

COALITION FOR AN ETHICAL PSYCHOLOGY

human rights * ethics * social justice

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Coalition Rejects New “Task Force”

With the support of the Board and Administration of the American Psychological Association (APA), a self-appointed group of APA members has just announced the creation of a “Task Force to Reconcile Policies Related to Psychologists’ Involvement in National Security Settings.” Superficially, the formation of this task force appears to be a step forward in addressing critical issues of human rights and professional ethics. But the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology, referenced in the task force’s announcement, opposes this initiative for many reasons. Our call for annulment of the deeply flawed PENS Report has gained broad support. Yet this new task force attempts to redefine priorities and deflect attention away from this urgent issue, asserting that “the PENS report offers unique contributions to APA policy” which need to be integrated into a “unified, comprehensive APA policy.” As such, this task force is primarily an “anti-annulment” initiative. If successful, its agenda will further enshrine PENS policies – policies that were adopted through a fundamentally unethical process and that resulted in grievous harm and the tarnishing of our profession.

Any attempt to clarify possible ambiguities in APA’s statements and resolutions bearing on torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment should be postponed until *after* the PENS Report has been officially annulled. Otherwise, from the outset the presumption will be that it is ethically permissible for psychologists to serve in aggressive operational psychology¹ roles, including consultation to interrogators of national security detainees. Yet a crucial *question* has never received broad and open discussion: *Should* psychologists serve in combatant and aggressive operational capacities in military/intelligence settings where our foundational “do no harm” ethical principle is subservient to military policy? The new task force states that it will not develop any new policy. Their initiative will merely delay these much needed deliberations and possible reform.

The Coalition is also concerned about the composition of the new task force. None of its five members actively supported – and at least three actively opposed – the 2008 member-initiated Referendum prohibiting psychologists from working in national security settings that violate human rights. This Referendum was overwhelmingly endorsed by 59% of voting APA members. Moreover, several members of this task force have been vehement opponents over the past several years of most attempts to change APA policies on interrogations. The three task force members from the Peace Psychology Division (Division 48) have taken this action without any discussion with the division membership, and despite the fact that the Executive Committee officially endorsed the annulment petition two months ago.

Returning to the key issue of annulment, when reports first surfaced that psychologists were aiding and even implementing U.S. programs of torture and abuse in national security settings, the APA turned its ethics process in this domain over to the military–intelligence establishment. The

¹ Operational psychologists, who are licensed clinical psychologists, are purportedly using psychology to further military/intelligence operations, as in interrogation support. We distinguish between traditional operational psychology roles (e.g., personnel selection) and aggressive operational psychology, where psychologists are duty-bound to put the mission first and where military regulations and orders supersede the ethical standards of their profession. Further, they often work in classified settings, which severely impedes effective ethical monitoring as they and their employer can deny ethics committees access to the information necessary to adjudicate cases.

resulting 2005 PENS Task Force had six of nine voting members from that area, including several members who served in chains of command publicly accused of abuses at that time. The three voting members of the PENS Task Force without military ties have all subsequently renounced the report, and two of them have denounced the process as corrupt from the start. Military-intelligence advisors who analyzed the PENS process identified it as “a social legitimization process for a decision made at higher levels of the DoD.”

While stating that psychologists should not participate in abuses, the PENS Report gives the imprimatur of the APA to psychologists serving in detention and other national security operations where their activities are protected by secrecy and information is classified. The Report also reiterates the primacy of U.S. law and military regulations over professional ethics. These two assertions were all that the military and CIA needed from the PENS Task Force and PENS Report. In important ways, the remainder of the Report simply serves to obscure the importance of these two profoundly problematic conclusions.²

Thus far, the Coalition’s petition calling for annulment of the PENS Report has been endorsed by 33 groups and organizations – including nine within APA itself – and by over 1,800 individuals. The full list is available online at www.ethicalpsychology.org/pens. Annulment is needed in order to (1) renounce the illegitimate process that enabled the military-intelligence establishment to control our profession’s ethics, and (2) move the profession to engage in a thorough and independent review of the ethics of psychologists participating in various national security activities. For the reasons we have summarized here, we strongly believe that this new task force will stand in the way of annulment. Indeed, its formation is reminiscent of the back-room deals of the PENS process itself. We also believe that the narrow interests currently dominating the APA’s agenda in this area must no longer supersede the ethical commitments and aspirations of the association’s membership and of psychologists outside the APA. The profession’s future depends on what we do *now*.

We therefore encourage psychologists to reject this new task force initiative, and to communicate your opposition to APA leaders, including Board members, Council members, and division officers. At the same time, we encourage you to visit the Coalition website, to review our materials on annulment of the PENS Report and, if you have not already done so, to sign our petition (www.ethicalpsychology.org/pens).

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² Further details about the illegitimacy of the PENS process and PENS Report are documented here: http://www.ethicalpsychology.org/materials/PENS_Annulment_Background_Statement.pdf.