In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Americans experienced many different emotions. They felt fear, surprise, pain, and confusion (Silver, 2011). It is understandable that people were confused because, in the early stages after the attack, little information was available regarding what motivated a terrorist group to attack the United States. Given the little information available initially, U.S. citizens and political commentators often inferred whether the terrorist groups’ motives were economic, political, or morally based (Silver & Matthew, 2008).

Within psychology, there is a rich literature regarding how people explain, predict, and understand the behavior of others. When information about others is limited, people tend to egocentrically use information about themselves as a reference for making inferences about others (Tamir & Mitchell, 2013). Stated differently, people use their own preferences and values as an anchor to base their inferences about other people including strangers (Tamir & Mitchell, 2013), friends (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004), and even members of rival groups (Chambers & Melnyk, 2006).

When people infer the values of rival groups, they tend to perceive greater conflict and disagreement than truly exists (Chambers & Melnyk, 2006). Such misperceptions are caused because people egocentrically focus on their own values more than their rival’s values (Chambers, Baron, & Inman, 2006). This egocentric focus leads people to overestimate the degree to which rival groups are opposed to their own most important values. To illustrate this point, consider the rival groups, prochoice and prolifef advocates. People who are prochoice focus on their own most important values (i.e., women’s reproductive rights). Similarly, people who are prolifef focus on their own most important values (i.e., the value of human life). When prochoice advocates infer the values of their prolifef rivals, they may egocentrically infer that their prolifef rivals are more opposed to their own most important values (i.e., women’s reproductive rights) than they truly

ABSTRACT. In the wake of a terrorist attack, people question terrorists’ motives and values. In the current research, we hypothesized that people may egocentrically infer that terrorists oppose values that are important and relevant to themselves more than values that are personally unimportant or are relevant to someone else. To test these hypotheses, participants inferred the values of a hypothetical terrorist group. They inferred the terrorist group’s position regarding values that were relevant/irrelevant and important/unimportant to themselves. As expected, people inferred that the terrorist group was more opposed to their own values than the values of others, $F(1, 65) = 5.66, p = .02, \eta^2_p = .08$. People also inferred that the terrorist group was more opposed to important values than unimportant values, $F(1, 65) = 7.67, p = .009, \eta^2_p = .10$. These findings suggested that egocentrism may guide people’s inferences about terrorists when little information is available. Implications regarding public perceptions of real terrorist groups are discussed.
are (Chambers et al., 2006). Similarly, when prolife people infer the values of their prochoice rivals, they may egocentrically infer that prochoice people are more opposed to their own most important values (i.e., the value of human life) than they truly are (Chambers et al., 2006).

In the current research, we extended the previous findings on egocentric social inferences to the realm of terrorism. Because prochoice and prolife advocates inferred greater opposition toward their own values, we hypothesized that participants would egocentrically infer that terrorist groups are opposed to their own values more than the values of others. Given the extreme nature of a terrorist attack, we also hypothesized that participants would infer that terrorist groups are opposed to personally important values more than personally unimportant values. To test these hypotheses, participants inferred the degree to which a hypothetical terrorist group opposed values that were self-relevant, other-relevant, important, and unimportant.

Method
Participants
Sixty-seven participants (\(M_{\text{age}} = 19.64, SD_{\text{age}} = 4.31\)) were recruited from lower level, undergraduate psychology courses at a midwestern university. All participants received a small amount of course credit for participating. The sample consisted of 37 women, 28 men, and two participants who chose not to identify their sex. Participants identified as European American (80%), Hispanic (8%), African American (8%), two or more races (3%) and other (unspecified; 1%). On a spectrum from 1 (liberal) to 5 (conservative), the average participants’ political beliefs were a 3.22 (SD = 0.91). In regard to political party affiliation, nearly 45% of the sample identified as Republican, 35% did not identify with any party, 12% identified as Democrat, and less than 3% identified with the Libertarian or Green Party.

Materials and Procedure
At the beginning of the study, participants were presented with an IRB approved informed consent form that explained participants’ rights during the study. All participants indicated that they read the informed consent form and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Afterward, participants were given a survey titled “Judgments About a Terrorist Group.” At the beginning of the survey, participants were led to believe that a new, relatively unknown domestic terrorist group had emerged in the United States. Participants were told that, “According to the U.S. National Security Agency, a domestic terrorist group is beginning to emerge that refers to itself as ‘The BCNC.’ Little information has been disclosed about The BCNC, so you may or may not have heard about it.” To avoid any demand characteristics, The BCNC was said to be supportive and opposed to many different values that may or not be related to participants’ personal values.

Next, participants inferred the values of the BCNC Group on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (not at all opposed) to 7 (extremely opposed). To manipulate the domain relevance (self-relevant, other-relevant) and importance (important, unimportant) of the value, four questions were presented to participants. The first question asked, “To what extent do you think the values of the BCNC are opposed to your most important values?” The second question asked, “To what extent do you think the values of the BCNC are opposed to values that are unimportant to you?” The third question asked, “To what extent do you think the values of the BCNC are opposed to the most important values of someone else?” The fourth question asked, “To what extent do you think the values of the BCNC are opposed to values that are unimportant to someone else?” It is important to note that participants did not state what their personally important or unimportant values were nor what the important or unimportant values for someone else.

After participants completed the value inference survey, they indicated the sex and ethnicity they identified most strongly with. Response options included man and woman for sex and European American, African American, Hispanic, Asian, two or more races, or other for ethnicity. Participants also indicated their age, political beliefs, and political party identification. Political beliefs were assessed by a single item, ranging from 1 (extremely liberal) to 5 (extremely conservative). Political parties included Republican, Democrat, Green, Libertarian, Other, or No Party Affiliation.

At the conclusion of the study, participants were presented with a one-page debriefing form. They were made aware of the deception used in the study, specifically that the BCNC was a fictitious terrorist group. Participants also learned the importance of the study and its implications for the public’s response to real-world terrorist attacks. Finally, the contact information of the principal
Egocentric Inferences About Terrorist Groups | Combs and Collisson

investigators, the IRB chair, and the student counseling center was provided to participants. Participants were granted extra credit for participating and dismissed.

Results

A repeated measures 2 X 2 factorial Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test whether people’s inferences regarding the values of a terrorist group varied as a function of domain-relevance (self-relevant, other-relevant) and importance (important, unimportant). As predicted, there was a main effect of domain-relevance. As seen in Figure 1, people inferred that the terrorist group was more opposed to their own values than the values of others, \( F(1, 65) = 5.66, p = .02, \eta^2_p = .08 \). There was also a main effect of importance. People inferred that a terrorist group was more opposed to important values than unimportant values, \( F(1, 65) = 7.67, p = .009, \eta^2_p = .10 \). There was no interaction between domain-relevance and importance in regard to people’s inferences of the terrorist group’s values, \( F(1, 65) = 1.28, p = .26, \eta^2_p = .02 \).

In an exploratory fashion, we also included participants’ political beliefs (grand mean centered) into the 2 (domain relevance: self-relevant, other-relevant) X 2 (importance: important, unimportant) repeated measures ANOVA model. There was no significant three-way interaction between political beliefs, domain relevance, and importance, \( F(4, 60) = 0.63, p = .84, \eta^2_p = .02 \). The main effects of domain relevance, \( F(1, 60) = 1.36, p = .25, \eta^2_p = .02 \), and importance, \( F(1,60) = 1.59, p = .21, \eta^2_p = .03 \), were no longer significant, suggesting a small or underpowered effect. Furthermore, similar results were found when political party identification was used in the model instead of political beliefs. There was no three-way interaction between political party identification, domain relevance, and importance, \( F(5, 59) = 0.36, p = .88, \eta^2_p = .03 \). Main effects of domain relevance, \( F(1, 59) = 0.62, p = .43, \eta^2_p = .01 \), and importance, \( F(1, 59) = 1.12, p = .29, \eta^2_p = .02 \), were not significant.

Discussion

In the current study, we tested whether people’s inferences about the values of a terrorist group depend on the self-relevance and importance of the value. As predicted, both hypotheses were confirmed. People egocentrically inferred that a hypothetical terrorist group was more opposed to their own values than the values of someone else. Furthermore, participants inferred that a terrorist group was more opposed to important, rather than unimportant, values.

Implications and Future Directions

Although the current study assessed inferences of a hypothetical terrorist group, the results may have implications for inferences of real terrorist groups. Presumably, the average American knows very little about real terrorist groups. Indeed, the exact number of domestic and foreign terrorist groups is unknown. Therefore, people may be left to infer a real terrorist group’s motives and values after an attack occurs domestically (e.g., threatening political figures by the “Sovereign Citizens”) or abroad (e.g., beheading of journalists by “ISIS”). The extent to which egocentric thinking guides people’s inferences of real-world terrorist groups is a logical extension of the current research.

If egocentrism affects people’s inferences about terrorist groups, different people may have different inferences about the same terrorist group. For instance, Republicans may egocentrically infer that a domestic terrorist group is opposed to conservative, rather than liberal, values. On the other hand, Democrats may egocentrically infer that the same terrorist group is opposed to liberal, rather than conservative, values. Presumably, both Republicans and Democrats egocentrically think about terrorist groups in relation to their own values. Although the current research was not adequately powered to answer these questions, future studies may address the link between personal political beliefs and political value inferences.

Finally, the current findings have implications for the broader public. In the aftermath of
a terrorist attack, people may need to adjust their inferences of the terrorist group to account for their own egocentric biases. Presumably, once people learn about the terrorist group’s values, they should no longer need to base their inferences upon their personal values. However, it is unclear to what extent people correct their inferences of terrorists’ values. In people’s search for answers, they may selectively seek out information that confirms their inferences (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). Indeed, people may misconstrue the values of terrorist groups and maintain inaccurate perceptions until they are corrected by unbiased, objective facts. It is also possible that such beliefs persevere and remain unchanged in light of evidence (Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975). Future research can better identify the extent to which people’s perceptions of terrorist groups are accurate.

Limitations
Given the lack of previous research regarding the inferred values of terrorist groups, we asked participants to infer values quite generally. In the study, participants were asked to infer the extent to which a terrorist group was opposed to their own, or another person’s, important or unimportant values. We did not specify which values (e.g., imperialism, honesty) participants should make inferences about. Therefore, the broad and general wording of our survey might have introduced demand characteristics. It is possible that participants felt compelled to infer that the terrorist group was opposed to important, rather than unimportant, values. If demand characteristics caused people to infer greater value opposition from terrorists generally, then people would infer that the terrorist group was equally opposed to important and other-relevant values, respectively.

Conclusion
The current study demonstrated that people egocentrically infer that a terrorist group is opposed to important and self-relevant values more than unimportant and other-relevant values, respectively. Given the emergence of radical groups throughout the world, this research is applicable and timely. It appears that, when little or no information is available about a group, the term terrorist may affect people’s inferences about the group’s values.

References

Author Note. Nina M. Combs and Brian Collisson, Department of Psychological Sciences, Marian University, Indianapolis, IN. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Brian Collisson, Department of Psychological Sciences, Marian University, 3200 Cold Spring Road, Indianapolis, IN 46222. E-mail: bcollisson@marian.edu.