Journal of Social and Political Psychology

PsychOpen GOLD

Original Research Reports

A Motivational Analysis of Perceived Legitimacy of Mafias

Gennaro Pica[1], Molly Ellenberg[2], Antonio Pierro[3], Arie W. Kruglanski[2]

[1] *School of Law, University of Camerino, Camerino, Italy.* **[2]** *Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA.* **[3]** *Department of Developmental and Social Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy.*

Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2026, Vol. 14(2), 574–589, https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.19671

Received: 2025-09-06 • **Accepted:** 2026-05-28 • **Published (VoR):** 2026-11-17

Handling Editor: Tobias Stark, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author: Gennaro Pica, School of Law, University of Camerino, Camerino, Italy, Via Andrea D'Accorso 16, 62032 Camerino (MC), presso il Campus Universitario. E-mail: gennaro.pica@unicam.it

Supplementary Materials: Data, Materials [see Index of Supplementary Materials]

Abstract

The present research aimed to investigate a motivational antecedent of people's perceived legitimacy of mafias and attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion. Based on the quest for significance theory, we hypothesized that the need to matter, to count, and to "be someone" predicts perceived legitimacy of mafias, understood as an internalized attitudinal and value-based orientation toward mafia authority, through two parallel mediating mechanisms: (a) a stronger endorsement of self-enhancement values (i.e., influence, wealth, authority, power), and (b) a stronger endorsement of a masculine honor ideology. Study 1 assessed attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion as an indirect indicator of legitimacy, whereas Study 2 employed a more direct measure of perceived mafia legitimacy. Results of two cross-sectional surveys (Total $N = 983$) supported the hypothesis. Overall, this research suggests a motivational dynamic underlying people's perceived legitimacy of and attitudinal tolerance toward mafias as a potential route to achieve personal significance.

Keywords

mafia legitimacy, quest for significance, self-enhancement values, masculine honor ideology, organized crime

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, CC BY 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Non-Technical Summary

Background

Mafias are not sustained only by violence and fear. In many communities, their influence also depends on whether people see their authority, values, or practices as understandable, acceptable, or even useful. Previous research has shown that cultural ideas about masculine honor, respect, reputation, and retaliation can contribute to more favorable attitudes toward mafia organizations. However, less is known about the personal motivations that may lead people to adopt values that make mafia authority appear legitimate.

Why was this study done?

This study examined whether the quest for significance, that is, the desire to matter, be respected, and be seen as important by others, helps explain why some people are more tolerant of mafia-related practices or more likely to perceive aspects of mafia activity as legitimate. The central idea was that people who strongly want to feel significant may be more attracted to values that promise status, power, wealth, and respect. These values are also central to the image and social influence of mafia organizations.

What did the researchers do and find?

The article reports two survey studies with Italian participants. Study 1 examined whether people who reported a stronger quest for significance were more tolerant of situations in which individuals accept help or money from criminal organizations during difficult times. The findings showed that this relationship was explained by stronger endorsement of self-enhancement values, such as influence, wealth, authority, and power. Study 2 tested the same idea using a more direct measure of perceived mafia legitimacy. It also examined masculine honor ideology, which includes beliefs about toughness, retaliation, and the defense of respect. The findings showed that the quest for significance was associated with greater perceived legitimacy of mafias through both self-enhancement values and masculine honor ideology.

What do these findings mean?

The findings suggest that support for, or tolerance toward, mafia-related practices may not be based only on fear, tradition, or practical dependence. It may also reflect a motivational process: people who want to feel important may be drawn to cultural values that present power, dominance, wealth, and honor as routes to recognition. When mafias are seen as embodying these values, their authority may appear more legitimate. This does not mean that people necessarily support violence or criminal behavior directly. Rather, the results highlight how certain values and ideologies can make criminal organizations appear meaningful, powerful, or socially relevant. Understanding these motivational processes may help researchers and policymakers design prevention efforts that offer non-criminal routes to dignity, status, and social recognition.

PsychOpen GOLD

The term mafias typically refers to a wide array of criminal organizations, often characterized by a rigid hierarchical internal organization, engagement in different illegal activities (e.g., drug selling, predatory crimes), and illegal governance over a given territory (Paoli, 2004; Travaglino & Drury, 2020; Von Lampe, 2016). Within the territories where they are embedded, mafias may be able to control criminality by forbidding certain crimes and enforcing such bans through their own code of "justice," exert power over businesses by demanding a "tax" for operating in areas controlled by mafias, and extort people in exchange for "protection" (Paoli, 2004; Siebert, 2003; Von Lampe, 2016). Such illegal governance is inherently political in nature, as through these practices mafias exercise forms of power and authority typically associated with state institutions (Paoli, 2004). The continued existence of mafias relies not only on fear of retribution, but also on the population's legitimization of their authority (Travaglino & Abrams, 2019; Travaglino & Drury, 2020).

Given the prevalence of mafias and their societal impact, understanding why local populations confer legitimacy to these organizations is crucial. Prior research suggests that a mafia's legitimacy is rooted in the endorsement of a masculine honor ideology, which condones the use of violence when individuals feel dishonored or disrespected (Travaglino & Abrams, 2019; Travaglino et al., 2016; Travaglino & Drury, 2020). Although this literature advances our understanding of the cultural factors that influence mafias' legitimacy, less is known about individual motivations that may guide this process. Based on the quest for significance theory, we propose that the need for significance, a fundamental human need to matter, be respected, and be recognized (Kruglanski et al., 2009, 2019), predicts the endorsement of mafia-aligned values and ideologies, thereby supporting perceived legitimacy.

Honor cultures and masculinity norms have both been highlighted as narratives that define how individuals can attain significance within their cultural contexts (Kruglanski et al., 2022). We posit that ideologies such as the masculine honor code, together with self-enhancement values such as power and wealth, sustain mafia influence and contribute to legitimizing their authority (Hess, 2011; Schneider & Schneider, 2007; Travaglino & Abrams, 2019; Travaglino & Drury, 2020).

Mafias' Legitimacy

Mafia organizations exert strong influence on social, political, and economic aspects of the territories where they operate (e.g., Felson, 2006; Hess, 2011; Schneider & Schneider, 2003, 2007; Siebert, 1998). This influence is bolstered by omertà, a culturally embedded code of silence in which individuals refrain from interfering with criminal activity to avoid retaliation (Travaglino & Abrams, 2019; Travaglino & Drury, 2020). Omertà goes beyond fear or passivity, encompassing broader, culturally structured ways in which communities regulate coexistence under mafia presence. It often functions as a "solidarity agreement," in which individuals protect each other and guarantee immunity to

PsychOpen GOLD

those who commit crimes (Schneider & Schneider, 2007; Travaglino & Abrams, 2019; Travaglino & Drury, 2020).

Even though fear of violent retaliation may explain much of mafia influence, local communities are not necessarily exclusively passive victims of mafias. Mafias' power also depends on collusion, reciprocity, and symbolic and attitudinal legitimacy from local populations (Schneider & Schneider, 2007; Travaglino & Abrams, 2019; Travaglino & Drury, 2020). Schneider and Schneider (2007) identify two processes establishing organic connections between Cosa Nostra and their surroundings: a process of conditioning elite interlocutors, such as politicians and business owners, through webs of mutual reciprocity, and a process of provisioning, taking care of, and assisting ordinary people with solutions to their problems. These processes secure community endorsement and perceived legitimacy without requiring the use of violence, although the threat of retaliation remains.

According to intracultural appropriation theory (Travaglino & Abrams, 2019; Travaglino & Drury, 2020), groups gain legitimacy by portraying themselves as prototypical embodiments of culturally valued norms and ideologies. Mafias, for example, symbolically enact masculine honor ideology, making them appear as legitimate carriers of the social order. Their authority relies not only on power and coercion but also on the embeddedness of a masculine honor ideology within the broader social and cultural context, in which dominance, respect, and retaliation shape social norms (e.g., in southern Italian regions; Peristiany, 1966). Endorsement of a masculine honor ideology is associated with positive attitudes toward mafias and increased contact with their members (Travaglino et al., 2016; Travaglino & Drury, 2019).

While local endorsement of the mafias' ideological universe is crucial to their legitimacy (e.g., Travaglino & Abrams, 2019; Travaglino & Drury, 2020), previous research has largely neglected the individual motivations that lead people to legitimate criminal groups through the endorsement of their values. One motivation that may play a meaningful role in this process is that of the quest for significance (Kruglanski et al., 2022). Although mafia influence is embedded in cultural, relational, and reciprocal networks, these broader structures operate by activating and shaping individual motivations.

The Quest for Significance

Significance-quest theory posits that the quest for significance is a fundamental human motivation to matter, to be valued by others, and to merit respect and dignity, which underlies human social behavior (Kruglanski et al., 2009, 2013, 2019, 2022; Kruglanski, Gelfand, et al., 2014). This need may be activated by situational conditions of deprivation, such as being ignored, disrespected, or humiliated, or incentivization, such as the perceived attainability of valued ends that provide significance (e.g., Kruglanski, Chernikova, et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2018). When activated, individuals become motivated to enact extreme behaviors (e.g., Chirico et al., 2021; Dugas et al., 2016; Kruglanski

PsychOpen GOLD

et al., 2017; Pica, 2026), endorse values, and join groups capable of conferring significance (Kruglanski, Gelfand, et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2009, 2022).

This dynamic is captured by the "3N model" of need, narrative, and network (Kruglanski et al., 2019). According to this model, the need for significance does not influence behavior directly; rather, it is expressed through culturally available narratives that define how recognition and worth can be achieved and are reinforced within relevant social networks. Applied to mafias, when individuals are embedded in social contexts where mafia-related values are shared and reinforced, these narratives provide culturally recognized pathways to significance, which may lead individuals to perceive mafias as legitimate.

We therefore propose that the endorsement of values linked to mafias' objectives (i.e., self-enhancement values: influence, wealth, authority, and power) and of a masculine honor ideology may support mafias' legitimacy (see Travaglino & Abrams, 2019; Travaglino et al., 2016; Travaglino & Drury, 2020), because they offer culturally salient routes to achieving significance. From this perspective, lending legitimacy to mafias is not an end in itself, but a way to satisfy the basic need to matter by aligning with socially valued ideals.

The Present Research

Based on these premises, we hypothesized that the quest for significance predicts perceived legitimacy of mafias by means of two parallel mediational processes: (1) the endorsement of self-enhancement values (i.e., influence, wealth, authority, power), and (2) the endorsement of a masculine honor ideology. Study 1 assessed attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion as an indirect indicator of legitimacy, while Study 2 measured perceived legitimacy directly. Both studies focused on internalized perceptions and endorsements rather than compliance driven by fear.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted a secondary data analysis on cross-sectional data collected for the research project "The Motivational Dynamics Underlying Mafia and Antimafia." Whereas Pica et al. (2025) examined predictors of anti-mafia action, the present article focuses on the motivational antecedents of perceived mafia legitimacy. The data were collected through two online questionnaires distributed using a snowball sampling method using Google Forms from December 2019 to May 2021. No incentive was offered for participating. At the beginning of the surveys, participants gave their informed consent after being informed about the topic of the research as well as the procedure in accordance with the ethical principles and rules of conduct of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017).

PsychOpen GOLD

Study 1

The aim of Study 1 was to test the first mediational hypothesis, that the relationship between the quest for significance and attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion is mediated by the endorsement of self-enhancement values, given that these values align with the objectives and culture of such criminal organizations (e.g., Felson, 2006; Hess, 2011). We tested this hypothesis by excluding the potential mediating effects of other values assessed in the survey.

Materials and Method

Participants and Procedures

Six hundred and eighty-four Italian citizens (274 women; *Mage* = 41.22 years, *SDage* = 11.93) participated in the study. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling via email and social media. Eligibility required being at least 18 years old and residing in Italy. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and uncompensated. Data were collected online between May and September 2020. Most participants had a high school degree (75.7%), Bachelor's degree (9.5%), or Master's degree (9.5%); the rest had a PhD or other professional degree (2.5%), or a middle school education (2.8%). All measures were presented in Italian. An a priori power analysis using 5,000 Monte Carlo simulations indicated a minimum required sample of 264 participants.

Measures

Quest for significance. Quest for significance was assessed by asking participants to what extent they agreed with three statements taken from Molinario and colleagues (2021; unpublished): "I wish I could be more respected"; "I wish I meant more to other people"; and "I wish other people thought I were significant." Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). The three items were averaged to create a composite quest for significance score (α = .86).

Values. Values were assessed using a short version of Schwartz's value scale (1992) developed by Stern and colleagues (1998). This scale consists of 15 values that belong to five major clusters: biospheric, altruistic, self-enhancement, openness to change, and conservation values. We added one item to the altruistic values (honesty), and one item to the self-enhancement values (power). Respondents indicated to what extent these values were important "as a guiding principle in their lives" on a seven-point scale. Internal consistency analyses supported the reliability of the dimensions (altruistic values, α = .72; biospheric values, α = .85; self-enhancement values, α = .71; openness to change values, α = .71; and conservation values, α = .50).

Attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion. Attitudes toward individuals who engage in collusion with mafias were assessed with three ad-hoc items focused

PsychOpen GOLD

on accepting money, loans, or "help" from criminal organizations in times of crisis. Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale. The three items were averaged to compute a composite score, with higher scores indicating greater tolerance (α = .90).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the key variables of the study are reported in Table 1. Results showed that the quest for significance was positively and significantly correlated with self-enhancement values (r = .32, p < .001), openness to change values (r = .12, p < .01), and attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion (r = .18, p < .001). Attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion was negatively and significantly correlated with conservation, biospheric, and altruistic values.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Internal Consistency Estimates, and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion	2.49	1.55	(.90)						
2. Quest for significance	3.86	1.67	.18***	(.86)					
3. Self-enhancement values	2.75	1.11	.24***	.32***	(.71)				
4. Conservation values	5.28	0.65	-.10**	.05	.12**	(.50)			
5. Biospheric values	5.32	0.82	-.12**	.04	-.05	.43***	(.85)		
6. Openness to change values	4.86	0.89	-.02	.12**	.17***	.29***	.39***	(.71)	
7. Altruistic values	5.54	0.58	-.17***	.03	-.07	.48***	.58***	.38***	(.72)

Note. Values on the diagonal (in parentheses) are Cronbach's α coefficients.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Multiple Mediation Model

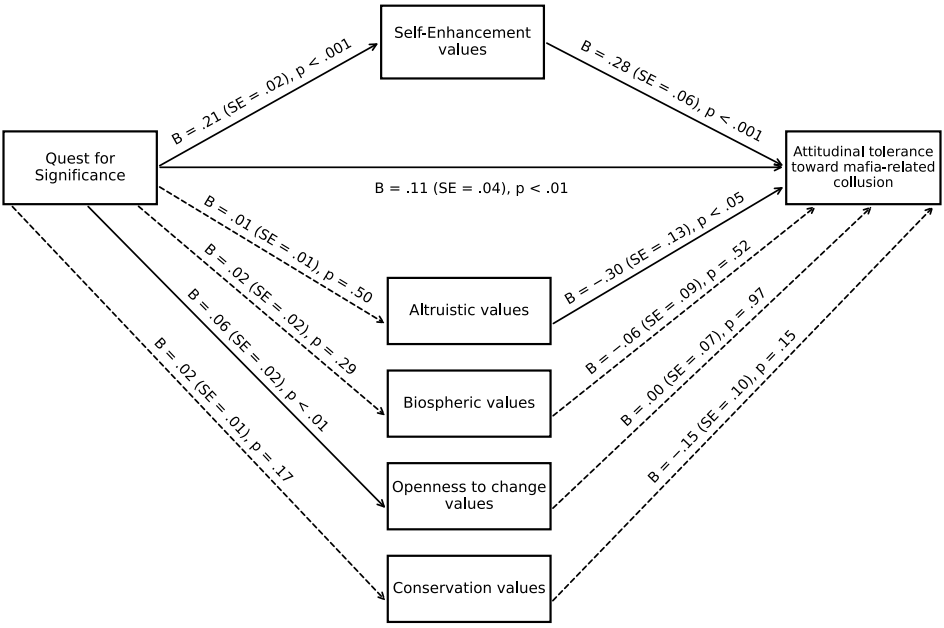
The multiple mediation model analysis was tested according to Hayes's (2018) recommendations. Specifically, Model 4 in the PROCESS macro was tested with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The direct and indirect effects between the quest for significance and attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion were examined while modeling self-enhancement values as the hypothesized mediator. Biospheric, conservation, openness to change, and altruistic values were also entered as potential mediators.

Quest for significance positively and significantly predicted endorsement of self-enhancement values, B = .21, *SE* = .02, 95% CI [.164, .259], p < .001, which, in turn, positively and significantly predicted attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion, B = .28, *SE* = .06, 95% CI [.172, .391], p < .001. The indirect effect of quest for significance on attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion via self-enhancement values was significant and positive (indirect effect = .060, BootSE = .014, 95% CI [.034, .090]). No other indirect effect was significant. In summary, the proposed mediation model was supported.[1] (See Figure 1).

PsychOpen GOLD

Figure 1

Hypothesized Multiple Mediation Model



Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Solid lines indicate significant paths. Dashed lines indicate non-significant paths.

Study 2

The results of Study 1 provided initial support for the prediction that the quest for significance positively predicts attitudinal indicators of perceived legitimacy toward mafia-related practices through the endorsement of self-enhancement values. Study 2 was designed to extend and strengthen these findings by replicating the observed mediational effect of self-enhancement values, testing masculine honor ideology as a second mediational pathway, and incorporating a more direct measure of mafia legitimacy.

1) The mediation analysis was re-run including age, gender, and education as covariates predicting both the mediators and the dependent variable. The indirect effect of the quest for significance on attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion via self-enhancement values remained significant, while indirect effects via other value-based mediators remained non-significant. Covariates showed small but significant associations with specific mediators but did not alter the main indirect effect.

PsychOpen GOLD

Materials and Method

Participants and Procedures

Two hundred and ninety-nine Italian citizens (216 women; *Mage* = 26.71 years, *SDage* = 12.76) participated in this study. Participants were recruited using the same snowball sampling procedure described in Study 1. The sample included mostly university students but also individuals from outside the university. Eligibility, voluntary participation, and anonymity were the same as in Study 1. Data were collected online between April and May 2021. Most participants had a high school degree (77.5%), Bachelor's degree (11.4%), or Master's degree (5%); the rest had a PhD or other professional degree (0.7%), or a middle school education (5.4%). All measures were presented in Italian. A sample of 250 participants was suggested by 5,000 Monte Carlo simulations, and the final sample exceeded this minimum.

Measures

Quest for significance. Quest for significance was assessed using the same items as in Study 1. Items were averaged to create a composite score (α = .75).

Values. Values were assessed using the same scale used in Study 1. Items corresponding to each value dimension were averaged to create composite scores (altruistic values, α = .77; biospheric values, α = .88; self-enhancement values, α = .77; openness to change values, α = .63; and conservation values, α = .50).

Masculine honor ideology. Masculine honor ideology was assessed by adapting eight items taken from Travaglino and colleagues (2014), who previously modified the original Honor Ideology for Manhood scale (Barnes et al., 2012). Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale. The items were averaged to compute a single composite score, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of masculine honor ideology (α = .89).

Attitudes regarding the legitimacy of mafias. Attitudes regarding the legitimacy of mafias were assessed by two items taken from Travaglino and colleagues (2016): "Some aspects of mafias activity are legitimate" and "Some actions of mafias may have positive direct or indirect consequences for the area where you live." Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale. The two items were averaged to compute a single composite score; the two items were highly correlated (*Spearman-Brown's r* = .51, $p < .001$).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the key variables are reported in Table 2. Results showed that the quest for significance was positively and significantly correlated with the endorsement of a masculine honor ideology and self-enhancement values (r = .21, $p < .001$; r = .26, $p < .001$, respectively). Attitudes regarding the legitimacy of mafias

PsychOpen GOLD

were negatively and significantly correlated with conservation, biospheric, openness to change, and altruistic values.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics, Internal Consistency Estimates, and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Attitudes regarding the legitimacy of mafias	1.87	1.23	(.51)							
2. Quest for significance	4.80	1.34	.07	(.75)						
3. Masculine honor ideology	3.07	1.41	.34***	.21***	(.89)					
4. Self-enhancement values	3.08	1.24	.27***	.26***	.43***	(.77)				
5. Conservation values	5.32	0.71	-.27***	.11	.14*	.10	(.50)			
6. Biospheric values	5.19	1.02	-.38***	.06	-.14*	-.11*	.49***	(.88)		
7. Openness to change values	5.00	0.90	-.18***	.00	.03	.20**	.35***	.40***	(.63)	
8. Altruistic values	5.46	0.73	-.40***	.10	-.21***	-.16**	.57***	.68***	.34***	(.77)

Note. Values on the diagonal (in parentheses) indicate internal consistency estimates. The coefficient for attitudes regarding the legitimacy of mafias is the Spearman–Brown coefficient; all other coefficients are Cronbach's α.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Multiple Parallel Mediation Model

The multiple parallel mediation model analysis was tested according to Hayes's (2018) recommendations. Specifically, Model 4 in the PROCESS macro was tested with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The direct and indirect effects between the quest for significance and attitudes regarding the legitimacy of mafias were examined while modeling masculine honor ideology and self-enhancement values as mediators. Biospheric, conservation, openness to change, and altruistic values were also entered as potential mediators.

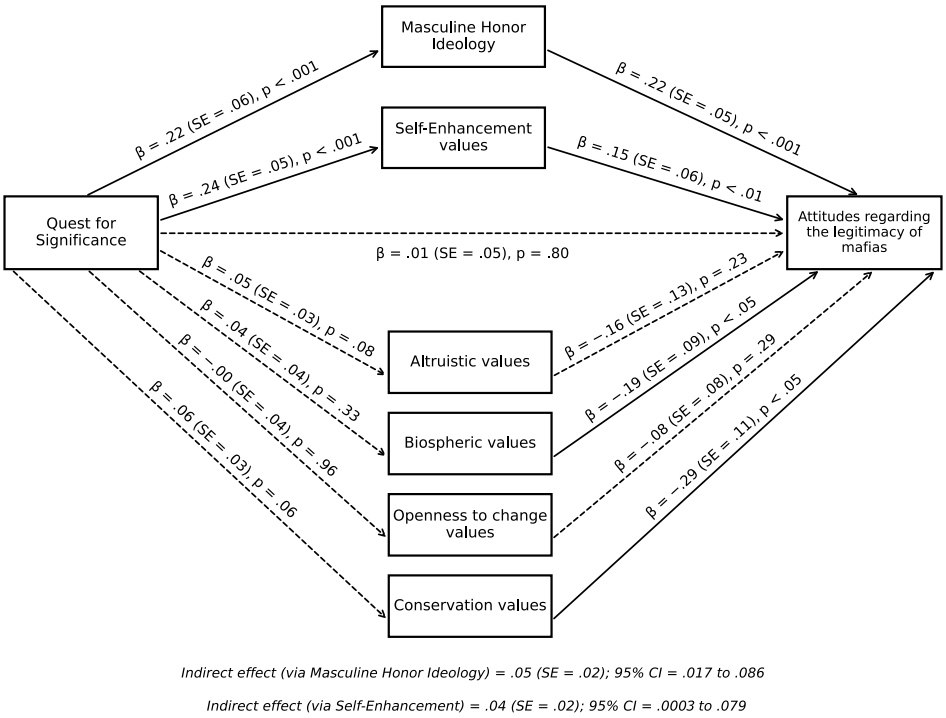
Quest for significance positively and significantly predicted endorsement of a masculine honor ideology, B = .22, *SE* = .06, 95% CI [.098, .333], $p < .001$, which, in turn, positively and significantly predicted attitudes regarding the legitimacy of mafias, B = .22, *SE* = .05, 95% CI [.123, .322], $p < .001$. Furthermore, the quest for significance positively and significantly predicted endorsement of self-enhancement values, B = .24, *SE* = .05, 95% CI [.134, .338], $p < .001$, which, in turn, positively and significantly predicted attitudes regarding the legitimacy of mafias, B = .15, *SE* = .06, 95% CI [.037, .266], $p < .01$. The indirect effects via masculine honor ideology and self-enhancement values were significant and positive (indirect effect = .048, BootSE = .018, 95% CI [.017, .086]; indirect effect = .036, BootSE = .020, 95% CI [.0003, .079], respectively). No other indirect effect was significant.[2] (See Figure 2).

2) The multiple parallel mediation analysis was re-run including age, gender, and education as covariates predicting both the mediators and the dependent variable. The indirect effect via masculine honor ideology remained significant, while the indirect effect via self-enhancement values approached significance (marginal effect). Other mediators

PsychOpen GOLD

Figure 2

Hypothesized Multiple Parallel Mediation Model



Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Solid lines indicate significant paths. Dashed lines indicate non-significant paths.

General Discussion

This article aimed to analyze the motivational role of the quest for significance in shaping individual perceptions of the legitimacy of mafia organizations. The results of two cross-sectional studies provided empirical evidence that the quest for significance has indirect effects on perceived legitimacy of mafias through the endorsement of values and ideologies aligned with the objectives and cultural narrative of these organizations (e.g., Felson, 2006; Hess, 2011). Study 1 found that the quest for significance positively

were non-significant. Covariates, including gender and education, predicted some mediators but did not affect the primary mediation pathways.

PsychOpen GOLD

predicts attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion through the endorsement of self-enhancement values, while excluding the potential mediating effects of other values. Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 and added an analysis of the mediational role of masculine honor ideology, previously found to be linked to perceived legitimacy of mafias (Travaglino et al., 2016).

From a theoretical standpoint, these results are consistent with the quest for significance theory (Kruglanski, Gelfand, et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2022), which holds that the quest for significance can lead people to endorse culturally available ideologies and values that promise recognition and personal worth. Although the present studies did not assess endorsement of violent acts directly, they examined perceived legitimacy of mafia organizations whose authority and power are strictly intertwined with the use of violence (Paoli, 2004; Travaglino & Drury, 2020; Von Lampe, 2016).

This interpretation is consistent with the 3N model (Kruglanski et al., 2019), according to which personal needs for significance are expressed through culturally available narratives and reinforced within social networks that validate specific routes to status and recognition. The results also align with intracultural appropriation theory (Travaglino & Abrams, 2019; Travaglino & Drury, 2020), as mafias gain influence by symbolically embodying culturally valued ideals, thereby appearing as prototypical carriers of the social order.

By connecting the quest for significance to perceived legitimacy of mafias, this research extends prior studies linking the same motivational dynamics to support for terrorism (Kruglanski, Gelfand, et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2009, 2019, 2022). It suggests that different forms of support for extreme or criminal organizations, whether terrorist groups or mafias, share a common motivational substrate rooted in the pursuit of personal significance.

In addition to contributing to the literature on significance-quest theory, the present research contributes to the literature on mafias by addressing a motivational aspect that has been largely neglected in research on factors underlying mafias' support, and by broadening our understanding of the cultural values that sustain mafia influence. The pursuit of wealth, power, and influence complements adherence to a masculine honor ideology in explaining support for mafia organizations.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research is not without limitations. First, the studies are correlational, and therefore causal inferences cannot be drawn. Future studies should replicate the present results longitudinally or use experiments in which the quest for significance is manipulated through conditions of deprivation or incentivization. Second, the present research focused on attitudinal perceptions rather than concrete behavioral outcomes. Future research may test whether perceived legitimacy of mafias predicts intentions to join such groups, particularly among youth.

PsychOpen GOLD

Third, the value-based pathway may not be the only mechanism linking the quest for significance to individual attitudes toward legitimacy of mafia organizations. Significance may also be achieved through a process of vicarious identification with powerful mafia members. Future studies may test whether the link between the quest for significance and attitudes toward legitimacy of mafias is mediated by participants' admiration of and identification with these groups and their members. Finally, our online samples did not assess participants' exposure to mafia-dominated environments, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Differences in local embeddedness and exposure to mafia influence could moderate the observed relationships.

In sum, the findings should be interpreted cautiously, as the correlational design, attitudinal measures, and online sampling limit causal inference and generalizability.

Conclusion

The present research provides evidence suggesting that the quest for significance is associated with perceived legitimacy of mafia organizations through the endorsement of self-enhancement values and a masculine honor ideology. By integrating motivational theory with culturally grounded explanations of mafia influence, this work highlights why individuals internalize and legitimize mafia-aligned cultural values and ideologies. Given the harmful consequences of mafia control and influence, understanding such processes is critical to reducing mafia influence and its detrimental effects.

Funding: The authors have no funding to report.

Acknowledgments: The authors have no additional (i.e., non-financial) support to report.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Ethics Statement: This set of studies was approved by the Ethical Committee of Sapienza University of Rome. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Data Availability: The data sets and study materials supporting the findings of this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework (OSF) repository at https://osf.io/cynq9. The repository includes the data and materials necessary to reproduce the analyses reported in this article.

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials include the following items:

- The data sets and study materials (Pica, 2026S)

PsychOpen GOLD

- Supplementary tables (Pica et al., 2026S):
  - **Table S1:** Regression analyses for Study 1 examining the associations between quest for significance, personal values, and attitudinal tolerance toward mafia-related collusion, including the total, direct, and indirect effects of the multiple mediation model.
  - **Table S2:** Regression analyses for Study 2 examining the associations between quest for significance, masculine honor ideology, personal values, and perceived legitimacy of mafias, including the total, direct, and indirect effects of the parallel mediation model.

Index of Supplementary Materials

Pica, G. (2026S). *Mafia and antimafia action* [Data sets and study materials]. PsychOpen GOLD. https://osf.io/cynq9

Pica, G., Ellenberg, M., Pierro, A., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2026S). *Supplementary materials to "A motivational analysis of perceived legitimacy of mafias"* [Supplementary tables]. PsychOpen GOLD. https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.22762

References

American Psychological Association. (2017). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct* (2002, amended effective June 1, 2010, and January 1, 2017). https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/ethics-code-2017.pdf

Barnes, C. D., Brown, R. P., & Osterman, L. L. (2012). Don't tread on me: Masculine honor ideology in the U.S. and militant responses to terrorism. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin, 38*(8), 1018–1029. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167212443383

Chirico, A., Lucidi, F., Pica, G., Di Santo, D., Galli, F., Alivernini, F., Mallia, L., Zelli, A., Kruglanski, A. W., & Pierro, A. (2021). The motivational underpinnings of intentions to use doping in sport: A sample of young non-professional athletes. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(10), Article 5411. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18105411

Dugas, M., Bélanger, J. J., Moyano, M., Schumpe, B. M., Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Touchton-Leonard, K., & Nociti, N. (2016). The quest for significance motivates self-sacrifice. *Motivation Science, 2*(1), 15–32. https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000030

Felson, M. (2006). *Crime and nature*. SAGE.

Hayes, A. F. (2018). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Hess, H. (2011). Approaching and explaining the mafia phenomenon: Attempt of a sociologist. *Sociologica: Italian Journal of Sociology Online,* 2/2011. https://doi.org/10.2383/35870

Kruglanski, A. W., Bélanger, J. J., Gelfand, M. J., Gunaratna, R., Hettiarachchi, M., Reinares, F., Orehek, E., Sasota, J., & Sharvit, K. (2013). Terrorism: A (self) love story: Redirecting the significance quest can end violence. *American Psychologist, 68*(7), 559–575. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032615

PsychOpen GOLD

Kruglanski, A. W., Bélanger, J. J., & Gunaratna, R. (2019). *The three pillars of radicalization: Needs, narratives, and networks.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190851125.001.0001

Kruglanski, A. W., Chen, X., Dechesne, M., Fishman, S., & Orehek, E. (2009). Fully committed: Suicide bombers' motivation and the quest for personal significance. *Political Psychology, 30*(3), 331–357. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2009.00698.x

Kruglanski, A. W., Chernikova, M., Rosenzweig, E., & Kopetz, C. (2014). On motivational readiness. *Psychological Review, 121*(3), 367–388. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037013

Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Bélanger, J. J., Sheveland, A., Hettiarachchi, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2014). The psychology of radicalization and deradicalization: How significance quest impacts violent extremism. *Advances in Political Psychology, 35*(S1), 69–93. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12163

Kruglanski, A. W., Jasko, K., Chernikova, M., Dugas, M., & Webber, D. (2017). To the fringe and back: Violent extremism and the psychology of deviance. *American Psychologist, 72*(3), 217–230. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000091

Kruglanski, A. W., Molinario, E., Jasko, K., Webber, D., Leander, P. N., & Pierro, A. (2022). Significance-quest theory. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 17*(4), 1050–1071. https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916211034825

Molinario, E., Elster, A., Kruglanski, A. W., Webber, D., Jasko, K., Leander, P. N., Sensales, G., Szumowska, E., & Jaume, L. (2021). *Striving for significance: Development and validation of the quest for significance scale* [Unpublished manuscript]. Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park.

Paoli, L. (2004). Italian organised crime: Mafia associations and criminal enterprises. *Global Crime, 6*(1), 19–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/1744057042000297954

Pica, G. (2026). The quest for significance and resistance to criminality: A case study in Centocelle, Rome. *International Journal of Social Psychology, 41*(2), 353–369. https://doi.org/10.1177/02134748261426500

Pica, G., Pierro, A., Giovagnoli, M., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2025). Antimafia action: A test for a motivational hypothesis. *Current Psychology, 44*(12), 12719–12732. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-025-08025-1

Peristiany, J. G. (1966). *Honour and shame: The values of Mediterranean society.* University of Chicago Press.

Schneider, J. C., & Schneider, P. T. (2003). *Reversible destiny: Mafia, antimafia, and the struggle for Palermo.* University of California Press.

Schneider, J. C., & Schneider, P. T. (2007). Mafias. In D. Nugent & J. Vincent (Eds.), *A companion to anthropology of politics* (pp. 303–317). Blackwell.

Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 25*, 1–65. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60281-6

PsychOpen GOLD

Siebert, R. (1998). Dinamiche psichiche, condotte violente: Uomini e donne di mafia. In G. Lo Verso (Ed.), *La mafia dentro: Psicologia e psicopatologia di un fondamentalismo* (pp. 107–118). FrancoAngeli.

Siebert, R. (2003). Mafia and anti-mafia: The implications for everyday life. In F. Allum & R. Siebert (Eds.), *Organized crime and the challenge to democracy* (pp. 24–38). Routledge.

Stern, P. C., Dietz, T., & Guagnano, G. A. (1998). A brief inventory of values. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 58*(6), 984–1001. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164498058006008

Travaglino, G. A., & Abrams, D. (2019). How criminal organisations exert secret power over communities: An intracultural appropriation theory of cultural values and norms. *European Review of Social Psychology, 30*(1), 74–122. https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2019.1621128

Travaglino, G. A., Abrams, D., & Randsley de Moura, G. (2016). Men of honor don't talk: The relationship between masculine honor and social activism against criminal organizations in Italy. *Political Psychology, 37*(2), 183–199. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12226

Travaglino, G. A., Abrams, D., Randsley de Moura, G., & Russo, G. (2014). Organized crime and group-based ideology: The association between masculine honor and collective opposition against criminal organizations. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 17*(6), 799–812. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430214533394

Travaglino, G. A., & Drury, L. (2019). Connected guys: Endorsement of masculine honour predicts more frequent contact with members of criminal organisations. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 49*(1), 157–168. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2389

Travaglino, G. A., & Drury, L. (2020). *The secret power of criminal organizations: A social psychological approach.* Springer.

Von Lampe, K. (2016). *Organized crime: Analyzing illegal activities, criminal structures, and extra legal governance.* SAGE.

Webber, D., Babush, M., Schori-Eyal, N., Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, A., Hettiarachchi, M., Bélanger, J. J., Moyano, M., Trujillo, H. M., Gunaratna, R., Kruglanski, A. W., & Gelfand, M. J. (2018). The road to extremism: Field and experimental evidence that significance loss-induced need for closure fosters radicalization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 114*(2), 270–285. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000111

PsychOpen GOLD