CONTRIBUTORS

Terrence M. Barnhardt
University of Arizona

Roy F. Baumeister
Case Western Reserve University

George A. Bonanno
University of California, San Francisco

Thomas D. Borkovec
Pennsylvania State University

Delia Cioffi
Dartmouth College

Lee Anna Clark
Southern Methodist University

Mary A. Collins
University of California, Los Angeles

Edward J. Emery
Westchester Institute for Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy

Robert A. Emmons
University of California, Davis

Ralph Erber
DePaul University

Matthew H. Erdelyi
Brooklyn College of CUNY

Susan T. Fiske
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Geoffrey T. Fong
University of Waterloo

Daniel T. Gilbert
University of Texas

C. Peter Herman
University of Toronto

Christopher K. Hsee
Yale University

John F. Kihlstrom
University of Arizona

Laura A. King
Southern Methodist University

Eric Klinger
University of Minnesota, Morris

Leonard L. Martin
University of Georgia

John D. Mayer
University of New Hampshire

William D. McIntosh
Georgia Southern University

Donald Meichenbaum
University of Waterloo

Susan Nolen-Hoeksema
Stanford University

W. Gerrod Parrott
Georgetown University

Delroy L. Paulhus
University of British Columbia

James W. Pennebaker
Southern Methodist University

Janet Polivy
University of Toronto

Lizabeth Roemer
Pennsylvania State University

Peter Salovey
Yale University

David J. Schneider
Rice University

Ken Sheldon
University of California, Davis

Jerome L. Singer
Yale University

Shelley E. Taylor
University of California, Los Angeles

Abraham Tesser
University of Georgia

Dianne M. Tice
Case Western Reserve University

Robin R. Vallacher
Florida Atlantic University

David Watson
Southern Methodist University

Heidi A. Wayment
University of California, Los Angeles

Daniel M. Wegner
University of Virginia

Richard M. Wenzlaff
University of Texas at San Antonio

Dolf Zillman
University of Alabama

Handbook of Mental Control

DANIEL M. WEGNER
JAMES W. PENNEBAKER
Editors

Century Psychology Series

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Social Foundations of Mental Control

DANIEL M. WEGNER
RALPH ERBER

It is a basic fact of psychology that we modify our actions for the purposes of social life. Even when we alter our behavior radically to meet social demands, however, we often remain aware of an inner pool of experience that seems real and true beneath the masquerade. Some of our thoughts and feelings survive the social control of our behavior. This observation is reinforced each time a person says what is proper (while really thinking things that are improper), displays the appropriate emotion (despite indifference or even an opposing feeling), or does what must be done (all the while yearning to run from the room).

The schism between outer behavior and inner experience is so striking in such cases that it invites a serious theoretical error—the assumption that social forces shape behavior while leaving the mind unperturbed. The inner pool of unmodified experience is mistaken for all mental processes, whereas in fact it represents only the eye of the storm. The struggle to conceal the inner pool, suppress it, and even replace it with mental contents that are compatible with socially appropriate behavior is itself a key task of mental activity. We may try not to cry in public, for instance, not just by stopping the behavior (while the private pool fills with tears), but by activating strategic mental processes designed to quell the experience of the emotion. In short, we attempt to control the behavior we present to others first by exercising the control of our minds.

Because modern social research is predicated on the implicit assumption that the mind is bypassed in self-presentation, little is understood or even suspected about mental function in self-presentation processes. The field examines the pressures that social situations direct toward individuals (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker, 1980), and is also well

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stocked with descriptions of the behavioral effects of self-presentational demands (e.g., DePaulo, 1992; Patterson, 1983), but it offers only a minimal account of the intrapsychic mechanisms underlying social self-presentation. Self-presentation has become the antithesis of a psychological theory, as though socially modified behaviors just spring out in social situations without benefit of thought, emotion, or motivation (Tetlock & Manstead, 1985).

This chapter is intended to add a measure of psychology to the social recipe by exploring mental control in social life. Our thesis is that mental control exists largely because of the demands of anticipated social interaction, and that it therefore enables many of the self-presentational capacities people exercise. We explore this idea by considering first the social sources of mental control—how mental control has emerged to supplant social control both in the development of individuality through human history and in the development of each individual over time. Then we move to our central concern—how mental control is occasioned by social circumstances in the daily influence of social situations on the mind.

THE BEGINNINGS OF MENTAL CONTROL

During mental control, a person is of two minds. One part of the mind harbors certain thoughts, emotions, or desires that another part of the mind wishes to dispel, modify, or replace (Wegner, 1989, 1992; Wegner & Schneider, 1989). This happens each time someone tries to overcome a dour mood, put away thoughts of an immoderate dessert, suppress a persistent worry, generate a smart thing to say in an awkward situation, hold back an inane comment, or even concentrate on a daunting task. In these circumstances, we exercise what James (1890) called the "effort of attention"—the willful direction of thought—in service of the control of mental processes.

The two minds we share during mental control suggest the metaphor of a social interaction going on inside the head. Like the caricatures of self-control in which a little devil or angel whispers in a person's ear, we find our minds divided at these times into the whisperer and the ear, the controller and the controlled. In actuality, of course, there is no real conversation. We simply find that a portion of our time is spent thinking about what we should be thinking, feeling, or wanting at other times. The social interaction metaphor has an interesting implication, however, that is important for grasping how mental control may have arisen to begin with: Mental control may exist as an internalized form of social control.

Extremes of Control

To see how mental control might develop, imagine first the extreme case in which it is unnecessary: a world of perfect social control. People in this world are under the constant and total control of their social groups; someone is *always there* to see what they do. Imagine also that it has always been this way and that this will continue as far into the future as a person can

see. Under these conditions, one would have no individual mental life to speak of because everything that is felt or thought would be prescribed entirely by others. There would be no need for mental control. Admittedly, such conditions don't happen often in most cultures these days (Moore, 1984). But this is a logical possibility even so, one that is simulated in normal life when we are under great social pressure and those in power are standing nose-to-nose with us and not letting us even turn away to think. Being held up by someone with a gun is one example; dinner with prospective in-laws is another.

The second extreme we can imagine is total freedom from social control. Perhaps the easiest way to envision this is to think about one's state of mind if one were utterly alone in the world. This apocalyptic scenario is a favorite for science fiction writers because it allows a glimpse of humans with extreme autonomy and individuality. One could do, feel, or think just about anything at all, within the bounds of physics anyway, and get away with everything. A more ordinary example is the feeling one might have alone at home one morning with no plans or obligations. In the absence of many if not most social constraints, one is free to let the mind wander wherever it may go. Mental control is not needed because social control is not relevant. It would be perfectly fine on stubbing a toe, for instance, to yell at the top of your lungs and hop around and swear for an indefinite period of time. One could indulge every mental state, even painful or unpleasant ones, because there would be no need to do otherwise.

The extremes of perfect social control and perfect individual autonomy are normally blended in daily life, however, and it is in this mongrel circumstance that we find the emergence of mental control. In the movement between public and private conditions, people find time to develop mental states in private that are incompatible with the social control that is exerted upon them in public. They think, feel, or desire things that others will want them to inhibit, or they fail to generate the thoughts, feelings, or desires that others will want them to have. The isolated mind drifts in private, and must be brought back into the fold when social interaction is resumed. This means that individuals may then come to control their own minds in private in an effort to anticipate or preempt social control—and with the effect that they exert mental control for social purposes.

Origins of the Individual

To understand how this model might account for *all* mental control, it is important to step back and examine how individuals come to have any autonomous mental life at all. Perhaps the broadest statement in this regard came from the sociologist Georg Simmel: "The secret is a first-rate element of individualization" (Wolff, 1950, p. 334). Simmel pointed out that secrets create social alliances and partitions, groups of insiders and outsiders, the "us" and the "them," and that this partitioning power is the source of individuality. When individuals have the ability to hide information from others, they achieve a significant measure of individual autonomy and a deep segregation of self from society.

Without our capacity to keep secrets, we would have no individual freedom. This is illustrated in George Orwell's view expressed in his novel *1984* or in Margaret Atwood's portrayal of totalitarian anti-utopia in *A Handmaid's Tale*. The protagonists in these novels conspire to secure even the most petty privacies—a tiny cache of personal belongings, a moment stolen outside Big Brother's line of sight—in pursuit of breathing space for individual thoughts and emotions. Yet their attempts are repeatedly rebuffed, as totalitarian surveillance destroys individual autonomy to the point that personal preferences, emotions, and aspirations are dissolved in acquiescence to societal will. Even minor daily experiences of surveillance can have consequences of this kind, as reflected in Amabile's (1979) finding that minimal surveillance undermines creativity in laboratory tasks.

In a world that was perfectly public, however, these skirmishes between individual and social environment would not happen. Mental control in *perfectly* public circumstances is not needed or possible because complete surveillance brings with it direct and constant social control of behavior. The wrong look or act is met with a challenge that is usually immediate and largely inescapable. With no time to premeditate any intended subterfuge, individuals are on a short leash to the group's wishes. Unshared thoughts are difficult to sustain, as the lack of privacy preempts even the inception of thoughts and emotions separate enough from those approved by others so as to require control at all. Only when we have moments in private can we generate a sufficient range of individual mental states that their divergence from the group's wishes becomes a matter of our concern.

In the early history of society, these moments in private seem not even to have been an option. Among the ancients, there was little need for mental control because there was little privacy. Aries (1962) observed: "The historians taught us long ago that the King was never left alone. But in fact, until the end of the seventeenth century, nobody was ever left alone. The density of social life made isolation virtually impossible, and people who managed to shut themselves up in a room for some time were regarded as exceptional characters: relations between peers, relations between people of the same class but dependent on one another, relations between masters and servants—these everyday relations never left a man by himself" (p. 398). The person who kept any private life may have been revered as holy, or cast out as profane, but was not allowed to blend into society.

Individuality and a private mental life are relatively recent arrivals in human psychology for the very reason that privacy itself is a product of recent times. Embedded as we are in contemporary democratic societies, we may find it hard to imagine a communal life in which privacy and individuality are absent (see, for example, Altman, 1977). But social tolerance for individuality does vary over time, even in recent history. The era of McCarthyism in the United States in the 1950s, for example, showed a peak in societal fear of secrecy. Conspiracies of individuals and groups were imagined everywhere in a national paranoia about Communist infiltration, and individual autonomy suffered a local historical ebb as a result (Shils, 1956). Even in democratic society, government shows an interest from time to time in controlling individual minds for the common welfare, and there are legal precedents regarding the exercise of such control (Beyer,

1983). In light of these examples, long-term trends in the overall level of individual autonomy do seem conceivable.

The longest-term trend in individuality tracks a basic trend in human social organization—the progressive increase in societal size. Prehistoric human groups were never as large as societies now or in recorded history, as they usually centered on clans or families. Association beyond such kinship lines involves key changes in social structure that allow the development of interaction among roles and positions rather than among specific individuals, and according to norms and rules rather than by specific agreements (Machalek, 1992). Ultimately, this movement from situated, specific social entanglements to general and interchangeable ones creates room for privacy and individuality. The person governed by abstract connections to society has greater freedom to be anonymous, and thus to think and feel independently.

In line with the general movement toward individuality predicted by societal size, there are indications that social pressures for the formation of individual identity have increased over time (Baumeister, 1986). With the destabilization or trivialization of such easy identity markers as geographical home, ancestral background, marriage, work, gender, age, and social rank, progressively more emphasis is placed on relatively impermanent and abstract indicators of personal identity—what one is feeling or thinking or how one perceives oneself. People spend greater time and resources in determining who they are, drawing their individuality not from clear social markers but from distinctions between their inner lives and those of others.

Although individuals are now much more clearly separate from others than they have been in the past, they nonetheless find they must live with others. Private life now mixes with public life, as people move readily from solitude to association and back again. There is plenty of time for individual thoughts, emotions, and motives to build in the absence of social pressures, and to be problematic when social demands make them inappropriate. In modern society, then, there is sufficient absence of moment-to-moment social control that many of the functions of such control are allotted to the individual. In this transformation, we find the wellsprings of mental control.

Development of Mental Control

Like the kings of old, infants have no privacy at all. They are cuddled, fed, swaddled, and bedded—the target of gazes, smiles, stares, and goofy looks all day long. Children, too, are under public scrutiny at all times and suffer constant control by their elders. This parallel suggests that human development recapitulates the history of society—in that each person moves from direct social control of the mind early on to the later exercise of individual mental control.

Freud was probably the most influential proponent of this idea. In his words, "The long period of childhood, during which the growing human lives in dependence upon his parents, leaves behind it a precipitate, which

forms within his ego a special agency in which this parental influence is prolonged. It has received the name of *superego*" (Freud, 1949, p. 14). In the functions of the superego, Freud described how mental control may exist as a lifelong echo of the social control parents exert over the behavior and the mind of the child.

It is, after all, not just outward behavior that parents wish to influence. The longer-term goal of the social control exercised by parents is to enable the child to achieve autonomous self-control through the exercise of mental control. We want little Kelsey, who experiences disgust at the mere sight of broccoli, to eat it anyway—not necessarily because *we* want her to, but out of enjoyment and the realization that it is good for her. Similarly, we want little Brian to inhibit disappointment when Aunt Susan's birthday present to him turns out to be underwear for the third year in a row. And once again we want him to do so not out of a fear of punishment but through the realization that anything short of a smile and a hug would hurt Aunt Susan's feelings.

Parents are pleased, no doubt, when their children become capable of managing the outward expressions of socially wanted mental states. With development, children do become able to control emotional expression in social situations—for example, responding to the presence of others by inhibiting facial expressions during exposure to emotion-eliciting slides (Yarczower & Daruns, 1982). Parents may be more gratified, however, when these outward reflections of mental control are accompanied by inner processes that produce actual reductions in the degree to which emotional thoughts are entertained and emotions themselves are experienced. Indeed, the course of emotional development through life seems to be one of steadily increasing autonomous control (Carstenson, 1987; Lewis & Michalson, 1983; McCoy & Masters, 1990).

Similar developments of internal strategies for mental control occur in the acquisition of skills in the delay of gratification and resistance to temptation. Children become able to forego a small, immediate reward in favor of a larger, delayed reward as they learn to wield mental control strategies. Preschoolers can manage to keep their hands off marshmallows, for example, when they have been instructed to think about how marshmallows are white and puffy like clouds rather than how they are sweet, soft, and chewy (Mischel & Baker, 1975). Similarly, preschoolers can be coaxed into persisting on a dull, repetitive task while faced with a temptation in the form of an attractive toy when they are supplied with plans to focus their attention away from the temptation (Mischel & Patterson, 1976; Patterson & Mischel, 1976).

Development of mental control is a gradual process involving the acquisition of a variety of strategies for influencing one's own mental states. Its occurrence is by no means inevitable or automatic, as James recognized in his comment on the willful control of attention: "An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about" (James, 1892, p. 95). As we see it, social control is necessary for the development of mental control, but not sufficient, as the eventual de-

velopment of freedom from social control is needed to begin the dialogue between the controlled and the controlling parts of the mind.

SOCIAL INTERACTION AND MENTAL CONTROL

If people control their minds for social purposes, there should be many observable consequences of social presence. People without the presence of others should seldom engage in intentional strategies designed to influence their mental contents. They should feel what they feel, think what they think, and desire what they desire without many second thoughts about how these things will influence their social interactions. People in public, however—and particularly those who are emerging from the private state and anticipate imminent social presence—should often engage in strategies to influence their mental contents in socially useful directions.

Strategic and Tactical Mental Control

Mental contents can be useful to social interaction at two stages—before the fitting social behaviors have been determined, and after the behaviors have been determined. It is useful to distinguish the operation of mental control at these times by reference to a distinction that is familiar to the military—between strategic operations that occur before engagement and tactical operations that occur during it. Before appropriate social behavior is chosen, *strategic* mental control operates to determine what behaviors are useful, how the self should be presented, and which inner states should be expressed. Thus, for example, in anticipation of interaction with others—especially powerful ones—people may intentionally scrutinize the others and think in detail about them (Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1976; Erber & Fiske, 1984; Knight & Vallacher, 1981). It makes sense in these circumstances to concentrate one's mind on the potential interaction partner, as such thoughts will be practical in learning about the partner and deciding how to behave.

Tactical mental control, in turn, involves promoting thoughts, emotions, or motives that are compatible with the social behaviors that have been selected for enactment. Once we know what we are going to do, in other words, we attempt to attain states of mind that foster and do not interfere with behavior production. For instance, in anticipation of lying to someone, we might at least briefly lend the lie some credence in our own minds, rehearsing it and entertaining it as though it were true. We try to get the feel of it, appreciate its implications, and so more effectively feign our belief. At the same time we must also clear our minds of incompatible thoughts—sweeping away not only our contemplation of the truth but also setting aside any worries we will blurt it out or think about what might happen if our deception were revealed. Only by these elaborate mental activities can we clear the way for the unimpeded manufacture of the socially appropriate action.

The operation of tactical mental control can be summarized in terms of three processes (see Table 3.1): *Suppression of one's natural state of mind, expression of one's preferred state of mind,* and *suppression of performance-related states* that might accrue from concerns about the success of this activity. Ideally, one would like to attain a state of thought, emotion, or desire that is entirely compatible with what one must do in the social setting, and be free of the thoughts, emotions, or desires that would normally come to mind without the social pressure. In addition, one must deal with performance concerns—the fears of what will happen if the appropriate states and actions are not expressed. These must be suppressed as part of the process of avoiding the incidental actions—nervous twitches, shifting eyes, quavering voices, or the like—that might give us away as amateurish performers.

Some circumstances and social behaviors induce a stronger emphasis on expression of the preferred state, whereas others tip the balance toward suppression of the natural state (Hochschild, 1979; Fiske, 1989). Most clearly, the social situations that prompt the *initiation* of social behavior bring with them a relative emphasis on expression. To make up a lie, generate a happy mood, fake an orgasm, feign delight, or pretend to be angry, one must concentrate attention on mental states compatible with the intended activity or expression. These kinds of activities require inventing relevant thoughts and emotions, and they thus tax the person's capacity to generate new states of mind at will. The social situations that prompt the *inhibition* of social behavior, in turn, bring along a relative emphasis on suppression. To keep a secret, stifle a laugh, abstain from orgasm, hold back an angry rebuke, or control a sad mood, one must suppress mental states that are compatible with the behavior that is being arrested.

Typically, self-presentation theories tend to emphasize behavior initiation over inhibition. Jones and Pittman (1982), for example, noted several possible self-images a person might want to create for different social predicaments—from likable or competent to dangerous, worthy, or helpless. To suggest that people are so creative as to originate behaviors that reflect these traits in daily life, however, is probably to overlook the sheer difficulty of generating new actions. Rather than inventing a wonderful new excuse for each time we are late, for example, we may use old ones or simply say nothing and hope it blows over. The everyday presentation of self probably calls on the person to be silent at the right times as often as it requires the production of novel actions, and for this reason the mental control associated with social life is likely to draw on the skills of suppression as well as those of expression.

TABLE 3.1 Mental Control in Self-Presentation

MENTAL CONTENT	ASSOCIATED POTENTIAL ACTION	MENTAL CONTROL
Natural State of Mind	Natural Action	Suppression
Preferred State of Mind	Preferred Action	Expression
Performance-Related States	Incidental Action	Suppression

In any event, we do try to achieve behavior-compatible states of mind in social settings. After all, action flows from what is on our minds. Although our acts may not always be the consequence of prior conscious intentions, both the actions we intend and those we simply find ourselves doing seem to arise from the admixture of our current conscious contents (e.g., James, 1890; Klinger, 1978; Vallacher, this volume). It is natural that we would anticipate cross-fertilization between our covert processes of thought, emotion, and motivation on the one hand, and our overt processes of talk, nonverbal expression, and action on the other. Concern that covert processes would leak into overt processes keeps us working constantly to make the covert processes as benign as possible.

The operation of tactical mental control makes our minds reflect our outward social performances. To act our parts in the play of life, we subscribe to the acting "method" (Stanislavski, 1965) and do what we can to experience the inner states from which our social behavior appears to radiate (and overcome those that should not be its source). Jones (1990) puts it this way: "Unless I am a completely shameless strategist, when I tell a lady that she is brilliant, witty, or beautiful, I will want to convince myself that she at least falls within the general range of those to whom such encomia would be applicable" (p. 216). Hence, we may come to believe what we say about ourselves (Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981), profess enjoyment of what we do in public (Zimbardo, 1969), or even believe something just because we expect to hear it (McFarland, Ross, & Conway, 1984).

Bringing our inner states into harmony with our social behavior is not just a matter of being consistent. In all likelihood, at least some inward experience of what we do is necessary to make our self-presentations effective as well. Dale Carnegie's (1936) memorable advice on how to win friends and influence people admonishes us to "give honest and sincere appreciation" to others, and to "become genuinely interested in other people." Like the paradoxical demand to "be spontaneous," these suggestions seem to require self-deception in addition to the deception of others. We are asked not only to *act* appreciative or interested, but to *be* these things honestly and genuinely. If we are to do this in any sensible way at all, the only path would seem to be through mental control. Making some part of our minds harmonize with our behavior can provide at least a modicum of the guileless authenticity we seek. At least, with this harmony we may not have to work as hard to suppress the performance-related concerns that would gather if we permitted inappropriate mental states to persist and confuse us.

The Regulation of Thought

If mental control arises in social interaction, thought regulation should be most evident in social settings. Even when thought regulation persists in private, however, it should be traceable to prior or anticipated social pressures. There is evidence for two sides of this proposition: The idea that social presence can prompt concentration on thoughts relevant to appropriate social behavior, and the idea that social presence can prompt suppression of thoughts relevant to inappropriate social behavior.

Regarding concentration, for example, Pope (1978) has shown that reports of the stream of consciousness indicate more shifts in content and greater focus on the present when the person is in the presence of another—even when the other cannot hear the person's think-aloud report. People in the presence of others experience fewer daydream-like episodes of thought, and their minds are less prone to drift away from the current situation (Antrobus, Singer, & Greenberg, 1966). Such presence of mind is likely to bring the mind into alignment with social behavior. Thoughts more compatible with behavior are commonly reported as resulting from various manifestations of social presence in the literatures on self-focused attention (Pryor, Gibbons, Wicklund, Fazio, & Hood, 1977), impression management (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971), and accountability (Tetlock, 1983).

Suppression of thoughts also follows from social presence, but the evidence for this has more to do with implied than actual social presence. Certainly people clearly anticipate that social disapproval will follow if they reveal personal weaknesses or stigmatizing traumatic events to others (Pennebaker, 1988, 1990; Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983; Tait & Silver, 1989), so there is a tendency to suppress thoughts relevant to social shortcomings of the self whenever these thoughts might prompt revelation. Freud (1953) expressed the more general insight that the social suppression of thinking centers on taboo topics, particularly sexual or aggressive ones, because behavior associated with these thoughts, not to mention disclosure of the thoughts themselves, has the continuing potential to create serious social disruptions.

An intriguing and apt example of the social production of thought suppression is provided in research by Carr and Axsom (1992). In their study, subjects were asked merely to talk for a time with a person in a wheelchair. This is a situation in which people might have the disability come to mind—but then suppress the thought as a way to avoid talking about it. For some subjects in the study, this suppression strategy was in fact recommended by the experimenters. For others, the strategy of purposefully thinking about the disability was recommended, and for others no strategy was mentioned. Measures of subjects' discomfort during the interaction indicated that the suppression group felt most comfortable, and the group who thought about the disability felt the least comfortable. This suggests that people would commonly adopt a suppression strategy to facilitate interactions about secret or otherwise socially maladroit topics.

Of course, there are reasons for suppression that are not so obviously social—as when one suppresses thoughts of pain while in the dentist's chair, or suppresses thoughts about food when dieting. But even in these cases there is some reason to believe that social forces are operating. In the case of pain, for example, it is unclear whether people would suppress pain thoughts were it not for a desire to appear stoic and calm to others (Lyman & Scott, 1968). All alone in the room, we might simply think about the pain and howl like a wiener dog. In the case of dieting, alcohol abstention,

or other forms of self-control, it is also possible to envision strong social forces pressuring the person to keep the behavior (and hence, the relevant thoughts) at bay.

Research on thought suppression suggests that any attempt to stop thinking about something promotes preoccupation with the very thought that is unwanted. Wegner, Schneider, Carter, and White (1987) have found, for instance, that attempts to suppress a thought in the laboratory can prompt recurrence of that thought. In this study, subjects were asked to try to stop thinking about a white bear as they reported their conscious thoughts. This was generally impossible for everyone, and the degree of subjects' preoccupation with the unwanted thought was revealed yet further when they were later asked to go ahead and think about a white bear. Reports of thoughts became very frequent, more so even than among subjects who were simply asked to think about a white bear from the outset.

Such preoccupation with a forbidden thought was also observed by Wegner, Shortt, Blake, and Page (1990), but in this case the thought was sex. In one experiment, subjects showed elevated skin conductance levels (SCL) when they were asked *not* to think of sex—levels just as high as they showed when asked *to* think about sex. In a second experiment, this overall effect on level of skin conductance was found to dissipate over a 3-minute interval. But in a third study examining suppression of sex thoughts over a 30-minute period, the influence of the suppressed thought was found to persist.

Subjects in this study were asked to report their thoughts aloud, and the covariation of sex thoughts with SCL was examined minute-by-minute for the entire period. A significant correlation was observed, such that minutes in which sex was mentioned also exhibited higher SCL. This was *not* the case for a period in which subjects were trying to think about sex or for a comparison period in which they tried not to think of the weather. Apparently, trying not to think about something that is already exciting produces renewed excitement whenever the thought intrudes on one's consciousness. Pennebaker and Chew (1985) reported similar results, in that SCL was enhanced among people who were inhibiting expression of a secret.

Findings of this kind provide hints about the social sources of sexual obsessions. People who interpret religious teachings or social mores to suggest that they should not think about sex are at risk, it would seem, for the development of suppression-induced obsessions. Such suppression of sexual thoughts is more popular than one might imagine, as even former President Jimmy Carter understood his religious training to mean that sexual thoughts are wrong and should be suppressed—and mentioned this abashedly in a *Playboy* magazine interview during his presidential campaign. His career fared much better, however, than did that of two other "Jimmies" who foreswore sexual thoughts—Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker.

Both of these fallen televangelists mentioned in autobiographies they penned prior to their eventual downfalls that they held strong religious convictions to resist unclean thoughts (Bakker, 1976; Swaggart, 1977). If their subsequent records of sexual activity are any measure, suppression

is indeed the parent of obsession. Both men were involved in unseemly sex scandals that toppled their ministries. Although we will never know if thought suppression was truly the operative factor in these particular cases, there is evidence that suppressed sexual thoughts are implicated in the development of obsessive sexual preoccupation. Studies of sexual deviants point to histories of unusually high levels of social pressure against sexuality in their adolescent family environments (e.g., Goldstein & Kant, 1973). It is possible to wonder just how often sexual deviance arises not from excessive permissiveness but rather from social repression and the subsequent manufacture of suppression-induced preoccupation.

The more general principle to be derived from this example is that socially disapproved thoughts will commonly be subject to suppression—and may therefore become obsessive preoccupations. People may become highly entrained on just those thoughts that social forces would wipe from their minds. This means there is likely to be a correspondence between thought topics that are socially disapproved and those that appear as obsessive concerns among individuals. Obsessive thinking does often center on private or taboo topics such as sexuality, aggression, personal shortcomings, fears, hygiene, and the like (Rachman & Hodgson, 1980; Stekel, 1949), and obsessive concern with negative thoughts—in the form of depression—would seem to be socially disapproved as well (Coyne, 1989). It is noteworthy also that secret or disapproved love affairs tend to be the focus of greater cognitive preoccupation than those that are fully public (Wegner, Lane, & Dimitri, 1992).

The eventual result of all this interest in what is socially taboo is that people will tend to perceive themselves as having private thoughts that are decidely antisocial (see Turner, 1976). In other words, social pressures may operate not to bring individual minds closer to the social ideal, but to push them away from the norm. Individuals may come over time to perceive themselves as quite the opposite of what society wants—and not because they are indeed so deviant, but just because they have tried to stop thinking of deviant things for society's sake. Ironically, this then means that the "inner pool of experience" that individuals harbor as the source of their distinction from the group may in fact be created by the very desire to follow the group's wishes. In trying to suppress thoughts for social purposes, we become obsessed with our private ruminations and come to see them as far more extensive than they truly may be.

In sum, there is reason to believe that social presence influences people to engage in the regulation of thought. At this point, the evidence tells an interesting but incomplete story. Although we do not have direct indications that social presence regularly influences concentration and suppression, we do know that some cases of the dysregulation of thought seem attributable to social origins.

Regulation of Mood

Mood regulation, like the self-control of thinking, may be traced in large part to anticipated social pressures. We try to get into moods that will

facilitate our social interaction, quelling private extremes of mood because we see them as potentially disruptive. This notion runs counter to the prevailing model of mood control—the purely hedonic theory that people generally try to improve their moods (Clark & Isen, 1982; Isen, 1986; Klinger, 1982; Wenzlaff, Wegner, & Roper, 1988; Zillman, 1988). Good moods are supposedly inherently pleasant and thus anyone would do anything to maintain and perhaps prolong them. Bad moods, on the other hand, are aversive, and thus there should be a tendency to repair bad moods whenever they occur. In fact, it has been argued that nothing short of being overworked or tired can prevent people from engaging in mood-repair strategies (Clark & Isen, 1982).

The hedonic model does not fully capture the social dynamics of mood control. For example, sometimes one may want to dwell on the blues and listen to the Blues to help do just that. On other occasions, one must try at length to hold back a grin brought on by a particularly elating experience. When we go to parties we try to be happy even though we have been preoccupied with our finances or our children's mental health. When we attend a funeral, or hear about a friend's misfortune, we try to be sad even though we just had an article accepted after four years of revisions and resubmissions.

The point is that the world around us places constraints not only on what moods we display but also on what moods to experience in a given situation. The notion that people actively work on inducing or inhibiting feelings so as to render them socially appropriate was expressed by Goffman as follows: "We find that participants will hold in check certain psychological states and attitudes, for after all, the very general rule that one enter into the prevailing mood in the encounter carries the understanding that contradictory feelings will be in abeyance. . . . So generally, in fact, does one suppress unsuitable affect, that we need to look at offenses to this rule to be reminded of its usual operation" (Goffman, 1961, p. 23).

Goffman's insights into mood control are noteworthy for two reasons. First, they point to the importance of social encounters as instigators of mood control. Second, they suggest that under the right circumstances we may try to inhibit both positive and negative moods. The idea that emotions might be controlled in this way has now been echoed by others (e.g., Baumeister & Cooper, 1981; Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Lyman & Scott, 1968). Evidence that people try to attenuate both positive and negative moods in certain social situations has been provided by Erber and Wegner (1992). In this study, musical mood inductions were used to put subjects in either happy or sad moods, and subjects were led to expect that they would either soon interact with another person or would spend some time alone.

Subjects' mood-control tendencies were then assessed by allowing them to choose from among a variety of newspaper articles the ones they would prefer to read. Headlines of articles were presented that in pretesting had identified the headlines as depressing (e.g, "Man facing death penalty for killing tot"), neutral (e.g., "Shuttle workers load Galileo on Atlantis"), or cheerful (e.g., "Adventurer aborts attempt to cross Bering Strait in a tub"), and subjects' preferences were recorded. As shown in Figure 3.1, those

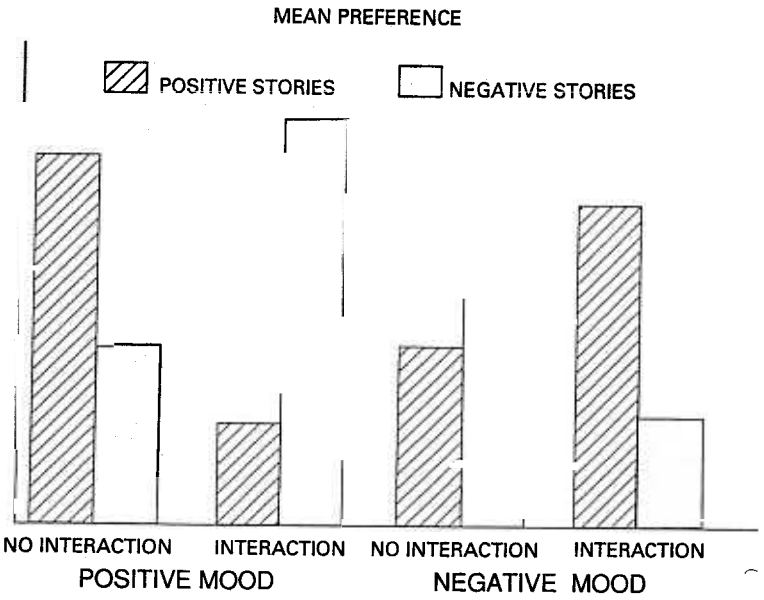

FIGURE 3.1 Positive and negative story preferences as a function of subject mood and anticipation of interaction. Data from Erber and Wegner (1992).

subjects who anticipated being alone tended to prefer stories consistent with their moods. Those who anticipated social interaction, however, chose articles that contrasted with their mood—seemingly in an attempt to neutralize the mood in service of the upcoming interaction. This was true for subjects in happy and sad moods alike. Sad subjects selected cheerful articles and happy subjects selected depressing articles in preparation for their interaction.

Evidence for mood regulation in anticipation of social interaction is not restricted to neutralization. Some interactions may benefit more from the production or maintenance of a particular mood or emotion. O'Neal and Taylor (1989), for example, angered subjects and then asked them to indicate their preferences for aggressive videos. Prior to indicating their preferences, subjects either knew that they would have a chance to retaliate against the provoker or were not provided with an opportunity to retaliate. As it turned out, subjects who knew they had a chance to retaliate showed a higher preference for aggressive videos than subjects who had no chance to retaliate, presumably because of their propensity to foster or maintain the feelings necessary to get even. Subjects with no chance for retaliation tended to prefer humorous videos more than did retaliation subjects, presumably because they thought them to be handy in ridding themselves of the hostile feelings for which they had little use.

Further support for the idea that people regulate their moods for the

purpose of social interaction comes from Tesser and Rosen's (1975) work on people's reluctance to transmit bad news. To convey good news or bad news requires that one take on a mood that is compatible with the valence of the news. After all, to giggle while telling a man that his house burned down may not just be awkward but wildly inappropriate. Similarly, to tell a woman she won a million dollars in a sweepstakes and doing so with a glum face may arouse the suspicion on the part of the recipient that we are perhaps envious. Thus we are better off generating an emotional state congruent with the message we have to convey. In support of this idea, Tesser, Rosen, and Waranch (1973) found that the mood of subjects who had to transmit bad news became more unpleasant as the interaction approached. The mood of subjects who had to transmit good news, on the other hand, became more pleasant.

It appears then that anticipating social interaction is a powerful instigator of mood regulation. Which direction our regulation attempts take may depend on the particular interaction goals. In many cases our attempts toward regulating our moods involve neutralizing an existing negative or positive mood. This may be especially true when we know little about the person with whom we expect to interact and the situation in which the interaction is to take place, as was the case in the Erber and Wegner (1992) study. From this point of view, neutralization can perhaps be considered to be the default setting in mood regulation. On the other hand, if we wish to yell at a salesperson for selling us a faulty product our interaction goal dictates that we do everything to maintain the anger we experienced at the time we opened the box. Similarly, if our interaction goal is to come across as sympathetic individuals we are likely to want to feel sad or happy depending on what the situation requires.

One final set of issues in the mental control of moods concerns the specific tactics through which mood regulation is achieved. Hochschild (1979, 1983) has suggested that it takes a certain amount of "emotion work" to change moods. The very use of the term "work" suggests that the mental control of moods involves effortful attempts to change the expressive, bodily, or cognitive aspects of one's mood. Thus, in order to control their moods, people might go beyond seeking out positive or negative stimuli as in the study by Erber and Wegner (1992). They might attempt to change their moods through changes in their own facial expressions (Laird, 1974; Strack, Martin, & Stepper, 1988). They might exercise to induce levels of physiological arousal incompatible with depression (McCann & Holmes, 1984) and on the cognitive side, they might try to recall memories incongruent with their mood (Parrott & Sabini, 1990; Slyker & McNally, 1991) or immerse themselves in a task that absorbs their mood (Erber & Tesser, 1992). A variety of strategies might be initiated when the social circumstances require that we regulate our moods.

THE PRICE OF MENTAL CONTROL

The benefits of mental control in social interaction are clear. If we control our minds, we can create smooth interactions with others in which our intentional self-presentations flow easily from their mental sources. We can converse without being confused or disrupted by contradictory thoughts; we can express emotions that will follow clearly from the social setting and not betray our inner turmoil; we can concentrate on what we desire and suppress what we wish, so not to be bothered by irrelevant images—or the lack of relevant ones—in the course of planning our social behaviors. The person who masters mental control gains clarity of mind in social interaction.

This picture of the fluid operation of mental control is, of course, an exaggeration. Mental control may be a valued ideal, but it is seldom achieved or perfected to the degree that it characterizes broad stretches of our lives. It is perhaps far more typical for individuals to be filled with worries and second thoughts in interaction, trying not to let their private thoughts or emotions leak through, and fretting over problems that mental control itself may set in motion. The plan to control our minds is, after all, a tall order. Given that we sometimes cannot control even the thought of a white bear, it may be that mental control is often incomplete.

The failure of mental control is probably not due to lack of trying. People surely attempt to control their minds and moods far more often than they succeed. The dangers of mental control are more inclined to arise from the complicated and potentially unpredictable processes that are set in motion by the control attempts themselves (Wegner et al., 1987; Wenzlaff, Wegner, & Klein, 1991). In this view, although people may on occasion make use of mental control to facilitate social interaction, they may often find that it gets in their way. Just as it might be unusually difficult to stay alive if we counted on intentional control to draw every breath of air, our minds can become cluttered and ineffective if we fill them with mental notes to the effect that one part should control another.

The price of mental control, then, is exacted when we find that we have tried to control our minds beyond our abilities. We may discover that whenever our attention is required for other tasks, mental control must be relaxed. This is the simple problem of attentional capacity that plagues all our attempts to perform multiple mental tasks at once. Although we may learn to automatize some previously controlled tasks and so add new layers of control in a way, we are nonetheless stymied by the occurrence of conditions that require too much attention. This means, for instance, that when social circumstances at a dinner party require we smile, have fun, act interested, enjoy the food, and think of witty things to say, we may fail in at least one task and go home later describing the other guests as boring, the food as bland, or our own contributions as less than inspired.

These lapses are to be expected, and most of us learn by adulthood not to try to keep too many mental control tasks operative at once. We seek out aids to control such as external stimuli that guide our attention or influence our mood (Wegner, 1989), or we forego some control attempts in the pursuit of others. Ultimately, we must recognize that the luxury of mental control comes at the steep price of unpredictable losses in mental function that may occur with its overuse. Like the "myopia" that comes from alcohol intoxication (Steele & Josephs, 1990), the "cognitive busyness" that comes from attentionally demanding distractions (Gilbert, 1991), or the "costs of denial" that occur with stressful life events (Lazarus, 1983), excess mental control can result in a kind of mental paralysis.

Mental paralysis in social settings is immediately obvious. It involves

the breakdown of controlled mental accommodation to social circumstance, and the appearance instead of whatever automatic responses remain. Most often, this amounts to simple and total inhibition, the freezing in the glare of social scrutiny that happens when people desire too much control at once (DePaulo, Lanier, & Davis, 1983). Short of this complete collapse, mental paralysis may also involve a reduction of responsiveness or attention to the degree that only some single social purpose is served (Vallacher, Wegner, & Somoza, 1989). The person who is overburdened with desires to control the mind becomes stupid, driven by only one line of thinking or some single, easily followed creed (Gilbert, Krull, & Pelham, 1987).

Beyond the difficulties that follow from the conflict among various demands on mental capacity, there may be further complications that arise from the very nature of mental control. Wegner and Erber (1992) have suggested that any attempt at mental control brings with it the ironic operation of mental monitoring processes that are likely to undermine that control. When a person tries to suppress a thought, for example, this intention may introduce an automatic, unconscious mental process that searches for that very thought. After all, an ongoing search of this kind would seem to be needed to determine when the thought has returned so that controlled, conscious processes of self-distraction can be reinitiated. And just as suppression may thus contain the seeds of attention to the suppressed thought, concentration may produce the beginnings of distraction, the avoidance of depression may imply sensitivity to depressing thoughts and feelings, and so on.

Mental control is at once a marvelous human ability and a dangerous tool. People no doubt wield it frequently and well in bringing their minds into proper alignment with social demands. But they do this with the risk that their control attempts, once initiated, make them ever-vulnerable to the disintegration of control into one of the extremes of mental activity—obsession on the one hand and oblivion on the other.

CONCLUSIONS

The foundations of mental control are difficult to uncover. Like the foundations of a building that are deep below the earth, and that support a structure that cannot reasonably be moved, they are so basic and so deep that they can only be understood with very sensitive techniques and considerable investigation. This chapter provides a plan for exploring those foundations. In tracing all of mental control to social origins, however, we are making a bold plan that may be mistaken. People engaged in the everyday exercise of mental control might often be hard-pressed to believe that their every impulse to squelch a thought or cover up a feeling is the result of some social impetus.

The motive to control the mind often seems to well up from deep inside us. For example, the highly religious young man who is dearly trying to hold back his sexual thoughts and urges, after all, is not likely to say he is resisting these things for the benefit of others. He is engaged in a very personal struggle. The desire to control the mind can be heartfelt, genuine, and even obsessive in itself. Indeed, the desire to avoid certain thoughts or feelings may often be so strong that individuals create their own psychopathologies in the attempt to gain mental control (see Wegner, 1989). The obsessive person may be troubled by recurrent thoughts, for example, but may desire so profoundly to expunge those thoughts that the thought suppression fuels the continued obsession. The phobic person may likewise give new life to fears each time he or she attempts to avoid thoughts or feelings associated with the feared object.

The power and sincerity of attempts to control the mind are not necessarily useful clues to the source of these attempts. People can be motivated by social forces in very personal ways, and this is our idea about how mental control is energized and directed. This chapter has marshalled a range of evidence suggesting that social forces are either present or anticipated each time mental control is employed. Although we have uncovered what we think are sound and logical reasons for why mental control arises in the context of social interaction, and for why it would not be necessary otherwise, the argument we are making is necessarily inductive and is thus always open to counter-evidence. We do know that people commonly control their minds for social purposes in daily life. It has been shown experimentally that people suppress thoughts and control moods for social reasons. And the evidence available at this time leads us to surmise as well that mental control has developed over the course of human history and over the course of the individual human life. In both cases, the relaxation of total social control leaves in the hands of the individual the job of maintaining personal mental control in anticipation of renewed social contact.

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