The millennial generation of Americans is often mocked for perceived emotional weakness and insecurity. What critics of liberal “safe space” culture often do not notice is that in addition to being less emotionally stable, younger Americans are also much more effectively manipulated and psychologically controlled.

“Every kid gets a trophy!” begins the favorite rant of many middle-American conservatives. It is a mantra echoed in Amy Chau’s best-selling book “Battle Hymn of a Tiger Mom.” It was repeated in a FOX news TV segment that alleged that children’s TV star Fred Rogers of “ruined a generation of kids” by telling them “you’re special just the way you are.”

Gripes about “Generation Snowflake” seem to everywhere in the western world these days. The term “snowflake” has been picked up to describe these attributes of the younger generation. Urban Dictionary defines this slang term as “a putdown for someone, usually on the political left, who are easily offended or felt they needed a “safe space” away from the harsh realities of the world, but now has morphed into a general putdown for anyone that complains about any subject.”

There is a strong feeling that the lack of harsh consequences and setbacks has made the next generation of Americans into a whiny group of insecure brats who can’t handle adversity and demand “safe spaces” when faced
with too much hardship in the world.

The feeling that American children are not punished harshly enough is echoed around the world. An op-ed in China’s Global Times commented: “In American vernacular, the term "generation snowflake" describes millennials with "glass-like hearts" who feel overwhelmed by academic or professional stresses. I’m curious if this term would have ever been invented had the parents of these "snowflakes" simply put them over their knee every once and while for a good, hard caning.”

But perhaps something else is underlying this perceived character flaw of young Americans, other than merely a society-wide weariness with “tough love" and over-willingness to praise. Perhaps it is simply a more effective means of controlling people.

B.F. Skinner, the Harvard psychologist, became famous for developing the science of behaviorism. He studied how to manipulate and control the behavior of animals and people. One thing his research was very clear on is that reward is far more effective than punishment in controlling people.

Why? The reason is simple. A punished person can often feel like a victim, resent the punisher, and not modify or even examine their behavior.

Long before Skinner’s research, the famed self-help pioneer Dale Carnegie wrote about this in his text “How to Win Friends and Influence People.” He described how the prisons are full of violent criminals who honestly believe they have done nothing wrong, and that they are simply the victim of unfair circumstances.

However, very few people are reluctant to believe something good about themselves. Human beings naturally long for the approval and affection of others. So, praise and a reward of any type immediately affects a person’s behavior. However, beyond affecting their behavior, a reward also impacts their mind. A person being rewarded or praised tends to absorb readily the message of the person rewarding or praising them.

Meanwhile, a reward’s absence or withdrawn affection can often be arranged in a way that the person does not feel like a victim. Rather, the person will begin examining and adjusting their own behavior in the desperate hope of making the reward or praise return.

Over-Socialization

Human beings are social and tribal creatures and naturally long for the approval of others. Being rejected by others causes human beings emotional pain while being accepted fills them with joy.

However, defining one’s individuality, on whatever scale a given society expects, is part of the human experience as well. We all want to believe we are special in some way and celebrate some unique aspect of ourselves.

Social media, be it Facebook, Twitter or Instagram has effectively manipulated both of these seemingly contradictory aspects of the human mind and its relationship to others. On social media, people can post pictures of their personal achievements, everyday life events, and pour out their hearts about their own viewpoint on whatever issue they want to address.

However, every post is followed up with anticipation to see how many “likes” and “shares” it receives. While social media allows us to flaunt our individuality, it also makes us more vulnerable than ever to needing validation from others.

With the constant handing out of seemingly unearned stickers by Kindergarten teachers, in addition to the constant check to see how many “likes” they are receiving from their peers, the need for the validation of others has made American youth particularly afraid to step out of line.

In fact, the “call out culture” of internet Social Justice Warriors is the opposite of the kind of the left-wing activism glorified in the past. Rather than challenging social norms, the young internet activists select an attribute widely perceived to be bad (racism, sexism, homophobia) and then seek to get likes and praise from others by lambasting it in creative and over the top ways.

If anything, SJWism is a kind of “creative conformity” by young people accepting a list of rules assigned to them by their teachers and the mainstream media, and trying to show off how obedient they are in enforcing it or applying it against a widely unnoticed violator.
Curbing Heroism to Control The Mind

Those who attended schools that employed corporal punishment will often reminisce about how the practice sometimes had the opposite of its intended effect. The students who were bold enough to break the rules and face a paddling were often held in admiration by the other students for how “tough” and “brave” they were. In fact, some recall that among athletic young men, getting “licks” became almost a rite of passage, and teenage boys who never misbehaved enough to get a beating from their coach or principal were viewed as cowardly.

Beyond the schoolyard antics, however, admiration for those who were strong enough to willingly endure punishment or the disapproval of others seems to have been deeply important to the history of human civilization. Each nation has its celebrated martyrs who gave their lives for future generations. Saints like Joan of Arc are admired for their total non-conformity, wearing men’s clothes, saying they heard the voice of God, leading soldiers into battle and ultimately being burned at the stake.

The symbol of the Christian faith is the cross on which Christ was executed by authority figures who deemed him to be a dangerous non-conformist who disregarded religious orthodoxy of his time.

The great heroes of the past have not been those who merely enforced the rules and expectations of the society around them in creative, over the top ways that got celebrated. The heroes of the past have been non-conformists, who challenged widespread assumptions, broke existing social norms, enraged authorities figures, and society at large, all in order to bring a higher, but unknown truth into the wider consciousness.

The way a generation of Americans has been reduced to constantly seeking the approval of others has, in a way, deprived them of the ability to be heroic. Reducing the potential for heroism among the population is something that the leaders of any existing social order would most likely prefer. Why? One aspect of all of history's greatest heroes has been their displacing of ineffective or hypocritical leaders and challenging of the status quo.

While the western world presents itself as honoring “human rights” and not repressing its opponents with violence, it seems to have pioneered a method for controlling not only the actions but the very thoughts of the population.

The Super-Hero Fantasy

The fact that younger Americans pile in to see re-make after re-make, telling of some masked nonconformist “superhero” with an unknown identity, who just doesn’t fit in with society, and uses their “superpowers” to help the innocent, is very telling.

The superheroes of the silver screen are doing something that younger Americans subconsciously long for the ability to do. The typical action superhero feels they do not fit in with society. They acquire some abnormal ability, and with it, they do bold things, violating the laws and social norms, taking great risks, in order to defeat forces of evil and carry out acts of great good.

It is worth noting that Superhero films tend to have strong principles and clear villains, not post-modern ambiguity. Increasingly, moral relativism has leaked into society, and even the concept of “good” and “evil” itself has been robbed from the younger generation. But yet, this popular genre of film celebrates a mindset that academia urges us to cast aside. In our world of moral relativism, the script of action, superhero flicks screams out “right and wrong DO exist!”

Within their conformity, political correctness, and emotional weakness, a deep conservatism seems to flow through young Americans. Beneath it all, they hold a deep desire to become heroic, an attribute, once far more common, that the current social order has deprived them of.

Their rallying in support political underdogs like Bernie Sanders or Tulsi Gabbard, and their willingness to embrace “conspiracy theories,” if only in private, shows that on some level, the “over-socialization” has not completely eroded a basic human desire to stand for some kind of truth.

Robert Smith is an independent American researcher and analyst that specializes in social psychology and conflict resolution. He writes especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”