

Brainwashing

Brainwashing (also known as **mind control**, **menticide**, **coercive persuasion**, **thought control**, **thought reform**, and **re-education**) is the concept that the human mind can be altered or controlled by certain psychological techniques. Brainwashing is said to reduce its subject's ability to think critically or independently,^[4] to allow the introduction of new, unwanted thoughts and ideas into the subject's mind,^[2] as well as to change his or her attitudes, values, and beliefs.^{[3][4]}

The concept of brainwashing was originally developed in the 1950s to explain how the Chinese government appeared to make people cooperate with them. Advocates of the concept also looked at Nazi Germany, at some criminal cases in the United States, and at the actions of human traffickers. The concept of mind control was later applied to explain conversions to some new religious movements and other groups. This resulted in scientific and legal debate;^[5] with Margaret Singer, Philip Zimbardo, and some others in the anti-cult movement promoting the concept while Eileen Barker, James Richardson, and other scholars, as well as legal experts, rejected at least the popular understanding of brainwashing.^[6]

Other views have been expressed by scholars including: Dick Anthony, Robert Cialdini, Stanley A. Deetz, Michael J. Freeman, Robert Jay Lifton, Joost Meerloo, Daniel Romanovsky, Kathleen Taylor, Louis Jolyon West, and Benjamin Zablocki. The concept of brainwashing is sometimes involved in legal cases, especially regarding child custody; and is also a major theme in science fiction and in criticism of modern political and corporate culture. Although the term appears in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) of the American Psychiatric Association^[7] it is not accepted as scientific fact.^[8]



A 2012 protest in Hong Kong against the "brainwashing" aspect of moral and national education

Contents

China and the Korean War

Popularization

American governmental research

Criminal and civil cases

Anti-cult movement

American Psychological Association on brainwashing

Human trafficking

Other areas and studies

See also

Further reading

External links

References

China and the Korean War

The Chinese term *xǐnǎo* (洗脑, literally "wash brain")^[9] was originally used to describe the coercive persuasion used under the Maoist government in China, which aimed to transform "reactionary" people into "right-thinking" members of the new Chinese social system.^[10] The term punned on the Taoist custom of "cleansing/washing the heart/mind" (*xǐxīn*, 洗心) before conducting ceremonies or entering holy places.^[11]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the earliest known English-language usage of the word "brainwashing" in an article by newspaperman Edward Hunter, in *Miami News*, published on 24 September 1950. Hunter was an outspoken anticommunist and was said to be a CIA agent working undercover as a journalist.^[12] Hunter and others used the Chinese term to explain why, during the Korean War (1950-1953), some American prisoners of war (POWs) cooperated with their Chinese captors, even in a few cases defected to their side.^[13] British radio operator Robert W. Ford^{[14][15]} and British army Colonel James Carne also claimed that the Chinese subjected them to brainwashing techniques during their wæera imprisonment.^[16]

The U.S. military and government laid charges of brainwashing in an effort to undermine confessions made by POWs to war crimes, including biological warfare.^[17] After Chinese radio broadcasts claimed to quote Frank Schwable, Chief of Staff of the First Marine Air Wing admitting to participating in germ warfare, United Nations commander GenMark W. Clark asserted:^[18]

Whether these statements ever passed the lips of these unfortunate men is doubtful. If they did, however, too familiar are the mind-annihilating methods of these Communists in extorting whatever words they want The men themselves are not to blame, and they have my deepest sympathy for having been used in this abominable way.

Beginning in 1953, Robert Jay Lifton interviewed American servicemen who had been POWs during the Korean War as well as priests, students, and teachers who had been held in prison in China after 1951. In addition to interviews with 25 Americans and Europeans, Lifton interviewed 15 Chinese citizens who had fled after having been subjected to indoctrination in Chinese universities. (Lifton's 1961 book *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China*, was based on this research.)^[19] Lifton found that when the POWs returned to the United States their thinking soon returned to normal, contrary to the popular image of "brainwashing."^[20]

In 1956, after reexamining the concept of brainwashing following the Korean War, the U.S. Army published a report entitled *Communist Interrogation, Indoctrination, and Exploitation of Prisoners of War*, which called brainwashing a "popular misconception".^[21] The report states "exhaustive research of several government agencies failed to reveal even one conclusively documented case of 'brainwashing' of an American prisoner of war in Korea."^[22]

Popularization

In George Orwell's 1949 dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the main character is subjected to imprisonment, isolation, and torture in order to conform his thoughts and emotions to the wishes of the rulers of Orwell's fictional future totalitarian society. Orwell's vision influenced Hunter and is still reflected in the popular understanding of the concept of brainwashing.^{[23][24]} Written about the same time, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* also addressed brainwashing, although in a fantasy setting.^{[25][26]} The science fiction stories of Cordwainer Smith (written from the 1940s until his death in 1966) depict brainwashing to remove memories of traumatic events as a normal and benign part of future medical practice.^[27]

In the 1950s many American films were filmed that featured brainwashing of POWs, including *The Rack*, *The Bamboo Prison*, *Toward the Unknown*, and *The Fearmakers*. *Forbidden Area* told the story of Soviet secret agents who had been brainwashed through classical conditioning by their own government so they wouldn't reveal their identities. In 1962 *The Manchurian Candidate* (based on the 1959 novel by Richard Condon) "put brainwashing front and center" by featuring a plot by the Soviet government to take over the United States by use of a brainwashed presidential candidate.^{[28][29][30]} The concept of brainwashing became popularly associated with the research of Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov, which mostly involved dogs, not humans, as subjects.^[31] In *The Manchurian Candidate* the head brainwasher is Dr. Yen Lo, of the Pavlov Institute.^[32]



Laurence Harvey and Frank Sinatra in *The Manchurian Candidate*

Mind control remains an important theme in science fiction. Terry O'Brien comments: "Mind control is such a powerful image that if hypnotism did not exist, then something similar would have to have been invented: the plot device is too useful for any writer to ignore. The fear of mind control is equally as powerful an image."^[33] A subgenre is *corporate mind control*, in which a future society

is run by one or more business corporations that dominate society using advertising and mass media to control the population's thoughts and feelings.^[34]

American governmental research

For twenty years starting in the early 1950s, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the United States Department of Defense conducted secret research, including Project MKUltra, in an attempt to develop practical brainwashing techniques; the results are unknown. (See also Sidney Gottlieb).^{[35][36]} CIA experiments using various psychedelic drugs such as LSD and Mescaline drew from Nazi human experimentation^[37]

Criminal and civil cases

In 1974, Patty Hearst, a member of the wealthy Hearst family, was kidnapped by a left-wing terrorist group calling itself the Symbionese Liberation Army. After several weeks of captivity she agreed to join the group and took part in their illegal, violent activities. In 1975, she was arrested and charged with bank robbery and use of a gun in committing a felony. Her attorney, F. Lee Bailey argued in her trial that she should not be held responsible for her actions since her treatment by her captors was the equivalent of the brainwashing of Korean War POWs. (See: diminished responsibility) Hearst was found guilty, but her so-called "brainwashing defense" brought the topic to renewed public attention in the United States,^[38] as did the 1969 to 1971 case of Charles Manson, who was said to have brainwashed his followers to commit murder and other crimes.^{[39][40]}

Bailey developed his case in conjunction with psychiatrist Louis Jolyon West and psychologist Margaret Singer. They had both studied the political brainwashing of Korean War POWs. In 1996 Singer published her theories in her best-selling book Cults in Our Midst.^{[41][42][43]} In 2003, the brainwashing defense was used unsuccessfully in the defense of Lee Boyd Malvo, who was charged with murder for his part in the D.C. sniper attacks^[44] Some legal scholars have argued that the brainwashing defense undermines the law's fundamental premise offree will.^{[45][46]}

Italy has had controversy over the concept of plagio, a crime consisting in an absolute psychological—and eventually physical—domination of a person. The effect is said to be the annihilation of the subject's freedom and self-determination and the consequent negation of his or her personality. The crime of plagio has rarely been prosecuted in Italy, and only one person was ever convicted. In 1981, an Italian court found that the concept is imprecise, lacks coherence, and is liable to arbitrary application.^[47] By the twenty-first century, the concept of brainwashing was being applied "with some success" in child custody and child sexual abuse cases. In some cases "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" (possibly resulting in or causing parental alienation^[48]).^{[49][50]}

In 2003, forensic psychologist Dick Anthony said that "no reasonable person would question that there are situations where people can be influenced against their best interests, but those arguments are evaluated on the basis of fact, not bogus expert testimony."^[50] In 2016, Israeli anthropologist of religion and fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute Adam Klin-Oron said about then-proposed "anti-cult" legislation:

In the 1980s there was a wave of 'brainwashing' claims, and then parliaments around the world examined the issue, courts around the world examined the issue, and reached a clear ruling: That there is no such thing as cults...that the people making these claims are often not experts on the issue. And in the end courts, including in Israel, rejected expert witnesses who claimed there is "brainwashing."^[51]

Anti-cult movement

In the 1970s, the anti-cult movement applied the concept of brainwashing to explain seemingly sudden and dramatic religious conversions to various new religious movements (NRMs) and other groups considered cults.^{[52][53][54]} News media reports tended to support the brainwashing view^[55] and social scientists sympathetic to the anti-cult movement, who were usually psychologists,

developed revised models of mind control.^[53] While some psychologists were receptive to the concept, sociologists were for the most part skeptical of its ability to explain conversion to NRMs.^[56]

Philip Zimbardo defined 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 or behavioral outcomes,"^[57] and he suggested that any human being is susceptible to such manipulation.^[58] Another adherent to this view, Jean-Marie Abgrall was heavily criticized by forensic psychologist Dick Anthony for employing a pseudo-scientific approach and lacking any evidence that anyone's worldview was substantially changed by these coercive methods. On the contrary, the concept and the fear surrounding it was used as a tool for the anti-cult movement to rationalize the persecution of minority religious groups.^[59]

James Richardson observed that if the new religious movements had access to powerful brainwashing techniques, one would expect that they 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.^[60] For this and other reasons, sociologists of religion including David Bromley and Anson Shupe consider the idea that "cults" are brainwashing American youth to be "implausible."^[61] In addition, Thomas Robbins, Massimo Introvigne, Lorne Dawson, Gordon Melton, Marc Galanter, and Saul Levine, amongst other scholars researching NRMs, have argued and established to the satisfaction of courts, relevant professional associations and scientific communities that there exists no generally accepted scientific theory, based upon methodologically sound research, that supports the concept of brainwashing advanced by the anti-cult movement.^[62]

Benjamin Zablocki responded that it is obvious that brainwashing occurs, but that it is not "a process that is directly observable."^[63] The "real sociological issue", he stated, is whether "brainwashing occurs frequently enough to be considered an important social problem".^[64] According to Zablocki, Richardson misunderstands brainwashing, conceiving of it as a recruiting process, instead of a retaining process.^[65] Zablocki added that the sheer number of former cult leaders and members who attest to brainwashing in interviews (performed in accordance with guidelines of the National Institute of Mental Health and National Science Foundation) is too large result from anything other than a genuine phenomenon.^[66] He also pointed out that in the two most prestigious journals dedicated to the sociology of religion there have been no articles "supporting the brainwashing perspective," while over one hundred such articles have been published in other journals "marginal to the field."^[67] Zablocki concludes that the concept of brainwashing has been unfairly blacklisted.^{[6][64][67][68]}

Eileen Barker criticized the concept of mind control because it functioned to justify costly interventions such as deprogramming or exit counseling.^[69] She has also criticized some mental health professionals, including Singer, for accepting expert witness jobs in court cases involving NRMs.^[70] Her 1984 book, The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?^[71] describes the religious conversion process to the Unification Church (whose members are sometimes informally referred to as Moonies), which had been one of the best known groups said to practice brainwashing.^{[72][73]} Barker spent close to seven years studying Unification Church members. She interviewed in depth or gave probing questionnaires to church members, ex-members, "non-joiners," and control groups of uninvolved people from similar backgrounds, as well as parents, spouses, and friends of members. She also attended numerous church workshops and communal facilities.^[69] Barker writes that she rejects the "brainwashing" theory because it explains neither the many people who attended a recruitment meeting and did not become members, nor the voluntary disaffiliation of members.^{[74][75][76][77]}

American Psychological Association on brainwashing

In 1983, the American Psychological Association (APA) asked 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 NRMs.^[78] It came to the following conclusion:^[79]

Cults and large group awareness trainings have generated considerable controversy because of their widespread use of deceptive and indirect techniques of persuasion and control. These techniques can compromise individual freedom, and their use has resulted in serious harm to thousands of individuals and families. This report reviews the literature

on this subject, proposes a new way of conceptualizing influence techniques, explores the ethical ramifications of deceptive and indirect techniques of persuasion and control, and makes recommendations addressing the problems described in the report.

On 11 May 1987, the APA's Board of Social and Ethical Responsibility for Psychology (BSERP) rejected the DIMPAC report because the report "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."^[80]

Human trafficking

Kathleen Barry, co-founder of the United Nations NGO, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW),^{[81][82]} in her 1979 book *Female Sexual Slavery* prompted international awareness of human sex trafficking.^[83] In his 1986 book *Woman Abuse: Facts Replacing Myths* Lewis Okun reported that: "Kathleen Barry shows in *Female Sexual Slavery* that forced female prostitution involves coercive control practices very similar to thought reform."^[84] In their 1996 book, *Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation in Asia and the United States*, Rita Nakashima Brock and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite report that the methods commonly used by pimps to control their victims "closely resemble the brainwashing techniques of terrorists and paranoid cults."^[85]

Some of the techniques used by traffickers include feigning love and concern for the victims' well-being to gain trust before beginning to track, manipulate and control the entire life of the victim, including environment, relationships, access to information and daily activities, promises of lucrative employment or corrupt marriage proposals, debt bondage, kidnapping^[86] induced drug dependency and fear tactics such as threats about law enforcement, deportation, and harm to friends or family members.^{[87][88]} Physical captivity, shame, Stockholm Syndrome, traumatic bonding and fear of arrest can contribute to victims' inability to seek assistance.^[89]

Other areas and studies

Russian historian Daniel Romanovsky, who interviewed survivors and eyewitnesses in the 1970s, reported on what he called "Nazi brainwashing" of the people of Belarus by the occupying Germans during the Second World War, which took place through both mass propaganda and intense re-education, especially in schools. Romanovsky noted that very soon most people had adopted the Nazi view that the Jews were an inferior race and were closely tied to the Soviet government, views that had not been at all common before the Nazi occupation.^{[90][91][92][93][94][95]}

Joost Meerloo, a Dutch psychiatrist, was an early proponent of the concept of brainwashing. ("Menticide" is a neologism coined by him meaning: "killing of the mind.") Meerloo's view was influenced by his experiences during the German occupation of his country and his work with the Dutch government and the American military in the interrogation of accused Nazi war criminals. He later emigrated to the United States and taught at Columbia University.^[96] His best-selling 1956 book, *The Rape of the Mind*, concludes by saying:

The modern techniques of brainwashing and menticide—those perversions of psychology—can bring almost any man into submission and surrender. Many of the victims of thought control, brainwashing, and menticide that we have talked about were strong men whose minds and wills were broken and degraded. But although the totalitarians use their knowledge of the mind for vicious and unscrupulous purposes, our democratic society can and must use its knowledge to help man to grow, to guard his freedom, and to understand himself. ^[97]

Scholars have said that modern business corporations practice mind control to create a work force that shares common values and culture.^[98] Critics have linked "corporate brainwashing" with globalization, saying that corporations are attempting to create a worldwide monocultural network of producers, consumers, and managers.^[99] Modern educational systems have also been criticized,

by both the left and the right, for contributing to corporate brainwashing.^[100] In his 1992 book, *Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonization*, Stanley A. Deetz says that modern "self awareness" and "self improvement" programs provide corporations with even more effective tools to control the minds of employees than traditional brainwashing.^[101]

In his 2000 book, *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism*, Robert Lifton applied his original ideas about thought reform to Aum Shinrikyo and the War on Terrorism, concluding that in this context thought reform was possible without violence or physical coercion. He also pointed out that in their efforts against terrorism Western governments were also using some mind control techniques, including thought-terminating clichés.^[102]

In her 2004 popular science book, *Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control*, neuroscientist and physiologist Kathleen Taylor reviewed the history of mind control theories, as well as notable incidents. She suggests that persons under its influence have more rigid neurological pathways, and that can make it more difficult to rethink situations or be able to later reorganize these pathways.^[103] Reviewers praised her book for its clear presentation, while some criticized it for oversimplification.^{[104][105][106][107]}

See also

- Abusive power and control
- Diminished responsibility
- Electronic harassment
- German-occupied Europe
- Homo Sovieticus
- Hypnosis
- Isolation to facilitate abuse
- List of topics characterized as pseudoscience
- Perception management
- Political abuse of psychiatry
- Psychological warfare
- Stockholm syndrome
- Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism
- Unethical human experimentation in the United States

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