



Peace Psychology

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President's Message: Psychologists, Coercive Interrogations, and Torture

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When social justice and human rights are routinely denied for the seemingly invisible among us, peace remains a dream for all of us. As peace psychologists, we are exceedingly aware of the truth underlying this statement and we also know that neither the universal application of human rights nor the practice of sustained social justice exist simply as "givens." Rather, we must advocate for and promote these values and practices in our endeavors towards building more peaceful local to global communities.

However, what do we as individual psychologists or as an organization do when we discover that psychologists may be playing a role as purveyors of destructive violence and torture? This is a question that the Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence: Peace Psychology (Division 48 of the American Psychological Association) has been addressing for well over six months.

When the press first exposed the abuse and torture of prisoners detained at Abu Ghraib, various explanations were given as rationales for such inhumane maltreatment. Largely, we heard and continue to hear the "bad apple" theory. In other words, as the theory goes, individual soldiers acting independently committed the abuse -- perhaps reflecting a particular soldier's own sadistic natures. An alternate explanation was provided in psychology classrooms around the United States. Professors began lecturing on the similarities between the conditions in Abu Ghraib and the mock prison set up by Zimbardo in the early 70's. Thus, while the rationales focused on individual and situational factors, none argued that the torture or degrading treatment of prisoners was part of approved policy or practice.

Early Reports and Action

Late last fall, an article appeared in the *New York Times* (Nov, 23, 2004) concerning the use of torture with prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. This article implicated psychologists in the use of torture during prisoner interrogations. Unlike previous articles concerning soldiers' behavior at Abu Ghraib, this article did not suggest that these interrogators were simply "bad apples" or had succumbed to situational forces. Rather, it suggested that coercive interrogations and what many would define as torture were national security policy and procedure as part of the "war on terrorism." Moreover, this article suggested that psychologists as part of Behavioral Science Consultation Teams were either indirectly and/or directly involved in such abuse and torture.

The Executive Committee of the Society (Div. 48) immediately responded with two actions. First, members of the Executive Committee put together a resource list concerning the effects and use of torture on its website including links, annotated bibliographic materials, and other information - www.webster.edu/peacepsychology/torture.html. This information remains available to anyone wanting more information about the use and effects of torture and is particularly useful for those who are engaged in research, teaching, and political action.

Second, a new business item from the Society (Div. 48) was developed and presented at the APA Council of Representatives meeting concerning the potential involvement of

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psychologists in the torture of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. The Council of Representatives business item included a strong statement against the use of torture and a call for action (written and moved by Corann Okorodudu, Judith Van Hoorn, Eileen Borris, and Linda M. Woolf) and included the following:

On November 30, 2004, the *New York Times* in an article titled, "Red Cross Finds Detainee Abuse in Guantanamo", cites a confidential report from the International Committee of the Red Cross. This article discusses the alleged abuse and torture of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and highlights the involvement of a Behavioral Science Consultation Team (BSCT) in the alleged abuse and torture.

According to the *Times*, the BSCT is composed of "psychologists and psychological workers who advise the interrogators." Essentially, the BSCT is described as an intermediary group that consults with medical professionals about individual prisoner's mental and physical health/vulnerabilities and then advises interrogators concerning the best practices to elicit information from these prisoners. The forms of interrogation described in the article are tantamount to both physical and psychological torture and include techniques such as solitary confinement, extreme temperatures, forced positions, excessive sensory stimulation, humiliation, and sexual taunting/abuse.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has refused comment on its confidential report and thus has neither confirmed nor denied the veracity of the *New York Times* article. Nonetheless, that U.S. psychologists may be or are playing roles of advising, training, or directly implementing torture of individuals or groups in either national or international, governmental or non-governmental settings is unacceptable in view of APA's obligations as an accredited non-governmental organization at the United Nations (UN) and APA's 1986 Resolution against the use of torture.

Following the Council Meeting, the American Psychological Association announced that Dr. Ron Levant, President of APA, was organizing a Presidential Task Force on

Psychological Ethics and National Security (PENS). Many within the Society (Div. 48) submitted their names and qualifications for participation on the Task Force although only a few were selected (Information about the Task Force and its members can be found at www.webster.edu/peacepsychology/tfpens.html).

Statement Concerning the Use of Torture With Prisoners

The PENS report was released in June of 2005 (also available on the Society's webpage at www.peacepsych.org). At that same time, there were several new articles about the potential role of psychologists in coercive interrogations and torture published in the *New York Times* (June 23, 2005; July 6, 2005) and the *New Yorker* (July 11-18, 2005). The *New Yorker* article written by Jane Mayer entitled, "The Experiment" is particularly descriptive of the practices against prisoners/detainees held in Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere.

Immediately upon reading of these reports, the Society's Executive Committee issued a *Statement Concerning the Use of Torture With Prisoners* denouncing the use of coercive interrogation/torture and affirmed the following:

All psychologists are bound by the ethical standards of their profession regardless of whether they are providing clinical services to patients or serving as researchers, as consultants to governmental or private agencies, or as experts providing information to the public.

All psychologists are bound by the requirement to use their knowledge for human betterment and to do no harm.

There are no circumstances under which the application of psychology to the degradation, coercive interrogation, or physical/mental torture either direct or indirect of others can be condoned.

Any provision of assistance, information, or sharing of records, to any group or individual in their application of coercive or inhumane methods of interrogation represents a serious breach of professional ethics.

The Executive Committee went on to further affirm the United Nations (UN) Conventions and articles prohibiting torture and 1986/87

APA Resolutions concerning Human Rights (Information about each of these is provided at the end of this article). The Executive Committee further called on the leadership of the APA for the following actions:

Issue a clear statement against the use of inhumane, degrading, or coercive interrogations and the use of torture either physical or mental in the interrogation of prisoners.

Acknowledge, based on the U.N. Convention Against Torture, that there are no exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether induced by a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, that may be invoked as a justification for torture.

Publicize both within and outside of APA the 1986 resolution concerning human rights and torture.

Issue a clear statement against the direct or indirect involvement of psychologists in inhumane, degrading, or coercive interrogations including interrogations involving the use of either physical or mental torture.

Finally, in light of the evidence implicating psychologists in the use of coercive interrogations and torture at Guantanamo Bay, the Executive Committee of Division 48 calls on the leadership of APA to pursue through whatever organizational and legal means possible an investigation of these charges.

The Executive Committee approved and released its *Statement Concerning the Use of Torture With Prisoners* in July of 2005. The statement was forwarded to many within APA (e.g., Council of Representatives, Board of Directors, Division Presidents) as well as to the Society's listservs. The Executive Committee received responses of support as well as questions concerning the *Statement Concerning the Use of Torture With Prisoners*. One query of particular interest concerned the definition of "coercive interrogation." This is an important question as the term "coercive interrogation" can be used as a euphemism for torture or what some have termed "torture-lite." The Executive Committee's full response to that question can be found at www.webster.edu/peacepsychology/CIResponse.html.

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At the Convention

Prior to the APA Annual Convention held in Washington, DC, many Divisions and individuals expressed interest in the *Statement Concerning the Use of Torture With Prisoners*. Information was shared with each Division or individual as requested and all of the Society's (Div. 48) materials were made available on the peacepsych.org website. Additionally, the Divisions for Social Justice (DSJ) meet to discuss the issue psychologist's involvement in coercive interrogations and torture as well as the Society's (Div. 48) *Statement*.

At the Convention, our Council Representatives, Corann Okorodudu and Judith Van Hoorn, as well as all of the representatives from the DSJ continued to work diligently on these issues. Because of their combined efforts, the APA Council adopted all of our recommended amendments to the PENS report! Please read the reports found elsewhere in this newsletter for a full description of the Council and DSJ activities. It is truly an example of how the few can effect important change.

Please know that the Executive Committee of the Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence: Peace Psychology will continue to work on this issue and send out periodic updates via the Division 48 listserv (Information about subscribing to this listserv can be found on the peacepsych.org webpage). Additionally, our webpage will provide the most recent information on this issue. There is much to be done and I encourage everyone's involvement. Please contact me at woolflm@webster.edu if you have any thoughts, questions, or want to become involved.

Have we made a difference? Perhaps, only history will be able to answer that question. Regardless, it will be clear that there was a voice, indeed many voices, within psychology speaking out against the use of inhumane, degrading, or coercive interrogations and the use of torture either physical or mental in the interrogation of prisoners.

In the meantime, I commend the diligent work of the entire Executive Committee and particularly our Council Representatives, Corann Okorodudu and Judith Van Hoorn and Past-President Eileen Borris in addressing the issues of coercive interrogations and

torture of prisoners as well as psychologist's possible involvement in such activities. I am honored to be working with such an amazing group of individuals as the Society's extended leadership.

Finally, I would note that there are many issues of social justice and human rights that are deserving of our attention. It is important that we do not remain, as individuals and as an organization, passive in the face of destructive action as such inaction only provides fuel for further destruction and harm. We can make a difference and we can increase our effectiveness by working together to address these issues. The more we can do as individuals and in partnership to research, teach, and work proactively for change, the greater the likelihood we can effectively bring positive change to the lives of individuals and communities both at home and around the globe.