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Psychologists and Torture

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History repeats itself, Marx famously warned, first as tragedy and then as farce. In the case of U.S. torture psychologists, the "tragedy" occurred half a century ago when CIA-funded psychological research on electroshock treatment, sensory deprivation and the like found its way into the Agency's counterintelligence interrogation manual. The 1963 Kubark Manual and its later iterations were used widely by U.S. intelligence and disseminated to other governments in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

The "farce" was played post-9/11, as psychologists became involved once again in aiding counterintelligence interrogators. Although some of the material in KUBARK remained in use, psychologists augmented already-existing material with newer techniques, some of which had been developed from torture resistance protocols used to train U.S. military personnel to survive capture and interrogation themselves. Thus, as Katherine Eban has reported, discoveries initially applied to help possible torture victims were later used to break interrogation subjects held in U.S. custody. Psychologists were complicit in designing and using techniques to break subjects rather than aid them, and in so doing they made a mockery of their ethical obligation to "do no harm."

Twice, then, psychologists forged relationships with the state in which they cast ethics aside. And both times they acted with impunity.

The Kubark Precedent

The Kubark Manual cites Albert Biderman and other research psychologists as sources for the "scientific findings" that support its conclusions. Biderman, who died in 2003, was known for his studies of U.S. personnel captured by the Chinese during the Cold War. He examined the ways in which the Chinese military induced false confessions – often outlandish and implausible ones – from U.S. prisoners. Whatever one thinks today of the validity and cogency of that literature, the government used it to

legitimize tactics and propositions that go well beyond the claims of the literature itself. KUBARK instructs interrogators to use protocols entitled, "Ivan is a Dope," "Alice in Wonderland," and "Mutt-and-Jeff." Some of these tactics recall the stationhouse "third degree" sessions documented by the 1931 Wickersham Report on police abuse; others appear even more ad hoc and arbitrary. To some extent, the bibliographical citations to social psychology literature provide window-dressing for a how-to on coercive interrogation practices. They help to create a scientific-sounding discourse of counterintelligence interrogation.

Kubark does not describe in detail the ways in which psychological interrogation methods ("clean torture," as Darius Rejali calls it) are done. KUBARK merely recognizes that "chemical and electrical" methods are available (though it may be more specific in the redacted portions). To see how sensory deprivation and electroshock treatment actually work on the psyche of subjects, we must look outside Kubark itself, at the research findings of scientists and the accounts of victims themselves. Naomi Klein interviewed one such victim who unwittingly became a research subject for Dr. Ewen Cameron of McGill University (a psychiatrist) while Cameron was treating her as a psychiatric inpatient. Cameron administered drug and electroshock therapy on his patient that left permanent, devastating injury. Many years later, she discovered the cause of her injuries when she learned of a legal settlement by the CIA paying unwitting experimental subjects for the damages they suffered. By then, she had become completely disabled as a

result of her “treatment.”

The relationship goes both ways, however. While the drafters of Kubark certainly utilized the research results to further interrogation objectives and to instruct interrogators in other countries, the researchers themselves certainly derived benefits from the relationship. Alfred McCoy notes that CIA operatives attended conferences in order to develop relationships with research psychologists, luring them with promises of research funding.

Incredibly, some of the research results from the early years of mind-control studies resurfaced post-9/11 in training protocols for Guantanamo interrogators. In 2008, *The New York Times* reported that Biderman’s 1957 “Chart of Coercion,” which indicates the ways that communist interrogators used such coercion to induce false confessions, was provided verbatim to trainees in 2002. In the intervening years since the chart was created, it had been used to counsel domestic violence victims and cult members to help them cope with the “mind control” they suffered. At Guantanamo, however, the application was less therapeutic.

Professional Complicity

The psychologist-torture connection is not merely a matter of individual practitioners but also involves their professional organization, the American Psychological Association (APA). The APA has a long history of involvement with the CIA — and, through that connection, with torture. The APA has compiled its own history of this relationship, starting with its joint statement with the American Psychiatric Association supporting the United Nations Declaration and Convention Against Torture in 1985. However, only in August 2006 did the APA “reaffirm” its anti-torture position. Of course, in the intervening years the 9/11 attacks occurred and the nation engaged in heated debate over the interrogation of suspected terrorists. In August 2007, the APA provided specific guidelines prohibiting certain interrogation techniques.

In addition to the substantive question of which tactics were condemned, however, there was the matter of ethics. In February of 2010, APA amended its ethics code to “address potential conflicts among professional ethics, law and organizational demands.” In June of 2010, APA’s president sent a letter to the Texas licensing board condemning the alleged involvement of one psychologist in coercive interrogation and urging the revocation of his license should the allegations against him prove true. This last action was by far the strongest that the APA has taken. Until then, the APA’s history of official action reflects, at the very least, an ambivalence on the part of some of its membership about condemning torture.

Of course, the APA cannot on its own initiative punish individual practitioners. That is the province of the state licensing boards, who have been reluctant to address the alleged violations of APA ethical standards by psychologists involved in torture and other inhumane treatment of detainees. Three psychologists in particular have come to the attention of the media in recent years: Drs. Leso, Jessen, and Mitchell. All three have allegedly been involved on some level (research, training, consultation, and even participation) in coercive interrogation. All three are licensed psychologists in different states. Although licensed psychologists and human rights groups have filed complaints, to date none of their licenses has been revoked. Nor have they received any kind of reprimand for their alleged involvement in torture.

Third Degree of Separation

The interconnections between torture and psychology in this half-century saga are remarkable, creating a veritable “Where’s Waldo?” catalog of appearances of its central figures. As noted above, Albert Biderman’s name resurfaced in Guantanamo, 50 years after his “chart of coercion” was initially published in a journal article. And when the Obama administration announced recently that it would prosecute a CIA operative for leaking facts and names tied to CIA

operations, one of the names that surfaced in that investigation was Deuce Martinez, a CIA interrogator. Martinez eventually left government and went to work for Mitchell and Jessen Associates, a consulting firm run by the same two psychologists discussed above who advised the CIA on the psychology of interrogation. A small world, indeed.

Cold War fantasies about beating the communists at the “mind control” game produced devastating effects on test subjects and prisoners. But these techniques failed to produce real-life gains in intelligence-gathering. The 9/11 attacks revived those fantasies and summoned research psychologists for another round of participation in coercive interrogation work. Some psychologists were ready to answer the call, and it appears, at least for now, that they will escape judgment from courts and licensing boards alike.

The APA’s stated position is clear:

Any direct or indirect participation in any act of torture or other forms of cruel, degrading or inhuman treatment or punishment by psychologists is strictly prohibited. There are no exceptions. Clear violations of APA’s no torture/no abuse policy include acts such as: waterboarding, sexual humiliation, stress positions, and exploitation of phobias.

This standard is meaningless, however, if there are no consequences for violating it. Licensing boards must act. The Texas State Board of Examiners website lists disciplinary actions taken against licensed psychologists. Texas psychologists have lost their licenses for sexual misconduct, dual relationships, deficiencies in professional knowledge and skill, and healthcare fraud. These cases show that ethical violations are punished. Involvement in torture is certainly no less important.

Licensing boards should be just as vigilant about punishing psychologists who aid in torture as they are about other ethical standards. Psychologists’ involvement in torture has done damage to the reputation of the profession, and the boards’ unwillingness to act undermines the integrity of ethics rules. It is both unconscionable and absurd that a psychologist can lose his or her license for Medicaid fraud but not for involvement in torture.

Post-scriptum :

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