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A Path to Solidarity: The Mediating Role of Self-Transcendence Values in the Relationship Between Perceived Anomie and Collective Action

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Abstract

This study investigated whether perceived anomie can foster engagement in collective action, particularly in favour of marginalised groups, such as immigrants. Building on recent research suggesting that anomie may trigger prosocial values like benevolence and universalism, we tested the hypothesis that self-transcendence values mediate the relationship between perceived anomie and collective action intentions. A sample of 298 Italian participants completed validated measures of anomie perception, personal values (Schwartz's model), and collective action support. Mediation analysis indicated that perceived anomie positively predicted self-transcendence values, which, in turn, significantly predicted support for collective action. The direct effect of anomie on collective action was non-significant, whereas the indirect effect via self-transcendence was significant, supporting the mediation hypothesis. These findings suggest that perceptions of societal breakdown may foster prosocial engagement by activating altruistic value orientations.

Keywords: Perceived anomie; Self-transcendence values; Collective action; Immigrants

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Introduction

In recent years, global crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing international conflicts have led to profound social consequences. Among these, an increase in social inequalities and attitudes of closure and social exclusion of vulnerable populations—particularly immigrants—has been widely documented (Gerber & Gimpelson, 2024; Mishra et al., 2020). On the one hand, wars have caused and continue to cause humanitarian crises and mass migrations to safer countries (Maidanik, 2024); on the other hand, pandemic-related restrictions and the consequential desire for clear and strict regulations have contributed to increasing ethnocentrism and hostility towards out-groups (Albarello, Mula, et al., 2023; Mula et al., 2022). In addition, the containment measures of the virus also resulted in a reduction of social interactions as a side effect, leading to a weakening of interpersonal relationships and an increased sense of loneliness (Magis-Weinberg et al., 2025; Tillewein et al., 2024).

These circumstances can intensify the perception of *anomie* - a term originally coined by Durkheim (1897/1987) to describe a state of deregulation and absence of social norms. Anomie is known to escalate during times of rapid transformations or crises (Mihail, 2015), especially when individuals perceive a breakdown in shared norms and institutional guidance (Rahmani et al., 2022). In such conditions, people may feel uncertain about expected social behaviour, leading to a sense of disconnection and distrust in others and in institutions (Atteslander, 2019). This perceived collapse of social order is particularly significant when it affects relationships with already marginalized/prejudiced groups, such as immigrants (Hövermann et al., 2015).

While anomie is often associated with disengagement and social fragmentation, recent studies suggest it may also give rise to contrasting reactions: in certain contexts, crises have spurred new forms of solidarity and prosocial behaviour—at least among different refugee groups (Mitra, 2024). These observations open a crucial question: Can perceived anomie lead to openness and collective engagement, rather than to social withdrawal and exclusion? The present study specifically addresses this question. It seeks to explore if anomie may encourage collective action in support of stigmatised groups, particularly immigrants. Specifically, we investigate whether the influence of perceived anomie on prosocial action towards immigrants is mediated by individual value orientations—particularly those that promote altruism and concern for others.

As discussed in the following sections, numerous studies indicate that prosocial behavior and political activism are closely tied to motivational factors, such as personal values. In particular, collectivist or self-transcendence values (e.g., universalism, benevolence) are positively associated with civic and altruistic engagement (Vecchione et al., 2015), besides being positively associated with a left-wing political orientation (Caprara et al., 2006). Moreover, evidence suggests that these values may intensify in times of crisis, when shared uncertainty can increase empathy and motivate more privileged individuals to act in support of those facing disadvantage (Sortheix et al., 2019; Tekin et al., 2021). If perceived anomie threatens social cohesion, then what psychological process might account for the link between perceived anomie and support for collective action in favour of immigrants? Could personal values be the mediating factor?

Anomie

Anomie is a multifaceted construct with deep roots in classical and contemporary sociological theory. Originally introduced by Durkheim, the term referred to a condition of social disintegration and normative breakdown, typically emerging in response to rapid societal transformations (Durkheim, 1897/1987; Seeman, 1991). At its core, anomie encompasses two interrelated dimensions: disintegration, which is the erosion of moral standards and a lack of trust, and deregulation, characterized by the perception that leadership is ineffective and does not distribute resources fairly (Parales Quenza, 2009; Teymoori et al., 2016, 2017). This shared perception of societal breakdown can generate a sense of instability and disorientation, reflecting a loss of social order and normative guidance (Neerdaels et al., 2024). In this sense, anomie is not simply a state of individual alienation, but a broader societal condition in which institutions appear incapable of upholding cohesion or fairness. As discussed earlier, research has demonstrated that such perceptions often emerge in response to accelerating social changes—such as migration flows, pandemics, economic crises, or armed conflicts—that disrupt existing social equilibria (Karimi & Jafari-Koshki, 2020; Mihail, 2015).

Importantly, the experience of anomie is closely intertwined with feelings of uncertainty and lack of control, which can lead to divergent psychological outcomes. On one hand, has been associated with increased prejudice, authoritarianism, social conservatism, and exclusionary attitudes, particularly toward minorities and immigrants (Albarello, Mula, et al., 2023; Fritsche et al., 2011). On the other hand, recent contributions (Wolf et al., 2020; Teymoori et al., 2017) highlight that shared perceptions of instability may also elicit empathy, social identification, and prosocial motivations—especially when individuals respond by reaffirming common human values. For instance, Abrutyn (2019) found that the distress individuals perceive in an anomic context can, in some cases, foster interest in prosocial behavior, as individuals seek to cope with uncertainty and reinforce interpersonal bonds. Similarly, Tekin et al. (2021) argued that in situations of perceived mismanagement by authority, social identification may increase, leading to increased support and cooperation between individuals. In such contexts, even among more privileged individuals, a shared sense of vulnerability may foster solidarity and engagement under the banner of a common human identity (Liekefett & Becker, 2021; Tekin et al., 2021; see also Albarello & Rubini, 2008, 2015; Albarello, Crocetti, et al., 2023).

Motivational Predictors of Collective Action: Personal Values Orientation

One possible indirect prosocial outcome of anomie is increased participation in *collective action* (Ionescu et al., 2021)—broadly defined as solidarity-based behaviour aimed at supporting

disadvantaged groups and promoting social equity (Cocco et al., 2024). This includes actions or intentions to benefit marginalized populations, such as expanding their rights and opportunities through individual or collective efforts and policy advocacy. Collective action can take the form of public demonstrations, petitions, or everyday activism, undertaken by individuals who identify with a group and seek to improve its social conditions and challenge injustice (Van Zomeren et al., 2008; 2018). According to Van Zomeren (2013), individuals are driven to collective action by four key motivations: beliefs in group efficacy, a shared sense of identity, emotional responses (particularly anger in response to perceived injustice), and moral convictions that bridge the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

While these situational factors are central, research also highlights the predictive role of individual value orientations in shaping collective engagement. In particular, values of self-transcendence—such as universalism and benevolence—are consistently linked to greater empathy, concern for others, and political activism (Barton & Hart, 2023; Ponizovskiy, 2016; Vecchione et al., 2015; Zeng et al., 2019). Schwartz (1992, 1994) conceptualizes personal values as stable, culturally universal motivational goals. The author's model identifies ten core values organized along two main bipolar dimensions: *self-transcendence* versus *self-enhancement*, and *openness to change* versus *conservation* (Schwartz et al., 2012). These values are not just preferences, but deeply embedded motivational orientations that guide behaviour across life domains (Lee et al., 2019). A study by Davidov et al. (2008) across 19 European countries found that individuals scoring higher in self-transcendence values expressed more favourable attitudes towards immigration, whereas those high in conservation values were more exclusionary. Self-transcendent individuals are guided by a desire to transcend the self and connect with broader social or moral causes, perceiving the needs of the community as personal responsibilities (Garcia et al., 2020). These values appear to intensify in times of crisis, where uncertainty may foster altruism and a sense of shared human identity (Sortheix et al., 2019; Tekin et al., 2021). Based on this framework, we hypothesize that personal values (specifically values of self-transcendence) may act as psychological mediators in the relationship between perceived anomie and support for collective action.

The Present Study

The perception of anomie can lead to the fragmentation of social ties, an increased ethnocentrism and exclusionary attitudes—particularly toward immigrants. However, the literature points out - albeit to a lesser extent - that anomie may foster contrasting responses, such as openness to prosocial behaviour and participation in collective action, especially in favour of disadvantaged groups such as immigrants (Mitra, 2024). This ambivalence underscores the importance of investigating pathways linking perception of anomie to support for collective action. Building on existing evidence that self-transcendence values tend to increase in critical situations – and that such values are positively correlated with collective actions – we hypothesised that in situations of perceived anomie, self-transcendence values might intensify and act as mediators between perceived anomie and support for collective actions. Specifically, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The perception of anomie would be positively related to support for collective action (X →Y).

H2: Self-transcendence values would mediate the relationship between perceived anomie and support for collective action (X →M →Y). More specifically, it has been hypothesized that the perception of anomie would be positively related to self-transcendence values, which, in turn, would be positively associated with support for collective action.

Methods

Participants

We enrolled 298 Italian participants (43.6% male; M_{age} = 30.71; SD_{age} = 8.00; range from 20 to 61 years) in a correlational study to test our hypotheses. Specifically, the sample was composed as follows: 62.1% were workers, 29.9% were students, and 8.1% had other occupations. Also, 60.7% were university graduates, 34.9% attended high school, 3.7% had a Ph.D, and 0.7% attended middle school.

Procedure

All participants were contacted through an online paid procedure provided by Prolific. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and each provided information about their gender, educational level, and occupation. Participants who identified as immigrants in Italy were excluded from the study. Subsequently, participants filled out a questionnaire to collect the research measures of interest, as described below.

Measures

Perceived Anomie. Participants responded to the Perception of Anomie Scale (Teymoori et al., 2016). This scale includes 12 statements referring to their country, encompassing two dimensions: a perceived breakdown in social fabric (e.g., "Everyone thinks of himself/herself and does not help others in need") and a perceived breakdown in leadership (e.g., "Politicians don't care about the problems of the average person"). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Importantly, relying on the recent contribution by Teymoori et al. (2016) defining anomie as a "perceived state of the society" (p. 3), and stressing that its two dimensions, that is, "breakdown in social fabric and breakdown of leadership, are highly interrelated and can be mutually reinforcing; when one dimension breaks down, it will place additional weight on the other" (p. 3), we considered it as a single factor. Reliability was satisfactory (α = .79).

Values Orientations. To assess an individual's personal values, we employed the Short Schwartz's Value Survey (Lindeman

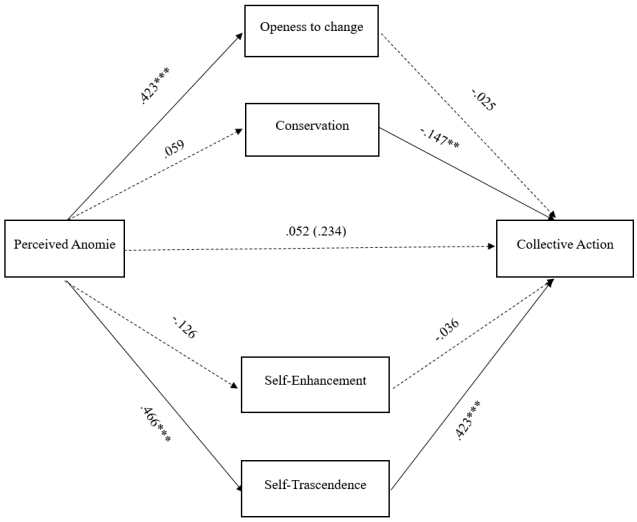
& Verkasalo, 2005), translated into Italian. The instrument comprises ten core values (power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security), which are grouped into four higher-order dimensions, in accordance with Schwartz's model: self-transcendence, self-enhancement, openness to change, and conservation. These four dimensions reflect two underlying bipolar continua: *self-transcendence* versus *self-enhancement* and *openness to change* versus *conservation*. Participants rated the importance of each value in their lives using a 9-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated that the value was opposed to their principles and 9 indicated that it was of supreme importance. The internal consistency of the four value dimensions was satisfactory: Cronbach's Alpha was 0.74 for conservation, 0.64 for openness to change, 0.72 for self-transcendence, and 0.78 for self-enhancement.

Collective Action Intentions. Participants' willingness to engage in collective action in support of immigrants was assessed through five items developed by De Cristofaro et al. (2019), based on Van Zomeren et al.' (2008) theoretical framework. Participants indicated their intention to participate in such actions by responding on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated no intention to engage in collective action in favour of immigrants, and 7 indicated a strong intent to do so. The internal consistency of the scale was excellent (α = 0.96).

Control Variable. To avoid possible confounding, as political orientation has been shown to be associated with value orientation (Caprara et al., 2006), participants' political orientation was included as a control variable. It was measured with a single item on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated an extremely left-wing orientation and 7 indicated an extremely right-wing orientation.

To test our mediational hypothesis, statistical analyses were conducted using *IBM SPSS Statistics* (Version 27). Parallel mediation analyses were performed using the PROCESS macro (Version 4.0; Hayes, 2022), specifically Model 4. The hypothesised model included perceived anomie as the main predictor variable, the four dimensions of Schwartz's values (self-transcendence, self-enhancement, openness to change, and conservation) as parallel mediators, and support for collective action as the criterion variable. Political orientation was included as a covariate in the model to control for its potential confounding effect (cf. Caprara et al., 2006) on the relationship between perceived anomie, personal value orientations, and collective action. The results of this model were summarized in Figure 1 and Table 2.

Fig. 1. Mediational model of the relationship between Perceived Anomie and Collective Action through Self-Transcendence, Conservation, Self-Enhancement, and Openness to Change



Note. ** p < .01, ***p < .001. Total effect is displayed in parentheses. Political orientation was included as a covariate in the model but is not displayed in the figure for clarity. Solid lines represent significant paths; dashed lines represent non-significant paths.

Results

Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. As shown, perceived anomie was significantly and positively correlated with collective action, thus confirming our hypothesis (*H1*), as well as with self-transcendence and openness to change. However, it was not significantly correlated with conservation or self-enhancement. Self-transcendence showed positive correlations with both openness to change and collective action. In contrast, collective action showed significant negative correlations with conservation and self-enhancement.

Tab. 1. Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	*M*	SD
1. PA	.79						4.93	.71
2. ST	.267***	.74					7.32	1.45
3. Cons	-.036	.056	.74				4.66	1.71
4. SE	-.095	-.210***	.394***	.78			4.61	1.76
5. OTC	.219***	.350***	.082	.228***	.64		6.16	1.39
6. CA	.176***	.449***	-.319***	-.299***	.097	.96	4.40	1.95

Note. *** p < .001. PA = Perceived Anomie; ST = Self-Transcendence; Cons = Conservation; SE = Self-Enhancement; OTC = Openness to Change; CA = Collective Action. Cronbach's α for each scale is reported on the diagonal.

As can be seen, political orientation was positively and significantly associated with both conservation and self-enhancement values. In contrast, political orientation was significantly and negatively associated with both self-transcendence values and support for collective action.

Importantly, controlling for political orientation, perceived anomie was positively and significantly associated with both self-transcendence and openness to change values, indicating that greater perceived anomie was positively related with higher endorsement of self-transcendence and openness to change values.

Regarding the various mediators (personal value orientations) considered, only self-transcendence and conservation values were significantly related to support for collective action. More specifically, self-transcendence values were positively associated with the outcome variable, whereas conservation-related values were negatively related to support for collective action. The total effect of anomie on collective action was positive and close to significance, whereas the direct effect of anomie on collective action was not significant.

Tab. 2. Results of the Parallel Mediation Model

						95% CI	
Outcome	**Predictor**	**B**	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**LL**	**UL**
Cons	PA	.059	.128	.461	.644	–.193	.311
Cons	PO	.556	.071	7.754	.000	.415	.697
ST	PA	.466	.111	4.193	.000	.248	.685
ST	PO	–.290	.062	–4.671	.000	–.413	–.168
SE	PA	–.126	.137	–.915	.360	–.398	.145
SE	PO	.409	.077	5.312	.000	.258	.562
OTC	PA	.423	.111	3.787	.000	.203	.643
OTC	PO	–.009	.062	–.154	.877	–.133	.113
CA	PA	.052	.120	.431	.666	–.186	.290
CA	Cons	–.147	.057	–2.572	.010	–.261	–.035
CA	ST	.423	.068	6.213	.000	.290	.558
CA	SE	–.036	.055	–.654	.513	–.146	.073
CA	OTC	–.025	.067	–.379	.704	–.159	.108
CA	PO	–.712	.075	–9.456	.000	–.861	–.565

Note. PA = Perceived Anomie; ST = Self-Transcendence; Cons = Conservation; SE = Self-Enhancement; OTC = Openness to Change; CA = Collective Action; PO = Political Orientation.

More importantly, for our mediational hypothesis (H2), the analysis of the indirect effects of perceived anomie on collective action across the four mediators revealed that only the indirect effect through self-transcendence was positive and statistically significant. This suggests that perceived anomie may influence prosocial engagement by reinforcing altruistic values, thereby confirming our hypothesis (*H2*). Instead, the indirect effects through the mediation of conservation, self-enhancement, and openness to change values were not significant. Data on total and specific indirect effects are shown in Table 3.

Tab. 3. Total and Specific Indirect Effects in the Parallel Mediation Model

			95% CI	
Path	**Effect**	**Bootstrap SE**	**LL**	**UL**
Total Indirect	.182	.061	.069	.311
PA → Cons → CA	–.008	.022	–.054	.038
PA → ST → CA	.197	.060	.091	.329
PA → SE → CA	.004	.012	–.019	.030
PA → OTC → CA	–.010	.030	–.073	.050

Note. PA = Perceived Anomie; ST = Self-Transcendence; Cons = Conservation; SE = Self-Enhancement; OTC = Openness to Change; CA = Collective Action. Significant effects are those whose confidence interval does not include zero.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the psychological process linking perceived anomie and support for collective action in favour of immigrants, with a focus on the mediating role of personal value orientations. Previous research — though still limited — suggests that in various contexts marked by uncertainty (e.g., during the Covid-19 pandemic, war, or economic crisis) and heightened perception of anomie, empathy, altruism, and benevolence values may increase (Abrutyn, 2019; Liekefett & Becker, 2021; Sortheix et al., 2019; Tekin et al., 2021). While anomie has often been conceptualized as leading to social disengagement and exclusionary attitudes, emerging evidence indicates that it may also foster contrasting responses, including prosocial motivation and civic engagement. Given previous findings showing that benevolence and universalism values are predictors of prosocial and collective action (Vecchione et al., 2015), we hypothesised that perceived anomie would be associated with support for collective action through the reinforcement of self-transcendence values.

Our results supported this hypothesis. First, they revealed a positive correlation between perceived anomie and values of self-transcendence (universalism and benevolence), thus supporting the idea that in situations of disorientation and uncertainty, people might seek meaning and cohesion by identifying with broader social or moral communities. In this sense, self-transcendence values may serve as psychological resources that counteract the social fragmentation linked to perceived anomie. Second, in line with literature (Davidov et al., 2008; Ponizovskiy et al., 2016), we confirmed that self-transcendence values are positively correlated with collective action in favour of immigrants. These results suggest that individuals who place greater importance on social justice and helping others are more likely to engage in collective action. Lastly, and most importantly, as expected, we showed the mediating role of self-transcendence values in influencing the intention to participate in collective action, supporting the claim that an orientation towards altruistic values may mediate the relationship between perceived anomie and collective action. Supporting our mediation hypothesis, the direct effect between perceived anomie and collective action was not statistically significant. Importantly, our mediation analysis confirmed that self-transcendence values serve as a psychological mediator in this relationship. The effect of perceived anomie on collective action appears to be transmitted entirely through its influence on personal values.

Additional findings further clarify the dynamics at play. A negative correlation emerged between conservation values and collective action. This aligns with prior findings (Davidov et al., 2008; Vecchione et al., 2015) and supports the idea that individuals who prioritize security, conformity, and tradition may be less inclined to endorse actions promoting social change, particularly those advocating for marginalized groups. To better isolate the psychological processes at play, we controlled for political orientation—a known predictor of attitudes toward immigrants and social activism (De Cristofaro et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, our results confirmed that a more conservative political orientation is associated with a lower propensity to participate in collective actions, particularly those in favour of immigrants. Importantly, even when controlling for this variable, the mediating role of self-transcendence values remained significant, underlining their unique contribution in promoting civic engagement under perceived social instability.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the perception of anomie was not related to conservation and self-enhancement values. This is intriguing evidence that suggests that those who are high in self-enhancement (i.e., those who prioritize personal success, power, and achievement) or conservation values (i.e., those who prioritize security, conformity, and tradition, emphasizing self-restriction, order, stability, and

the maintenance of social norms and customs) do not resent the perception of societal state. It should be possible that these personal values work as stable, overarching, driving principles for the individual's attitudes and behaviour that are uncompelled by situational constraints. This finding is indeed consistent with available evidence showing that perceived anomie was not related to individual differences such as social dominance orientation (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) or the tendency to dislike imperfect situations (i.e., perfectionism; cf. Teymoori et al., 2016).

Also, attention should be placed on the fact that openness to change was not associated with collective action intentions. Indeed, we computed this factor including hedonism, as it is common practice in the field (cf. Schwartz et al., 2012; Vecchione et al. 2015). Nonetheless, it is debated whether hedonism falls within the Self-enhancement value too (Caprara et al., 2006). Indeed, relying on the evidence that hedonism is unrelated or negatively related to civic and political engagement (e.g., Pavlova & Lühr, 2023; Vega-Tinoco et al., 2024), we might acknowledge that including hedonism in the openness to change dimension may have attenuated its potential association with collective action intentions. Thus, we might reasonably argue that our evidence would have been even stronger if we had not included hedonism in the openness to change factor.

Taken together, these findings offer a more nuanced understanding of anomie: rather than functioning solely as a force of social disengagement, its perceptions may foster prosocial responses. When mediated by self-transcendence values, perceived anomie appears capable of encouraging intergroup solidarity and action in favour of marginalised groups.

Limitations and Future Directions

While offering interesting insights, this study has some limitations. Our research focused on an Italian sample, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or national contexts. Nonetheless, immigrants are a highly marginalised and prejudiced group in Italy (Albarello et al., 2017, 2019; Albarello, Contu, et al., 2023; Albarello, Manganelli, et al., 2023; Albarello & Rubini, 2011, 2018; Bobba et al., 2023; Calavita, 2007; Mantovan, 2018), thus results might be generalized to other contexts or prejudiced ethnic outgroups. Cross-cultural future research may explore whether the relationship between perceived anomie, self-transcendence values, and collective action is confirmed in other countries, with particular attention to cultural and political differences in relation to the endorsement of personal values. Moreover, the cross-sectional design of this study limits the ability to draw causal inferences; thus, our data might be interpreted with appropriate caution. Nevertheless, the hypothesized mediation model is grounded in theoretical reasoning (i.e., the reverse model of collective action influencing perceived anomie is not theoretically reasonable) and supported by statistical analyses. Indeed, also available literature stresses that personal values promote/inhibit (political) activism (e.g., Vecchione et al., 2015), thus supporting our assumption that personal values might also be associated with collective action tendencies. To further strengthen our evidence, future longitudinal or experimental studies are needed to confirm the directionality of the observed relationships.

Finally, in addition to acknowledging that the findings reveal moderate associations among our variables of interest, it is worth emphasizing that these findings are compelling, given that they represent the first time such associations have been observed. Future studies conducted in different contexts may be necessary to test the validity of these relationships.

Conclusions

This study sheds light on the complex psychological process linking an individual's perceived societal anomie in fostering collective action in favour of marginalised groups. While typically associated with social fragmentation, our findings suggest that, when mediated by self-transcendence values, the role of anomie may be associated with intergroup solidarity, and participation in collective action in favour of immigrants. These results underscore the importance of personal value orientations in transforming societal instability into prosocial responses, offering important insights for future social policies and psychosocial interventions aimed at promoting integration and support for vulnerable groups, even in times of crisis.

Ethical Approval
The research was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Sapienza University of Rome (CERT_18D3B4B89A8).

Data Availability Statement
Data are available upon request to the corresponding author.

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Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions
Conceptualization: Flavia Albarello, Martina Camera, Antonio Pierro; Methodology: Antonio Pierro; Data Curation: Antonio Pierro; Writing—original draft preparation: Flavia Albarello, Martina Camera; Writing—review and editing Flavia Albarello, Martina Camera, Valentina Rizzoli. Supervision: Antonio Pierro. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Supplementary material
Not applicable

Declaration about the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process
No AI was employed in any stage of the study, including the writing process.

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