

Operational psychology, professional ethics, and democracy: A challenge for our time

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Abstract

The post-9/11 United States abusive detention and interrogation program brought attention to the critical roles of health professionals generally and of psychologists more particularly in the modern administration of torture and other detainee abuse. Over a decade of controversy in the American Psychological Association (APA) and an independent investigation finding APA collusion with the Bush administration's torture and coercive interrogation programs led to 2015 policies restricting the activities of psychologists in national security interrogations and illegal detention sites like Guantanamo. This controversy expanded to evaluation of a broader set of issues regarding the ethical roles of psychologists in furthering military and intelligence operations, or what has become known as Operational Psychology. Controversy over the extent to which Operational Psychology activities are consistent with psychological ethics has expanded since 2015 with critics calling for policies restraining Operational Psychologists from involvement in activities that cause greater than trivial unstipulated harm, lack informed consent, or are absent plausible independent ethical monitoring (due, for instance to security classification). Operational Psychologists have pushed back against any constraints on their actions other than US law and government regulations.

This debate also raises a broader issue: are there limitations on the extent to which we, as members of democratic societies, can tolerate the use of psychological science and expertise to manipulate unwitting people?

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The post-9/11 United States (US) abusive detention, interrogation, and (sometimes) torture program brought attention to the critical roles of health professionals generally, and of psychologists more particularly, in the administration of torture and detainee abuse. Health professionals assessed prisoner tolerance for interrogations and identified vulnerabilities to be targeted, attended to victims between episodes of abuse, monitored the physical and psychological effects of abuse, and researched the effects of torture. In the US, psychologists went so far as to develop and administer "enhanced interrogation" torture techniques for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA; Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2014).

There has been considerable controversy regarding the appropriate roles for psychologists in interrogations and military and intelligence operations more broadly. Military psychologists and their allies have defended past actions by their colleagues and oppose any restrictions on psychologists other than

those embodied in US law. However, after a decade of internal conflict and an independent investigation of the organisation's complicity (Hoffman et al., 2015), the leading US psychological organisation, the American Psychological Association (APA), followed psychiatrists and medical professionals in 2015 by issuing a policy banning psychologists from any direct involvement in national security interrogations as well as any involvement with detainee affairs at detention sites, like Guantanamo, judged by the United Nations to be operating in violation of international law (Aldhous, 2015a, 2015b; American Psychological Association, 2015). These policy changes moved the APA toward the position of their psychiatrist colleagues in the US and worldwide—that psychiatrists should have no direct role in interrogations, whether for national security or law enforcement purposes (American Psychiatric Association, 2006; Pérez-Sales et al. 2017, Miles, 2017; Soldz, 2017).

The decade of controversy regarding the proper role of psychologists in national security detention and interrogations has also raised broader questions about the ethics of Operational Psychology, the speciality area in which psychologists participate in furthering military and intelligence operations (Palarea, 2007; Staal & Harvey, 2019; Staal & Stephenson, 2006; Williams et al., 2006). In addition to interrogation support, Operational Psychologists participate in personnel selection, including for high-risk missions; monitor mock torture “resistance” trainings; assist hostage negotiations; and destroy adversaries’ reputations via manipulation of online messages; among other activities. While definitions vary, most notably in regard to whether the speciality includes domestic law enforcement consultation, Williams et. al. (2006, pp 193-194), define Operational Psychology as:

the actions by military psychologists that support the employment and/or sustainment of military forces (in particular, military commanders) to attain strategic goals in a theater of war or theater of operations by leveraging and applying their psychological expertise in helping to identify enemy capabilities, personalities, and intentions; facilitating and supporting intelligence operations; designing and implementing assessment and selection programs in support of special populations and high-risk missions; and providing an operationally focused level of mental health support.

These Operational Psychology activities contrast with the usual clinical role of psychologists in treating soldiers and prisoners of war (Kennedy & Zillmer, 2006).

Operational Psychology has a long history in the US (Capshew, 1999; Soldz et al., 2018a), dating back at least to psychologists’ development of tests for military personnel selection in World War I. It has developed more recently in other countries (i.e. Dimitrovska, 2017, 2018). The development and implementation of testing on such a massive scale in the war played a major role in establishing psychology as an area of professional practice in addition to its earlier recognition as a behavioral science. Operational Psychology efforts expanded in World War II and included the creation of psychological profiles of enemy leaders, the development of wartime propaganda, and the training of spies. These wartime efforts were largely uncontroversial within the psychology profession, as evidenced by the support for these psychologists in the major psychology journals. This extensive aid to the war effort from psychologists helped garner support for state licensure of psychologists in the postwar era (Capshew, 1999).

As professional psychology grew and diversified in the Cold War era, so too did Op-

erational Psychology. Especially notable was the development of Operational Psychology research, raising – and often bypassing – profound ethical questions. For example, Mitchell Berkun conducted research for the military on severe stress induced in servicemembers without their consent. In one of his papers:

Army trainees unaware that they were serving in an experiment were, under controlled conditions, led to believe that either (1) an aircraft in which they were passengers was about to make an emergency crash landing, (2) their outpost was now an artillery impact area, or (3) they had caused serious injury to a buddy by a mistake in wiring up explosive charges

Berkun, 1964, p. 92.

During the same period, dozens of psychologists funded by the CIA's secret MKUltra research program sought to uncover the secrets of mind control and successful interrogation (Greenfield, 1977; Kinzer, 2019; Marks, 1991). Thousands of people were unwittingly given LSD; prisoners and people hospitalized with a mental health condition were subjected to harmful experiments without consent in institutions across the United States. A renowned psychiatrist at McGill University in Canada attempted to wipe patients' minds clean and replace them with thoughts of his own, causing long-term harm to many.

Furthermore, as recently revealed by a declassified CIA document, psychologists helped write the infamous KUBARK interrogation manual that formed the basis for the US promulgation of torture in much of Latin America (Central Intelligence Agency, 1963; Office of Medical Services, Central Intelligence Agency, 2007). These research projects violated the ethical guidelines for research that the US military established for the doctors on trial after World War II,

which stated in Principle 1: "The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential" ("The Nuremberg Code (1947)," 1996). Despite these ethical breaches, much of this CIA-funded research was published in mainstream psychological and medical journals, and the researchers were esteemed members of the psychological and medical communities.

Given this problematic history, as well as the wide range of activities currently undertaken by the specialty's practitioners, Operational Psychology is in great need of independent ethical analysis. This analysis should be twofold. One set of questions concerns which of these activities are ethically appropriate for professional psychologists, and which are not. Separate from the issue of professional ethics are questions regarding the limitations a democratic society should place upon the use of psychological knowledge for purposes of manipulation.

Psychological ethics in the US and many other countries are based on fundamental values including beneficence, nonmaleficence, transparency, and universal respect for all peoples. As none of these are fundamental values for military or intelligence establishments, there are likely to be significant conflicts between these two sets of values.

To address these conflicts, several psychologists who led the struggle resisting psychological complicity with US government interrogational abuse convened a workshop in 2015 at the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis. The workshop participants comprised fellow psychologists, other medical and social science professionals, military and intelligence professionals, and ethicists. The group discussed and evaluated ethical conundrums in actual cases of Operational Psychology practice.

The workshop refined a model of ethical and unethical behaviour in Operational Psychology developed by psychologists Jean Maria Arrigo and Roy Eidelson together with retired Army interrogator Ray Bennett (Arrigo et al., 2012). With significant input from the participating military and intelligence professionals, the workshop produced the Brookline Principles on the Ethical Practice of Operational Psychology (Soldz et al., 2017). These Brookline Principles emphasize the centrality of non-maleficence or avoidance of harm, informed consent, and the availability of independent ethical monitoring of all psychological practice specialities, including Operational Psychology.

To be considered ethical under these Principles, Operational Psychology activities must meet three criteria. First, they must risk only minor, foreseeable and implicitly or explicitly agreed to (“stipulated”) harms. Second, they must involve a reasonable degree of informed consent. And third, they must not be so shrouded in secrecy that independent ethical monitoring is implausible. This would allow, for example, traditional Operational Psychology roles of screening applicants such as pilots or special forces for high-risk missions and screening personnel such as non-coercive interrogators or hostage negotiators for highly sensitive positions. However, direct participation by psychologists themselves in the interrogation of individuals, whether coercive or noncoercive, would not be allowed as consent is lacking and even noncoercive interrogation has substantial potential to cause unstipulated harms. It remains to be determined whether participation in interrogations conducted according to the recently released “Mendez Principles” would be considered ethical under these Principles (Association for the Prevention of Torture, 2021; Brandon & Fallon, 2021; *Principles on Effective*

Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering, 2021).

The Brookline Principles were perceived as a serious threat by many from the Operational Psychology community. A leader of that community and past president of the Military Psychology division of the APA ignored the content of the Brookline Principles while launching *ad hominem* attacks on the Workshop’s participants (Harvey, 2015). She called on Operational Psychology’s allies to instigate protests regarding the Workshop’s leadership with the APA and its Ethics Committee; she later made public accusations of unethical behaviour against me for speaking about Operational Psychology without ever having been in the military. Operational Psychologists made similar claims against a colleague in a formal complaint to the APA Ethics Committee (Aldhous, 2018; Reisner, 2017).

The ideas central to the Brookline Principles were later the basis for a more scholarly debate, which appeared in the journal *Peace and Conflict*, between some of the Workshop participants and another leader within the Operational Psychology community (Soldz et al., 2018a, 2018b; M. A. Staal, 2018a, 2018b). In this debate, Soldz et. al., proposed five ethical considerations that we argued are central to evaluating the ethical practice of Operational Psychology:

1. Historical and prospective cases of [Operational Psychology]. The history of abuses in the area demands close examination moral risks....
2. Analogous professions. The historical courses of operational medicine, psychiatry, anthropology, and the chaplaincy offer unexamined warnings for the future of [Operational Psychology]....
3. Institutional exigencies and pressures. The findings of social, organisational,

and cognitive psychology and techniques of applied ethics must be adapted to the high-risk, high-stakes, hierarchical situations of [Operational Psychology], as in determining the “infrastructures of responsibility” (G. Williams, 2006).

4. The entirety of operational psychologists in the security sector. [Operational Psychology] ethics must encompass all security-sector operational psychologists, including the heretofore unacknowledged defense contractors with their corporate allegiances (e.g., U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2008).
5. Monitoring and accountability. There is a long history of failure of internal accountability in operational social and health sciences, and no plausible mechanism of internal nor external accountability has been proposed. Standard 1.02 of the 2002 APA Code of Ethics (American Psychological Association, 2002) enshrined this omission by waiving ethics standards that conflicted with work assignments for government employees (Soldz et al., 2018b, p. 461).

The Operational Psychologist who participated in this debate ignored all our proposed considerations while making it clear that these psychologists would not accept any limitations on their activities arising from psychological ethics, arguing in response to critiques of psychologist participation in national security interrogations: “Either an activity is ethical, or it isn’t. If ethical, then psychologists should be allowed to provide their expertise to whatever problem or issue is presented” (M. A. Staal, 2018b, p. 458). This argument negates the very concept of professional ethics and the existence of psychology as a profession. One of the defining characteristics of a profession in our society is that members undertake ethical

obligations beyond those carried by nonprofessionals (Tjeltveit, 1999).

The preface to a recent anthology by Operational Psychologists calls upon their allies to join the struggle against the threat posed by developers of the Brookline Principles and by those who have opposed psychologist participation in the abuses at Guantanamo and CIA black sites. The preface author argues that psychologists opposed to Operational Psychology must not only be defeated on the battlefield of ideas, but must be expelled from the profession:

To fully appreciate and achieve these expressed aspirations and interests of our profession, we must ensure we are able to dislodge the opposition to Operational Psychology from within our profession. The most vocal and frequent of this opposition is too often thinly veiled in the shadows of distorted, disingenuous, and discredited diatribes that serve to distort the knowledge and facts, undermining trust both within and for our profession.

Emphasis added, Williams, 2019, p. x.

As I was working on this essay, APA submitted for public comment a draft of Proposed Guidelines for Operational Psychology. These Guidelines were the product of the Operational Psychology Practice Guidelines Task Force, appointed and chaired by an Operational Psychologist and past president of the APA’s Military Psychology division, the same person who participated in the scholarly debate described above. The Task Force included psychologists nominated by three unspecified national security agencies.

These draft Guidelines illustrate the danger of Operational Psychology to the antitorture movement and to the psychology profession’s ethics. They fail to call upon Operational Psychologists to abide by the restrictions put in place by the APA in a series of

policy resolutions culminating in the 2015 ban on national security interrogation involvement and participation in detention operations at illegal detention sites, such as CIA “black site” prisons or Guantanamo. They fail to call upon Operational Psychologists to abstain from involvement in coercive interrogations if the interrogations are permitted by US government policy. The furthest the Guidelines go in this direction is to state that “Operational Psychologists *strive to avoid participating* in practices that are illegal or unjust, or that unnecessarily infringe upon or violate others’ rights” (emphasis added; Operational Psychology Practice Guidelines Task Force (OPPGTF), 2022, ll. 334–335).

Additionally, the Guidelines ignore existing relevant international law, such as the Convention Against Torture (United Nations General Assembly, 1984). If these Guidelines are approved by the APA, it will free Operational Psychologists to participate in any future US government sanctioned abuses, undoing nearly two decades of efforts to constrain involvement in such abuses. The Guidelines also pose a danger in that, if approved, they may encourage psychologists linked to national security agencies in other countries to pursue such opportunities as well.

The recent experience of psychologist participation in torture and other detainee abuses has raised serious questions about the ethics of Operational Psychology for psychologists, who as members of a profession are bound by a specific code of conduct. However, our societies, confronted with various applications of psychological knowledge by Operational Psychologists and other practitioners, are also faced with a broader issue. Regardless of professional ethical concerns, are there limitations on the extent to which we as members of democratic societies can tolerate the use of psy-

chological science and expertise to manipulate unwitting people?

I do not have an answer to that crucial question, but I know that as psychological knowledge and technological power increase, so too will the ability to manipulate. As our societies’ recent experiences with political advertising and with social media demonstrate, we must confront this issue of limits on psychological manipulation or surrender the ideal of democratic self-government. While this article focusses on US experience and on the profession of psychology, the questions about limits on appropriate, ethical uses of professional knowledge confront other health professions and social and behavioral sciences in all would-be democratic societies.

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