

Psychologists and torture

More than a question of interrogation

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 indicate its fundamentally political nature. 'Organised psychology' refers to bodies like the British Psychological Society and the American Psychological Association (APA), but such bodies represent a variety of interests. For example, there are significant numbers of US psychologists in the pay of the military and related state organisations, as well as an APA 'Division of Peace Psychology'. 'Military occupation' can indicate a particular understanding of the situations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine or Haiti, with varying views on where the liberation of the populations and the bringing of democracy sit on the agenda. 'Terrorist suspects' or 'insurgents' implies contrasting understandings of the motives of political violence, and of how people should be treated.

The APA has entered this complex sociopolitical debate about psychologists' role in 'national security' (see *The Psychologist*, News, October 2006, and this month; Letters, November 2006). There are a number of key issues, not all of which were reported by *The Psychologist* or have surfaced within the APA debate. The main purpose here is not to document the debate and internal politics of the APA – that can be found elsewhere (Behnke, 2006;



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Moorhead-Slaughter, 2006; Psychologists for Social Responsibility, 2006a; Soldz, 2006a, 2006b; Summers, 1992); instead, the intention is to contextualise this debate in the wider debates and controversies on psychological torture. While the key issues we discuss have the APA at their heart, they are relevant to us all, due to the extensive influence of the APA over professional psychology worldwide.

What constitutes 'torture'?

The APA's President's Task Force Report on Psychological Ethics and National Security (The PENS Report: APA, 2005) embraces the US government's 'Reservations, Declarations and Understandings' to the United Nations Convention on Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (see McCoy, 2006; Soldz, 2006b). There are no less than 19 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). Basoglu *et al.* (2007) have recently provided empirical evidence that 'psychological manipulations, humiliating treatment, and forced stress positions, do not seem to be substantially different from physical torture in terms of the severity of mental suffering they cause, the underlying mechanism of traumatic stress, and their long-term psychological outcome'. 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.

The role of psychologists

The APA also legitimises the role of psychologists in interrogation:

...it is consistent with the APA Ethics Code for psychologists to serve in consultative roles to interrogation and information-gathering processes for national security-related purposes...
(APA, 2005, p.1)

While the APA declaration is clear that the same ethical rules apply to those in healthcare 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

WEBLINKS

On the APA controversy: tinyurl.com/38dopf

Psychologists for Social Responsibility: www.psysr.org

The Martín Baró Fund: tinyurl.com/27qwba

The CIA's interrogation manual:

www.kimsoft.com/2000/kubark.htm

UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment: www.hrweb.org/legal/cat.html

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' (cited in Rubinstein *et al.*, 2005).

Therefore, by allowing psychologists to participate or assist in the interrogation process, the APA is adopting a position out of step with both the medical profession (as Anne Anderson of Psychologists for Social Responsibility pointed out in a letter in 2006 to APA President Gerald Koocher) and the wider UN declaration on health workers, while at the same time making a declaration that appears to condemn psychological torture.

The US context is distinctive. The military established Behavioural Science Consultation Teams to advise the Guantánamo interrogators (Miles, 2007; Physicians for Human Rights, 2005; Soldz, 2006a, 2006b). 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. Its position is at least implicitly in line with the medical bodies listed above, and at variance with the APA.

Just following orders?

Most concerning of all, the APA allows its members the 'Nuremberg defence' that 'I

was only following orders'. Article 1.02 of the 2002 revision of the APA Ethics Code reads:

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.
(APA, 2002)

The implication is that psychologists are permitted to assist 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. But this problem would not arise at all if there were a clear ban on all participation in interrogation, as suggested by Anne Anderson's letter to Gerald Koocher of the APA.

As Miles (2004) indicates, the notion that by being present in compromised interrogations psychologists can prevent harm is almost certainly illusory, with significant risks of being 'drawn in' to the whole process. An ethical rulebook is a weak safeguard in such total institutions as the Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib prisons, or in many other military and penal contexts.

The roots of the APA position

The APA rests its declarations on two ethical principles, the first is the uncontroversial 'do no harm', while the second is that 'psychologists are aware of their professional and scientific responsibilities to society'. Former APA President Gerald Koocher (cited in Soldz 2006c) used the combination of these principles to legitimise the involvement of US psychologists in interrogation and other roles in State security.

However, in our view the problem is not one of individual professional practice but of collusion with a whole oppressive system. The APA's position is arguably consistent with a 50-year history of psychologists' 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 (CIA, n.d.-b). This further development has been done within the agency – for example in the mass torture of prisoners during the Vietnam war (McCoy, 2006), 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 psychologists on the PENS Task Force with links to the military (see e.g. tinyurl.com/2186at), and what Soldz has argued are carefully crafted rules and guidance to psychologists on this question. He suggests that the APA leadership does not want to risk governmental support for psychology. As the APA Division 19 (Military Psychology) proudly proclaims, the US Department of Defence is the largest employer of psychologists worldwide. The problem is that support of psychology by the past and current US governments is, almost by definition, compromising for the ethics of the profession, not merely at the level of codes of practice but in terms of the very construction of the discipline itself together with its knowledge. Psychologists of our generation simply didn't learn how classic research by Hebb, Schein, Orne (Harper, 2004), Janis and possibly Milgram (McCoy, 2006) 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, Gray and Zielinski (2006) argue that the CIA's handbook on counter-insurgency (CIA, n.d.-a), used to such devastating effect on human rights in Central America, is likely to have been written by psychologists. Considering the wording, and taking account of the size of the psychological operations units in the US army (the 4th Psychological Operations Group at Fort Bragg currently has 1300 staff and accounts for 26 per cent of the 5000 total: Pike, 2006), we too find this plausible.

More than interrogation

No doubt some readers will be thinking that this is dirty work, but someone has to do it – that the ends, in terms of intelligence gained from interrogation, justifies the means. Yet consider the current conflict in Iraq: is the use of torture and ill treatment really a matter of interrogation and intelligence? 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 death toll for Iraqis outside prison – some 186,000 excess deaths attributable to the coalition forces (Burnham *et al.*, 2006) – and atrocities like

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the destruction of Fallujah, this massive intervention has the familiar characteristics of the regimes imposed on Vietnam and in Latin America, where social control is imposed on a population by the establishment of fear. It has been suggested (e.g. Gray, 2006) that many of the torture victims are not actually interrogated, and are returned in extreme distress as a lesson to the population – just as the mutilated corpses left by the US-trained death squads in the Latin American dictatorships had the same purpose (CIA, n.d.-a).

An enduring conflict

We would like to conclude by broadening the perspective 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). In our view, 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. This stance should be backed by a clear ethical code, and it should a) prohibit any involvement in interrogation; b) prohibit psychologists from taking research and development money from state security organisations; and c) encourage involvement in the promotion of humane policies of detention and crime prevention, and against neo-colonial military adventures.

But we should not fall into the trap of thinking that this will change the basic paradigm of social control exerted by the state, which will also pick up and use psychological knowledge not produced in a military/state security context. Nor will it 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.

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DISCUSS AND DEBATE

How can psychologists best work to prevent military interventions in other countries?

How can psychologists best support initiatives to end torture and abuse of people in detention?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' on psychologist@bps.org.uk or contribute (members only) via www.psychforum.org.uk.