

A Lesson for World Psychology: Denunciation and Accommodation of Abusive Interrogations by the American Psychological Association

by Jean Maria Arrigo, PhD and Jancis Long, PhD

Revelations of abusive interrogation protocols at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, at Guantanamo Bay detention centre in Cuba, and at CIA “black sites” abroad have raised ethical concerns about the use of psychology and the role of psychologists in national security-related interrogations and research. This article describes key elements of the involvement of psychologists and the failures of the American Psychological Association (APA) in the “Abusive Turn” of United States policy toward foreign detainees. Although this story is specific to the United States and its largest psychological association, it can provide lessons for psychologists around the world who may likewise be confronted—or courted—with unethical demands on their expertise in national security programmes.

U.S. psychologist involvement in detainee abuse

Psychologists were substantially involved in implementing the Abusive Turn, at least in regard to interrogations. Psychologists designed and were consulted on interrogation techniques and advised on “softening up” tactics, such as sensory deprivation, stress positions, isolation and dependency on interrogators. Particularly distressing were the reports of psychologists’ identification of individual prisoners’ fears and phobias, obtained during “clinical” interviews, which were then used to individualize the threats and actions made.ⁱ

The most dramatic abuses perpetrated on foreign detainees were the work of senior officers, some of them psychologists, from programmes designed to train U.S. airmen, special forces, spies and other knowledgeable personnel vulnerable to hostile capture, in Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) techniques. That is, through effective simulations, personnel are trained in psychological resistance to deprivation, pain and torture. Drowning, for instance, may be simulated by waterboarding. After 2001, senior trainers and graduates of the SERE programme became leaders of the Behavioral Science Consultation Teams (BSCTs) that sought to break down personality and resistance in detainees.

A mystery to many psychologists and other clinical professionals was why the APA, committed by its charter to promote the highest professional ethics for its members, did not act effectively against psychologists’ involvement in abusive interrogations. Below we document our thesis that APA policy has been shaped by the dependence of psychology on the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), and that the historic rise of psychology in the military context is key to understanding this dependence.

The rise of U.S. psychology in the military context

In World War I, U.S. psychologists conducted intelligence testing of military recruits. In World War II, psychologists optimized team performances, boosted troop morale, devised enemy propaganda programmes, developed psychological operations against enemies, trained spies and generally applied the behavioural sciences to military goals with notable success. During the Cold War, the DoD became the major institutional sponsor of psychological research. Psychologists have continued to conduct research and design methods to improve the efficiency of military activities, including killing, in various settings.ⁱⁱ They are also employed in a wide range of clinical and psychosocial positions to support military life. Indeed, the DoD is the largest single provider of grants for graduate school training in psychology, for psychology internships and for early career employment of psychologists in the U.S.ⁱⁱⁱ Unsurprisingly, the American Psychological Association, founded in 1892 and with a current membership of 148,000^{iv}, became institutionally intertwined with the DoD.

The heavily ideological foundation of the “war on terror” naturally intensifies the relationship between psychology and the military, but so too does fierce guild competition between psychology and psychiatry. Psychiatry began with the advantages of medical prestige and accessibility to

biological interventions such as psychoactive drugs. But psychology's broad range of roles outside of clinical practice secured the military as its close ally and has enabled psychology to compete in turf wars with psychiatry. The American Medical Association (2006) and American Psychiatric Association (2006) have forbidden their members to assist in national security interrogations, thereby providing exclusive opportunities for the APA and for DoD and CIA psychologists.

In sum, psychology and the military are highly interdependent in the United States. In addition to its clinical role of providing mental health services to service men and women, psychology applies the science of behaviour to warfare and legitimizes some problematic operations, such as coercive interrogation. The military provides enormous funding, research and career opportunities for psychologists, and institutional support for such ventures as prescriptive authority. The APA mediates this exchange, with many high-level officials circulating between APA and DoD/CIA roles. The key issue at this time is APA authorization of psychologists' participation in interrogations.

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The PENS task force

APA public policy on psychologists' involvement in interrogations in national security settings was first developed in 2005 under the leadership of then President-Elect Gerald Koocher. He stated his position on the confidential listserv of the ten-person task force appointed to formulate APA guidelines for Psychological Ethics and National Security (PENS). Drawing the analogy to a school psychologist, who "must hold paramount the welfare of the most vulnerable party (i.e., usually the child)," Koocher wrote:

The government-employed psychologist has a similar chain of responsibility and accountability. In many of the circumstances we will discuss when we meet[,] the psychologist's role may bear on people who are not "clients" in the traditional sense. [For] example, the psychologist employed by the CIA, Secret Service, FBI, etc., who helps formulate profiles for risk prevention, negotiation strategy, destabilization, etc., or the psychologist asked to assist interrogators in eliciting data or detecting dissimulation with the intent of preventing harm to many other people. In this case the client is the agency, government, and ultimately the people of the nation (at risk). The goal of such psychologists' work will ultimately be the protection of others (i.e., innocents) by contributing to the incarceration, debilitation, or even death of the potential perpetrator, who will often remain unaware of the psychologists' involvement.^v

Six of the ten appointed PENS task force members were high-level DoD or CIA employees or contractors. At times, their national security roles have appeared to trump their commitments to psychological ethics.^{vi} All task force members were pledged to confidentiality on the proceedings, and APA did not publicly announce the names of the task force members for a year, until a reporter disclosed the names.

One of us (J.M. Arrigo) who had served as a task force member broke the confidentiality agreement in August 2006, revealing to human rights researchers that several so-called "observers" who attended the task force meeting had never been acknowledged by the APA. Among these observers were two APA grant seekers who had previously lobbied a PENS task force member in his role as head psychologist at the Counterintelligence Field Activity Agency. Other observers had affiliations (former and current) with the White House Office of Science & Technology Policy, the National Security Agency and the Navy Internship Program. All had stakes in APA accommodation of DoD-CIA interrogation policy and, therefore, conflicts of interest with the mandate from the APA Board of Directors to the PENS task force to objectively address the following:

- What appropriate limits does the principle “Do no harm” place on psychologists’ involvement in investigations related to national security?
- To the extent it can be determined, given the classified nature of many of these activities: What roles are psychologists asked to take in investigations related to national security?
- What are the criteria to differentiate ethically appropriate from ethically inappropriate roles that psychologists may take?
- How is psychology likely to be used in investigations related to national security?
- What role does informed consent have in investigations related to national security?
- What does current research tell us about the efficacy and effectiveness of various investigative techniques?
- Would the efficacy and effectiveness of various investigative techniques, if demonstrated, affect our ethics?
- Has APA responded strongly enough to media accounts of activities that have occurred at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay?

These are excellent questions and could well serve as guidelines for psychologists in different nations working on security issues. Given what later transpired, however, these words also demonstrate how breaches of ethics can be covered by inquiries that sound earnest but lead nowhere.

Another unmentioned “observer,” Russ Newman, Director of the APA Practice Directorate – whose wife was an active-duty SERE-trained psychologist - took a lead role in the task force meeting. At the June 2005 PENS task force meeting, Newman prevailed with these principles: that the task force mission was to put out the fires of controversy right away; that all present would keep the proceedings confidential so as not to feed the fire; that the *PENS Report* must express unity; and that only a couple of APA authorities would speak for the task force.

The June 2005 *PENS Report* endorsed psychologists’ assistance in national security interrogations but rejected torture: “Psychologists do not engage in, direct, support, facilitate, or offer training in torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment”. Immediately upon release the *PENS Report* evoked strong condemnation from critics around three points: the presumption that psychologists may ethically provide direct assistance in interrogations; allowance for psychologists to follow permissive U.S. law regarding interrogations rather than stricter international human rights law; and tacit permission for psychologists to support interrogations in detention centres that violate international human rights laws and standards. *The PENS Report*, in spite of its high principles, accommodated in practice the approach Koocher had depicted: “The goal of such psychologists’ work will ultimately be the protection of others (i.e., innocents) by contributing to the incarceration, debilitation, or even death of the potential perpetrator”

Criticism of APA policy on interrogations and further APA resolutions

Under heavy pressure from critics, the APA in August 2007 passed a Resolution by the Council of Representatives denouncing specific, *physically* aversive interrogation techniques, such as waterboarding. *Psychologically* aversive techniques, such as sleep deprivation and prolonged isolation, were forbidden only in certain circumstances. Additional pressure on the APA leadership resulted in a February 2008 Modification denouncing all techniques rejected under international human rights law.

These concessions, however, did not mollify APA critics, who pointed to: (a) the continuing APA legitimization of psychologists at detention sites where human rights standards are not observed and (b) the impossibility of monitoring the conduct of these psychologists or protecting whistleblowers.^{vii} That is, the policy “just say no to torture” in a practical sense continues to accommodate Bush

Administration policy on interrogations. Violations of APA Ethics Code in civilian settings, in contrast, may be reported by victims or witnesses; and remedies are supported by the clinics, hospitals, schools, universities and other institutions that embed civilian psychological practices.

The U.S. critics include Psychologists for Social Responsibility, the APA Divisions for Social Justice, six college psychology departments that have formally protested APA policy, the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and numerous human rights organisations, with Physicians for Human Rights foremost. Prominent psychologists have resigned from APA, and over 300 members are withholding their dues in protest. From abroad, the Australian Psychological Society and the Norwegian Psychological Association, among others, have registered their opposition to APA policy on participation in interrogations.

Some intelligence professionals have also been critical of APA policy. David DeBatto, a counterintelligence operative with much experience in Iraq, characterised the APA PENS task force episode as a “typical legitimization process for a decision made at a higher level in the Department of Defense”. Because of the hierarchical structure of the DoD, he said, it was impossible that the DoD members of the task force participated as *individuals* bringing their expertise and judgment to the policy issue at hand. They were certainly there as representatives of the decision maker. And because the decision maker’s position had to prevail, a quorum of DoD/CIA affiliates was necessary, rather than one or two to express DoD/CIA concerns to the task force. The reason for the several task force observers, DeBatto said, would be to represent to the decision maker the perspectives of various government agencies connected to the different observers, so as to broadly legitimize the predetermined decision, an assessment also shared by another former counterintelligence officer.^{viii}

APA policy continues to ignore the institutional context of psychologists in detention facilities. Rather, it construes psychologists in national security settings as morally autonomous agents serving as independent consultants. This view conforms to the military “virtue ethic” of officership, that is, the belief that individual character is the basis of conduct. The virtue ethic is inspirational for officer training and as an individual guide to conduct. But military ethicists themselves have warned that, “The focus on character may prevent leaders from taking a critical look at the institutions they lead and thereby ensure that morally corrupting rules, structures, and systems remain”.^{ix} In any case, the APA model of the morally autonomous psychologist, “absolutely prohibited from knowingly planning, designing, participating in or assisting in the use of all condemned techniques,” as stated in the February 2008 Modification, defies the classic empirical social psychological studies^x on conformity and obedience, as well as recent findings on limits to self-control in demanding situations.^{xi}

In further disregard of psychological realism, APA policymakers have not inquired into the opinions of senior interrogators regarding abusive interrogations and the contributions of psychologists to interrogations.

Perspectives of professional military interrogators

Many professional military interrogators were unhappy with the Abusive Turn in interrogation policy. In 2006, 20 former U.S. Army interrogators and interrogation technicians sent an open letter the Senate Armed Services Committee, arguing that torture and other coercive interrogations methods are ineffective in intelligence gathering.^{xii} Two senior U.S. Army interrogators independently stated during their presentations to the 2007 APA Convention that they do not need or want the assistance of psychologists in interrogations.

Nor do psychologists serve to raise the moral level of interrogations overall. According to interrogators whom we consulted in the Psychologists for Social Responsibility *Seminar for Psychologists and Interrogators on Rethinking the Psychology of Torture*, psychologists’ efforts are misplaced in “softening up” detainees for novice interrogators and for extralegal, untrained amateurs. Instead, psychologists should direct their efforts toward selection of interrogation trainees and preparation of novice interrogators for superior, non-abusive methods of interrogation. These methods require social perception, tolerance, cultural sensitivity, cognitive complexity, flexible

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thinking, situational awareness, and self-control.^{xiii} The proper mentor for a novice interrogator is not a psychologist but a senior interrogator. A senior interrogator needing consultation will ordinarily prefer another senior interrogator, as a psychotherapist will prefer consultation with another psychotherapist. Moreover, psychologists easily interfere with the dynamics of the interrogator-source relationship.

Most psychological work in the army is conducted by young career psychologists carrying out their obligations in return for the

substantial financial help for their training. At the top, however, are seasoned psychologists, such as those who operationalized the change from the SERE to the BSCT teams. The actual power structure related to interrogations is quite complicated. The great majority of psychologists in contact with detainees must obey the orders of field commanders, whom they may technically outrank, while some senior psychologists, as staff officers with the ear of a commander, indirectly have power over interrogators and interrogation protocols.

Under the Bush Administration, the expert counsel of senior interrogators has easily been ignored due to the very low ceiling on interrogator rank in a strictly hierarchical institution, penalties for dissent, disastrous understaffing of senior interrogators in a context of high demand and, especially, unwarranted exemptions for abusive interrogations.^{xiv}

A positive role for military psychologists in interrogations

The APA leadership has served to protect military psychologists from accusations of illegal and unethical behaviour rather than to speak out against the cruelties of the Abusive Turn in U.S. treatment of detainees. By accommodating Bush Administration interrogation policy, the APA misses the opportunity to support genuine psychological contributions to interrogations.

Military psychologists could contribute ethically to the effectiveness of interrogation by taking the "expert-performance approach" articulated by cognitive psychologists. The same training requirements detailed by senior interrogators are found in many other domains of measurable expertise, such as chess competitions and musicianship: "10 years of intense preparation—even for the most 'talented'," "training situations with immediate valid feedback," "deliberate practice...in maintaining expertise," and so on.^{xv} Recent cognitive research^{xvi} also shows how various forms of self-control and initiative that are essential to effective interrogation—decision making, choice, creative problem solving, management of emotions, etc.—are quickly depleted in high stress situations. Indeed, "there are levels of depletion beyond which people may be unable to control themselves effectively, regardless of what is at stake". A senior interrogator gave this example: "In the high-adrenaline raid of a terrorist safe house, the direct interrogation approach of Special Forces may be to kick the captive in the head and then ask his name".^{xvii} Scientific psychologists could research and promote the expert-performance approach to interrogation deemed effective by senior interrogators. They could assist interrogators in establishing the necessary training programmes and in securing resources. Where, for example, is the APA opposition to the use of 18-year-old interrogators with 16 weeks of training and no professional mentorship?

The principal obstacle to such a response on the part of APA, we believe, has been hidden financial interests. The APA's effective refusal to assist and legitimize abusive interrogations under the Bush Administration would jeopardize the APA's vigorous lobbying efforts for Department of Defense funding. These financial interests were represented by the participation of unacknowledged, high-level APA fund seekers in the original APA *PENS Report*.

A lesson for world psychology

This article has examined a tragic episode for the United States, the American Psychological Association, and U.S. psychologists. We focused most on the role of the APA, whose mission includes the commitment “to maintain the highest level of ethics among psychologists”. During the years of the Abusive Turn in government policy, the APA has been found to enable, more than to regulate, psychologists’ involvement with abuses, as demonstrated in the PENS task force process.

The long history of APA and DoD interdependence indicates how institutional entanglements have prevented the APA from acting as an ethical leader for psychologists involved in interrogations. Assessments from non-psychologist, military intelligence representatives reveal conflicts within the military concerning abusive interrogations and psychologists, and point to the difficulty of psychologists upholding their ethical standards where an overall directive for abusive treatment exist. Admittedly the voices that are missing here are those from within the APA leadership itself, some of whom undoubtedly dissent from official APA policies and pronouncements.

For psychologists across nations, we believe that similarly structured tragedies frequently unfold and perplex, even though the details are quite different. Yet professional organisations should be places where ethical professionals in different political systems have an opportunity, not available in other areas of society, to oppose or abet unethical government policies. We hope that each part of this story can aid our colleagues elsewhere to anticipate and recognise unethical government demands on their psychological expertise, and to develop ethical responses with less tragic outcomes.

Jean Maria Arrigo, PhD, is an independent social psychologist and oral historian whose work gives moral voice to military and intelligence professionals. See, for example, Arrigo, J.M. & Wagner, R. (2007). “Torture Is for Amateurs”: A Meeting of Psychologists and Military Interrogators. [Special issue]. Peace and Conflict, 11 (4). Jancis Long, PhD is a clinical psychologist who is currently President of Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) and Secretary of the International Network of organizations actively committed to issues of peace and justice (INPsySR). The authors wish to thank Brad Olson, Stephen Soldz, Steven Reisner, Fathali Moghaddam, Anthony Marsella and the International Network of Psychologists for Social Responsibility for their input and suggestions on this piece. A longer version of this article, with full references, first appeared in the journal Revista Psicología: Teoría e Prática and is available at: www.mackenzie.com.br/psicologia/index.html. Brandy Bauer of the IRCT kindly prepared this condensed version at the request of the authors.

ⁱ Eban K. Rorschach and Awe. *Vanity Fair*. 2007 July 17.

ⁱⁱ Grossman D. *On Killing*. Boston: Little Brown. 1995.

ⁱⁱⁱ Herman E. *The Romance of American Psychology: political culture in the age of experts*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1995.

^{iv} All information about the APA, its resolutions and referenda cited in this article, unless otherwise noted, can be accessed at www.apa.org.

^v Koocher G.K. 2005 May 6. In APA PENS Listserv, J.M. Arrigo, 2006. *Op cit*.

^{vi} See for example, Arrigo J.M. APA PENS task force meeting debriefing of J.M. Arrigo by J.F. Crigler and Notes from June 24-26 APA PENS task force meeting. 24-26 June 2005. *Op cit*.

^{vii} Coverage of this criticism can be found at Stephen Soldz’s blog: <http://psychoanalystsopposewar.org/blog>

^{viii} Arrigo J.M. [APA interrogation task force member Dr. Jean Maria Arrigo exposes group’s ties to military](http://www.mackenzie.com.br/psicologia/index.html). 20 August 2007.

^{ix} Robinson P. Ethics training and development in the military. *Parameters: US Army War College Quarterly*, 2007; 37(1):4-22.

^x Zimbardo P. *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding how good people turn evil*. New York: Random House. 2007.

^{xi} Baumeister R.F. 2008. Free will in scientific psychology. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 2008; 3(1):14-19.

^{xii} See [Statement on interrogation practices from U.S. Army interrogators and interrogation technicians to the U.S. House Committee on the Armed Services](http://www.house.gov/armedservices). 31 July 2006.

^{xiii} McCauley C. Toward a social psychology of professional military interrogations. In *Torture Is for Amateurs*, special issue of *Peace and Conflict*, 2007; 13 (4): 399-410.

^{xiv} Arrigo J.M. & Bennett R. Organizational supports for abusive interrogations in “The War on Terror.” In *Torture Is for Amateurs*, special issue of *Peace and Conflict*, 2007; 13(4): 411-421.

^{xv} Ericsson K.A. & Ward P. Capturing the naturally occurring superior performance of experts in the laboratory: Toward a science of expert and exceptional performance. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2007;16(6):346-350.

^{xvi} Baumeister R.F., Vohs K.D. & Tice D.M. The strength model of self-control. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2007;16(6):351-358.

^{xvii} Arrigo & Bennett, 2007, p. 418.

Ed. Note: This article was drafted prior to a vote by APA members on a referendum that would prohibit psychologists from working in settings where international and human rights law are not upheld. The results of this vote—which closed on 15 September—were not available at the time of publication but will be published on the APA website at www.apa.org. For more information, visit Psychologists for Social Responsibility, <http://psysr.org/about/committees/endtorture/>