The number of people incarcerated for extremist actions has grown over the past decades. The resulting prospect of prison radicalization has contributed to widespread risk responsibilitization among prison staff. Low-level correctional officers now perceive themselves as being directly responsible for detecting radicalization on their units. Consequently, radicalization has become a meaningful topic for prison staff, one which shapes their daily actions and perceptions. However, officers’ understandings of radicalization may not conform with accepted definitions. Through 131 semistructured interviews with Canadian correctional officers, we demonstrate how radicalization functions as a floating signifier in prison, influencing officer thought and behavior in meaningful ways while eluding easy definition. Officers redefine radicalization to fit interpretive frames around religion and race, gang membership, and mental health, irrespective of whether stereotypical extremists exist in a given prison. We demonstrate how radicalization, when operating as a floating signifier, can significantly influence officers’ perceptions and front-line prison operations.

Keywords: prison; correctional officers; risk; decision making; law enforcement

INTRODUCTION

Prisons hold a distinctive place in global efforts to thwart terrorism. On one hand, they are the terminal point for captured terrorists, as the number of extremists held in western prisons has climbed steadily in recent years (Skilicorn et al., 2015). Yet at the same time, prisons are understood as a generative space for terrorists, with documented instances of...
individuals being radicalized behind prison walls (Hamm, 2013; Khosrokhavar, 2013; Mulcahy et al., 2013). Most countries have not reported widespread prison radicalization (Jones, 2014). Nonetheless, many nations now view it as an acute security concern, even in places with little history of terrorist activity or extremist messaging (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2016). In an attempt to interrupt cycles of radicalization and extremist recruitment, several countries have dedicated entire prisons exclusively to terrorists and violent extremists (Patel, 2017). For instance, the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and the Netherlands have all created segregated, high-security custody units intended to disrupt terrorist recruitment (Silke & Veldhuis, 2017). As a direct result of these efforts, prison staff, including managers and correctional officers, are now considered key players in both interrupting extremist recruitment and deradicalizing convicted terrorists (Silke & Veldhuis, 2017; UNODC, 2016).

Despite the prominent role that prison staff are expected to play in managing incarcerated extremists, we know little about how correctional officers conceive of or react to incarcerated persons espousing radical messages. Nor do we fully understand how officers connect their understanding of radicalization with formal definitions (Liebling & Williams, 2018). Therefore, although prison staff frequently deal with a wide range of incarcerated persons who may or may not fit official definitions of radicalization, we have little idea about how officers define or understand “radical” on a day-to-day basis. We also do not know if or how these understandings relate to the carefully specified operationalizations of radicalization that are central to academic work in this area (Neumann, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010).

Although it is an open question as to whether prison radicalization is a significant issue empirically or practically in North America (Bucerius et al., under review; Hamm, 2013; Useem, 2012), correctional officer perceptions on the topic matter for two significant reasons. First, if radicalization is indeed a pervasive threat in prison, it represents a significant security concern, and we are well served to understand how prison staff identify and manage this risk. Second, even if prison radicalization is not a meaningful security concern in any particular prison, the widespread framing of radicalization as a distinct social threat (Roy, 2017) can shape the perceptions and actions of correctional officers, similar to how extremism, radicalization, and terrorism inform societal and institutional perceptions of risk more generally (Beck, 2006). As a result, examining how correctional officers relate to radical and radicalizing persons provides a key insight into officer culture, institutional practice, and informal risk assessments.

We use Lévi-Strauss’s concept of a floating signifier to examine how perceived ideological radicalization and extremism shape the behavior and outlooks of correctional officers. The data we use are drawn from 131 interviews with correctional officers who work in four prisons in Western Canada. These interviews make up part of a larger project investigating radicalization and life experiences in prison (Schultz et al., 2020). We identified three primary research questions: (a) How do correctional officers conceive of and identify extremism and radicalization in prison? (b) Do officers redefine radicalization in specific ways to fit their distinctive daily realities? and (c) What implications do those understandings have for incarcerated people and the prison regime? Overall, our research identifies significant and meaningful tension between different conceptualizations of radicalization operating in prison, with distinct consequences for incarcerated persons, correctional officers, and prison officials.
In recent years, there has been a notable increase in research conducted on correctional officers (Arnold, 2016; Crawley, 2012; Ricciardelli, 2019). These works have fleshed out the occupational dynamics and professional culture of correctional officers, and several aspects of this occupation are now well documented. Most officers are male (Britton, 2003), and many enjoy high-risk edgework (Stout et al., 2018). Unsurprisingly, this results in a widespread culture of hypermasculinity (Ricciardelli, 2019), which manifests in specific officer codes, or more generally as a workplace habitus (Arnold et al., 2012; Lerman & Page, 2012). This shared code/belief system is often cited as a major influence shaping correctional officer behavior (Crawley, 2012; Tait, 2011). It is also well established that most interactions between correctional officers and incarcerated people are based on discretion, negotiation, and soft power (Crewe, 2009; Haggerty & Bucerius, Forthcoming; Ibsen, 2013; Liebling et al., 2011; Liebling & Williams, 2018). Despite this, officers also tend to be control focused, meaning they actively and vocally support almost any action which helps them maintain order in prison (Crewe, 2009; Sparks et al., 1996). However, despite this body of research, there are still gaps in our understanding of how prison staff do their job, and correctional officers remain some of the least understood actors in the criminal justice system (Arnold, 2016).

This lack of understanding corresponds with a general decline in empirical research on prison life in North America more generally (Simon, 2000; Wacquant, 2002). In Canada, where we do our work, there is a notable lack of independent social science research conducted inside of prisons (but see Bucerius & Haggerty, 2019; Pelvin, 2019; Tetrault et al., 2020). A major reason for this is because, in many jurisdictions, it can be challenging to secure research access to prisons (Britton, 2003). Overall, the decline in research conducted inside prisons leaves major gaps in our understanding of how prison officials and staff deal with new and emerging challenges of any sort (Bucerius & Haggerty, 2019).

Prisons, and by extension, prison staff, have been the subject of considerable public commentary in the evolving debate over how to best prevent radicalization. To appreciate why and to understand how this issue shapes officers’ perceptions, it is necessary to briefly contextualize the historical links between prison and radicalization (Hamm, 2013; Roy, 2017). Prisons and extremist movements have a long, shared history. Observers in popular and academic circles have drawn a causal relationship, conflating prior criminality, incarceration, and ideological violence (Burke, 2016; Roy, 2017). A subset of analysts frames prison radicalization as a significant threat, portraying incarcerated persons as inherently susceptible to violent ideological messaging (Cilluffo et al., 2007; Wilner, 2010). Dozens of news articles characterize prisons as “breeding grounds” for jihadism, with many linking prisons (especially French prisons) with ISIS recruitment (Bershidsky, 2017; Roy, 2017). However, other scholars have challenged this assertion, suggesting prison radicalization is not a widespread concern (Hamm, 2013; Khosrokhavar, 2013; Useem, 2012).

Our research focuses on how officers conceive of and react to the prospect of overseeing radicalized individuals. Radicalization into violent extremism is a complicated and often controversial phenomena, and definitions vary widely (Borum, 2017; Neumann, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010). We understand it as “the process by which individuals are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate mainstream beliefs towards extreme views” (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2016, p. 6). This definition is broad enough to encompass a wide range of ideological groups, including...
white supremacists, jihadi Islamist groups, Freemen on the Land (aka “Sovereign Citizens”), and ecoterrorists. Importantly, it focuses on a range of ideological viewpoints instead of specific groups (stereotypically, jihadist Islamism), and employs support for, or engagement with, violence as the key determinative variable (Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Neumann, 2013).

To appreciate how correctional officers understand and identify radicalization and to explain why these concepts are meaningful even in institutions where extremism is not common, we draw upon poststructural theory to suggest that radicalization acts as a floating signifier within prison. Floating signifiers are linguistic signs which are open to multiple and occasionally contradictory sets of meanings. Originating in the linguistics of Saussure, and developed through the work of Lévi-Strauss (1987) and Lacan and Fink (2006), floating signifiers refer to terms and concepts lacking a clear or stable referent (Mehlman, 1972). Linguists and cultural theorists have demonstrated how a range of phenomena can be understood as floating signifiers, including race, gender, and multiculturalism. While these concepts may appear self-evident, when subjected to scrutiny, their precise meaning proves elusive or contradictory. Such meanings are neither random nor arbitrary; instead, they are conditioned by the interpretive frames available in a particular social context that are sufficiently coherent to shape personal or organizational activity. Consequently, although floating signifiers are inherently ambiguous, meaning different things to different parties, they nonetheless serve to bind actors together in pursuit of a perceived hegemonic goal (Laclau, 2005; Žižek, 2006b). Theorists emphasize how struggles over the meaning and impact of a given signifier establish and reinforce social and power structures, with notable consequences for the body politic (Laclau, 1996; Žižek, 2006a).

Based on the work of Lévi-Strauss (1987), Laclau (1996, 2005), and Žižek (2006a, 2006b), we understand a floating signifier to be a discursive construct with flexible and indeterminate meaning(s), whose broader conceptualization and influence are subject to political and interpersonal struggle (Onursal & Kirkpatrick, 2019). Radicalization fits this definition. While the concept is not new, the term itself only gained widespread popularity after 9/11 (Borum, 2017; Sedgwick, 2010) due to its “apparent simplicity [and] inherent ambiguity” (Coolsaet, 2019, p. 43). Although several academic definitions exist, most sources agree that radicalization is often subject to the whims of definitional preference (Neumann, 2013). As is fitting for a floating signifier, the term is subject to significant controversy and struggle (Coolsaet, 2019). We do not propose to resolve the debates over the proper definition of what radicalization “means” (Laclau, 2005). Instead, we demonstrate how radicalization, in this case understood as a floating signifier imbued with meanings pertaining to societal risk (Onursal & Kirkpatrick, 2019), is operationalized in distinctive ways in prison, influencing the actions of correctional staff and the lived environment of incarcerated people.

METHOD

This article is derived from a larger research project conducted on prison radicalization in one province in Western Canada. The specific data we draw upon here come from interviews with 131 correctional officers working in four prisons. Our views are also informed by the 587 interviews we conducted with incarcerated people in provincial jails during this period. However, we do not directly use any of these perspectives in our
analysis (see Bucerius et al., under review; Schultz et al., 2020, for the views of incarcerated participants).

Our research was conducted in prisons that are part of the provincial correctional system, which detains the majority of incarcerated people in Canada (Malakieh, 2019). These institutions vary and are generally comprised of two primary types of facilities. The first are sentenced institutions, detaining adults sentenced to less than 2 years in prison. The second are remand centers (often called “jails” in the United States). Most individuals in remand facilities are legally innocent and are held awaiting trial. This means that remand centers house people who are arrested for comparatively minor offenses, such as petty theft or impaired driving, but also those accused of serious crimes, including murder or terrorist activities. As a result, all remand facilities are maximum-security institutions.

We interviewed correctional officers and incarcerated people in four different institutions. Two of the prisons were remand centers, one was a sentenced facility, and one was a mixed institution holding about 70% remanded individuals and 30% sentenced individuals. Except for the sentenced facility, all the prisons in our sample housed both men and women (on different units). One of the two remand prisons we studied housed more than 1,600 individuals, while the other held roughly 700 people. The sentenced facility accommodated around 300 persons, while the mixed facility detained a combined population of about 500 remanded and sentenced men and women. These facilities display markedly different architectural arrangements, ranging from Alcatraz-style barred cells to modern high-tech living units to warehouse-style open dorms. Overall, these prisons are roughly representative of the mix of institutions in western Canada (based on size, population, location, remand vs. sentenced, and programming).

We conducted 55 of our correctional officer interviews at the two remand centers, and the remaining 76 were split almost equally between the other two institutions. Twenty-one interviewees were women; 10 were visible minorities. The remainder of the interviewees were white men, a breakdown which roughly corresponds with the gender and ethnic profile of the correctional officers working in these institutions. We recruited participants using several methods. Our correctional contact sent all officers an email asking for volunteers. We also attended preshift meetings of correctional officers where we introduced the study in person. The most successful recruiting strategy, however, came from spending time on the units where we could personally ask correctional officers if they would be willing to be interviewed and suggest other potential participants. One limitation of such nonprobability, chain referral selection (i.e., “snowball” sampling) is that it depends on relationships among research participants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Maxwell, 2013). That said, many authors have used this method to conduct police and correctional officer interviews (Crawley, 2012), and it proved highly successful in helping us to secure participation from a wide range of officers.

We employed a generalized prompt guide to ensure consistency between interviews and asked a series of questions about prison radicalization. For example, “Do you observe radical group activity in this prison?” If so: “Tell me about who becomes part of extremist groups,” and “Do radicalized people change the prison routine?” However, we also allowed our participants’ perspectives and experiences to shape the conversation. This provided the opportunity to examine how officers perceived and identified radicalization. To ensure analytical rigor, we drew on principles and heuristic devices of grounded theory when coding and analyzing our data set (Charmaz, 2014). Our interviews averaged approximately
50 minutes and were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using Nvivo 11 coding software (Nvivo, 2017). During this process, we also assigned each participant a randomly generated pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

We used basic tabular data to identify similarities and differences and to verify the overall strength of patterns in the data. This method also helped us to identify cases that deviated from our observed patterns. After completing all of our interviews, the authors and two additional research assistants coded a set of six randomly chosen interview transcripts to determine whether our coding scheme required additions or amendments. Once we reached between 85% to 90% overlap on the six randomly chosen interviews, thereby establishing interrater reliability, we coded the transcripts line-by-line. As is typical in qualitative research, we have chosen representative quotes to support our findings. In cases where officers articulated a view only shared by a minority in our sample, we indicate it as such.

RESULTS

Our findings demonstrate that officers’ understandings of radicalization do not accord with accepted academic definitions. Rather, officers ground their assessment of which incarcerated individuals are and are not radical by foregrounding concerns about maintaining order in prison, while simultaneously orienting themselves to a set of recurrent interpretive frames that ostensibly provide guidance about who is and is not a radical. These frames allow the meaning of radical to float, depending on factors that have little or nothing to do with ideology or extremism. Yet, these frames are distinctively powerful, as they directly relate the day-to-day work of correctional officers to larger social lenses of risk pertaining to terrorism and extremism (Beck, 2006; Onursal & Kirkpatrick, 2019). In the prisons we studied, those meanings revolved around (a) religion/race, (b) gangs, and (c) mental illness, each of which are themselves open to considerable interpretive flexibility. None of these frames by itself determines how any individual officer will conceive of a specific individual. Still, they are the consistent points of reference officers turn to in trying to make sense of the prospect of radicalization in the prison where they work.

Our participants demonstrated considerable variability in how they conceived of radicalization, something also apparent in academic discussions (Sedgwick, 2010). At the beginning of each interview, we asked correctional officers to define radicalization. A few of their descriptions were close to official definitions. For instance, Officer Charles immediately differentiated radicalization from racist tropes. He defined radicalization as “I guess anything on the extreme edges of normal society, right? It doesn’t have to be Islamic.” Others were more idiosyncratic. Officer Jennifer, for example, was confused over whether a violent dispute over canteen items would count as a form of radicalization: “It can go down to frickin’ Kimchees [noodles]. You can get your face smashed in for not paying your Kimchee back. Like, is that part of radicalization? I don’t know!” Officer Stewart employed an understanding of radicalization as combining extreme beliefs with support for violence. Using that definition, he concluded that some of his fellow officers held extremist, radical views:

The officers too can be very radicalized in that us-versus-them mentality, where some of us look at [inmates] as ... completely negatively, zero positive, like ... if you had a choice, you’d [assault or murder] them and stuff like that. Some guys ... to put it, for lack of a better word,
more assholes; always yelling at inmates, locking them up for really no reason. Just having these beliefs that “Oh, they [the inmates] should all be liquidated,” and stuff like that.

While these views are unconventional and do not represent the larger group of officers, they demonstrate how widely individual understandings of radicalization varied. Some officers focused exclusively on a particular ethnic/racial group, while others viewed radicalization as pertaining to a broader set of subcultures. Yet others saw it as a process applicable to any social grouping. Sometimes, the defining factor was an act of extreme violence, while other times, officers accentuated religious or more broadly ideological beliefs. Alternatively, officers might foreground an individual’s intelligence or mental state. As we will show, specific prominent frames combined with particular institutional pressures to influence how the definition of radical “floated” in different contexts.

In the four prisons we studied, there was no meaningful evidence of pervasive radicalization (Bucerius et al., under review; Hamm, 2013; Schultz et al., 2020). Both officers and incarcerated people rejected suggestions that their prison had a problem with radicalization—or perhaps more accurately, rejected suggestions that their prison had a problem with forms of radicalization matching any accepted law enforcement or academic definition. Jason, a correctional officer with more than 15 years of experience in youth and adult prisons, made this clear:

Jason: Fuck your research on radicals, man. What you’re looking for does not exist.
I: You don’t think so?
Jason: Fuck, no. I mean, maybe some of the Muslim guys, they might want to be. They say they are. But legit fucking ties? Fuck that. There’s no—if you did your whole research, I bet you’re coming back with under three percent. And I would say even under one percent. That would be my guess.

A small number of individuals in the prisons we studied were incarcerated for terrorist-related activities, including one frequently mentioned individual who had been arrested near a public park with an explosive device in his backpack. A few radicalized persons might also have been keeping a low profile and, as such, were unknown to both the officers and individuals housed in the prison (Hamm, 2013). Jason’s assessment, however, was generally correct: forms of radicalization which accord with official definitions were not a pervasive phenomenon, something we heard from staff and incarcerated people across the data. This was true across the entire spectrum of radicalization, including right-wing radicals, Sovereign Citizens, or ISIS supporters, for example. This, in itself, is a crucial research finding which differentiates our work from some of the alarming conclusions about prison radicalization in other jurisdictions (Cilluffo et al., 2007; UNODC, 2016; Wilner, 2010).

Surprisingly then, Jason was one of the few officers we encountered who dismissed our focus on radicalization. Instead, officers tended to approach radicalization as both a proximate and concealed reality. Extensive pockets of stereotypical radicalization were understood to exist, but elsewhere. Officer Charles, for example, believed we would find wholesale radicalization in other parts of the country: “I hear out East it’s different. Jails in Ottawa and things like that, I hear it’s different out there.” Others suggested radicalization was prevalent in the federal correctional system: “I think the federal system is where you get all this. Especially when you look at joining the Freemen, or gangs, and ISIS. I think that’s more likely to happen in the federal system . . .” (Officer Esther). Correctional
officers who worked in the remand facilities believed radicalization was more established in sentenced facilities, and vice versa. Still others suggested that we could find sizable groups of radicals on another unit in their prison. The point is that radicalization was recognized as being a legitimate, looming threat, although something that was usually to be found in a different jurisdiction, prison, or unit.

The frequently mentioned implication of this situation was that officers expected to see quick increases in radicalization in their prison. Officer Tony stressed this point, noting: “I think it’s just inevitable that there’s radicalization among our inmate population . . . Just a matter of time. It’s happening in other jurisdictions, why wouldn’t it happen here? I mean, c’mon.” Likewise, officer Carrie observed: “When all the attacks started happening in random places or whatever, my first thought was, ‘It will hit the jail.’” As this demonstrates, even officers who rarely encountered conventional forms of radicalization expected that they would likely, and perhaps inevitably, do so with greater frequency in the near future.

While such an eventuality would require officers to have resources to identify radicalized individuals, those who are in direct contact with incarcerated people on living units have almost no training in identifying and managing so-called “radicals.” Schooled primarily in techniques for de-escalation and physical control, officers are provided with little additional specialized education. A handful of security intelligence officers are responsible for tracking particularly troublesome individuals, but they have no actuarial tools for identifying or profiling radicalized persons, and their focus is almost exclusively on gang members or drug traffickers.

By default, then, correctional officers are left mainly to their own devices to identify and manage any radicalized persons on their units. Ultimately, officers rely primarily on their own experience and intuition in making such determinations. This, in turn, appeared to be shaped by media and news depictions of radicalization as filtered through correctional officers’ culture. Indeed, in the months before our research, there had been prominent accounts in the national and international media of prison radicalization (Bershidsky, 2017; Burke, 2016). The definitions officers employed displayed some general commonalities, while also being shaped by particularities of the specific prison, officer, and incarcerated individuals on a given unit. In other words, definitions of radicalization floated. Furthermore, the prevalence of “radicalization talk” in the media had made the great majority of officers attentive for signs of radicalization. Lacking precise training on what to look for, they turned to a recurrent set of interpretive frames to help guide and ground such determinations.

One characteristic aspect of how officers conceive of radicalization relates to their distinctive occupational responsibilities. Officers see their primary mandate as maintaining order in a volatile environment (Sparks et al., 1996). As a result, officers’ concerns about radicalization were primarily informed by an assessment of the extent to which individuals or groups might disturb the prison order. Individuals who vocally or visibly opposed a wide range of practices, routines, or officer demands, were seen as potential threats to the prison regime. By engaging in such behavior, individuals could be characterized as radicals, even though they did not conform to any recognized definition or understanding of radical (Borum, 2011a, 2011b; Neumann, 2013). Ideological viewpoints, which are perhaps the single most crucial determinative factor when analytically defining radicalization (Borum, 2017) became nearly irrelevant for making such assessments. While officers recognized that terrorism involves stereotypical politically motivated attacks, on a day-to-day basis, perceptions of radicalization risks in prison were shaped by distinctive, organizationally
specific mandates and priorities relating to an officer’s desire to run the prison with minimal disruption or conflict.

Conscious that they needed to be attuned to signs of prison radicalization while also lacking clear definitions, officers interpreted the actions of incarcerated persons through the lens of their own concerns, which were themselves informed by organizational mandates and institutional routines. Unsurprisingly, this resulted in a significant expansion of the population that could be deemed radical. Officers regularly approached radicalization in light of three dominant interpretive frames: (a) religion/race, (b) gangs, and (c) mental health. These frames serve as consistent reference points for officers when trying to make sense of the prospect of radicalization in the prisons where they work.

Religion and Race Frameworks

The first and most prominent interpretive frame officers employed in contemplating radicalization was religion/race. While race and religion are conceptually distinct, in practice, officers displayed considerable slippage in this area, often marking Islam as a “brown person’s” religion. Officers’ views were often complex and occasionally contradictory on this point. Many of our correctional officer participants, for example, believed that religion, including Islam, contributes to self-discipline and rehabilitation. Most recognized the importance of religious freedom, and several were vocally concerned about racism, especially as it applied to discussions of radicalization. At the same time, Muslim persons prompted heightened anxieties about radicalization for many officers and were therefore a greater focus of attention.

In keeping with widespread cultural currents in western societies, officers tended to equate terrorism with Muslim extremists (Jackson, 2007). Comprising perhaps only 5% of the population in our study sites, Muslim persons were conspicuous to officers and could face heightened suspicion. Muslim individuals tended to seek each other out, and even innocuously socializing together to play cards, or lining up together for meals, could raise anxieties (see also Liebling & Williams, 2018). Such worries were apparent even in prisons where individuals from the same ethnic groups commonly socialized among themselves (Tetrault et al., 2020). In light of this perceived Muslim/terrorist connection, relatively mundane markers of the Islamic faith could draw an officer’s attention, including having Arabic reading materials in their cells, growing a beard, wearing a taqiyah (skull cap), or writing out verses from the Quran. The following quotes from officers Archie and John, both of whom worked in specialized security intelligence positions, tracking gang members and high-risk individuals, provide a sense of how such quotidian activities and religious practice can become suspicious:

“...hey, do you guys see some guy who might have been at one point a pretty normal guy on the unit at one point, and then—is he becoming... is he isolating himself? Is he becoming more—y’know, very religious? Or all of a sudden is glued to his prayer times?” That sort of thing. Like... is he becoming more and more withdrawn from other offenders, and staff, and... just focused on his beliefs and that sort of thing, right? (Archie)

If you’re looking at the Muslim or the Islamic radicals, we see them converting. So, all of a sudden, we’ll see some changes. They might start to pick up the Quran. They might start to say, “Yeah, I’m a Muslim now, I need a prayer mat.” Or “I need a meal system set up,” food that
we offer. From there, we’re seeing things like . . . Is he praying more, right? He’s making those psychological changes about his beliefs. (John)

Officers were apprehensive of people who converted to Islam in prison, something they saw as particularly troubling if it involved individuals who were not from stereotypically Muslim ethnic backgrounds. Several officers portrayed such conversions as strategic attempts to manipulate the prison system and obtain perks, most conspicuously better meals. As officer Chan put it, “they’re playing that Muslim ticket. They don’t practice, but they know enough about the religion to manipulate it and get what they want out of it.” For others, converting to Islam in prison, irrespective of the person’s ethnic background, was a warning sign. Nigel was one such officer. Having spent much of his 20 years in corrections dealing with troublesome groups, he was particularly anxious about what he saw as an increase in Islam in the prison:

I don’t wanna be racist or anything, but seeing people that are not Muslim, that don’t have Muslim backgrounds, Muslim families, that are converting . . . It’s weird. It’s like, you’re seeing like . . . uh, Aboriginal people, First Nations . . . just normal white people, probably wouldn’t be doing this if they were on the streets . . . But now that you’re in jail, now you want to join . . . The radical thing, it’s taking over more and more.

Officers tended to disproportionately see Muslim persons as troublemakers, inclined to oppose officer commands, and challenge prison rules. Unsurprisingly then, they often characterized Muslim people as an exasperating group to deal with. Officers holding such beliefs could interpret the behavior of Muslims in ways that reinforced existing stereotypes of Muslim men as interpersonally hostile, untrustworthy, and demanding (Sides & Gross, 2013). In keeping with the overriding concern to maintain the prison order, officers could single out Muslim believers as potential radicals simply due to such challenging behavior. Officer Carrie, for example, articulated the widespread perception that Muslims were more confrontational: “Now these Muslims that we’ve been having a lot of issues with—with the Muslims—because they’re just so defiant and so argumentative, and so aggressive.” In part, this assessment was informed by the fact that Muslim individuals had conspicuously different prayer routines and would occasionally “demand” treatment that was “special,” such as a halal diet, a prayer mat, the ability to participate in Ramadan, or asking to leave their cells to ritually wash their hands and face (Wudu) before prayer.

In a highly regulated and conservative institution, where deviations from established institutional routines were actively discouraged, such practices were sometimes viewed as a sign of nascent radicalization. Many officers also saw these routines as an annoyance, and feared that not accommodating such activities would lead to accusations of racism:

Well, not at all to be racist, but I find sort of like the Muslim and Islamic inmates cause the most issues, ‘cuz they think that anything you say is sort of racism. So, um, they’re just trying to grind always, because it’s their religion—they can do this, they can do this. And then if you say no, then all of a sudden, they blow up. And they sort of group together, and . . . it causes a lot of problems. (Officer Stewart)

So now you have on the floor—you’re getting . . . the guys with inmates who are these cocky fucking ignorant, and I hate to say it because—it’s not the overall Muslims. It’s Muslim
extremists. The ones that are utilizing it for their own games, whatever their games might be. Just to be a fucking ignorant asshole. (Officer Carrie)

Several, but by no means all, of our participants enacted cultural stereotypes of “Muslim terrorism,” which they saw as being confirmed by their perceptions of high levels of resistance and opposition from Muslims. On numerous occasions, correctional officers mentioned the risk that Muslims might group together and “blow up” (disrupt) the prison order. Again, this concern was with confrontational Muslim individuals, rather than self-identified radicals. In a telling contrast which highlighted the importance of resistance or disruption, rather than ideology or belief in shaping officers’ perceptions of radicalization, officers did not perceive extremists or terrorist affiliates as an issue if they were respectful and compliant. Describing a convicted terrorist who had spent months in his prison awaiting extradition, officer Stewart noted, “We actually had an al-Qaeda guy in there, and—no issues whatsoever with him. Super nice to staff.”

One notable consequence of this focus on radicalization among Muslim people was that confrontational behavior by other groups that might be deemed radical could be normalized. Consequently, violence and resistance from non-Muslim groups were sometimes overlooked or classified differently, thereby skewing the portrait as a whole. Officer Jason identified this when he discussed whether white supremacists were considered radical: “We accept that as normal, don’t we though? We kinda do. It’s not like I’m far off here—it’s like, if there was like, a white supremacist beat up somebody, we’d be—‘OK’. We’d get it.”

**Gang Frameworks**

While race/religion was the most prominent interpretive frame for conceptualizing the threat of radicalization, gangs were also a conspicuous part of the equation. In our research setting, gangs frequently used prison to replenish their membership. Officers quickly made a connection between such gang recruitment and terrorist recruitment: “If you want to learn about that kind of stuff, the best sort of association I can make it to is gang recruitment” (Officer Quentin). While ideological radicalization and gang membership are dissimilar in many ways (Pyrooz et al., 2017), officers often drew explicit parallels based on their observations:

That’s your extreme radicalization, and what the media loves to hear about right? If you’re talking about radicalization in a sense, like—full-blown gang culture—that happens all the time. (Officer Matt)

Officer Asher also made this clear:

Yeah, so far, the radicalization hasn’t really made its way here yet. Bits and pieces, especially Muslim radicalization, but . . . native gang radicalization, that’s what you see the most of.

Although this “gangs equal radicals” logic was not as prominent as the orientation to religion/race, it was still a common interpretive framework. Officers regularly described gang members, particularly gang leaders, as radicals within the prison. Notably, however, there were no specific “Muslim gangs” in the prisons we studied. Instead, the gangs these officers
referred to were primarily composed of other ethnic groups (mostly young Indigenous men) or gangs containing members from diverse ethnicities.

A critical factor that connected gangs with radicalization was related to the overriding emphasis officers placed on maintaining order across a given prison. Officers could deem gangs and gang members as radical because they would disproportionately confront officers, undermine their authority, and break the rules. Resisting prison staff and violating rules were key, as many of these individuals were perceived to be trying to gain reputation or gang status by opposing institutional dictates and officer demands. The floating understanding of radicalization employed by correctional officers allowed them to interpret gang-related resistance or violence as “evidence” of radicalization (Borum, 2011a, 2011b; Neumann, 2013). This theme was particularly strong among officers who worked at the large remand centers, where overcrowding and turnover led to regular confrontations between officers and incarcerated persons and made order maintenance an ongoing challenge. The smaller sentenced prisons had fewer gang members, and staff had more time and opportunities to develop functional, working relationships with individuals. Tellingly, officers at these institutions either described radicalization as being less common or placed more weight on one of the other two frames.

Another prominent connection that officers saw between gangs and terrorists concerned the perceived motivations for joining both groups. In keeping with insights from the scholarly literature (Decker et al., 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2019), officers believed that a major appeal of gang membership related to members’ desire for a sense of identity, belonging, family, and solidarity. Here, Officer Matt points to this connection that officers commonly made between terrorist groups and gangs:

They’re [gang members] searching for something to join, where it’s like, “I feel part of a family. I feel like they love me, they want me.” So that’s what gang culture is. And ISIS is just a more organized, more extreme version of that. So, when you’re talking radicalization to an extreme terrorism-style group—that’s just . . . it’s an international, very well-organized version of gang culture, in my opinion. (Officer Matt)

Calvin makes the same connection between why both gangs and terrorist groups might be appealing for particular individuals:

It’s that sense of belonging! It’s that sense of, I feel like I am involved in a different community, or I feel belonging from this group of people because they accept me for . . . whatever, right? Whether that’s because I’m a tough guy, smart guy—whatever you can find that meaning from that group.

Officer Ricky gave this analogy a distinctively Canadian flavor, suggesting that for both groups “It’s like being part of a hockey team or something, right? You get the acceptance; you get the acknowledgment and all that crap.”

**Mental Health Frameworks**

The final interpretive frame typically came to the forefront only after an officer had become suspicious that an incarcerated individual might be radicalized (or radicalizing). Almost simultaneously, the officer would consider the person’s mental capabilities, something that could involve formal or informal clinical assessments or a perfunctory
consideration of the individual’s intelligence. This helped an officer determine whether they were interacting with a radical deserving of heightened scrutiny, or someone they could dismiss as simply “nuts.” As Officer Trent put it, “Most of those guys that are saying this type of stuff, they’re not mentally all there, and they end up in mental health.”

This became clear during separate conversations we had with eight officers who had, at one time, worked with the rare persons who openly expressed support for ISIS. Despite having close encounters with individuals who fit stereotypical aspects of the profile of “real” radicals, these officers unanimously dismissed them as a threat by pointing to their limited intelligence and/or questionable mental health. Harry, an unassuming young correctional officer with less than 2 years on the job, put it this way in discussing such an ISIS supporter:

No, he’s not one of those stone-cold faced killers that, like terrorists or whatever, he’s just . . . he’s just an idiot. Scatterbrained . . . it’s really unique dealing with him, because in the media you see these like, stone-cold-faced, y’know, “death-to-America” kinda types, and you actually meet one of them, and you’re like—this guy’s not going to do shit.

An individual proclaiming his allegiance to a radical cause was therefore not in itself sufficient to prompt an officer to conclude they were dealing with a “real” (or potential) radical. Such a determination was again informed by assessing whether this person could translate radical beliefs into potentially violent action, either in or outside of prison (or as Officer Harry puts it above, if they are going to “do shit”). Such appraisals involved contemplating a person’s demeanor, interactions, and overall behavior to decide whether they might simply be mentally ill:

Every time I see them [ISIS-aligned inmates], they seem so fucked up. These people are so bizarre. Last time I saw this [name] guy I was talking about, he was in his cell, he had like an apple core glued to the wall, talking about how we’re all going to, we’re the white devils, and we’re going to burn in hell. (Officer Chad)

This critical assessment of the mental abilities of potential radicals was particularly apparent with individuals who identified as Freemen/Sovereign Citizens. Such individuals employ a largely incomprehensible set of quasi-legalistic arguments to deem the state illegitimate. As a result, Sovereign Citizens believe they do not have to pay taxes, need driver’s licenses, sign legal forms, or respect formal legal strictures. While security officials occasionally see them as posing a terrorist threat (Perry & Scrivens, 2016), correctional officers mostly approach Sovereign Citizens as a mentally ill nuisance. As Officer John observed: “. . . most people [prisoners] are kinda under the same impression that everyone is, these guys are nutty.” As they were not usually seen as a threat to the institutional order and were viewed as too “crazy” to do anything serious outside of prison, most officers believed that they could safely ignore Sovereign Citizens. Occasionally, however, when such individuals were held on a general population unit, their constant proselytizing could become an irritant to officers and incarcerated persons alike, prompting them to be transferred to a different unit, particularly mental health. As Officer Anna noted, “And [they] won’t stop talking. So, we put them on a Max unit or mental health, where they’d be more accepted, because they’re used to that there.”
Such transfers, however, could be a double-edged sword. Officers believed that because those units detain people with lower mental acuity, those individuals are consequently more open to accepting radical messaging. As Officer Stewart put it:

and then obviously it’s very easy to influence [prisoners on mental health units] because they’re not a hundred percent there. Their mind doesn’t work a hundred percent the same. The logic isn’t a hundred percent the same, so they’re easily fooled into believing whatever the person wants them to believe. Or, very easily told to do something where they don’t know anything better.

While officers were concerned about the potential disorder which could occur when proselytizing radicals ended up on mental health units, they were not concerned that these individuals or their potential acolytes represented any sort of legitimate threat to either the prison or to society outside of prison. Rather, officers dismissed these individuals as nuisances and continued to focus their efforts on the prospect that there might be “real” radicals “out there” in the general prison population.

CONCLUSION

The correctional officers in our study found themselves in a curious position when it came to radicalization within prison. On one hand, they work in an environment where risk is pervasive. Radicalization is just one of many risks officers encounter in prison, along with those related to escape, riots, overdoses, and self-harm (Ferdik, 2016). Yet, officers in our sample interpret radicalization in a qualitatively different manner than other risks they face on a day-to-day basis. Radicals are widely perceived as posing a violent threat to society outside of the prison walls, whereas the risks officers typically manage are more concretely focused on the dynamics within the prison itself (Hamm, 2013; Roy, 2017). This framing is undoubtedly a result of larger societal risk frameworks rather than empirically grounded threat assessments (Beck, 2006). At the same time, the increased risk profile attached to radicalization means that officers are far more concerned about “radicals” on their units than they are about normal, quotidian prison risks, which officers feel knowledgeable about and capable of managing. However, as our findings demonstrate, the same risk profiles mean officers use frames they encounter every day to define and redefine radicalization. As a result, individuals who threaten the institutional order of prisons are quickly defined as radicals and treated as such.

How officers define various prison-based risks varies considerably, sometimes involving formal, actuarial risk assessment tools, but usually relying on informal, personal intuition and experience. In relation to radicalization, officers had few organizational resources to accomplish their job. They received little training on radicalization and almost no information on the biographies or risk profiles of individuals on their units. So, while they worked at the deep end of the state’s criminal justice apparatus, officers nonetheless found themselves operating as informal responsibilized risk managers.

Officers were attuned to mass-mediated messaging about the dangers and ostensible increased prevalence of prison radicalization globally. They drew upon such representations as well as their personal experiences and broader cultural stereotypes in contemplating the extent of this threat in their workplace (Beck, 2006). In practice, this meant that the prospect that radicalization might be occurring in prison prompted a visceral reaction from officers.
and ongoing detection efforts. At the same time, the phenomena itself was open to considerable interpretive flexibility. The floating character of officers’ understandings meant that on a day-to-day basis, the meaning of radicalization was amorphous and contested (Žižek, 2006b). Officers could see evidence of radicalization in assorted otherwise innocuous behaviors that operated at the micro-level to condition interactions between officers and incarcerated people.

Such conceptual elasticity, however, was limited. Officers’ determinations operated within moderately circumscribed contours, which were themselves influenced by the fact that officers consistently turn to three dominant interpretive frames to help guide their assessments of potentially radical individuals on a case-by-case basis. As we have documented above, these were (a) religion/race, (b) gangs, and (c) mental health. For analytical purposes, we have isolated each orientation; in practice, they sometimes overlapped to provide a form of mutual reinforcement but also clashed, introducing tensions and contradictions in how officers perceive ostensible radicals. Some of these themes mimic risk frameworks relating to radicalization in wider society (particularly concerning race/religion), while others are quite distinctive to prison (gangs). Importantly, these are orientations, not algorithms. The interpretive frames influence how classificatory decisions are made but do not result in standardized assessments; more points of orientation than formal rules, as is consistent with street-level bureaucrats’ approach to policy enforcement in other settings (Lipsky, 2013; Stuart, 2016).

All three frameworks point to one similarity: officers tend to read radicalization through the lens of non-conformity, whether that is a particular religion that is not “common,” gang behavior they identify as out of the ordinary, or an “abnormal” mental health status. Lacking set definitions on radicalization to orient their work, officers read the prospect of radicalization through institutional suspicions about forms of difference and deviance.

Yet, unlike legally ascribed formal classifications, officers’ characterizations tend to be far more temporary and contextual, meaning that their designation of radicalization typically only applies to individuals who are actively resisting the prison’s regulatory structures. In other words, officers tended to characterize individuals as radical when they directly challenged official control of the prison. They would also quickly drop such characterizations if those individuals complied with the rules and officer demands, as was the case with the polite-but-confirmed-Al-Qaeda-member officer Stuart mentioned. Therefore, this order-based definition of radicalization was little concerned with long-term ideological group membership.

Beyond providing empirical insights into correctional officer culture as it pertains to managing incarcerated radicals, our findings provide new insight on how researchers can study radicalization in prison. Intellectually, the picture we have painted reinforces the social scientific emphasis on clear operational definitions. Our data signal the need for caution and critical distance in relation to any discussion concerning prison radicalization, as the meaning of the concept is malleable, and interlocutors may be working with starkly different interpretations. Such ambiguity foregrounds the scholarly need to meticulously ascertain what radicalization amounts to in the prison(s) under discussion, paying particular attention to the organizational and interpersonal realities of how individuals come to be perceived and dealt with in light of such an (unofficial) designation. Detailing these realities promises to be a fruitful area of future research.
Policymakers should also bear this point in mind. Moreover, if they want to have a realistic sense of the prevalence and dynamics of radicalization in their institutions (Silke & Veldhuis, 2017), they need to provide front-line officers with clear, standardized definitions. Staff also have to be sufficiently trained to appropriately manage radicalization and extremist recruitment without relying on highly subjective interpretations. Such efforts are particularly important, given how prominent official bodies have positioned correctional staff as a bulwark against prison radicalization (UNODC, 2016). It is also the case that in contemporary culture, terrorists or radicals are met with considerable disdain. When such individuals are incarcerated, they face additional stigma, suspicion, and the prospect of violence from other incarcerated people (Bucerius et al., under review; Schultz et al., 2020). This reality adds greater urgency to ensure that the radical label does not float to encompass an ever-widening group of individuals, simply because officers see them as unpleasant, different, or disruptive.

In the prisons where we conducted our research, there was not a large core of stereotypical radicals that might serve as “ideal types” of incarcerated terrorists (Liebling & Williams, 2018). This is a limitation of this study: were we to study prisons where such stereotypical forms of radicalization were prevalent, we suspect our findings about how officers identify and make sense of radicals would be noticeably different. It is possible, however, that by studying prisons with few stereotypically radical individuals, our research setting mimics the profile of many, and perhaps most, prisons internationally. If so, it means that our findings about how the floating signifier of “radicalization” becomes grounded in a series of consistent interpretive frames related to the local realities of prisons will have a wide remit. In conclusion, we believe that examining how these interpretive frames differ between prisons and countries is a logical next step for this research. The floating signifier concept can undoubtedly be extended to other pertinent risks in prison and should include the perspective of incarcerated people. Understanding how threats like radicalization “float” in the correctional setting may help to expand our understanding of prisons more generally.

ORCID iD
William J. Schultz https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6125-1837

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William J. Schultz is a Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation and Vanier Canada Doctoral scholar at the University of Alberta. His research interests center on policing, radicalization, prisons, and prison work.

Sandra M. Bucerius is an associate professor of criminology and sociology and the director of the Center for Criminological Research at the University of Alberta. She directs the University of Alberta Prison Project (twitter @theUAPP).

Kevin D. Haggerty is a Canada Research Chair and Killam Laureate. Among his research interests are prisons, policing, surveillance, and research ethics.