

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF INDOC

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From a psychological point of view, all of the phases of the Naval flight training program make sense. They are effectively designed to rapidly weed out trainees who are unfit, while at the same time motivating those recruits who can hack it to learn at the highest possible rate. An additional benefit of the program is that the recruits who survive their ordeal come away from their experience with strong positive feelings toward their instructor, the Navy, and the flight training program.

The initial poopie-suited indoctrination period is highly stressful to all of the recruits. It is a period in which they are constantly and purposefully subjected to frustration. Individuals differ a great deal in their ability to cope with frustration, and the Navy doesn't want people in the program whose performance suffers severely when they are frustrated. Studies have shown that people who cannot take frustration are more likely to be neurotic (prone to excessive worry and anxiety), and are more likely to become alcoholics, than people who can tolerate frustration well.

Further studies have shown that neurotic individuals are much more affected by altitude than are normals. In one study at 14,500 feet (where the oxygen concentration is 12 percent compared to 21 percent at sea level) 85 percent of the neurotic subjects were seriously impaired, approached collapse, or actually physically collapsed, compared to only 20 percent of the normal control group. Incidentally, none of the normal control group actually collapsed and 28 percent of the neurotics collapsed.

Obviously, the Navy doesn't want to train people who are this susceptible to the effects of high altitudes. Brutal though it may seem, the highly stressful, frustrating initial indoctrination program is an effective psychological tool for the elimination of undesirable personality characteristics.

One of the ways in which people with high frustration tolerance deal with frustration is to put a great deal of energy into their work. Thus, for those who can take the frustration, the initial indoctrination period produces extremely high motivation and consequent near-optimal learning. The trainee is so scared and anxious to please his instructors that he works extra hard to learn the required material so that there is no chance that he will make a mis-

take and incur their wrath. By using this kind of training program with its high degree of motivation, the Navy can teach material that would take less motivated students twice as long to learn.

A softer approach would give the student the opportunity to rely on his instructor to get him out of a tight situation. We see this problem in civil flight training. If the instructor is too good a guy, we tend to rely on him to get us out of a tight spot and when we inevitably must fly without him sitting next to us, we may not be prepared to act decisively enough. If he has always salvaged a catastrophic landing with a smile and a kindly "it will come with practice," we tend not to learn to act for ourselves. In the Navy program, the trainee is so scared and anxious to please his instructor that he rapidly learns to act decisively for himself because he wouldn't dare make a mistake.

Admittedly, the indoctrination program is brutally hard on the recruits but it does quickly and effectively eliminate misfits and motivate the recruits while instilling each with a high regard for the Navy. How this is done may be seen in an interesting experiment that demonstrated that the more severe a person's initiation or indoctrination into a group, the more highly he comes to regard that group.

The study used three groups of college girls who were being initiated into a sorority. One group was required to stand up in front of the sorority and read a list of the foulest, most obscene sexually oriented words and two vivid descriptions of sexual activities from a current sex book. A second group just read a list of mildly sex-oriented words, and the third or control group had no initiation ceremony. In later analysis, the first group of girls who had the most severe initiation came to have a much higher opinion and valuation of the sorority than those who had mild or no initiations.

For the Navy, then, the severe initiation or indoctrination program serves to quickly weed out misfits and motivate learning while, at the same time, actually building loyalty and team spirit. To use any aspects of such a program in civil flight training would undoubtedly solve our traffic problems by rapidly depleting the ranks of student pilots, but for the Navy's purposes, their method is probably the best. It is based on sound, demonstrable psychological principles, and it works. □