



A political psychology perspective on Yellow Vests violence: shifting from ‘who’ to ‘why’

Jais Adam-Troian
Istanbul Bilgi University
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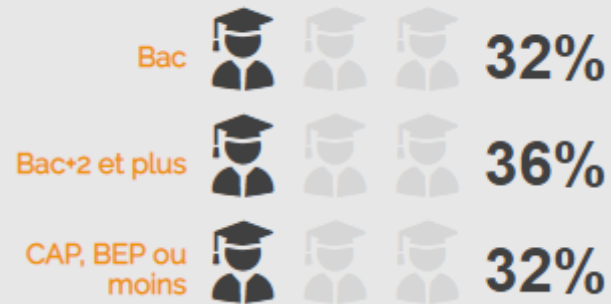


The Yellow Vests in a nutshell

- More than 3 months of demonstrations each Saturday.
- 12 casualties (civilians and protesters), 3142 injuries including severe mutilations (including protesters and riot police) and > 5000 custodies (1500 in one day)
- In march of 2019 (Viavoice poll, 2019):
 - 36% of public opinion support
 - 63% think protests must stop but other courses of action should be taken

Who are the Yellow Vests ?

Niveau d'études



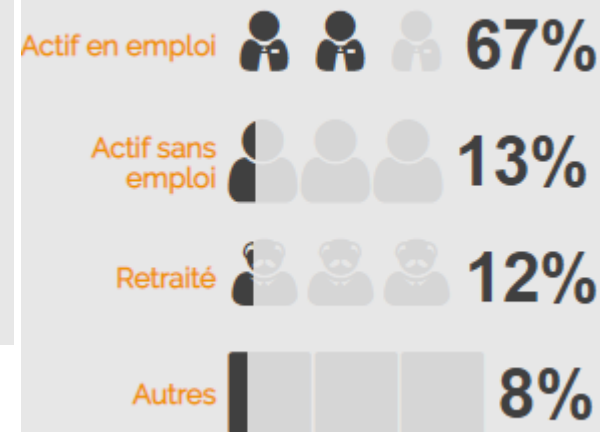
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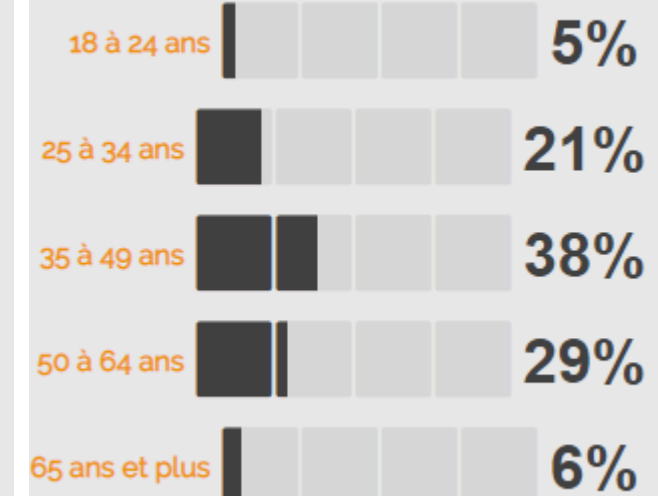
Type d'habitat



Situation professionnelle



Classe d'âge



Position sur l'axe Gauche-Droite

Ne se retrouve pas, ni droite, ni gauche



Très à droite



A droite



Au centre



A gauche



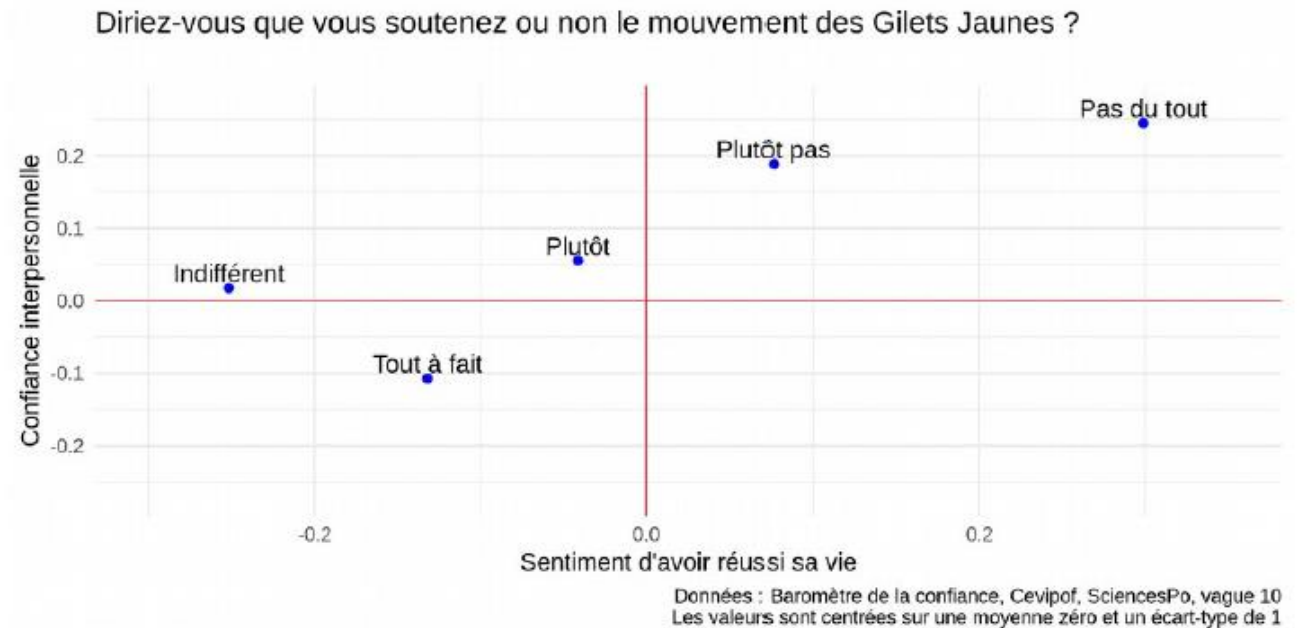
Très à gauche



Data from Sciences-Po Grenoble (2019)

What predicts support for the Yellow Vests ?

- Some studies point at ideological factors (political extremism/political apathy)
- Other polls emphasize the socio-economic composition of the movement (rural, low/middle SES, economically deprived...)
- BUT more recent investigations (see figure on the right) emphasize the psychological underpinnings of support for the Yellow vests (feelings of personal failure).
- As we will see, this is an important finding if we are to understand Yellow Vest violent extremism.



Violent extremism from a political psychology perspective

A few basic principles...

- Political psychology is the study of **both** the psychological determinants of political cognition/behaviour and the impact of political decisions on psychological processes (behaviour/cognition).
- Political behavior = voting, protesting...
- Political cognition = attitudes, values...
- Political behavior/cognition is not different than other types of behavior/cognition (health, work etc...) and obeys basic psychological principles.

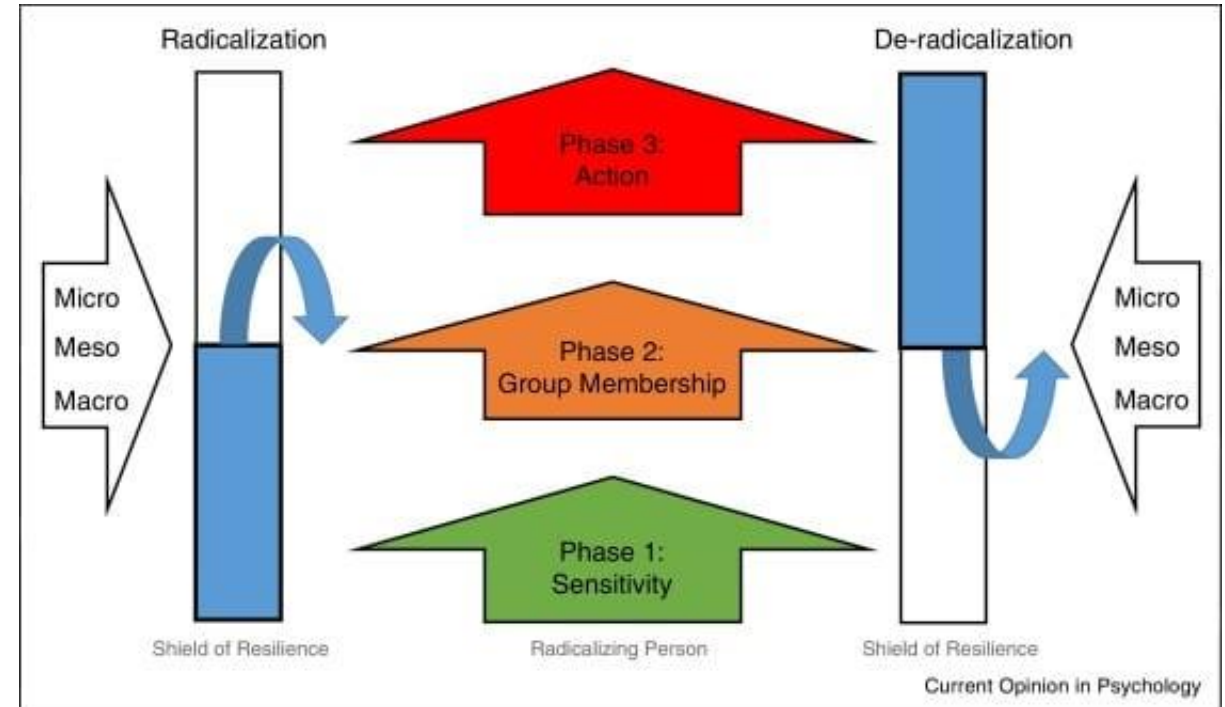
- Violent extremism is the consequence of a progressive radicalization process whereby individuals gradually commit to extreme political/religious ideologies (Bélanger et al., 2019)

- This process is the same for both religious and political extremism whatever the ideology

- It starts with a *sensitivity* phase (Doosje et al., 2016) and involves 3 types of factors (3N):

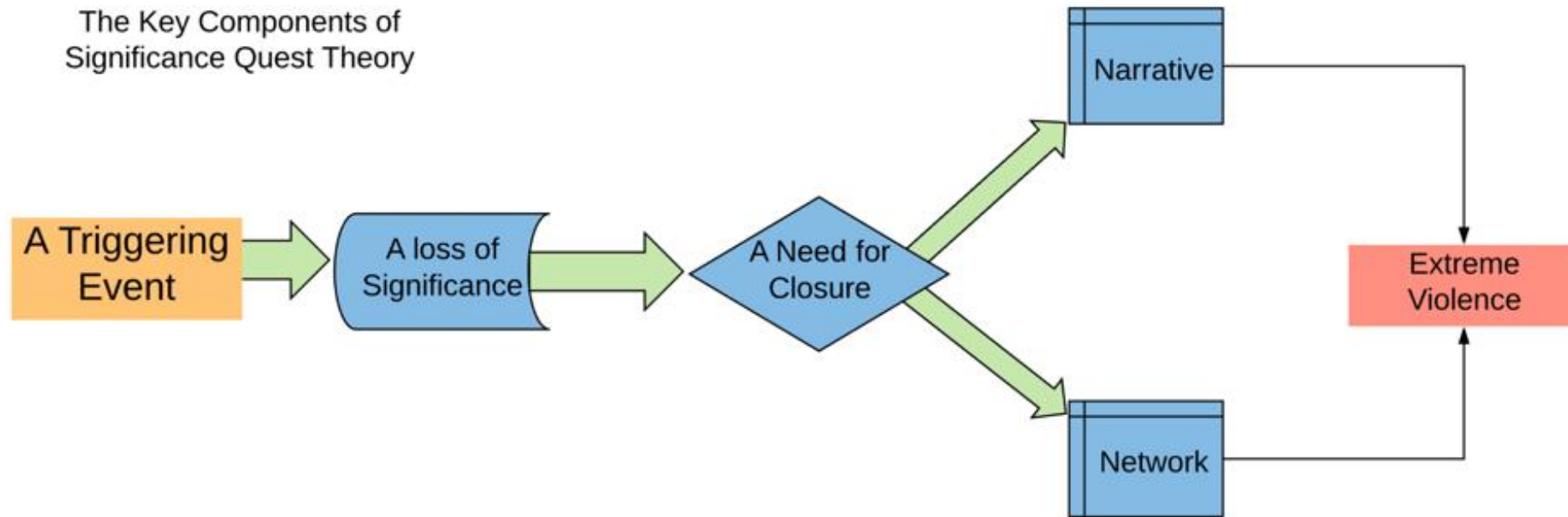
- **Need:** motivation to engage in violent extremism
- **Narrative:** exposure to ideologies that legitimate violence
- **Network:** engagement in a supportive, tightly-knit group

Violent extremism 101



Significance Quest Theory

The Key Components of
Significance Quest Theory



Kruglanski, A., Jasko, K., Webber, D., Chernikova, M., & Molinaro, E. (2018). The making of violent extremists. *Review of General Psychology*, 22(1), 107-120.

Significance Quest Theory

- Webber et al. (2017, *JPSP*)

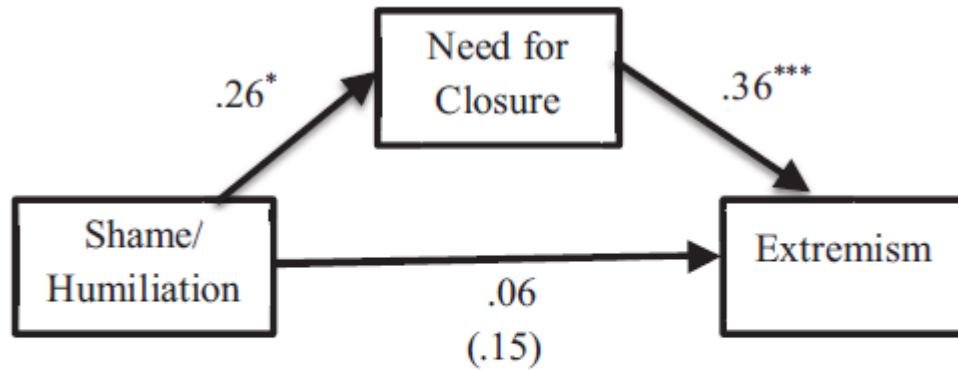
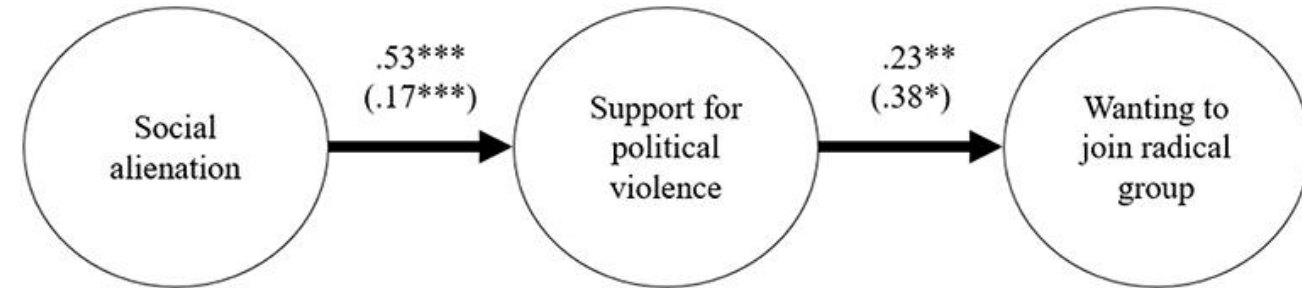


Figure 1. Indirect effect of loss of significance (shame/humiliation) on extremism through increased need for closure (Study 1). Coefficients are unstandardized. The total effect is presented in parentheses. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

- Bélanger et al. (2019, *Frontiers*)



- Schumpe, Bélanger, Moyano, & Nisa (2018, *JPSP*)

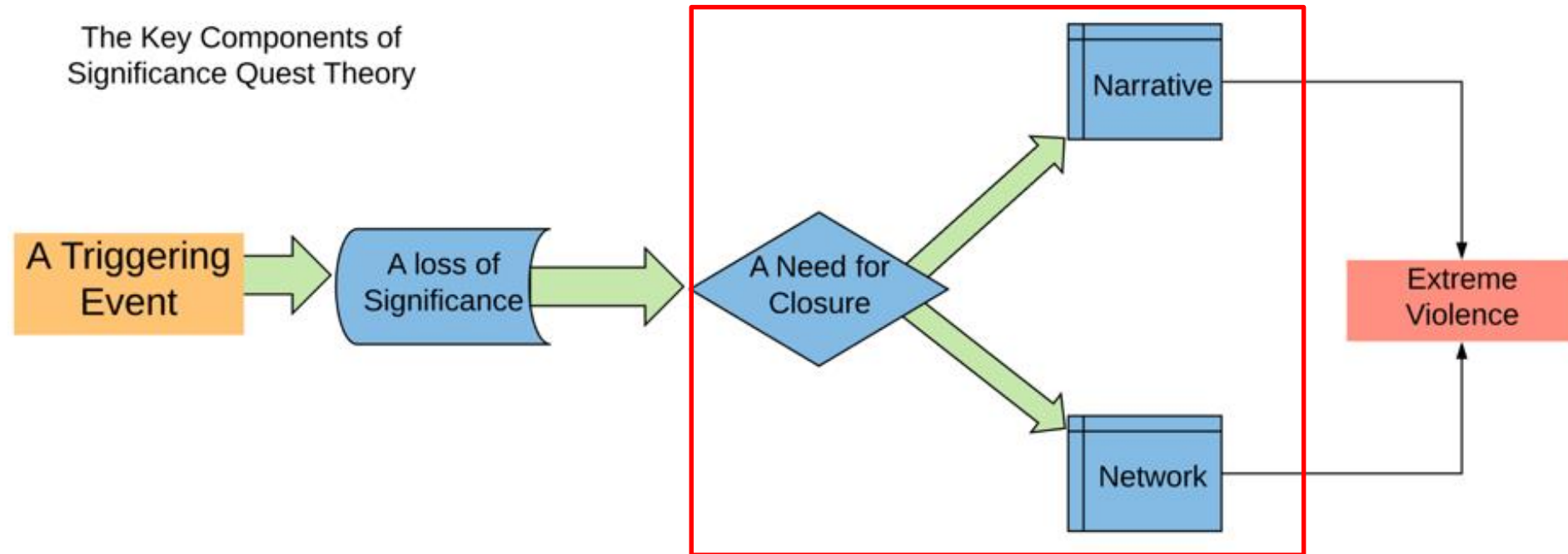


Figure 3. Indirect effect of experimental condition on support for political violence via search for meaning and sensation seeking (Study 3). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$. Experimental condition: 0 = control, 1 = legacy.



Applying Significance Quest Theory to Yellow Vests Violence

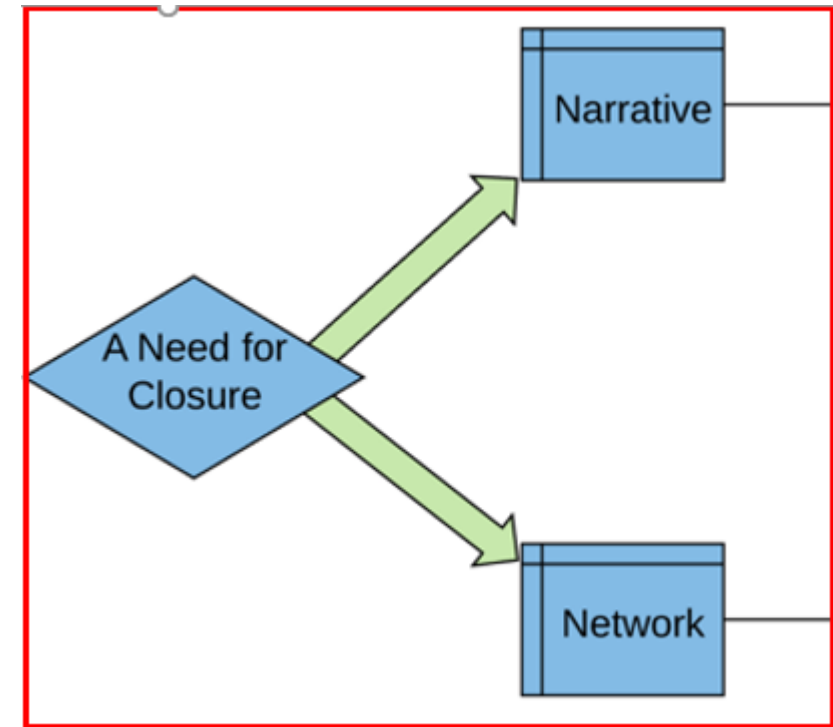
Anomia: a key variable ?



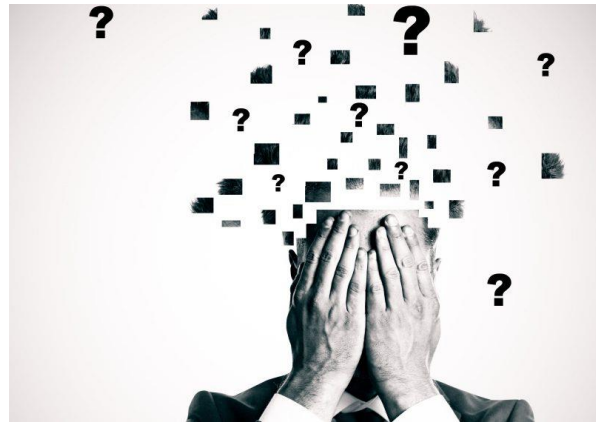
Kruglanski, A., Jasko, K., Webber, D., Chernikova, M., & Molinaro, E. (2018). The making of violent extremists. *Review of General Psychology*, 22(1), 107-120.

- Derived from the sociological concept of *Anomie* (absence of norms in a society to regulate behavior, Durkheim, 1897)
- *Anomia* is a psychological syndrome including feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, social isolation, self-estrangement and normlessness (Smith & Bohm, 2008).
- Parsimonious and powerful construct that reflects:
 - **Need for closure:** meaninglessness, normlessness
 - **Narrative:** political powerlessness, self estrangement
 - **Network:** social isolation

Anomia: a key variable ?



A LoS/Anomia model of violent extremism



Triggering
event



Loss of
Significance

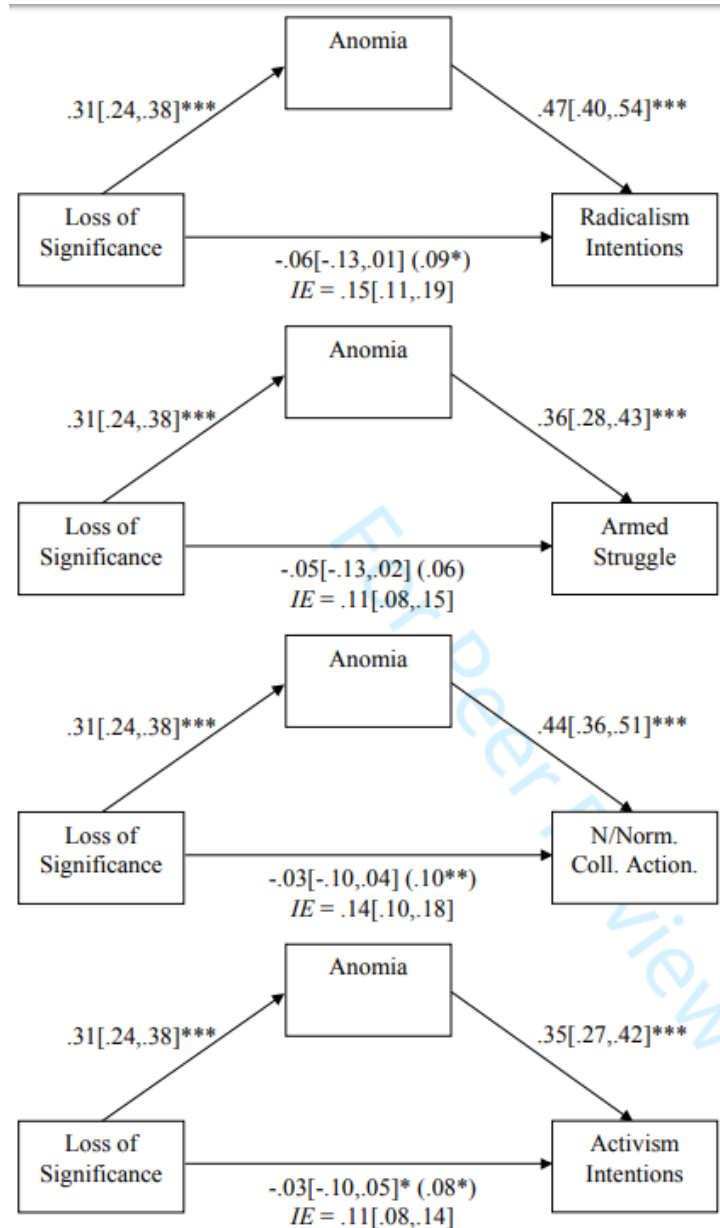


Anomia



Violent
Extremism

Empirical Support (Study 1)



■ Cross-sectional design among FB groups. 776 French individuals from the general population (28.48% male, 50.39% female, 21.13% unreported; $M_{age} = 32.02$, $SD = 15.19$).

■ Measures:

- Activism (intentions to protest with YV)
- Radicalism (intentions to display protest violence)
- Non-normative collective action (intentions to use illegal forms of protests)
- Intentions to engage in armed struggle

Empirical Support (Study 2)

| | | Control <i>N</i> = 258 <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | LoS <i>N</i> = 253 <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | <i>t</i> -values (<i>df</i>) | <i>p</i> - value | <i>d</i> -effect size |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|---|---|-----------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Demographics</i> | Age | 19.51 (.288) | 19.26 (3.19) | .92 (509) | .36 | .08 |
| | %male | 10.9 (3.10) | 7.9 (2.70) | 1.16 (502) | .25 | .10 |
| | Income | 1.79 (.86) | 1.89 (.96) | 1.23 (509) | .22 | .11 |
| | Id. w. YV | 2.31 (1.47) | 2.44 (1.64) | .96 (498) | .34 | .09 |
| <i>Ideology</i> | Pol. Ideology | 4.33 (1.22) | 4.23 (1.26) | .92 (509) | .36 | .08 |
| | Pol. Extremism | .97 (1.44) | 1.03 (1.62) | .40 (509) | .69 | .03 |
| <i>Manipulation Checks</i> | Positive Affects | 2.75 (.74) | 2.67 (.79) | 1.11 (491) | .27 | .10 |
| | Negative Affects | 1.79 (.70) | 2.01 (.86) | 3.12 (492) | .002 | .28** |
| | LoS | 1.50 (.69) | 1.81 (1.01) | 4.00 (492) | < .001 | .36*** |
| <i>Mediator</i> | Anomia | 2.07 (.59) | 2.10 (.57) | .58 (498) | .56 | .05 |
| <i>Measures</i> | Activism Int. | 1.78 (.74) | 1.94 (.84) | 2.18 (498) | .03 | .20* |
| | Radicalism Int. | 1.60 (.68) | 1.69 (.78) | 1.34 (498) | .18 | .12 |
| | Armed Struggle | 1.18 (.44) | 1.26 (.54) | 2.00 (498) | .047 | .18* |
| | N/N. Coll. Action | 2.13 (1.33) | 2.29 (1.46) | 1.30 (498) | .19 | .12 |

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of the experiment and between-condition differences (N=511).*

Note. Number between brackets represent *SDs*. **p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001.

- Experimental design. 511 undergraduates (9.1% male, 1.3% unspecified, *M*_{age} = 19.39, *SD* = 3.04), equally assigned to the experimental conditions (*N*_{control} = 258, *N*_{LoS} = 253).
- Randomly assigned to LoS condition (write about a time they felt humiliated) vs. control condition (write about the last time they watched TV)
- Measures of violent extremism were the same as in Study 1

Empirical Support (Study 2)

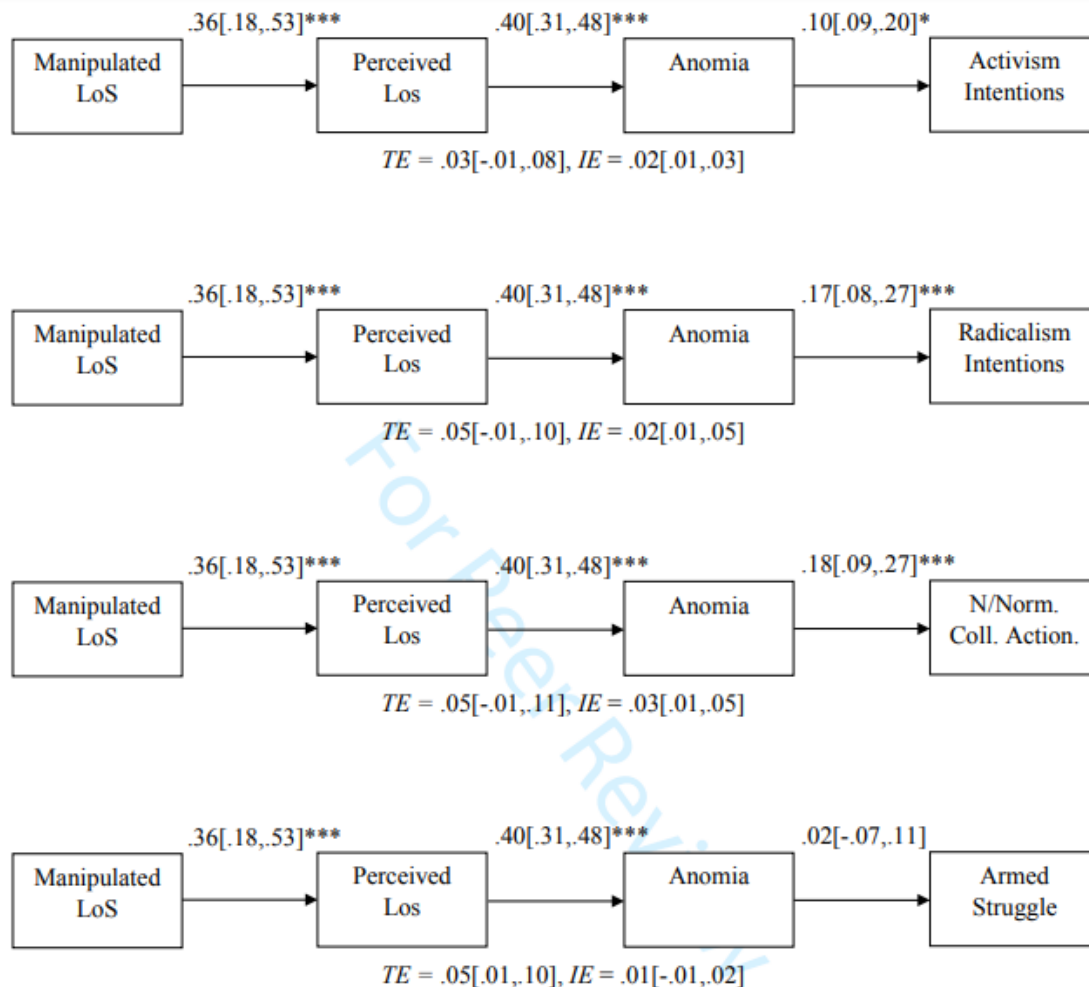


Figure 2. Serial mediation models for Study 2 measures. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, numbers represent β coefficients for each path and characters in brackets indicate 95%CI bounds. IE = indirect effect standardized beta coefficient. TE = total effect of Loss of Significance on the dependent variables.

- Held independently of negative affects
- No indirect effect on intentions to engage in armed struggle
- Probably because students are a well integrated population (less anomia)
- These results globally corroborate the correlations observed in Study 1.

‘Macron is not responsible for the situation but he’s there at the wrong time. And his behavior doesn’t help at all...’ - Jacques, 67, Yellow Vest.

‘He despises the people, he doesn’t hear us [...] he doesn’t respect people.’ - Bertrand, 33, Yellow Vest.

‘He sometimes has words which are not worthy of a President [...] he’s taking us for fools, he’s arrogant’ - Jacqueline, 62, Yellow Vest

‘We don’t live, we survive...’ - Sandra, 45, Yellow Vest.

Conclusion

- Yellow Vests violence can be understood as a consequence of growing feelings of alienation among the populations, independently of socio-economic or ideological factors
- This resonates with the discourse of Yellow Vests themselves (see left)
- It also explains potentially why such a diverse movement can attract violent extremists from both extreme left and right organizations.

Acknowledgments



- These studies were conducted with my *amazing* co-author Yara Mahfud (post-doc researcher university of Paris-10)
- More work to come with her on the relationship between anomia and political violence...

Thank you for your attention !
