



Main > People > Culture

How Brainwashing Works

by Julia Layton

Introduction to How Brainwashing Works

During the Korean War, Korean and Chinese captors reportedly brainwashed American POWs held in prison camps. Several prisoners ultimately confessed to waging germ warfare -- which they hadn't -- and pledged allegiance to communism by the end of their captivity. At least 21 soldiers refused to come back to the United States when they were set free. It sounds impressive, but skeptics point out that it was 21 out of more than 20,000 prisoners in communist countries. Does brainwashing really work in any reliable way?



In psychology, the study of brainwashing, often referred to as **thought reform**, falls into the sphere of "social influence." Social influence happens every minute of every day. It's the collection of ways in which people can change other people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. For instance, the **compliance** method aims to produce a change in a person's behavior and is not concerned with his attitudes or beliefs. It's the "Just do it" approach. **Persuasion**, on the other hand, aims for a change in attitude, or "Do it because it'll make you feel good/happy/healthy/successful." The **education** method (which is called the "propaganda method" when you don't believe in what's being taught) goes for the social-influence gold, trying to affect a change in the person's beliefs, along the lines of "Do it because you know it's the right thing to do." Brainwashing is a severe form of social influence that combines all of these approaches to cause changes in someone's way of thinking without that person's consent and often against his will.

Because brainwashing is such an invasive form of influence, it requires the complete isolation and dependency of the subject, which is why you mostly hear of brainwashing occurring in prison camps or **totalist cults**. The **agent** (the brainwasher) must have complete control over the **target** (the brainwashee) so that **sleep** patterns, eating, using the bathroom and the fulfillment of other basic human needs depend on the will of the agent. In the brainwashing process, the agent systematically breaks down the target's identity to the point that it doesn't work anymore. The agent then replaces it with another set of behaviors, attitudes and beliefs that work in the target's current environment.

While most psychologists believe that brainwashing is possible under the right conditions, some see it as improbable or at least as a less severe form of influence than the media portrays it to be. Some definitions of brainwashing require the presence of the threat of physical harm, and under these definitions most extremist cults do not practice true brainwashing since they typically do not physically abuse recruits. Other definitions rely on "nonphysical coercion and control" as an equally effective means of asserting influence. Regardless of which definition you use, many experts believe that even under ideal brainwashing conditions, the effects of the process are most often short-term -- the brainwashing victim's old identity is not in fact eradicated by the process, but instead is in hiding, and once the "new identity" stops being reinforced the person's old attitudes and beliefs will start to return.

There are psychologists who say the apparent conversion of American POWs during the Korean War was the result of plain-old torture, not "brainwashing." And in fact, most POWs in the Korean War were not converted to communism at all, which leads to the question of reliability: Is brainwashing a system that produces similar results across cultures and personality types, or does it hinge primarily on the target's susceptibility to influence? In the next section, we'll examine one expert's description of the brainwashing process and find out what makes an easy target.

Fictional Brainwashing

Modern literature and film use the brainwashing scenario pretty liberally. It gets to the very nature of humanity: Are we all ultimately reducible to puppets? The protagonist in George Orwell's "1984" undergoes a classic case of brainwashing that ends with the famous concession to his tormentors: "two plus two equals five." In 1962's "The Manchurian Candidate," brainwashing produces a robot-like assassin incapable of overriding the control commands he's been programmed with. "A Clockwork Orange" (1971) positions institutional brainwashing as an option for violent convicts looking to shorten their sentences, and in 1997's "Conspiracy Theory," a mentally unstable, government-brainwashed assassin seeks to prove that some very powerful people have been

$$2 + 2 = 5$$

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tampering with his mind.

Brainwashing Techniques

In the late 1950s, psychologist **Robert Jay Lifton** studied former prisoners of Korean and Chinese war camps. He determined that they'd undergone a multistep process that began with attacks on the prisoner's sense of self and ended with what appeared to be a change in beliefs. Lifton ultimately defined a set of steps involved in the brainwashing cases he studied:



Photo courtesy [U.S. Army](#)
**American POWs in the
 Korean War**

1. Assault on identity
2. Guilt
3. Self-betrayal
4. Breaking point
5. Leniency
6. Compulsion to confess
7. Channeling of guilt
8. Releasing of guilt
9. Progress and harmony
10. Final confession and rebirth

Each of these stages takes place in an environment of isolation, meaning all "normal" social reference points are unavailable, and mind-clouding techniques like sleep deprivation and malnutrition are typically part of the process. There is often the presence or constant threat of physical harm, which adds to the target's difficulty in thinking critically and independently.

We can roughly divide the process Lifton identified into three stages: breaking down the self, introducing the possibility of salvation, and rebuilding the self.

Breaking down the self

- **Assault on identity:** You are not who you think you are.
 This is a systematic attack on a target's sense of self (also called his identity or ego) and his core belief system. The agent denies everything that makes the target who he is: "You are not a soldier." "You are not a man." "You are not defending freedom." The target is under constant attack for days, weeks or months, to the point that he becomes exhausted, confused and disoriented. In this state, his beliefs seem less solid.
- **Guilt:** You are bad.
 While the identity crisis is setting in, the agent is simultaneously creating an overwhelming sense of guilt in the target. He repeatedly and mercilessly attacks the subject for any "sin" the target has committed, large or small. He may criticize the target for everything from the "evilness" of his beliefs to the way he eats too slowly. The target begins to feel a general sense of shame, that everything he does is wrong.
- **Self-betrayal:** Agree with me that you are bad.
 Once the subject is disoriented and drowning in guilt, the agent forces him (either with the threat of physical harm or of continuance of the mental attack) to denounce his family, friends and peers who share the same "wrong" belief system that he holds. This betrayal of his own beliefs and of people he feels a sense of loyalty to increases the shame and loss of identity the target is already experiencing.
- **Breaking point:** *Who am I, where am I and what am I supposed to do?*
 With his identity in crisis, experiencing deep shame and having betrayed what he has always believed in, the target may undergo what in the lay community is referred to as a "nervous breakdown." In psychology, "nervous breakdown" is really just a collection of severe symptoms that can indicate any number of psychological disturbances. It may involve uncontrollable sobbing, deep depression and general disorientation. The target may have lost his grip on reality and have the feeling of being completely lost and alone.

When the target reaches his breaking point, his sense of self is pretty much up for grabs -- he has no clear understanding of who he is or what is happening to him. At this point, the agent sets up the temptation to convert to another belief system that will save the target from his misery.

The Possibility of Salvation

- **Leniency:** I can help you.
 With the target in a state of crisis, the agent offers some small kindness or reprieve from the abuse. He may offer the target a drink of water, or take a moment to ask the target what he misses about home. In a state of breakdown resulting from an endless psychological attack, the small kindness seems huge, and the target may experience a sense of relief and gratitude

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completely out of proportion to the offering, as if the agent has saved his life.

- **Compulsion to confession:** You can help yourself.
For the first time in the brainwashing process, the target is faced with the contrast between the guilt and pain of identity assault and the sudden relief of leniency. The target may feel a desire to reciprocate the kindness offered to him, and at this point, the agent may present the possibility of confession as a means to relieving guilt and pain.
- **Channeling of guilt:** This is why you're in pain.
After weeks or months of assault, confusion, breakdown and moments of leniency, the target's guilt has lost all meaning -- he's not sure what he has done wrong, he just knows he is wrong. This creates something of a blank slate that lets the agent fill in the blanks: He can attach that guilt, that sense of "wrongness," to whatever he wants. The agent attaches the target's guilt to the belief system the agent is trying to replace. The target comes to believe it is his belief system that is the cause of his shame. The contrast between old and new has been established: The old belief system is associated with psychological (and usually physical) agony; and the new belief system is associated with the possibility of escaping that agony.
- **Releasing of guilt:** *It's not me; it's my beliefs.*
The embattled target is relieved to learn there is an external cause of his wrongness, that it is not he himself that is inescapably bad -- this means he can escape his wrongness by escaping the wrong belief system. All he has to do is denounce the people and institutions associated with that belief system, and he won't be in pain anymore. The target has the power to release himself from wrongness by confessing to acts associated with his old belief system.

With his full confessions, the target has completed his psychological rejection of his former identity. It is now up to the agent to offer the target a new one.

Rebuilding the Self

- **Progress and harmony:** If you want, you can choose good.
The agent introduces a new belief system as the path to "good." At this stage, the agent stops the abuse, offering the target physical comfort and mental calm in conjunction with the new belief system. The target is made to feel that it is he who must choose between old and new, giving the target the sense that his fate is in his own hands. The target has already denounced his old belief system in response to leniency and torment, and making a "conscious choice" in favor of the contrasting belief system helps to further relieve his guilt: If he truly believes, then he really didn't betray anyone. The choice is not a difficult one: The new identity is safe and desirable because it is nothing like the one that led to his breakdown.
- **Final confession and rebirth:** *I choose good.*
Contrasting the agony of the old with the peacefulness of the new, the target chooses the new identity, clinging to it like a life preserver. He rejects his old belief system and pledges allegiance to the new one that is going to make his life better. At this final stage, there are often rituals or ceremonies to induct the converted target into his new community. This stage has been described by some brainwashing victims as a feeling of "rebirth."

(See [How Cults Work: Indoctrination](#) for details on the thought-reform process that takes place specifically in destructive cults.)

A brainwashing process like the one discussed above has not been tested in a modern laboratory setting, because it's damaging to the target and would therefore be an unethical scientific experiment. Lifton created this description from first-hand accounts of the techniques used by captors in the Korean War and other instances of "brainwashing" around the same time. Since Lifton and other psychologists have identified variations on what appears to be a distinct set of steps leading to a profound state of suggestibility, an interesting question is why some people end up brainwashed and others don't.

Certain personality traits of the brainwashing targets can determine the effectiveness of the process. People who commonly experience great self doubt, have a weak sense of identity, and show a tendency toward guilt and absolutism (black-and-white thinking) are more likely to be successfully brainwashed, while a strong sense of identity and self-confidence can make a target more resistant to brainwashing. Some accounts show that faith in a higher power can assist a target in mentally detaching from the process. Mental detachment is one of the POW-survival techniques now taught to soldiers as part of their training. It involves the target psychologically removing himself from his actual surroundings through visualization, the constant repetition of a mantra and various other meditative techniques. The military also teaches soldiers about the methods used in brainwashing, because a target's knowledge of the process tends to make it less effective.

While the U.S. consciousness was turned to brainwashing in the 1950s in the aftermath of the Korean War, brainwashing has been around for longer than that. Scholars have traced the roots of systematic thought reform to the prison camps of communist Russia in the early 1900s, when political prisoners were routinely "re-educated" to the communist view of the world. But it was when the practice spread to China and the writings of Chairman Mao Tse-tung ("The Little Red Book") that the world started to take notice.

Brainwashing Then and Now

In 1929, Mao Tse-tung, who would later lead the Chinese Communist Party, used the phrase *ssu-hsiang tou-cheng* (translated as "thought struggle") to describe a process of brainwashing. Political prisoners in China and Korea were reportedly subjected to communist-conversion techniques as a matter of course. The modern concept and the term "brainwashing" was first used by journalist Edward Hunter in 1951 to describe what had happened to American POWs during the Korean War. Hunter introduced the concept at a time when Americans were already afraid: It was the Cold War, and America panicked at the idea of mass communist indoctrination through "brainwashing" -- they might be converted and not even know it!

In the wake of the Korean War revelations, the U.S. government seemed to fear it was falling behind in the weapons race, because it began its own mind-control research. In 1953, the CIA began a program called **MKULTRA**. In one study, the CIA supposedly gave subjects (including the famed Timothy Leary) LSD in order to study the effects of mind-altering drugs and gauge the effectiveness of psychedelics at inducing a brainwashing-friendly state of mind. The results were not that encouraging, and subjects were supposedly harmed by the experiments. Drug experimentation by the CIA was officially cancelled by Congress in the 1970s, although some claim it still happens under the radar. Public interest in brainwashing briefly subsided after the Cold War but resurfaced in the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of countless non-mainstream political and religious groups during that era. Parents who were horrified by their children's new beliefs and activities were sure they'd been brainwashed by a "cult." The mass suicides and killing sprees committed by a small percentage of those cults seemed to validate the brainwashing fears, and some parents went so far as to have their children kidnapped by "deprogrammers" to remove them from the influence of cult leaders.

One supposed victim of brainwashing at that time was Patty Hearst, heiress to the Hearst publishing fortune, who would later use a brainwashing defense when she was on trial for [bank](#) robbery. Hearst became famous in the early 1970s after she was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army (the SLA, which some deem a "political cult") and ended up joining the group. Hearst reports that she was locked in a dark closet for several days after her kidnapping and was kept hungry, tired, brutalized and afraid for her life while SLA members bombarded her with their anti-capitalist political ideology. Within two months of her kidnapping, Patty had changed her name, issued a statement in which she referred to her family as the "pig-Hearsts" and appeared on a security tape robbing a bank with her kidnappers.

Patty Hearst stood trial for bank robbery in 1976, defended by the famous F. Lee Bailey. The defense claimed that Hearst was brainwashed by the SLA and would not have committed the crime otherwise. In her mental state, she could not tell right from wrong. Hearst was found guilty and sentenced to seven years in prison. She only served two -- in 1979, President Carter commuted her sentence.

In the next section we'll look at the Lee Boyd Malvo case.

The Lee Boyd Malvo Case

Another "insanity by brainwashing" defense hit the courtroom 30 years later, when **Lee Boyd Malvo** stood trial for his role in the 2002 sniper attacks in and around Washington, D.C. The 17-year-old Malvo and 42-year-old John Allen Muhammad killed 10 people and wounded three in a killing spree. The defense claimed that the teenaged Malvo was brainwashed by Muhammad into committing the crimes, which he would not have committed if he weren't under Muhammad's control. According to "The Brainwashing Defense" in Psychology Today:

Muhammad plucked 15-year-old Malvo from the Caribbean island of Antigua, where his mother had abandoned him, and brought him to the U.S. in 2001. An army veteran, Muhammad filled the teen's head with visions of an impending race war and trained Malvo in marksmanship. He isolated Malvo, steeped him to his own idiosyncratic, vitriolic brand of Islam and imposed a strict diet and exercise regimen on his "adopted" son.

The argument was that Malvo was brainwashed, and because he was brainwashed he could not tell right from wrong. Malvo was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison without parole. (Muhammad was sentenced to death in a separate trial.)

There seems to be a contrast between an underlying fear of brainwashing in modern society, as seen in contemporary films and literature, and the apparent belief of many people who sit on juries that brainwashing is hogwash. Maybe it's the "it could never happen to me" reaction, or maybe it's just a general reluctance to absolve a criminal of responsibility for his or her crime. Whatever the cause, people



Photo courtesy Keystone/Consolidated News Pictures/Getty Images

Patty Hearst is caught on surveillance camera during a bank robbery in San Francisco.



Photo courtesy Davis Turner/AFP/Getty Images

Lee Boyd Malvo is escorted by deputies as he is brought into court to be identified by a witness.

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seem to distinguish between brainwashing now and brainwashing in the future, the latter of which appears to be the more fearsome of the two. The future of brainwashing, if Hollywood and the conspiracy theorists are to be trusted, involves much more high-tech approaches. And yes, brain implants are arguably a lot scarier than verbal or physical "assaults on identity." If some evil branch of neurosurgery can get it right, we're all doomed to be puppets of the state. Combined with [hypnosis](#) techniques, a brain implant might be all that's needed to control a human being's thoughts, actions and beliefs. But most scientists agree that the field of neurology is nowhere close to that level of understanding of the [human brain](#). Likewise, many psychologists believe that large-scale brainwashing -- via the mass media and subliminal messages, for instance -- is not possible, because the thought-reform process requires isolation and absolute dependence of the subject in order to be effective. It's just not that easy to change a person's core personality and belief system.

For more information on brainwashing and related topics, check out the links on the next page.

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- [ChangingMinds: Lifton's Brainwashing Processes.](#)
- [Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology: Brainwashing](#)
- [PsychologyToday: The Brainwashing Defense](#)
- [The Skeptic's Dictionary: Mind Control \(Brainwashing\)](#)
- [Working Psychology: Introduction to Influence](#)

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