

# American psychologists, the Central Intelligence Agency, and enhanced interrogation

Health Psychology Open  
July-December 2018: 1–2  
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DOI: 10.1177/2055102918796610  
journals.sagepub.com/home/hpo



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## Abstract

In two commissioned articles, *Health Psychology Open* clarifies once and for all the role of two prominent American psychologists in the Central Intelligence Agency program of enhanced interrogation post 9/11. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program and the Hoffman Report produced more questions than answers. In these historically significant articles, Martin Seligman and Joseph Matarazzo assert the truth about their actions and the lessons learned.

## Keywords

American Psychological Association, Central Intelligence Agency, enhanced interrogation, Matarazzo, Seligman

We live in a far-from-ideal world that is fearful, dangerous, and threatening. Terrorism is everywhere a real and imminent danger. World War III is already upon us as the “War on Terror.” Our military forces, police, and intelligence authorities have a huge responsibility to protect citizens and to keep us safe. We all look to them to do that. We also look to our professional associations and lawmakers to define the parameters of their conduct. Never before have we needed more clarity than now. Unfortunately, considerable confusion exists about these ethical and legal parameters. It should not be this way and the American Psychological Association (APA) and other psychological associations need to be clear and consistent about the rights of detainees and the responsibilities of operational practitioners.

It is a reasonable expectation of psychologists that they engage in activities concerned with care, well-being, and the reduction of suffering, not in its deliberate use for torture. Astonishing as it may seem, however, psychologists have been involved in programs of “enhanced interrogation” (Senate Select Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program, 2014; Hoffman Report, 2015). The techniques included waterboarding, sleep deprivation, and sensory deprivation, which were all used at Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere during the Bush administration. The Senate Select Committee Study stated,

Beginning with the CIA's first detainee, Abu Zubaydah ... the CIA applied its enhanced interrogation techniques with significant repetition for days or weeks at a time. Interrogation techniques such as slaps and “wallings” (slamming detainees against a wall) were used in combination, frequently concurrent with sleep deprivation and nudity ... The waterboarding technique was physically harmful, inducing convulsions and vomiting. Abu Zubaydah, for example, became “completely unresponsive, with bubbles rising through his open, full mouth.” Internal CIA records describe the waterboarding of Khalid Shaykh Mohammad as evolving into a “series of near drownings.” Sleep deprivation involved keeping detainees awake for up to 180 hours, usually standing or in stress positions, at times with their hands shackled above their heads. At least five detainees experienced disturbing hallucinations during prolonged sleep deprivation and, in at least two of those cases, the CIA nonetheless continued the sleep deprivation. (p. 10)

This all in spite of the fact that, prior to the attacks of September 2001, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

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itself determined from its own experience with coercive interrogations that such techniques “do not produce intelligence,” “will probably result in false answers” (Senate Select Committee Study, 2014, Foreword, p. 3). The Hoffman Report is full of speculation, unsubstantiated evidence, and innuendo. It states,

Hubbard, Mitchell and other CIA psychologists met with former APA President Martin Seligman at his home to fully understand the psychological theory of “learned helplessness,” a theory that Mitchell and others at the CIA were clearly incorporating into the CIA interrogation program. Seligman and Matarazzo also spoke at the SERE training academies where Mitchell and Jessen had been instructors, with Seligman doing so at Hubbard and Mitchell’s request ... Mitchell and Jessen, who were alternating between (a) interrogating and waterboarding detainees in secret CIA sites abroad and (b) having meetings and conferences in the U.S. on topics that might assist them in attempting to extract information through torture and other abusive interrogation techniques.

Martin Seligman, the founder of Positive Psychology, and developer of the theory of learned helplessness, is accused of laying the theoretical foundations to the CIA’s enhanced interrogation program. Martin Seligman acknowledges that he held meetings and gave a 3-hour lecture on learned helplessness for the training of military personnel to resist torture. However, Dr Seligman is adamant that, at no time, did he ever participate in discussions about torture or interrogation. In his article, “The Hoffman Report, the CIA, and the Defense of the Nation A Personal View,” and supporting documentation, it becomes obvious that Martin Seligman did not aid and abet torture and he clears his name.

The Hoffman Report alleges that other APA past-Presidents assisted and advised the CIA to design torture. Joseph Matarazzo, the “Father of Health Psychology,” the person who defined the field, is alleged to have owned shares in a company Mitchell Jessen and Associates, contracted to advise the CIA on interrogation and torture and to administer that torture. The report states that Matarazzo was invited by the CIA to provide an opinion about whether sleep deprivation constitutes torture. Based on his consultations with experts, the advice from Matarazzo at that time was that it did not. In his article and supporting documentation, Joseph Matarazzo clarifies his role and clears his name.

The Hoffman (2015) Report’s conclusion states: “One question that arises from this investigation is whether APA

has taken sufficient steps to ensure that, as an organization, its commitment to the highest standards of ethical integrity is sufficiently strong and independent of powerful government benefactors” (p. 72). On 24 July 2015, the APA wrote a letter of apology to all members which stated,

Dear Members, As is true for us, we know the contents of the Independent Review [Hoffman] report are extremely troubling and painful to our members. We have heard from many that you feel the profession you love and respect has been tarnished and, for some, your identity as a psychologist and integrity as a person are called into question even though you personally have done nothing wrong. On behalf of our organization, we apologize for what has emerged in the Hoffman report, including the secret coordination between several APA leaders and the Department of Defense that resulted in the lack of a clear and consistent anti-torture stance, limited guidance for military psychologists in the field, a failure to uphold an appropriate conflict-of-interest policy with regard to the PENS Task Force on military interrogation, and a lack of appropriate checks and balances that could have revealed these significant problems. In addition, we deeply regret the fact that some APA members and other critics were privately and publicly discounted for raising concerns. What happened never should have.

After the Hoffman Report debacle, one wonders if the APA can ever fully restore the trust of its membership and the public at large. Much damage has been wreaked upon individuals and on the psychology profession. A first step has to be the replacement of the Hoffman Report by an even-handed and authentic narrative of the post-9/11 world and our responses to it.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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