

No Exit: Living With Walls and Fences

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The right to move around is a fundamental human right. Back in 1948, in the wake of World War II, the United Nations declared that all men and women have the right to roam freely in their homeland, to leave, to return if they choose, and to exit again. That political vision recognized a basic psychological truth—that it is a violation of human nature to fence people in.

Even so, the global reality never matched the ideal. Citizens of many nations are still denied the basic liberty to pack up and leave for a better place. What are the psychological consequences when this human liberty is violated? When borders are closed and exit papers withheld?

One would think that being penned in would spark resentment at the least, and perhaps even rebelliousness and political unrest. But some new psychological research is suggesting this may not be the case, that indeed the opposite may be true: Denying citizens their fundamental freedom of movement may ironically transform those citizens into passionate defenders of the status quo—including unfair policies totally unrelated to emigration.

A team of psychological scientists at the University of Waterloo—Kristin Laurin, Steven Shepherd and Aaron Kay—wanted to see the lengths to which people will go to rationalize such political repression. They suspected, because restrictions on emigration often lead to all sorts of other punitive policies, that trapped citizens will rationalize the existence of a repressive regime and all its practices. They tested this idea in some interesting laboratory experiments.

In one study, for example, the scientists primed volunteers' thoughts about either unfettered movement or confinement by having them read futuristic depictions of Canada. Some read of a future with unrestricted travel beyond Canada's borders, while others read that it would be increasingly difficult to leave and settle elsewhere. Afterward, all the volunteers read an account of gender inequality in their country—including the fact that men earn much more than equally qualified women. They were given the option of explaining such unfairness by either blaming the system or by attributing it to genuine differences between men and women.

The researchers studied only women in this experiment, on the assumption that the gender issue would hit closer to home for them. They suspected that women who felt confined would be more likely to rationalize the negative aspects of their lives at home, even something as emotionally powerful as gender inequality. And that's exactly what they found. [As reported on-line in the journal *Psychological Science*](#), the women who felt free to leave home were more critical of their lives at home, blaming gender inequality on an unfair system. Those who felt "stuck" were much less likely to acknowledge the hypothetical Canada's flaws; they were more tolerant of their underclass status, viewing it as a legitimate result of natural differences.

This is cognitive dissonance writ large. Cognitive dissonance is the theory that humans will rationalize

even the most aversive conditions—if they are forced to live with them. These results go even further, suggesting that denial of one liberty can lead victims to rationalize another kind another rights violation altogether—even something as basic as equality under the law—and indeed an entire system. Interestingly, when the scientists reran this experiment with a depiction of Germany rather than Canada, the rationalization of the repressive system vanished. That is to say, the volunteers were motivated not by some abstract belief in freedom, but by the prospect of very personal restrictions on their liberty, at home in Canada. The researchers ran another version of the study, this one involving both men and women, and found the same phenomenon at work.

So how much repression will citizens “make okay”? There may be limits, the Waterloo scientists say. When the former Soviet Union refused to grant exit visas to its Jewish citizens, many of them did the opposite of what these lab results suggest: They formed dissident groups and unrelentingly attacked the repressive regime—not just the Soviet emigration policy but the entire system. Despite the remarkable human ability to rationalize, it may be Soviet repression was too dreadful and immoral to justify.

Wray Herbert’s book, *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind’s Hard-Wired Habits*, will be [published by Crown in September](#). Excerpts from the “We’re Only Human” blog appear regularly in *The Huffington Post* and in *Scientific American Mind*.