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# Two Sides of the Same Coin?

An Examination of the Cognitive and Psychosocial Pathways  
Leading to EMPOWERMENT and RADICALIZATION,  
and a Model for Reorienting Violent Radicalization



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## I. Introduction

*"There are many causes that I am prepared to die for, but no causes that I am prepared to kill for."  
– Mahatma Gandhi*

Rarely are the notions of “empowerment” and “radicalization” uttered in the same sentence. Conventionally and colloquially, “empowerment” is seen as positive, and “radicalization” is seen as negative. “Empowerment” is to be desired and supported, whereas “radicalization” is to be prevented and feared. The contrast between the two terms is highlighted in the fact that many programs aimed at preventing radicalization are called “empowerment” programs. Indeed, these two notions exist on opposite ends of conversational, political, and theoretical agendas, to the extent that one is often seen as the antidote to the other.

The purpose of this review is in large part to unpack key theories of empowerment and radicalization, and to elucidate some of the shared elements between the two notions, ultimately for the purpose of leveraging and transforming often-destructive processes and behaviors associated with radicalization for positive, pro-social outcomes. Instead of relying on countering violent extremism (CVE) approaches that aim to prevent radicalization or emphasize *de*-radicalization, which have inherent limitations and often deny the potential assets of radicalized youth, this report explores the merits of a process akin to “re-radicalization.”<sup>1</sup> (Sieckelink 2016; Nema 2016)

De-radicalization programs are often premised on conformity, in essence placing the burden for reform and rehabilitation on the “radicalized” individual. Not only can this strip away core elements of an individual’s chosen identity, belief system, and path, therefore invalidating critical grievances and abilities, this approach also fails to demand that societies, institutions, or states acknowledge their contributions or push for change. Rooted in a positive youth development framework,<sup>2</sup> “re-radicalization” as a construct aims to “channel their radical energy in a way that ultimately benefits all of society.” (Sieckelink, 2016)

This paper argues that, to be more effective, CVE programming needs to recognize, enhance, and channel potential assets of radicalized youth – such as agency, commitment, leadership, and self-efficacy – and examines the possibility of reorienting their impulses, attitudes, and behaviors from violent radicalization towards non-violent civic empowerment. Such a process can be understood as a reframing of empowerment informed by a deep understanding of what makes radicalization so total, so quick, and so potent a path for creating transformative personal and social change. As such, our goal is not to impose our desired outcome on someone’s journey of self-actualization, but rather work to better understand their journey and potential contributions in order to create a more effective and inclusive approach to transforming violent extremism.

Close evaluation of the disparate literatures on empowerment and radicalization suggests that, just as many vaccines contain small doses of live virus, radicalization does contain small doses, or shared elements, of empowerment. That is not to suggest that the desired outcomes are the same, but rather a similarity of *process*. Indeed, empowerment and radicalization are both processes, specifically *psychosocial processes*, meaning they have a starting point, stages, and an end point, influenced by

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<sup>1</sup> Equal Access, “Assessing Conflict Drivers and Reframing Radicalization in Northern Nigeria,” 2017, <http://www.equalaccess.org/success-stories/re-framing-radicalization/>

<sup>2</sup> Positive youth development is an approach rooted in an asset-based understanding of personal empowerment, while also accounting for cognitive and emotional development, discussed in section three below.

individual psychological dynamics and interpersonal relationships. Similarly, the trajectory of each process—growing more empowered, or growing more radical—have developmental phases, inflection points, and potential intervention points. Peers matter, in both processes. Individual psychology matters, in both processes. Community matters, in both processes.

We here explore various theoretical models in moderate detail, paying particular attention to the individual-environment interactions requisite in each empowerment and radicalization phase, and suggest an innovative and controversial paradigm that capitalizes on what we know about radicalization, that it can be redirected for constructive and inclusive outcomes.

## II. Empowerment and Radicalization as Psychosocial Processes

Many models of empowerment and radicalization take sociological or social ecological approaches (Bronfenbrenner 1977; Centers for Disease Control 2002), focusing on the interaction of individual traits and characteristics with external factors including social network, community, and institutional or policy environment (Moghaddam 2005; Atran 2010; King & Taylor 2011; see Kruglanski et al 2014). These social ecological approaches are explored further below in psychosocial terms. Digging deeper, the empowerment-radicalization overlap is particularly noticeable when we analyze empowerment and radicalization through the lens of social psychology, which focuses deeply on the interaction of individual minds and environmental inputs in increasing the likelihood for specific behavioral outcomes. The mind-environment interaction explored in social psychology maps neatly onto traditional social science paradigms of agent-environment interaction, in which individuals are formed by, interact with, and seek to affect structures which, constantly, are shaping their social reality.

By nature of the field of study, psychology reduces concepts to components linked to known processes in the brain and mind. A layer deeper, social neuroscience specifically studies the neural patterns associated with social thoughts (thoughts about our social selves and other people) and social behaviors (including intergroup behavior). In contrast, sociology and political science approaches place little to no emphasis on biological, neural, or psychological processes, opting for a focus on behavioral and environmental signs and markers. In other words, they focus on behaviors and external characteristics of process stages, instead of exploring the underlying mechanisms that produce those behaviors.

Social psychology offers a convenient bridge between the social sciences and the brain sciences when it comes to the study of empowerment and radicalization, insofar as social psychology inherently accounts for external factors that influence internal factors. It explores how external environments – relational, cultural, and structural – shape individuals’ and groups’ psychology and behaviors. It takes a specific look at the social aspects of the brain and mind, encompassing self-referential thought, thoughts, and behaviors towards others, and meta-level influences on neural and psychical processes from abstract social entities like community, political structures, and policies. In doing so, social psychologists who study radicalization and empowerment seek to explain mental and behavioral phenomena that emerge in the tension created in agent-structure dialectic. In this sense, the sub-fields of social psychology, and to a certain degree social neuroscience, offer what we could call a social ecological model of the brain and mind, as they specifically study how brain, thought, and behavior are influenced by extrinsic factors of the social world.

Before going further, it is important that we establish working definitions and understandings of our key terms: “empowerment” and “radicalization.” And as mentioned, we will pay particular attention to theoretical models of each concept that can be reconciled in a social ecological model (SEM).

### III. Unpacking Empowerment

We begin with “**empowerment**.” At the most introductory level, the English dictionary states that to *empower* is to “promote the self-actualization and or influence of a given individual, group, or entity” (Merriam-Webster 2018). At this basic level, then, we already see that empowerment has internal and external components; internal change and outward-facing impact.

For our purposes, we briefly focus on six theoretical models of empowerment and youth development: Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman 1995; 2000); Freire’s concept of Critical Consciousness (Freire 1979; 1983; 2002); Prosocial Communities (Tyler 2001; 2007); Development Assets (Search Institute, 1990); Critical Social Model of Youth Empowerment (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, & McLoughlin 2006); and Vision or Asset-Based Empowerment (Gershon and Straub, Empowerment Institute).

Most of these models share the basic concept of empowerment being both internal and external, benchmarked by not just processes, but by external outcomes and impact (performed, tangible actions that lead to change). Additionally, all models approach empowerment as an asset-focused process, removing the focus from individuals’ and communities’ problems, and placing it on cultivating assets and visions for growth. Simply, most major models of empowerment accept that the internal growth and actualization associated with empowerment should be accompanied by external signs of *collective* self-actualization. In other words, empowerment is about social change, and specifically around social change that brings collective agency, or control, over life’s course. This will be important to understand as we look to radicalization later.

#### a. Comparing Empowerment Theories

First, we will briefly examine Zimmerman’s *Empowerment Theory*, as it has been widely integrated into youth development programs internationally. Zimmerman (1995; 2000) provided one of the earliest theoretical models of empowerment, taking into account both the individual’s psychological inner life, and the environment in which the individual exists. He writes that

“Psychological empowerment is a contextually-oriented conception of empowerment that embraces the notion of *person-environment fit*. It includes, but is not limited to, collective action, skill development, and cultural awareness; and incorporates intrapsychic variables such as motivation to control, locus of control, and self-efficacy.” (Zimmerman 1990, p 174)

Zimmerman summarizes his own theory neatly, suggesting that the goal of his theory is to “understand how what goes on inside one’s head interacts with what goes on in one’s environment to enhance or inhibit one’s mastery and control over the factors that affect one’s life” (Zimmerman 1990, p 174). Of course, the logical extension of this model requires an individual acting alone or with others to make change, and Zimmerman elaborates extensively on how individual empowerment of youth must be accompanied by progressive participation, stake, and roles in socio-political community structures.

Zimmerman's model has been criticized for an over-reliance on individual factors, and the quote above indicates his reliance on psychology and limited attention to actual social action. By using terms such as "motivation to control," "locus of control," and "self-efficacy," Zimmerman indeed grounds his definition in social psychology.

Importantly, Zimmerman does not suggest that actual power (in political or social terms) is necessary for an individual to be empowered. He specifically states that "an empowered person may have no real power in the political sense, but may have an understanding of what choices can be made in different situations" (1990, p 174). He allows for an individual who is objectively powerless to *operate in an empowered way*. In this sense, he shares Viktor Frankl's guiding principle of resilience, which proposes that, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (1952, p. 75). Keep in mind that Frankl's perspectives on freedom and self-actualization were developed during his imprisonment in a concentration camp, strongly supporting the notion of self-actualization and psychological empowerment despite, and perhaps intensified by, disempowering circumstances.

Zimmerman's model of empowerment as an individual-collective continuum sits nicely alongside the theories of Paolo Freire (1979; 1983; 2002). Grounded in Marxist social theory, Freire is one of the few theorists to link empowerment and radicalization in the same model, and avoid prescribing the means one uses as an empowered or radicalized individual; we will return to this point. Freire understood empowerment as an equivalent of *conscientização* (critical consciousness), a central element of which was developing an understanding of the causality of events in our lives, and then acting to change our society (1983). In other words, self-awareness is a necessary precursor to agency.

Freire's model is inherently pedagogical, proposing a model of learning by which young people or adults enter into a deeper understanding of structures of oppression and hegemony, and then take individual and collective steps toward liberation from that oppression. Antonia Darder (2014) summarizes as follows:

By entering into their own world, students can become aware of what they know in relation to their world and also what more they need to know, in order to participate more concretely, in the making of their destinies. This is a path toward greater consciousness, where students are actively involved in the task of codifying their reality as they know it and moving beyond the known to the unknown, toward becoming creators of knowledge and participants in making of the world (p 4).

Freire and Zimmerman share an emphasis on the possibility of empowerment decoupled from objective political power. This is in part because both men worked with objectively disenfranchised communities where structural change and economic mobility were not always seen as possible through nonviolent means alone. Furthermore, both theories share emphasis on self-awareness and developing an understanding of how and why one's position in society functions, and then, active participation for change.

Lasting positive change for disenfranchised individuals and communities requires work in three interlocking levels—individual change, institutional change, and policy change.

In the same vein as Zimmerman and Freire, Forrest Tyler (2001; 2007) offers a convenient model of what he calls *Pro-Social Community Development*, which bridges more theoretical understandings of self-actualization and empowerment with programmatic strategies for empowerment. Tyler suggests that lasting empowerment requires that *individual change be met*

by receiving and participatory structures (community institutions), and amenable policies that place

disempowered individuals at their focus, and that confer agency and opportunities for practiced empowerment. Tyler’s model has influenced youth development programs internationally, as it allows for a convenient design within broader social ecosystems and ecologies.

Like Tyler’s model, the Search Institute’s concept of *Developmental Assets* (1992) has become a popular approach to youth empowerment, and covers nearly all levels of an individual’s social ecology. The Developmental Assets framework suggests that *positive youth*

SI’s Developmental Assets™	
<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>
Commitment to Learning	Support
Positive Values	Empowerment
Social Competencies	Boundaries & Expectations
Positive Identity	Constructive Use of Time

*development*—which is rooted in an asset-based understanding of personal empowerment, while also accounting for cognitive and emotional development—requires working at two ends of a continuum from internal to external. Like all the approaches highlighted, Developmental Assets suggests that empowerment is an ecological issue—requiring internal change linked to opportunities for external influence in progressive tiers from family, to social network, to community, to political institutions. Highly instructional, the Developmental Assets approach is usefully prescriptive, but is vast, moving beyond empowerment and into adolescent and youth psychological development.

Rooted in the concept of Developmental Assets, **Positive Youth Development (PYD)** is an important conceptual framework that is both a philosophy and an approach to adolescent development. According to USAID’s YouthPower Learning: *Positive youth development engages youth along with their families, communities and/or governments so that youth are empowered to reach their full potential. PYD approaches build skills, assets and competencies; foster healthy relationships; strengthen the environment; and transform systems.*

Jennings’ 2006 *Critical Social Model of Youth Empowerment* is an additional and fairly comprehensive programmatic approach to empowerment. In the development of her model, Jennings reviewed Zimmerman and Freire’s models, along with others to come up with a more robust understanding of the requisite *inputs* to youth empowerment. Process oriented, she suggests the following six inputs:

1. A welcoming and **safe** environment;
2. Meaningful **participation** and engagement;
3. Equitable **power-sharing** between youth and adults;
4. Engagement in **critical reflection** on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes;
5. **Participation** in sociopolitical processes to effect change; and
6. Integrated individual and community-level empowerment

Jennings functionally ignores the internal processes of empowerment, offering a somewhat vague framework for designing and accompanying empowering structures and systems. Importantly, the elements proposed by Jennings appear in many common international frameworks of youth development and empowerment promoted by groups like UNFPA, UNICEF, and UNDP, which have become quite popular in much of the world, particularly in humanitarian contexts.

Lastly, we consider the empowerment model of David Gershon and Gail Straub, founders of the Empowerment Institute. Similar to Zimmerman, Gershon and Straub approach empowerment from the perspective that thoughts create our reality. Unconscious and limiting beliefs lead us to manifest a

disempowered reality. Gershon and Straub, whose work is rooted in personal empowerment and spiritual consciousness, emphasize the importance of shifting mindsets from pathology to vision. While they believe empowerment is both an individual and group process, they argue it must start at the personal level. Specifically, they argue that psychotherapy and development programs are often inadequate because they focus overwhelming on the problem and how to fix it. Instead, they argue, the focus of personal and social change work should be on what is possible and how to create it. They emphasize the concepts of self-awareness, human agency, visioning, and manifestation as the critical ingredients of empowerment. They offer the following four steps, rooted, as with previous thinkers, in an asset-based approach and guiding questions intended to help individuals empower themselves by crafting reality with thought:

1. Increase Awareness – Where am I now around this issue?
2. Craft a Vision – Where do I want to go?
3. Transform Limiting Beliefs – What is preventing me from achieving my vision and how can I transform it?
4. Focus on Your Growing Edge – What is my next growth step on this empowerment journey towards my vision?

Gershon and Straub argue that most people do not cultivate a vision for what they want in life, and even fewer know how to create it once they do know. As a result, they argue, many people live in a disempowered state, and therefore lead lives that are manifestations of unconscious and disempowered thoughts. As we will see below, radical groups tap into both of these voids, providing both a clear and compelling vision for self-actualization and social transformation, and offering the tools and concrete pathways to manifest this vision.

Overall, the five models we reviewed share some key elements. First, they are all dependent on a social ecological understanding of empowerment, where the individual is deeply embedded in a system of relationships, structures, and environments that affect what empowerment looks like. Second, all of them share an outcome orientation, meaning that empowerment is oriented for tangible change in 1) an individual's ability to navigate their social world successfully, and 2) change their social ecology. In other words, they share the notion of building agency and *performance* of that agency as evidenced by tangible change. While Zimmerman can be seen as an exception to that, his theory does discuss psychological empowerment as a key step *towards* external influence and social change. Third, all theories agree that empowerment is a group process as well as an individual process. In this sense, social networks intrinsically matter when discussing empowerment. Fourth and finally, all theories of empowerment place agency at the core of empowerment. Importantly, from a psychological perspective, agency is simultaneously a motivation, a process, and an outcome.

The notion of agency thus provides a convenient segue into radicalization, which similarly can be understood as a highly-motivated process of acquiring agency, even if the performance of that agency in society is often counter-normative or destructive.

## b. Critique of Empowerment

It is worth noting that the concept of “empowerment” has been heavily criticized (Rappaport 1985; Riger 1993; *see* Archibald & Wilson 2011 *for a review*) for several reasons relevant to our framework. Most importantly, in common parlance and practice the concept of empowerment implies a conferral from a high-power source to a lower-power source, thus placing “ownership” of power in those higher power

entities in a given space. “High power” sources can include development actors, in addition to state structures. In this “conferred” empowerment, power is reduced to commodity (see also Marx), linked to and controlled by power inequalities present in a given society. The “giver” of power can thus theoretically “take” it back, which calls into question the quality of “power” supposedly conferred to low-power individuals and groups. Such a conception of power stands in contrast to Foucault’s understanding of power as mostly detached from capital and coercion (1991), linked more abstractly to discourse in society and politicized economies of “truth” in a given society.

Second, and more practically, the notion of “empowerment” programming risks placing the burden of change on “empowered” individuals while ignoring or not addressing the role of structures in perpetuating disempowerment, oppression, and violence. In other words, empowerment programs place burden of action and maintenance on disempowered or newly empowered individuals. This system thus does not inherently pursue accountability or action by power-holders, including political and economic structures. Yet, in either case, the pursuit or conferral of agency, of the ability to act, rests at the core of empowerment.

For our purposes, CVE research and programming often go beyond empowerment programming by incorporating the structural and enabling factors that drive radicalization and extremism. One way in which CVE programs often fall short is by placing the burden for change on radicalized individuals and groups and failing to create processes that compel states and power holders to acknowledge and address their contributions to perpetuating conditions which lead to marginalization and violence.

#### IV. The Challenge of Defining ‘Radicalization’

*...[W]e must invoke our radical ancestors and with their spirit attack the problems of a stratified society, highly mechanized and forced to continue along the road of mass production. Without further apologies, therefore, I recommend to the attention of all who are interested in preserving freedom the need for the American radical – the missing political link between the past and future of this great democratic land.*

– James Bryant Conant, then President of Harvard University, writing for the Atlantic Monthly, 1943

It is difficult to find a useful definition of *radicalization* (see Sedgewick 2010; Borum 2011; Mandel *in press*), as its use cuts across multiple disciplines. Its meaning is highly contextual and, to large degree reflects a fervor of action and core impulses that at their root are neither positive nor negative. In other words, the notion of radicalism is not inherently destructive or violent, and exploration of its neutral and constructive aspects bears relevance for how we can understand empowerment moving forward.

First and most basically, radicalization is not a uniform process. There are many diverse means, signs, and outcomes in the process of radicalization for any end (Moghaddam 2005; King & Taylor 2010; Borum 2011). Second, the concept of radicalization is inherently linked to the social context (Kruglanski et al 2014). In other words, radicalization is dependent on the social norms and in- and out-group dynamics

For the purposes of this study, **radicalization** is defined as a cognitive and psychosocial process whereby an individual undergoes an alteration of beliefs, values, demands, and actions (possibly including the use of violence), gains agency and conviction, and gradually adopts a more hardline, activist, and counter-normative identity and ideology to bring about transformative social change that aligns with his/her cause.

surrounding the radical and the labeler of the radical. For example, “radical” behavior in an Orthodox Jewish community is different than “radical” behavior in a nightclub. “Radical,” as a term, is oppositional—standing in opposition to a system, context, or set of norms from which it emerges (see Alinsky 1971/2010). Third, radicalization discourse is very much linked to power structures; the term is used most often to characterize only that which is oppositional to the individual or group using the term (Berger 2017). Finally, radicalization is now rarely discussed outside the context of terrorism or violent extremism (Borum 2011; Berger 2017), casting immediate negative connotation on the term and the process writ large, when in reality, history gives many examples of radicals with constructive, pro-social ends.<sup>3</sup>

### a. Separating Radicalism from Violence

The concept of radicalization should, and must, be decoupled from violence if we are to attempt to find pathways for redirecting the neutral, natural, and potentially noteworthy impulses that are associated with radicalization. To leave “radicalism” tied to violence in public consciousness and policy parlance risks discouraging and disparaging any intense dedication to a cause, even perfectly healthy, pro-social causes.

Common conceptions of radicalization include Neumann’s suggestion that it is “the process whereby people turn to extremism” (2017). Mandel (*in press*) offers a similar definition, proposing that radicalization “refers to an increase in and/or reinforcing of extremism in the thinking, sentiments, and/or behavior of individuals and/or groups of individuals.” Both Neumann and Mandel’s definitions emerge from the study of radicalization as linked to violent extremism, and therefore, to a certain degree assume that the reader is approaching radicalism from the lens of terrorism or violent extremism as well. They both make reference to “extremism” in their definitions, though “extremism” as a term has the same etiological and definitional problems as radicalization. Their definitions are therefore vague and somewhat circular.

While Neumann and Mandel explore radicalization in the context of terrorism, neither of their definitions prescribe that extremism is negative; they simply deflect attention to extremism, to another term also undefined and full of assumptions, though commonly understood as “fringe” or “fanatical.” The assumption of violence or anti-sociality as a necessary outcome of radicalization is just that, an assumption on the part of the audience. When it comes to radicalization and the term “radical,” we must accept and acknowledge decades of conditioning in the media and culture.

Most people are interested in radicalization as linked to violent extremism, or more specifically, to extremist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State. However, we must make it clear **that neither radicalism nor extremism are necessarily or inherently linked to violent behavior**, nor are they conceptually linked to destructive change.

We must first point out that while many often assume that violence is an inherent endpoint of *radicalization*, not all who hold extremist or radical views are violent (Moghaddam 2005; Kurzman 2010).

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout history, many “radicals” have played an important role in promoting democracy, racial justice, workers’ rights, and equality. The labor movement, unions, abolitionists, civil rights activists, suffragettes, were all radical or fringe in their nascent days. Among others, this list could include: Jesus of Nazareth, Nelson Mandela, Bishop Oscar Romero, Cesar Chavez, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Ivory 1997), (Aslan 2013), (Bradstock & Rowland 2008). Because of the threat they posed to the dominant structures, they were often described in a way intended to condemn, delegitimize, and oppose. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/20/we-need-radicals-for-social-change>

Kurzman (2010) aptly points out the massive gap between extremist or radical *views* and violent extremist *actions* in the Arab World. Millions of people hold deep beliefs that are considered by many to be radical or extreme interpretations of religious texts, such as the Quran or the Bible, yet only a relatively miniscule number of people commit acts of terrorism in the name of their convictions. In other words, the gap between belief and action is more than just an issue of opportunity.

Importantly, while radicalism is so often demonized as a stepping stone to violence, we simultaneously uphold some “radicals” as role models. “Radical” is commonly used to characterize highly active, passionate activists who support a deeply-held belief, and try to create change towards that belief (Alinsky, 1972/2010). So, while “radical” is most often used pejoratively to describe the beliefs and behaviors of violent extremists, the label of “radical” has been historically used to describe popular and lauded social justice activists.

Mandel (*in press*) provides a comprehensive overview of the evolution of the term “radical” from its Latin root, suggesting that *radicalization* provides, at its most clear, a “**motivational scaffolding**” which *may* facilitate an adoption of violence, but does not cause it. This characterization is critical for our understanding as we move forward and explore the deep psychological motivations shared between the notions of radicalization and empowerment.

Mandel (*in press*) and Alinsky (1972/2010), who approach radicalism from very different schools of thought—security studies and community organizing, respectively—both characterize radicalization as a neutral *psychosocial* process, containing cognitive and subconscious motivational elements, as well as interpersonal and behavioral components. Put slightly differently, Mandel and Alinsky agree that radicalization is, fundamentally, **a process of seeking and gaining agency and promoting social change**, fueled by zeal and extreme conviction, often counter-normative views, and likeminded peers. Extreme conviction is a necessary part of the definition, while violence is not.

Mandel’s and Alinsky’s notions of radicalism align with Paolo Freire’s pedagogic approach to the subject (1979; 1983; 2002), as briefly mentioned earlier. Freire approached and explained radicalization as a necessary and fundamental part of collective emancipation from oppression and the development of critical consciousness (*conscientização*) in youth. Darder (2014) summarizes Freire’s concept of radicalism:

Hence, revolutionaries or those who are *radicalized* are those who, unable to persist in the oppressive values, formations, and practices of the old era, commit their passion, reason, life energy, and physical fortitude to the long historical struggle for freedom and, thus, to self-determine their own destiny as authentic human beings— extricating themselves from the limited choices presented to them by the hegemonic apparatus of schooling (p. 16).

The extent to which the Freirean notion of radicalization as a necessary part of social transformation and liberation from oppression allows or advocates for armed violence remains contested (see Cortez 2016). In other words, as Freirean “radicalization” is defined, unpacked, and utilized in the context of education and community empowerment, it is somewhat unclear about the role of armed violence as part of collective empowerment. We thus have multiple schools of thought which agree on the violence-ambivalent nature of radicalism.

Indeed, at some points Freire explicitly condemns violence. He writes “the duty, imposed by love, to react against the violence...in a situation in which the excessive power of a few leads to the dehumanization of all” (1983 p. 10-11). Likely due to his grounding in humanist Marxism, Freire takes the stance of trying to

overcome violence throughout his works (see Cortez 2016), as armed violence is so often the very mechanism by which oppressed peoples are consistently oppressed.

In Mandel, Alinsky, and Freire, we find three divergent fields of study—security studies, community organizing, and critical pedagogy—align on a somewhat shared understanding of radicalization, which can be characterized as a process of seeking and gaining agency and promoting social change, fueled by extreme conviction, often counter-normative views, and likeminded peers. In this proposed framework, **radicalization is essentially a process of increasing conviction and performed empowerment towards those convictions.** While we will return to this later, we can state here that radicalization is thus very similar to empowerment, placing more emphasis on specific convictions or beliefs, while maintaining the importance of progressive (i.e. growing) agency.

## V. Psychosocial Pillars of Radicalization Theories

Here we summarize a few key researchers' work regarding the social psychology of radicalization, and briefly explore four key concepts that underlie major schools of thought of radicalization—critical significance, grievance, identity threat, and social belonging—to illustrate the overlap between processes of radicalization and empowerment. We dedicate an entire section to human agency afterwards, as it is the central focus of our comparison.

Essentially, we suggest that these four pillars are *neutral influences and individual motivations* that interact with social environmental inputs, and it is the way in which an ideology or a group engages with these motivations that dictates whether an individual will utilize constructive or destructive impulses as they grow in agency, power, and worldview.

It is important to reiterate here that radicalization is a psychosocial process. While we place more attention here on individual psychological motivations, all theories of radicalization appreciate this characterization of radicalization as a psychosocial process (Moghaddam 2005; Borum 2011; Mandel, *in press*), as it involves individual psychological elements as well as the social influences surrounding the potential “radical.”

These four themes—**critical significance, grievance, identity threat, and social belonging**—are important pillars for both empowerment and radicalization, including radicalization that culminates in violence.

Importantly, “psychosocial,” does not preclude the possibility that an individual is radicalized alone or purely online. In most cases of individual radicalization (i.e. “lone wolves”), the trajectory of thought and adoption of the cause is linked to perceived grievances against specific *social* groups or shared identities, or anger at perceived oppressive *social* groups. Furthermore, the mere existence of an enemy in most processes of radicalization allows us to define radicalization as an interactive social process, not to mention the fact that the vast majority of radicalization happens in the context of relationships and social networks (see Trujillo, Jordán, Antonio Gutierrez, & Gonzalez-Cabrera 2009; Atran 2010).

Also, here it is important to note that major theories of radicalization accept two important facts. First, they accept that radicalization is a process unique from person to person (see Moghaddam 2005; Borum 2011; King & Taylor 2011), and second, they accept that there is no link between mental illness, or psychological “abnormality” more generally, and radicalization (Ruby, 2002; Atran, 2003; Silke, 2008; Dean, 2014). That said, the relationship between psychopathology and “lone wolf” terrorists remains

contested (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014), though we are most interested here in radicalization as linked to membership in a group. Simply, from a psychological perspective, violent extremists are generally “normal,” and their normality facilitates research into the extremist brain, as it is frighteningly similar to most other brains. In fact, some “radicals” may demonstrate high levels of psychological and behavioral functioning, or what some youth development experts refer to as the “Five C’s” – competence, confidence, connections, character, and compassion. (Bowers et al, 2010)

Finally, major theories of radicalization also share an understanding of radicalization as a process with no defined timeline. As with most psychosocial processes, there are accelerants and retardants to radicalization, and many of those influencing factors are related to the social ecology surrounding a radicalizing individual, and also include individual psychological factors.

Accepting the caveat that many conceptualizations of radicalization (inaccurately) assume that violence is the final outcome of radicalization, we must **first** explore the role of critical significance and meaning in the process. Interestingly, critical significance is functionally absent from most of the empowerment literature, which focuses instead on building “aspirations” and ensuring “self-actualization.” Importantly, the need for significance, purpose, and meaning is a fundamental human motivation. Embedded in one’s search for critical significance is a desire for personal growth, social value, and a unique contribution.

Indeed, the need for meaning and significance has been cited as a key factor in psychological resilience (Ryff & Singer 1996; Zika & Chamberlain 1992; Nygren et al 2005; *see also* Victoroff 2009), and thus naturally would be a contributing factor in the psychology of disenfranchised youth across the world. The conveyance of meaning is therefore an important and a “sticky” factor for young people developing their identity, social network, and aspirations (Damon, Menon & Cotton Bronk 2003; Kruglanski & Orehek 2011; *see also* Shaver & Mikulincer 2009). Even more, the need for significance and meaning is—with exceptions and caveats—a cognitive and emotional priority above ethical and moral views (Kruglanski & Orehek 2011; Kruglanski et al 2014). In other words, “to matter” is an end that justifies many means, including destructive ones (see also Atran 2010; 2016).

When it comes to radicalization, Kruglanski (2009; 2011; 2013; 2014), among others (Victoroff 2009; Dugas & Kruglanski 2014; Jasko, Lafree & Kruglanski 2017), has championed the notion that the need for significance is a major pull towards radicalization, and specifically radicalization into violence. He further argues that for many, the need for glory and status plays a key

In models that examine the quest for critical significance we find that wounds to the ego, including humiliation, can catalyze the risk of radicalization into a cause that soothes that wound (Lindner), also referred to as “**narcissistic injury**” (Victoroff & Adelman 2012). In this model, even normal social justice causes can conflate with personal shame and humiliation to increase the risk of violence (Elison, Garofalo & Velotti 2014) in the name of “significance.”

role. Kruglanski’s understanding of role of social status (e.g. glorified martyrdom) is backed up by years of psychology research on the need for status maintenance, particularly among men (Keltner; Gruenfeld & Anderson, 2003; Von Rueden, Gurven & Kaplan 2008; Guinote & Lammers 2016).

**Second**, while *grievance* is neither requisite nor determinant when it comes to violent extremism (Humphreys & Weinstein 2008), anecdotal (Proctor 2016; Braizat, Speckhard, Shajkovci, & Sabaileh, 2017) and lab-based evidence indicates it often plays a role in radicalization into violence. In terms of lab-based evidence, research on *collective relative deprivation*, meaning the “subjective experience of unjust

disadvantage” (van Zomeren et al, 2008, p. 505), has been linked to increased desire for *retribution* (van Bergen et al, 2015), as well as increased tendency for collective action (van Zomeren et al, 2008). Specifically, van Zomeren and colleagues (2008) found that perceived collective *injustice* was a strong predictor of anti-social collective action. Furthermore, van Bergen and colleagues (2015) later showed, in a study of more than 200 Muslim Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch youth, that attitudes towards in-group defense (i.e., aggressive, retributive collective action) were a function of *perceived relative deprivation* of an individual’s in-group, compared to the out-group (i.e. white Dutch).

Importantly, we must note the word “perceived” in this brief explanation of relative deprivation. Grievance can catalyze aggression or violence even when the grievance is imagined. Bluntly, perceived victimhood does not require proof in order to have tremendous sway over the mind (see also Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar 2009; Schori-Eyal, Halperin, & Bar-Tal 2014).

It is worth noting here that grievance as a catalyst of violence does not preclude the role of grievance as a catalyst of nonviolent social movements. Non-violent social justice movements tend to catalyze around grievance as well. In this sense, grievance as a concept contributes to what Mandel consistently refers to as “motivational scaffolding” for radical, though not necessarily violent, behavior.

**Third**, and particularly for disadvantaged individuals, threats to self and identity play a key role in radicalization. The mind is always scanning for threats to individual safety and security (LeDoux, 2000, 2003; Öhman, 2005; Neuberg, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2011); it is among the brain’s chief purposes. The human brain is highly developed compared to other species, and individual safety and security, in humans, encompasses physical as well as abstract elements (see Greene, 2014; LeDoux, 2015). Basically, the more primitive areas of the brain (such as the amygdala, thalamus, and hippocampus) are constantly attuned to physical or abstract threats to safety, *including threats to our national, ethnic, religious, or other social group identity* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Phelps et al 2001; Berns & Atran, 2012; Greene, 2014; van Bavel, Hackel, & Xiao, 2014; LeDoux 2015; Kaplan et al, 2016; Lüders, Jonas, Fritzsche, & Agroskin, 2016).

Many researchers have explored extremism through the lens of social identity and identity threat (Al Raffie, 2013; van Bergen, Feddes, Doosje, & Pels, 2015; Atran, 2016; Lüders et al, 2016), and various theories converge on the notion that the human mind orients cognition and neural functioning for threat amelioration and identity maintenance, often using groups as a means to achieve those goals (see van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; Jonas et al, 2014). Across contemporary theories, including *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), *uncertainty-identity theory* (Hogg 2007a, 2007b), *ontological security theory* (Kinnvall, 2004), and the *devoted actor hypothesis* (see Atran, 2016), we have learned that, in the effort to protect our identities, the social brain mobilizes against perceived risks, incoming information, and social groups, even if that leads to dangerous or violent outcomes.

**Lastly**, social psychology and neuroscience have deeply explored the role of *group belonging* and relationships in violent extremism (Silke, 2008; Atran, 2010; 2016; Ginges et al, 2011; Perliger & Pedahzur, 2011; Berns & Atran, 2012; Helfstein, 2012; Mink, 2015; Lyons-Padilla et al 2015). This literature suggests that in the context of group belonging, a sense of threat to the in-group can facilitate the intensification of in-group identity, which some scholars also explore as identity ‘fusion’ (Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012). Identity fusion, which lies at the heart of the Devoted Actor theory of extremism (Atran 2016) has been reinforced by studies in moral psychology (Hildreth, Gino, Bazerman, 2016), which suggest that with the notion of *loyalty* the group injects a certain moral quality to group identification. The authors state simply that, “in the context of groups, loyalty imbues collectivism with morality.” (p. 19)

Across major theories of radicalization, we see that individual and group radicalization is a complex process that must be understood in its context. Only recently have scholars like Berger (2017) attempted to distill a common chronology of group radicalization. Indeed, not all youth who experience the psychological phenomena of grievance, identity threat, social exclusion, and the search for significance will become extremists (see Moghaddam, 2005; Atran, 2010; Kurzman 2010; Borum 2011). Similarly, not all radical individuals' social movements will turn violent. While more work is needed to understand the moments and mechanisms in the transition from ideological extremism to violent action, such investigation is outside our current scope.

Our discussion of radicalization concludes with a reiteration that all of the processes explained in detail above are not inherently bad or destructive. The desire of equality and justice, the desire for identity security, in-group protection, the need to belong, and the desire to have meaning and purpose are core motivations that guide human psychology and social behavior. These motivations are, to large extent, agnostic of the morality of the outcomes. So, we can say with relative assurance that the four issues outlined above all contribute to a “motivational scaffolding” (Mandel, *in press*) that may or may not result in violence, but that surely moves an individual towards a demand for change, and particularly, greater agency.

By understanding and harnessing these core motivations, peacebuilding and CVE practitioners can be more successful in designing projects that empower youth and reorient them towards pro-social outcomes.

## VI. Agency as the Central Concept

Critically, the *performance* of empowerment and radicalization alike require opportunity to do so. Opportunity, in this sense, is part structural, part social. Systems, structures, and policies in the social ecology arbitrate how, where, and when, individuals can exercise agency over their life decisions. Similarly, the likelihood of individual opportunity increases when individuals connect and bond with likeminded individuals (Stollberg et al 2015; Guinote & Lammers 2016). At the core, then, both empowerment and radicalization show the most overlap when it comes to the need, search, and performance of *agency*, which we define as one's ability to influence his or her life course.

Tightly linked to the need for control, the need for agency interacts deeply with a motivation already discussed—the need to belong. Particularly for powerless individuals (Guinote & Lammers 2016) the possibility of agency increases with group affiliation (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Atran 2010; 2016; Stollberg et al 2015; van Bavel et al 2015; Niconchuk, Harris, & Guinote *in preparation*), as groups confer safety, purpose, and opportunity. Here we can see why and how agency and interpersonal relationships are at the core of empowerment and radicalization. To a certain degree, relationships are the means, and agency is the end. The peaceful or violent, constructive or destructive, inclusive or exclusive nature of methods of radicalized or empowered individuals is thus less relevant than the psychological and evolutionary needs fulfilled by the process.

This is a key point of overlap between notions of empowerment and radicalization. If we accept this frame, radicalization can thus be a very constructive process, and deeply complementary to the concept of empowerment. Unfortunately, however, many of those who are radicalized into violent extremism

choose armed violent groups precisely because there are limited or ineffective options for non-violent performance of empowerment. Essentially then, frustrating the process of empowerment or radicalization by denying or blocking opportunities to perform desired changes in society may increase the likelihood that an individual chooses armed violence as a means of achieving change.

Simply put, empowerment and radicalization both seek to build internal and collective assets for change, as well as individual and group opportunities to realize the desired change in society.

Interestingly, Alinsky's (1972/2010) understanding of radicalism requires that individuals already have some semblance of power over their life course. Alinsky, in his seminal *Rules for Radicals* suggests that agency—the ability to influence your life course—is necessary for the radical to live out his or her radicalism effectively or “pragmatically.” He writes:

“radicals must be resilient, adaptable to shifting political circumstances, and sensitive enough to the process of action and reaction to avoid being trapped by their own tactics and forced to travel a road not of their choosing. In short, radicals must have a degree of control over the flow of events” (p 7).

Alinsky writes about positive radicals—activists and others who made positive change for social justice. In his exploration, he, if inadvertently, highlights precisely the link between empowerment and radicalization in the simplest of terms. He confirms that both processes are pathways to acquiring agency, and that the process is not complete without chances to make change in one's own life and externally in concrete terms.

As with all psychological processes discussed, the need for agency is able to be manipulated for constructive as well as destructive outcomes. Even a cursory analysis of extremist recruitment material would reveal that agency and control play a key role in radicalization into violence. As a brief example, much of ISIS/Daesh's worldview rests on an apocalyptic narrative which, by its nature, provokes a sense of threat and focuses on the violation of Muslim's rights, values, and existence (see Baker & Canna 2010; Orlina, & Desjardins, 2012; Spitaletta, 2016.) And violations demand a response, and responses are only possible by agentic individuals with the power, skills, and willingness to respond. Indeed, these radicalization materials directly target individuals' need for control and mastery, as well as the four themes we explored above: critical significance, grievance, identity threat, and social belonging.

As the need for agency is a manipulable facet of human psychology (i.e. it can be swayed towards pro or anti-social behaviors), it is important to note that state and political structures interact continuously with this need. In an agent-structure dialectic, the state (and even development actors) should think critically about their role and how that dialectic affects psychological and behavioral trajectories of “disempowered” youth actors. If we assume that empowerment is, conventionally, something “conferred,” high power actors (including the state, or development agencies) are thus the structures that inherently fulfill the deep psychological need for agency.

In this way, states and empowered actors generally are implicated in a serious way in the discussion of the psychology of empowerment. Withholding fulfillment of agency leads to a frustration of a core need, thus increasing the risk that youth will seek power via other potential conferring parties who exercise similar or comparable power to the state. In this way, non-state actors who have demonstrated a coercive potential in society become surrogate “structures” in the agent-structure dialectic and its accompanying psychology.

## VII. Summarizing the Common Ground between Empowerment and Radicalization

As empowerment and radicalization are both psychosocial processes, they both imply a “before” and an “after.” When it comes to empowerment, we often define individuals as “disempowered” or “disenfranchised” in the *before* state. They are in need of a process that is defined by self-actualization and increased influence over their external environment and life events. Critically, almost the same can be said of radicalization, except the “before” state is defined as conforming with social norms and expectations, in many cases someone described as a “moderate.” In other cases, pre-radicalized individuals are characterized as “vulnerable” or “susceptible” to radicalization.

Radicalization is framed by risk and mitigation, whereas empowerment is framed by need and assets. The “before” state of both radicalization and empowerment often look the same—lack of opportunity, a desire for change, social immobility, lack of agency, lack of self-efficacy, and frustration. A key difference is that youth who are met through empowerment frameworks are approached in an asset-building model (based on a positive youth development frame of reference), whilst youth who are met through counter-radicalization frameworks are most usually approached through a deficit-based or risk-mitigation model, inherently denying or ignoring their potential assets.

Many of the individual psychological processes that we seek to address through empowerment are nearly the same processes that are targeted in radicalization, and especially radicalization linked to a group. There are individual psychological processes that affect empowerment, and these include the need for agency, personal identity, purpose, justice, and control. These same needs that, when addressed, lead to what we call “empowerment,” can also lead to acts of abuse or violence, such as terrorism. In this sense, radicalization can be seen as a *destructive form of empowerment* when it leads to violence. When taken alone, then, and decoupled from violence, radicalization is little more than a process of empowerment hyper-focused on specific ideological or social convictions.

**Authors’ Note:** While ethics and morals are largely beyond the scope of this paper, what may help us distinguish between empowered versus radicalized individuals is by objectively examining their ethical orientation. What is the impact of the individual or group’s vision on the broader society and is their value system rooted in equality, non-violence, inclusion, and pro-social outcomes? Or is the vision intolerant, destructive, and exclusive? When we examine historical figures, we also see that this orientation can shift over time. Many populist figures, rebel leaders, and other ideological figures move back and forth on this value spectrum, based on external events, in-group pressure, and whether original strategies are deemed effective.

Remarkably, empowerment and radicalization share a value-orientation of individual and social change. Across theories of empowerment, particularly Zimmerman (1990; 1995; 2000) and Freire (1979; 1983; 2002), we see a shared understanding of individual self-actualization and awareness as a requisite step towards social change. Similarly, anecdotal evidence from extremist fighters and radicalized individuals (Proctor 2016; Braizat, Speckhard, Shajkovci, & Sabaileh, 2017) suggests an often rapid process of individual change that starts with self-reflection of one’s status in society, the causes of this status, and subsequent need to make a change.

A key difference here, though, is that the self-actualization associated with empowerment is not necessarily counter-normative and it is not stigmatized. Authoritarian regimes obviously present some exceptions to this; however, in many cases, the desire for non-violent reform and social justice is not counter-normative. In contrast, an individual who realizes his or her potential role in society and chooses a radical path, including through the use of violence, risks stigmatization, rejection, and jail time, and often in seeking to attain that role seeks to punish those who frustrate or impede their self-actualization.

Kruglanski (2014) here points out that a key distinguishing factor of radicalization is its *counterfinal* nature. Kruglanski suggests that while radicalization often occurs in pursuit of purpose, agency, belonging, power, social mobility, or social change, the results of violent extremists' tactics are inherently antithetical to those goals. In other words, in striving to realize a worldview that is exclusive and destructive, many radicals are denying others what they seek for themselves. Furthermore, radicalized, violent extremists are willing to die, and often kill themselves or get killed in their devotion. Their willingness to die, and their frequent follow through, is antithetical to agency. Of course, the choice to take one's own life can be seen as the ultimate or final expression of agency. Yet, in death, the agent-system interaction ceases to exist. In Kruglanski's estimation, the choice for death may be agentic, but the removal from the pursuit of agency (via death) is *counterfinal* to the goal of pursuing agency.

In addition to those commonalities already mentioned, both empowerment and radicalization are fueled by social networks. Online radicalization, while often targeting individuals, is still about building trusting relationships with recruiters and compelling alternative narratives for those seeking another path. In this sense, nearly all pathways to radicalization involve the exploitation of existing social networks or the creation of a new social network. This notion deepens our understanding of both empowerment and radicalization as embedded in the social ecology of an individual.

Lastly, both empowerment and radicalization cultivate a new and shared vision in the target individual. While there is a stark difference in the narratives and future visions associated with empowerment programs versus extremist radicalization, both processes rely, to a large degree, on instilling a series of new *cognitive alternatives* (i.e. new future possibilities) in the target individual. Much work in youth empowerment involves the development or cultivation of aspirations, and then proceeding to promote mastery of the skills, competencies, and influences needed to achieve those aspirations (see Zimmerman 1995; 2000). As a process, this mimics what we find in radicalization, where radical groups walk targets through an understanding of what the world *could be like* if enemies or oppositional forces were eliminated. One area where radical groups are often more effective than empowerment schemes is that they equip hungry youth with not only the vision and the skills to create change, they also create tangible opportunities and defined roles for these individuals to participate in realizing their vision.

Youth development and empowerment programs often succeed at building skills, agency, and vision, but fall short of creating long-term meaningful opportunities for young people to engage civically. The result is often more disillusionment and frustration, which extremist groups target and leverage.

## VIII. Clarifying Individual versus Group Processes

Whether we are looking at an individual or a collective of individuals, human minds respond strongly to **perceived threats**, risks of **exclusion**, and **lack of agency**. In this sense, the mechanisms outlined above

are important for both individuals and groups, insofar as groups are collectives of individual minds. The key difference to note however lies in whether or not we are discussing collective radicalization among already-formed groups heretofore not radical, versus individuals and peer groups joining already-radicalized groups.

In some cases, *already formed groups of individuals can slowly radicalize*. More generally and more importantly for our purposes, CVE practitioners and social psychologists concern themselves with individuals who are at-risk of joining an already-radicalized community or group whether online or offline. This type of radicalization can be extended to include groups of peers or friends who *together* become increasingly radicalized and associated with an already-radical community (see Atran 2010). Ample anecdotal evidence from the Middle East, North Africa (MENA) region shows that this process is quite common (Atran 2010; Proctor 2016; Braizat et al 2017; Yom & Sammour 2017). In these cases, the *process of concern* is individual or peer-group radicalization, and for our purposes, loosely defined peer groups can be studied as a collective of individual minds.

We admit that there is a certain blurriness here, as peer influence does play a catalytic role in radicalization, and peer influence is a stronger “push factor” in some cases more than other. That said, peer influence, whether online or in a loosely defined collective of friends in a community, still capitalizes on the same motives—threat perception, the need for agency, and the need to belong—that have been outlined above. And furthermore, as discussed, peer bonds are an inherent counterpart to the search for agency. In short, a group can achieve what an individual cannot.

Here we quickly must note the role of *entitativity* (Campbell, 1958) in shaping individuals’ and peers’ collective attraction to certain groups (see Lickel et al 2000). Entitativity simply means *the degree to which a group is perceived as a tight entity*. Entitativity is an important concept in understanding both empowerment and radicalization, as groups that are perceived as high in entitativity are often more attractive than those with low entitativity (Gaertner & Schopler 1998; Hogg et al 2007; Stollberg, Fritsche, & Bäcker 2015). This is particularly the case when individuals feel under threat or powerless, and when groups with high entitativity are also seen as highly agentic (i.e. effective.) (see Stollberg, Fritsche, & Bäcker 2015; see also Guinote & Lammers 2016).

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that highly entitative and highly agentic groups are proven to be more attractive to individuals who feel a lack of control over their lives, or feel under threat (Stollberg et al 2015). These conditions apply equally to youth at-risk of violent ideological radicalization as well as youth “in need” of empowerment. In this sense, entitativity should be at the core of radical group analysis as well as the design of group programs for empowerment. In other words, not all groups are created equally, and not all groups are attractive to the disempowered mind.

While it is a core strategy of recruitment efforts by extremist groups, empowerment practitioners often overlook the merits of a group-based strategy to strengthening empowerment, belonging, identity, and agency among vulnerable youth.

Furthermore, in the context of group entitativity or bonding, we must note that a sense of in-group threat can facilitate the intensification of in-group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), unquestioning ascription to group norms (Galinsky et al, 2008) and the *dehumanization*—or the denial of full humanness (Haslam, 2006)—of out-groups (Demoulin et al, 2009; Hackel, Looser, & van Bavel, 2014; Waytz & Epley, 2012). Simply, entitativity increases both personal perceptions of agency vis a vis the group, as well as risk of out-group antipathy. Herein lies an important point, that group formation is a process that is malleable and

plastic. It can be cultivated easily for destructive ends, as our biological and cognitive systems are profoundly oriented by group belonging. Empowerment practitioners should deeply consider the social psychological and cognitive influences of group belonging and entitativity in their design of programs for at risk youth.

## IX. Conclusions

*“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” – Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

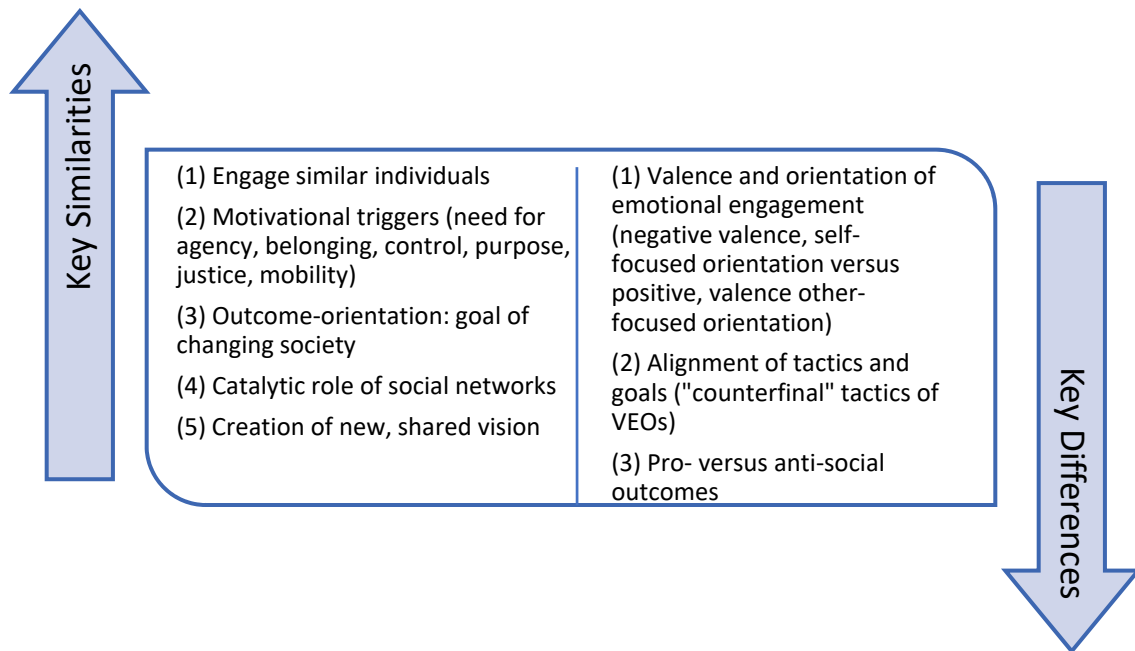
Antoine de Saint-Exupery's words provide a roadmap to empowerment. Unfortunately, to date, violent extremist actors have been more effective than CVE actors at creating a compelling vision that mobilizes others to create change in their lives and communities. Radical groups and their leaders are highly effective at mobilizing disaffected youth toward their compelling vision. Empowerment practitioners could learn a great deal from radicalizers and their tactics at building self-awareness, agency, and visioning. Similarly, these groups offer something that society often fails to: critical significance, belonging, and value.

Whether called empowerment or radicalization, what is important is to understand that we can influence, but do not control, the outcome of someone's self-actualized state. While social norms, networks, and influences play an important role, an empowered person can use their empowered state for good or bad, as can a radicalized person. It is possible to be a radical for peace, for social justice, or for an exclusive, racist, or violent ideology. The difference is largely informed by whether someone's empowerment or radicalization journey is built around an inclusive value-based system. Is their process rooted in ideas of inclusion, equality, and non-violence, or exclusion, superiority, and violence? And even then, someone can be radical and have a worldview that is not inclusive or tolerant, but they are not necessarily violent. Values matter, but behaviors matters more.

To be clear, the authors of this report condemn terrorism and violent extremism, but not struggle. Struggle is the right of every individual to make their life better. Simply put, empowerment and radicalization are similar cognitive and psychosocial processes that embody and organize that highly personal struggle, yet lead to very different outcomes. To summarize what we have discussed thus far:

- Both are agency-conferring processes;
- Both share demographic factors associated with “at-risk” or targeted individuals;
- Both tap into similar psychological motivations at the individual level;
- Both share an outcome and vision-orientation of individual and social transformation;
- Social networks and peer influences play a critical role in empowerment and radicalization; both processes increase the agency and entitativity of groups; and
- Both start by creating or cultivating a new, shared vision for an alternative future.

The figure below illustrates some commonalities between empowerment and radicalization, while highlighting key differences, specifically: 1) the valence (positivity or negativity) of the emotions engaged in the process, 2) the alignment of process tactics and the desired outcomes, and 3) the quality of the outcomes for society at large.



By better understanding the overlap in the processes of empowerment and radicalization, we are more likely to better understand the reasons why vulnerable youth take certain paths and to creatively identify potential off-ramps and alternative pathways for reorienting (or “re-radicalizing”) these young people toward inclusive and constructive opportunities for self-actualization and civic engagement. In societies that fail to create and protect spaces for youth to develop agency, critical significance, belonging, and control over their futures, some youth are likely to mobilize in destructive ways. Similarly, if programs strengthen the assets, skills, and agency of youth, but fail to create meaningful opportunities for civic engagement, some youth are likely to choose paths whose value orientation is exclusive, intolerant, and destructive.

Furthermore, empowerment for non-violent ends is also a method for preventing and countering violent extremism. During the next phase of our research, we look at how empowerment schemes can inoculate vulnerable communities from violent radical ideologies, mobilize disaffected youth in constructive ways, and how we can better understand and reorient the assets of “radicals” towards pro-social outcomes.

## X. Recommendations: Finding Constructive Contributions

The processes of empowerment and radicalization are often treated as antithetical, incompatible, and oppositional to each other. We suggest a dramatically different perspective—that they are similar processes, cultivating similar motivations and psychosocial mechanisms with vastly different outcomes. Truly, tactics and outcomes are the key differences. Radicalization, in our conception, resembles closely the process of empowerment, requiring similar motivations and social factors, yet is hyper-focused on specific ideological or non-inclusive social convictions.

To understand the implications of these findings on youth empowerment and CVE programs, we need to anchor our research and activities in a deeper understanding of the human brain. Programs such as these that attempt to change attitudes, behaviors, and social norms in charged environments face an uphill battle, as negative, parochial, identity, and threat-based emotions are often much stronger in the brain

than positive emotions, or notions of ecumenism and inclusivity. Indeed, millions of years of evolution have shown us that ecumenism and coexistence are difficult to maintain. In view of our human history, one could argue, and many do, that we default regularly to competition and violence. While we believe that violence is the exception and that peaceful coexistence is the norm and the rule (at least in the past 500 years), to a certain degree, our tendency toward competition and violence is the result of contexts of perceived threat and resource scarcity. In fact, some scholars (Pinker 2011) strongly argue that we, as a species, are becoming more peaceful and less violent. It is not our intention here to evaluate overall trajectories of human behavior; however, the fact remains that threat and scarcity increase the risk of violence, in the same way that they increase the need for tight group bonds (Niconchuk, Harris, & Guinote *in preparation*). Put differently, radical coexistence and radical violence, and narratives that reinforce these motifs, can both be cultivated in times of threat and scarcity, but very little attention has been paid to the former. The cultivation of empowerment, while simultaneously resisting violence, has been praised in media and aid sectors, yet it has not been studied rigorously.

While not the focus of this paper, it is worth noting that the authors are not advocating that all pro-social activists be *radical*. In fact, we support a more broad-based inclusive definition of civic activism whereby concerned and engaged citizens do not necessarily need to be radically engaged to make meaningful contributions. Civic action and empowerment can occur in diverse and powerful ways that are less zealous or ideologically-driven.

#### a. Recommendations for Programming

Empowerment programs can learn a great deal from the study of radicalization. That said, it takes time, deliberateness, and dedication to unpack radicalization as a “motivational scaffolding” separate from violence. Ultimately, empowerment is a process associated with positive social change and self-development. Radicalization is a similar process but with often counter-normative elements and deep commitment to a particular cause(s). Radicalization, in this sense, is not negative. As mentioned, many heroes in our society were considered radicalized individuals. In this sense, we already know that radicalized individuals are not only needed, but sometimes to be applauded. The key caveat is thus how to separate the power and influence of the radical from the violence of *some* radicals.

Based on our brief review, we can suggest some concrete principles which organizations can use to leverage the process of radicalization to supplant destructive impulses with positive impulses and contributions:

- In countries experiencing violent extremism, empowerment schemes should be designed around non-violence and positive youth development as a method for preventing, countering, and, more accurately, transforming violent extremism;
- Empowerment programs should focus on agency-conferral. In other words, empowerment programs that do not actively seek to create opportunities for targets to enact change in local, municipal, or national systems (and transnational and/or online spaces) will likely fall short of their stated goal and could even lead to frustrations thereby actually exacerbating the situation the empowerment program sought to improve;
- CVE programs should move beyond preventing and disrupting violent extremism, and, rooted in an asset-based approach, find creative ways to directly engage with radicalized individuals, creating empowering alternative pathways that reorient radicalization for pro-social outcomes and valorize everyone’s potential contributions to peace.

- Empowerment programs should deliberately cultivate powerful social bonds, including through group-based interventions, but manage the activities and outputs closely;
- Empowerment programs should hear, recognize, and work with existing grievances; programs that ignore grievances due to fear or intolerance of negativity risk frustrating youth whose grievances are potential opportunities for positive engagement;
- Empowerment programs should deliberately measure concepts of agency, belonging, and critical significance when possible;

#### b. Recommendations for Research

Research on non-violence has not yet meaningfully explored the psychological, mechanistic, or design elements of what makes certain bonded, agency-seeking groups consistently non-violent. The progression from neutrality to radicalism to violence has been studied by others (Berger 2017), yet youth empowerment programs that rely on group bonding and social network formation have not been treated with the same curiosity as radicalization programs that likewise rely on groups.

Based on our review, we suggest a few concrete recommendations for research agendas moving forward:

- Develop research that compares group composition and structure between pro-social and anti-social peer groups matched for levels of structural disempowerment and disadvantage;
- Develop research that explores cognitive and biological impacts of empowerment programs;
- Design opportunities to conduct participatory research with former fighters that unpacks the fulfilled mechanisms and needs associated with radicalization;
- Promote research that studies radicalization as a psychological process decoupled from violence; find the precise role that violence plays in radicalization, if at all;
- Design research that focuses on youth that are already radicalized to be understand the radicalization journey, including onramps and offramps, triggers, and influences;
- Develop research that differentiates between the needs of female and male youth;
- Develop research to better understand how to prepare communities to welcome back former fighters, radicalized youth, or otherwise counter-normative and vulnerable youth.

Violent radicals seem to get more attention than peaceful ones. At the same time, more peaceful radicals often get lumped together with violent actors, often characterized as Anarchists, Hooligans, and Terrorists as a way to delegitimize, isolate, and criminalize them. Terrorism in particular has a strong place in collective social psychology and media. Terrorism, above other forms of crime, taps into some of mankind's deepest fears and vulnerabilities. Terrorism is unpredictable. It is intentional. It is often about identity. It is fatal. As such, research on the subject of radicalization has tended to be oriented around violent radicalization.

In short, the commitment to non-violent empowerment carries inherent risks and requires working with the reality of structural oppression. At the individual and societal levels, violence may be latent. Skilled empowerment workers should bring implicit biases, existing grievances, and structural inequality into their processes and programs. Agencies who work with youth empowerment should be aware of the similarities and distinctions between empowerment and radicalization. Indeed, social relationships are a defining factor, and empowerment-focused organizations should be cognizant of the responsibility that comes with engaging youth's need for agency and belonging.

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## About the Report:

Rarely are the notions of "empowerment" and "radicalization" uttered in the same sentence. "Empowerment" is to be desired and supported, whereas "radicalization" is to be prevented and feared. While less than obvious, radicalization and empowerment can be studied through similar lenses and can in fact be reduced to certain shared constructs. The purpose of this paper is in large part to unpack key theories of empowerment and radicalization, and to elucidate some of the shared elements between the two notions, ultimately for the purpose of leveraging and transforming often-destructive processes and behavior associated with radicalization for positive outcomes. Instead of relying on CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) approaches that aim to prevent radicalization or emphasize de-radicalization, which have inherent limitations and often deny the potential assets of radicalized youth, this report explores the merits of a process akin to "re-radicalization."

This paper argues that, to be more effective, CVE programming needs to recognize, enhance, and channel potential assets of radicalized youth - such as agency, commitment, leadership, and self-efficacy - and examines the possibility of reorienting their impulses, attitudes, and behaviors from violent radicalization towards non-violent civic empowerment. We here explore various theoretical models in moderate detail, paying particular attention to the individual-environment interactions requisite in each empowerment and radicalization phase, and suggest an innovative and controversial paradigm that capitalizes on what we know about radicalization, to redirect it for constructive, inclusive, and pro-social outcomes.



Equal Access (EA) is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to creating positive social change for millions of underserved people across the developing world by providing critically needed information and education. With award-winning expertise in communications for social change, Equal Access combines innovative media programming with direct community engagement activities to inform, educate, and inspire individuals and communities, providing them with the skills and tools they need to improve their lives.