In case of the latter the higher the glorification scores a subject had the more negatively he/she evaluated the Trianon Peace Treaty ( $\beta=-.069$ , standardized  $\beta=-.490$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

### *Discussion*

Based on the results of our first study it has been proved that there is a high degree of agreement in selection of historical events considered to be the most important. Two-third of all choices mentioned the same 13 events. These selections are almost identical with the previously identified historical trajectory of the Hungarian group (László et al, 2008, László and Fülöp, 2010). It has been also found that subjects prefer to choose positive events, most of them occurred in the distant past. Going forward, glorious victories, which could be able to reinforce the positive social identity of the group, seem to be less frequent or immediately were followed by oppression. The repetitive experience of victimization by out-groups is a central element of the Hungarian historical trajectory.

Although the evaluation of events is characterized mostly by a kind of agreement - revolutions and victories are basically evaluated positively, defeats and occupations are judged negatively -, we found differences in the intensity of evaluations of certain events depending on national identification. Trianon Peace Treaty evaluated by the whole sample very negatively was judged more extremely negatively by subjects with high glorification. It seems that subjects aspiring for positive social identity and emphasizing the superiority of the in-group are more sensitive to negative events. Besides, serving the need for a positive social identity subjects with strong identification, specifically with high attachment scores evaluates the Revolution of 1848 more positively than others, thereby emphasizing the historical greatness of the nation.

In our second study, our aim was to test whether the different study design – i.e. restricted choice instead of free choice – influences the results.

## **Study2**

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

Forty-seven undergraduate students (21 males, 26 females, mean age: 21,23, Std: 1,87) at the University of Pécs participated in Study2. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Subjects received no reward in return to completing the questionnaire.

### Design

Subjects received a booklet with the Hungarian national identification questionnaire. Besides, in this restricted-choice version of the study participants had to choose from 20 given (nine positive, nine negative and two neutral) historical events the ten most important, and had to evaluate on a 7-point scale again ranging from very negative (1) to very positive (7). Events presented as given options were collected being based on previous studies on Hungarian historical trajectory.

### Results

In this study, nine events emerged from the 20 given choice-options. Each one of them was chosen by more than 25 subjects. These nine most frequently selected events owned the 66,8% of all choices (309 selections from the total of 462). The nine most frequently selected historical events with the frequency of choice, the mean of evaluations and standard deviations are shown in Table2. The remaining 11 events with the same descriptive data are shown in Table3.

**Table 2: The nine most important Hungarian historical events, the number of people who chose them, the means of evaluations and the standard deviations**

Historical event	Frequency of choice (number of people who chose it)	Means of evaluation (7-point scale; 1 very negative, 7 very positive)	Standard deviation
The outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 against the Habsburg Empire (15 <sup>th</sup> March 1848) (separate code)	43	5,25	0,95
Trianon Peace Treaty	39	2,00	1,93
End of the Communist Regime in Hungary (1989)	39	5,82	1,39
Conquest of the homeland (895-896)	37	6,81	0,56
King St Stephen I (1000-1038) and the foundation of the Christian monarchy/the Kingdom of Hungary	37	6,81	0,46
Hungarian Revolution of 1956 against the Soviet Union	32	5,25	1,68
The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867	28	5,92	1,43
World War I	28	2,72	1,99
World War II	26	2,31	1,73

**Table 3: The 11 remaining less frequently selected historical events, the number of people who chose them, the means of evaluations and the standard deviations**

Historical event	Frequency of choice (number of people who chose it)	Means of evaluation (7-point scale; 1 very negative, 7 very positive)	Standard deviation
Entering the European Union (2004)	21	5,71	1,23
The division of Hungary into three parts (1541 – see also Ottoman Hungary in Study1)	18	2,45	1,58
Matthias Corvinus (1443-1490), the King of Hungary	17	6,17	0,80
Reoccupation of Buda (1686)	17	6,23	1,34
The Battle of <i>Mohács</i> (1526 – Decisive Ottoman victory)	16	2,63	1,82
Mongol invasion of the Kingdom of Hungary (1241-42)	15	2,6	2,13
Second Foundation of Hungary after the catastrophe of Mongol invasion	13	5,92	1,55
Holocaust	12	1,92	1,97
The Repression of the revolution of 1956	12	2,50	2,11
The Golden Bull of 1222	7	5,29	1,25
The Repression of the revolution of 1848 – Surrender at Világos (1849)	5	5,40	1,32

As for the evaluations, from the most important nine events six were positively and three were negatively evaluated. While the six positive events had a total of 216 nominations, the three negative events had a total of 93 nominations.

Similarly to Study1, to examine the impact of the mode of identification on evaluation of historical events, we used regression analysis where attachment and glorification were predictor variables and the evaluation of events were dependent variables. Similar results were found: the higher glorification scores possessed a subject the more negatively was evaluated by him/her the Trianon Peace Treaty [ $F(2, 36) = 3,36, p < .05, R^2 = .157, \beta = -.087, \text{standardized } \beta = -.419, p < .05$ ] and at the same time the more positively he/she evaluated the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 [ $F(2, 40) = 3,05, p < .06, R^2 = .132, \beta = .049, \text{standardized } \beta = .369, p < .05$ ] and Matthias Corvinus (1443-1490), the King of Hungary, a Renaissance ruler, also called the Just in folk tales [ $F(2, 14) = 3,63, p < .05, R^2 = .342, \beta = .056, \text{standardized } \beta = .486, p < .05$ ].

### *Discussion*

Based on the results of the second study we can draw the conclusion that the different study design had no impact on our results. The nine historical events selected as the most important were basically identical with the events emerged in Study1; and moreover with the events of the Hungarian historical trajectory. It has been proved again that subjects are reluctant to choose negative events especially when the in-group is the perpetrator (e.g. the Hungarian Holocaust) or when the negative event closes a glorious episode of the Hungarian history (e.g. suppression of revolutions). None of this type of events got into the most frequently selected ones.

Similarly to Study1 it has been found that subjects with strong identification and – in this version of the study - more specifically subjects with high glorification reacted more sensitively to the major events of the nation. Identity threat caused by negative events (see the extremely negative evaluation of the Trianon Peace Treaty, which fundamentally shook the country) was compensated by emphasizing the glorious episodes of history (extremely positive evaluations of Revolution of 1848 and Mathias Corvinus the Just) by subjects with high glorification.

In our third study participants did not have to nominate or select the events; ten given events – five typical Hungarian positive-negative event-pairs – selected by us (based on previous studies) had to be evaluated. Hence, each subject was forced to face and evaluate negative turns of historical sequences.

### **Study3**

#### ***Method***

##### *Participants*

Forty-eight undergraduate students (12 males, 36 females; mean age: 21,67, Std: 1,96) at the University of Pécs participated in this study. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Subjects received no reward in return to completing the questionnaire.

##### *Design*

In this design of the study subjects had to evaluate on a 7-point scale - ranging from very negative (1) to very positive (7) - five typical Hungarian positive-negative event-pairs. These patterns are characteristic of Hungarian history: the events are close in time, linked to the same out-group and evaluated with opposite sign (for instance a revolution against an out-group followed by the repression of the revolution).

##### ***Results***

As expected positive events were evaluated positively and negative events negatively. The ten given events, the means of evaluation and the standard deviations are shown in Table4. Event-pairs are located one below the other.

**Table 4: The five positive-negative event-pairs (following each other), the means of evaluations and the standard deviations**

Historical event	Means of evaluation (7-point scale; 1 very negative, 7 very positive)	Standard deviation
Mongol invasion of the Kingdom of Hungary (1241-42)	2,34	1,32
Second Foundation of Hungary after the catastrophe of Mongol invasion	5,96	0,88
The Battle of <i>Mohács</i> (1526 – Decisive Ottoman victory)	2,04	1,30
Reoccupation of Buda (1686)	5,96	1,04
The outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 against the Habsburg Empire (15 <sup>th</sup> March)	5,70	1,33
The Repression of the revolution of 1848 – Surrender at Világos (13 <sup>th</sup> Aug 1849)	2,91	1,36
Vienna Arbitration Awards (in 1938 and 1940)	4,06	1,93
World War II (abolition of the Vienna Arbitration Awards)	1,77	1,31
Hungarian Revolution of 1956 against the Soviet Union (23 <sup>rd</sup> Oct)	5,15	1,86
The Repression of the revolution of 1956 (4 <sup>th</sup> Nov)	1,62	1,11

Examining the influence of national identification on the evaluations in Study3, the regression model was significant in two cases: the event of the Second Foundation of Hungary, the rebuilding of Hungary after the catastrophe of the Mongolian invasion in 1241 by Béla IV ( $F(2, 43) = 3,21, p < .05, R^2 = .130$ .) and the Vienna Arbitration Awards (in 1938 and 1940) by which arbiters of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy sought to enforce peacefully the claims of Hungary on territory it had lost in 1920 when it signed the Treaty of Trianon ( $F(2, 42) = 3,66, p < .05, R^2 = .148$ .). While in case of the former attachment was a significant positive predictor ( $\beta = .031$ , standardized  $\beta = .408, p < .05$ ), in case of the latter glorification was marginally significant positive predictor ( $\beta = .047$ , standardized  $\beta = .286, p < .07$ ).

### **Discussion**

Based on the results of previous studies about the pattern of Hungarian history, we conducted this study in which the events organized into the typical narrative schemas of 'we lost and then won' and 'we won and then lost' had been judged. It is worth to note that event-pairs organized according to the former type of schema belongs to the distant past, and the event-pairs organized according to the latter type of schema are closer to us in time.

As for the impact of identification on evaluations, we found again that strengthening the power and perseverance of the nation, a powerful king (Béla IV) is judged more positively by subjects with strong identification, specifically with high attachment. While fairly logically, people with high glorification are more prone to evaluate the revision of Trianon - the so-called Vienna Arbitration Awards - more positively because as we saw in Study1 and Study2 the events of Trianon form a central part of their national identity.

### **General Discussion**

In each of the three studies convergent results were found: high consensus has been showed both in the selection and in the evaluations of the most important historical events. There exist 9-13 events in Hungarian history, which are considered to be central by most of the group-members. It is easy to accept that people fundamentally experience the same historical trajectory independently of the mode of identification; in-group members consider the same events as important and as positive/negative. Nevertheless, consistent differences were found in the intensity of evaluations of events depending on the national identification. Negative events such as Trianon Peace Treaty were evaluated more negatively mostly by subjects with high glorification, and positive events like revolutions and great kings or the revision of Trianon itself were evaluated more positively by high identifiers, both subjects with high glorification and high attachment.

As for the representation of history, the repetitive pattern of last centuries is that initial victories are followed by defeats. The Hungarian historical trajectory, namely the repetitive experiences of being victim of out-group's harmful acts is well suited to the construct of collective victimhood, which had been formulated by Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori and Gundar (2009). This status has severe social identity-serving function thereby groups are motivated to maintain it; selection and interpretation of group-related events are in correspondence with the sense of victimhood. It can provide explanation for threatening events, it motivates patriotism, and it gives feeling of superiority and moral justification in case of in-group aggression. As we have seen, subjects were reluctant to choose negative events where the aggressor-role could have been attributed to the in-group (Holocaust). However, being victim of repetitive traumas, losses, repressions and failures make difficult to maintain the belief that the group is competent and strong, threatening not only the integrity or survival but positive identity of the group as well.

Negative events in Hungarian history – with low level of attributed in-group agency – are typically experienced as identity threats. Positive social identity can be enhanced by emphasizing the historical greatness of the nation (László, 2012). Subjects choose positive events more frequently than negative events. Besides, this phenomenon is supported by the impact of identification on the evaluation of events. An inflated but unstable type of identification - revealed by previous qualitative analysis (László, 2008; László and Fülöp, 2010) - characterizes people with strong identification, especially people with high glorification. The results proved that people with high glorification are more prone to emphasize the historical greatness of the nation in the distant past. This can be considered as a compensating strategy to the identity threat generated by the constant victimization by out-groups in the later centuries.

## Conclusion

In summary, our aim was to examine the homogeneity/heterogeneity of historical representations; and we found consistent differences in the intensity of evaluations of events depending on identification. Additionally, it has been proved that not only identification plays a role in judgments of events but the socially shared representations of history (the repetitive experiences of being victim of out-groups' harms) are important in creating social identity. Relationship seems to be found between the inflated but unstable type of identification (characterize people with high identification, especially glorification) and an identity status, the so-called collective victimhood (which seems to be a characteristic feature of Hungarian national identity).

Future studies should explore and elaborate this relationship. Moreover, assuming that collective victimhood can be seen as a kind of identity state of the Hungarian nation, it can be a distant goal to explore other kind of identity states (e.g. collective narcissism, de Zavala et al, 2009) of other countries by studying their historical representations.

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