

Mind Control

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Mind control (also known as coercive persuasion, mind abuse, thought control, or thought reform) refers to a process in which a group or individual "systematically uses unethically manipulative methods to persuade others to conform to the wishes of the manipulator(s), often to the detriment of the person being manipulated". The term has been applied to any tactic, psychological or otherwise, which can be seen as subverting an individual's sense of control over their own thinking, behavior, emotions or decision making.

Theories of brainwashing and of mind control were originally developed to explain how totalitarian regimes appeared to succeed in systematically indoctrinating prisoners of war through propaganda and torture techniques. These theories were later expanded and modified, by psychologists including Margaret Singer, to explain a wider range of phenomena, especially conversions to new religious movements (NRMs). A third-generation theory proposed by Ben Zablocki focused on the utilization of mind control to retain members of NRMs and cults to convert them to a new religion. The suggestion that NRMs use mind control techniques has resulted in scientific and legal controversy.

The Korean War and the origin of brainwashing

The Oxford English Dictionary records its earliest known English-language usage of brainwashing in an article by Edward Hunter in *New Leader* published on 7 October 1950. During the Korean War, Hunter, who worked at the time both as a journalist and as a U.S. intelligence agent, wrote a series of books and articles on the theme of Chinese brainwashing.

The Chinese term was originally used to describe methodologies of coercive persuasion used under the Maoist regime in China, which aimed to transform individuals with a reactionary imperialist mindset into "right-thinking" members of the new Chinese social system. To that end the regime developed techniques that would break down the psychic integrity of the individual with regard to information processing, information retained in the mind and individual values. Chosen techniques included dehumanizing of individuals by keeping them in filth, sleep deprivation, partial sensory deprivation, psychological harassment, inculcation of guilt and group social pressure. The term punned on the Taoist custom of "cleansing/washing the heart" (洗心, xǐ xīn) prior to conducting certain ceremonies or entering certain holy places.

Hunter and those who picked up the Chinese term used it to explain why, unlike in earlier wars, a relatively high percentage of American GIs defected to the enemy side after becoming prisoners-of-war. It was believed that the Chinese in North Korea used such techniques to disrupt the ability of captured troops to effectively organize and resist their imprisonment. British radio operator Robert W. Ford and British army Colonel James Carne also claimed that the Chinese subjected them to brainwashing techniques during their war-era imprisonment.

After the war, two studies of the repatriation of American prisoners of war by Robert Jay Lifton and

by Edgar Schein concluded that brainwashing (called "thought reform" by Lifton and "coercive persuasion" by Schein) had a transient effect. Both researchers found that the Chinese mainly used coercive persuasion to disrupt the ability of the prisoners to organize and maintain morale and hence to escape. By placing the prisoners under conditions of physical and social deprivation and disruption, and then by offering them more comfortable situations such as better sleeping quarters, better food, warmer clothes or blankets, the Chinese did succeed in getting some of the prisoners to make anti-American statements. Nevertheless, the majority of prisoners did not actually adopt Communist beliefs, instead behaving as though they did in order to avoid the plausible threat of extreme physical abuse. Both researchers also concluded that such coercive persuasion succeeded only on a minority of POWs, and that the end-result of such coercion remained very unstable, as most of the individuals reverted to their previous condition soon after they left the coercive environment. In 1961 they both published books expanding on these findings. Schein published *Coercive Persuasion* and Lifton published *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*. More recent writers including Mikhail Heller have suggested that Lifton's model of brainwashing may throw light on the use of mass propaganda in other communist states such as the former Soviet Union.

In a summary published in 1963, Edgar Schein gave a background history of the precursor origins of the brainwashing phenomenon:

Thought reform contains elements which are evident in Chinese culture (emphasis on interpersonal sensitivity, learning by rote and self-cultivation); in methods of extracting confessions well known in the Papal Inquisition (13th century) and elaborated through the centuries, especially by the Russian secret police; in methods of organizing corrective prisons, mental hospitals and other institutions for producing value change; in methods used by religious sects, fraternal orders, political elites or primitive societies for converting or initiating new members. Thought reform techniques are consistent with psychological principles but were not explicitly derived from such principles.

Mind-control theories from the Korean War era came under criticism in subsequent years. According to forensic psychologist Dick Anthony, the CIA invented the concept of "brainwashing" as a propaganda strategy to undercut communist claims that American POWs in Korean communist camps had voluntarily expressed sympathy for communism. Anthony stated that definitive research demonstrated that fear and duress, not brainwashing, caused western POWs to collaborate. He argued that the books of Edward Hunter (whom he identified as a secret CIA "psychological warfare specialist" passing as a journalist) pushed the CIA brainwashing theory onto the general public. He further asserted that for twenty years, starting in the early 1950s, the CIA and the Defense Department conducted secret research (notably including Project MKULTRA) in an attempt to develop practical brainwashing techniques, and that their attempt failed.

The U.S. military and government laid charges of "brainwashing" in an effort to undermine detailed confessions made by U.S. military personnel to war crimes, including biological warfare, against the Koreans. (The United States and Biological Warfare: Secrets From the Early Cold War, by Stephen Endicott and Edward Hagerman at York University, Toronto; Indiana University Press, 1998).

Cults and the shift of focus

After the Korean War, applications of mind control theories in the United States shifted in focus from politics to religion. From the 1960s an increasing number of American youths started to come into contact with new religious movements (NRM), and some who converted suddenly adopted beliefs and behaviors that differed greatly from those of their families and friends; in some cases they neglected or even broke contact with their loved ones. In the 1970s the anti-cult movement applied mind control theories to explain these sudden and seemingly dramatic religious conversions. The media was quick to follow suit, and social scientists sympathetic to the anti-cult movement, who were usually psychologists, developed more sophisticated models of brainwashing. While some psychologists were receptive to these theories, sociologists were for the most part skeptical of their ability to explain conversion to NRMs. In the years that followed, brainwashing controversies developed between NRM members, various academic researchers, and cult critics.

Theories of mind control and religious conversion

Over the years various theories of conversion and member retention have been proposed that link mind control to NRMs, and particularly those religious movements referred to as "cults" by their critics. These theories resemble the original political brainwashing theories with some minor changes. Philip Zimbardo discusses mind control as "the process by which individual or collective freedom of choice and action is compromised by agents or agencies that modify or distort perception, motivation, affect, cognition and/or behavioral outcomes", and he suggests that any human being is susceptible to such manipulation. In a 1999 book, Robert Lifton also applied his original ideas about thought reform to Aum Shinrikyo, concluding that in this context thought reform was possible without violence or physical coercion. Margaret Singer, who also spent time studying the political brainwashing of Korean prisoners of war, agreed with this conclusion: in her book *Cults in Our Midst* she describes six conditions which would create an atmosphere in which thought reform is possible.

Approaching the subject from the perspective of neuroscience and social psychology, Kathleen Taylor suggests that manipulation of the prefrontal cortex activates "brainwashing", rendering a person more susceptible to black-and-white thinking. Meanwhile, in *Influence, Science and Practice*, social psychologist Robert Cialdini argues that mind control is possible through the covert

exploitation of the unconscious rules that underlie and facilitate healthy human social interactions. He states that common social rules can be used to prey upon the unwary. Using categories, he offers specific examples of both mild and extreme mind control (both one on one and in groups), notes the conditions under which each social rule is most easily exploited for false ends, and offers suggestions on how to resist such methods.

Deprogramming and the anti-cult movement

Both academic and non-academic critics of "destructive cults" have adopted and adapted the theories of Singer, Lifton and other researchers from the inception of the anti-cult movement onwards. Such critics often argue that certain religious groups use mind control techniques to unethically recruit and maintain members. Many of these critics advocated or engaged in deprogramming as a method to liberate group members from apparent "brainwashing". However the practice of coercive deprogramming fell out of favor in the West and was largely superseded by exit counseling. Exit counselor Steven Hassan promotes what he calls the "BITE" model in his book *Releasing the Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves* (2000). The BITE model describes various controls over human behavior, information, thought and emotion. Hassan claims that cults recruit and retain members by using, among other things, systematic deception, behavior modification, the withholding of information, and emotionally intense persuasion techniques (such as the induction of phobias). He refers to all of these techniques collectively as "mind control".

Critics of mind control theories caution against the broader implications of these conversion models. In the 1998 Enquete Commission report on "So-called Sects and Psychogroups" in Germany, a review was made of the BITE model. The report concluded that "control of these areas of action is an inevitable component of social interactions in a group or community. The social control that is always associated with intense commitment to a group must therefore be clearly distinguished from the exertion of intentional, methodical influence for the express purpose of manipulation." Indeed virtually all of these models share the notion that converts are in fact innocent "victims" of mind-control techniques. Hassan suggests that even the cult members manipulating the new converts may themselves be sincerely misled people. By considering NRM members innocent "victims" of psychological coercion these theories open the door for psychological treatments.

Sociologists including Eileen Barker have criticized theories of conversion precisely because they function to justify costly interventions such as deprogramming or exit counseling. For similar reasons, Barker and other scholars have criticized mental health professionals like Margaret Singer for accepting lucrative expert witness jobs in court cases involving NRMs. Singer was perhaps the most publicly notable scholarly proponent of "cult" brainwashing theories, and she became the focal point of the relative demise of those same theories within her discipline.

Scholarly debate

James Richardson observes that if the NRMs had access to powerful brainwashing techniques, one would expect that NRMs would have high growth rates, yet in fact most have not had notable success in recruitment. Most adherents participate for only a short time, and the success in retaining members is limited. For this and other reasons, sociologists including David Bromley and Anson Shupe consider the idea that "cults" are brainwashing American youth to be "implausible." In addition to Bromley, Thomas Robbins, Dick Anthony, Eileen Barker, Newton Maloney, Massimo Introvigne, John Hall, Lorne Dawson, Anson Shupe, Gordon Melton, Marc Galanter, Saul Levine (amongst other scholars researching NRMs) have argued and established to the satisfaction of courts, of relevant professional associations and of scientific communities that there exists no scientific theory, generally accepted and based upon methodologically sound research, that supports the brainwashing theories as advanced by the anti-cult movement.

Some sociologists disagree with this consensus. Benjamin Zablocki sees strong indicators of mind control in some NRMs and suggests that the concept should be researched without bias. Stephen A. Kent has also published several articles about brainwashing. These scholars tend to see the APA's decision as one of no consensus, while what Melton sees as a majority of scholars may regard it as a rejection of brainwashing and of mind control as legitimate theories.

Legal issues, the APA and DIMPAC

Since their inception, mind control theories have also been used in various legal proceedings against "cult" groups. In 1980, ex-Scientologist Lawrence Wollersheim successfully sued the Church of Scientology in a California court which decided in 1986 that church practices had been conducted in a psychologically coercive environment and so were not protected by religious freedom guarantees. Others who have tried claiming a "brainwashing defense" for crimes committed while purportedly under mind control, including Patty Hearst, Steven Fishman and Lee Boyd Malvo, have not been successful.

In 1983, the American Psychological Association (APA) asked Margaret Singer to chair a taskforce called the APA Task Force on Deceptive and Indirect Techniques of Persuasion and Control (DIMPAC) to investigate whether brainwashing or "coercive persuasion" did indeed play a role in recruitment by such movements. Before the taskforce had submitted its final report, the APA submitted on February 10, 1987 an amicus curiæ brief in an ongoing court case related to brainwashing. The brief repudiated Singer's theories on "coercive persuasion" and suggested that brainwashing theories were without empirical proof. Afterward the APA filed a motion to withdraw its signature from the brief, since Singer's final report had not been completed. However, on May 11, 1987, the APA's Board of Social and Ethical Responsibility for Psychology (BSERP) rejected the DIMPAC report because the brainwashing theory espoused "lacks the scientific rigor and

evenhanded critical approach necessary for APA imprimatur", and concluded that "after much consideration, BSERP does not believe that we have sufficient information available to guide us in taking a position on this issue."

Two critical letters from external reviewers Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi and Jeffery D. Fisher accompanied the rejection memo. The letters criticized "brainwashing" as an unrecognized theoretical concept and Singer's reasoning as so flawed that it was "almost ridiculous." After her findings were rejected, Singer sued the APA in 1992 for "defamation, frauds, aiding and abetting and conspiracy" and lost. Benjamin Zablocki and Alberto Amtrani interpreted the APA's response as meaning that there was no unanimous decision on the issue either way, suggesting also that Singer retained the respect of the psychological community after the incident. Yet her career as an expert witness ended at this time. She was meant to appear with Richard Ofshe in the 1990 U.S. v. Fishman Case, in which Steven Fishman claimed to have been under mind control by the Church of Scientology in order to defend himself against charges of embezzlement, but the courts disallowed her testimony. In the eyes of the court, "neither the APA nor the ASA has endorsed the views of Dr. Singer and Dr. Ofshe on thought reform".

After that time U.S. courts consistently rejected testimonies about mind control and manipulation, stating that such theories were not part of accepted mainline science according to the Frye Standard (Anthony & Robbins 1992: 5-29) of 1923.

An expanding concept

Mind control is a general term for a number of controversial theories proposing that an individual's thinking, behavior, emotions or decisions can, to a greater or lesser extent, be manipulated at will by outside sources. According to sociologist James T. Richardson, some of the concepts of brainwashing have spread to other fields and are applied "with some success" in contexts unrelated to the earlier cult controversies, such as custody battles and child sexual abuse cases, "where one parent is accused of brainwashing the child to reject the other parent, and in child sex abuse cases where one parent is accused of brainwashing the child to make sex abuse accusations against the other parent".

Stephen A. Kent analyzes and summarizes the use of the brainwashing meme by non-sociologists in the period 2000-2007, finding the term useful not only in the context of "New Religions/Cults", but equally under the headings of "Teen Behavior Modification Programs; Terrorist Groups; Dysfunctional Corporate Culture; Interpersonal Violence; and Alleged Chinese Governmental Human Rights Violations Against Falun Gong".