Construction of Radicalization: Examination of an Important Construct in the Explanation of Terrorism

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Introduction

Terrorism by extremist groups has garnered much political, media, and scholarly attention since 9/11. Although radicalization may not be a necessary cause of terrorism, it has been found to play a role in terrorist pathways, but what we mean by the term “radicalization” is still somewhat of a mystery, because its definition is ever evolving across different groups and people. We have all read media stories in which politicians, criminal justice professionals, and/or scholars refer to “radicalized terrorists,” assuming everyone in the United States or globally knows what they mean by “radicalized” people or “radical” terrorism. During the 2016 presidential election, then President Trump often spoke of “radical Islamic terrorism,” but what exactly did he mean by “radical” terrorism, is there nonradical terrorism, is this term being used simply as an adjective, or does the term “radical” have some substantive meaning to which politicians and scholars adhere?

The fact is that “radicalization” is a socially constructed artifact. Scholarly books and articles, media accounts, and legislation have all embraced the
term “radicalization” at some point when discussing terrorist activities. First, we have scholars who examine and research “radicalization” and define this term for other academic scholars and readers who can propose policy. Media is the life source of the majority of material circulated at high volumes regarding any type of social problem or concern and it influences public understanding of “radicalization.” Last, terrorism policies are how the government reacts to social concerns, hence forcing a legal definition of “radicalization” if it is to be a part of the law. Three mediums—scholarly publications, media accounts, and policy—affect how we come to understand “radicalization” and thus are important in the examination of how we define radicalization as it relates to terrorist activities.

This article uses a mixed methodological comparative analysis of scholarly, media, and policy accounts to highlight the various definitions of “radicalization” offered by different groups over time to better understand terrorism theory and counterterrorism efforts. Within a social constructionist framework, we will examine how definitions have shifted over time, what medium is involved in defining the term, and if some definition of radicalization garnered favor over others. Given the prominence of radicalization in terrorism theory, answers to these questions can help us better understand terrorist activity and what steps can be taken to prevent it.

In what follows, we introduce the social construction perspective and how it pertains to notions of radicalization across groups. We describe the principal research questions and the methodological approach to examining radicalization through scholarly work, media accounts, and policy. The results are introduced and we conclude by discussing implications of the findings and suggesting avenues for further research.

Constructing Social Problems

Social Constructionism

We are in constant pursuit of knowledge; it plays a critical role in deliberation, decision making, and action in everyday life. Social constructionism takes as its point of departure the social basis of all human knowledge—that social construction is an inquiry into explicating how people come to define,
explain, and account for a given phenomenon relative to a particular social, cultural, and historical setting. Constructionism assumes deviance and crime are constructed as social problems through a process involving various actors who make subjective interpretations of events and behaviors that eventually find their way into public policy and law. Unlike positivistic examinations, constructionism does not presume the intrinsically problematic nature of deviant behavior, so constructionists are more concerned with investigating the processes involved in behavior coming to be classified as deviant than in the causes of the behavior itself. The development of the classification process is part of understanding the etiology of deviance. Constructionist investigations are liberating because they remind us that phenomenon we consider problems are not necessarily fixed or inevitable.

“It challenges complacent assumptions about the inevitability of what we have found out or our present ways of doing things.”

The constructionist perspective does not necessarily deny the existence of the problem under investigation, although it is often interpreted as doing so. The confusion lies within a subtle distinction between “objects” and “ideas,” or ways of classifying objects. “Objects” are real items that exist in the world, such as people, practices, actions, and behaviors. “Ideas,” however, are concepts, beliefs, and attitudes about objects in the world. Within the context of terrorism, terrorist activities are real and have had negative consequences on the people to whom the activities are directed. The “idea” of terrorism, however, has evolved over time and has, to some degree, become intertwined with the “idea” of radicalization. In this way, “radicalization’ should not be seen as some linear object to be classified, but rather as an “interactive kind” because it interacts with the object of terrorist activity. “Looping effects,” or interactions between the idea of terrorism and the policies put in place to address it, can be seen. Terrorism policies have influence on law enforcement and judicial practices, which can in turn influence the behavior of terrorists and our idea of radicalization.

Radicalization is a prominent factor in terrorism theory and as such a social problem in need of managing. The term radicalization has been bantered about in terrorism rhetoric without a real, concrete understanding of what it means. Of course, some mediums have more power, authority, and reach than others when it comes to defining the idea of radicalization, so for the purposes of this investigation, we explore scholarship, media accounts,
and legislative acts to present a well-rounded picture of what “radicalization” means across various segments of society. From this, perhaps we will move closer to a more standardized understanding of the idea of radicalization.

**Scholars, Media, and Policy Makers**

Scholarship, or peer-reviewed publications, can influence social-problem creation and management, but the relationship can be complex. As explained, the “soft tissue” between research and policy is bothered by casual ordering, funding availability, relevance, and partisanship. It is as difficult to discern if policies led to research or research led to policies as it is to determine if the chicken or the egg came first. Nevertheless, there is “soft tissue” or a relationship between scholarship and the definition of social concerns in education, crime, domestic policy, and other areas of foreign policy making and maintenance in the United States and other countries. As such, an examination of how we define “radicalization” must include attention to how scholars define the term, but would be woefully incomplete if based only on a review of scholarly publications.

News media accounts have the power to influence the social construction of norms, issues of interest, and ideas. The media provide a major forum for familiarizing the public with behavior definitions, solidifying those definitions into a coherent account, and generating support for this account. As Ray Surrotte explained, “The media serve the role of world knowledge conduit and playing field for the competition between claims-makers.” Researchers have investigated various ways in which the media influence public opinion. The selective portrayal of victims and offenders, the use of prejudicial language, and the inference of guilt in crime news all can influence the way the public comes to perceive various offenses and offenders of crime.

The sources largely responsible for people’s conceptions of social ills are preexisting knowledge structures and two simple judgment heuristics: representativeness and availability. Representativeness is often judged by applying goodness-of-fit criteria to information, whereas availability relates to how easily information can be stored and remembered. Once the representativeness and availability heuristics are used to formulate conceptions, people often ignore future information and fail to adjust their initial conceptions. The overutilization of preexisting knowledge structures
and the representativeness and availability heuristics, coupled with people’s willingness to discard scientifically derived yet pallid information, contributes to people’s incorrect judgments of social phenomena. The media can then exacerbate people’s inferential shortcomings: “As human experience has come to rely more and more on the social transmission of information, the likelihood of being deliberately misled by concrete, vivid accounts has increased dramatically. Social communicators bombard us with concrete instances and vivid incidents carefully selected (or constructed) to influence our inferences and behavior.”

The media act as the bridge between people’s private lives and the public world. Because people have little personal experience with crime, they must rely on the media for knowledge of criminal events and behaviors. Given this reliance, “nothing can be more important than the mass content of crime and justice news.”

It can be argued that the media’s influence in the definition of “radicalization” may be even more prominent today with the widespread use and accessibility of the internet. Individuals today need only ask questions and search articles, studies, stories, and social sites online for definitions of terms such as radicalization to understand social climate on mainstream issues. Moreover, the application of social norms has been shown to be important to the identification of deviance and the invocations of social norms are often disseminated through news stories that ascertain which ideas, actions, or appearances conform to or violate social norms. Given terroristic activities are classified as criminal events, one could presume that news media accounts offer some definition of terrorism and the “radicalization” implicit in its theory. It also goes without saying, given people’s limited experiences with terrorism, that the media have played a role in defining what we think of as “radicalization.”

The policies and legislation introduced by policy makers to address social problems influence and are influenced by policy makers’ own opinions and beliefs. Policies and legislation pushed by government officials affect what society views as paramount in upholding our rights, strengthening our country, and protecting our communities. In addition to informing society of what is important, policy makers are susceptible to wanting to appease constituents through addressing public concerns, in particular during election time. Through the proposal of policies supporting shared public values, policy makers influence the policy agenda and “send messages
about what government is supposed to do, which citizens are deserving (and which not), and what kinds of attitudes and participatory patterns are appropriate in a democratic society.”

Research findings suggest that several factors influence public officials’ perceptions of social problems and their need for solutions. For instance, some scholars find that public officials’ introduction of criminal justice reforms is often nothing more than political posturing, pandering to constituents’ perceptions and concerns to ensure their election, thus asserting proposed solutions to social problems are reactions to citizens’ concerns.\textsuperscript{28} In contrast, Sample and Kadleck found that policymakers’ thoughts, opinions, and beliefs about a sex offense problem in Illinois influenced the content and scope of sex offense policy and were largely independent of constituents’ views.\textsuperscript{29} Although causal ordering is unclear, there is some connection between policy makers’ individual opinions on an issue and what they propose as policy redress. Concerning the prevention of terroristic activities, a review of legislation meant to address terrorism should reveal if and how policy makers define radicalization and the role it plays in terrorism.

Concepts rarely have single meanings that hold constant across places, people, and time. For this reason, it is important to review a triangulation of sources when it comes to defining “radicalization,” which is important to our understanding of terrorism. Although media accounts, scholarly publications, and legislation may not be a comprehensive list of sources involved in defining radicalization, it is a start. The comparison of how scholars, media, and policy makers explain radicalization over time will move use beyond the understanding of radicalization we currently hold, which has been derived one scholar, story, or policy at a time.

**Methodology**

The major questions driving the current examination include, (1) How has radicalization been defined by scholars, media, and policy makers over time? and (2) Has a consensus on a definition of radicalization emerged over time? To answer these questions, several variables are identified as significant in the understanding of radicalization: definition, time frame (e.g., date published, notable events), ideology/population targeted (e.g., right-wing,
Muslims, students), and fields/disciplines represented (e.g., criminal justice, psychology, sociology).

We utilized a sequential research design in the exploration of our primary questions. We started with the examination of radicalization in the scholarly literature and then updated our decision making and parameters as we moved on to the other mechanisms (i.e., media and policy) of social construction.30 We acknowledged early in this investigation that not all search terms and methods were universally successful in locating research artifacts and thus the methods and search terms were tailored to fit each type of artifact (i.e., scholarly literature, newspaper articles, and legislation). Below, we outline the methods employed for each artifact type, including data source and search strategy, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and data extraction in an attempt to better understand how radicalization is conceptualized.

**Scholarly Definitions**

We investigated the contribution of scholarly literature to the social construction of radicalization by examining the academic literature (e.g., peer-reviewed journal articles and books) authored by scholars from a wide range of disciplines. The academic literature included radicalization as it pertains to terrorism, extremism, gangs, and student movements. The Campbell Collaboration’s Systematic Review policy approach was utilized in an attempt to secure a systematic, unbiased, and representative sample of the academic literature. The Campbell Collaboration protocol requires setting methodological criteria in an attempt to cope with the volume of work needed to maintain high standards, and in particular, incorporating certain filters for literature searching, identifying different types of bibliographic databases, and setting clear inclusion and exclusion criteria.31

An internet search was conducted using PsycInfo, Lexis Nexis, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Social Sciences, Google Scholar search engine, JSTOR, Amazon.com/books, and the University of Nebraska-Omaha’s Dr. C. C. and Mabel L. Criss Library. Searches were performed using specific terms and filters including radicalization, right-wing extremism, terrorism theories, explaining left-wing extremism, and jihadi radicals. Sources were also identified using bibliographies from published sources related to the research topic. Keeping with the idea that radicalization is its own phenomenon,
literature that identified radicalization or a derivative of radicalization (e.g., radical, radicalize) within the title or abstract were included.

We recognize that our search terms may lead to different derivatives of the concept “radical” within terrorism literature. For instance, Snow and Cross suggest that “radicalization” is an important component of radicalism, which is defined as the active pursuit of and/or support for far-reaching changes in society that may present a danger to the continuity of the democratic order, possibly by using undemocratic means and/or encouraging others to do so. They identify three types of radicalism, which include a practice of extreme movement activity, a process by which people become radicals, and an identity ascribed to activists who may or may not be radicalized.32 “Radicalization” can be seen as a four-stage process in which motives or cognitive preconditions become ripe for “radicalism” and terrorist activities.33 In general, radicalization processes help form the belief in the need for actions to enact extreme social or political change, which we refer to as radicalism. In this way, people may find themselves in radicalization processes but not necessarily become radicals or experience radicalism because radicalism is contextually dependent. Radical ideas are defined in relation to how they comport with dominant societal and cultural ideas. Within history, the idea that the Earth was round was once a “radical” idea that eventually evolved into a dominant cultural belief. Radicalization was the process by which people came to change their longstanding beliefs that earth was flat to notions that the earth was round. Radicalization is a focus on the adoption of a belief system, whereas radicalism is the action taken to change dominant ideas to fit a belief system.

For this article, we have chosen to focus on definitions of “radicalization” or the process by which people come to have radical or extremist beliefs, as opposed to “radicalism.” First, most terrorism theories include “radicalization” in relation to violence rather than “radicalism,” so we believe that an understanding of “radicalization” is important to understanding and preventing terrorism. Also, the distinction between “radicalization” and “radicalism” is largely a scholarly one that is not found within media accounts or policy papers, and even within scholarly works, often this distinction is not apparent. Nonetheless, we want to remind readers of the possibility that our research design can lead to rendering radicalization and radicalism as synonymous concepts when in fact one is likely a component of the other.34
Because we are interested in understanding how radicalization as a concept has been defined, within the context of terrorism theory, we included scholarly works that appeared to evaluate radicalization and offered theories of radicalization and/or an explanation of radicalization, based on their titles. Using the most liberal approach, any article or book at this stage that even hinted at a theory and/or explanation of radicalization was included yielding approximately 250 pieces of literature in several languages and venues. To be included in this study, the literature had to be written in English and be readily accessible via computer download. Several studies in the initial sample were excluded because they focused on terrorism and extremism but paid minimal attention to radicalization, suggesting how easily the term “radicalization” is bandied about in scholarship when discussing terrorism but lacks definitional parameters. Furthermore, several books were excluded because they were novels rather than scholarly works, demonstrating the cultural entertainment value of the idea of “radicalization.”

The present examination was open to all disciplines in an attempt to minimize bias and counter “insiderism.” Once a piece of literature was identified as appropriate for this examination, the lead author conducted an analysis using a deductively and inductively derived codebook that was constructed to identify the particular points of interest (e.g., definition, ideology/population). After reading each piece of literature, the inclusion and exclusion criteria yielded 119 studies, which makes up the scholarly sample of the present research.

Media Accounts

Media's role in the social construction of the radicalization term was examined using a content analysis of online newspaper articles, which is, to date, one of the most common and well-established methodologies of obtaining data from media text. This method involves a data-reduction process whereby words and phrases were extracted from text and reduced to meaningful categories and variables. The New York Times was used as our primary source, and we acknowledge that it is not the only online news source. It is, however, one of the most widely circulated news sources across the nation and holds a long-standing position as one of the major newspapers in the United States. Still, readers should understand the use of a single media
source as a limitation of our research design and understand our results may change with the inclusion of more media sources.

Articles from *The New York Times* were located using online search engines and archives. In particular, we used Google News and Proquest historical newspapers archives accessed through the library to locate appropriate articles for the current examination housed within *The New York Times* and the following keywords aided in the search for news articles: radical terrorism, radical, and derivatives of the word radical (e.g., radicalize, radicalization, radicals). As is common with sequential research designs, earlier decisions were updated as deemed necessary. We first used the same keywords that were identified in the scholarly article search but the terms proved to be too broad in scope and articles did not cover anything to do with radicalization. In essence, specific inclusion criteria were the article had to originate from *The New York Times* and be readily available (not cost to view), have the term “radical” (e.g., radicalize, radicalization, radicals) in the title or subtitle, and the term “radical” had to pertain to terrorism, extremism, terrorist or extremist individuals or groups, and /or terrorist or extremist actions. The search yielded a total of forty-one new articles from *The New York Times* from 1920 to 2017. The articles were then coded per the codebook to identify particular points of interest (e.g., definition, time frame, ideology/population) and represent the media sample of the current investigation.

**Policy Makers**

Legislative artifacts (i.e., acts, bills, laws) were chosen to represent the contribution of policy makers to the social construction of radicalization. We included legislation that has been introduced and became federal law. Terrorism policy has proven to be mostly federal in nature, so state laws were not searched for radicalization or its definition. The search terms used were legislation: radical terrorism; and legislation: radical. The keyword search differs from both the scholars and media samples and was shaped to provide optimal results. The next step was to search all accessible federal legislation that mentioned terrorism, homeland security, and violence in the introductory paragraph. Once the policies were located we searched within those results to determine whether any mention of radical or any derivative
of the term was present. To be included in this study the legislation had to mention radicalization or any derivative of the term radicalization (e.g., radicals, radicalize, radical) in relation to terrorism or extremism, in the title or in the body of the policy. The legislation could be in any part of the political process (e.g., introduced, passed the House, passed the Senate, sent to the President, or became law). The information regarding the policy had to be readily accessible through the use of either Google or the congress.gov website. The final sample yielded a total of sixteen pieces of legislation. The legislation was then dissected to extract topics of interest (e.g., definitions, time frame, ideology), per the codebook used for the scholarly articles and media accounts.

Limitations

We employed qualitative data analysis techniques to code data, so reliability may be in question, and our ability to draw definite conclusions about radicalization definitions is compromised by sampling design; however, the primary limitation of the study is that we had to put constraints on data sources and inclusion criteria to make the task of examining scholarly, media, and policy sources manageable. First, an exhaustive review of the literature or media was not attempted because we set out to acquire any literature and news articles regardless of date published as a representative sample of radicalization construction. Our searches were limited, so obviously we missed sources that may have contributed and artifacts from those sources that may contribute to the construction of radicalization, but this exercise was not to definitively conclude what radicalization is or may be. Rather, it was to understand how a single concept such as radicalization is defined or understood across various groups. Our intention was to better understand what we mean by “radicalization” as a concept and to demonstrate the variability across venues and over time, not to definitively define radicalization.

Results

We focused on four variables of interest in the understanding of the conceptualization of radicalization: definitions of radicalization, fields/disciplines,
ideology/population, and variability over time. What follows is a discussion of results by variable and by sample (scholars, media, and policy).

**Definitions of Radicalization**

There are several definitions of radicalization and not one that is universally agreed upon. Thus, we were interested in the extent to which definitions were present, whether they shared common themes, if the characteristics changed over time (see “Variability over Time,” below), and the degree to which definitions combine or separate definitional components of ideology and action. At the very least, the definitions provide a platform to build upon or something to discard altogether.

Definitions of radicalization (e.g., radical, radicals, radicalize) applied by scholars, media, and policy makers were examined. Overall, the vast majority, 109 (62%) out of a sample of 176 did not define radicalization with a total of 67 (38%) defining radicalization within the article (e.g., journal, news), book, policy, bill, or law (see Table 2). The absence of a definition suggests multiple sources take for granted their audiences intrinsic knowledge of what is meant by the term “radicalization.” Within a policy realm, that has allowed much discretion to determine what radicalization may be and its influence in behavior. A minority of accounts reviewed did provide definitions of radicalization.

Concerning definitional components, we examined whether the definition necessitated action (e.g., terrorist action, violence, actions in support of beliefs), or if the definition of radicalization included both belief and action. Of the 67 definitions offered, 26 (39%) mandated belief was a necessary component of radicalization with 9 (13%) requiring action and 40 (60%) claiming that both belief and action were necessary factors in defining radicalization. The presence and characteristics of definitions as they occurred for each source (i.e., scholars, media, and policy) can be found in Table 1 and the discussion below.

**Scholars**

The scholarly articles were most likely to define radicalization compared to the media and policy maker samples. Out of a total of 119 academic journal
articles and books, 58 (49%) provided a definition whereas 61 (51%) did not (see Table 1). Of the definitions found in the scholarly literature, forty (69%) included both belief and actions as essential characteristics in their definitions of radicalization with thirty-two (55%) identifying only the use of beliefs and eight (14%) identifying action as a necessary component. Listed below are sample definitions of radicalization.

- An example of a definition incorporating belief: “Process by which individuals are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs toward extreme views.”
- Examples of definitions of radicalization with both belief and action: “A personal process in which the individual adopts extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations, and where the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of indiscriminate violence.” “The progression of searching, finding, adopting, nurturing, and developing this extreme belief system to the point where it acts as a catalyst for a terrorist act.”
- An additional factor found in the definitions provided by the scholarly literature was that there were three (6%) that defined radicalization using a specific ideology, for example: “The psychological transformations that occur among Western Muslims as they increasingly accept the legitimacy of terrorism in support of violent Jihad against Western countries.” “The process of progressively adopting more radical beliefs and ideas of Islam.”
Media

There were forty-one articles in the media sample from The New York Times. Of the forty-one articles, three (7 percent) provided a definition of radicalization (e.g., radical, radicals, radicalize), with the majority, thirty-eight (93%), of articles not providing a definition (see Table 1). Being that media is a major contributor in the social construction process; the absence of definitions in an article is problematic and leaves the audience without a clear picture of radicalization. How are we to understand and prevent terrorism if the key concept underlying terrorism is ambiguous or not defined at all?

Regarding the characteristics found in the definitions, one defined radicalization by belief, one by action, and one by both belief and action. In addition, there was one definition in The New York Times that specified not only violence but also a specific ideology, in this case radical Islam. Definitions: (1) “As extreme views, practices, and policies.” (2) “Susceptible to revolutionary beliefs and willing or eager to subordinate personal relationships to an abstract cause.” (3) “Refers to only those Muslims who have embraced violence.”

Policy Makers

Policies, bills, and laws represent the policy maker section of the current examination. Of the sample of sixteen, six (38%) provided a definition of radicalization (e.g., radical, radicals, radicalize) and ten (63%) did not provide a definition within the body of the policy, bill, or law (see Table 1). Of the six definitions, three (50%) identified action in their definition of radicalization and three (50%) required both action and belief. Examples: (1) “The process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change.” (2) “The process of adopting or promoting an extremist belief system for the purpose of facilitating ideologically based violence to advance political, religious, or social change.” (3) “The process by which an individual chooses to facilitate or commit domestic terrorism or international terrorism.”

A commonality across mediums is that sources of information involved in the discussion or description of terrorism typically do not define radicalization, a key variable in terrorist activities. Scholars are leading
Construction of Radicalization

the way in defining “radicalization,” yet we know legislation and media accounts are more widely consumed by the U.S. population than scholarly research. In this way, the group least likely to be read by the U.S. public is responsible for defining a sufficient cause of terrorism. It is intuitive to ask who are the scholars offering definitions of “radicalization” that play a key role in terrorism?

Fields/Disciplines

The field/discipline variable was examined in particular for the scholarly sample as little legislation and few media accounts relied on scholarly sources. Discipline for the literature included in this examination was determined by either the discipline of the journal the article was published in or the discipline of the explanation used in the book. Some disciplines have a wider reach than others, which could provide a larger influence. Though discipline of the literature was not a search criterion, it was a factor used to determine reach and identify disciplines represented in the sample. In Table 2, disciplines that represent the sample literature’s medium from which it is published are identified. Thirty-two percent of the literature originated from criminology and criminal justice and 22 percent from political science fields. Sociology represented 16 percent of literature followed by psychiatry/psychology with 14 percent and communications with 4 percent of the sampled literature. In essence, the main focus here was to identify who, in terms of discipline, is leading the way on how radicalization is being conceptualized.

Ideology/Population

Definitions of radicalization by criminologists and political scientists have led the way in understanding what radicalization may be, something that includes both actions and beliefs. What beliefs have disciplines identified as conducive to radicalization? In addition, this variable provides insight into if we define radicalization through purely ideological or population lenses?

Overall, as presented in Table 3, across all mediums 65 percent of the 176 documents reviewed focused on connecting radicalization to jihadi extremists. Note that for this examination, jihadi extremist included any type of radical Islam (e.g., al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda). Going along with the attention
garnered by 9/11 and the earlier conflict of Desert Storm in the 1990s, if we drew conclusions of what is meant by radicalization, we are left to believe that radicalization is predominately present among jihadi extremists. Although some acts of terrorism have been perpetrated by jihadi extremists, we know empirically that not all terrorist acts involve jihadi extremism. According to a New America Foundation publication, since 9/11, right-wing extremists have killed more Americans in the United States than jihadi extremists.\textsuperscript{55}

Scholars

The investigation into the ideology/population utilized in the academic literature highlighted the incessant attention on jihadi extremists. Although the scholar sample was open to more groups (e.g., right-wing, gangs, and student movements) compared to the other venues, the vast majority, sixty-six (55 percent), examined radicalization as it relates to jihadi extremism with twenty-six (22 percent) looking at radicalization in general, regardless of ideology or group. In five (6 percent) pieces of literature, the authors investigated a combination of ideologies in their aim to explain the radicalization
phenomenon along with two on student movements and one article each for gangs, left-wing, and right-wing groups.

**Media**

The news articles that comprise media \((N = 41)\) had twenty-four (59 percent) that focused on *jihadi* extremists with eleven (27 percent) looking at left-wing groups, three (7 percent) on radicalization in general, two (5 percent) articles on right-wing groups and one (2 percent) looking at a combination of ideological groups and populations. Similar to the scholarly sample, *jihadi* extremists make up the majority of the focus in the online news sample.

**Policy Makers**

The policy maker sample \((N = 16)\) consists of relevant legislation mentioning radicalization within the context of terrorism. Although it was expected for *jihadi* extremist to comprise the majority of the sample, it only represented six (38 percent) with the majority, nine (56 percent) looking at radicalization generally and a mere one (6 percent) policy applying radicalization to right-wing ideology in the Combating European Anti-Semitism Act of 2017.

**Variability over Time**

We examine “time” to identify when scholars, media, and legislation were published that confronted the topic of radicalization in their respected

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**Table 3. Ideology/Population among Sample (Percentage)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Right-Wing</th>
<th>Left-Wing</th>
<th>Jihadi Extremist</th>
<th>Gangs</th>
<th>Student Movement</th>
<th>Combination</th>
<th>General</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scholars</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total ((N=145))</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number*
mediums. Looking at the time frame is beneficial for investigating the period that radicalization has been present in the social consciousness and to allow an understanding of particular components of definition and conceptualization of radicalization in comparison to any notable events of the time (e.g., terrorist actions, student protests). The term “radicalization” has been present in the American lexicon for almost 100 years. Figure 1 depicts a timeline of the dates each article, news account, and legislation ($N = 176$) was published or made public. The vast majority of the sample, 126 (87 percent), was published on or after the year 2001, demonstrating the influence that the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States had on scholarly, media, and legislative attention. Although there were greater volumes of terrorist events before 2001, such as the Jewish Defense Leagues in their plight of Jews in the Soviet Union, those perpetrated by the Weather Underground and the New Liberation Front bombings in the 1970s, and the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, the attacks of 9/11 brought the notion of radicalization to the forefront of terrorism research. This increase is likely due to the incidents of terrorism and extremist act that are attributed to radicalization such as 9/11 terrorist events, the bombing at the Boston Marathon and the suicide bomber attack on the Turkish Capital, Ankara, which killed 100 people.

The policies regarding radicalization that were included in the present examination did not start until 2005 with the Targeting Terrorists More Effectively Act of 2005, which is curious in that the 9/11 terrorist acts took place, and the USA Patriot Act was passed, in 2001. The majority of the policy sample was published or introduced in 2016 with eight (53 percent) policies out of a total of fifteen (see Figure 1). Similar to the scholars and media sample, a majority, in this case, the entire sample, of policies were introduced or published after 2001. An explanation for policies to target radicalization is the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and perceived growing terrorist threat that was met with the passing of the USA Patriot Act, which was signed into law on 26 October 2001 by President George W. Bush along with the introduction of radicalization as a component of terrorism. So, there was a time when at least legislators did not see radicalization as necessary or sufficient to cause terrorism.

Overall, scholarly works have more input into the definition since 2004, and because field or discipline did not change much over time, one would
expect the definition to be stable across scholars. Also, media rarely offers a definition so its influence into operationalization of the concept is minimal and lastly, legislation should provide a definition of necessary or sufficient conditions of what radicalization is, yet we have little legislation in light of media and scholarly attention.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The current investigation examined the conceptualization of radicalization through a constructionist lens including scholars, media, and policy makers to answer how long we have been trying to understand the concept of radicalization, how it is defined, who is involved in the defining of radicalization, and if some definitions of radicalization have garnered favor over others. The sample consisted of 176 journal and news articles, books, and legislation that were found to meet all the criteria of the present study to examine definitions, timeline, ideology/population, and discipline in the construction of radicalization and a number of findings were illuminated.

**Summary of Findings**

Definitions are a necessary component of understanding any concept, yet, the majority of our sample did not define radicalization or any derivative of the term, including “radicalism.” The lack of a definition of radicalization was particularly troubling within the media sample. The media has a wider circulation of influence; it is a matter of concern that the majority of the articles regarding radicalization did not provide a definition of radicalization,
meaning that we are throwing this term around without any real direction or construction for the society at large to latch on to. In addition, we found some common characteristics of the definition of radicalization, albeit in a broad sense. In the majority of cases the definitions included both the ideology (belief) and action (use or acceptance/support of the use of violence). Within policies, three pieces of legislation favored defining radicalization as “the process by which an individual chooses to facilitate or commit domestic terrorism or international terrorism,” which is tautological if radicalization is thought to be involved in the process of committing terrorist attacks.

If we were to adopt a definition of radicalization within the context of terrorism based on this study, we would suggest that radicalization is a process by which motives and cognitions for transforming current governing and social structure are developed. Radicalization involves both beliefs and actions taken to overturn the status quo and the individual identities that are developed from such. Both a history of macro and micro level factors contribute to radicalization, such a governing leadership over time and how leadership activities interact with individuals to shape role and personal identities. As can be seen, radicalization is difficult to define in a single sentence because of the hypothesized process of confluence of aggregate and individual attributes in space and time. We are, however, gaining consensus that radicalization is a process.

If the very concept of radicalization is loosely defined then it must be assumed that counter-radicalization strategies are impeded.57 Considering the heterogeneous definitions and lack of definitions in some venue areas, it is concluded that radicalization as a concept is problematic, at least in terms of understanding the causes of terrorism. Then again, perhaps “radicalization” is a concept akin to the concept of “pornography” within legal and scholarly realms. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Steward stated in Jacobellis v. Ohio,58 concerning pornography, “I know it when I see it.” News reporters, scholars, and policy makers may be just assuming the citizens know what radicalization is “when they see it.”

The timeline of radicalization in the social consciousness dates back to the 1920s, but the vast majority of the sample journal and news articles, books, and policies revealed the use of the term “radicalization” after 2001. The popularity of the term after 9/11 showed how the terrorist attacks made terrorism priority number one regarding national security and ripe
for research, coverage, and policies in an effort to thwart future attacks. This timeline also demonstrates that the term “terrorism” has been used to represent some type of a crime for a long time, regardless of a cause or explanation has been relayed to the public. Once again, “terrorism” may be another legal term like “pornography” in that “we know it when we see it.”

The ideology/population variable is something of concern because the bulk of the sample examined radicalization in relation to jihadi extremism. We know that not all terrorist or violent extremist acts are perpetrated by jihadi extremists, and in the United States, some claim higher fatality rates for right-wing extremists than for jihadi. This indicates that not only are we focusing narrowly on one ideology, but we are also excluding other viable threats to international and domestic security. Moreover, the identification of a particular group in defining radicalization can and has led to the targeting of particular groups, namely those who identify as Muslim, as persons to fear and in so doing people to discriminate against. Anti-Muslim rhetoric has become a staple in the United States since the 11 September terrorist attacks and has fueled the hate and discontent toward Muslims both within the United States and abroad.

Discipline was also examined in the context of scholarly journals and books. The disciplines that represented the bulk of the scholarly sample were criminology and criminal justice and political science. The point here is to look at who has been contributing to the conceptualization of radicalization and who had not within the scholarly community and to recognize who has been influencing what we as a society view in terms of what radicalization entails. This leads us to infer that “radicalization” is not thought to be something people are born with. Rather, radicalization results almost solely through social interaction. We need to encourage other disciplines and all disciplines for that matter, to contribute to what we view as radical and how we view radicalization to present an inclusive, well-rounded view of radicalization.

Policy Implications and Future Research

The findings of the current examination illuminate the problematic nature of the conceptualization of radicalization, an important construct in the explanation of terrorism. The concept of radicalization is a signifier of
terror and there is a popular trend of painting an image of a “radical.” Yet, we lack a universally accepted definition of radicalization as it is, in most cases, all-together absent, inhibiting the capacity of purveyors of knowledge to adequately explain the problem. It is likely the contextual nature of what is “radical,” the confluence of aggregate and individual factors involved in “radicalization,” and the dissonance between whether “radicalization” requires beliefs, actions, or both that make radicalization so difficult to define. If we are unable to comprehend what exactly radicalization is then how can we construct successful counterradicalization strategies? Furthermore, policy makers need to take into consideration the problematic nature of assigning a specific ideology to the actual conceptualization of radicalization. It is a necessity to ensure that legislation and counterradicalization efforts do not take away civil rights, liberties, nor promote discrimination of any particular group of people based on their religion or culture.

We would encourage future research into the radicalization phenomenon to expand the conceptualization of radicalization by encouraging persons from all disciplines and background to contribute to the construction of radicalization. In addition, scholarly research should strive to utilize all forms, books, journals, and reports in explaining radicalization. Though this is a tedious process, it would be beneficial to be as inclusive as possible. We must never forget that important and revolutionary information can be found in the most mundane of places and forms and it would behoove of us to see the significance in all disciplines and views. Moreover, regarding the media, research into how the different media outlets espouse radicalization should be examined to shed light on how society is portraying radicalization, radical events, and persons who radicalize.

Closing Remarks

In closing, the response to radicalization on a societal and legal level have made addressing how radicalization is being constructed a necessity and the question of how radicalization is conceptualized given its prominence in terrorism theory a pressing one. Thousands of deaths and injuries in the United States and worldwide can be attributed to the specter of terrorists and violent extremist groups. As such, terrorists threaten our stability and security and have become an unfortunate defining characteristic of our
In fact, few topics in the last presidential election drew more attention than terrorist activity, so clearly terrorism, and in relation, radicalization is constructed as a social problem in need of executive and legislative solutions. The social construction of radicalization by scholars, media, and policy makers cannot be understated. Counterterrorism strategies are informed by how scholars and policy makers are defining and explaining radicalization. Society is influenced by how political actors and media figures are disseminating information regarding the terrorist problem through the radicalization pandemic.

The current investigation extends prior research regarding the conceptualization of radicalization by emphasizing definitions, time frames, ideology/population, and disciplines provided by scholars, media, and policy makers. Our results suggest radicalization is defined for scholarly purposes to research terrorism, but legislators and media accounts mostly assume that they and the public know what radicalization is “when they see it.” This ambiguity has implications for anti-terrorism counter measures. How are we to address, intervene, or prevent the radicalization that is believed to be a key factor in terrorist activity if we are only to assume we know what radicalization may look like when we hear about it or see it. Our goals were not to disprove the absence of “radicalization” in a comprehensive understanding of terrorism, but rather we hope this examination brings to light that “radicalization” is often defined out of convenience based on available data or not defined at all. Terrorism is an important enough crime type to have its key causal constructs be more consistently defined.

Notes

2. Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science


29. Lisa L. Sample and Colleen Kadleck, “Sex Offender Laws: Legislators’ Accounts of the


36. The complete list of scholarly, media, and policy sample is available upon request at hmcneel@unomaha.edu.


41. Legislation utilized in this study was found through the congress.gov website.


54. Department of Homeland Security Accountability Act of 2016. 114th Congress 2d Session S. 2976 (2016). It should be noted that this definition was shared by two other policies, the Combat Terrorism Use of Social Media Act of 2016 and the Homeland Security Act of 2002.


56. Brian Michael Jenkins, Would-Be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States since September 11, 2001 (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation,