

RESOLUTION CONCERNING PARTICIPATION OF PSYCHOLOGISTS IN MILITARY DETENTION CENTERS

WHEREAS psychologists in the United States, through their major professional organization, the American Psychological Association (APA), have adopted a set of ethical principles that includes the principle of Beneficence and Nonmaleficence (Principle A), which declares that psychologists should strive, in their work, “to do no harm” and should “seek to safeguard the welfare and rights of those with whom they interact” and the principle of Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity (Principle E), which declares that psychologists should “respect the dignity and worth of all people” and explicitly recognizes that “special safeguards may be necessary to protect the rights and welfare of persons or communities whose vulnerabilities impair autonomous decision making”; and

WHEREAS the United States military and Central Intelligence Agency are widely recognized and acknowledged to have incarcerated a number of persons in foreign detention centers without the due process of law ordinarily afforded by international human rights treaties and standards and to have subjected many of these detainees to forms of interrogation banned under international law, including some forms of torture; and

WHEREAS attention has recently been drawn to the fact that psychologists have been involved in the interrogations of incarcerated persons in such detention centers, and in some cases have contributed to the development of extraordinary forms of interrogation including torture; and

WHEREAS the American Psychological Association adopted a resolution on August 19, 2007 that, while condemning torture, continues to allow coercive interrogations so long as these interrogations do not cause “significant pain or suffering” or “lasting harm,” and that continues to allow psychologists to participate in interrogations in foreign detention centers in which internationally recognized due process of law is not afforded, and that in continuing to permit these violations of Principles A and E of the APA Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct, serves to legitimize the above mentioned violations of human rights and to undermine the moral authority and stature of psychology as a profession, and that, moreover, fails to recognize that decades of research in social psychology demonstrates that situational factors, especially in highly ideological and isolated settings, can be predicted, over time, to undermine the resolve of well-intentioned individuals, including psychologists, to resist institutional pressures to misuse authority;

The Department of Psychology of Earlham College therefore resolves

1. that the direct or indirect participation by psychologists in interrogations of prisoners incarcerated in foreign detention centers that do not afford prisoners internationally recognized due process of law is unethical; and

2. that the American Psychological Association should prohibit the participation of psychologists, directly or indirectly, in interrogations in these facilities.

Dear Friends

The Psychology faculty of Earlham College is contacting some of our colleagues in other institutions with interests in human rights and issues of peace to invite your Psychology Department to join us in condemning the involvement of psychologists in illegal interrogations and to call on the American Psychological Association to take a clear and unambiguous stand on the issue.

As you may be aware, on August 19, 2007, the APA Council of Representatives passed a resolution condemning torture. However, that resolution, while well-intentioned and important in many ways, still permits psychologists to participate in coercive interrogations so long as these interrogations do not cause “significant” pain and suffering or “lasting” harm, and therefore constitutes a violation of Principle A of our code of ethics; it also continues to permit psychologists to be associated with agencies or facilities in which prisoners are deprived of due process of law, a violation of Principle E. Most troubling of all, by allowing psychologists to continue to participate in the interrogations of detainees in secret military and CIA facilities, it continues to aid in legitimizing these interrogations and facilities.

The main justification offered for APA’s position is that psychologists attending military or CIA interrogations can serve an oversight function and act as “whistleblowers” if these interrogations cross the line into abuse or torture. While such oversight is theoretically possible, and may actually occur in some instances, we psychologists, of all professionals, understand (or should understand) just how difficult and atypical such resistance to authority is and how unrealistic it is to base organizational policy on the expectation that individuals in these settings will routinely or reliably act as whistleblowers. We have only to look at the classic work of Milgram, Zimbardo, Asch, Loftus, Janis, and others to recognize how much more likely and predictable it is that these psychologists will gradually succumb to the relentless “power of the situation” and tend over time to align themselves, implicitly or explicitly, with the practices of their employing institutions.

We will be forwarding the attached resolution to the American Psychological Association. We hope that other psychology departments in other educational institutions will join us in passing similar resolutions and that, together, we can serve as a conscience for APA. If you have any comments or questions, please feel free to contact me at jacksmi@earlham.edu.

Sincerely,

Michael R. Jackson
Convener
Department of Psychology
Earlham College