Response to Ethics Committee Vignettes
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The original call for a casebook was driven by the generalities of the PENS report, which banned participation in “torture” while claiming, without evidence, that “psychologists have a vital role to play in keeping interrogations safe, legal, ethical, and effective.” The intent of the proposer, PENS member Jean Maria Arrigo, was that the casebook would give specific guidance in specific situations.

These Ethics Committee commentaries on vignettes are an utter failure. Rather than providing guidance, they tell psychologists involved in aggressive operational psychology actions like interrogation support to read and interpret a bunch of often ambiguous documents, consult with (often nonexistent) colleagues, and decide for themselves in situations where they are under tremendous command, career, and peer pressure to go along.

When the issue of psychologist participation in torture and abuse first came up, it was in response to a systematic program of abuse ordered by the top layers of our government, the President, Vice President, National Security Adviser, and Secretary of Defense among others. For a psychologist to refuse orders to participate would be a career-ending event, as numerous military members have described. Just look at what happened to Gen. Antonio Taguba, who insisted on honestly investigating the abuses at Abu Ghraib; he was sidelined and forced to retire. If that’s what happened to a General, imagine what would happen to a Captain, Major, or Colonel who refused to participate in command ordered abuse. The response of the Ethics Committee totally fails to deal with these realities.

As psychologists, we are well aware of the incredible pressures that unethical settings can place upon otherwise ethical individuals. Just think of the Stanford Prison Experiment. Phil Zimbardo movingly criticized the PENS Report for ignoring these pressures. Any meaningful casebook would put such pressures at its core. The Ethics Committee commentary utterly fails to deal with these issues and thus does a disservice both to military psychologists in ethically problematic situations and to the profession of psychology—which has spent decades investigating how ordinary people can be led to commit evil.

The Ethics Committee commentary often tells military/intelligence psychologists to consult the PENS Report, among other documents. It is by now indisputable that the PENS Report lacks all legitimacy. The APA deliberately created a task force dominated (6 of 9 voting members) by the military-intelligence communities. Many (5) of its members served in chains of command accused of torture and abuse. Most of the usual APA processes of review were sidestepped. The Report was by design rushed over to the Secretary of Defense’s office for rapid dissemination while members of the task force moved quickly to incorporate the Report into the instructions for the Behavioral Science Consultation Teams (BSCTs) at Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and elsewhere. All this occurred during a U.S. administration committed to promoting torture as national policy. Through PENS the APA gave its seal of approval to this government-sanctioned program of abuse and received rewards in return. To summarize, PENS involved turning over the profession’s ethics process to a military-intelligence establishment committed to systematized
torture. Given the illegitimate nature of the PENS Report, it has no business being included in this “commentary.”

The “commentary” continually recommends that military/intelligence psychologists consult with peers. This recommendation is particularly disingenuous. Surely the Ethics Committee knows that national security detention settings are operating in secret and that interrogations activities are classified. Further, these settings are often isolated. A psychologist there may have no peers. Even if there are peers, they will be under the same situational and command pressures as is the one seeking consultation. Further, talk will be severely restricted by the requirements to preserve the secrecy of classified information. In many instances, the only colleagues available will be superiors in the intelligence chain of command (e.g., the commander of the BSCTs), who may well be the ones issuing or conveying unethical orders. The Ethics Committee’s recommendation to consult peers is thus horribly naïve at best or disingenuous at worst.

For all these reasons, the Ethics Committee “commentary” is a total failure. It utterly fails to give guidance to military/intelligence psychologists in ethically ambiguous situations. It provides no clear guidance that a military psychologist could cite as unequivocal evidence that certain actions violate his/her professional ethics. It serves, rather, as yet another example of APA officials claiming to be against psychologist participation in abuse while doing nothing practical to prevent abuse. It should be discarded as worse than useless. By issuing it the Ethics Committee has completely disqualified itself from any real role in helping the profession of psychology stand up to government or institutionally sanctioned abuse while relying on its “do no harm” ethics.

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