

An Interview with Margaret Singer on Undue Influence¹

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Margaret Singer Ph.D is a clinical psychologist and emeritus adjunct professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. As a nationally renowned expert on cults, brainwashing, and persuasion, she has been an active consultant and expert witness in numerous legal cases and has appeared frequently on television and radio. She has written more than one hundred articles and a book, *Cults in our Midst*, which was published by Jossey-Bass in 1995. Dr. Singer started her career in geriatric research in the late 1940s at the University of Colorado where she studied the adjustment problems of widowhood.

Nexus: You've studied everything from prisoners of war to cults, and now you're interested in elder abuse. What is the common theme in your work?

MS: The common theme is how people go about influencing each other with words through social and psychological manipulations. I am a specialist on brainwashing and thought reform. I am especially interested in elder abuse because I will be 75 pretty soon. I am a good example of a tough old bird who wants to help the other old birds see to it that their roofs and swings and cages don't get stolen.

Nexus: Many of us in the field of elder abuse became interested in undue influence because we were seeing cases in which older people who were clearly competent from a legal and psychological standpoint were making decisions that just didn't make sense to us. Undue influence seemed to offer an explanation. Can you explain exactly what it is?

MS: Undue influence is when people use their role and power to exploit the trust, dependency, and fear of others. They use this power to deceptively gain control over the decision making of the second person.

Nexus: What patterns have you observed in elder abuse cases?

MS: I have seen a lot of widows in their late sixties or early 70s who have homes and considerable wealth, which they inherited from their husbands or acquired over a lifetime. And then, a younger guy moves in on these older ladies and starts making them

¹ This interview was conducted by Lisa Nerenberg for the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, which published *nexus*.

feel as if they were cute 19 year olds again. They bring them flowers, they bring them candy, they take them to places that they haven't been to in years, and they make them forget their age. The next thing you know, the relatives are coming to me saying, "Look, this 45 year old bozo who claims to be a retired stockbroker has moved into my mother's house. She's taking him on expensive vacations and he's convinced her to sign over stocks saying that he can make them grow faster than her broker can." She's being, as they used to say in the old movies, "hornswoggled."

Nexus: Who are likely candidates for this kind of abuse?

MS: Many older women have relied on trustworthy husbands or others to make all of their decisions. As a result, they are very dependent and overly trusting. Many women have conveyed to me, right after widowhood, that they are suddenly terrified. And then someone comes along and starts the seduction.

With older men, it is also often the ones who have recently been widowed. These men have been socialized to being with another person. With single men, its often the ones who have lost a long time friend who was very central in their lives. Suddenly, there's nobody there to talk ideas over with. Often, it's younger women who start bringing them cookies or bowls of soup. Later, they get money out of the older men by saying they are going to cosmetology school, junior college, or social work school. The men sympathize with them and see them as needy daughters. And then they start giving them "presents."

Then we have the more fragile elderly who are not really sprightly enough to make all their business, money, household, and tax decisions. In these cases, it is often the hired help - a housekeeper, chauffeur, cleaning lady, or practical nurse. First, they start telling the older person that there were no phone calls for him or her. They censor the mail and turn people away at the door and convince the older person that they're the only one who really cares about them. They may start to infantilize the person or, if the person is on medication, they will overdose them with sleeping pills, or give them a little shove so that the person falls or feels dizzy. They treat them more and more fragilely until pretty soon the older person feels that they are totally dependent on this individual. Soon, its "why don't you just let me take the checkbook to Safeway and I'll sign the check at the store?" And pretty soon, they have emptied out the checking account. It may sound as if I'm only talking about middle and upper middle class people, but the same thing happens to poor people.

Nexus: During your career, you've dealt with some real pros, people who were extremely skilled in undue influence. In the elder abuse cases, who are the abusers?

MS: It's a whole range. A lot of abusers are real psychopaths or sociopaths who see money, go for it, and have no conscience about it. There are others who have defects in their character and are greedy. And then there are others who are basically okay people who get tempted. I have even worked with some helpers who got angry at the older person they worked for and felt that they deserved what they took because the elderly person was abusive to them. They felt the older person was crotchety and didn't say "thank you," and so they started justifying their behavior and developing a sense of entitlement. There are also people who believe that the world owes them a living. They feel that because they are 45 and this man is 79, they deserve his money.

Nexus: Lets talk more about how abusers carefully construct conditions that increase the older person's vulnerability to persuasion. You've already mentioned isolating the older person and creating dependency. Are there others?

MS: Yes, and they often reach outrageous proportions. Another approach is to create a "siege mentality," which is the illusion that there are enemies lurking everywhere.

Nexus: In the cases we see, it's often service providers who are made out to be the villains.

MS: Right, they start bad mouthing the social worker or the visiting nurse. They'll make the person afraid to take the medicine that the visiting nurse brings or tells them that the police can't be trusted. They tell them that these professionals are going to take away their houses, pensions, and social security, and that they are going to put them in nursing homes. That's the "siege mentality."

Nexus: Sometimes victims get very protective of their abusers.

MS: Because they are so afraid. Because they buy into the siege.

Nexus: How do you "rescue" these people?

MS: You usually need to find a relative who will come in and get control. Once you get the brainwashers or control artists away, you can hire legitimate people and start bringing the person back to reality. You say, "I know this is going to make you feel badly, but I want you to know that 'Bill' lied to you. This happened not because anything was wrong with you, but because he is a very deceptive person." And when they want to know where the poor boy is, you tell them, "Well, he's not a poor boy. He's being well taken care of in the state prison."

Of course its harder when the relatives are wishy-washy about getting involved. Its like the parents of kids who get picked up by cults who keep saying, "Maybe he really wants to be with the cult at the airport soliciting funds." Their counterparts say, "Maybe grandma really loves this old buzzard." Eventually, in the successful cases, the relatives catch on to the fact that the older person is being held like a hostage and is being manipulated.

Nexus: You make it sound easy, getting the abuser away from the victim. Sometimes these people are very enmeshed.

MS: Yes, you may have heard about the Stockholm Syndrome which was identified in 1973 after four people who were held captive in a Stockholm bank vault for six days became attached to the bank robbers. What was astonishing was that the captives said that the police were picking on the bank robbers. That was the first time that the world really recognized that when someone has been held captive and they see that the captor had the power to harm them more but didn't, they develop a strong feeling of gratefulness toward them. It's true in domestic violence, as well. A bond develops between the victim and the person who beats her because after he's stopped, she's grateful that he didn't kill her. And the abuser almost always apologizes.

Nexus: Does vulnerability to undue influence reflect intelligence?

MS: No. It has nothing to do with intelligence. But the more cognitively impaired someone is, the more easily they can be manipulated because they forget things and they don't trust their memories. But you can make anybody believe almost anything if you are enough of a con artist.

Nexus: You've mentioned some factors that make people vulnerable to undue influence, like nutritional deficits, which are common in the elderly.

MS: Yes, that makes somebody more pliable. Instead of giving them a really good meal, these abusers say, "Well, you didn't eat your vegetables last night, so I didn't prepare any tonight." Pretty soon they are just feeding them mush, which makes them very weak and more suggestible. Subjecting them to a lot of noise is another technique. And if you haven't seen the movie Gaslight, you should. I use it as a teaching device. Charles Boyer marries Ingrid Bergman who plays an heiress. He bribes the servants to start dimming the gas lights and when Bergman complains, he says, "What are you talking about?" It slowly drives her crazy. Well, this phrase "gaslighting" has even been written about in psychiatric journals. It's easy to do with the elderly.

Nexus: You testified in a very high profile criminal case here in San Francisco in which a younger man and his accomplices took over the property and assets of a wealthy older woman. The defendants claimed that the older woman had given it all to them voluntarily. What was your role in the case?

MS: I was hired to evaluate the victim. The prosecutors had all kinds of neurologists but they wanted me to evaluate the social influences and forces that had been brought to bear on her. I interviewed her, read the nurse's records, talked to her housekeeper, and pieced together what had happened. The abusers had sequestered the victim, terrified her, deceived her, got the siege mentality going, and got her totally dependent and regressed. When I described the process to the Grand Jury, I could see the lights go on. They were saying "Oh, that's how they do it!"

Nexus: I'm afraid we're going to be seeing a lot more of these cases. Can you offer any advice to service providers, family members, or concerned citizens about what we can do to make the elderly less vulnerable?

MS: Help them get more information, better nutrition, and better health. The more alert people are, the better. Be sure that they have proper lenses in their glasses so that they can watch the newscast and read the newspapers. Make sure that their teeth fit so that they can eat properly. Reducing isolation is also very important. I know priests, rabbis and ministers are busy, but if an older, isolated person has belonged to a church, maybe the church will send someone out to visit.

Tell them about the things we're talking about. In Colorado, 45 years ago, we actually made home and apartment visits and warned people about artful and designing persons. We said, "Hey, it's real lonely and you know you've got to be careful." We think of elder abuse as being a new field but I'm sure we could find a lot of examples of people scamming back in Biblical times.

I also think more and more education is needed to keep families and friends in contact with the elderly, and to get the elderly to understand that the safest thing for them is to stay connected to relatives and people who they have known for a long time. And if they are lonely, they can always turn to established legal organizations like senior centers. The question that intrigues me is how can we help people become critical thinkers from grade school on? So much of our society needs to learn how to evaluate what they hear and read so that they can say no to drugs, to sex, to staying in abusive relationships, and to keep from getting conned on the street.