

# SINGER'S CONTINUUM OF INFLUENCE & PERSUASION

## Thought Reform Exists: Organized, Programmatic Influence

("Thought Reform" throughout this article can be read as synonymous with "Brainwashing" & "Coercive Persuasion".)

### Margaret Thaler Singer, Ph.D.

Recently, cult apologists have attempted to create the impression that the concept of thought reform has been rejected by the scientific community. This is untrue.

As recently as May of this year, the new *Diagnosics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) published by the American Psychiatric Association cites thought reform as a contributing factor to "Dissociative Disorder Not Otherwise Specified" (a diagnosis frequently given to former cult members). Thought reform (notes 1,2,3 below) and its synonyms brainwashing and coercive persuasion (4,5) were also noted in DSM-III (1980) and in DSM-III revised (1987), as well as in widely recognized medical texts (6,7).

Thought reform is not mysterious. It is the systematic application of psychological and social influence techniques in an organized programmatic way within a constructed and managed environments (5,7,8,9,10). The goal is to produce specific attitudinal and behavioral changes. The changes occur incrementally without its being patently visible to those undergoing the process that their attitudes and behavior are being changed a step at a time according to the plan of those directing the program.

In society there are numerous elaborate attempts to influence attitudes and modify behavior. However, thought reform programs can be distinguished from other social influence efforts because of their totalistic scope and their sequenced phases aimed at destabilizing participants' sense of self, sense of reality, and values. Thought reform programs rely on organized peer pressure, the development of bonds between the leader or trainer and the followers, the control of communication, and the use of a variety of influence techniques. The aim of all this is to promote conformity, compliance, and the adoption of specific attitudes and behaviors desired by the group. Such a program is further characterized by the manipulation of the person's total social environment to stabilize and reinforce the modified behavior and attitude changes. (8,9,10)

Thought reform is accomplished through the use of psychological and environmental control processes that do *not* depend on physical coercion. Today's thought reform programs are sophisticated, subtle, and insidious, creating a psychological bond that in many ways is far more powerful than gun-at-the-head methods of influence. The effects generally lose their potency when the control processes are lifted or neutralized in some way. That is why most Korean War POWs gave up the content of their prison camp indoctrination programs when they came home and why many cultists leave their groups if they spend a substantial amount of time away from the group or have an opportunity to discuss their doubts with in intimate (11).

Contrary to popular misconceptions (some intentional on the part of naysayers), a thought reform program does not require physical confinement and does not produce robots. Nor does it permanently capture the allegiance of all those exposed to it. In fact, some persons do not respond at all to the programs, while others retain the contents for varied periods of time. In sum, thought reform should be regarded as "situationally adaptive belief change that is *not* subtle and is environment-dependent". (8,10)

The current effort by cult apologists to deny thought reform exists is linked to earlier protective stances toward cults in which apologists attempted to deny the cults' active and deceptive recruitment practices, deny the massive social, psychological, financial, spiritual and other controls wielded by cult leaders and thus dismiss their often destructive consequences.

These earlier efforts to shield cults from criticism rest on a seeker theory of how people get into cults, which overlooks the active and deceptive tactics that most cults use to recruit and retain members. When bad things happened to followers of Jim Jones or David Koresh, the twisted logic of some apologists implied that these "seekers" found what they wanted, thus absolving the cult leader and his conduct.

Finally, to promulgate the myth that though reform has been rejected by the scientific community, cult apologists doggedly stick to faulty understanding of the process contrary to findings in the literature, they ---- that physical coercion and debilitation are necessary for thought reform to occur, and that the effects of thought reform must be instant, massive, uniform, universally responded to, and enduring.

The recent upholding of thought reform in DSM-IV is but one more piece of evidence that this orchestrated process of exploitative psychological manipulation is real and recognized within the professional psychiatric field. To say then that the concept of thought reform is rejected by the scientific community is false and irresponsible. The phenomenon has been studied and discussed since 1951,

and continuing studies by social psychologists and other behavioral scientists have solidified our understandings of its components and overall impact.

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This table is from **Cults In Our Midst**

Table 3.2. **Continuum of Influence and Persuasion**

	<b>Education</b>	<b>Advertising</b>	<b>Propaganda</b>	<b>Indoctrination</b>	<b>Thought Reform</b>
<b>Focus of body of knowledge</b>	Many bodies of knowledge, based on scientific findings in various fields.	Body of knowledge concerns product, competitors; how to sell and influence via legal persuasion.	Body of knowledge centers on political persuasion of masses of people.	Body of knowledge is explicitly designed to inculcate organizational values.	Body of knowledge centers on changing people without their knowledge.
<b>Direction &amp; degree of exchange</b>	Two way pupil-teacher exchange encouraged.	Exchange can occur but communication generally one-sided.	Some exchange occurs but communication generally one-sided.	Limited exchange occurs, communication is one-sided.	No exchange occurs, communication is one-sided.
<b>Ability to change</b>	Change occurs as science advances; as students and other scholars offer criticisms; as students & citizens evaluate programs.	Change made by those who pay for it, based upon the success of ad programs by consumers law, & in response to consumer complaints.	Change based on changing tides in world politics and on political need to promote the group, nation, or international organization.	Change made through formal channels, via written suggestions to higher-ups.	Change occurs rarely; organization remains fairly rigid; change occurs primarily to improve thought-reform effectiveness.
<b>Structure of persuasion</b>	Uses teacher-pupil structure; logical thinking encouraged.	Uses an instructional mode to persuade consumer/buyer.	Takes authoritarian stance to persuade masses.	Takes authoritarian & hierarchical stance.	Takes authoritarian & hierarchical stance; No full awareness on part of learner.
<b>Type of relationship</b>	Instruction is time-limited: consensual.	Consumer/buyer can accept or ignore communication.	Learner support & engrossment expected.	Instruction is contractual: consensual	Group attempts to retain people forever.
<b>Deceptiveness</b>	Is not deceptive.	Can be deceptive, selecting only positive views.	Can be deceptive, often exaggerated.	Is not deceptive.	Is deceptive.
<b>Breadth of learning</b>	Focuses on learning to learn & learning about reality; broad goal is rounded knowledge for development of the individual.	Has a narrow goal of swaying opinion to promote and sell an idea, object, or program; another goal is to enhance seller & possibly buyer.	Targets large political masses to make them believe a specific view or circumstance is good.	Stresses narrow learning for a specific goal; to become something or to train for performance of duties.	Individualized target; hidden agenda (you will be changed one step at a time to become deployable to serve leaders).
<b>Tolerance</b>	Respects differences.	Puts down competition.	Wants to lessen opposition.	Aware of differences.	No respect for differences.
<b>Methods</b>	Instructional techniques.	Mild to heavy persuasion.	Overt persuasion sometimes unethical.	Disciplinary techniques.	Improper and unethical techniques.

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