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Enhanced Interrogation Techniques

Why Torture Doesn't Work demonstrates that torture is ineffective and abhorrent. Posted Dec 09, 2015


CIA records describe the waterboarding of Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, the alleged mastermind of 9/11, as evolving into “a series of near drownings. Abu Zubaydah, another terrorist suspect, “coughed, vomited, and had involuntary spasms of the torso and extremities” during his waterboarding sessions. Zubaydah became “completely unresponsive, with bubbles rising through his open, full mouth.”

Defenders of waterboarding and other “enhanced interrogation techniques” deny that these practices constitute torture. They claim that “breaking someone” will make it far more likely that he will divulge secrets that will save lives.

In Why Torture Doesn’t Work, Shane O’Mara, a professor of Experimental Brain Research at Trinity College, Dublin, draws on research in psychology and neuro-science to demonstrate that they are wrong. Lay intuitions and assumptions about memory, motivation, and stress, based on popular television shows like 24, which dominate public discussions of torture as a harsh necessity, he indicates, are fundamentally flawed; they have misled led those responsible for designing interrogation techniques. Imposing severe pain or suffering, O’Mara maintains, is “as ineffective as it is abhorrent.” It may induce people to do what they have previously refused to do, such as signing false confessions. But it does not help – and often hinders – the extraction of actual information.
Mara cites a slew of empirical studies (including tests of survival training and special operations soldiers placed in prisoner-of-war situations) on the responses of people who are motivated to cooperate with their interrogators that come to the same conclusion: physical pain and extreme stressors impair recall of information. They decrease the ability to relate fluid accounts that integrate recently acquired knowledge – about what happened, when, and to whom, and about relationships among alleged perpetrators. The effects get worse when the stressors are applied repeatedly, when leading information is supplied, and when the accuracy of the information given by the prisoner is denied. Activating a brainstem network directed toward immediate survival, these stimuli suppress searches related to memory and will. In such cases, although the capacity of subjects to resist reduced along with the likelihood that they will refuse to comply with simple behavioral commands may well be reduced, tortured prisoners rarely say anything useful and may start to doubt their own judgment about what they think they know.

Significantly, O’Mara adds, even CIA practitioners acknowledge that enhanced interrogation techniques take a lot of time, “obviating any ticking time bomb argument in favor of torture.” One captive, for example, was put in isolation for forty-seven days before coercive interrogation began. Another prisoner was waterboarded hundreds of times for thirty days to no discernible effect – and then given the treatment for another month. And sleep deprivation was meted out for 180 hours (twenty-two days straight for eight hours per night) to yet another detainee.

Acknowledging the paucity of social psychological studies related to interrogation, O’Mara concludes with an intriguing and sure to be controversial recommendation that non-coercive means be used to extract information from prisoners. An overwhelming percentage of detainees, he points out, respond to questions and do not resort to silence. Self-disclosure, in fact, activates reward circuits in the brain. And so when interrogators build trust with prisoners, they may well receive relevant information in return. In contrast to isolation and torture, which cause deficits in memory and elicit defensive behavior, authorities might try putting several detainees together in a relatively comfortable setting, as the British High Command did with senior Nazi officials at the end of World War II, and monitor their conversations and non-verbal signals with one another.

O’Mara recognizes that there are no clear, consistently successfully approaches to getting reliable information from captives. He makes a compelling case, however, that our current naïve intuitions and macho methods, including conducting interrogations in English to show who is in charge, as well as torture, are counter-productive. And that the training and experience of interrogators currently employed by the CIA is woefully inadequate.

O’Mara’s book highlights the challenges facing policy makers in the United States. These days, as public opinion polls about climate change demonstrate, experts are discounted or dismissed by a sizeable percentage of Americans, even when there is a virtual consensus among them about what is (or is not) going on. “The strange, abstracted, Vulcan-like musings” of politicians and pundits “who spin a gossamer-light justification for coercion and torment” while remaining willfully ignorant of the substantial extant literature on the impact of torture, O’Mara points out, “would be risible and ridiculous if they were not taken seriously by so many.” Jack Bauer of 24 to the contrary, torture is not an effective method for extracting intentionally withheld
information, either instantaneously or over time. Americans must begin—now—to apply evidence-based reasoning to public policy, O’Mara concludes, and do what scientists aspire to do: discard “dearly held or oft-applied theories” when the evidence demonstrably finds them wanting.”