

Psychologists' Roles in National Security: Getting Beyond Dichotomous Thinking

A review of the film



Doctors of the Dark Side

(2011)

Martha Davis (Director)

Reviewed by

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Doctors of the Dark Side, directed by Martha Davis, opens with a jarring series of photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq featuring all manner of prisoner abuse, even torture. The victims are Arab prisoners. The perpetrators are American enlisted service members—generally young, inexperienced, poorly trained, and markedly unsupervised. The stream of photos is hard to watch. Each cruelty further reveals something repellent about human nature, something we might prefer to ignore. The events at Abu Ghraib remind us how easy it can be to step onto the slippery slope of cruelty, given the right circumstances and social context (Zimbardo, 1971).

As a former active-duty military psychologist and someone currently employed by the U.S. Department of Defense, I was prepared to dislike *Doctors of the Dark Side*. During the last decade, I have grown weary of a steady stream of sensational and inaccurate accusations and innuendo about the complicity of the American Psychological Association (APA) in sanctioning or tolerating torture and the conflation of intelligence gathering and torture.

Although the current film perpetuates a few erroneous beliefs about psychologists in national security roles and about APA policy, there are several elements in this work to applaud. *Doctors of the Dark Side* sheds an important, if unpleasant, light on a dark chapter in the history of the United States and the behavior of a very few psychologists.

This film reminds us of the power of context in determining behavior. It also highlights the risks associated with mixed-agency ethical dilemmas that involve the simultaneous commitment to two or more entities (Johnson & Koocher, 2011); most often, these present as conflicts between loyalties to individual clients and loyalties to an organization. It is undoubtedly the case that when a psychologist accepts employment with the military—particularly when employment requires being commissioned as a military officer—he or she will find occasional tensions between the best interests of individual clients and the needs or interests of the organization.

Doctors of the Dark Side also reminds viewers of the risks associated with mixing clinical and other roles with clients, as well as the profound danger of practice and consultation in areas for which one has not demonstrated competence as a function of appropriate education, training, and supervision (APA, 2010). The film sheds light on the fact that some of the information gleaned through the use of abusive techniques was entirely false, provided by detainees merely to escape torture. Brigadier General Xenakis, MD, underscores the fact that the enhanced interrogation techniques used with some prisoners in U.S. custody were not only entirely unethical and immoral, they were also often ineffective.

This is a salient lesson and one supported by the first systematic and comprehensive review of both experimental and observational studies on the effectiveness of interviewing and interrogation methods (Meissner, Redlich, Bhatt, & Brandon, 2012). This review concluded that information-gathering (rapport-based) interrogation methods elicit a greater proportion of true information (when compared with harsh or accusatorial methods) while significantly reducing the likelihood of a false confession.

A final laudatory aspect of this film is its potential utility as a training tool for psychologists and physicians preparing for national security roles. There is some powerful inoculation value here. New professionals will hardly be able to absorb this film without appreciating the risks associated with detainee interview and interrogation work and the terrible toll associated with ignoring human rights.

I have already shared the film with two of my Naval Academy students interested in careers as Navy psychologists. In our subsequent debriefing and discussion, it was clear to me that this movie helped them to appreciate the risks associated with practice in operational contexts as well as the purpose of professional ethics and human rights declarations bearing on work with detainees.

But there are some problems with *Doctors of the Dark Side*. First, the filmmakers were rather transparent in the use of *peripheral route persuasion* throughout (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). As viewers are inundated with disturbing images of torture from Abu Ghraib (a venue where no psychologist ever consulted to an interrogation), a narrator asks,

“How have American psychologists come to sanction and implement torture in military prisons, and why haven’t they been held accountable for their actions?”

Social psychologists know that peripheral route persuasion techniques rely primarily on emotional arousal and other superficial factors, not evidence. The narrator decries the fact that no ethics board or state licensing board has ever taken action against a handful of psychologists accused of unethical behavior by the filmmakers. The film’s haunting music, disturbing imagery, and accusing narrative imply that adjudicatory bodies have shirked their duties or, worse, are complicit in protecting guilty psychologists.

Although some licensing boards may have determined that they do not have jurisdiction over behaviors occurring outside the United States or in military settings, it also seems quite clear that other licensing boards have carefully reviewed allegations and found the evidence wanting. For instance, licensing board complaints against Larry James in Ohio and Louisiana have been dismissed. Additionally, this film is quick to publically name and accuse three or four psychologists as aiding or condoning harsh and unethical practices with detainees, yet it fails entirely to devote equal time to those psychologists—there were several—who refused to participate or even filed reports of abuses up the chain of command. This oversight is an especially unfortunate shortcoming in the film.

This film also implies that APA was late to the game in making it clear to psychologists that torture in any form is unacceptable. As a matter of record, APA’s first formal resolution on this matter occurred in 1985 with the passage of Against Torture: Joint Resolution of the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association (<http://www.apa.org/news/press/statements/joint-resolution-against-torture.pdf>). APA’s Council of Representatives passed a similar resolution the following year.

Although the film mentions APA’s *Report of the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Psychological Ethics and National Security* (The PENS Report; APA, 2005), it seems to do so merely to cast aspersions at those task force members with any military service history or employment connection to the U.S. government. Somehow, the virtue of involving national security psychologists in the development of a policy document on national security work is lost on the filmmakers. In fact, viewers unfamiliar with APA’s cumulative policy actions relating to torture, ethics, and national security work might never suspect that APA’s position achieves each of the following:

- Prohibits torture, cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment;
- Prohibits specific interrogation techniques (“enhanced” interrogations);
- Prohibits psychologists from intelligence-gathering activities in unlawful detention facilities;
- Obligates psychologists to report torture and abuse;

- Commends psychologists who have taken a stand against torture, especially those who have done so in the line of duty;
- Codifies these values in the APA Ethics Code, removing “following law” or “following orders” as a possible defense against a violation of human rights.

My final concern with *Doctors of the Dark Side* is the clear message that APA is negligent in refusing to join the American Psychiatric Association in prohibiting its members from participating in interrogation work. First, a careful review of the position of the American Psychiatric Association (American Psychiatric Association, 2006)—which its president characterized as *not* an ethical rule when it was adopted in 2006—reveals substantial exceptions to the policy against psychiatrist involvement in interrogations.

Moreover, although there is now clear and consistent empirical evidence that interviewers and interrogators may safely, ethically, and effectively gather valuable and accurate intelligence from detainees (Meissner et al., 2012), and although psychologists may be uniquely prepared to assist in information-gathering activities of national importance, this possibility is never addressed. In this regard, the film disappoints by implying that all psychologist involvement in interrogations—even those that are conducted ethically and are intended to prevent acts of violence—is unethical.

If the filmmaker wanted to make this point, she has not done so, any more than a critic of psychoanalysis would have persuaded an audience that psychoanalysis is unethical because Freud’s early followers engaged in egregious boundary violations. Yes, the history is important (that’s my first point in this review and why I argue for using the film to educate), but the point moving forward is to create rules and systems that derive from the lessons that history has taught us.

In the years since the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and approval of enhanced interrogation techniques by the G. W. Bush administration, the profession of psychology has created clear policy, accompanied by enforceable ethical standards, that firmly prohibits any form of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment. It is now time for psychologists to stop conflating interrogation and torture. This leads to dichotomous and reactive beliefs including, “Psychologists may *never* engage in interrogation consultation because this activity will *always* lead to torture.”

This idea is demonstrably false. Information gathering and interviewing with detainees must be considered a specific competency area (Fouad et al., 2009) within the field of operational psychology. Trainees in national security settings must receive appropriate education, training, and supervised experience in various approaches to ethical information gathering if there is a possibility that they will be asked to serve in this role.

Unfortunately, when the Department of Defense (DOD) has reached out to psychologists and other mental health professionals for assistance in developing safe, evidence-based, and ethically appropriate interview training for DOD personnel, it has been

rebuffed. On the very day that I sat down to pen this review, there was outrage in the media because Yale University was considering a collaboration with DOD for the purpose of training military personnel in appropriate interview strategies. The headline “Yale’s Potential ‘Interrogation Center’ Sparks Controversy” (cf. Costantini, 2013) suggests that we have work to do in getting beyond dichotomous perspectives on intelligence gathering.

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