

What is Psychological Torture?

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Defining Psychological Torture

- *PT* is often proscribed, but seldom defined.
- Difficulty: All forms of torture cause psychological pain.
- Idea: Focus on the *cause* rather than the *effect*.
- Proposal: *PT* is the intentional infliction of suffering *without resorting to direct physical violence*.
- All instances of *PT* must satisfy four criteria :
 1. Suffering
 2. Infliction
 3. Deliberateness
 4. Lack of *direct* physical violence (*indirect* physical violence is always present with torture).

Psychological Torture is Torture

[Torture is] the deliberate, systematic, or wanton infliction of physical or mental suffering by one or more persons acting alone or on the orders of any authority, to force another person to yield information, to make a confession, or for any other reason (World Medical Association, 1975).

[Torture is] any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by, or at the instigation of, or *with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity* (United Nations, 1987).

□ *PT* is 'no-touch torture' (Alfred McCoy, 2006).

Categories of Psychological Torture

Isolation: solitary or quasi-solitary confinement.

Debilitation: food, water, and sleep deprivation; extreme temperatures.

Spatiotemporal disorientation: confinement in small places, natural light denial

Sensory deprivation: hoods, goggles, gloves, deodorizing masks.

Sensory assault: shouting, loud music, bright lights.

Desperation: indefinite detention, sense of futility.

Threats: of death or violence, to self or others, mock executions, witness torture.

Degradation: verbal, nudity, personal hygiene denial, overcrowding,
contact with pests, or excrement, sexual, ethnic, religious.

Pharmacological manipulation: tranquilizers, hallucinogens.

See Amnesty International (1975, 53), Allodi et al. (1985, 63), Miles (2006, 8f).

Testimony of *PT* at Guantánamo

(T182, Guantánamo Testimonials Project) About a week later I was suddenly collected and taken to one of the three isolation blocks, 'November'. I asked the Sergeant why I was being moved and he simply said "we don't know. The order is from the interrogators". I was placed in a metal cell painted green inside. It was filthy and very rusty. There was a tap, sink, toilet and a metal bunk. It was extremely hot, hotter than the other cells I'd been in previously. Although there was an air conditioning unit it was turned off so the cells were much hotter than the ones I was previously held in because they were completely closed off and no air could come into the cell. There was a glass panel at the hatch at the front of the cell so they could keep an eye on us. Whilst it was extremely hot in the daytime, at night when it got cold, anyway, they would turn the air conditioning up so that it became freezing. I didn't have a blanket or a mattress and had only my clothes to keep me warm so I got absolutely freezing at night. For the first week I had no idea what was going on. I was not taken to interrogation; I just had to sit there waiting. I felt like I was going out of my mind. I didn't know where the others were, I didn't know why I was being held there. Nobody would talk to me. I was taken out maybe just twice for showers but that was it. I was extremely anxious. Then about a week later I was taken by two soldiers to interrogation at the Gold building (Rasul et al. 2004, paragraph 182).

Testimony of *PT* at Guantánamo

(ES39, Guantánamo Testimonials Project) As she said this, she stood and moved her chair out of the way. She started unbuttoning her BDU pants. “Fareek, did you know that I’m having my period?” she said. She placed her hands in her pants as she started to circle behind the detainee. “How do you feel about me touching you now?” | Fareek’s spine shot straight as a steel rod. As I translated, he looked at me as if my death was his most profound desire. | Brooke came back around his other side, and he could see that she was beginning to withdraw her hand from her pants. As it became visible, the Saudi saw what looked like red blood on her hand. “Who told you to learn to fly, Fareek?” she demanded. He glared at her with vengeance, refusing to give in. “You fuck,” she hissed, wiping what he believed was menstrual blood on his face [...] Fareek was screaming at the top of his lungs, rattling the flimsy trailer, body shaking, beginning to sob. He kept yanking his arms apart, as if he could somehow wrest himself out of his handcuffs. | “How do you like this?” she asked, holding open the palm of her hand to show him her blood. | [...] The MPs rushed into the room and Brooke said to the lower-ranking one, “Fix the fucking shackles, leave him lying on the floor, and get the fuck out!” [...] Brooke got down to her knees next to him. I followed suit. “It doesn’t have to be this way,” she said. “You have choices, Fareek. Who sent you to flight school?” He began to cry like a baby, sobbing and mumbling in Arabic too indistinct for me to understand. The only thing I picked out was, “You American whore.” | “What do you think your brothers will think of you in the morning when they see an American woman’s menstrual blood on your face?” Brooke said, standing up. “By the way, we’ve shut off the water to your cell for tonight, so the blood will still be there tomorrow,” she tossed out as we left the booth (Saar and Novak 2005, 221-229).

Testimony of *PT* at Guantánamo

(CCR29, Guantánamo Testimonials Project) Perhaps one of the most severe examples of sleep deprivation is that of Mohammed Al-Qahtani who, pursuant to a special “interrogation plan” approved by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, was subjected to fifty days of sleep deprivation. Except for one day during this period, Mr. Al-Qahtani was permitted to sleep no more than four hours a day between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Medical personnel monitored Mohammed al Qahtani’s interrogation during a period of nearly two months of severe sleep deprivation and physical stress. At one point, they rushed him to the base hospital when his heart rate dropped dangerously low. After stabilizing him, they returned him for further interrogation the following day. Other prisoners who report experiencing sleep deprivation include Mr. Hicks, Mr. Abbasi, Mr. Habib, Mr. Esmail, and Mr. Abd al-Malik al-Wahab (Center for Constitutional Rights 2006, 22f).

Testimony of *PT* at Guantánamo

(Y55, Guantánamo Testimonials Project) The worst incident I was aware of [with respect to the cycle of riots and IRFings] happened in late July, in response to news that an interrogator had thrown a detainee's Qur'an on the floor, stepped on it, and kicked it across the room [...] Before I made any attempts to look into it, I was quietly approached by Staff Sergeant Mustapha Abdeddine, a translator with the intelligence group. He came to tell me that the incident was true and that it bothered him to see the Qur'an abused (Yee 2005, 115).

Conclusion

- It is hard to characterize *PT* by the *fact* that it causes psychological pain.
- We might have better luck defining it by the *way* it causes psychological pain.
- We have defined *PT* as torture that does not resort to direct physical violence.
- Appeal of this definition:
 - It is inclusive enough to accept many (all?) pretheoretical cases of *PT*.
 - It is exclusive enough to reject all cases of physical torture.
 - It articulates a generalization about *PT*: its shunning of direct physical violence.
 - This generalization explains the allure of *PT*: it leaves no physical trace (or so it seems).

References

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