

BRAINWASHING YOUNG PEOPLE INTO VIOLENT EXTREMIST CULTS

The phenomenon of people and organizations using “undue influence” techniques to recruit and indoctrinate young (and old) people has reached epidemic proportions. While victim-centered approaches are now being discussed and utilized in trafficking realms, little attention has been given to the actual techniques and behavioral methods that can be used to enslave a person into a new “pseudo-identity” which is dependent and obedient to their controller.

One of the principle emotional control techniques is phobia indoctrination: the inculcation of irrational fears to question the authority or the leadership or doctrine as it will result in terrifying negative consequences. Most typical religious cults contain threats such as: going to “hell”; being judged by a superhuman being for eternity; or being possessed by demons. With a cult like Daesh that practices extreme acts of violence including beheadings, rapes, executions, and bombings, fear is no longer just a psychologically irrational fear. There is real potential danger. This exerts a powerful mind control.

Use of hypnosis as well as social influence techniques using deception and systematic manipulation is an area I have been professionally and personally involved with for over forty years. When I was nineteen years old and a college student, I was vulnerable to three young women flirting with me, unaware that they were members of a cult and believed their leader was a deity. I underwent a total and radical personality change: complete with change of beliefs, language, values and code of behavior. Thankfully, I “woke up” after a near fatal van crash and five days of deprogramming, and realized that I had been programmed to accept a completely foreign set of beliefs. I had been encouraged to be deceptive, drop out of school, cut off contact with family and friends, throw out my poetry (I was a creative writing major), and work 18-21 hours a day, seven days a week for no pay. I was rescued in 1976 and have become a mental health professional who has been helping people all over the world who have been mind controlled, brainwashed, and unethically hypnotized.

In the past several years, Daesh, otherwise known as ISIS, has demonstrated a remarkable sophistication in utilizing the Internet and social media to recruit and indoctrinate people to become terrorists. Young people today feel quite comfortable online and spend hours on social media and watching YouTube videos and chatting via their smartphones. Cult recruiters utilize Hollywood style propaganda to influence young people. Popular video games like Call of Duty, movies like the Matrix, and novels like the Lord of the Rings are all used to draw in young minds. The story line is twisted to make the person feel like they are the courageous hero figure fighting evil. But there are many forms of influence used. For example, “revolutionary poetry” is another way to influence, inspire, and indoctrinate young people. After an individual is identified as a potential target, a systematic online recruitment takes place using YouTube videos and invitations to discussion boards (which are becoming more encrypted and therefore harder to infiltrate).



Recruiters quickly encourage their young recruits to “not tell anyone” - especially parents and friends. This should be a huge “red flag” when a veritable stranger is telling someone to not trust their loved ones and trust them instead.

But there are many hundreds of other groups online that also include human traffickers who wish to enslave people. Some groups, like my former cult have hundreds of entities controlled by them that go by different names. So what I have learned is that to be effective, is vital to focus on the psychology of mind control and brainwashing, and helping people become critical thinkers and good consumers.

Robert Jay Lifton in 1961 (1) described eight criteria that may be used to evaluate any group or environment. It is from his work, and Dr. Margaret Singer’s model that I developed my BITE model for mind control: Behavior Control, Information Control, Thought Control and Emotional Control. (2) By reviewing these four components in the context of my Influence Continuum, one can begin to see clear criteria that distinguish healthy from unhealthy situations.

The Diagnostic Manual of the American Psychiatric Association names brainwashing and mind control as Dissociative Disorder 300.15. Other Specified Dissociative Disorder 300.15 (F44.9) is defined as “Identity disturbance due to prolonged and intense coercive persuasion: Individuals who have been subjected to intense coercive persuasion (e.g., brainwashing, thought reform, indoctrination while captive, torture, long-term political imprisonment, recruitment by sects/cults or by terror organizations) may present with prolonged changes in, or conscious questioning of, their identity.”

So, in order to understand the phenomenon of what is happening with cult recruitment and indoctrination, it is essential to think about the person as two identities: who they were prior to the programming and who they have been influenced to become. I refer to this as the dual identity, or simply described: John-John (authentic John) and John-cult member. The programming does not erase the core identity, it suppresses it by the creation and continued influence of the “cult” self. (3)

By educating the public about how cults recruit and indoctrinate and by giving them ways to identify and protect themselves, we can certainly slow the growth of destructive cult recruitment. Furthermore, families and friends of individuals who have been recruited into a cult need to understand what has happened and be guided on what to do and what not to do. Ultimately, I have evolved a systematic, ethical influence approach to un-doing the programmed cult self and empowering the person’s real self.

Governments, NGOs, and law enforcement representatives can all be trained to understand and implement

programs and policies which will be far more effective than the current approach which focuses on changing the “narrative.” Resources can and should be developed online as well as teams of people led by former members of destructive cults who are capable of doing interventions. Religious clergy should also be part of intervention teams. In order to combat unethical mind control cults, we must understand exactly what they are doing and work creatively to find ways to protect citizens and counter the negative programming.

The author

Steven Hassan is one of the foremost authorities on undue influence (mind control) and destructive, authoritarian people and cults.

He understands the subject from the unique perspective as both a former cult member and as a clinical professional who has been working full time in the field since 1976.

Steven is the author of *Combating Cult Mind Control: The #1 Best-Selling Guide to Protection, Rescue, and Recovery from Destructive Cults* and *Freedom of Mind: Helping Loved Ones Leave Controlling People, Cults and Beliefs*. He is the founder and director of the Freedom of Mind Resource Center Inc., a counseling and publishing organization dedicated to helping people become psychologically empowered, upholding human rights, promoting consumer awareness and exposing abuses of undue influence. He is also the co-developer of *Ending the Game*, a non-coercive curriculum designed to educate and empower sex trafficking victims to leave pimps and traffickers. For more information, please visit www.freedomofmind.com.

Footnotes

1. Robert Jay Lifton *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, New York: W. W. Norton. 1961.
2. Steven Hassan, *Combating, Cult Mind Control*, Freedom of Mind Press, Newton, MA., 2015 (1988,1990).
3. Steven Hassan, *Freedom of Mind*, Freedom of Mind Press., Newton, MA 2012.