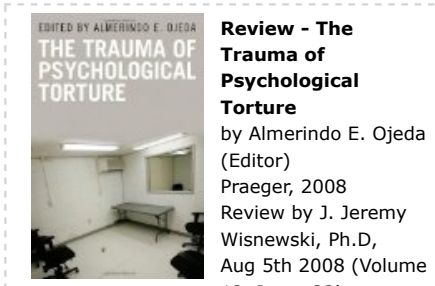




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PSYCHOLOGY



Review - The Trauma of Psychological Torture

by Almerindo E. Ojeda
 (Editor)
 Praeger, 2008
 Review by J. Jeremy
 Wisniewski, Ph.D,
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In a publishing climate where books on torture are being released faster than we can read them, it is refreshing to know that there is still plenty to say--and plenty to learn. Almerindo E. Ojeda's newly edited volume proves this in spades. Each of the twelve chapters offers fresh perspective on a surprising range of issues. Despite the title, *The Trauma of Psychological Torture* goes well beyond an analysis of the psychological and physiological effects of torture. On my view, this is a serious asset--even charm, if such a thing can be said--of this book: it attempts to situate the trauma of psychological torture in historical and social context, paying close attention to several areas of interest that a reader might not expect from the title alone. In addition to exploring what the title indicates, the book features articles on the origins of torture in U.S. history (one contributed by none other than Alfred McCoy), the ethical questions surrounding medical complicity in torture, and the relation of torture to practices in 'supermax' prison facilities in the United States. In addition, the editor of the book contributes an interesting attempt to operationalize the definition of 'psychological torture.' The range of articles makes this book a surprisingly panoramic work that would be a welcome read to anyone interested in gaining a better understanding of torture as it exists today.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that this book does not contribute to our understanding of

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issues--sometimes technical--surrounding trauma in particular. There is all ready a powerful body of literature that has emerged from

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persons working directly with torture survivors. (See, for example, *At the Side of Torture Survivors*, edited by Sepp Graessner, Norbert Gurrus, and Christian Pross, Johns Hopkins Press, 2001). This literature focuses primarily on pragmatic issues surrounding the treatment of those torture survivors who have strength enough to seek help from mental health professionals. On this subject, *The Trauma of Psychological Torture* has little to say (though Stuart Grassian's "Neuropsychiatric Effects of Solitary Confinement" is a powerful look at how torture can make therapeutic communication--indeed, *any* communication--paralysis-inducing for the victim). On the other hand, the contributions focusing on the affects of psychological torture on the brain provide a range of useful information that provides real empirical meat to psychiatric bone. (For a text that attempts to treat both the psychiatry and the neurobiology of torture, see *The Mental Health Consequences of Torture*, edited by Ellen Gerrity, Terence M. Keane, and Farris Tuma, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2001.) Three essays of twelve concentrate explicitly on this dimension of the trauma of psychological torture.

One essay in particular that deserves special attention is Uwe Jacobs' "Documenting the Neurobiology of Psychological Torture: Conceptual and Nueropsychological Observations." In one respect, this essay instantiates the merits of the book as a whole. Rather than limiting himself to documenting the physical affects of torture and PTSD, Jacobs works to dismantle the very distinction between physical and psychological torture. Given the brute physical effects of so-called 'psychological' torture, Jacobs argues, it is misleading to suggest that 'psychological torture' is fundamentally distinct from physical torture. At the end of the day, all torture is physical, and it all has long-term (and disastrous) consequences for those who have been its victim. To mark a distinction based on ease and method of diagnosis (which is what the physical/psychological distinction comes to, in Jacobs' view), is to perpetuate a false dichotomy that has caused a great deal of harm. As Jacobs argues, "the notion of psychological torture is itself artificial, and...it is of interest mainly to those who hope to conceal and deny the practice of torture" (163). This is a powerful indictment, grounded in solid empirical work, and one that is first and foremost about the ethics of our very *conceptualization* of torture.

This multi-disciplinary and innovative approach to the question of psychological torture, I hope obviously, is not limited to Jacobs' essay. While this is certainly one of the better articles in the volume, the volume is uniformly good. Indeed, it ranks among some of the better collections on torture. Unlike Karen Greenberg's impressive *The Torture Debate in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) which focuses largely on legal issues surrounding torture, and Sanford Levinson's equally impressive *Torture* (Oxford University Press, 2004), which offers on array of jurisprudential, philosophical, and historical articles, *The Trauma of Psychological Torture* offers a helpful view of issues involving the responsibility of the medical profession, the neurobiological effects of torture, and the historical emergence of so-called 'psychological torture'--but it also provides us with an ethical demand--namely, that we think carefully about our current practices, as well as the categories we use to describe them.

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