

When Psychologists Torture, Our Heads Spin

by Frances Shure, M.Ed., M.A., L.P.C.

Those of us in the psychology profession whose goal is to help clients heal from horrifying, often hidden trauma are not strangers to taboo topics such as 9/11.

We are not strangers to mankind's inhumanity to fellow beings — particularly to the weak, the helpless, the disabled, the diagnosed, the outsider, or the imprisoned.

We are not strangers to helping our clients shine the light of their own awareness into walled-off areas of their psyche in the search for their personal truth. For those who can brave this inward journey, the awareness of what really happened — the hidden truth — will eventually lead them to catharsis and healing. That awareness is crucial, even if it's only the *beginning* of the healing process.

Nor are we strangers to defensiveness — to reactionary blowback from perpetrators of crimes or from bullies who are themselves in desperate need of healing. They, too, are victims, though their tenacious addiction to power enables them to avoid their underlying feelings of vulnerability and helplessness. Those of us who value healing want wronged *and* wrongdoer to heal. For, in the final analysis, both are victims.

The field of psychology is far-reaching. Its scope is vast. Ten psychology professionals in the same room may each be unfamiliar with the area of expertise of the other nine. Notwithstanding, the *raison d'être* of this profession, at least for me, is to deeply understand the human condition in order to facilitate the healing of individuals.

Imagine, then, how my head spun when I learned from an [article](#) by Roy Eidelson, a past president of [Psychologists for Social Responsibility](#) and a member of the [Coalition for Ethical Psychology](#), that the prestigious American Psychological Association (APA) had sacrificed its “do no harm” ethics and had become intimately involved with the torture programs of the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) following the attacks of September 11, 2001. This ethical regression by the APA is one of the many examples of the fallout from 9/11. It is a symptom of the lows to which a democratic society can fall when its standards of openness, justice, and rights — civil and constitutional — are violated by officials in high places. The threshold for what is possible and permissible — ways of treating our fellow man that were unthinkable 15 years ago — has been breached in horrendous ways.

Before 9/11, most of us wouldn't have been able to fathom the concept of health consultants devising and supporting “enhanced interrogation techniques” — a phrase that, purely and simply, means torture.

History from September 11, 2001, through 2013: Weaving the Web of Deceit

After the 9/11 attacks, APA leaders were eager, according to Eidelson, to curry favor with the Pentagon as a ticket to expanding their sphere of influence. In their bid to

become an indispensable source of psychological expertise for counter-terrorism efforts at the Pentagon and CIA, some psychologists received key roles in torture operations at CIA black sites and the Guantánamo Bay prison camp.

Setting the stage for the protection of the *perpetrators* of torture, the Bush Administration crafted U.S. law to exempt detainees from the Geneva Conventions, which were designed to protect all individuals captured within the framework of armed combat from humiliating and degrading treatment and from torture. By designating that the detainees at CIA black sites and the Guantánamo prison camp were not “prisoners of war,” but were newly declared “enemy combatants,” the way was opened for these detainees to be tortured.¹

Nevertheless, by 2006, both the American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association issued declarations against their members’ participation in these clandestine and illegal actions.

The leaders of the American Psychological Association, however, were committed to a different path. In 2005, in close and confidential collaboration with certain members of the Department of Defense (DoD), they established the Psychological Ethics and National Security (PENS) task force, choosing as members psychologists who were predominantly representatives of the military and intelligence communities. Several of them, notably, were in the chain of command where abuses took place.

Not surprisingly, the task force supported the participation of psychologists in national security detention and interrogation operations, as long as they adhered to U.S. law.² The PENS report was quickly approved in an emergency session by the APA’s Board of Directors.³

Law and ethics are often not in harmony with one another. In this case, the Bush Administration’s interrogation policies violated every international code of medical ethics as well as the APA’s own ethic of doing no harm.

What *did* surprise me, though, is that earlier, in August 2002, for the first time in its 100-year history, the APA rejected, as part of its *enforceable* code, what is known as the Nuremberg Ethic, which specifies that people who choose to violate fundamental ethical responsibilities cannot avoid accountability by blaming the laws, orders, or regulations

¹ Since March 2009 the government has ceased using the term “enemy combatant.” For further explanation, see <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/departments-justice-withdraws-enemy-combatant-definition-guantanamo-detainees>.

² Roy Eidelson and Trudy Bond, “The APA Relied on the CIA for Ethical Guidance,” May 4, 2015, <http://www.socialsciencespace.com/2015/07/the-apa-colluded-on-torture-what-now>.

³ This information is from an email communication to me from Dr. Roy Eidelson.

governing them. In other words, according to Nuremberg, the defense of “I was following the law” or “I was just following orders” could no longer serve as a valid defense for someone who was found violating basic ethical principles.

With this titanic shift in its ethical code, the APA gave psychologists permission to set aside their “ethical responsibilities” if those responsibilities inherently conflicted with military orders, governmental regulations, national and local laws, and any other form of governing legal authority.⁴ Thus, APA leadership unilaterally unraveled for its members a well-regarded international legal precedent.

In this regard, the APA is a study in contradictions. The organization had earlier adopted an enforceable standard focusing on “humane treatment” of animals, yet after 9/11 it did *not* adopt an enforceable standard focusing on “humane treatment” of human detainees.⁵ Some might think that this contradiction deserves rethinking, hopefully in the direction of humane treatment for *all* beings, especially those in captivity.

Had the American Psychological Association prohibited its members from participation in these operations, as did the American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association, harsh interrogations and torture by elements of the U.S. government would likely have come to a sudden halt.

Why do I say this? Because the psychologists’ participation in the interrogations had the likely intended consequence of protecting the interrogators from future prosecutions. The interrogators would be able to cite the word of these experts, who judged the “enhanced interrogation techniques” to be “safe, legal, ethical, and effective.”⁶

This strategy was, of course, disingenuous. Indeed, the International Committee of the Red Cross issued a statement that the so-called “enhanced interrogations” were tantamount to torture. Any of us know that torture is anything *but* “safe, legal, ethical, and effective.” Among other effects, torture causes debilitating and recalcitrant post traumatic stress disorder.

Ominously, this debasing and weaponizing of psychology was applied to the CIA’s torture programs. For example, the designers of interrogation techniques adapted the animal research on “learned helplessness” done by a past president of the APA, Dr. Martin Seligman, as a means of breaking the resistance of detainees by subjecting them

⁴ Kenneth S. Pope, “Are the American Psychological Association’s Detainee Interrogation Policies Ethical and Effective?” (Gogrefe Publishing, 2011) <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3200196>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

to inescapable pain and trauma until they become completely helpless, hopeless, and dependent on their captors.⁷

A segment on learned helplessness, included in my “Why Do Good People Become Silent—or Worse—About 9/11?” serial essay, describes the original research done by Seligman and explains why this knowledge may contribute to our understanding of the American public’s silence on the sensitive subject of 9/11.⁸

For 10 years the APA leadership suppressed any attempt to question its PENS faux ethics, its close ties to the DoD, and its motivation for psychologists to play a central role in “enhancing” interrogations. Throughout this ethically regressive period of the APA, its leadership has adhered to the CIA’s informal motto: Admit nothing, deny everything, and make counter-accusations. For example, after one psychologist went public with details she had learned in her role as one of the token civilians on the 2005 task force, she was targeted with character assassination.

All along, APA leaders assured the general membership that their goal in setting the association’s new standards was to protect the health and welfare of the prisoners at Guantánamo. In fact, just the opposite was true. For this reason, I find it appropriate to add to the above list, “Lie about everything that does not support our agenda.”

Do not these deceptive tactics sound familiar to those of us working for transparency regarding the attacks of September 11, 2001?

The APA did not rescind its 2005 PENS report until 2013.⁹

History from 2014 to the Present: Dismantling the Web of Deceit

In December 2014 a Senate Armed Services Committee report disclosed the involvement of individual APA psychologists in the CIA’s black-site torture program. Furthermore, this Senate committee found that the psychologists were not mere passive observers. Rather, they were “military psychologists [who] were enlisted to help develop more aggressive interrogation methods, including snarling dogs, forced nudity, and long periods of standing, against terrorism suspects.”¹⁰

⁷ Peter Chamberlin, “Weaponizing Psychology: Treating People Like Dogs”
<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article23355.htm>.

⁸ Frances Shure, “Why Do Good People Become Silent—or Worse—About 9/11?”
<http://www.ae911truth.org/news/196-news-media-events-fran-shure-part-14.html>

⁹ J. Wesley Boyd, “The APA Colluded on Torture. What Now?” July 15, 2015,
<http://www.socialsciencespace.com/2015/07/the-apa-colluded-on-torture-what-now>

¹⁰ Kenneth S. Pope, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3200196>.

A few weeks earlier, in November 2014, the Board of Directors of the APA asked David Hoffman, a former federal prosecutor and a partner in the Sidley Austin law firm, to lead an independent review of allegations that the APA had colluded with government officials to sanction the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques.” Seven months later, Hoffman and his colleagues completed their 542-page report. After more than 150 interviews and the examination of thousands of emails and other documents, the authors of the Hoffman Report confirmed that senior APA members had indeed colluded with DoD officials to create and support policies that would preserve the ongoing participation of psychologists in the abuse and torture of detainees.

Following the Hoffman Report, in August 2015 the APA’s governing Council of Representatives overwhelmingly approved an historic resolution that included three crucial policy changes:

- 1) opposition to psychologist involvement in national security interrogations;
- 2) adoption of the United Nations Convention Against Torture in what constitutes torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; and
- 3) specification that psychologists present at torture sites are in violation of APA policy unless they are working directly on behalf of the detainees or providing treatment to military personnel.

Unfortunately, this encouraging development has not gone unchallenged by those in favor of dismembering real ethics for the APA. According to the members of the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology, various individuals and groups are carrying out a coordinated effort to undermine these important APA reforms and the Hoffman Report. Many of these are sober-sounding maneuvers by those opposed to these reforms. Some display the ad hominem attacks familiar to activists in the 9/11 Truth community — for example, rhetoric that denigrates the Hoffman Report as a “classic attack of cowards” and that accuses the APA of being “a willing co-conspirator to the likes of al Qaeda and ISIS.”¹¹

One example of this effort to re-weave the web of deceit is a letter sent to APA officials by Brad Carson, Acting Principal Deputy for the Under Secretary of the DoD. In it, he requests the APA to confirm that restrictions on the role of psychologists at U.S. sites whose practices violate international law “are a matter of policy, not an ethical mandate.”

For its part, the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology has countered with a statement pointing out that if the Carson's request were adopted, psychologists would be able to continue engaging in national security interrogations with no repercussions — including

¹¹ Roy Eidelson, “Standing Firm for Reform at the American Psychological Association,” June 17, 2016, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/06/17/standing-firm-for-reform-at-the-american-psychological-association>.

risk of loss of licensure. The Coalition insists that such a move would contradict the intent of the APA's new policy.¹²

Thus, as with the 9/11 Truth endeavor to bring to light and hold accountable the perpetrators of the September 11, 2001, attacks, the battle for real ethics within the APA rages on. The forces that work toward a closed society — toward a fascist state and world — are determined and unrelenting. But the 9/11 Truth community is equally determined and persevering. And so are the psychologists who believe that it is ethically imperative for psychologists to benefit their brethren and above all, to do no harm.

¹² See <http://www.ethicalpsychology.org/materials/Coalition-Responds-to-DoD-Letter-to-APA.pdf>.