Contextualizing Debates About Brainwashing Within the Discipline of Sociology

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Abstract

As a discipline, sociology lacks a core of universally accepted paradigms. Consequently, noncognitive factors, such as political and ideological values, influence sociologists' choice of research problems and responses to conflicts between and among theories, which hinders theory growth. In this article, we examine aspects of the theoretical debate within sociology about brainwashing to assess the possibility of theory growth in the absence of universally accepted paradigms. We do so by returning to important debates between sociologist Benjamin Zablocki and transpersonal psychologist Dick Anthony, and also published exchanges between sociologists Stephen Kent and Lorne Dawson. These debates reveal imprecision over whether the brainwashing term refers to a psychological condition or a social program, and disagreements over the implications of brainwashing for controversial sociological concepts that involve agency versus free-will restrictions. Imprecision and disagreements within these debates hinder theoretical growth involving brainwashing as a useful, scientific, sociological concept.

In this article, we examine the brainwashing theory[1] debate primarily within sociology, using Berger, Willer, and Zelditch's (2005) theoretical research program as a framework for theoretical growth, to assess the possibility of theoretical progress within a context of limited consensus. By doing so, we hope to untangle several thorny issues that seem to be impeding reasoned discussion and possible theoretical advancement of brainwashing as a social scientific (especially sociological) theory. We begin the article with an overview of arguments by sociologist Stephen Cole (b. 1941) and physicist/historical philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996) about advancement in scientific theory, especially their discussions about paradigms and core concepts. We follow these discussions with Berger et al.'s response to them, then use this exchange as a framework through which to examine the conflict within sociology over the scientific status of brainwashing. In the final section, we discuss the implications of this analysis of the concept for theoretical growth in sociology. We examine literature from both sides of the brainwashing-theory debate to obtain a current overview of the argument as it relates to controversial religions[2] that have flourished in the West after World War II (Kent, 2009).

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[1] A basic definition of *brainwashing* as a social psychological phenomenon is "the systematic, scientific[,] and coercive elimination of the individuality of the mind of another" (Scheflin & Opton, 1978, p. 40). As an organizational program, brainwashing involves coercive regimens of harsh punishment, forced self-confessions, social isolation, hard labor, and intense doctrinal study (see Kent, 2000, p. 9). We are aware that the term's first Western appearance was in works published by journalist and CIA employee Edward Hunter (see Scheflin & Opton, 1978, pp. 15, 86–87), leading some to see it as being "first and foremost an emotional scare word" (Scheflin & Opton, 1978, p. 23). Hunter, however, simply used a translation of the Chinese term *hsi nao* ("wash brain" [Lifton, 1961, p. 3; see Taylor, 2004, pp. 4–5]).

Going beyond the term's origins, Kathleen Taylor observed that "as brainwashing became more popular it became more academically disreputable, perhaps in part because of its highly political origins. But in the early 1950s academic psychologists and psychiatrists were still prepared to associate themselves with brainwashing research, resulting in a flurry of studies on Korean prisoners of war" (Taylor, 2004, p. 269, n. 3).

[2] Scholars who use the term *new religious movement* tend to have a positive disposition toward the group, whereas scholars with a more critical stance tend to use the term *cult* (for further explanation, see Zablocki & Robbins, 2001, p. 5). The purpose of this article is not to evaluate the accuracy of these terms, but rather to examine the ways in which the scholars attempt to resolve theoretical conflicts. Therefore, whenever possible, we use the term *controversial religions* in this article to reflect a neutral approach.

Overview of the Debate Over Theory and the Sociology of Knowledge

Determining the extent to which social processes influence the construction of sociological knowledge is an overarching theme in the ongoing debate over the state of sociology (Best, 2003; Cole, 2001a, pp. 9–10; Keith & Ender, 2004; Turner, 2006). Central to the debate is the argument that sociology has become too ideological (i.e., more influenced by "personal experiences and values" [Cole, 2001b, p. 56] than by empiricism, theory development, and theory testing). Critics concerned with the state of the discipline argue that ideology, power, authority, and other social processes, rather than evidence from the empirical world, influence sociologists' understanding of human behavior (Cole, 2001a, pp. 8–13; see Smith, 2014). For example, sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset (2001, p. 247) attributed the "parlous" state of sociology to the increasing politicization of the discipline (see also Huber, 2001, pp. 299–300, 305). Joel Best went so far as to claim that critics charge sociology with being "just ideology, only thinly and disingenuously disguised as science, that is the domain of 'knee-jerk liberals' and irresponsible radicals who would coddle criminals while blaming society" (Best, 2003, p. 2).

A related concern is the problem of progress and consensus (Cole, 2001a, pp. 13–20). Sociologist Stephen Cole (2001b) argued that sociology lacks a developed core of agreed-upon knowledge.[3] Many others concur (see Davis 2001; Huber 2001, pp. 301–302; Stinchcombe, 2001, p. 95). For example, a review of introductory textbooks in sociology concluded "sociology, at least at the introductory level, does not appear to be widely grounded in a common language of core concepts, in either the 1940s or the 1990s" (Keith & Ender, 2004, p. 28). Subsequently, respected theorist Jonathan Turner concluded, "sociology is not symbolically unified. Its symbolic resource base is fractured and cannot serve to integrate sociology" (Turner, 2006, p. 25).

In the absence of core knowledge, political and social processes have great significance. Power within the discipline, rather than contributions to the core, determines intellectual authority in sociology. Thus, without core knowledge, disagreeing sociologists engage in political fighting (Cole, 2001a, pp. 29–30). Cole (2001a, pp. 29–30) stated that sociologists "fight and war among each other; with the spoils going to the most powerful (the extent to which someone's ideas are right or wrong has no bearing on the battle)." Indeed, reported Joel Best, "the history of American sociology is, in part, a story of competition for social standing in the discipline" (Best, 2003, p. 5).

Cole (2001b, pp. 39–40) argued that a discipline's progress is dependent on core knowledge. Core knowledge (similar to Thomas Kuhn's [2012, pp. 43–51] concept of paradigm) provides the foundation for the development of science. With core knowledge, researchers know which unsolved problems are solvable.[4] Without core knowledge, researchers select topics on personal and ideological grounds,[5] which leads to "undoable" [6] projects (Cole, 2001b, p. 53).

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[3] Unlike sociology, the natural sciences have core knowledge. Examples of core knowledge in the natural sciences include the Weinberg, Salam and Glashow theory of weak interactions (physics), the Watson, and Crick model of DNA (molecular biology), and Darwin's theory of evolution (evolutionary biology) (Cole, 2001b, p. 37).

[4] "Solvable" problems are puzzles, the answers to which utilize theoretically collected data related to a core disciplinary issue. A solvable research investigation might involve validity and reliability analyses of researchers' use of the brainwashing concept in relation to social-manipulation programs in an effort to determine the concept's scientific rigor. An unsolvable research investigation would involve an attempt to determine a universally accepted moral or ethical position on these programs. As psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton observed, "it is important to realize that *what we see as a set of coercive maneuvers, the Chinese Communists view as a morally uplifting, harmonizing, and scientifically therapeutic experience*" (Lifton, 1961, p. 15 [italics in original]; see Taylor, 2004, p. 5).

[5] As Cole (2001b, p. 51) clarified, "physicists don't decide to study quarks because they have experienced them. Sociologists study aspects of phenomena which they themselves participate in. The problem with selecting topics for research based upon noncognitive [i.e., ideological or personal] criteria is that it reduces the chances that the results of the research will be important in answering any significant theoretical questions."

[6] "Doable" research involves investigations using available techniques and existing theories to examine issues with existing or discoverable data. A doable research investigation might be the use of widely used coding techniques to identify how researchers use

Furthermore, without core knowledge, a discipline lacks a standard set of methods with which to resolve conflicts. Perpetual conflict exists between competing theoretical formulations, and little or no theoretical growth occurs (see Cole, 2001b, pp. 52–54; Kuhn, 2012, p. 26).

Overview of Kuhn-Cole Argument

According to Kuhn (2012, pp. 10–11), a paradigm is a scientific achievement that is "sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity . . . [and] . . . sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the refined group of practitioners to resolve." Paradigms provide the foundation upon which a particular scientific community furthers its practice of normal science.

Following Kuhn, Cole argued that core knowledge provides the basis of progress in all sciences. Cole (2001b, p. 37) defined *core knowledge* as "a small group of theories, methods, and exemplars that are almost universally accepted by the relevant scientific community as being both true and important." With core knowledge, a discipline can define which problems are doable, select problems using cognitive[7] criteria, and resolve conflict between competing theoretical formulations with reason and evidence as opposed to politics or ideology. Cole (2001b, pp. 39–40) attributed sociology's lack of progress to the absence of a core of universally accepted knowledge that unites the discipline.

Cole (2001b, p. 49) argued, "research will advance and accumulate most rapidly when cognitive criteria are the most significant influence on the decisions made by scientists."

In sociology, however, noncognitive factors, such as personal experience and political values,[8] strongly influence problem choice and the decisions made to achieve attempted solutions. The selection of research problems on the basis of noncognitive grounds leads researchers to undertake undoable problems. Kuhn (2012, p. 96) explained the relation between problem selection and scientific development:

> Normal research, which is cumulative, owes its success to the ability of scientists regularly to select problems that can be solved with conceptual and instrumental techniques close to those already in existence. (That is why an excessive concern with useful problems, regardless of their relation to existing knowledge and technique, can so easily inhibit scientific development.)

The conceptual and instrumental techniques of a paradigm define a set of problems as doable. Therefore, with paradigms, it is possible to determine which problems are solvable. The research problems "may have no intrinsic significance other than their importance for the theory of the paradigm" (Cole, 2001b, p. 49). Natural sciences, which have highly developed paradigms, progress because the problems undertaken are doable, given the conceptual and instrumental techniques of the paradigm. Without highly developed paradigms, a discipline is unable to determine which problems are doable, with noncognitive criteria leading researchers to attempt undoable problems, and no theoretical growth occurs.

Kuhn (2012, pp. 11, 38–42) and Cole (2001b, pp. 49–56) further argued that, with highly developed paradigms, researchers within a discipline agree on cognitive standards with which to assess solutions to problems.

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the *brainwashing* term when discussing various programs of social manipulation. Countless topics would be interesting to research (such as bureaucrats' development of social-manipulation programs in various periods of history), but limitations such as sparse documentation and few if any bureaucrats' accounts make these projects undoable.

[7] Our sources use the term *cognitive* to mean *scientific*. We deduce that their idea of *scientific* (and hence *cognitive*) is of empirically generated data acquired through the use of current instrumental techniques, which address a widely agreed-upon theoretical problem in the discipline.

[8] By *noncognitive*, our sources mean *nonscientific* and/or *nonempirical*. We deduce that their idea of *nonscientific* (and hence *noncognitive*) is of data acquired and/or used to advance agendas that are personal or ideological (e.g., political, religious, economic) and, hence, disconnected from a widely agreed-upon theoretical problem in the discipline.

Consensual standards of assessment enable conflict resolution among competing theoretical formulations on the basis of reason and evidence as opposed to noncognitive social, economic, ideological, or political factors. Furthermore, disciplines with universally accepted paradigms have firmly established foundations. Therefore, debates between theories do not include disputes over the foundations of the discipline. Disciplines, however, without universally accepted paradigms lack consensual standards of assessment. Consequently, political/ideological struggles and foundation questions dominate conflicts between theories, conflicts remain unresolved, and little or no theoretical growth occurs (Cole, 2001b, pp. 55–56; see Berger et al., 2005, p. 148; Kuhn, 2012, p. 94).

Highly developed paradigms perform the functions necessary for theoretical growth. Thus, according to the Kuhn-Cole argument, universally accepted paradigms are a necessary condition for a discipline's theoretical progress. Sociology, however, lacks a core of universally accepted paradigms and therefore lacks significant progress.

In response to Cole's argument, sociologists Joseph Berger, David Willer, and Morris Zelditch (2005) argued that, in the absence of a universally accepted core of knowledge, theoretical research programs engender theoretical growth. These programs, they assert, define a set of problems as doable, and researchers within programs share common cognitive standards of assessing solutions to problems. Consequently, theoretical growth occurs within them (Berger et al., 2005).

Overview of Berger-Willer-Zelditch Response

Berger et al. (2005) acknowledged that sociology lacks universally accepted paradigms, but they challenged the implicit assumption of the Kuhn-Cole argument that universally accepted paradigms are necessary for theoretical progress. They argued that theoretical research programs, which already exist within sociology, perform similar functions for theoretical progress as highly developed paradigms.

Berger et al. (2005, pp. 131–132) distinguished three levels of theoretical activity.[9] At the elementary level is the unit theory, consisting of a set of interrelated concepts and principles. Unit theories employ empirical models to explain specific concrete phenomena. At the overarching level is the orienting strategy, a metatheoretical structure that consists of broad aims, ontological and epistemological presuppositions, and substantive and methodological directives. Orienting strategies guide the construction of unit theories. At the intermediate level is the theoretical research program, which combines elements of both unit theories and orienting strategies. Theoretical research programs combine "a set of substantive and methodological working strategies, a network of interrelated unit theories embodying these strategies, and a set of theory-based empirical models that interpret these theories" (Berger et al., 2005, p. 132).

A theoretical research program provides a community of scientists with the conceptual and methodological resources that normal science requires (Berger et al., 2005, pp. 131–132). The concepts and principles available in the program enable researchers to formulate solutions to problems. The information-gathering and information-processing techniques of the program enable researchers to determine the empirical adequacy of the solutions. Furthermore, a community of scientists committed to a program share common cognitive standards for assessing solutions to theoretical problems. Therefore, researchers use reason and evidence, as opposed to politics and ideology, to resolve conflicts between competing theoretical formulations. Theoretical research programs grow because researchers within a program are able to determine which problems are doable given the conceptual and methodological resources of the program; and researchers resolve conflicts between competing theoretical formulations on rational grounds (given that the standards of assessment are

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9 Berger et al.'s analytic scheme comprises the three major types of theoretical activity given in Wagner and Berger (1985), and refined in Berger and Zelditch (1993; 1997).

consensual within the program). Berger et al. (2005, p. 150) argued that many theoretical research programs already exist in contemporary sociology. Thus, substantial theory growth is occurring in sociology at the level of theoretical research programs (Berger et al., 2005, p. 150).

Brainwashing Theory Debate

Berger et al. (2005, p. 148) argued that a community of scientists who share common cognitive standards of assessment can resolve conflicts using agreed-upon procedures of science without the interference of politics or ideology. A relatively small community of social scientists (especially sociologists) study newer, controversial religions (or cults), so it will be useful to examine aspects of the debates about brainwashing in which a few of them are engaged. In this section, therefore, we examine the brainwashing theory debate associated with the academic study of controversial religions to determine (a) the extent to which noncognitive factors influence the researchers, and (b) the ability of the researchers to resolve disputes using reason and evidence. Given the controversial nature of the subject matter, the academic study of these newer and often marginal religions is a highly polarized area of study. Sociologists Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins (2001, p. x) addressed the complexities of the phenomena under investigation:

> Cults are a genuine expression of religious freedom deserving toleration. At the same time, they are opportunities for unchecked exploitation of followers by leaders deserving civic scrutiny. As fragile new belief systems, they need the protective cover of benign neglect by the state. But as religious movements, it is always possible that a few of them may turn into potential incubators of terrorism or other forms of crime and abuse.

Consequently, a polarization between scholars concerned with repressive over-regulation of the group (such as interference in rights to choose, assemble, and practice a faith) and scholars concerned with exploitation of individual members (including a range of human rights violations) defines the study of controversial, often cultish, religions (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001, p. x).

The involvement of scholars in litigation relating to controversial religions reinforces the polarization (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001, p. 6). Scholars from both sides of the polarization testify as expert witnesses in court cases involving allegations of brainwashing (Zablocki, 1997, p. 100) and related concepts. An additional source of the polarization is the collaboration between scholars and the controversial religions themselves (Kent & Krebs, 1998a; 1998b). Controversial religions searching for recognition and legitimacy recognize the value of gaining scholarly support (Balch & Langdon, 1998, pp. 205–206). Some controversial religions sponsor scholarly activities, and some leading scholars in the field engage with controversial religions as consultants to lend support in public relations efforts (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001; Horowitz, 1978).

Scholars have raised concern over the extent to which their colleagues can remain committed to objectivity when they are either defending freedom of religion or combating religious exploitation (Robbins, 2001, p. 85). A related concern is the extent to which litigation and collaborationism further compromise objectivity (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001; Horowitz, 1978; Zablocki, 1997). According to Robbins (2001, p. 78), scholars can establish "lucrative careers as 'professional witnesses,' lobbyists, or expert consultants to various advocates and entities embroiled in adversarial processes in law and government." Experts frequently engaged in litigation may develop more extreme claims in response to the requirements of the legal situation (Robbins 2001, p. 78). Collaborations between scholars and controversial religions, in which the scholars regard the groups as allies rather than foci of study, compromise the credibility of the research (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001, p. 46). Undisclosed financial arrangements further undermine the credibility of research findings (Beit-Hallahmi, 2001, p. 49; Zablocki, 1997, pp. 115–116).

In addition to possible compromises of objectivity regarding controversial issues, Cole

(2001b, p. 56) argued that, without a universally accepted core of paradigms, political and social goals often are more important than cognitive goals. In addition to career interests, researchers in the social sciences often have a personal, as opposed to intellectual, stake in the content of their research (Cole, 2001b, p. 55). As applied to the study of controversial religions, social scientific researchers (or their families or friends) either may have been or are members of some of these groups. Moreover, they may have developed images as representatives of particular positions on controversial issues through public sociological stances in the media. Polarization, therefore, among researchers and the correlative political and social goals of the scholars demonstrate that noncognitive criteria may be influential factors in the brainwashing theory debate.

In the remainder of this section, we consider the ability of the researchers involved in the debate to use reason and evidence to resolve disputes. According to Berger et al. (2005, p. 148), a community of scientists within a program is able to resolve disputes on rational grounds because the scientists share consensual standards of assessment. Therefore, we examine the underlying disagreements of the brainwashing debate to determine the extent to which the researchers adhere to consensual standards of assessment.

Central to the brainwashing debate is the disagreement over the scientific validity of the brainwashing concept. Some researchers argue that brainwashing is a scientifically valid concept (see Kent, 2000, p. 47; Singer & Addis, 1992; Zablocki, 1997, 1998). Other researchers regard brainwashing as an ideological weapon rather than a scientific concept (see Anthony, 2001, p. 289; Dawson, 1998, p. 103; Richardson & Kilbourne, 1983; Robbins, Anthony, & McCarthy, 1983, p. 322). Complicating this debate over the validity of the concept is confusion over whether debating parties are discussing brainwashing as a social psychological state among (presumably) heavily indoctrinated individuals or as a sociological program through which leaders attempt to create compliance and agreement with an imposed ideology. As David Bromley complained about

the brainwashing debates, it was "unclear whether 'brainwashing' refers to the totalistic structure of the organization, the process through which various elements of that structure operate, the intent of actors implementing those elements, the impact or state that is created by the structure/process, or some combination of the foregoing" (Bromley, 1998a, p. 256). In essence, brainwashing may exist on social levels as programs or operative structures within groups and organizations, but (at least as permanent transformations) they may fail on individual levels to indoctrinate according to group or organizational leaders' intentions (Somit, 1968, p. 142). Scholars, therefore, have to specify to which aspect of brainwashing they are referring.

Whether researchers assume their discussions about brainwashing to be on the social psychological level or the sociological level has important implications for their scientific testing. According to Karl Popper (1963, p. 256),

> A system is to be considered as scientific only if it makes assertions which may clash with observations; and a system is, in fact tested by attempts to produce such clashes, that is to say by attempts to refute it.

Generally, researchers agree that falsifiability differentiates scientific concepts from pseudoscientific concepts (see Anthony, 2001, p. 274; Popper, 1959, pp. 34, 40–42; 1963, pp. 33–39; Zablocki, 2001, p. 193; see also Kuhn, 2012, pp. 145–146 [on verification-falsification]). Varying interpretations, however, of what qualifies as falsifiability, and to what extent brainwashing theories involve either psychologically or sociologically unfalsifiable criteria, contribute to the disagreement over the scientific validity of the brainwashing concept.

Brainwashing and Free Will

At some point, all types of brainwashing discussions make assumptions about people's free will and their agency to make decisions. Not surprisingly, the issue of free will and its implications for empirical evaluation figure prominently in the disagreement over the

scientific validity of brainwashing theories. Many (but not all) researchers agree that free will is a philosophical assumption rather than an empirical concept (see Barker, 1984, p. 281, n. 45; Robbins & Anthony, 1980, p. 67; Zablocki, 1997, p. 102), even as some social psychologists are in fact studying aspects of it scientifically (for example, Baumeister & Moore, 2014; Crone & Levy, 2018). Researchers disagree, however, on whether brainwashing theories concern notions of free will.

Some critics of brainwashing theories argue that brainwashing theories assert the loss of the alleged brainwashing victim's free will and therefore involve unfalsifiable criteria (see Anthony, 2001, pp. 222, 262; Robbins, Anthony, & McCarthy, 1983, p. 323). As far back as 1980, for example, Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony argued along these lines:

> When brainwashing, mind control, or coercive persuasion concepts are applied to social movements, certain assumptions are often made that are not really intrinsic to scholarly coercive persuasion models. One such assumption is the notion that "mind controlled" converts lack *free will* and personal autonomy. Free will is not really an empirical concept; it is more of a philosophical assumption that we assign to adult human behavior and withhold only in extreme cases (e.g., psychosis, senility). (Robbins & Anthony, 1980, pp. 67–68 [italics in original])

Conversely, some defenders of brainwashing theories argue that the overthrow of free will is not a component of brainwashing theories (see Zablocki, 1997, p. 102).

Interestingly, Zablocki, who defends the utility of the *brainwashing* term, concluded that "brainwashing has absolutely nothing to do with the overthrow of 'free will' or any other such mystical or non-scientific concept" (Zablocki, 2001, p. 204; see also pp. 170–171, 182).[10] The

qualification to this statement, which he added to it, however, is central to the sociological discipline: "People who have been brainwashed are 'not free' only in the sense that all of us, hemmed in on all sides as we are by social and cultural constraints, are not free" (Zablocki, 2001, p. 204). We return to this insight shortly.

Since these arguments about whether free will was only a philosophical (not a social scientific) concept appeared, however, at least two philosophical articles (one of which is in a law journal) actually mention brainwashing as a coercive practice that specifically limits if not eliminates free will. Some philosophers seem willing to recognize brainwashing's implications for free will even if some social scientists are unwilling to recognize the implications of free will within the brainwashing debate. Philosopher Ileana Marcoulesco (1929–2011) was definite about the impact of brainwashing on the philosophical free-will issue: "For the will to be free it is therefore necessary that there be no direct coercion, serious compulsion, or distortion of truth (for example, through propaganda or brainwashing) and also that alternative choice be at hand" (Marcoulesco, 1987/2005, p. 2). Similarly, in an article about free will and the law, Greg Simmons indicated that "attitudes generated by indoctrination, brainwashing or elaborate delusion . . . do not sit well with our notions of free will" (Simmons, 2017, p. 228).

Neglected, too, in the debate about free will and brainwashing is the fact that, more or less, the relation between the two now may be settled. Intentionally or unintentionally, a major figure in apparently settling this debate is Eileen Barker, whose 1984 study of conversions to the Unification Church found that the high failure rate of workshop attendees converting (and a subsequently high defection rate of the subsequent converts) refuted a simplistic interpretation about brainwashing in relation to the converts (Barker, 1984, p. 147). Moreover, she felt that the brainwashing term lacked

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[10] Zablocki's (1997; 2001) argument that brainwashing theories do not involve notions of free will refers to brainwashing theories in

the scientific literature. Zablocki (2001, p. 170) acknowledged that the free will of alleged brainwashing victims is a significant factor in legal cases concerning brainwashing.

precision,[11] and that critics of groups used it when they disapproved of a belief system to which people had converted (Barker, 1984, p. 135; see Barker, 2003, p. 288). Some years later, however, she offered observations about social control and restraint that are central to an understanding of free will within a sociological perspective.

In her 2002 presidential address to the Association for the Sociology of Religion (and published the following year), Barker reminded her audience that "the natural sciences describe laws that clearly impose well-nigh insuperable limits on our freedom" (Barker, 2003, p. 291). Specifically, within the social sciences (particularly sociology), "freedom and control" were concepts

> that lie at the very heart of the sociological enterprise. [Karl] Marx, [Émile] Durkheim, [Max] Weber, [Georg] Simmel, and [George Herbert] Mead . . . were all concerned with the ways in which individuals are, variously, enabled and restrained by the structures and cultures within which they find themselves and how they create, conserve, change and negotiate those structures and cultures. (Barker, 2003, pp. 286–287)

Likewise, in a 2005 presentation (published in 2006) at a Finnish conference, Barker returned to the question of free will, this time observing that

> the whole exercise of sociology assumes that, to a greater or lesser extent, we are all affected by the social situation in which we find ourselves. . . . The problem is not usually to declare either that a person is totally free of society or

that (s)he is totally constrained by it, but to assess the degree to which the position of each is negotiable as part of an on-going process of interaction that affects both the individual and the social environment. (Barker, 2006, pp. 11–12)

A central exercise of sociology, therefore, is to identify and analyze the degrees of constraint and negotiation strategies that people use in organizational and interpersonal settings.

Some of those constraints can be quite severe, as Barker realized after interviewing a convicted terrorist who had been groomed to be a suicide bomber. Based upon those interviews, Barker concluded "that it was a series of social variables that had the effect of controlling her mind to what, it could be argued, was an *almost* irresistible and irreversible degree" (Barker, 2013, p. 44 [italics in original]; see Dubrow-Marshall, 2010). Barker's conclusion seems to have been that the convicted terrorist had lost almost all of her free will through social processes that others would call *brainwashing*.

Moreover, similar social processes probably take place with some "members of closed communities" (Barker, 2013, p. 44). Again, Barker revealed,

> I have repeatedly been struck by how they have insisted that they now felt freer than they had before joining what may seem to others to be an authoritarian group severely restricting the freedom of its members. On the other hand, I have observed groups which proclaim that they embrace total freedom and that everyone can do just whatever they choose when, in fact, these "free souls" may be perceived to be quite severely constrained in a number of ways. (Barker, 2013, p. 45)

Social scientists who have studied people in controversial groups variously called *sects, cults*, or *new religious movements* have witnessed the same contradiction that Barker did between members' own views about free will and choice versus the researchers' outside perceptions of the (often) severe restrictions under which they live.

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[11] Barker stated that, often, people use *brainwashing* interchangeably with terms such as "*menticide, mind-control, thought reform, coercion, indoctrination, conditioning, conversion, persuasion, socialization, re-education, influence* or simply *changing one's mind*" (Barker, 1984, p. 135 [italics added]). Singer with Lalich (1995, p. 53) included *brainwashing* amidst "Terms Used to Identify Thought Reform." The other terms were *thought struggle; thought reform; debility, dependency*, and *dread*; *coercive persuasion; mind control; systematic manipulation of psychological and social influence; coordinated programs of coercive influence and behavioral control;* and *exploitative persuasion*.

Among the social scientists who have had similar perspectives as did Barker about the vast differences between members' beliefs in their free will versus outsiders' conclusions about their severe constraints is social psychologist Alexandra Stein, who spent years in a political cult (which she simply calls *The O*). Combining her own experiences with research, Stein concluded that

> Brainwashing takes place within a wide variety of social situations. It occurs in cults. . . , in cultic terrorist organizations where political violence is an organizing principle, in totalitarian movements and in totalitarian states. . . . On the other end of the spectrum, brainwashing can occur in very small or even one-on-one cults . . . . (Stein, 2017, p. 6)

In these contexts, Stein specifically rejected notions that members exerted their own free wills in the beliefs that they held and the actions that they committed (see Stein, 2017, pp. 6; 146, n. iv).

On a more theoretical level, sociologist Janja Lalich (who also had spent years in a different political cult, the Democratic Workers Party) developed a perspective about imposed restrictions in high-demand groups that she called *bounded choice*, which involved "a narrow realm of constraint and control, dedication and duty," in which members operated (Lalich, 2004, p. 15). Under conditions of bounded choice, "free will has not been taken away, but it has been restricted and distorted. The individual cult member acts and is responsible for his or her actions—but these actions must be recognized as occurring in a specific context" (Lalich, 2004, p. 260). Many of these contexts involved "brainwashing," which "is the result of a series of intense social-psychological influences aimed at behavior modification. It is a complex, multilayered, and time-consuming process. Typically, it is not used during the introduction and recruitment stages of cult contact" (Lalich, 2004, p. 6).

Autobiography, Topic Choice, and Agency

For sociological critics such as Stephen Cole, the autobiographical elements behind Stein's

and Lalich's selection of brainwashing as a research question reflects a problem for sociology. A similar problem also would exist regarding the autobiographical backgrounds of two of the major critics of brainwashing, Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, who had been in an alternative religious movement (Anthony & Robbins, 1974, p. 482),[12] and which

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[12] In an article that Anthony and Robbins published on the Meher Baba movement, the two researchers revealed that

> it should be noted that both researchers are, in varying degrees "in" the movement which they endeavored to study. Both researchers are "involved" with the Meher Baba movement, and have been personally "interested" in the thought of Meher Baba for several years prior to embarking on the present study. Of the two researchers, Mr. Robbins has the more "academic" orientation, with a tendency toward reductionistic explanations. Mr. Anthony, on the other hand, is a committed devotee with a penchant for explanations based on the perspective of Meher Baba himself. (Anthony & Robbins, 1974, p. 482)

Anthony's "penchant for explanations based on the perspective of Meher Baba himself" was based at least in part upon supposedly mystical experiences that he had involving Meher Baba.

Before Meher Baba's death on January 31, 1969 (see Anthony, 1982, p. 9), Anthony visited the Meher Baba Center in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. While there, Anthony went into a cabin in which Meher Baba had held private interviews, and reported having an experience of the spiritual teacher coming into the cabin and talking to him about his quest to "regain transcendence, and how it related to various social concerns" (Anthony, 1982, p. 8; see also p. 7). He felt "an uprush of consciousness" when he believed that Meher Baba said to him, "'I'm not outside of you; I'm inside of you'" (Meher Baba, reputedly quoted in Anthony, 1982, p. 8). Anthony reported to have experienced a "transformed consciousness," and "was swept away into a feeling of love and reverence" (Anthony, 1982, p. 8).

Then in 1969, while walking out of Meher Baba's tomb in Meherabad, India, Anthony indicated that he "fell to the ground in a very intense state of consciousness." In that state, he reflected later that he felt "a sort of divine wind," "a sense of omnipotence and benevolence," and "of being capable of blowing any obstacles away" (Anthony, 1982, p. 10). Anthony indicated that his "own experiences in relation to Meher Baba have been relatively private, and not socially created, so I've never thought of it [*sic*] as something that could be explained on the basis of brainwashing or something like it, or even on the basis of various kinds of sociological conversion theories" (Anthony, 1982, p. 20).

Later, at a conference, he heard an anticult lawyer report on winning a case "concerning somebody who had been kidnapped and deprogrammed because the person had dropped out of medical school, and spent his time working as a janitor and meditating under the influence of involvement in a new religious movement. That served as evidence in a court of law that this young person had been brainwashed by a cult into a mentally unbalanced state" (Anthony, 1982, pp. 12–13). Anthony realized that he had done something similar, having "dropped out of graduate school shortly after my first contact with Meher Baba and spent a year writing mystical poetry and supporting myself working as a clerk in a bookstore" (Anthony, 1982, p. 13). He also knew of a Meher Baba devotee whose Christian fundamentalist parents had hired a "well-known deprogrammer" to "return her to their own more restricted way of seeing the world" (Anthony, 1982, p. 13). About these

may have influenced their position that new religions did not brainwash. From Cole's perspective:

> Unlike physicists, sociologists study phenomena which they personally participate in—not as sociologists but as people. This means that the choice of topics and decisions made in the course of doing research are more likely for sociologists than for physicists to be influenced by non-cognitive concerns. My assumption is that research will advance and accumulate most rapidly when cognitive criteria are the most significant influence on the decisions made by scientists (Cole, 2001b: 49).

The influence of autobiographical experiences increases the likelihood of introducing "non-scientific values" into research, thereby reducing "the chances that the results of the research will be important in answering any significant theoretical questions . . . [that] may have any theoretical significance given the current state of the discipline" (Cole, 2001b, p. 51).

Although it is true that some of the current players within the brainwashing debate have had firsthand experiences with controversial religions or other high-demand ideologies, it by no means is the case that all researchers on brainwashing have had such experiences. Indeed, the foundational studies about brainwashing and thought reform from the 1950s and 1960s (including J. A. C. Brown, Robert J. Lifton, William Sargant, Edgar H. Schein, Margaret Singer, Albert Somit, and Louis Jocelyn West) involved researchers who

had no particular involvement with such groups. Furthermore, one cannot assume that autobiographical experiences deflect attention away from what should be central sociological questions. Experiences of systematic, coercive indoctrination programs *may lead* to insights about the sociology of free-will restrictions, which—if it were not for a clash with another sociological concept—might be identified as a core sociological concept.

Perhaps what keeps the reality of free-will restrictions from serving as a foundational sociological concept is the related debate within the discipline over agency, which (in simple terms) involves people's ability to make decisions for themselves and act accordingly. Sociologist David Bromley, for example, even proposed reformulating the issue of free will using the more empirically measurable concepts around structure/agency (see Bromley 1998a, pp. 258–261). His proffering of agency (broadly meant as "the capacity for willed [voluntary] action" [Scott & Marshall, 2005, p. 9]) as a sociologically measurable concept took place in the same year (1998) that an important article about the topic appeared in a leading sociological journal (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).[13]

Sociologists Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische indicated that "agency itself remains a dimension that is present in (but conceptually distinct from) all empirical instances of human action; hence there are no concrete agents, but only actors who engage agentically with their structuring environments" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 1004). Their analysis of agency, therefore, primarily assumed people acting in more or less open societies in which actors can: have "selective reactivation . . . of past patterns of thought and action" (called *iteration* [Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971); have the ability to imaginatively generate

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cases (and based upon his interpretations of his own experiences), Anthony wondered, "how can we distinguish between socially unconventional behavior that is determined by the inappropriate influence of an illegitimate civil religious cult on the one hand, and that associated with authentic mystical awakening on the other?" (Anthony, 1982, p. 13). He concluded, "I think the constitutional protection of freedom of religion should be pretty nearly absolute" (Anthony, 1982, p. 13). It seems, therefore, that Anthony rejected a brainwashing interpretation for his own involvement with Meher Baba, and extended that rejection as an explanation for anyone's intense involvement in a controversial religion. Perhaps worth noting is that Anthony reproduced the essay in which he discussed his reputed mystical experiences in a book that he coedited that was published by a Unification Church publisher, Paragon House (Anthony, Ecker, & Wilber [Eds.], 1987; see Streitfeld, 1993).

[13] Emirbayer and Mische's definition of agency is as follows: "the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970 [italics in original]).

"future trajectories of action" (called *projectivity* [Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971]); and make "practical-evaluative" judgements "among alternative possible trajectories of action" (called *practical-evaluative* [Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971]). Clearly, however, each of these elements would be severely curtailed in group or state brainwashing programs, and the curtailment would have dramatic implications for people in them. Moreover, the authors realized that their "relational" position about interaction needed adjustment before it was applicable to "corporate actors such as firms, states, or other organizational entities" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 974). These entities "cannot easily be accommodated within the terms of such a framework unless they are themselves given theoretical status equivalent to that of natural persons or selves" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 974, n. 9).

Asserting the centrality of agency, therefore, would require considerable adjustment before it would be applicable to organizationally or state-run brainwashing programs. Preliminary discussions of agentic resistance to "total-institution"[14] programs have taken place (Flam, 1993: Scott, S., 2010, pp. 214–217; 2011, pp. 5, 149, 160, 245), and sociologist Erving Goffman identified a few of them in his famous 1961 study (Goffman, 1961, pp. 54, 63). He actually mentioned "brainwashing camps," which "offer the inmate an opportunity to live up to a model of conduct that is at once ideal and staff-sponsored—a model felt by its advocates to be in the best interests of the very persons to whom it is applied" (Goffman, 1961, p. 64). He did not, however, offer any examples of agentic resistance to the camps.

Apostate Accounts

Another important and related disagreement in the debate concerns supporting evidence, namely the use of former-member (apostate)

accounts. A primary source of disagreement is the veracity of former-member accounts, and thereby the use of former-member accounts as empirical evidence for brainwashing. Some researchers regard former members as valuable sources of information (Carter 1998; Kent & Swanson, 2017; Zablocki, 1997, 1998). Former members are valuable in that they may possess both insider knowledge and outsider detachment (Carter, 1998, p. 228). Other researchers, however, contend that apostates construct narratives as a means of legitimating social control measures against the groups in which they were members (Bromley, 1998b, pp. 19, 23–24, 36–37; Richardson, 1998, pp. 172–173; Wright, 1998, p. 97). Furthermore, former members attempting to reenter mainstream institutions may embrace brainwashing claims to evade responsibility for their involvement in controversial religions (Anthony, 2001, p. 286; Dawson, 2001, p. 387). Researchers who reject the validity of apostate accounts tend to rely on the statements of leaders and current members (Lalich, 2001, p. 140).

Apostasy may refer to general religious leave-taking or oppositional leave-taking (Bromley, 1998b, p. 35). Researchers who reject apostate accounts tend to emphasize apostates as oppositional leave-takers. For example, sociologist David Bromley (1998b, p. 36) defined the apostate role as

> . . . one that occurs in a highly polarized situation in which an organization member undertakes a total change of loyalties by allying with one or more elements of an oppositional coalition without the consent or control of the organization.

Bromley (1998b, p. 37) further raised concern over the credibility of apostate narratives:

> Given the polarized situation and power imbalance, there is considerable pressure on individuals exiting in [s]ubversive organizations to negotiate a narrative with the oppositional coalition that offers an acceptable explanation for participation in the organization and for now once again reversing loyalties.

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[14] The classic definition of total institutions comes from Erving Goffman: "a total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (Goffman, 1961, p. xiii).

Bromley's emphasis on the oppositional role of apostates undermines the reliability of apostate accounts. Sociologist Lewis Carter (1998, p. 227), however, argued that defining apostates solely as oppositional leave-takers is problematic because it leads researchers to dismiss the potential value of moderate former members.

The findings from Zablocki's (1996) study, which examined apostate accounts in relation to believer accounts, provide support for the reliability and validity of apostate accounts. The study involved a sample of 281 members of new religious communities, divided into a subsample of 176 believers and 105 apostates, and a control group consisting of 109 members of nonreligious communes (Zablocki, 1996, p. 14). Zablocki (1996, p. 15) concluded that "not only are apostate responses no less consistent than believer responses, but they are also no less consistent than those of people with no involvement at all with NRMs."

Despite the evidence supporting the credibility of former-member accounts, the issue remains contentious. Researchers who use the accounts of former members risk "being accused of being an anticult-movement sympathizer, not getting published in certain academic journals, not being accepted as a conference participant, [or] being pressured to conform" (Lalich, 2001, p. 140). Furthermore, researchers who use information from former members receive criticism for committing an alleged methodological error (Kent & Swanson, 2017, p. 15). The academics who criticize their colleagues for using information from former members tend to formulate their critiques solely on the basis of the alleged methodological error as opposed to evaluating the content of the research (Kent & Swanson 2017, p. 15).

The nature of the disagreements within the brainwashing-theory debate prevents the researchers from resolving disputes empirically. Berger et al. (2005, p. 148) argued that researchers within a theoretical research program resolve disputes using reason and evidence:

> Theoretical research programs cannot guarantee discipline-wide consensus in

the interpretation of evidence, but because any given program is at the same time a network of investigators who share consensual standards of assessment, it is possible to resolve such disputes within programs; there are in fact many disputes; they are in fact resolved; and the grounds on which they are resolved are rational, in the sense that they appeal to argument and evidence, not politics or ideology.

The disagreements within the brainwashing theory debate, however, concern theoretical concepts and principles, as well as substantive and methodological directives. Given the disagreement over methodological directives, researchers within the debate lack a set of consensual information-gathering and information-processing techniques by which to determine the empirical adequacy of the brainwashing concept. Therefore, a fundamental issue of the debate is the researchers' inability to agree on the "doability" of the problem. Furthermore, the lack of consensual standards of assessment prevents the researchers from resolving disputes using evidence and reason.

Implications for Theory Growth

This section examines the implications for theory growth within the brainwashing debate, given the lack of consensual standards of assessment. Without consensual standards of assessment, noncognitive factors prevent researchers from resolving theoretical conflicts (Cole, 2001b, pp. 53–54); see Berger et al., 2005, p. 148). Consequently, little or no theory growth occurs. Therefore, we examine sociologist Stephen Kent's application of the brainwashing concept to Scientology's Rehabilitation Project Force (RPF) and sociologist Lorne Dawson's corresponding critique to determine the extent to which noncognitive factors influence how researchers respond to new evidence that may contradict existing views.

Kent's application of the brainwashing concept to Scientology's RPF demonstrates Wagner and Berger's (1985) "theory proliferation." *Theory proliferation* is a type of relationship between theories in which "ideas from one theory are

used to generate a theory concerned with a new or different sociological problem or data base" (Wagner & Berger, 1985, p. 707). The two theories are similar in structure in that the new theory modifies the concepts and theoretical principles of the original theory. The new theory, however, introduces new and auxiliary concepts and principles to account for the distinct problems of the new domain. Wagner and Berger (1985, pp. 707–708) identified theory proliferation as an example of theory growth in that the new theory expanded the range of application of the original theory. Kent (2001b, p. 401) expanded the range of application of the existing brainwashing theory from being a means of converting members into the new domain of retaining members. Furthermore, Kent refined the previous definition of brainwashing to establish a more rigorous set of criteria required for the application of the concept. In addition to the existing criteria of forcible confinement and physical coercion, Kent (2001a, p. 350) identified social degradations and maltreatment, intense study of ideology, forced confessions, and personal "success" stories as additional criteria for identifying brainwashing programs.

In disciplines without universally accepted paradigms, a new theory that contradicts existing values, regardless of how well it fits the data, is unlikely to gain acceptance within the discipline because political or social goals often are more important than cognitive goals (Cole, 2001b, pp. 55–56). Kent's research introduced new evidence that challenged existing conceptions of brainwashing. Consequently, Dawson's critique demonstrates opposition to the development of a new theory that contradicts existing values. Furthermore, given the lack of consensual standards with which to resolve theoretical conflict, Dawson formulated his critique on the basis of politics and ideology as opposed to reason and evidence.

In "Balance and Fairness in the Study of Alternative Religions," Thomas Robbins (2001, p. 87) argued that "too often the allegations of bias and expressive commitment serve as a glib substitute for a careful critique of a study which has produced unwelcome conclusions." Robbins's statement applies to Dawson's critique in that Dawson substituted allegations of prejudice for a careful analysis of Kent's work. As has happened in previous sociological debates (Best, 2003, p. 3), Dawson resorted to accusations that Kent's political motivations resulted in compromised research. For example, Dawson (2001, p. 379) argued that Kent's "efforts are designed to encourage and facilitate the introduction of new legal sanctions and restrictions on minority religions in North America and elsewhere (i.e., in Europe, most especially Germany)." Dawson (2001, p. 380) further argued that ". . . the methodological inadequacies detected are indicative of a prejudice inappropriate to the practice of the social sciences (given the consensus on maintaining at least the regulative ideal of objectivity and value-neutrality)."

Thus, Dawson attempted to dismiss a competing theory on the basis of politics and ideology as opposed to reason and evidence.

Dawson argued that, given Kent's methodological inadequacies, "there is considerable reason for treating his conclusions with great caution, if not outright scepticism." Dawson's critique, however, contains several inconsistencies and flaws that undermine his attempt to discredit Kent. The flaws in Dawson's critique demonstrate that he failed to conduct a careful analysis of Kent's work. For example, Dawson (2001, p. 289) argued that "Kent shows little circumspection in his use of apostate accounts, and he makes no effort at triangulation at all." Kent (2001b, p. 405), however, proved that his RPF research qualified as a multiple triangulated study:

> I obtained data from nine different types of sources. First, information provided by former members came from court decisions, legal affidavits (many sworn under oath), in-person and telephone interviews, Internet postings, books about Scientology, magazine accounts, and newspaper accounts. Second, the position of Scientology towards its RPF program came from the organization's publications and internal documents. Third, . . . I also utilized information from one current Scientologist.

In addition, Dawson's (2001, p. 387) primary argument against the validity of apostate accounts concerned the influence that deprogramming and exit counseling have on apostates' brainwashing claims and their negative posture toward the former group. Kent (2001b, p. 408) indicated, however, that none of the former members he interviewed had undergone deprogramming or exit counselling.

Furthermore, in focusing on the supposed methodological inadequacies rather than assessing the evidence, Dawson avoided evaluating the content of Kent's theory. Dawson argued that, given the methodological issues, he could not verify Kent's evidence; therefore,

> . . . little attempt will be made to question directly the veracity of the evidence reported by Kent, derived largely from media reports, court documents, religious texts, and organizational memoranda, and interviews with ex-members done by Kent. . . . The specific factual claims Kent makes may or may not be true. I do not have access to the materials he uses in order to make my own assessment. But in some respects *it is not relevant whether or not the facts are true* (Dawson, 2001, p. 380; emphasis added).

Thus, Dawson's critique reflects the Kuhn-Cole argument that, without consensual standards of assessment, conflicts concern foundation issues rather than the theory.

Kent's theory proliferation demonstrates that theory growth is possible. Dawson's critique, however, indicates that a lack of consensual standards of assessment, in combination with noncognitive factors, constrains theory growth. According to Cole (2001b, p. 39), "a field is making progress if it has a core and is developing new knowledge which is being added to the core." Analysis of the brainwashing-theory debate reveals that the researchers involved in it lack consensual cognitive standards of assessment with which to resolve theoretical problems.

Noncognitive factors, which have polarized the researchers into opposing factions, influence how the researchers respond to theoretical conflict. Thus, it is unlikely that the researchers will accept the development of new and possibly contradictory knowledge. Furthermore, the grounds on which the researchers dismiss new knowledge are political and ideological rather than scientific. Zablocki (1997, p. 106–107) referred to the dismissal of brainwashing as "blacklisting," in that the dominant faction of researchers seeks to "defame, ridicule, or ignore the theory and to marginalize its adherents," as opposed to refuting the theory on an empirical basis. Zablocki (1997, p. 97) concluded that "the majority camp (debunkers of the brainwashing conjecture) has declared victory and demanded premature closure to the scientific debate."

For example, Anthony and Robbins (2004, p. 285) contend that all brainwashing formulations are essentially modifications of the same core brainwashing theory, which "has been conclusively disconfirmed in all of the realms in which it has been scientifically evaluated." The dismissal of brainwashing without scientific refutation minimizes the valuable potential of further research. In contrast to this blanket dismissal, Kent (2008, p. 99) demonstrated that brainwashing remains applicable "in a wide variety of legal, political, and social contexts." Articles supporting brainwashing, however, appear in marginalized journals, as opposed to the leading journals concerning the sociology of religion (Zablocki, 2001, pp. 168–169).

Conclusion

In response to the Kuhn-Cole argument that sociological theory cannot progress without highly developed paradigms, Berger et al. (2005) argued that theoretical research programs are sufficient for theoretical progress. Berger et al. (2005) further argued that sociology already has many programs, and theory growth is occurring at the level of theoretical research programs. Sociology, however, is a diverse and divided field, encompassing several very different orienting strategies (Szmatka & Mazur, 1996, p. 267). Consequently, researchers disagree over methodological directives. Conflict between communities of researchers,

whose members do not share consensual standards of assessment, constrains the theory growth that occurs within theoretical research programs. Thus, the current structure of sociology limits theory growth beyond the level of theoretical research programs. To further advance theory growth, sociology needs to develop methods of engagement, in which competing theoretical research programs can resolve conflicts on the basis of reason and evidence.

Specifically regarding the brainwashing issue, researchers, while realizing the intimate relationship among the levels, must specify to which level of analysis they are applying the term. Most likely, their application will be to a program (either organizational or individual, as may be the case of some forms of family violence [see Boulette & Andersen, 1986]), or to a social psychological effect. Clarity about the level of analysis will facilitate the scientific discussion of the concept. Therefore, measuring the levels of restriction that programs are designed to achieve, and measuring the "success" of such programs on the social psychological lives of individuals, may become possible (at least for some brainwashing efforts). So perhaps at some time in the near future, social scientists will be able to use agreed-upon evidence to resolve the brainwashing debate.

Research on paradigmatic or core issues in the natural sciences insulates scientists from degrees of social pressure, which social scientists experience "to defend their choice of a research problem . . . in terms of the social importance of achieving a solution" to a societal problem (Kuhn, 2012, p. 164). Even "the research enterprise" in the natural sciences, however, "does from time to time prove useful, open up new territory, display, order, and test long-accepted belief" (Kuhn, 2012, p. 38). If framed and conducted with attention paid to theoretical implications along with social relevance, the research enterprise in the social sciences can be, simultaneously, scientifically enriching and socially relevant. Such may be the case with empirically designed sociological studies of brainwashing, a term whose use already has real consequences. In recent years, brainwashing charges have appeared against (and denied by)

the Chinese government concerning camps to reeducate Falun Gong members (McDonald, 2004); and now credible allegations exist that the government has placed at least 1,000,000 Chinese (Islamic) Uyghurs in reeducation programs (Zenz, 2018, p. 22; see Denyer, 2018, and Vanderklippe, 2018). In addition, escapees from North Korea continue to describe their indoctrination in that country as brainwashing (Il, as told to Lasley, 2014; Leistedt, 2013, p. 23; Loza, 2007, p. 151; Walker, 2014) as do some people who interpret forms of Islamic terrorist training (Omar & Smith, 2017; Sullivan, 2018; also see Argo, 2006, p. 2; Nuraniyah, 2018, p. 2). The term *brainwashing* appears in the current (5th) edition of psychiatry's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* within "Other Specified Dissociative Disorder" (APA, 2013, p. 306),[15] and going through a process of being brainwashed likely has neurological implications (Taylor, 2004).[16]

Obviously, the brainwashing concept has utility, even if a consensus forms around using a different term (such as *systematic, coercive indoctrination*). Whatever the case may be, social scientists would benefit from refining the meaning of the concept and then designing measurement tests of its validity and reliability within sociology, the social sciences, and elsewhere.

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[15] In the second subcategory within "Other Specified Disorder," the *DSM* states the following: "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" (APA, 2013, p. 306).

[16] Taylor acknowledges, "direct modern scientific evidence of what happens to brains during brainwashing is non-existent: ethical objections forbid such research from taking place" (Taylor, 2004, p. x). However, she identified brain functions that likely are impacted from brainwashing techniques. For example, she identified "emotions" as "one of the most potent tools in a brainwasher's armoury" (Taylor, 2004, p. 147) and devoted a chapter to the likely neurological impact of brainwashing programs on emotions (Taylor, 2004, pp. 147–165). Likewise, she identified how the prefrontal cortex likely "implements the brain's ideology" created through brainwashing (Taylor, 2004, p. 185; see 167–186). She defined brainwashing as "a systematic processing of non-compliant human beings which, if successful, refashions their very identities" (Taylor, 2004, p. 9).

Acknowledgements

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