

Psychologists, the APS and Torture

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Background

Community psychologists who subscribe to the email lists of the American equivalents of Psychologists for Peace and the College of Community Psychologists (APA Division 27 - SCRA) have been privy over the past two years to extensive discussions on the subject of psychologists' involvement in torture, as well as via the literature on bioethics and the electronic and print media (e.g., sample links below).

This issue came to our particular attention in Australia in early 2007, when several APS members began to express concern about one of the keynote speakers for the 2007 APS Conference Brisbane, Dr. Gerald P Koocher. As immediate past President of the APA, Dr. Koocher was at the forefront of the very public debates surrounding the involvement by psychologists in Behavioral Science Consultation Teams (BSCTs, or 'biscuits' as they are known) deployed in interrogations at Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere. In 2005, Dr. Koocher oversaw the establishment of the Psychological Ethics and National Security task force, whose report attracted widespread condemnation. In part as a result of the PENS report, which stood in contrast to AMA (and American Psychiatric Association) policies prohibiting their members from participating in any activity that could be described as torture, the US Department of Defense decided to only use psychologists in these roles.

A number of members argued that the status of Dr Koocher as a keynote speaker raised questions about the APS's own stand on the ethics of psychologists' involvement in torture, interrogation and related practices, and risked bringing the Society and the profession into disrepute. In response to these concerns, the APS decided to invite Dr Koocher to make himself available for a public forum, alongside representatives of groups such as Psychologists for Peace, which he did. The forum was titled "Lessons form Guantanamo: Ethical issues for psychologists working in the military, intelligence and detention facilities". I was asked to participate in the forum, to represent the concerns that had been raised by APS members, especially Psychologists for Peace and the Community College. Apart from Dr Koocher and myself, the other participants in the forum were APS President Amanda Gordon, and Dr. Chris Lennings from University of Sydney, who had been involved in research and advocacy in relation to the mental health of detainees in places like Villawood and Baxter. The forum was chaired by Professor Graham Davidson.

Speaking at the forum was one of the scariest experiences of my professional life. While I had read a lot of material prior to the forum, I didn't feel I could argue directly with Dr Koocher, since he was a protagonist in a debate on which I had only second-hand information. And it seemed hypocritical for us to be pointing the finger at the APA without examining our own responses to somewhat parallel issues closer to home, such as psychologists' roles in immigration detention centres.

For me, the forum felt a bit like a drawn Grand Final – it was impossible to tell which side had won or lost, partly because the focus shifted between issues such as service provision in coercive environments, direct and indirect roles (e.g. designing interrogation tactics), and whether in such roles psychologists can actually intervene to prevent or report abuses, or whether our very presence makes us complicit in cruelty. Much of the 'action' had already taken place over the previous two days: the APS Board had passed a resolution on members' involvement in the use, involvement or provision of advice about torture and other injurious

practices (see below); and Dr Koocher had delivered his keynote address on the complex ethics surrounding the visible and invisible harms that might ensue from psychologists' actions in a range of contexts, including litigation, advertising, 'homeland security', triage, mandatory reporting – and interrogation/torture. So the forum was in some ways an anti-climax.

For some, the announcement of the APS's very strong declaration, based on the UN definition of 'Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment', was a major achievement that in itself could serve to shine a torch on the APA's much more equivocal stance (with its exceptions for 'national security', and falling short of forbidding members from participating directly or indirectly in such practices). For others, there was a sense that Dr Koocher had 'got off lightly', because he was not tackled directly on the APA stance, perhaps due to his status as a guest, and perhaps because the forum was largely in-house, with no input from groups like Amnesty International, and no attempt to invite the general public or involve the media.

APS Declaration on Torture

The Australian Psychological Society, as a member of the International Union of Psychological Science, fully endorses the United Nations Declaration and Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment 1997.

The Australian Psychological Society regards all forms of torture, as defined in Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration and Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment 1997, as breaches of the Society's Code of Ethics (2003) General Principle III Propriety.

DECLARATION

Psychologists shall at all times comply with the Society's Code of Ethics.

Psychologists shall not countenance, condone or participate in the practice of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading procedures, in any situation, including armed conflict and civil strife.

Psychologists shall not provide any premises, instruments, substances or knowledge to facilitate the practice of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or to diminish the ability of the victim to resist such treatment.

Psychologists shall not be present during any procedure in which torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment is used or threatened.

Psychologists must have complete professional independence in deciding upon the care of a person for whom they are responsible.

Links

A Profession Struggles to Save Its Soul: Psychologists, Guantanamo and Torture

<http://www.counterpunch.org/soldz08012006.html>

"Collective Unconscionable" By Arthur Levine The Washington Monthly, January/February 2007

Miles, S. (2007). Medical Ethics and the Interrogation of Guantanamo 063 2007. The American Journal of Bioethics. 7(1):W3 Read Full Text:

http://www.bioethics.net/journal/j_article.php?aid=1140

Protecting the Torturers: Bad Faith and Distortions From the American Psychological Association. <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=10903>

<http://www.newscenter.org/2007/03/06/psychological-torture-just-as-bad-study-finds>