

# PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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## END TORTURE

Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) recognizes that U.S. prisons and detention centers for so-called "enemy combatants" misuse and abuse certain psychological principles to abet torture and other detainee abuse. These abuses often occur in secret and under the guise of national security. This use of psychological techniques of abuse--"psychological torture"--has been developed in systematic ways over the past 50 years. Recent abuses at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and Bagram, Afghanistan have brought worldwide condemnation for the psychological horrors of prolonged isolation, sensory deprivation and overload, attacks on personal identity, and culturally-inspired humiliations.

Revelations from journalists and government reports document that psychologists have been central in the design, implementation, standardization, and dissemination of the U.S. program of psychological torture. Yet decades of psychological research into such topics as social influence, stress, cultural and religious identification, false confessions, and interpersonal relationships point to the conclusion that torture is an ineffective means of gaining accurate information for national security purposes—and psychological torture is no more effective at generating reliable intelligence than is physical torture.

Because of psychologists' central role in designing U.S. abuse--and because, worldwide, many survivors of torture recall that a mental health professional was present during their torture--psychologists have a special responsibility to use their knowledge and expertise to oppose torture in general, and psychological torture in particular. Furthermore, psychologists need to disseminate the message from psychological research that torture does not lead to accurate intelligence.

Towards this end, PsySR strives to be a global partner for peace by supporting international human rights. We denounce the precepts of "American exceptionalism" that aim to excuse our nation from upholding international standards. We believe ethnocentric attitudes sustain systems of domination and thereby further global conflict. PsySR also takes seriously a professional commitment to "do no harm." We form alliances with diverse groups working to end torture, especially those who have been subjected to and silenced by torture. Research, articles, seminars, discussion groups, resolutions, and protest demonstrations are just some of the means we employ, individually and collectively.

As ethical professionals, we acknowledge that psychologists can be willingly or unwillingly complicit in the implementation of torture and abuse. We strive to address

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all forms of complicity. At the same time, PsySR recognizes that there are situations in which psychologists can be helpful to the military interrogation process and that interrogations are not synonymous with torture. However, we question whether psychologists should be directly involved in the interrogation of detainees in settings where human rights are violated. Due to the lack of professional accountability at Guantanamo, at secret CIA “black sites,” and at other U.S. detention facilities, we believe that a psychologist’s role should be restricted to that of a professional healer wherever human rights are not guaranteed.

While our primary focus has been on the abuses occurring in U.S. national security detention facilities, PsySR is also committed to using psychological knowledge and expertise as partners in efforts to oppose torture and abuse in other situations, including criminal justice systems and other institutions of domination.

Finally, we believe that psychologists must practice self-care and effective coping so that we are able to sustain this important and challenging work. Working in a community with like-minded others can provide invaluable support to psychologists and activists alike.

PsySR’s End Torture Action Committee focuses on the many key issues highlighted in this brief overview. For more information about the committee’s current work and future plans, please contact co-chairs Jill Flores ([jillflores@centurytel.net](mailto:jillflores@centurytel.net)) and Stephen Soldz ([ssoldz@bgsp.edu](mailto:ssoldz@bgsp.edu)). We encourage new members to join us in these efforts. Media inquiries are also very welcome.