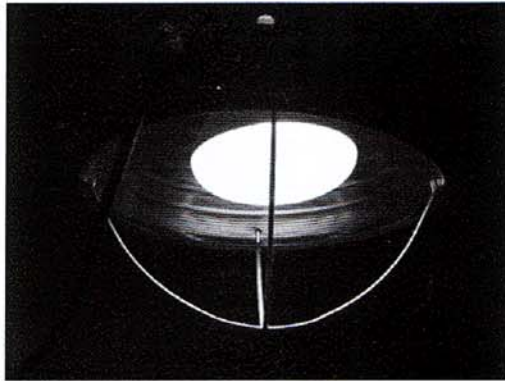




## Healing the Mind or Breaking the Spirit: The Role of Psychology During Interrogations

Michael B. Donner, Ph.D.

Following news reports of psychologists participation in so-called “biscuit teams” (behavioral science consultation teams) at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib prisons, an important dialogue has been generated about psychologists’ involvement in the interrogation of detainees. Various reports have indicated that interrogation techniques such as prolonged isolation, sleep and light deprivation were common. Sexual and cultural humiliation techniques were used that included forced nudity in front of, and sexual provocation by, female interrogators. Temperature extremes, hooding, strobe lights, loud music and forced postures have also been reported. The apparent goal of these techniques, whether used singly or in combination, was to break down the will of detainees to facilitate gathering of information (Physicians for Human Rights, 2005)



According to the American Psychological Association Report Of The Presidential Task Force On Psychological Ethics And National Security (2005), “psychologists do not engage in, direct, support, facilitate, or offer training in torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment” (p. 5). Although the task force recommended providing examples of behaviors that would exemplify these restrictions, none have been detailed thus far. At the present time, psychologists are left without clear guidance as to what distinguishes acceptable interrogation techniques from those that constitute torture or otherwise unacceptable treatment.

In a radio interview following the publication of the Task Force report (Democracy Now, 2005), Michael Wilks, Chair of the Medical Ethics Committee of the British Medical Association, noted that “it’s very difficult to see how a psychologist who has training in psychological techniques designed to help people with psychological problems, in other words, to put it bluntly, to help heal minds, can in any way regard it as ethically acceptable to be engaged, even at a distance, in training people in techniques that damage minds” (p. 4).

Principle A of the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles Of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2002) states that “Psychologists strive to benefit those with whom they work and take care to do no harm.” While, at first glance, this principal seems to

Task Force came to a different conclusion. Although the Task Force raised multiple issues to which psychologists should be alert, the Task Force did not undertake to prohibit psychologists’ participation in interrogations. Stephen Behnke of the APA Ethics Office noted that the question is not as to whether psychologists should be involved in interrogations, but how (Democracy Now, 2005).

While licensing boards or ethics committees necessarily might have to determine whether or where a psychologist crosses the line from interrogation to torture, a larger issue may be whether a psychologist should ever engage in interrogation. Even if distinguishing between torturous and non-torturous techniques is possible, interrogation by its nature is intended to break down an individual’s resistance and sense of well being. Whether applied to a military detainee or a suspect in a crime, interrogations are against the interest of the individual being detained. Dr. Wilks has reframed the issue in a compelling way. He has asked us to consider whether psychologists should ever use their education and training to damage minds, or use their abilities for anything other than healing minds.

The APA code of ethics permits psychologists to engage in any number of activities that are not intended for the purpose of healing minds. Psychologists engage in many activities that result in outcomes that can be quite harmful to the participants. This list is extensive and includes child custody evaluations, determinations of competency to stand trial, death penalty evaluations, job screenings, benefits administration and personal injury evaluations. However, the role of psychologists in the interrogation of military detainees may be particularly problematic. In most forensic evaluations, the role of the evaluator is defined and constrained by rules of court and professional guidelines. The subjects typically have legal counsel, access to other experts, and the evaluator can be cross examined.

A psychologist participating in an interrogation is in a very different environment. No one specifically may be charged with looking out for the well being of the detainee, and clear guidelines may not be provided for psychologists as to how to define their role. Although, in theory, the ethical principles and standards that inform all psychologists’ work should serve to protect the subject of

