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# Research Note: The role of ideas in radicalization to terrorism: Ideology and narrative vs. diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational action frames

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***Abstract***
The concepts of ideology and narrative have become popular in efforts to understand the role of ideas in radicalization to terrorism. This review finds that definitions of these concepts in terrorism research are inconsistent and seldom linked with measurement, and that references to these concepts can often be interpreted as one or more of the three dimensions of a collective action frame. These three dimensions--diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing--are relatively easy to define and measure; poll items tapping the three dimensions can track progress in the war of ideas against terrorism. Munson's (2008) study of the anti-abortion movement in the U.S. identified four prognostic frames (politics, education, services, direct action) competing within the same anti-abortion diagnostic frame. The same four prognostic frames can be found competing within Islamist and Extreme Right movements. The distinction between diagnostic and prognostic frames leads to the suggestion that P/CVE programs should contest violent prognostic frames rather than contesting the diagnostic frames that support both violent and nonviolent prognostic frames. The review concludes with a residual puzzle: why have ideology and narrative been popular concepts in terrorism research despite their empirical weaknesses, while diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational action frames have been relatively neglected despite their empirical promise?

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## Introduction

Many share the intuition that political violence has something to do with ideas. This review evaluates two popular instantiations of this intuition: that ideology and narrative are key concepts for understanding the role of ideas in radicalization to terrorism.

Google searches indicate that terrorism is often linked with *ideology* and *narrative*.[1] Google Scholar Advanced Search for *terrorism ideology* with years specified as 2000 to 2023, no patents or citations, produces 16,400 to 18,300 hits (depending on order of terms).

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Similarly specified, *terrorism narrative* produces 19,800 to 19,900 hits. Similarly specified, *terrorism "collective action frame"* produces only 802 hits (either order). Despite its relative lack of popularity in the literature, this review will suggest that collective action frames offer significant advantages for understanding radicalization to terrorism.

To be clear, the suggestion here is not simply that collective action frames can be a useful way of thinking about radicalization to terrorism. Others have made this point.[2] Rather this review focuses on comparison in showing that ideology and narrative have conceptual and empirical weaknesses that have prevented tracking the "war of ideas" in terrorism research, whereas collective action frames offer a more promising account of the role of ideas in radicalization to terrorism.

The review begins with definition of collective action frame, in order to see reflections of this concept in definitions of ideology and narrative that follow. After making the case for collective action frames, implications for research and practice are considered.

## What Is a Collective Action Frame?

Along with *political opportunity* and *resource mobilization*, *collective action frame* is a basic concept of Social Movement Theory.[3] SMT aims to understand how individuals come together in social movement organizations (SMOs) to work for social change. Some social movements succeed, like the Women's Suffrage Movement that brought the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Some, like the Prohibition Movement, succeed partially or temporarily (Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, repealed by the Twenty-first Amendment). Some, like the Anarchist Movement in the U.S., fail definitively. SMT aspires to understand how some movements succeed and others fail.

A collective action frame is usually considered to have three dimensions. The *diagnostic* dimension identifies a problem or injustice, and who or what is to blame. The *prognostic* dimension is a proposed solution to the problem--what needs to be done to make things right. And the *motivational* dimension identifies who should feel responsible to act, including rewards for action and a grand vision of the world to be achieved by successful action. It is interesting to note that the three dimensions of a collective action frame were

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originally offered by John Wilson in his 1973 text, *Introduction to Social Movements*, in an effort to clarify and specify the role of ideology in the development of social movements.[4]

Social Movement Theory, including the concept of collective action frame, emerged from sociology. In psychology and political science, the diagnostic dimension of collective action frame is usually referred to as *grievance*, that is, a perception of injustice that includes identifying the perpetrators of the injustice. A collective action frame connects grievance to action by identifying what is to be done and who should join in doing it.

For jihadist terrorists, the diagnostic framing claims that the Umma is suffering from a war on Islam, a war waged by Western nations led by the U.S. The prognostic framing claims that jihad--violence in return for the violence against Muslims--is the only way to end Muslim suffering. And the motivational framing claims that every Muslim who is able should join in violent jihad, that jihadist successes (9/11 attacks, U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan) show the efficacy of jihad, that a just and safer world awaits under a new caliphate, and that those who join the fight will gain warrior status on earth and reward in heaven.[5]

For many Extreme Right militants in Western countries, the diagnostic framing claims that ever-expanding government power is controlled by leftist elites who want to replace the white majority with dark skinned minorities (“Replacement Theory”). The prognostic framing calls for preparation and action to resist government power and minority encroachment. The motivational framing promises brotherhood and warrior status in fighting government power and leftist elites.[6]

The three dimensions of a collective action frame are general enough to apply to both sides of an intergroup conflict, including the conflict between terrorists and their target state. For a government and its citizens, the diagnostic framing claims that terrorists are guilty of unprovoked attack. The prognostic framing is often a war on terrorists that includes new powers for police, military, and intelligence agencies. The motivational framing emphasizes patriotic appeals to defend the nation and its values.

Examination of ideology and narrative in the next two sections will show that these concepts are often reduced, in practice, to themes that look very much like the dimensions of a collective action frame.

## What Is Ideology?

This review focuses on the concept of ideology as it has been used in trying to understand terrorism and the trajectories of radicalization by which individuals and groups move to terrorism. Beyond its use in relation to terrorism, there is a long, large, and controverted literature on the meaning and use of the concept of ideology in sociology, political science, and psychology.[7] It would be useful to try to try to integrate conceptions of ideology across these four literatures—terrorism, sociology, political science, psychology. This ambitious goal is, however, beyond the scope of the present review, which is limited to use of the concept of ideology in relation to terrorism.

Given the popularity of the concept of ideology in terrorism research (Google Scholar results already cited), it is not possible to cite and discuss every reference to terrorist ideology. Instead this review examines seven prominent efforts to advance the concept of ideology for understanding radicalization to terrorism. The scholarly status of the experts and articles considered in this section justify their inclusion in the review, although the author acknowledges that the review cannot be exhaustive.

### Ideology as Consensus of Expert Opinion

In an ambitious literature search, Ackerman and Burnham identified 46 definitions of ideology: 19 general definitions, 6 definitions in relation to violent extremism, and 21 definitions in relation to terrorism. From these examples Ackerman and Burnham built a definition of *violent adversarial ideology* as “an ideology that enunciates specific grievances, delimits enemies, and legitimates violence against those enemies.” By extension, Ackerman and Burnham defined *terrorist ideology* as “a violent adversarial ideology which explicitly permits the use of terrorism.”[8]

A violent adversarial ideology thus appears to be a collective action frame that includes both diagnostic (“specific grievances,” “delimits enemies”) and prognostic (“explicitly permits the use of terrorism”) dimensions.

**Terrorist Ideology as Encouraging Violence Against Civilians**

Another expert approach is to define terrorist ideology as any kind of content--text, image, audio, or video – that encourages or condones violence against civilians.

Taylor and Ramsey describe how the U.K.'s government has tried to criminalize both messages that directly encourage terrorism and messages that indirectly encourage by "glorifying" terrorism or terrorists. But they find that there are no objective measures of these categories of content.[9] They turn to common definitions of terrorism to suggest that terrorist content is anything that encourages or condones violence against civilians.

Looking at videos on jihadist web sites, Taylor and Ramsey found that most of the videos are about jihadist attacks on Western military targets, or news reports of Western attacks on Muslims. Direct encouragement of attacks on civilians was relatively rare, although celebration of martyrs and prisoners who have attempted such attacks is more common. The issue here is that reports of terrorist attacks on Western targets, as well as reports of Western attacks on Muslims, are often news reports. At least in Western countries, it would be difficult to criminalize or otherwise suppress such reports.

**Ideology as Label of a Political Cause or Movement**

A report from START (National Consortium for Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism) divided all U.S. terrorist attacks between 1990 and 2016 into six types: left wing, environmentalist, right wing, nationalist/separatist, religious, and single-issue.[10] The report includes this caveat:

> Note that classification of terrorist attacks by ideology can be unclear, particularly when perpetrators of attacks identify with more than one ideological group or perspective, which may or may not be relevant to the motivations for the attack itself.

The title of this report is "Ideological motivations of terrorism in the United States, 1970-2016." As the caveat makes clear, however, it is not the motivation of perpetrators that is being coded, but the cause or movement the perpetrator is thought to be acting for. Thus the START report referred to causes or movements without trying to define or code the ideologies behind these labels.

Similarly, there is a significant literature linking Obsessive Passion for a political cause with approval of violent political action to advance the cause. This literature does not attempt to define ideology beyond naming particular causes: Republican Party, Democratic Party, Environment, Islam, Black Lives Matter. These are indeed political causes or political movements, but the ideologies behind these labels are not defined or coded.[11]

**Ideology as Frame or Subculture**

Holbrook and Horgan recognized three challenges in trying to link ideology with terrorist action. First, many terrorists show little understanding of the ideology supposed to motivate them. Second, terrorist histories often show no evidence that ideology was important in moving the individual to violence. And third, only few of those sharing an ideology ever turn to violence.

Holbrook and Horgan then undertook to enlarge the concept of ideology to respond to these challenges. They offered two directions of enlargement, that is, they stipulated two possible definitions of ideology.

First, in a section titled *Grievance-Blame-Response*, they argued that "Concentrating on social dimensions of ideology that emphasize perceptions of collective grievance, common alternatives and a united response, therefore, enhances the utility of the term in its application to terrorism as socio-political violence and harmonizes its usage with other sources of explanation."[12] Again reference to collective grievance and united action suggests that terrorist ideology can be understood as a collective action frame with diagnostic ("collective grievance") and prognostic ("common alternatives and a united response") dimensions.

Second, in a section titled *Social Fabric*, Holbrook and Horgan suggest that "Ideologies provide a shared sense of belonging and stories that define that community, its heritage and common values."[13] In this view, a melody or song (*nasheed* is their example) can be part of an ideology. At this level of generality, ideology includes all the beliefs, feelings, and rituals of a subculture. For research, the problem arises that measures of culture are complex and contested; defining ideology as culture makes it impossible to measure in any succinct way.[14]

A stipulated definition succeeds to the extent that it is empirically useful, leading to new measures and new patterns of relationships uncovered with these measures. Holbrook

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and Horgan do not offer new measures related to either definition of ideology, and the challenge of designing measures of ideology that can include a *nasheed* is—daunting.

**Ideology as Terrorists' Media Choices**

In a creative effort to track terrorist ideology, Holbrook examined print, audio, and video publications found in investigations of 17 plots in which 57 individuals sought to carry out Islamist-inspired acts of lethal violence in the U.K. between 2004 and 2017.[15] In all, 2397 publications were identified; 2196 were coded as ideological ("items that conveyed religious, political, or other ideological opinion or proscription"). Of the ideological items, 25 percent were coded as extreme ("support for lethal violence against identified people and/or explicit dehumanising rhetoric undermining their right to life").

Holbrook concludes as follows. "Overall, in short, the extremist ideological content that this selection of individuals collected dwelled on why violence should be embraced, occasionally against whom it should be targeted, often through broad-stroke condemnation of adversaries, but very rarely on how violence should be organized and carried out." Here again, extremist ideology can be represented as a diagnostic frame ("condemnation of adversaries") and a prognostic frame ("why violence should be embraced…against whom it should be targeted"), with an interesting additional finding that a specific prognostic frame ("how violence should be organized and carried out") is rare.

**Ideology as Moving Target**

A general problem with defining ideology is that it is constantly changing and adapting to political events. Shaffer's review of several books about militant and terrorist ideology begins with a definition so general that few could object to it. "Ideologies provide frameworks for viewing the world. Extremists' behavior is intertwined with systems of ideas that combine with a variety of other factors which shape motivations and justifications for political violence and terrorism."[16] More challenging is the conclusion of Schaffer's review: "The books reviewed demonstrate how ideas change over time, how they are interpreted in different political contexts and how they are shaped by personal and societal norms, attitudes, grievance and objectives."

A similar caution is offered by the Director of the National Consortium for Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) in testimony for a congressional hearing in 2019. Referencing multiple START data sets, Braniff's first conclusion was as follows: "The ideological motivations behind terrorist behaviors in the United States are exceptionally diverse, constantly evolving, often overlapping, and difficult to assess in many instances."[17]
If ideology evolves over time, then measurement of ideology is both more important and more challenging. Measurement must be sufficiently fast and inexpensive to track change in ideology over years and perhaps even months.

**Ideology as Collective Action Frame**

For Koehler, "…ideology can be understood as a clustered set of political concepts constituted around a problem definition, an offered solution or method, and a future vision of society."[18] This definition clearly invokes a collective action frame, including dimensions of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing.

In his 2021 book, Koehler applies this definition to distinguish far-right and jihadist ideologies. "*The key unifying component of the far-right* extremist ideological family is the notion of being part of an innately superior race or nation that is under threat from lesser value races of nations, for example through race mixing or immigration."[19] For jihadists, "*The unifying ideological goal* in this category is the protection of Muslims from a perceived war on Islam and the establishment of a society based on religious creed and authority."[20] The far-right example is easily recognized as a diagnostic framing (race threat); the jihadist example includes both diagnostic and prognostic dimensions (war on Islam, establish Caliphate).

**Ideology: Conclusions**

This section finds that expert definitions of ideology in terrorism research are many and inconsistent, ranging from collective grievance to a complex system of political ideas or even a subculture. Definitions of ideology as a system of ideas are not accompanied by suggestions for how to measure such a system. Ideology is generally recognized as a moving target that changes in relation to personal and political events, but change is difficult to assess without measures of ideology.

The key limitation of the concept of ideology is that abstract and inconsistent definitions have impeded development of measures of ideology, without which the value of this concept cannot be tested. Evidence of the difficulty in measuring ideology is that, outside of terrorism studies, ideology has meant something as simple as self-placement on a one-item scale from Far Left to Far Right[21] or Liberal to Conservative,[22] or on a multi-item scale of Authoritarianism or Social Dominance Orientation.[23] A Left-Right or Liberal-Conservative scale does not do justice to conceptions of ideology as a constellation or system of ideas. Scales of Authoritarianism or Social Dominance tap personality dimensions that are unlikely to vary with political and personal events as ideology does.

One might say that political ideology includes all the beliefs, attitudes, values, and even personality dimensions that can be correlated with political preferences or political behavior. This kind of open-ended definition is, however, difficult to translate into measurement. The number of possible correlates is unlimited; how many beliefs, attitudes, and values must be included to provide an adequate measure of ideology?

In contrast, collective action frames specify the belief content relevant to mobilization: What's wrong? What to do? Who should do it? Thus Snow and Byrd argued that ideology is too broad and undifferentiated a concept to represent the role of ideas in social movement mobilization, and that collective action frames offered more analytic purchase.[24] Snow and Byrd made their argument on conceptual grounds, whereas this review has emphasized empirical grounds for preferring collective action frames over ideology in terrorism research. As Snow and Benford observed. "…framing, in contrast to ideology, is an empirically observable activity."[25]

To sum up, proposed definitions of ideology are inconsistent and difficult to translate into measurement, and references to ideology can often be interpreted as collective action frames that include one or more of the three dimensions of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing. It appears that collective action framing may a be useful alternative to ideology for understanding the role of ideas in radicalization to terrorism.

The next section suggests that similar issues of definition and the same alternative can be identified for the concept of narrative.

## What Is a Narrative?

This review focuses on the concept of narrative as it has been used in trying to understand terrorism and the trajectories of radicalization by which individuals and groups move to terrorism. Beyond its use in relation to terrorism, there is a long and controverted literature on the meaning and use of the concept of narrative in sociology, political science, and psychology.[26] Again, this larger literature is beyond the scope of the present review.

Like ideology, the concept of narrative in terrorism research has been defined in numerous ways. Most definitions have not been tested in empirical research; this review focuses on two research programs that did apply a definition of narrative to enumerate and describe a body of narratives relating to terrorism.

### Stories, Narratives and Master Narratives

Perhaps the most ambitious effort to understand jihadist narratives has come from the collaboration of a religious studies professor and two professors of communications.[27] Halverson, Corman and Goodall distinguish *stories* from *narratives*, and *narratives* from *master narratives*. An example of a story is a report of a successful attack on Western forces by mujahideen in Afghanistan. A related series of such stories constitute a narrative of jihadist success. Paul Revere's ride is a story, the American Revolution is a narrative; this narrative is so much a part of American culture as to constitute a master narrative.[28]

Here is Corman's summary of jihadist narratives.

> The Nakba loss of Palestine, Crusader unbelievers attack ummah, and Pharaoh [God drowns pharaoh chasing Moses] master narratives are only three among the 13 we have identified (albeit the most commonly used) … Nonetheless, they provide a good picture of the rhetorical vision of Islamist extremists. They see the world as a dangerous place for Islam and Muslims. Enemies stand ready to invade, subjugate, and humiliate, as they have done repeatedly throughout history. They are chipping away at the land promised to Muslims by God. Corrupt leaders collude with the Crusaders and also oppress their people. In many cases the narratives are unresolved, so the situation implicitly cries out for Muslims to come forward as champions to rectify the injustice.

> This simultaneously allows the extremists to position themselves as the champions, and implies that those on the sidelines should join them.[29]

This summary describes the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational dimensions of a collective action frame. In the diagnostic framing, Crusaders are invading and Muslims are oppressed by corrupt leaders. In the motivational framing, Muslims should come forward as champions; God will help Muslims as He helped Moses. The prognostic dimension—jihad—is implied by the example of extremists asking other Muslims to join them.

**Characters in Action over Time**

More recently, Braddock and Horgan reviewed six different meanings of narrative.[30] Recognizing that the research literature has not settled on a consensus definition, they suggested their own definition: "any cohesive and coherent account of events with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end about characters engaged in actions that result in questions or conflicts for which answers or resolutions are provided."[31]

They go on to distinguish narrative from ideology as follows: "Whereas a terrorist 'ideology' is a group of beliefs to which a terrorist group purports to adhere and attempts to instill in members to guide their actions, a 'narrative' is a vehicle through which an ideology can be communicated."[32] In this view, a narrative is more specific than an ideology; a narrative is a story or series of related stories that can convey or reinforce an ideology.

In his study of Animal Liberation Front (ALF) narratives, Braddock began with an ALF website on which he found 88 links to what the website referred to as "stories."[33] He discarded sixteen of these stories (18 percent) as incompatible with his definition of narrative—the Braddock and Horgan definition.

For the 72 ALF stories remaining, Braddock developed a list of common themes. His procedure produced 70 initial codes, 41 consolidated codes and 10 overarching themes. The three most prevalent themes identified were: the near-human cognitive capacity of animals, victimization of animals, and animal kindheartedness. These themes can be loosely summarized as "animals are like humans in mind and heart, but are victims of human mistreatment." Those who identify with animals have a grievance, the diagnostic dimension of a collective action frame, but where is the narrative?

Recall the postulated elements of narrative: “any cohesive and coherent account of events with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end about characters engaged in actions that result in questions or conflicts for which answers or resolutions are provided.” Braddock does not report narrative events, or beginnings, middles or ends, or characters or their actions, or questions or conflicts, or answers or resolutions provided.

**Narrative: Conclusions**

Summing up this section, it appears that definitions of narrative are multiple and inconsistent, and that analysis of narratives focuses on themes induced from the narratives rather than on narrative events. In addition, the themes drawn from narratives often look like collective action framing, or at least the diagnostic dimension (grievance) of a collective action frame.

Thus both narrative and ideology have issues of definition and measurement that limit the usefulness of these concepts for understanding radicalization to terrorism. For both narrative and ideology, discussion of radicalization is often interpretable as including one or more of the three dimensions of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing.[34] The next section suggests how these three dimensions can be measured in surveys and polls.

## Measuring Diagnostic, Prognostic, and Motivational Frames

A crucial limitation of ideology and narrative is that these complex concepts are difficult to translate into measurement. A social science concept that is not operationalized in empirical research is severely handicapped. As already noted, ideology and narrative are moving targets that change in response to changing situations and events, but these changes cannot be tracked if ideology and narrative cannot be measured.

In contrast, the meanings of the three dimensions of collective action frame are relatively well agreed and easily measured. Here is a measure of diagnostic framing from the 2011 Pew poll of U.S. Muslims.[35] “Do you think the U.S.-led war on terrorism is a sincere effort to reduce international terrorism or don’t you believe that?” In 2011, about forty percent of US Muslims did not believe “sincere effort,” indicating belief in a war on Islam.

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Also useful is this item from the same Pew poll. “Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. Other people believe that, no matter what the reasons, this kind of violence is never justified. Do you personally believe that this kind of violence is often justified, sometimes justified, rarely justified, or never justified?” In 2011, about eight percent of U.S. Muslims thought this kind of violence is *often* or *sometimes* justified. This item is a measure of prognostic framing: what to do in response to grievance.

A motivational framing item might be something like the following. “How many Muslims do you think admire the individuals who join in Jihad against those who attack Islam? *None, A few, Many but less than half, More than half, Nearly all*.” This item could assess perceived ingroup status as a motive for joining Jihad: the chance to move “from zero to hero.”[36]

The value of measuring collective action frames with poll items is that, as suggested earlier in relation to ideology, measures of mobilizing issues must be sufficiently inexpensive and fast-turnaround to track change over years or even months. Poll measures of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames can satisfy these requirements.

It is worth noting that research in the tradition of Social Movement Theory has seldom included polling data, perhaps because SMT has focused on Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) rather than individuals. Still, there have been a few initiatives to broaden SMT applications. In a much-cited article, Zald suggested looking for movement activity, not just in SMOs, but in a wide variety of organizations and institutions, including families, schools, political parties, religious institutions, and government agencies.[37] Allen, McCright and Dietz have expanded SMT attention to include polling data on attitudes toward 20 different social movements (Animal rights, Antinuclear, Civil rights…).[38] If the ultimate success of a social movement is to move public opinion, then polling to track agreement with a movement’s diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames should become routine.

Ease of measurement is thus a major advantage of attending to collective action frames, especially in comparison with the measurement difficulties associated with concepts of ideology and narrative. Collective action frames can support new directions in terrorism research, bringing empirical light to discussions of the role of ideas in radicalization to terrorism.

A second major advantage is more conceptual: the distinction between diagnostic and prognostic frames leads to new directions for programs aimed at de-radicalization, desistence, and P/CVE (Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism). The first step in appreciating this distinction is to see how multiple prognostic frames can compete within the same diagnostic frame. The next section provides a particularly clear case of such competition, including identification of four prognostic frames that may have considerable generality.

## A Framing Analysis of the Pro-Life Movement

This section draws on Ziad Munson's 2008 study of the U.S. pro-life movement from the perspective of Social Movement Theory.[39]

### The Making of Pro-life Activists

Munson conducted interviews in four U.S. cities: Oklahoma City, Charleston, Twin Cities, and Boston. He identified 32 pro-life organizations in the four cities, and interviewed about 50 leaders and key informants about these organizations. At the individual level, he obtained life-history interviews from 82 pro-life activists and from 29 non-activists identified by activists as sharing pro-life beliefs but not active in the movement. Three-fifths of his interviewees were Catholic; two-fifths were Protestant. Of those targeted for interview, only 10 declined, for an impressive response rate of 92%.

One-quarter of his activists were more sympathetic to the pro-choice position when they first became involved in pro-life activities. Another quarter were ambivalent, with mixed or indifferent beliefs about abortion when they first became involved. Even the half who were pro-life before involvement had what Munson calls ‘‘thin beliefs’’: not well considered and often contradictory. In short, about half of Munson's pro-life activists were previously pro-choice or ambivalent (in comparison, about 50% of Americans were pro-choice in 2005 US polls).[40]

These results leave a question. If activists are not driven by strong beliefs against abortion, how are they moved to anti-abortion activism? Munson describes a four-step process with each step necessary but not sufficient for the next. The crucial first step is contact with a stream of the pro-life movement at a ‘‘turning point’’ in which an individual's everyday life is

changing because of moving away from home, marriage, birth of a child, death of a parent or partner, new job, or retirement.

Contact is more likely to occur through the accidents of social networks, including school, family, church, or work, than through ideology-based seeking for similar others. Turning points mean loss of old connections and openness to new routines, new relationships, and new ideas. Going to college is a turning point, and about 20 percent of pro-life activists became involved during college years.

In psychology, a turning point is often referred to as *unfreezing*: loss of everyday relations, responsibilities and routines that provide identity and social norms.[41] In sociology, a turning point is often referred to as *biographical availability*: "absence of personal constraints that may increase the costs and risks of movement participation, such as full-time employment, marriage, and family responsibilities."[42] The common idea here is that connection with a new group is particularly attractive to individuals who are, at least temporarily, feeling socially disconnected and perhaps lonely.

The second step in mobilization is participation in some kind of activism, usually by personal invitation to a meeting, a protest, a counseling session, or a rally. The third step is development of considered and consistent pro-life beliefs. This step mirrors social psychology experiments demonstrating the human tendency to find reasons for what we do (Aronson's 1969 reformulation of dissonance theory).[43] The fourth and last step is regular and routinized participation in a stream of pro-life activism.

Where is religion in this story? Participation in a church group can provide contact with activists, but only rarely does activism emerge directly from a conversion experience. Munson's comparison of activists and non-activists with similar anti-abortion beliefs found no difference in religiosity or religious activities.

**Four Streams of Activism**

An important result of Munson's study is the extent to which the pro-life movement is divided into different ''streams'' or directions. Munson identifies four streams: politics, education, services, and direct action (occasionally violent). Political groups focus on legislation, litigation, and lobbying. Public education groups sponsor mass advertising, including websites, TV, radio, and billboards. Service groups offer individual counseling and

social services to women with unplanned pregnancies. Finally, direct action groups picket and protest against abortion clinics and try to dissuade women from entering these clinics. Munson (p. 123) reports that 63 of his 82 activists – 77% – have participated in only one of these streams.

This degree of separation becomes less surprising in light of two other observations. First, individuals do not join a movement, they join a particular network and form of activism – a particular stream. Second, each stream represents a different view of what works in the fight against abortion: the prognostic dimension of a collective action frame.

Here is where ideas matter. As Benford and Snow note "Case studies reveal that the prognostic dimension is one of the primary ways in which a movement's SMOs [social movement organizations] differ from one another."[44] Munson's interviews establish that members of each stream tend to disparage the efforts of other streams as ineffective or even counterproductive, except that the other three streams all respect the efforts focused on public education.

The four organizational streams have different targets. Political groups target government and government officials. Public education groups target mass audiences. Service groups target mothers seen as victims of male selfishness and a culture that does not respect mothers. Direct action groups target evildoers – the abortionists and their clinics.

These four targets are in turn associated with different emotional experiences. Interactions with government are business-like and unemotional; public education groups feel parental pride in reducing child-like ignorance; service groups feel sympathy for victims; and direct-action groups feel outrage at evildoers.

**The Four Streams in Islamist and Right Wing Movements**

It appears that the four activist streams Munson identified in the pro-life movement have considerable generality. In related research, Dornschneider compared jihadists with non-violent Muslim activists in Egypt, and compared terrorist Leftists with non-violent Leftist activists in Germany.[45] In both comparisons, terrorists and activists shared the same grievances against the government but differed in perceptions of the morality and usefulness of terrorist violence. In other words, terrorists and activists had the same diagnostic framing but different prognostic framings.

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If ‘‘abortion is murder’’ can support four streams of activism, only one of which is militant action, so too can ‘‘the war on terrorism is a war on Islam’’ and “Replacement Theory.” Perhaps militants are not distinguished by their radical grievance but by their commitment to radical means.

Indeed the four streams have parallels in the social movement that is called political Islam. Hizb ut-Tahrir, which sees itself as an international political party, is part of the political action stream. More local representation of the political action stream is Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. Dawa organizations – notably Wahhabist international support for conservative Islamic centers, mosques, and schools – provide a mass education stream. The social welfare programs of Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood are a social services stream, as are the U.K. Muslims who trucked medical and food supplies to Syria for victims of civil war.[46] Al-Qaeda and ISIS and those they inspire are the militant action stream.

The four streams are also evident in Right Wing activists in the U.S. Donald Trump and his MAGA supporters target political power. Fox News, Glenn Beck, John Stossel and many more aim to educate mass audiences. Social service groups include the many crowdfunding sites that support individuals indicted for breaching the Capitol on 1/6 2021.[47] Direct action groups include Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, and numerous militias.

The fact that the same diagnostic framing can support multiple prognostic framings, the observation shared by Munson, Dornschneider, and Benford and Snow, has important implications for programs to prevent or counter terrorism. These implications are addressed in the next section.

## Countering Violence Rather Than Grievance

The competition among streams within the same movement opens an important direction for programs aiming to prevent terrorism or to move militants toward desistence (P/CVE). Rather than trying to counter the grievance or diagnostic framing, these programs can counter the prognostic framing, that is, can argue against the use of violence rather than about the justice of perceived grievances. The argument is two-fold: killing civilians is morally unjustified, and killing their civilians does not help the victims on our side. In practice this argument

encourages the expression of political outrage in the three non-violent streams identified by Munson: politics, education, and services.

Deradicalization of individuals convicted of terrorist offenses in the U.K. is in the hands of probation officers, often working with community groups that try to provide support and mentoring for probationers. Marsden has interviewed more than thirty of these frontline de-rad workers to learn what they do and what they think works.[48] Her results are in the form of interview excerpts rather than statistics about success and failure. Here is a senior probation officer talking about the importance of grievance:

> Social exclusion, racism, things like that, you know, diversity's a big part of it, foreign policy, perceived injustice, and grievance … grievance is an important part, foreign policy, it's about the impact factors, that people are seeing Muslim children dying on the TV, these can have big impacts on people.[49]

A notable finding of the interviews is that probation officers and community mentors report some success with interventions that do not directly challenge jihadist ideas. These interventions aim for disengagement and desistence by debating not the grievance but the violent response to grievance. Here is a community mentor talking:

> … if they want to talk about foreign policy, we'll just join their argument, you know, I think you're right about Afghanistan or Iraq, why should other people go into Afghanistan or Iraq and kill innocent people, they've no right to go there—yes you're right. So then these people start thinking, well hang on we've got the same views, at the end then, when the conversation finishes on that particular subject, what we have both agreed is that, yes, we don't like it what's happening, but what is the action we can take, to stop that from happening?[50]

Rather than insist the probationer deny Western victimization of Muslims, or deny that this suffering justifies violence in return, the debate turns on whether violence or support for violence is the best way to help suffering Muslims. This shift is useful because arguing against diagnostic frame or grievance is unlikely to be successful. Programs aimed at

preventing jihadist terrorism are unlikely to persuade Muslims that the West is NOT killing Muslims in Muslim countries. Similarly, programs aimed at preventing Right Wing terrorism are unlikely to be convincing that the Great Replacement is NOT happening or that government is NOT welcoming minority immigrants. Such arguments are unlikely to succeed against news reports of collateral damage in Muslim countries and news reports of demographic shifts in Western countries. Contesting prognostic frames should be easier than contesting diagnostic frames or grievances.[51]

## Conclusion

This review has found that concepts of ideology and narrative suffer from definitional uncertainties that have impeded empirical study of the role of ideas in radicalization to terrorism. In contrast, collective action frames are conceptually clearer and can more easily be translated into measurement, including survey and poll items. The measurement advantage for collective action frames is important but perhaps more important is the distinction between diagnostic and prognostic frames.

Diagnostic framing identifies victims and perpetrators. Prognostic framing identifies the action to be taken to make things right. Munson's study of anti-abortion activists found four competing prognostic frames, four ways of fighting abortion: mass education, services for women and children, election politics, and direct-action against abortion providers. Individuals generally join and work in just one of these prognostic frames; they do not join "the anti-abortion movement," they join a particular form of anti-abortion activism. The same four prognostic frames can be identified competing within Islamist and Right Wing movements.

Ideology and narrative do not distinguish diagnostic from prognostic frames, or distinguish the four prognostic frames. References to ideology and narrative thus tend to ignore the degree to which the same ideology, or the same narrative, can support both peaceful and militant action. Recognition of multiple prognostic frames competing within a shared diagnostic frame opens a new direction for P/CVE programs: to encourage nonviolent activism in education, services, and politics as alternatives to militant action and terrorism.

To sum up, the conclusion of this review is that tracking the war of ideas in terrorism research might be advanced with less reference to ideology and narrative, and more measurement of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framings. Practitioners charged with individual-level interventions for preventing political radicalization, or with deradicalization or disengagement of already radicalized individuals, may find it useful to refer to ideology and narrative in developing a fuller map of an individual's political ideas.[52] But at the group level—the level of politics, social movements, and intergroup conflict--the war of ideas can best be tracked in measures of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames.

## A Residual Puzzle

Given the conceptual and empirical limitations of ideology and narrative described here, why have these concepts been popular in theorizing terrorism? Why have collective action frames been relatively unpopular? There are at least two possible explanations.

First, both ideology and narrative are concepts representing the power of ideas. Academics are trained to focus on ideas; perhaps as a result they are more confident in the power of ideas in human affairs. They feel at home trying to understand radicalization as the rise of bad ideas. To the extent that terrorism studies are carried out by academics, or security officials trained by academics, the academic bias favoring ideas as causes may be reinforced in terrorism research.

This explanation does not, however, make clear why collective action frames would be less popular than ideology and narrative. Collective action frames are no less cognitive than ideology and narrative, no less interpretable as bad ideas. Especially the preference for ideology and narrative is difficult to understand when we recall that the origin of the concepts of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing was Wilson's effort to structure and specify the concept of ideology in Social Movement Theory.[53] Why would academics favor more complex and general ideas over simpler and more specific ideas?

The second possibility is that ideology and narrative are attractive in putting the problem of terrorism in the terrorists' heads. Ideology and narrative are ways of seeing terrorism as the result of terrorists' mistaken perceptions and wrong ideas.

In contrast, collective action framing implies a political conflict, with two sides. Grievance and diagnostic framing describe what's wrong: Who are the victims? Who is responsible? For jihadist terrorists, the grievance is Western countries led by the US in a war on Islam. For some Right Wing terrorists, the grievance is ever-expanding government power that is controlled by those who want to replace the white majority with dark skinned minorities. In identifying victim and perpetrator, grievance and diagnostic framing identify a conflict with two sides.

It seems that it is the "out there" element that best explains the popularity of ideology and narrative in efforts to understand terrorism. These two concepts put the problem of terrorism in *their* heads, away from *us*. Analyzing terrorism as a problem of their bad ideas--ideologies and narratives—saves us from having to analyze an intergroup conflict, a conflict with two sides, a conflict that cannot be understood without addressing the collective action frames of both sides.

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**Notes**

[1] Google Scholar results from May 11, 2023. Google has made efforts to "personalize" search results, making its search algorithm more opaque. The same search string can produce different results for different searchers, or even for repeated searches by the same searcher. Nevertheless, the 10+ ratio of hits for searches with *ideology* or *narrative* versus searches with *collective action frame* makes clear the relative popularity of the three concepts in terrorism research.

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