

# **Contemporary Uses of the Brainwashing Concept: 2000 to Mid- 2007**

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## **Abstract**

The brainwashing concept is sufficiently useful that it continues to appear in a wide variety of legal, political, and social contexts. This article identifies those contexts by summarizing its appearance in court cases, discussions about cults and former cult members, terrorists, and alleged victims of state repression between the years 2000 and mid-2007. In creating this summary, we discover that a physiologist has examined the biochemical aspects of persons going through brainwashing processes, and that (to varying degrees) some judges and others related to the judiciary have realized that people who have been through these processes have impaired judgment and often need special counseling. Most dramatically, a new brainwashing program may be operating in Communist China, a country whose political activities toward its own citizens in the late 1940s and 1950s spawned so much of the initial brainwashing research.

In relation to controversial religions, the brainwashing debate is particularly intense, probably because so much is at stake. For groups themselves, avoiding a 'spoiling designation' as organizations that at least *try* to brainwash their members is vital for their public images. Consequently, some groups have put out public relations statements dismissing the validity of the concept (for example, The Family, 1993; Foundation for Religious Freedom [Scientology], 2000:85-86), and they find support in the work of scholars who argue that the concept itself has no social scientific validity (for example, Aldridge, 2000, pp.

160-170; Anthony and Introvigne, 2006; Richardson, 1993). For several academics and scholars on both sides of the issue, professional reputations are at stake, which may explain why the debate over the concept has become acrimonious at times. For others in the academic, legal, and ex-member communities, however, 'brainwashing' is a concept with great utility because it applies to intense programs of indoctrination that various ideological groups impose upon members and/or potential members in efforts to obtain social-psychological compliance and adherence.

In this article, I expand the discussion about the utility and applicability of brainwashing by moving outside the comments of scholars (like myself) who have been involved in the social scientific debate and bring forward examples of how professionals and laypeople in the legal, political, financial, and 'ex-cult' communities use brainwashing to make sense out of their lives and events in them. In doing so, I introduce perspectives from people who are *not* entangled in the rancorous exchanges within the social sciences about brainwashing but who nevertheless use the concept. This article, therefore, proceeds inductively, as I gather, organize, and present information about the use of brainwashing in descriptions that people formulate about their own lives and the lives of others.

Methodologically, the data-gathering process that I use involves the examination of legal documents and various presentations in newspapers, magazines, and biographical and autobiographical accounts that mention brainwashing as possible explanations for intense, (almost always) detrimental personality reformulation programs that people seemed to have undergone. I obtained these sources in a variety of ways, which included database and Internet searches and an ongoing compilation that I began several years ago of print-media articles that use the brainwashing term. My choice to begin this analysis with materials in the year 2000 was an attempt to get beyond the raft of speculative articles about millenarianism and 'cults' prior to the beginning of the new century, and selection of late June 2007 as a cut-off date simply reflected that fact that I had to prepare my initial findings for a conference held around that period. I hope that, in the future, someone repeats a similar analysis for material that appears after mid-2007, especially

because the debate over 'brainwashing' is not likely to subside.

Through monitoring media stories, plus continuing to read about various alternative religions, I have amassed a collection of references that various academics, journalists, lawyers, other professionals, and former group members have made to brainwashing. For purposes of presentation I have divided these references into categories—ones that admittedly have some overlapping characteristics. These categories include New Religions/Cults; Teen Behavior Modification Programs; Terrorist Groups; Dysfunctional Corporate Culture; Interpersonal Violence; and Alleged Chinese Governmental Human Rights Violations Against Falun Gong.

### **'New Religions/Cults'**

#### **Aum Shinrikyo**

Japanese defense lawyers representing Aum Shinrikyo members on trial for their role in the 1995 Tokyo subway gas attacks used a brainwashing defense in an effort to save their clients' lives. According to *The Japan Times*:

Mind control at the hands of Aum Shinrikyo founder Shoko Asahara was a key defense argument for many of the 11 cultists sentenced to death and the six others handed life prison terms for carrying out Aum's heinous crimes—an argument that had little if any effect.

As the convicted cultists pursue their appeals, including before the Supreme Court, their lawyers continue to seek leniency, claiming their clients were brainwashed by the guru and his teachings—a factor the courts have partially recognized.

In the case of Kiyohide Hayakawa, who was convicted of playing a role in the 1989 murders of Yokohama lawyer Tsutsumi Sakamoto and errant cultist Shuji Taguchi, the Tokyo District Court determined the accused was in "a state of absolute obedience to the guru, in which it was unthinkable to refuse his orders."

But Hayakawa was nonetheless sentenced to hang. The judge noted, "It is very common in organized crimes that a member of a lower rank blindly follows the orders of his senior, and that does not lessen his criminal responsibility" (Wijers-Hasegawa, 2004:1).

Subsequent court rulings boosted to thirteen the number of former Aum members sentenced to death, including Yoshihiro Inoue, who initially had received a life sentence for his involvement in the attack. A lower court had spared Inoue the death penalty, apparently having accepted his attorneys' argument that he had been brainwashed and had not been directly involved with releasing the gas. This court even allowed Inoue to receive counseling about his involvement in the group, during which time he had "reflected deeply on his deeds" (Wijers-Hasegawa, 2004:2). Presumably his repentance, combined with his indirect involvement, were sufficient grounds for the lower court to stop short of a death sentence. In late May 2004, however, the Tokyo High Court overturned the lower court decision by imposing the death penalty on him (*The New York Times*, 2004).

A journalist named Yoshifu Arita, who was following the Hayakawa trial, sharply criticized the court's failure to realize the importance of the 'brainwashing' techniques. He stated:

The court completely lacks the view that it is dealing with crimes committed by a cult.... Sentences are handed down under the same criteria as any other criminal offense, and punishments are based on the number of people killed in the crime involving the accused cultist. But the judges should have first realized that the crimes would never have happened if it had not been for Asahara.

Arita said society has wrongly perceived the cultists as part of a bizarre fringe group. They could have been anybody, he said, noting Asahara used brainwashing tactics that entailed the use of drugs.

In 'the initiation of Christ' ploy, Aum members had to drink a liquid containing LSD, and then were made to sit in solitary confinement with

a photo of the guru and listen to his recorded sermons for up to ten hours.

Because they did not know they had been drugged, they thought their hallucinations were the result of some religious miracle, thereby solidifying their dedication to the guru, Arita said (Wijers-Hasegawa, 2004:2).

The journalist's points are worth reiterating because we then can compare them with several American court rulings about people who had been brainwashed and manipulated by other cult leaders.

First, courts apparently recognized that brainwashing occurs as a real social-psychological phenomenon, and a lower court's permission to one defendant, Yoshihiro Inoue, to receive counseling about his Aum involvement would have saved his life (Wijers-Hasegawa, 2004:2) if a higher court had not overturned the ruling. (Later we will see examples involving American courts where defendants claiming to have been brainwashed obtained counseling, repented, and received reduced sentences.)

Second, Japanese courts' acknowledgement that defendants had been brainwashed did not mitigate their death sentences. (Soon we will see an American case in which a parole board also acknowledges brainwashing but continues to deny parole, probably because of the serious nature of the initial crimes.)

Third, the journalist's comments remind us that Asahara's indoctrination techniques used drugs—particularly LSD. Indeed, the respected terrorist expert working for the RAND Corporation, Bruce Hoffman, also wrote about Aum's administration of "drugs—including powerful hallucinogens and electroshock therapy—to 'brainwash' recalcitrant group members and make them more compliant" (Hoffman, 2006:122; see 124). Although in an article published in *Cultic Studies Review* I have mentioned the relatively under-examined role that substance abuse has played in the lives of many cult leaders and members (Kent, 2004:106-107), what occurred within Aum Shinrikyo harkens back to the CIA and United States army mind-altering LSD experiments conducted in the early to mid-1950s and early 1960s (Lee and Shlain, 1985:27-43; Schefflin and Opton, 1978:108-112,

137-144, 147).<sup>1</sup> The brainwashing explanation appears in another analysis of a former cult member of another group whose leader used drugs to break down and indoctrinate his followers. This analysis involves a study of the former follower of Charles Manson, Leslie Van Houten, written in 2001 by a Canadian criminology professor at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia.

### **The Manson Family**

Criminologist Karlene Faith is unequivocal about what happened to Van Houten: "She joined Manson's cult and she was brainwashed" (Faith, 2001:xviii). As part of the brainwashing process, Faith discussed Manson's use of LSD to manipulate Van Houten, summarizing an expert on the drug who testified at one of her trials that "Leslie surrendered herself to him through sequential processes mediated by LSD" (Faith, 2001:111). The professor concluded,

A powerful guru can take hold of the minds of his subjects while they are under the effects of LSD, and reinforce his authority over them in times when they are not under the drug's effects. This was surely the case with Charles Manson. (Faith, 2001:114)

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<sup>1</sup> The most extensive and diverse U.S. government research program involving the effects of LSD was MK-Ultra, begun by the CIA in April 1953 and continued into the 1960s. Research involving LSD apparently had six variants, all revolving around its possible use in warfare or covert operations. Various experiments and projects attempted to use LSD to disturb people's memories; facilitate "aberrant" behavior, the performance of which would discredit the unwitting actors; change people's sexual patterns (and presumably opening them up to blackmail or other compromises); facilitate interrogation; heighten suggestibility; and create dependence (presumably on the drug itself, thereby making them susceptible to compromise [Schefflin and Opton, 1978:147]). Clearly, Asahara's use of LSD to create a god-like illusion about himself among his followers is an example of using the drug to heighten suggestibility, although I have no indication that the CIA ever tried to create godly delusions. Charles Manson, however, did use LSD to create such delusions among his followers (see Faith, 2001: 34-35, 37, 69).

Important to note about the Van Houten case is that, apparently, her parole board finally acknowledged that Manson had brainwashed her, but it still did not use that acknowledgement in order to grant her release. In 2000, "After thirteen hearings, beginning with her first one in 1978, a board panel finally officially acknowledged that Leslie had indeed been the victim of cult brainwashing" (Faith, 2001:152). Still, however, the board denied her parole, perhaps because of the viciousness of her crimes and the continued opposition from the family of her victims (Faith, 2001:151-153). As is the case with former members of Aum Shinrikyo, the severity of the crimes that Van Houten committed seems to outweigh the official acknowledgement that she had been brainwashed when committing them.

### **Winnfred Wright**

An acknowledgement of brainwashing also took place in a 2003 California court case in which a man and two women were convicted for the malnourishment death of a nineteen-month-old child. Many of the twelve other children in the home suffered from malnourishment and rickets. The male head of the household was a vegan Rastafarian named Winnfred Wright, who fathered these children with the women under his control.

One article written about what it called this "cultlike" group that referred to itself as The Family indicated that various authorities and others who had contact it alleged "that Wright manipulated these women with drugs, sex, violence, and racial guilt" (Brown, 2002:2). I am unable to find out more about the alleged manipulation through drugs, but two of the women charged along with Wright, Deirdre Hart Wilson and Mary Campbell, asked for, and received, permission from the judge to "enter a treatment clinic for former cult members" (Klien, 2003:1). Prosecution and defense lawyers argued over whether the women had been brainwashed, with the defense attorney taking issue with the prosecution's "contention that Wilson was no more a victim of brainwashing than 'Patty Hearst, John Walker Lindh or the Manson women'" (Garretson, 2003:2). Ironically, some observers would contend that all three of those figures in fact *had* been brainwashed.

In any case, upon returning from a month at Wellspring (which is a rehabilitation facility in Ohio for former 'cult'

members), Wilson stated, "Mind control is a reality," and referred to herself as a "psychological amputee" as a result of physical, psychological and sexual abuse during her 15 years with Wright... (Garretson, 2003:1). It is unclear whether the judge factored in her brainwashing and subsequent counseling when he sentenced Wilson to seven years and four months for felony child abuse (Garretson, 2003:1), which was less than the eleven years and four months that she could have received. Likewise, Mary Campbell's ten-year sentence could have been four years longer. Wright's sentence, however, was for sixteen years (Garretson, 2003:2). While I cannot be certain whether the *judge* ever said that the women had been brainwashed, the fact that he allowed—over the prosecution's objections—two defendants to obtain treatment for their subjugation under Wright suggests that he suspected that they had been. Brainwashing, therefore, likely mitigated the women's sentences, but did not completely absolve them from guilt. If in fact brainwashing played this mitigating role in sentencing, then it is in line with recommendations that a lawyer and a psychiatrist made about the utility of the concept in light of issues raised thirty years ago in the Patricia Hearst trial (Lunde and Wilson, 1977:377).

### **Karen Robidoux and the Body**

In yet another 'cult' trial in the United States in February 2004, Karen Robidoux, who was the mother of an infant who died from starvation, had a jury clear her of second-degree murder while convicting her of misdemeanor assault and battery. Her husband, however, received a first-degree murder conviction for the child's death. Karen Robidoux's lawyer "had argued that [she] was brainwashed and tortured by her husband and other members of the group" (Associated Press, 2004:1). Like the women under Winnfred Wright's control, Robidoux went to a rehabilitation centre (in this case, Meadow Haven, in Massachusetts [Ellement, 2004:2]). Once again, it is impossible to know for certain whether her enrollment in a rehabilitation centre for ex-cult members had an impact on the jury's opinion of her, but the jury's foreman determined that "her intent was not to kill the baby" (foreman Robert Bartolome, quoted in Ellement, 2004:1).

## Jesus Christians

Brainwashing charges against another group, the Jesus Christians, appeared in the press after "Canada's largest organ transplant hospital has cancelled an operation that would have allowed a young Australian man to demonstrate his deep Christian faith by donating one of his kidneys to a desperately ill stranger in Toronto" (Boswell, 2007a:A1). According to the article, "More than half of the 30 members of the Jesus Christians—from Britain, Australia, Kenya, and the United States—have provided a kidney to recipients around the world..." (Boswell, 2007a:A9).

The potential donor was twenty-two-year-old Ash Falkingham, and officials at the Toronto General Hospital "postponed the transplant after Falkingham's mother, Kate Croft, raised alarms about her son's membership in the Jesus Christians and claimed that [the leader, David McKay] had coerced Falkingham to make the donation" (Boswell, 2007a:A9). The press labeled this alleged coercion "brainwashing." The expected recipient of the Falkingham's kidney, Sandi Sabloff, however, and potential donor Ash Falkingham himself, dismissed

the Crofts' brainwashing allegations.... 'By implication, they [i.e., hospital officials] are definitely hurting Ash, and the Jesus Christians, because they refuse to also list the REAL reason [for the cancellation],' [Ash] wrote. 'Which is they also call off operations if they think adverse publicity will bring criticism on them (in this case, from religious bigots).'

(quoted in Hartley, 2007)

Apparently Ash initially had received permission to proceed with the kidney donation after having passed a preliminary interview (conducted over the telephone) "with an executive committee from the hospital that included a psychiatrist, a social worker, and a bioethicist." The hospital then determined that he had tissue compatibility with the potential recipient (Sabloff). Ash even claimed that "he was sent for an evaluation with a forensic psychiatrist who specialized in the field of undue influence, or brainwashing," and subsequently "the hospital told me I was cleared of any suspicion of undue influence" (quoted in Hartley, 2007).

For ethical reasons involving patient confidentiality, however, the hospital would not say why it cancelled the surgery. Nor did the media articles provide any specific information about the alleged brainwashing that went on in the group. Meanwhile, Sabloff held out hope that Australian authorities might allow the transplant to go on in their country (Boswell, 2007b).

### **Lyndon LaRouche**

Among the more compelling recent accounts of brainwashing is that which appeared in a *Washington Post Magazine* article about Lyndon LaRouche, who leads a politically oriented group often called a political cult (Witt, 2004). Reporter April Witt documented LaRouche's frequent claim that "enemies, including American, Soviet, and British intelligence agencies, [were] sending brainwashed zombies to assassinate him" (Witt, 2004:37). Moreover, within the group during the 1970s,

Brainwashing hysteria quickly spread through the LaRouche organization, [former member Paul] Kacprzak says. He attended LaRouche meetings in the United States where there were 'people writhing on the floor saying, "I've been brainwashed, somebody deprogram me!"' (quoted in Witt, 2004:37).

The account of another former member, however, indicated that the LaRouche group itself might have been doing the brainwashing. Former member Michael Scott Winstead recounted the circumstances that led to his own departure from the movement:

One day a member of LaRouche's inner circle of advisors was giving a lecture when he touched upon a favorite topic in the movement—brainwashing. He mentioned a 1957 book on the subject, *Battle for the Mind*. Curious, Winstead tracked down the book at a library.

'Various types of belief can be implanted in people, after brain function has been sufficiently disturbed by accidentally or deliberately induced fear, anger or excitement,' the author, William Sargant,

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wrote. 'Of the results caused by such disturbances, the most common one is temporarily impaired judgment and heightened suggestibility' (quoted in Witt, 2004:39; see Sargant, 1957:145, 160-168).

Chinese communists 'spread their gospel,' the author noted, through psychological conditioning: inventing enemies, isolating trainees in special locations, keeping them exhausted by performing demeaning tasks and learning difficult new terminology, using informers to keep people tense and uncertain, and forcing them to sever ties with family and friends, even encouraging their recruits, as Hitler had, to denounce their parents.

'Winstead felt ill,' he says. 'I sat there and read exactly what I had been going through for the last six months,' he says. 'It [i.e., his involvement in the LaRouche group] definitely had worked on me quite a bit, more than I'd like to admit to myself then or now' (quoted in Witt, 2004:39).

Within days, Winstead left the group, and—as he did—he stuffed a report that he had written about (what he felt were) LaRouche's brainwashing techniques into the mailboxes of members (Witt, 2004:39).

### **Cults in General**

Among the most interesting and recent discussions of cults in general took place in a 2004 book written by a research physiologist at the University of Oxford, Dr. Kathleen Taylor, which is devoted entirely to brainwashing. While specialists in the area of cults would adjust a few of her facts—she seems to believe, for example, that the attack against Congressman Leo J. Ryan happened when his plane landed near Jonestown rather than when he was leaving (Taylor, 2004:32)—the study is important in part because Taylor came to the topic unencumbered by the rancorous debates within the social scientific scholarship on 'cults/new religions' (see Zablocki, 2001:159-171).

First, she uses the label 'cults' when describing groups that passionately, "fervently, and irreconcilably, believe their own descriptions" of reality (Taylor, 2004:37). Second, she realizes that "many of the most dangerous cults can be

described as totalitarian" (Taylor, 2004:43). Third, she realizes that "coercive techniques may be applied to keep members in the group" (Taylor, 2004:44), although not all groups need to use them. This statement certainly is in line with ones that Ben Zablocki and I have made about some groups using brainwashing techniques in efforts to retain members (Kent, 2001:367-368; Kent and Hall, 2000:75; Zablocki, 1998; 2001:174-177). Finally, while rejecting any notion that "a particular process called 'brainwashing' ... is distinct from ... other psychological processes" (Taylor, 2004:44), she nonetheless realizes the brainwashing term alerts us to the "dream of control" that dangerous cults and their leaders hold:

When the apocalypse comes, it is the cult which will survive and inherit the new dispensation; the rest of the world will be dead, or at best enslaved. In the here and now, the cult leader typically insists on increasingly severe control over his members' lives, often encouraging them to refer to him as God or God's representative on earth ....  
(Taylor, 2004:45)

Because cult leaders and members hold these grandiose visions, she concludes, "Brainwashing as control fantasy [by cult leaders] remains extremely relevant" as a concept (Taylor: 2004:45).

Much of the remainder of her study discusses how the extreme social psychological pressures that people undergo in brainwashing programs change the neurology and physiology of the brain. In doing so, Taylor has given the discussion about brainwashing grounding in medical science that complements and extends the social scientific discussions about the processes. Her definition of brainwashing, however, still assumes that targeted individuals must be in such a program unwillingly, which is a highly contentious assumption not shared by several others cited in this article. Regarding a wide range of research, she concludes, "the studies suggest that brainwashing, in its aspect as process, is best regarded as a collective noun for various, increasingly well-understood techniques of non-consensual mind change" (Taylor, 2004:23). While many might disagree with the implication that brainwashing always

takes place in nonconsensual settings, few researchers doubt that the particular techniques employed in brainwashing attempts simply are well-understood social-psychological phenomena.<sup>2</sup> Taylor reminds us, too, that the techniques also involve physiological alterations and reformulations within the brain.

### **Teen Behavior Modification Programs**

In the mid-1980s, Louisiana and Georgia officials developed facilities for teenage boys who had gotten in trouble with the law for various offences (Selcraig, 2000:67). Soon similar facilities appeared in other sections of the United States, and various camps and programs opened in other countries. Parents who were concerned, if not at times desperate, about their children's (real or imagined) behaviors sent their children to these programs, as did juvenile justice officials in many states. Criticisms arose, however, about the often brutal—and sometimes deadly—punishments that the 'inmates' suffered, and some of those brutal punishments led to charges that the teens were undergoing brainwashing programs.

For example, a parent, Karen Burnett, who withdrew her son from the Dundee Ranch Academy in Costa Rica, looked at what her son had been through and concluded,

'It's really a brainwashing technique. It's to keep them hungry, keep them stressed, break them down, emotionally, psychologically, get

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<sup>2</sup> I note, for example, that psychologist Yvonne Walsh dismissed use of the brainwashing term when discussing controls that some 'new religions' and 'modern cults' employed against individuals, some of whom subsequently entered therapy. She feared, for example, that 'brainwashing' conveyed the use of mystical and "bizarre" techniques of control that (if they were real) would place them beyond the realm of orthodox psychological intervention (Walsh, 2000:127). The techniques that cults and others use, however, are well known within social psychology (Walsh, 2001:126). On this point, of course, Taylor would agree, so it is unfortunate that Walsh rejected use of the brainwashing term based upon a misconception. Walsh also insisted that brainwashing implies an "apparent physical threat" (Walsh, 2001:126), which Taylor may also have assumed but which others dispute (Lifton, 1957:6; Zablocki, 1997:99).

them to admit to their crimes, then build them back up. And in the building back up process ... you rebuild what you want.' (quoted in Smyth, 2003)

Likewise, psychologist Larry Brendtro, president of a nonprofit and advocacy group for troubled children called Reclaiming Youth International, looked at the accounts of the procedures that sixteen-year-old Katherine McNamara experienced in a Mexican program called Harmony Harbor and concluded:

'The methods which she describes are substantially the same used to brainwash prisoners of war: Isolate individuals from anything familiar, strip them of their personal identity, push them psychologically and physically to the point of exhaustion, make them submit to all-powerful adult authorities, and use pure ridicule and punishment to enforce authority' (quoted in Arriola, 2001:3).<sup>3</sup>

Many of the accounts from teens who had been in programs in Oregon, Missouri, Italy, and Mexico involved "psychological rapes, physical abuses, [and] sleep and food deprivation ..." (Arriola, 2001:1). Despite, if not because of, these probable abuses, attendance in these programs seems not to deter juvenile crime, with one study finding "that nearly three out of every four children who pass through the camps are back in detention within a year" (Selcraig, 2000:67).

In 2005, eighteen plaintiffs filed suit against at least a dozen defendants who either owned or worked at a Christian "boot-camp" facility for troubled teens in Mississippi. The facility—formerly known as Bethel Children's Home, then Bethel Boys

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<sup>3</sup> Worth noting, however, is that in February 2007, the owner of the former Dundee Ranch Academy, Narvin Lichfield, was acquitted of charges involving "coercion, holding minors against their will, and 'crimes of an international character' (violating a law based on international treaties, in this case, torture)...." While the three judges declared Lichfield innocent, they still "said they believe the students at Dundee were abused, but the evidence and testimony presented did not prove that Lichfield ordered the abuses" (Baxter-Neal, 2007).

Academy (with a girls' equivalent in another part of the state), and finally Eagle Point Christian Academy—had been under investigation several times previously (see Coalition Against Institutionalized Child Abuse, 2007). During one investigation in 1988, which led to the closure of the facility, state officials raided the facility amidst "charges of mental and physical abuse." Some of the children in the institution, however, "were loyal, many believed brainwashed, and wanted to stay" (Wade-Dixon, 2002). A court reached a settlement with the facility that was supposed to eliminate the abuse of children (by such actions as "allowing restroom and water breaks during exercise to forbidding the use of electrical devices for discipline" [Brown, 2003; see Chancery Court of George County, Mississippi, 2003]), but allegations of abuse continued.

Consequently, in 2005, numerous parents filed suit against Bethel Boys Academy and its staff, in which (among a litany of allegations) they assert that the facility brainwashed the defendants. The specific claim states:

35. Defendants routinely pressure cadets to remain at the Academy as staff. In some cases, pre-arranged marriages are carried out, with Defendant performing the marriage ceremony and both cadet and spouse remaining as Bethel Staff members. Such employees are given a pittance of pay, much less than minimum wage, and are expected to enforce all the demands of the Defendants against any cadet in their custody. The employment of such persons is made possible only by Defendants' brainwashing and routine deprivation of substantial age and intelligence appropriate education which might thereby render the cadet competent and confident to find employment in the outside world. (Struble et al v. Fountain, et al, 2005:para. 35)

I am unable to determine what the current status of this action is.

### **Terrorist Groups**

With the escalation of suicide bombing in numerous locations around the world, attention has turned to the indoctrination

and training that these bombers receive. Analysts sometimes use the brainwashing concept to describe what people go through in order to detonate bombs that destroy themselves and others. For example, the Director of Global Research in International Affairs, Barry Rubin, reports, "Palestinian groups have historically used after-school activities and youth clubs to spot potential suicide bombers. Promising recruits have then typically been subject to intensive brainwashing by experienced terrorists" (Rubin, 2004).<sup>4</sup>

Experienced terrorists in another part of the world, Sri Lanka, also put recruits through a brainwashing program, according to Christoph Reuter, who is an international correspondent for the German magazine, *Stern*. Writing about the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Reuter reported:

Brainwashing methods have played a significant role in the Tamil Tiger organization. In its training camps, one hears heroic songs blaring from loudspeakers from dusk to dawn. LTTE recruits are not allowed to marry; they are already married to the 'Tamil Eelam.' Nor are they allowed to have sex, for anyone who is chaste and who saves his sperm bestows a magical potency on it or gives it superhuman powers which are then set free at the critical moment. The highest goal, drummed repeatedly into the heads of the youths, is to be ready to die for the common cause.... [T]he highest honor is to be invited by [their leader,

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<sup>4</sup> Two other references to brainwashing and terrorism are worth mentioning. First, an imam in Alberta, Canada was "almost certain" that he knew the identity of a young Canadian being held in Afghanistan for assisting insurgents in May 2007. "Sheikh Alaa Elsayed says that just a few months ago he urged a University of Calgary computer-science student, who had been 'brainwashed' by Internet propaganda, to dispense with notions of fighting the *jihad* in Afghanistan" (Freeze, 2007a). Second, a notorious Canadian family of fundamentalist Muslims, the Khadr family, has four sons, all of whom have served prison time for alleged terrorist activities. One son (Abdulrahman), however, has denounced his family's political orientation and al-Qaeda support by stating that his relatives are "'mindwashed'" (quoted in Freeze, 2007b).

Velupillai Prabhakaran [b. 1954]) to a 'last supper'—an opulent meal normally available only to those who have been chosen for a suicide attack (Reuter, 2004:160).<sup>5</sup>

Here we have a reputed brainwashing program that does not orient one to an afterlife paradise but instead to "the privilege of being at the side of God's chosen one in the here-and-now, for the first and last time, at an evening feast" (Reuter, 2004:160). Nevertheless, the outcomes of both the Palestinian and Tamil Tiger brainwashing programs are the tragic loss of life, coupled with untold pain and suffering.<sup>6</sup>

### **Dysfunctional Corporate Culture**

Terrorist training might involve the most extreme situations of brainwashing programs that do use forcible confinement and physical coercion. By contrast, highly focused and ideologically filled corporate training has neither aspect to it. Nevertheless, anthropologist and psychoanalyst Michael Maccoby described General Electric's (or GE's) corporate executive officer (from 1981 to 2000), Jack Welch, as a narcissist, and then added that his organizational

'teaching' involves a personal ideology that he indoctrinates into GE managers through speeches, memos, and confrontations.... GE managers must either internalize his vision, or they must leave. Clearly, this is incentive learning with a vengeance. I would even go so

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<sup>5</sup> I thank Susan Raine for reminding me of this information.

<sup>6</sup> I note in passing that a Website run by the Wyoming Office of the Attorney General—Division of Victim Services about domestic violence states, "Experts have compared methods used by batterers to those used by terrorists to brainwash hostages" (Wyoming Silent Witness Initiative, 2007). Finally, a graduate student of mine, Terra Manca, found a quote about brainwashing made by a young woman who had been abducted briefly by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda. When a researcher asked her why she thought the LRA trained child soldiers to commit appalling atrocities, she replied, "The rebels ... target the children, because they are brainwashed very fast ... and when they do something they don't really reason: 'What I am doing is bad ...'" (quoted in Allen, 2006:42).

far as to call Welch's training brainwashing.  
(Maccoby, 2000:76)

This evaluation of Welch's rule may sound exaggerated, but a management study of his tactics indicated that "For several years, GE managers were encouraged to carry in their wallets a card listing GE values, just as Chinese party members, soldiers, and students had to carry Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*" (Abetti, 2006:79).

Important to note about Maccoby's evaluation of Jack Welch's program is that people were neither forcibly restrained to stay nor physically threatened if they tried to leave. Social, professional, and financial pressures likely kept many people in the company (although tens of thousands were fired) and acted as incentives for those employees to successfully internalize the values that Welch imposed; but if these pressures resembled brainwashing, then he and GE did not conduct it with a sanction of violence toward those who quit.

### **Interpersonal Violence**

In the examples of alleged brainwashing cited thus far, all of the abuses took place within group contexts of four or more people. Two legal cases occurred early in the new decade, however, that involved only dyads, in which defense lawyers argued that the less powerful individuals had suffered brainwashing. Both cases involve deeply disturbing behaviour.

#### **Graeme John Slattery**

In February 2004, Graeme John Slattery, 42, went on trial in Australia, charged with "keeping a woman as a slave in the garage of his family home..." between 1996 and 1999 (Silkstone, 2004). While the defense argued that the woman could have left but did not (thereby providing consent), the "prosecutor said the woman could not leave Slattery because she had been subjected to brainwashing similar to that experienced by concentration camp victims. She was brutalized, her head shaved, and her name taken away, replaced by the demeaning title 'toe rag,' which was tattooed on her body" (Silkstone, 2004). The defense failed, and Slattery received a fourteen-year sentence for convictions "on 2 charges, including assault, indecent assault and

intentionally causing serious injury against the woman between 1996 and 1999" (Walsh, 2004).

### **Lee Boyd Malvo**

By far, however, the highest-profile case in which the brainwashing defense appeared was the Washington, D.C. sniper case involving Lee Boyd Malvo, who—at seventeen years old—was arrested along with John Allen Muhammad in late 2002 for a string of random sniper killings of ten people. Because of Malvo's age, the court appointed a guardian to act as a replacement for a parent; and this guardian, Todd G. Petit, concluded that Muhammad had brainwashed the boy. "The only conclusion I can come to is that [Malvo] was under the total control of John Muhammad... This really was an indoctrination and brainwashing of the boy" (Petit, quoted in Jackman, 2003).

Petit researched the boy's history, discovering that his mother had abandoned him when he was fifteen. Without a place to live, he moved in with Muhammad, and then probably listened to the older man's teachings of hatred against the United States government and other bodies. Petit concluded that Muhammad's brainwashing "probably started out as benign and not very forceful, worked its way ... until he could tell Lee what to do, how to act, and Lee had no choice but to listen" (Jackman, 2003). With other evidence in hand about how dependent Malvo was and how controlling Muhammad had been of Malvo, Malvo's defense team decided to go with a temporary insanity defense based upon brainwashing in an attempt to explain the young man's participation in the shooting death of an FBI analyst in Fairfax County, Virginia on October 14, 2002. According to one of Malvo's lawyers, "Lay folks may use the term 'brainwashed....' Specifically, it is the defense of indoctrination" (Craig S. Cooley, quoted in Kovaleski, 2003). In the end, this defense did not prevent a jury from finding Malvo guilty, but it might have been the key factor in the young man avoiding the death penalty and instead receiving life in prison (see Eichel, 2004:3).

During the trial, the press reported about the testimony of defense witnesses who concluded that Muhhamed likely had brainwashed Malvo. One of these witnesses was Paul R. Martin of the Wellspring rehabilitation facility in Ohio, who suggested that John Muhammad "may have come to control

Mr. Malvo's mind and free will." In making his argument, Martin drew "parallels to the brainwashing of prisoners of war in Korea, to the Jonestown mass suicide, and the Branch Davidian siege in Texas" (Liptak, 2003). The press reported on the expert testimony of another witness, psychiatrist Diane Schetky, who concluded that a "childhood marred by abuse, neglect, and the absence of a father figure rendered ... Lee Malvo susceptible to brainwashing techniques that enabled him to kill without emotion" (Bender, 2004).

Along these same lines, psychologist Steve Eichel and psychiatrist Neil Blumberg concluded that Malvo had a dissociative disorder, with Blumberg concluding that the young man had lost the ability to distinguish between right and wrong "because of brainwashing by his alleged accomplice, convicted killer John Allen Muhammad." Specifically, Malvo was "suffering from an unspecified 'dissociative disorder,' depression, and a 'conduct disorder'" (Siegel, 2003:1; Eichel, 2004:1). These diagnoses were in line with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Disorder IV-TR*, which gives as an example of "Dissociative Disorder Not Otherwise Specified": "States of dissociation that occur in individuals who have been subjected to periods of prolonged and intense coercive persuasion (e.g., brainwashing, thought reform, or indoctrination while captive)" (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

In the *Washington Post*, reporter Don Oldenburg used the Malvo case to highlight other recent cases in which the brainwashing concept appeared. After he mentioned the Manson family murders, Jonestown, and the Heaven's Gate suicides, Oldenburg indicated:

When Islamic extremists flew airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, some speculated brainwashing. The mother of 'shoe bomber' Richard Reid and the father of American Taliban soldier John Walker Lindh said their sons were brainwashed. When kidnapped Elizabeth Smart was reported to have strangely complied with her abductors, her father said she had been brainwashed. (Oldenburg, 2003)

Throughout the rest of the article, Oldenburg used insights from Benjamin Zablocki, Philip Zimbardo, Robert Lifton, Dick

Anthony, and James Richardson, all of whom are important people in the brainwashing debate, to provide an overview of the controversy surrounding the term. It is doubtful, however, that Malvo's trial changed any of these disputants' views about the brainwashing issue.

### **Alleged Chinese Governmental Human Rights Violations Against Falun Gong**

In the classic research on brainwashing, conducted in the 1950s by Lifton, Schein, and others, the actions of Communist China came under close scrutiny. The Communists ran re-education or brainwashing programs for members of society (especially intellectuals) in attempts to indoctrinate them into the Party line, and the Communists collaborated with the North Korean brainwashing programs against captured United Nations soldiers. In the contemporary period, the Communist Chinese appear to be using camps again in efforts to indoctrinate a defiant segment of its population—those persons who practice Falun Gong.

Numerous Falun Gong websites speak about brainwashing programs and facilities used against practitioners who run afoul of the law (for example, Falun Dafa, 2007; Falun Gong Human Rights Working Group, 2003-2007: 2; FalunInfo.net, 2007:2; Friends of Falun Gong USA, 2004:2), and an article in the *Washington Post* seems to confirm these sites' basic assertions. In August 2001 the newspaper reported:

After a year and a half of difficulties in suppressing the movement, the government for the first time this year sanctioned the systematic use of violence against the group, establishing a network of brainwashing classes and embarking on a painstaking effort to weed out followers neighborhood by neighborhood and workplace by workplace, the sources said. They said the crackdown has benefited from a turn in public opinion against Falun Gong, since five purported members set themselves on fire in Tiananmen Square, leading many

Chinese to conclude the group is a dangerous cult (Pomfret and Pan, 2001:A1).<sup>7</sup>

Worth noting is that—at least on the surface---these classes have parallels to the Communist brainwashing programs in the 1950s.

So, too, does the current regime's development of labour camps resonate with techniques that Chinese Communists implemented in the early years of its regime. Mentions of contemporary "labor camps" appear throughout Falun Gong's literature, as indicated by the account of a woman who reputedly "was detained at the Fenghuangtai Office for one month of brainwashing, then illegally sent to a labor camp" (FalunInfo.net,2007:3). Of course, the Communists in the 1950s (Fu-Sheng, 1962:160, 173; Schein with Schneier and Barker, 1961:50), and then again during the Cultural Revolution (MacInnis, 1972:360-366; Rice, 1972:291), used labor as part of their re-education efforts (see also Pomfret and Pan, 2001:A22). Moreover, according to Amnesty International's 2007 report on China:

Hundreds of thousands of people were believed to be held in Re-education through Labour facilities across China and were at risk of torture and ill-treatment. In May 2006, the Beijing city authorities announced their intention to extend their use of Re-education through Labour as a way to control 'offending behaviour' and to clean up the city's image ahead of the Olympics. (Amnesty International, 2007:3)

Amnesty's report specifically named a Falun Gong practitioner who received a two-and-a half-year sentence into one of these re-education and labour programs for having possessed the group's literature (Amnesty International, 2007:2).

China, however, is not the only ideologically driven body to use labour as part of its re-education efforts. Studies

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<sup>7</sup> I am aware, too, of the study by Human Rights Watch and the Geneva Initiative on Psychiatry (2002), examining Communist China's abusive use of pseudo-psychiatry to punish political and social dissenters.

published in 2000 and 2001 showed that both the Children of God/The Family and Scientology had used labour as part of their confinement and re-education programs to 'reform' supposed deviants in their respective organizations. Scientology's program is called the Rehabilitation Project Force, and it has operated in various forms since 1974 (Kent, 2001). Likewise, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Children of God/The Family put teens through hard labour in its teen detention programs (Kent and Hall, 2000:67). No information exists, however, about whether the designers of either program consciously borrowed the idea of forced labour from the earlier Chinese camps.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly we have much to learn about the contemporary situation of Falun Gong in China, and at some point an entirely new wave of publications is likely to appear about these reputed brainwashing programs. Certainly, too, these publications will return to the classic brainwashing literature in an attempt to see whether the new Chinese techniques and programs differ from ones used in the 1950s.

Descriptions of the Chinese government's anti-Falun Gong campaign are only a few of many social contexts in which laypeople and professionals are using the brainwashing concept. Its widespread use does not necessarily mean that that it is a legitimate social-scientific term. As a British writer, Dominic Streatfield, concluded in his recent, book-length history of brainwashing, it "is a useful term because it can be used to describe anybody who performs actions out of character.... Although no one really seems to know exactly what 'brainwashing' entails, how it works, or who uses it, the term is applied all over the place" (Streatfield, 2006:357). Indeed, this article has documented that the brainwashing term is in fact applied "all over the place"—courtrooms, terrorism discussions, analyses of interpersonal undue influence, abusive teen behaviour modification programs, high-demand business settings, and so on. Streatfield may *misstate*, however, just how much various people know about what 'brainwashing' entails, how it works, and who uses it. While the content of such programs varies according to the groups or individuals operating them, all seem to involve manipulative, systematic efforts at reformulating the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of target populations.

Nothing in any of the techniques is mystical or magical; all of the techniques—in whatever combinations they may appear within particular programs—use well-understood social psychological means (albeit usually for ends that likely are harmful for the targeted persons). Kathleen Taylor would even go so far as to argue that she and others now understand brainwashing down through the levels of physiology and biochemistry.

Several judges and parole-board personnel seem to have recognized that some people brought before them had committed criminal acts while having been brainwashed, and a few judges even have let defendants receive treatment before sentencing. These actions make me question the categorical statement made by sociologist Lorne Dawson, who indicated, “American courts will no longer accept expert testimony on ‘cult brainwashing’ as scientifically credible” (Dawson, 2006:96). Evidence presented here shows that American judges allowed defendants to receive treatment to counteract brainwashing, thought reform, or mind control in at least two cult-related cases (Winnfred Wright and Karen Robidoux), and brainwashing evidence was the central defense in the Malvo case. Likewise, we should not arbitrarily discount the accounts (as some social scientists such as Dawson would have us do) of people who have gone through intensive thought- and behavioural-alteration programs, and subsequently have been able to reflect critically upon them (cf. Dawson, 2006:106).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the appearance of a physiology book on brainwashing should transform the debate about the concept to a new level of discourse, providing a partial response to critics who assert that the concept itself is unscientific.

Whether confinement and force are necessary remains a research question rather than a conclusion; but suffice it to say that a few of the examples that I provided of professionals using the brainwashing term involved

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<sup>8</sup> The most recent examples of former members using the brainwashing term to describe how they had been indoctrinated in a group they consider to be a cult are in a book written by three sisters who grew up in the Children of God/The Family but who eventually left as they gained insights into the abuses that they had suffered (Jones, Jones, and Buhring, 2007:263, 271, 381, 403; see 83).

situations of imprisoned confinement and immediate physical punishment, while others did not. Indeed, some of the situations involved manipulative drug use, so it seems likely that altered states play a role in the brainwashing techniques found in some social settings.

Regardless of what ongoing researchers might find or what definitions they might use, it is far too early to move beyond the brainwashing debate and leave important issues either unexplored or unanswered (see Zablocki, 2001:168-169). I disagree, therefore, with the position taken by sociologist of religion Lorne Dawson, whose call for expanding the study of alternative religions beyond (among other issues) the "brainwashing controversy" seems like an attempt to shut the door on further examination of the concept's utility (see Lucas, 2007:12; cf. Zablocki, 1997). Intelligent, thoughtful people from a variety of backgrounds continue to use the term, and social science will be remiss if it lets its own disciplinary biases get in the way of legitimate, and potentially important, research.

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### **Note**

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