
PSYCHOLOGY

RESISTING MIND CONTROL

"Effective mind control exists in the most mundane aspects of human existence: the inner pressure to be bonded to other people, the power of group norms to influence behavior, and the force of social rewards such as smiles, praise, a gentle touch."

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EFFECTIVE mind control stems more from everyday social relations than from exotic technological gimmicks. Social control is part of everyday living. In personal relationships, in religious experience, and in encounters with advertising, influences tantamount to the alluring recruitment strategies of high-powered organizations and "cults" abound. Effective social pressures gain their potency by exploiting fundamental human needs.

Resisting social influences becomes important when they can appropriately be

thought of as "mind control." When information is systematically hidden, withheld, or distorted, making unbiased decisions is virtually impossible.

What people need to know is how to reduce their susceptibility to undesirable, coercive controls, and to find a way to determine which influences to consider suspect.

In this article, pragmatic advice is interwoven with a conceptual analysis. The hope is that it may assist individuals to transform impulsive reactions to contrived communications into thoughtful, meaningful choices.

Exquisite torture devices, electroshock therapy, mind-altering drugs, hypnosis, and sensory deprivation have all been used to get targeted persons to do the bidding of various agents and agencies of control. Indeed, these methods carry enough wallop to distort and sometimes destroy the mind's normal functioning; but they are not adequate for the task of reliably directing behavior through specific scenarios as designated by would-be manipulators.

After a decade of intensive, costly research into the technology of mind control, the Central Intelligence Agency's MK-

ULTRA program was deemed a failure. Covert operations could claim little more than being capable of turning unsuspecting victims into "vegetables."

Relying on technology was the mistake. Effective mind control exists in the most mundane aspects of human existence: the inner pressure to be bonded to other people, the power of group norms to influence behavior, and the force of social rewards such as smiles, praise, a gentle touch. It is people in convincing social situations, not gadgets or gimmicks, that control the minds of other people.

The more worried we are about being seen as ignorant, uncultured, untalented, or boring and the more ambiguous events are that are to be evaluated, the more likely we are to take on the beliefs of those around us to avoid being rejected by them.

Words like "hypnosis" and "brainwashing" mystify more than they clarify. Once ensconced in some social role, our behavioral freedom is compromised in subtle ways. Interviewees answer, but don't ask questions; guests don't demand better food; prisoners don't give commands; audiences listen; "true believers" believe; rescuers sacrifice; tough guys in-

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timidate and others recoil.

These social expectations come to control us more completely than the most charismatic of persuaders. As a nation, we saw in the Watergate coverup how the "best and the brightest" caved in to the pressures that required "team players" to win this one for the President. Unquestioned protocol persuaded them to betray their public offices.

Unquestioned protocol can also lead us to surrender our own better judgment. Most residents of Nevada in the 1950's had their own fears about atomic bomb testing near their homes. However, government officials refused to warn them about the risks of radiation fallout, so residents kept quiet and remained in the area. Similarly, the employees of the Kerr-McGee plutonium plant in Oklahoma were silent about flagrant safety violations for many years. When they aired their grievances among themselves and organized in protest, a court battle began. In 1979, Kerr-McGee was found guilty of misleading the public about the hazards of its operation.

It is a fact of social life that those "in power" define reality for the rest of us. By controlling the outflow of informa-

tion, they conveniently restrict the range of options from which the rest of us seem to "freely" choose.

The "social programming" of childhood circumscribes our perception of these behavioral possibilities with a neat cleave. The "good child" learns his or her place in all social settings, stays put in his or her seat, is polite, speaks only when spoken to, is cooperative, does not make trouble, and never makes a scene. We are rewarded for going along with the group, not for insisting on getting our way. It is the wiser course of action to go with power; we are taught not to challenge it.

Developing a critical eye is vital for individuals to counteract compelling social pressures, to resist the lure of passivity. When people behave essentially as they are expected to, it becomes difficult for us to evaluate their actions critically or to be the one who deviates from what is expected in the situation.

We must learn to be vigilant in seeing discrepancies between the ideals people espouse and their concrete actions. Separating the preacher from the practice, the promise from the outcome, the perceived intention from the consequence is at the core of resistance. It is too easy to

mistake the label for the thing labeled, to deal in symbols and concepts instead of people and their behavior.

Many notable politicians, for example, gave their support to pastor Jim Jones without questioning why he was surrounded by a half-dozen guards, why his church had locked doors, and why newcomers were searched before being approved by the Welcoming Committee. People's Temple members admired "Dad" because he cared for them and because he said he cared most of all about his children. However, they failed to critically appraise or even acknowledge the reality that he punished them severely—at times with electric shock—and subjected them to public ridicule for minor transgressions. The result was the tragedy of Jonestown.

Effective manipulators often conceal their intent amid "normal" appearances. Information from rape prevention centers, for example, suggests that it is especially important for women to be aware of the effects of "normal appearances." Entering dangerous situations with potential rapists may seem "natural," tantamount to being polite and helpful, when you have been trained

to be ladylike.

Answering all questions put to you with a friendly, gracious smile or always deferring to the protection and judgment of men, even when they are strangers, is not the best idea. Nor is being courteous and open with service personnel at the expense of requesting proper identification.

Resisting persuasion

Going passively along "on automatic" is often our worst enemy. When we habitually take simple assumptions for granted in a setting, we fail to check out the reality. The following are suggestions for awareness and resistance:

- Actively monitor social interactions. Practice thinking ahead, anticipating what will come next, checking discrepancies and noting how you feel about them.

- Be willing to disobey simple situational rules when you feel you should, to sound false alarms occasionally or cause a scene. Never do anything you don't believe just to appear normal or get someone off your back.

- At the very least, try to get more information so you can carefully consider the consequences of saying "no" to something that could turn out essentially "good" (could you return in a week or a year and say "yes?"), or of saying "yes" to something that could turn out essentially "bad" (could you lose your money, pride, or life?).

Millions of Americans are subjected to stress and intimidation in the presence of those whom society has termed "expert." Auto mechanics, for example, often make thousands of dollars each year for services and supplies they don't deliver. Last year, over 2,000,000 Americans underwent surgical operations that they did not need, at a cost of more than \$4,000,000,000. Here, it is important to be assertive.

- Practice "seeing through" programmed responses to authority. Pay attention to the social roles you and others play, including such subtle indicators as clothing—the business suit, repairman's uniform, etc.

- Be aware of who is controlling whom in social situations, to what end and at what cost.

- To the extent that it seems possible, refuse to accept the initial premise that someone else is more powerful, more competent, more in control than you are.

- State your arguments with conviction if the other person does so.

- Learn to retain a sense of self-worth in the face of intimidating circumstances. Remember a time when some person or group of people thought you were the best thing to hit the planet; a violin if you are a virtuoso; a photograph, person, or place—anything that makes you feel exhilarated and alive, that you will not reveal to others, but will retain as an inner core that can not be violated.

The best persuaders always appear to be just like us. They use our lingo and know the inside jokes in order to influence our attitudes. Attitude change is most effective when it goes unnoticed. Among some defenses, one should check for signs of ingratiation, for overemphasis on mutual interests, and for requests for just one small commitment now, with an open-ended contract for later. How deep do the stated similarities go? How well does the persuader really know the common friend you supposedly share?

Mind control typically involves coming to accept a new reality. We are often dissuaded from probing beyond surface illusions of meaningfulness by letting symbols substitute for reality, abstract maps for concrete territories.

Thus, the Watergate conspirators never referred explicitly to money, but spoke of "bites of the apple." At the extreme, it is easier to "waste an enemy" or engage in "revolutionary protest" than to murder other human beings. As some specific counterstrategies:

- Never accept vague generalities and inadequate explanations in response to your pleas, questions, or challenges.

- Learn to recognize when a message is actually confused or ambiguous, perhaps intentionally so, especially if someone suggests "you're just too stupid to understand" or "women get too emotional to think logically."

- Paraphrase other people's thoughts both aloud and to yourself to see if you're understanding clearly.

- Practice generating creative arguments and counterarguments as you listen to persuasive messages to avoid slipping into "automatic" processing.

- Always seek outside information and criticism before joining a group or making a commitment to invest time, energy, or money in some endeavor.

- Train yourself and your children to notice the "tricks" in deceptive packaging such as those used in TV commercials.

Associate Prof. Donald F. Roberts of the Stanford Institute of Communications Research has found that knowledge of make-believe constructions, of audiovisual distortion techniques, and of celebrities, experts, and overgeneralizations can build the kind of skepticism in children which is the front line of all resistance efforts.

Susceptibility to mind control becomes greater when individuals are forced to focus attention on themselves, making them feel deviant or silly. To combat this:

- Be sensitive to—and avoid—situations and people that put you on the spot, making you feel different, awkward, or inadequate.

- Try to focus on what you are doing, rather than on thoughts about yourself. Don't generate negative internal dialogs about yourself, and never accept a

chronically negative view from someone else.

- Maintain some nonsocial interests that satisfy you while alone—painting, carpentry, working on cars, reading or writing, for example.

- Be willing to look foolish now and then, to accept being "different" as being "special," rather than inferior.

If you can develop a concrete sense of self-worth, a sense of who you are, what you are interested in, and where your competencies lie, quite apart from the values, interests, and judgments of others, you may feel better about yourself in their presence, as well as in their absence.

Many of the most powerfully persuasive appeals are based on making people afraid or anxious. The following are suggestions for reducing this influence:

- No matter what the relationship, avoid getting sucked into unwanted confessions that may later be used against you. Many cults and mind-control systems use public confessions, self-exposure "games," and the like to catalog the weaknesses of their followers for later exploitation.

- Avoid making decisions when under stress, particularly in the presence of the person who has triggered the emotional reaction. Tell them you'll decide *manana*.

- As you feel yourself becoming uncomfortably aroused, begin taking slower, deeper breaths to help your body relax.

Gnawing feelings of guilt can also provide a powerful impetus for personal change. Patty Hearst's psychological transformation in the hands of the Symbionese Liberation Army came from exploiting the differences between her family's privileged position and the poverty of so many others. All conflicts were slowly relieved with each step she took in the direction of accepting her captors' definition of reality.

To counteract such tactics, learn to confront your frustrations and fears. Start by thinking about the least provoking aspects while in a state of total relaxation, then work up to the more difficult ones. Don't let people make you feel indebted to them. When you feel grateful, be prepared to acknowledge the sacrifices of others with sincere thanks, instead of the expected repayment in kind.

Once aware that their prey is bagged, the slickest operators then emphasize the victim's freedom of choice, after tactfully constraining the alternatives. The newly persuaded person chooses "freely" while the influencer bolsters his or her decision.

Alternatively, the persuader may deliberately provoke your reaction in the desired direction. A salesperson thus might declare: "Excuse me for saying so, but this is quite an exclusive line; you may not be able to afford it." Some helpful hints:

- Be wary of people who overemphasize how free you are to choose among the

options they have prescribed. Electing Anacin over Bayer is not the same as deciding whether you want an aspirin.

- Test the limits of your options by selecting "none of the above" or by proposing unexpected alternatives, at least tentatively, especially when you create them yourself and think they are better.

- Test others' intentions by giving them the impression you'll comply with their demands and then observing their reaction. ("You're right, that merchandise is too expensive.") If they start pushing in the opposite direction or simply look befuddled, you may have uncovered a hidden agenda.

Resisting systems

Large-scale systems of social persuasion depend on controls which impart a sense of belonging to a broad movement. Tightly structured situations are dangerous when we lose sight of who we are, when we forget that we have feelings and histories other than those programmed by the immediate social setting and the roles we are led to play in it. Some suggestions:

- Test for the presence of stated or unstated rules that unnecessarily restrict freedom of speech, action, and association. By subtly violating some of the rules and roles, you may discover how much latitude is allowed for eccentric or creative self-expression.

- Resist the lure of uniforms and other disguises that make you look like one of the bunch.

- Develop a sense of humor about yourself to retain a creative view of your situation and deal with any apparent personal weakness without undue anxiety.

- Listen to criticisms of your most cherished beliefs and institutions. Know them, but don't accept them uncritically.

- Retain your sense of individual integrity in the system by calling others by name and referring to yourself by name. If people are typically referred to by title, try adding their first or last name to the conventional address, abbreviating it casually, or somehow reformulating the typical approach.

- Disclose personal observations about your surroundings and about experiences you've had elsewhere to those you feel might share your views. Elicit feelings and ideas from them so that, together, you can disengage the "scripts" that specify the basic, unquestioned rules of the present setting.

- Remember that ignoring social rules is not easy and is sometimes met with censure.

When groups become preoccupied with seeking and maintaining unanimity of thought, they tend to isolate themselves from outside sources of information, and their decision-making processes deteriorate.

Persuaders bring us to their place of power, separate the good or aware "us" from the evil, ignorant "them," and then proceed to limit our access to ideas that they find heretical, traitorous, or not in their best interests.

When we are isolated from outside information, it is impossible to make unbiased decisions. Police interrogators question suspects at the station, not at their homes. Synanon rehabilitates alcoholics and drug addicts—and keeps its other members in line—by removing them from their usual haunts and restricting their liberty.

When we come to believe so thoroughly in our favorite concepts that we begin to hate those who don't share our views, to develop rehearsed, programmatic responses to discrediting arguments, and to acknowledge only ideas stated within our terminology, it may be time to make our belief systems a little more permeable. Some suggested tactics:

- Try to establish whether you can actually have an impact upon decision-making processes or whether you are simply part of the clean-up crew for decisions that have already been made.

- Refuse to accept a we-they dichotomy that cuts you off from outsiders and suggests you should think of them in terms of dehumanizing labels like animals, sinners, queers, rednecks, women's libbers, the teeming masses, etc.

- Suspect appeals that encourage you to detach your feelings from the rest of your being; assert the harmony of mind and body, intellect and emotion, past and present.

- Try to encourage independent thinking among group members.

- Remember that the minority may at times have the only accurate view of the issues. Any worthwhile group should tolerate dissent or be abandoned.

- Question commitments if they are no longer appropriate for you. Consistency in the face of contrary evidence is usually not a virtue, but a sign of rigidity, delusion, or prejudice.

- Maintain outside interests and sources of social support. Reject the appeal that devotion to the cause requires severing these ties. Battered wives, religious converts, undercover agents, Mafia informants, and inmates of prisons and mental hospitals all suffer from impoverished connections to outside systems.

- Family and friends should leave the path back home open. Your unconditional accessibility to those who have strayed, no matter what they've done or said, may be their only hope.

Disowning children, friends, or relatives when you disapprove of their decisions is much less effective in the long run than a gentle hand and some warm words. "Love bombing" is the favorite tactic of most cults because it works best among the love-deprived—those to whom we

have not given love.

Challenging the system

The tighter a system is, the more likely that minor challenges will be met with retaliation. In prisons, mental hospitals, religious or political cults, military establishments, concentration camps, and so on, people have virtually total control over the existence of others. Threats to that power are intolerable. Even systems that appear less authoritarian may wield comparable punishments onto dissidents. For this reason, it's often more practical to challenge systems from outside, especially by forming other systems. Some final suggestions:

- Don't let your silence pass for agreement with the system. While talking with others, subtly imply your discontent in areas where you think they might agree.

- Once you establish a group of allies and decide that you can not escape the system or that you are committed to change it, band together in opposition. A consistent minority, firm in its conviction, can often undo a majority.

- Begin by assessing the power of those who hold the reins. By determining what contributions you make to the system that are important to its functioning, you can collect a significant repository of such resources to withhold from the system when bargaining time arrives. Citizens' action, organized labor, the women's movement, and others follow this strategy.

- Appeal to the same human needs of the power-holders in the system manipulate in others. Collective resistance by a group that states its problems concisely and specifies clear and concrete goals, resources, and strategies is infinitely more likely to be successful than are disorganized revolts and spit-and-run tactics.

- Exit those situations in which disobedience is likely to be futile and punishable, if you can. Escape plans must be carefully thought through in concrete terms, not wished about vaguely. Above all, try to take others with you, rather than going alone.

It takes a firm sense of social commitment to escape a system of mind control and to then persist in challenging it from without. However, it is because we can exercise our ability to critically evaluate ideas, institutions, and our own behavior that we can perceive options beyond those provided by convenient dogma and ostensibly inescapable circumstances. In this way, we are "free" to make meaningful choices and to not be controlled. Even so, buyers do well to beware. "Every exit is an entry somewhere else."*

*Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).