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BRIEF REPORT

Positive Associations Between Anomia and Intentions to Engage in Political Violence: Cross-Cultural Evidence From Four Countries

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Psychological research suggests that politically motivated violence (e.g., terrorism) partially stems from existential motives, and more specifically from individuals' need to achieve significance in life (Signif-

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continued

icance Quest Theory [SQT]; Kruglanski et al., 2014). Interestingly, sociological research has established similar findings linking *anomia*—a syndrome including feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, isolation, self-estrangement and normlessness—with violent behavior. In line with SQT, the present contribution aimed to test for the first time if anomia could be linked with political violence. Results from a study conducted in four countries (Brazil, Turkey, Belgium, and France; $N = 1,240$) supported this hypothesis by revealing a consistent, small-to-medium-sized positive correlation between anomia and intentions to display political violence ($r = .21$, 95% CI [.14, .28]) among undergraduate samples. This link held across countries, independently of political ideology. These results highlight the theoretical and practical usefulness of considering the role of anomia in explaining violent political behavior.

Public Significance Statement

Politically motivated violence stems from various psychological motives such as the need to restore significance, meaning or control in one's life. Here, we demonstrate for the first time that anomia, a generalized feeling of being meaningless, powerless, isolated and alienated is linked with intentions to engage in political violence across cultures and political ideologies. Anomia may therefore constitute a single unifying psychological construct to study radicalization and violent extremism.

Keywords: anomia, political violence, cross-cultural study, significance quest, radicalism

Politically motivated violence refers to the use of violent means to attain political goals (e.g., terrorism). This violence can take many forms. From state terrorism such as Iranian backed Hezbollah attacks in the 1980s Lebanon to the armed struggle fought by Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) members in Turkey, or protest violence perpetrated by smaller factions (e.g., Alt-Right in Charlottesville, Anarchist "Black Blocks" during protests in France), it is widespread around the world and across the ideological spectrum. To this day, political violence remains a challenge to governments and state agencies trying to prevent it. Moreover, it appears that the threat of political violence comes increasingly from individuals living in the very societies they target. For instance, French, Turkish, and Belgian citizens constituted an important part of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's (ISIS's) foreign fighter pool (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-24/french-connection>), and thus actively perpetrated violent political actions against their own societies. Therefore, the issue of domestic ("homegrown") radicalization has triggered growing interest for understanding the mechanisms underlying ideological extremism and identifying predictors of violent political behavior.

Social psychological research has established that display of political violence depends on a combination of one's exposure to ideologies that promote and legitimize political violence with one's motivation to enact such behavior because it gives a meaningful purpose to one's life (a higher purpose that makes it possible to transcend oneself, to achieve a sense of significance; see Krug-

lanski et al., 2014). The present contribution focuses on the motivational component at work behind violent political behavior. We will try to highlight how Significance Quest (Kruglanski et al., 2014) can sometimes lead individuals to commit violent acts against their fellow citizens through a generalized syndrome including feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, social isolation, normlessness, and self-estrangement.

From Significance Quest to Anomia

Significance Quest Theory (Kruglanski et al., 2014) posits that individuals are motivated to engage in violent ideological actions for existential reasons. That is, violent extremist groups can satisfy one's needs to belong and to achieve meaning in life through attaining supraordinate goals with a higher purpose (Webber et al., 2018). Seen in this light, ideologically motivated violence is not only a way to attain political goals, it also serves to restore individuals' sense of meaning, control, justice, honor, and dignity in the face of perceived threats and humiliations (Webber et al., 2018). So far, converging evidence has provided corroboration for the role of feelings of shame, relative deprivation, humiliation, and meaninglessness as powerful drivers of both intentions and effective display of violent political behavior (Kruglanski et al., 2014). The present contribution aims to test if political violence could be linked with another well-established construct pertaining to existential needs: anomia.

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Shortly, anomia (Smith & Bohm, 2008) is a generalized social-psychological syndrome that includes five main components (Smith & Bohm, 2008): feelings of meaninglessness (that one's life has no purpose), powerlessness (that one's actions have no political consequences), social isolation (that one's values do not fit with those of one's society), normlessness (that behavior is not efficiently socially regulated) and self-estrangement (that one's daily actions are motivated by external factors such as working for the wage only). As a psychological state, anomia is clearly distinct from *anomie* (Durkheim, 1897), which is a societal state characterized by a rapid shift in social norms and can lead to perceived normlessness; thus, increased anomia at the individual level (Smith & Bohm, 2008; Teymoori et al., 2016).

Because of anomia's properties, which pertain to existential motives as described above, we think that it should be a potent predictor of violent political behavior. In fact, anomia includes feelings of powerlessness, self-estrangement, and social isolation, all of which have been found to generate violent extremism (see Jonas et al., 2014). Significance itself could be seen as one of the five components of anomia (i.e., meaninglessness); which means Loss of Significance could trigger ideological violence because it would tap into that broader construct. Therefore, we argue that anomia could be a potent construct to explain why individuals from very different backgrounds (educated or not, from wealthy or less wealthy nations, living in peaceful areas or combat zones) nevertheless engage in political violence, sometimes among the same organizations (e.g., ISIS).

The present contribution aimed to establish if anomia is related to political violence. We thus hypothesized that feelings of anomia would be positively correlated with intentions to engage in political violence and to use non-normative (i.e., illegal) means of collective action. Moreover, we hypothesized that this association would be stable across cultural, historical, and immediate social contexts, regardless of individuals' political ideology (left-right orientation).

Overview

To test this hypothesis, we used cross-sectional data from four surveys conducted among undergraduate samples in Turkey, France, Belgium, and Brazil between September 1 and November 10, 2018. These surveys were part of a broader cross-cultural research program and included measures of anomia and political violence intentions, as well as political ideology. The countries were chosen so as to reflect a diversity of state organizations (republic, monarchy, federal states), cultural backgrounds (Near Eastern, Western European, Latin American), and societal contexts (France and Belgium have recently been the targets of terrorist attacks and violent actions by various political groups, Turkey has also endured terrorism/major political changes, and Brazil is exposed to the international scene because of the corruption scandals that affect the closest actors of the government). This was done to provide a strong test for our hypothesis.

Parametric tests are all bivariate and significance threshold α was set at .05. No participant data was suppressed from the raw database. All four studies were conducted in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments and the 2016 APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. The scales (see Appendix A), sample characteristics (see Appendix

B), and data for these studies are openly accessible at: https://osf.io/r47ms/?view_only=68dfc8986855431ba8847ce5bf8bdd4e.

Method

Participants

At least 250 participants per country were needed to gain stable estimates of correlation values among the population ($N_{min} = 1,000$; Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013). A total of 1,240 individuals were recruited ($M_{age} = 23.29$, $SD = 6.46$, $\%_{male} = 24.03$). Sample characteristics for each country can be found in Table 1.

Material and Procedure

In Turkey, participants were recruited in classrooms from a private institution in Istanbul. They were invited to fill out a computerized questionnaire. In France and French-speaking Belgium, participants were recruited through posts on student groups' social network pages, which included links to a computerized questionnaire. In Brazil, participants were recruited through links to a computerized questionnaire from public institutions.

The questionnaire included one scale pertaining to anomia, another pertaining to radicalism intentions, to intentions to engage in non-normative collective action (except for Turkey, which was a pilot and did not include it) and a measure of political ideology (as a reminder, items can be found in Appendix A). All scales were translated from English to Brazilian Portuguese, Turkish, and French by bilingual members of the research teams in each relevant country. They were then reverse translated by native speakers in each country who also had academic-level skills in spoken/written English.

MOS-Alienation Scale (7 items, 5-point Likert scales, from 1 Not at all to 5 Extremely; Travis, 1993). This scale was chosen because it presents good internal/external validities (Travis, 1993). Also, it includes a sample of items pertaining to the five dimensions of anomia (Smith & Bohm, 2008), while being considerably shorter than other exhaustive scales (see Teymoori et al., 2016). Finally, we preferred the MOS Alienation Scale over the Perceived Anomie Scale (Teymoori et al., 2016) because of the conceptual distinction between anomia and anomie (e.g., "People do not know who they can trust and rely on"), which may be correlated but nevertheless different in nature.

Radicalism Intentions Scale (RIS; 4 items, 4-point Likert scales, from 1 Extremely unlikely to 4 Extremely likely; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009). This scale assesses the extent to which individuals intend to participate in violent collective

Table 1
Summary Statistics for Correlation Analyses Across Countries

Country	Anomia-RIS	Anomia-NNCA
Turkey	.17** (.18**)	—
France	.13* (.13*)	.05 (.05)
Belgium	.25*** (.26***)	.17** (.21**)
Brazil	.27*** (.25***)	.24*** (.19**)

Note. Number between brackets represent partial correlations coefficients adjusted for political ideology.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

action to defend the cause of a group that is important to them, which they are asked to indicate before filling the items (e.g., “I would participate in a public protest against oppression of my group even if I thought the protest might turn violent”). The RIS was chosen over alternative measures because it is generally reliable, generic, and very short (see Scarcella, Page, & Furtado, 2016). Because it is a subtle measure of political violence, it was also deemed safer to use compared to more explicit scales assessing direct engagement in armed struggle, which may lead to missing data and/or floor effects in some countries where these issues are very sensitive (e.g., Turkey).

Intentions to Engage in Non-Normative Collective Action (NNCA; 5 items; 7-point Likert scales, from 1 *Completely disagree* to 7 *Completely agree*). We created a measure of intentions to engage in illegal collective actions (e.g., “I would occupy public buildings as a way of protesting”) to provide us with another estimate of intentions to display political behavior that can be tied to violent actions but that does not necessarily entail it.

Political Ideology (1 item, 11-point Likert-scale, from 1 *Far left* to 11 *Far right*). This measure was placed along with demographics, at the end of the questionnaire.

Results

Correlation Analyses

Descriptive statistics are presented in Appendix B. Scores were standardized (Z-scores) and Pearson correlations were computed. As predicted, anomia displayed a small-to-medium-size association with radicalism intentions and intentions to engage in non-normative collective action in all samples (except for the French sample, among which anomia and non-normative collective action were not linked at all). Partial correlation analyses controlling for political ideology showed that these associations were robust (see Table 1).

Mini-Meta Analysis

We decided to meta-analyze the associations between anomia and intentions to engage in political violence as measured by the

RIS (see Goh, Hall, & Rosenthal, 2016) to firmly establish the presence of this seemingly replicable association, and to obtain more accurate estimates of its size for subsequent studies. A mixed-effects model (REML) was computed with country as a random factor. It was adequate ($AIC = -3.48$) and yielded an estimate of correlation size between anomia and RIS of $r = .21$ ($se = .04$), 95% CI [.14, .28] with a $Z = 5.88$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1). As we expected, anomia seems to display small-to-medium associations with intentions to engage in political violence as measured by the RIS, independent of cultural context.

Discussion

As these results suggest, anomia seems to be a potent factor for explaining political violence. It displayed an average $r = .21$ association with intentions to engage in violent action across our samples. This is remarkable given that the countries investigated have different state organizations (federal vs. central), different cultural backgrounds (Near Eastern, Western European, Latin American), and given that data were collected in very different social-political contexts (presidential election in Brazil, economic crisis in Turkey, pre-electoral context in France and Belgium) among samples of different age/gender ratios. Therefore, this contribution provides the first robust evidence for considering the role of anomia as a potential mediator of loss of significance effects in a Significance Quest perspective. Moreover, it is associated with political violence independently of political ideology, which means it could be used as a generic individual level predictor of violent political behavior.

That said, we must note that if anomia was consistently associated with radicalism intentions, this was not necessarily so regarding intentions to engage in non-normative collective action. The negative result in the French sample might be explained by various reasons. First, it is possible that non-normative collective action, because it does not necessarily entail display of violence, might be more subjected to cross-cultural variations; especially regarding constructs pertaining to social regulation and enforcement of social norms (e.g., tightness–looseness; see Harrington & Gelfand, 2014). Second, it is likely that the link between anomia and non-normative collective action may be moderated by the degree

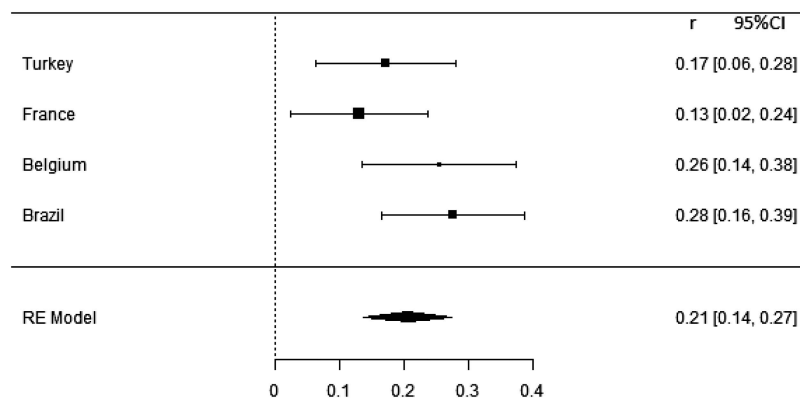


Figure 1. Summary of the mini-meta analysis of the association between anomia and radicalism intentions across countries. Numbers on the right represent Pearson correlation coefficients and lower and upper bounds for 95% CIs.

to which individuals still perceive collective action as efficient, which may differ not only across cultures (e.g., individualism) but also according to local political contexts. For instance, at the time of data collection, the French population just came out of a 2-year period throughout which many popular (and violent) demonstrations occurred but were inefficient in changing the current government's political agenda (e.g., regarding labor law reforms). Also, it is important to acknowledge the fact that anomia might motivate individuals to display positive behaviors such as increased prosocial engagement at the community level (see Durkheim, 1897). Therefore, we argue that social affordances like the type of groups (e.g., activists, radicals, volunteers) in an individuals' immediate environment should be an important moderator of anomia's link with political violence.

There are, however, a few limitations that must be taken into account regarding the present contribution. First and foremost, our samples come from predominantly female students (except for Brazil), which limits the generalizability of our findings to mostly female and educated populations from the different countries investigated. Second, reliability of the RIS was sometimes at the lower end of what can be considered acceptable, which poses issues for parameter estimates. Nonetheless, far from being a limitation, because reliability sets a maximum limit to the size of correlations that can be found, we have some reasons to believe the associations between anomia and political violence should be higher than the ones we found. If so, our hypothesis would have been tested under adverse conditions. Third, we argue these results need to be conceptually replicated by using scales other than the RIS to assess other forms of political violence (for instance intentions to engage in explicit terrorist actions or to sacrifice oneself for a cause). Even though radical behavior self-report scales are closely related and yield similar results (Scarcella et al., 2016), only conceptual replications will make it possible to definitely rule out materials as a confound. Finally, the design being cross-sectional, no causal inference should be made from the present data, and further experimental studies should be conducted to assess the predictive power of anomia on violent political behavior.

In sum, this series of studies provided the first and robust evidence for considering a positive link between individual feelings of anomia and intentions to engage in violent political action. This link was theoretically expected, both from sociological theory pertaining to alienation phenomena and a more general psychological take on the existential motives that underlie human social-ideological behavior. These results can contribute to the emer-

gence of a more social-existential perspective on violent extremism and terrorism.

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(Appendices follow)

Appendix A

Scale Items

MOS-Alienation Scale (7 items, 5-point Likert scale, from 1 *Not at all* to 5 *Extremely*; Travis, 1993)

Here is a series of personal feelings. For each, please select the number that corresponds most to your feelings. . . .

1. I feel all alone these days.
2. I often feel discriminated against.
3. My whole world feels like it's falling apart.
4. I wish I were somebody important.
5. It's hard for me to tell just what is right and wrong these days.
6. I do not like to live by society's rules.
7. I'll never find the right person to care enough about me.

Radicalism Intentions Scale (RIS; 4 items, 4-point Likert scale, from 1 *Extremely unlikely* to 4 *Extremely likely*; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009)

People care about many different kinds of groups, including the following: Religious (e.g., Catholics, Muslims); Single-Issue (e.g., environmental, human rights, abortion); Economic (e.g., union, farmers, unemployed); Political (e.g., Democrats, Republicans, Libertarian); Ethnic-Racial (e.g., African-Americans, Native Americans, Irish); and Gender-Lifestyle (e.g., Gay-Lesbian, Women, Goths). Write down the name of the particular group most important to you:

[.]
]

"my group" in the next questions [RIS and NNCA] refers to the group you just wrote down.

1. I would continue to support an organization that fights for my group's political and legal rights even if the organization sometimes breaks the law.
2. I would continue to support an organization that fights for my group's political and legal rights even if the organization sometimes resorts to violence.
3. I would participate in a public protest against oppression of my group even if I thought the protest might turn violent.
4. I would attack police or security forces if I saw them beating members of my group.

Intentions to Engage in Non-Normative Collective Action (NNCA; 5 items; 7-point Likert scale, from 1 *Completely disagree* to 7 *Completely agree*)

[This scale was presented following the RIS, please refer to the RIS for the instruction]

1. I would cut off traffic in my city during political protests.
2. I would occupy public buildings as a way of protesting.
3. I would take part in an informative picket line in case of a strike is called.
4. I would confront police if necessary when protesting.
5. I would participate in a sit-in in front of a public building as a way of protesting.

(Appendices continue)

Appendix B

Summary Statistics for Sample Characteristics and Measures Across Countries

Country	Population (<i>N</i> , <i>M</i> _{age} , <i>SD</i> _{age} , % Male)	Anomia (<i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> , α)	RIS (<i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> , α)	NNCA (<i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> , α)	Political ideology (<i>M</i> , <i>SD</i>)
Turkey	<i>N</i> = 321, <i>M</i> = 25.06, <i>SD</i> = 9.22, 16.2% Male	<i>M</i> = 2.63, <i>SD</i> = .80, α = .70	<i>M</i> = 1.83, <i>SD</i> = .67, α = .66	—	<i>M</i> = 5.98, <i>SD</i> = 2.05
France	<i>N</i> = 341, <i>M</i> = 20.33, <i>SD</i> = 3.72, 14.4% Male	<i>M</i> = 2.22, <i>SD</i> = .72, α = .70	<i>M</i> = 2.18, <i>SD</i> = .68, α = .69	<i>M</i> = 3.60, <i>SD</i> = 1.56, α = .83	<i>M</i> = 4.60, <i>SD</i> = 1.91
Belgium	<i>N</i> = 269, <i>M</i> = 21.83, <i>SD</i> = 5.15, 26.4% Male	<i>M</i> = 2.17, <i>SD</i> = .68, α = .67	<i>M</i> = 2.11, <i>SD</i> = .63, α = .64	<i>M</i> = 3.44, <i>SD</i> = 1.49, α = .82	<i>M</i> = 5.04, <i>SD</i> = 2.13
Brazil	<i>N</i> = 309, <i>M</i> = 25.93, <i>SD</i> = 7.75, 40.8% Male	<i>M</i> = 2.30, <i>SD</i> = .68, α = .66	<i>M</i> = 1.89, <i>SD</i> = .72, α = .75	<i>M</i> = 4.05, <i>SD</i> = 1.70, α = .84	<i>M</i> = 4.25, <i>SD</i> = 2.21