Brainwashing Techniques in Leadership and Child Rearing

By R. LYNN

Exeter University

It used to be thought that brainwashing techniques for manipulating the beliefs of others were the sole prerogative of sinister interrogators behind the iron curtain. This view received something of a jolt from Sargant (1957), who argued that the essentials of the method—which lie in arousing anxiety in the victim and then offering an escape from it—are used by a variety of practitioners in the west, notably policemen, certain religious leaders, and psychoanalysts. Even so, these persuaders only practice their arts on minorities and it may be thought that the ordinary citizen is not a victim—or a practitioner—of brainwashing procedures.

The purpose of the present note is to carry the argument somewhat further and show that brainwashing is a pervasive phenomenon of social life and that we are all brainwashing and being brainwashed a good deal of the time. However, we do this rather inefficiently, as amateurs, because we lack a knowledge of the scientific principles involved, which will presently be made plain.

The essence of brainwashing, according to Sargant, lies in the *alternating signals method*, i.e. the brainwasher first induces fear in his prey by threatening gaol, Siberia, Hell, etc., and then offers an escape message to the effect 'only do or believe such and such and you will avoid these terrors'. If the victim does not break with the first alternation the process is repeated. The other components of brainwashing—solitary confinement, starvation, physical weakening and the like—should be understood as appendages to the basic alternating signals procedure. Now this analysis is stating that the brainwasher must play *two roles*, which he must alternate. The first role is as threatener and anxiety inducer. The second role is that of friend, protector and anxiety reducer. Both roles are essential if the victim is to be influenced in the most efficient manner.

The first area in ordinary social life giving scope to brainwashing methods is that of leader-group and superior-subordinate relations. In the traditional analysis leaders were divided into authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire types and psychologists considered that the democratic type was the most effective. As a rough approximation this may be accepted, but it has more recently become recognised that effective democratic leadership has two components. The leader must be aloof; he must also be friendly. (Argyle, 1964a, p. 148). There are a number of studies showing that on the one hand the leader must have a warm and friendly relation with the led (Katz & Kahn, 1960); on the other hand he must not be too friendly and must maintain a certain social distance between himself and the group (Fiedler, 1958, 1964). We see here the dual role of the brainwasher: the aloofness corresponds to the threatener role, the friendliness to the protector role. The authoritarian leader is only playing the threatener role and misses out on the friendliness. Vice-versa with the laissez-faire leader. It is the brainwashing, democratic leader who plays both these roles who is the most effective.

Another area where the efficacy of brainwashing techniques has been discovered, though not recognised as such, is in parental methods of bringing up children. One of the most authoritative studies, whose conclusions are now widely accepted, is that of Sears, Maccoby and Levin (1957). These authors showed that the parents who had most effectively socialised their children had two characteristics: they had used a high degree of 'psychological punishment' involving the withdrawal of love, and they had also been affectionate and warm in their relationship with the child. These parents are playing the dual role of the brainwasher.

While the Sears, Maccoby and Levin study was made on American parents, a very similar conclusion has been reached by Whiting & Child (1953) in their cross-cultural investigation. These writers also stress that effective socialisation depends on the parents playing a dual role. This involves 'keeping the child strongly orientated toward seeking the love of his parents, while at the same time arousing uncertainties about his attaining this goal' (p. 241). This dual role demands that the parents maintain a warm relationship with the child and also impose 'love-orientated' punishments for unwelcome behaviour. Once again we see the essential technique of the brainwasher, the psychological punishment corresponding to the threatener role, the affection corresponding to the protector and friend role. Neither role is efficient by itself and both must be combined for the effective moulding of the behaviour, attitudes and beliefs of the victim.

Now that the pervasive scope of brainwashing techniques has been indicated we can turn to the mechanisms involved. Sargant draws an analogy between the alternating signals in brainwashing and those which Pavlov used in discrimination learning tasks to induce experimental neurosis in his dogs. He further follows Pavlov in assuming that the conflict and stress induce protective inhibition in the cerebral cortex and relies on the full panoply of Pavlovian theory to account for the brainwashing phenomenon. To the western psychologist, to whom the Pavlovian framework is generally uncongenial, a more straightforward view of the matter is at hand in classical behaviour theory. It is simply that learning and performance are greatly facilitated if there is both a drive and a reinforcement. The brainwasher provides both in his dual role: as threatener he induces the drive (anxiety); as protector and friend he provides the reinforcement (anxiety-reduction). The reasons for the failure of the other two styles of leadership/parenthood now become readily apparent. The authoritarian type induces the drive without offering reinforcements in the way of friendliness and affection. On the other hand the laissez-faire type of leader and parent is too friendly, so that he fails to induce the anxiety drive. Only the brainwashing method, with its alternation of role both provoking drive and offering reinforcement, is fully effect in moulding the beliefs and behaviour of others.

It now becomes possible to understand a paradox in the Mowrer-Eysenck anxiety conditioning theory of socialisation (Mowrer, 1950; Eysenck, 1964). This theory states that when parents punish their children anxiety becomes associated with the punished behaviour and this anxiety checks the behaviour on future occasions. It seems to follow from this theory that the more parents punish their children, the more socialised their children should become, since more conditioning trials for the

association between anxiety and the undesirable behaviour have taken place. The paradox is that as a matter of fact the opposite relation seems to hold. The evidence is that socialisation is *negatively* associated with the amount of physical punishment by the parents (e.g. Sears, Maccoby & Levin, 1957; Argyle, 1964*b*). This fact is clearly an embarrassment to the Mowrer-Eysenck theory.

This paradox can be resolved by considering the problem from a brainwashing point of view. The parent who uses a great deal of physical punishment naturally tends not to be warm and affectionate to the child, as Sears, Maccoby & Levin (1957) found. Consequently he is not using proper brainwashing methods. In terms of conditioning theory several factors may account for the failure of the excessively punitive parent. First, physical punishment is aversive partly because it implies parental rejection and this induces anxiety in addition to the pain from the punishment itself. In a family where there is little warmth this rejection will be present more or less all the time and anxiety about it will therefore be subject to experimental extinction or satiation (if this anxiety is innate). In a warm family this anxiety will be much more intense for being elicited less frequently and for standing in contrast to the habitually agreeable atmosphere. A second factor may be that a good deal of socialisation is concerned with building up positive habits to replace undesirable ones (e.g. being polite and friendly instead of being rude and aggressive, etc.). The warm parent will build up these habits more readily in the child because he gives reinforcements. A third factor may be that the highly punishing parent creates rigidity in the unsocialised behaviour patterns of the child, as Eysenck (1965) has recently argued.

In conclusion it should be made explicit that in this note two principal arguments have been advanced. At an empirical level a case has been made out for the universality of the brainwashing law: a superior moulds the behaviour of an inferior most effectively by adopting the dual role of threatener and protector, that is to say by using the alternating signals technique of the brainwasher. At a more theoretical level it is argued that the effectiveness of this technique can be deduced from conditioning principles, because it brings into play the important elements of drive and reinforcement. It is, of course, possible to accept the validity of brainwashing methods while retaining doubts, as Argyle (1965) has urged, about whether they can properly be understood in terms of conditioning theory. Nevertheless a plausible case can be made out that brainwashing rests on conditioning principles.

REFERENCES

ARGYLE, M. (1964*a*). *Psychology and Social Problems*. London: Methuen.
ARGYLE, M. (1964*b*). Introjection: a form of social learning. *Brit. J. Psychol.* **55**, 391–402.
ARGYLE, M. (1965). Eysenck's theory of the conscience. *Brit. J. Psychol.* **56**, 309-10.
EYSENCK, H. J. (1964). *Crime and Personality*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
EYSENCK, H. J. (1965). A note on some criticisms of the Mowrer/Eysenck conditioning theory of conscience. *Brit. J. Psychol.* (In press.)
FIEDLER, F. E. (1958). *Leader Attitudes and Group Effectiveness*. Urbana: U. of Illinois Press.

FIEDLER, F. E. (1964). A contingency model of leadership effectiveness. In Berkowitz, L. (ed.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. New York: Academic Press.

KATZ, D. & KAHN, R. L. (1960). Leadership practices in relation to productivity and morale. In Cartwright, D. and Zander, A. (eds.) *Group Dynamics*. New York: Row, Peterson.

MOWRER, O. H. (1950). *Learning theory and personality dynamics*. New York: Ronald.

SARGANT, W. (1957). *Battle of the mind*. London: Heinemann.

SEARS, R. R., MACCOBY, E. E. & LEVIN, H. (1957). Patterns of child rearing. New York: Row, Peterson.

T