

Psychologists and torture: more than a question of interrogation.

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How can organised psychology best promote and protect human rights in relation to military occupation and the detention of terrorist suspects or insurgents? The very terms used to pose this question are problematic and indicate its fundamentally political nature.

Organised psychology refers to bodies like the BPS and the *American (sic) Psychological Association* (APA) but it must be understood that they represent a variety of interests. In the case of the APA for example there are significant numbers of psychologists in the pay of the military and related state organisations as well as a 'Division of Peace Psychology'. *Military Occupation* indicates a particular understanding of the situations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine or Haiti, according to which the liberation of the populations and the bringing of democracy are the last things on the agenda. *Terrorist suspects* and *insurgents* imply contrasting understandings of the origins and motives of political violence, and hence a contrasting understanding of how people should be treated. It is not the intention here to fall into a relativist "it depends upon your point of view", but rather to argue that the whole debate rests on fundamental contradictions of economic and political power whose result is modern neo-imperialism with its resultant

movements of resistance, the whole veiled in an ideological haze that to a greater or lesser degree engulfs the participants.

The October 2006 *Psychologist* reported on the controversy in the APA about psychologists' role in "national security" (or imperial policing). Key aspects of this situation can be summarised in terms of a number of key issues, not all of which were reported by *The Psychologist* or have surfaced within the APA debate. The purpose here is not primarily to document the debate and internal politics of the APA which can be found elsewhere (Behnke, 2006; Moorhead-Slaughter, 2006; Psychologists for Social Responsibility, 2006a; Soldz, 2006a, 2006c; Summers, 1992). Instead the intention is to contextualise this debate in the wider debates and controversies on psychological torture.

1) The APA's recently adopted President's Task Force Report on Psychological Ethics and National Security (American Psychological Association, 2005) (The PENS Report) embraces the US government's "Reservations, Declarations and Understandings" (United States Senate, 1988) to the United Nations Convention on Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (United Nations, 1985) (see McCoy, 2006: 100-101; Soldz, 2006a). There are no less than nineteen of these Reservations, in itself remarkable, but the central issue is the definition of psychological torture itself. The US Reservations, at least if narrowly interpreted, would exempt hooding, forced adoption of stress positions, isolation and sleep denial, the very techniques that formed the core of the CIA methods used at occupied Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and elsewhere (McCoy, 2006; Physicians for Human Rights, 2005) and by the British in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s

(Watson, 1978). So when the APA condemned torture, it may be argued that its definition, being parasitic on the US Reservations, excluded precisely the kind of torture (approved by Defence Secretary Rumsfeld in December 2002) based on psychological research and which psychological interrogation consultants might advise on. Similarly the Reservations and the APA exclude from the definition of torture the newer use of cultural, religious and sexual ridicule again documented at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib.

2) The APA also legitimises the role of psychologists in interrogation. While the APA declaration is clear that the same ethical rules apply to those in health care roles and those in other roles, this legitimisation is in stark contrast to the position adopted by the World Medical Association, its 1975 declaration of Tokyo following the BMA review of the Northern Ireland experience. This declaration proscribed the participation of physicians in designing, or even monitoring interrogation strategies. This rule was also adopted by both the American Medical Association (AMA) and the American Psychiatric Association. Moreover, the 1982 United Nations General Assembly addressed the ethical questions associated with the participation of medical and other health workers in the interrogation of detainees. These principles establish as an absolute rule that health workers "may not engage, actively or passively, in acts which constitute participation in, complicity in, incitement to or attempts to commit torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" (quoted by Rubinstein, Pross, Davidoff, & Iacopino, 2005). The APA then, in contrast to the AMA, by allowing psychologists to participate

or assist in the interrogation process is adopting a position out of step with the medical profession and the wider UN declaration on health workers.

Here the US context is distinctive. The US military established Behavioural Science Consultation Teams that included psychologists to advise the Guantánamo interrogators (Physicians for Human Rights, 2005; Soldz, 2006a, 2006c). While the AMA and the American Psychiatric Association gave clear directions that this was inappropriate, the APA, following its military dominated PENS task force leaves the road open. Perhaps this is why the US military is reported as saying that it is planning to “use only psychologists...to help interrogators devise strategies to get information from detainees at places like Guantánamo Bay” (New York Times, 7 June 2006, cited by Psychologists for Social Responsibility, 2006b).

The BPS (2005) made a clear declaration against torture and the participation of psychologists and the use of psychological knowledge in its design. While it does not explicitly proscribe the participation of psychologists in interrogation, it does endorse the UN declaration so its position is at least implicitly in line with the medical bodies listed above, and at variance with the APA.

3) Most concerning of all, the APA allows its members the "Nuremberg defence" that "I was only following orders". Article 2.02 of the 2002 revision of the APA Ethics code reads

**1.02 Conflicts Between Ethics and Law, Regulations, or Other
Governing Legal Authority**

If psychologists' ethical responsibilities conflict with law, regulations, or other governing legal authority, psychologists make known their commitment to the Ethics Code and take steps to resolve the conflict. If the conflict is unresolvable via such means, psychologists may adhere to the requirements of the law, regulations, or other governing legal authority.

(American Psychological Association, 2002)

The implication is that psychologists are exempted from assisting in torture and abuse if they can claim that they first tried to resolve the conflict between their ethical responsibility and the law, regulations or government legal authority. Otherwise they can invoke the Nuremberg defence, but would still of course be out of step with international law (which the USA does not observe). But this problem would not arise at all if there were a clear ban on all participation in interrogation.

4) The APA's indefensible position is consistent with a fifty year history of collaboration with US state security. As detailed by McCoy (2006) the CIA took up Hebb's Canadian Defence funded work on sensory deprivation, funding further work to take it to its limits in producing psychological breakdown. This research and the phenomenon of sensory deprivation is the cornerstone of psychological torture, a paradigm refined over the years. This further development has been done within the agency - for example in the mass torture of prisoners during the Vietnam war (McCoy, 2006: 60-71), or through the culture specific elements added for Muslim detainees in the

present conflict (Physicians for Human Rights, 2005; Soldz, 2006b). It has also been done through further commissioned research, typically through CIA created funding vehicles such as the Human Ecology Fund (Greenfield, 1977; Harper, 2004; McCoy, 2006; Watson, 1978). The symbiotic relationship of US psychology with influential sections of the US military-security establishment is also suggested by the majority of military psychologists on the PENS task force and what Soldz has argued are carefully crafted rules and guidance to psychologists on this question. The implication is that the APA leadership does not want to risk governmental support for psychology. The problem is that support of psychology by the past and current US governments is by definition deeply compromising for the ethics of the profession, not merely at the level of codes of practice that perhaps do little beyond cementing a profession's identity, but in terms of the very construction of the discipline itself together with its knowledge. Psychologists of our generation certainly didn't learn how classic research by Hebb, Schein, Orne (Harper, 2004), Janis and possibly Milgram (McCoy, 2006: 47-49) was funded by the defence establishment with a view to improved social control in global conflicts.

As a further example of psychological complicity with state security, the CIA's handbook on counter-insurgency, used to such devastating effect on human rights in Central America, is likely to have been written by psychologists, or at least with their substantial input (Gray & Zielinski, 2006).

5) The foregoing analysis suggests that the ethical problem for organised psychology goes well beyond the particular problem of the ethics of interrogation. Returning to the current conflict in Iraq, the question has to be

asked, is the use of torture and ill treatment primarily a matter of interrogation of the individual at all? In Iraq it seems that in the 10 known US prisons, more than 50,000 people were detained at some point in 2005. Many were ill-treated using the various techniques known as psychological torture. At least 26 have been killed (Physicians for Human Rights, 2005). In addition to the casual killings of Iraqis outside prison and atrocities like the total destruction of central Fallujah, this massive intervention has the familiar characteristics of the terror regimes imposed on Vietnam and in Latin America where social control is imposed on a population by the establishment of fear. The torture victims, many of whom are not interrogated, return, in extreme distress as a lesson to the population (Gray, 2006), just as the mutilated corpses left by the US trained death squads in the Latin American dictatorships had the same purpose (CIA, undated).

Our perspective can be broadened further: just as radical psychologists have tried to argue that psychology should extend its analysis to the societal construction of psychological life and the mechanisms of social control (Armistead, 1974; Martín-Baró, 1996; Parker, 1999), so the imperialist state has for years been harnessing its psychology to refine its methods of social control (Herman, 1995; Prilleltensky, 1994), whether through anti-democratic, pro-system propaganda in the core countries of the West (Carey, 1997) or in the control of those populations who try to take on the empire and its economic system (Duckett, 2005; Lira, 2000; Martín-Baró, 1988).

The implication of this analysis is that socially responsible psychologists should by all means work to achieve a coherent stance by organised psychology on torture and interrogation, one that absolutely prohibits any participation, and which is backed by a clear ethical code. But we should not fall into the trap of thinking that this will either change the basic paradigm of social control exerted by the imperialist state or do much by itself to reduce the influence of the security apparatus on North American psychology - itself the hegemonic force in world psychology and one that touches us all.

1840 words (excl. of references)

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