



Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control

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The term 'brainwashing' was first recorded in 1950, but it is an expression of a much older concept: the forcible and full-scale alteration of a person's beliefs. Over the past 50 years the term has crept into popular culture, served as a topic for jokes, frightened the public in media headlines, and slandered innumerable people and institutions. It has also been the subject of learned discussion from many angles: history, sociology, psychology, psychotherapy, and marketing. Despite this variety, to date there has been one angle missing: any serious reference to real brains. Descriptions of how opinions can be changed, whether by persuasion, deceit, or force, have been almost entirely psychological.

Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control Details

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Anonymous Writer says

Top notch!

Nerine Dorman says

This is possibly one of the most important books I've read in a long while. As someone trained in media studies and employed within an advertising-driven environment, I understand all too well how modern media manipulate people. Kathleen Taylor offers readers a basic breakdown with reference to further reading, examining not only the history of thought control, but also discusses the fact that we are continually bombarded with information seeking to change our minds.

I urge anyone with an interest in psychology and thought processes to at least give this book a try. Our minds and how they function are so intricate. Taylor really drives it home that we don't know nearly enough about the symbiosis of consciousness and matter.

While she doesn't deliver any definite answers to such a complex issue, she does offer us some practical applications. Now if only more people out there were willing to pursue knowledge and employ the simple technique of stop-think.

This book's a keeper, and is a valuable resource to anyone, be they atheist, Christian, Muslim or believe in the Tooth Fairy. I've just ordered my print copy.

Lena says

I got this book hoping that it would provide me with scientific evidence that would help me develop a more informed opinion on the controversial issue of brainwashing. Unfortunately, Taylor points out that it is ethically impossible to conduct controlled brainwashing studies, so I did not find the specific evidence I was looking for. What the book does provide, however, is a detailed discussion of what science can tell us about how we come to believe what we do, and how influence attempts can impact that process.

Taylor's discussion of influence techniques is thorough, ranging from advertising and education through systematic techniques used by cult leaders to the physical abuse used on American prisoners during the Korean War. By diving into neuroscience to detail how concepts and ideas are established in the brain, Taylor offers insight into how different kinds of manipulation attempts try to change how people think about the world around them. Her discussion of how skilled manipulators work to link strong emotion to a new idea in attempt to bypass the critical thought processes that would make people stop and think is particularly important for people interested in cultic issues.

Chris Ramirez says

This book started interesting but got boring like a textbook REAL fast. I should have known since it said science but somehow I expect EVERY book that isn't a textbook to have some sort of story. This didn't. It had some really interesting observations but between each one was ALOT of science and no story. Nonetheless, I did pick up some interesting info about brainwashing but that was few and far between.

Clark Hays says

Making sense of the “accreted concoction of ideas we call the self”

Kathleen Taylor is one of my favorite authors. She has a rich, irreverent writing style — bordering on the cheeky — matched with an incredible depth of knowledge in neuroscience and human behavior. More importantly, at least to me, she tends to focus those two things onto the darkest alleys of human existence — why people do bad things.

My introduction to her was through reading *Cruelty: Human Evil and the Human Brain*, a terrific book about the neurological sources of cruelty as shaped by evolutionary pressures, and brain function and chemistry. *Brainwashing* was written two years earlier and is structured in much the same way: using a negative concept — in this case, the fear, processes and outcomes of brainwashing — to explore the neuroscience of how we think and why we respond in often predictable, similar ways to the external world. It's a rewarding journey through the architecture and function of the brain and how people have tried — with varying levels of success — to brainwash others into changing or suppressing core beliefs.

Many of the examples come from politics (the Red Army, our CIA), religion (Christianity, Branch Davidians, the People's Temple), cults (the Manson family) and culture (academia, the family unit, advertising and the news media).

Some of the standout a-ha moments include the concept of emotions as a contagion, domestic abuse as an especially effective, and heinous, form of brainwashing and the “thought terminating clichés” of ethereal concepts that hide lack of meaning or complexity (especially intriguing given the jargon-heavy corporate world I work in).

Had I read this book before *Cruelty*, it would have gotten 5 stars, but it suffers just a bit by comparison — mostly due to the “softer” final section that focuses on ways to prevent brainwashing and the effects of undue influence. The moralizing felt flat compared to the harder revelations of why we are who we are and how easily we succumb to “influence technicians.” It seems that section could have been distilled down into two simple concepts: we should be more accepting of others and we should reinforce the value of critical thinking.

It's not a book for those who consider themselves, their community, their religion or their country exceptional in any way or who are unsettled by confronting the “scary fragility of that accreted concoction of ideas we call the self.”

Perhaps I've been brainwashed myself, but I'm greatly looking forward to reading her newer book *The Brain Supremacy: Notes from the Frontiers of Neuroscience*.

Sotiris Makrygiannis says

The subject deserves 5 star, Kathleen is knowledgeable but book has a rather messy structure. Maybe was her first book so I added one more on my reading list.

Liked the FACET approach, the dangers of VR and nanotech that can be used to manipulate our brains without even knowing it. Is book deserves a public debate about the morals of brainwashing, or mind altering techniques that could be used for the benefit of humanity but also for total control.

I think that one needs to read such a book to understand the techniques currently available and also the ones under development.

Should I buy a Electromagnetic shield soon? Well less internet and more books could be OK for the time being.

severyn says

Excellent. Far wider ranging and deeper than the title and subtitle suggest. Now listen to me: you will read this book.

Pete says

Very thorough and intelligent book looking at the way cults, totalitarian regimes and even the media can bring us round to their way of thinking. Looks at the subject from all angles - from the violent spouse to the torture camp, from the narrow focus of most media to the milieu control of cult leaders. Explains how ethereal ideas such as "freedom" and "liberation" can be used to manipulate an individual, group or even entire populace into consensus.

Also has a fascinating primer into neuroscience, perception, the self and consciousness which repays repeat reading.

Sarah says

This book was very interesting but, for me, difficult to read in some places. It's 20 years since I completed my degree in Psychology and I certainly haven't kept up with things and this book does contain some technical neuro-stuff. However, Kathleen Taylor's explanation of the many varieties of influence techniques used in politics, religion and advertising were fascinating and very useful (to me).

Her expression 'cogwebs', as an abbreviation for cognitive web - connections in the brain made through

reinforcement of certain beliefs and thought patterns often through external influence, were particularly interesting. The stronger the reinforcement of these beliefs the harder they are to change. Rather like a gully cut into rock by a small stream - even though the force of the water isn't strong the constant flow gradually erodes the rock. It is then very difficult to change the route of the stream. It is the same with beliefs, it is very difficult to change beliefs when current beliefs have been reinforced over and over. Therefore, those who are part of cults or totalitarian regimes of some kind are trapped by their own minds and the influence that the leaders of these groups have over them by the constant reinforcement of certain messages.

Taylor mentions Robert Lifton's Thought Reform Criteria:

- ** Milieu Control – The control of information and communication.
- ** Mystical Manipulation – The manipulation of experiences that appear spontaneous but in fact were planned and orchestrated.
- ** Demand for Purity – The world is viewed as black and white and the members are constantly exhorted to conform to the ideology of the group and strive for perfection.
- ** Confession – Sins, as defined by the group, are to be confessed either to a personal monitor or publicly to the group.
- ** Sacred Science – The group's doctrine or ideology is considered to be the ultimate Truth, beyond all questioning or dispute.
- ** Loading the Language – The group interprets or uses words and phrases in new ways so that often the outside world does not understand.
- ** Doctrine over person – The member's personal experiences are subordinated to the sacred science and any contrary experiences must be denied or reinterpreted to fit the ideology of the group.
- ** Dispensing of existence – The group has the prerogative to decide who has the right to exist and who does not.

But how does one resist such influence? Stop and think! She also suggests that cynicism and humour assist resisting influence - which is great, because being English we are endlessly cynical and like to use humour as a defence. Awesome. :)

Great book, if you're interested in this kind of thing.

Mizuki says

I read this book for my fanfic-writing. The information within is very useful, but the text itself is a bit dry...

Mark says

Wow - first published in 2004 but a new edition with a new eleven page preface that makes the book's relevance most topical. Here is a topic we all thought we understood but laid bare by cogent scientific argument made accessible for the lay reader (or almost - there were a few very technical sections on the physics of the brain and its operations !).

" ...Brainwashing describes three approaches to mind-changing; by force, by stealth and by direct brain

manipulation technologies..."

The author describes the psychological process..

"The aim is to isolate victims from their previous environment; control what they perceive, think and do; increase uncertainty about previous beliefs; instil new beliefs by repetition; and imply positive and negative emotions to weaken former beliefs and strengthen new ones."

As I read this I thought about misogynistic men and how they abuse women in these three ways to undermine their self esteem and ultimately self belief.... And for me it is that sort of mind expanding read that so many different approaches are adopted by the author in her wide ranging discussion that all manner of different thoughts occur....

And then there is the impact of such 'brainwashing' upon national politics and our media through deliberate manipulation 'fake news' and misinformation...

...and television reality shows that distort things further..

So, she argues advertising with its powers of persuasion and deliberate manipulation of the media may be contributing to our immersion in an environment which is in fact becoming increasingly manipulative.

Kadri says

It gives some examples of how and when brainwashing has been used and explains the psychological processes behind it as well as what happens in the brain... Quite interesting.

Ebi says

I am planning to write an article about how political Islam is radicalizing generations of young Muslims around the world and found out about this book during my research work for the topic. It is a very interesting book and I did learn many things from it. Maybe the book offers too much theory and rather less observations, but in spite of this, I would recommend this book to anyone who has questions regarding the authenticity of her/his thoughts and even more to those who are sure of the authenticity of their thoughts.

Shaun says

While Taylor does discuss hardcore brainwashing (think Communist China), its uses, and its potential future, which in a technological age is kind of scary, much of the book (the really interesting part) deals with a more insidious, though milder, form of thought control, particularly that which is accomplished through advertising, the media, and society/culture.

The thing is once you abandon the idea of a "soul" or entity that is separate from the body, you have no choice but to accept that we are nothing more than a mass of cells, though complex (basically you accept the biological basis for all behavior). This can be a reassuring concept, but it can also be alienating and

terrifying. On one level, it suggests that the devil isn't the one who makes us do "bad" things. It's our faulty neurons, a result of genetics and our life circumstances and experiences, instead. Both explanations are hard to swallow in their own way. One implies a certain level of "free will" while the other seems to eliminate it. But both acknowledge that there are forces beyond our control working on/against us.

After reading this and many other books on the subject, I find myself feeling somewhat conflicted. The idea that our brains, and therefore ourselves, are nothing more than malleable pieces of clay offers a level of hope, but also a level of despair. You can't choose your genetics, and most of us have very little control over our culture or early life experiences, both of which are changing our brains without our knowing it. Even as adults, though we may feel free...our freedoms are limited at every turn.

In the end, we are all unique experiments of nature and the societies/circumstances we are born into and ultimately some end-products that work better than others at least as far as "society" is concerned. Furthermore, this concept of free will is probably an illusion, up to a point depending on how you define "free to choose".

What the book really helped me to better understand is how things like the Holocaust can happen. It would seem we are creatures that not only create our own realities (realities that ultimately serve us and sometimes work to protect and preserve our most flawed beliefs) but we will also go to great lengths to protect those subjective realities even when those realities are challenged and their flaws revealed.

Understanding how the brain works really does help to explain how a guard in a prison camp can oversee the mass murder of a family, including children, and then return home, a loving father, to his own family. It explains how a pro-lifer can reconcile his pro-death penalty stance. We are a conundrum of illogical and blatant inconsistencies. And the greatest shot we have at true freedom is to understand why.

The "me" we feel is a brain, nothing mystical or magical, and possibly someday with enough technology and science, who we are and how we act may be both predictable and controllable.

What I found most disturbing is that manipulating individuals is extremely easy, even now with our limited knowledge of the brain/psychology, and we are all victims of "brainwashing" on some level whether we realize/admit it or not. Furthermore, our susceptibility to outside suggestions is probably highly influenced by genetics and circumstances/life experiences and thus the physical make-up of our brain. Even the food we eat may impact how our brain functions and thus who "we are" or perceive ourselves to be.

The concept that "reality" is on many levels a self-created individualized delusion (subjective and not objective) is a mind-bender, but then again if it is real to the self, than what's the difference. I keep coming back to how we see the world, say as opposed to bees. We see a flower, bees see something that looks like a bull's eye. What makes our version of "reality" any more real than theirs.

Overall, the book is well written and entertaining. I loved the quotes at the beginning of sections, which added to the literary experience, and I loved the topic, which really is why we believe what we believe and how those beliefs are formed and thus can be changed without our even knowing. I think given technology and scientific advances, this is important stuff that has far reaching implications.

I kept coming back to two great classics, 1984 and Brave New World, both which were quoted/mentioned in the book. Clearly 1984 is a dystopia...but what about Brave New World. I kept asking myself...was it a dystopian or a utopian society. If you could induce a perpetual state of happiness and contentedness (artificially) say through some new neuro-scientific procedure...would you? And are there really states of

happiness or contentedness that aren't "artificial" (at least on some level) since happiness/contentedness like so many other things are subjective and personal experiences.

Would recommend to those who enjoy brain science and its implications for psychology and sociology, as well as discussions of concepts like "free will". Would also recommend *The Believing Brain* by Michael Shermer, *Free Will* by Sam Harris and *Incognito* by David Eagleman for complimentary reading.

Interestingly, I checked out "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest" to reread before starting this book (haven't read since high school), and I am excited about reading it with Taylor's ideas still fresh in my head. Taylor also briefly talks about "mental illness" and "justified" brainwashing, as we as a society seem to agree that in certain circumstances, reprogramming (brainwashing) is not only warranted but absolutely ethical.

Some favorite quotes/ideas:(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

Ellen says

I found this book hard to read at first until I got used to the author's style and began to figure out her goals. (I skipped to the end of the book to read her conclusion.) Taylor stated in the beginning that she was examining the concept of brainwashing, but I did not understand what her definition of brainwashing was. She outlines many aspects of brainwashing: as a term of abuse, as a scientific process, as a dream, and as a concept of last resort, but does not obviously pick one definition before discussing the term, usually referring to "brainwashing" without qualification. As a result, I had difficulty following the discussion. I couldn't keep all of these aspects of the term "brainwashing" in my head as I read. This was especially true in the earlier sections about the history of brainwashing and the cultural experiences we have had with it. I understand now that she was trying to step back from any context in which brainwashing had been defined and start with a blank page, but I found it too frustrating. I did not know right away what the foundation of her arguments for deconstructing the concept was at any given time. I took me awhile to catchup.

The book became more focused as it got into discussions of psychiatry. By the time I read the sections on how the brain works, the text flowed more logically, although it was complex and challenging because of the

subject matter. A very broad book, Brainwashing was a 5-week investment of my time. It was worth it, but I did struggle at times with the complexity of the issues Taylor was attempting to tackle. She touched the surface of a lot of important interrelated issues surrounding brainwashing. But this book, by itself, does not go into enough depth in any one area to truly make me feel that I understand.

I also thought that Taylor's style was a bit clunky. Maybe it was a cultural barrier between British English and American English. Taylor seemed to be trying to be "hip," which increased the cultural barrier, and which, at times, seemed flippant.

Taylor does deserve kudos for beginning to tackle the concept of brainwashing in a scientific way. She uses both empirical data and laboratory results to support her arguments. I plan to go on to other sources to get more information on the brain, psychiatry and behavioral studies. Taylor includes an extensive reference and further reading list, which I plan to use.

I recommend the book, but not as a single source on the subject.
