

Psychology Researchers Recommend Ethical Ban on Torture by Psychologists

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(PhysOrg.com) -- University of Arkansas psychology professor Jeffrey Lohr and colleague David Tolin have documented the history and criticisms of the ethics policy of the American Psychological Association and recommended remedies to restore ethical standards to the profession.

The researchers examined the evidence of the alleged role of psychologists in “creating, teaching and implementing torture practices.” They discussed the response of the APA to the torture allegations and criticisms from inside and outside the organization.

The results of their study and their recommendations were published in the Fall 2009 issue of the newsletter of the Society for a Science of [Clinical Psychology](#), a section of the APA.

In September 2009, the board of the society issued a statement condemning involvement of psychologists in torture and recommending changes in the APA ethics code and investigation of the role of individual psychologists in torture.

Before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the APA had required psychologists to adhere to an ethics code and, should a law be at odds with the code, to “resolve the conflict in a responsible manner.” In 2002, the code was revised to permit psychologists to “adhere to the requirements of the law, regulations, or other governing authority” over professional ethics.

“As an ethical organization, we must recognize that there are no ‘pre-9/11 ethics’ or ‘post-9/11 ethics,’” Lohr and Tolin wrote. “Rather, our discipline is guided by a core set of principles that should not vary according to shifts in the political tide.”

Lohr and Tolin made three recommendations:

- First, the APA code of conduct should be revised “to state unambiguously that psychologists cannot be party to torture, nor can they collaborate with organizations or personnel who engage in such practices.”
- Second, “psychologists who have participated in such practices at the behest of the government must be held accountable for ethical misconduct and violations of federal and international law.”
- Third, professional organizations that have allowed such practices “must be held accountable for the consequences.”

Further, the researchers wrote, harm done to prisoners cannot be justified by “loopholes” in the APA ethical code. Besides damaging the integrity of the profession, “it sets professional psychology apart from other helping and healing professions who have refused to compromise principle for expediency.”

Lohr and Tolin’s research found that psychologists did more than just develop and train others in “enhanced interrogation methods.”

Investigative reports and recently declassified documents show that psychologists have been directly involved in administering such interrogation, including waterboarding.

In response to concerns that psychologists had been involved in torture, the APA convened the Presidential Task Force on Psychological Ethics

and National Security to review the ethics of psychologists' participation in interrogations. Lohr and Tolin note that six out of the nine voting members of the task force had direct ties to the military. One civilian task force member resigned out of concern that continuing to work with the task force would legitimize APA inaction. Another civilian member wrote a minority opinion that was not included in the final report of the task force.

The task force's final report affirmed the 2002 APA ethics code allowing psychologists to do as required by legal authorities, even when such demands violate ethics. The report was approved in emergency session by the APA Board of Directors, rather than going through the organization's Council of Representatives. Subsequently, the Pentagon announced plans to use psychologists exclusively, rather than psychiatrists, whose professional organization bans participation in torture.

The researchers note that the APA is at odds with the ethical stance of the World Medical Association, standards derived from decisions made at Nuremburg in 1947 requiring that a medical professional "not deviate from his ethical obligations even if legislation demands otherwise."

The researchers detailed recent developments suggesting that "the membership of APA is working to redirect the organization." Between 2006 and 2009, a series of resolutions by the Council of Representatives have been progressively more critical of allowing psychologists to be involved with torture. A referendum of the full APA membership in 2008, which was approved by the Council of Representatives in February 2009, resolved that psychologists not work in settings where people are held outside of or in violation of international law. This resolution has not been enforced.

On August 7, a letter from the United Nations Special Rapporteur on

Torture called on the APA to enforce the referendum: “Every day that you delay invoking the referendum is another day where [psychologists](#) are, by their presence and participation in these operations, acquiescing in human rights violations.”

Also in August, the APA Council of Representatives requested the ethics committee to propose new language for the ethics code. No revisions had been proposed by late September.

Provided by University of Arkansas ([news](#) : [web](#))

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