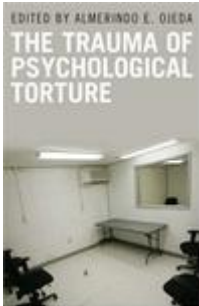


Why Torture Doesn't Work and Other Trauma Psychology Lessons

A review of



The Trauma of Psychological Torture

by Almerindo E. Ojeda (Ed.)

Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008. 240 pp. ISBN 978-0-313-34514-2. \$49.95



Reviewed by

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Long ago when I went through Marine Corps boot camp, we recruits were schooled in what is now called “battlefield ethics.” We were taught that torture of any kind doesn't work. We had grown up with movies and TV shows about POW camps. It was hard to imagine Colonel Klink ordering any of the Hogan's Heroes gang tortured in order to gain useful information. There were far better methods other than torture, and our training reinforced that view.

Years later Col. Ron Levy, who was, at the time, head of the Israeli Defense Forces Mental Health System, reinforced this lesson about torture. He and several other psychologists had read my book (Figley, 1978) and traveled to West Lafayette, Indiana, to consult with me about helping Israeli war veterans. We met for the first time in my office at Purdue University in the 1970s. After I voiced my concern about how my findings about the

trauma induction process might be used to harm others, he chuckled. He explained that torture and brutal interrogations do not work unless the purpose is revenge, which, in turn, breeds the need for retribution for the brutality. Psychological tactics trump torture.

In 2008 the American Psychological Association (APA) membership endorsed a resolution about psychological torture that I am sure brought a sense of satisfaction to the editor of the book that I am reviewing here. The APA membership voted to ban fellow members from working in settings where detainees are held in inhumane conditions and/or in sites that operate outside of the Geneva Convention unless those members serve the detainees, provide treatment to military members, or assist a human rights organization.

The Trauma of Psychological Torture provides an abundance of detailed support for the ban supported by the membership and proof for the assertion that torture—physical or mental—does not work. The chapter by Soldz and Olson includes a detailed discussion of the efforts of APA to address this issue with due respect to the “war on terrorism.”

The book contains 12 chapters, beginning with a very brief introduction by the book's editor, Almerindo E. Ojeda, who also wrote the first chapter. Ojeda, born and raised in Peru, is founding director of the Center for the Study of Human Rights in the Americas (CSHRA) at the University of California at Davis, where he is a professor of linguistics. He established CSHRA to engage the university and others in human rights issues, with special attention to the detainment camp on the U.S. Naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Psychologists interested in becoming familiar with the torture debate, particularly within APA, will find this book quite useful but also disturbing. The book focuses on the contexts of the Cold War (Gildner); modern medical ethics (McCoy); the debates within APA (Soldz and Olson); Guantánamo Bay (Marks) and two cases of prisoner abuse there (Gutierrez; Matthews); solitary confinement effects (Grassian); horrific prison conditions (Kupers); and the neurobiological effects of psychological torture (Catani, Neuner, Weinbruch, and Elbert; Fields; Jacobs). Although very little attention is given to the history of psychological torture, other books have focused exclusively on this topic (e.g., Innes, 1998).

Following the introductory front matter, the book immediately addresses the challenges of defining psychological torture and offers an “extensional” definition, identifying 13 sets of practices “rather than in terms of the goals, intended or attained, of those who designed these practices or carried them out;... the definition is phenomenological rather than teleological” (p. 4). The rest of the first chapter includes an explanation of the emergence of these practices. Among these seminal practices that define psychological torture are isolation of the victim, induced desperation, threat of physical harm to themselves or loved ones, sexual humiliation, and desecration of sacred and valued symbols.

The only shortcoming of this book is the lack of psychosocial theory of the trauma of psychological torture or even more generally the psychology of trauma induction and, especially, the psychology of coercion. There is no discussion of the links between

psychological torture of prisoners and other contexts in which psychological torture takes place. These include abusive families; cults; hazing in certain clubs, sororities, and fraternities; and the psychological torture directed toward so many middle- and high-school children in the form of bullying, sexual harassment, and other forms of intimidation and humiliation.

The book notes in passing that “hundreds of studies were published in the 1950s and 1960s to identify the methods whereby Communist regimes could exact implausible confessions from their enemies (and to understand, more broadly, the *psychology of coercion*)” (p. 4; emphasis added). The psychology of coercion is an important focus that has broad implications.

In summary, *The Trauma of Psychological Torture* provides a useful compendium of knowledge about systematic psychological torture and coercion in the context of war and provides justification for efforts by members of APA and the American Psychiatric Association to not sanction such practices. What is needed is an effort to link empirically and theoretically these and other forms and practices in a wide variety of contexts into a psychology of coercion and its consequences.

It is well known that psychological torture does not work, but we need to know why this is the case, beyond these professional contexts. What about the personal and interpersonal contexts in daily living? We run the risk, of course, of providing a blueprint for inducing trauma. Yet, without our understanding the process of trauma induction, reversing the troubling effects of this process may remain elusive.

References

- Figley, C. R. (Ed.). (1978). *Stress disorders among Vietnam veterans: Theory, research, and treatment*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Innes, B. (1998). *The history of torture*. New York: St. Martin's Press.