

Report of the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force



on Psychological Ethics and National Security

NOTE: In July 2013, APA's governing Council of Representatives adopted the "[Policy Related to Psychologists' Work in National Security Settings and Reaffirmation of the APA Position Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#)." This policy unifies into a single document prior APA policies dating to 1986 related to detainee welfare and interrogation. **As part of the policy reconciliation process, the council also voted to rescind the 2005 Report of the APA Presidential Task Force on Psychological Ethics and National Security (PENS) and two other APA policies dated 2007 and 2008.** These policies had become outdated or rendered inaccurate with the passage of subsequent policies, most notably a 2010 revision of the APA Ethics Code and the 2013 policy.

June 2005

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENTIAL TASK FORCE ON PSYCHOLOGICAL ETHICS AND NATIONAL SECURITY

I. Overview of the Report

The Presidential Task Force on Psychological Ethics and National Security (PENS) met in response to the Board of Directors' February 2005 charge, that the Task Force:

[E]xamine whether our current Ethics Code adequately addresses [the ethical dimensions of psychologists' involvement in national security-related activities], whether the APA provides adequate ethical guidance to psychologists involved in these endeavors, and whether APA should develop policy to address the role of psychologists and psychology in investigations related to national security.

Recognizing the ethical complexity of this work, which takes place in unique settings and constantly evolving circumstances, the Task Force was nonetheless able to set forth 12 clear and agreed-upon statements about psychologists' ethical obligations.

As a context for its statements, the Task Force affirmed that when psychologists serve in any position by virtue of their training, experience, and expertise as psychologists, the APA Ethics Code applies. The Task Force thus rejected the contention that when acting in roles outside traditional health-service provider relationships psychologists are not acting in a professional capacity as psychologists and are therefore not bound by the APA Ethics Code.

The Task Force noted that the Board of Directors' charge did not include an investigative or adjudicatory role, and as a consequence emphasized that it did not render any judgment concerning events that may or may not have occurred in national security-related settings. Nonetheless, the Task Force was unambiguous that psychologists do not engage in, direct, support, facilitate, or offer training in torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and that psychologists have an ethical responsibility to be alert to and report any such acts to appropriate authorities. The Task Force stated that it is consistent with the APA Ethics Code for psychologists to serve in consultative roles to interrogation and information-gathering processes for national security-related purposes, as psychologists have a long-standing tradition of doing in other law enforcement contexts. Acknowledging that engaging in such consultative and advisory roles entails a delicate balance of ethical considerations, the Task Force stated that psychologists are in a unique position to assist in ensuring that these processes are safe and ethical for all participants.

The Task Force Report concludes with a series of recommendations to the American Psychological Association Board of Directors.

II. Introduction to the Report

The Task Force believes it is critical for the American Psychological Association to address the ethical challenges facing psychologists whose work involves national security-related activities. APA is the world's largest association of psychologists. Article I of the Association Bylaws states:

The objects of the American Psychological Association shall be to advance psychology as a science and profession and as a means of promoting health, education and human welfare by the...improvement of the qualifications and usefulness of psychologists through high standards of ethics...[and] by the establishment and maintenance of the highest standards of professional ethics and conduct of the members of the Association...¹

Many association members work for the United States government as employees or consultants in national security-related positions. It is the responsibility of APA to think through and provide guidance on the complex ethical challenges that face these psychologists, who apply their training, skills, and expertise in our nation's service.

The Task Force addressed the argument that when psychologists act in certain roles outside traditional health-service provider relationships, for example as consultants to interrogations, they are not acting in a professional capacity as psychologists and are therefore not bound by the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (hereinafter the Ethics Code).² The Task Force rejected this contention. The Task Force believes that when psychologists serve in a position by virtue of their training, experience, and expertise as psychologists, the APA Ethics Code applies. Thus in any such circumstance, psychologists are bound by the APA Ethics Code.

Principle B of the Ethics Code, Fidelity and Responsibility, states that psychologists "are aware of their professional and scientific responsibilities to society." Psychologists have a valuable and ethical role to assist in protecting our nation, other nations, and innocent civilians from harm, which will at times entail gathering information that can be used in our nation's and other nations' defense. The Task Force believes that a central role for psychologists working in the area of national security-related investigations is to assist in ensuring that processes are safe, legal, and ethical for all participants.

¹ American Psychological Association (2004). *Bylaws of the American Psychological Association* [Brochure]. Washington, DC: Author. (Also available at <http://www.apa.org/governance/>)

² American Psychological Association. (2002). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. *American Psychologist*, 57, 1060–1073. (Also available at <http://www.apa.org/ethics/>)

The Task Force looked to the APA Ethics Code for fundamental principles to guide its thinking. The Task Force found such principles in numerous aspects of the Ethics Code, such as the Preamble, “Psychologists respect and protect civil and human rights” and “[The Ethics Code] has as its goals the welfare and protection of the individuals and groups with whom psychologists work”; Principle A, Beneficence and Nonmaleficence, “In their professional actions, psychologists seek to safeguard the welfare and rights of those with whom they interact professionally and other affected persons”; Principle D, Justice, “Psychologists exercise reasonable judgment and take precautions to ensure that their potential biases, the boundaries of their competence, and the limitations of their expertise do not lead to or condone unjust practices”; and Principle E, Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity, “Psychologists respect the dignity and worth of all people.” The Task Force concluded that the Ethics Code is fundamentally sound in addressing the ethical dilemmas that arise in the context of national security-related work.

III. Twelve Statements Concerning Psychologists' Ethical Obligations in National Security-Related Work and Commentary on the Statements

1. Psychologists do not engage in, direct, support, facilitate, or offer training in torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. The Task Force endorses the 1986 Resolution Against Torture of the American Psychological Association Council of Representatives,³ and the 1985 Joint Resolution Against Torture of the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association.⁴ (Principle A, Beneficence and Nonmaleficence, and Ethical Standard 3.04, Avoiding Harm) The Task Force emphasizes that the Board of Directors' charge did not include an investigative or adjudicatory role and so the Task Force does not render any judgment concerning events that may or may not have occurred in national security-related settings. The Task Force nonetheless feels that an absolute statement against torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment is appropriate.

2. Psychologists are alert to acts of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and have an ethical responsibility to report these acts to the appropriate authorities. This ethical responsibility is rooted in the Preamble, "Psychologists respect and protect civil and human rights...the development of a dynamic set of ethical standards for psychologists' work-related conduct requires a personal commitment and lifelong effort to act ethically [and] to encourage ethical behavior by...colleagues," and Principle B, Fidelity and Responsibility, which states that psychologists "are concerned about the ethical compliance of their colleagues' scientific and professional conduct." (Ethical Standard 1.05, Reporting Ethical Violations) The Task Force notes that when fulfilling the obligation to respond to unethical behavior by reporting the behavior to appropriate authorities as a prelude to an adjudicatory process, psychologists guard against the names of individual psychologists being disseminated to the public. Inappropriate or premature public dissemination can expose psychologists to a risk of harm outside of established and appropriate legal and adjudicatory processes. (Ethical Standard 3.04, Avoiding Harm)

3. Psychologists who serve in the role of supporting an interrogation do not use health care related information from an individual's medical record to the detriment of the individual's safety and well-being. While information from a medical record may be helpful or necessary to ensure that an interrogation process remains safe, psychologists do not use such information to the detriment of an individual's safety and well-being. (Ethical Standards 3.04, Avoiding Harm, and 3.08, Exploitative Relationships)

³ American Psychological Association Council of Representatives. (1986). American Psychological Association resolution against torture. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/division/cpminternatl.html#3>

⁴ American Psychiatric Association & American Psychological Association. (1985). Against torture: Joint resolution of the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association. Retrieved from http://www.psych.org/edu/other_res/lib_archives/archives/198506.pdf

4. Psychologists do not engage in behaviors that violate the laws of the United States, although psychologists may refuse for ethical reasons to follow laws or orders that are unjust or that violate basic principles of human rights. Psychologists involved in national security-related activities follow all applicable rules and regulations that govern their roles. Over the course of the recent United States military presence in locations such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Cuba, such rules and regulations have been significantly developed and refined. Psychologists have an ethical responsibility to be informed of, familiar with, and follow the most recent applicable regulations and rules. The Task Force notes that certain rules and regulations incorporate texts that are fundamental to the treatment of individuals whose liberty has been curtailed, such as the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War.⁵

The Task Force notes that psychologists sometimes encounter conflicts between ethics and law. When such conflicts arise, psychologists make known their commitment to the APA Ethics Code and attempt to resolve the conflict in a responsible manner. If the conflict cannot be resolved in this manner, psychologists may adhere to the requirements of the law. (Ethical Standard 1.02) An ethical reason for psychologists to not follow the law is to act “in keeping with basic principles of human rights.” (APA Ethics Code, Introduction and Applicability) The Task Force encourages psychologists working in this area to review essential human rights documents, such as the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War.⁶

5. Psychologists are aware of and clarify their role in situations where the nature of their professional identity and professional function may be ambiguous.

Psychologists have a special responsibility to clarify their role in situations where individuals may have an incorrect impression that psychologists are serving in a health care provider role. (Ethical Standards 3.07, Third-Party Requests for Services, and 3.11, Psychological Services Delivered to or Through Organizations)

The Task Force noted that psychologists acting in the role of consultant to national security issues most often work closely with other professionals from various disciplines. As a consequence, psychologists rarely act alone or independently, but rather as part of a group of professionals who bring together a variety of skills and experiences in order to provide an ethically appropriate service. (Ethical Standard 3.09, Cooperating with Other Professionals)

⁵ United Nations. (1987, June 26). *Convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment*. Retrieved from http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/h_cat39.htm

United Nations. (1950, October 21). *Geneva convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/91.htm>

⁶ Ibid.

Regardless of their role, psychologists who are aware of an individual in need of health or mental health treatment may seek consultation regarding how to ensure that the individual receives needed care. (Principle A, Beneficence and Nonmaleficence)

6. Psychologists are sensitive to the problems inherent in mixing potentially inconsistent roles such as health care provider and consultant to an interrogation, and refrain from engaging in such multiple relationships. (Ethical Standard 3.05, Multiple Relationships, “A psychologist refrains from entering into a multiple relationship if the multiple relationship could reasonably be expected to impair the psychologist’s objectivity, competence, or effectiveness in performing his or her functions as a psychologist, or otherwise risks exploitation or harm to the person with whom the professional relationship exists.”)

7. Psychologists may serve in various national security-related roles, such as a consultant to an interrogation, in a manner that is consistent with the Ethics Code, and when doing so psychologists are mindful of factors unique to these roles and contexts that require special ethical consideration. The Task Force noted that psychologists have served in consultant roles to law enforcement on the state and federal levels for a considerable period of time. Psychologists have proven highly effective in lending assistance to law enforcement in the vital area of information gathering and have done so in an ethical manner. The Task Force noted special ethical considerations for psychologists serving as consultants to interrogation processes in national security-related settings, especially when individuals from countries other than the United States have been detained by United States authorities. Such ethical considerations include:

- How certain settings may instill in individuals a profound sense of powerlessness and may place individuals in considerable positions of disadvantage in terms of asserting their interests and rights. (Ethical Standards 1.01, Misuse of Psychologists’ Work, and 3.08, Exploitative Relationships)
- How failures to understand aspects of individuals’ culture and ethnicity may generate misunderstandings, compromise the efficacy and hence the safety of investigatory processes, and result in significant mental and physical harm. (Principle E, “Psychologists are aware of and respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on...race, ethnicity, culture, national origin... and consider these factors when working with members of such groups”; Ethical Standard 2.01(b), Boundaries of Competence, “Where scientific or professional knowledge in the discipline of psychology establishes that an understanding of factors associated with...race, ethnicity, culture, national origin...is essential for effective implementation of their services or research, psychologists have or obtain the training, experience, consultation, or supervision necessary to ensure the competence of their services, or they make appropriate referrals...”; and Ethical Standard 3.01, Unfair Discrimination, “In their work-related activities, psychologists do not engage in unfair discrimination based on...race, ethnicity, culture, national origin...”)

- How the combination of a setting's ambiguity with high stress may facilitate engaging in behaviors that cross the boundaries of competence and ethical propriety. As behavioral scientists, psychologists are trained to observe, respond to, and ideally correct such processes as they occur. (Principle A, Beneficence and Nonmaleficence, and Ethical Standard 3.04, Avoiding Harm)

8. Psychologists who consult on interrogation techniques are mindful that the individual being interrogated may not have engaged in untoward behavior and may not have information of interest to the interrogator. This ethical obligation is not diminished by the nature of an individual's acts prior to detainment or the likelihood of the individual having relevant information. At all times psychologists remain mindful of and abide by the prohibitions against engaging in or facilitating torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Psychologists inform themselves about research regarding the most effective and humane methods of obtaining information and become familiar with how culture may interact with the techniques consulted upon. (Principle E, Respect for Peoples' Rights and Dignity; Ethical Standards 2.01, Boundaries of Competence; 2.03, Maintaining Competence; and 3.01, Unfair Discrimination)

9. Psychologists make clear the limits of confidentiality. (Ethical Standard 4.02, Discussing the Limits of Confidentiality). Psychologists who have access to, utilize, or share health or mental health related information do so with an awareness of the sensitivity of such information, keeping in mind that "Psychologists have a primary obligation and take reasonable precautions to protect confidential information..." (Ethical Standard 4.01, Maintaining Confidentiality) When disclosing sensitive information, psychologists share the minimum amount of information necessary, and only with individuals who have a clear professional purpose for obtaining the information. (Ethical Standard 4.04, Minimizing Intrusions on Privacy) Psychologists take care not to leave a misimpression that information is confidential when in fact it is not. (Ethical Standards 3.10, Informed Consent, and 4.02, Discussing the Limits of Confidentiality)

10. Psychologists are aware of and do not act beyond their competencies, except in unusual circumstances, such as set forth in the Ethics Code. (Ethical Standard 2.02, Providing Services in Emergencies) Psychologists strive to ensure that they rely on methods that are effective, in addition to being safe, legal, and ethical. (Ethical Standards 2.01, Boundaries of Competence; 2.04, Bases for Scientific and Professional Judgments; 9.01, Bases for Assessments)

11. Psychologists clarify for themselves the identity of their client and retain ethical obligations to individuals who are not their clients. (Ethical Standards 3.07, Third-Party Requests for Services, and 3.11, Psychological Services Delivered to or Through Organizations) Regardless of whether an individual is considered a client, psychologists have an ethical obligation to ensure that their activities in relation to the individual are safe, legal, and ethical. (Ethical Standard 3.04, Avoiding Harm) Sensitivity to the entirety of a psychologist's ethical obligations is especially important where, because of a setting's unique characteristics, an individual may not be fully able to assert relevant rights and interests. (Principle A, Beneficence and Nonmaleficence, "In their professional

actions, psychologists seek to safeguard the welfare and rights of those with whom they interact professionally and other affected persons...”; Principle D, Justice, “Psychologists exercise reasonable judgment and take precautions to ensure that their potential biases, the boundaries of their competence, and the limitations of their expertise do not lead to or condone unjust practices”; Principle E, Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity, “Psychologists are aware that special safeguards may be necessary to protect the rights and welfare of persons or communities whose vulnerabilities impair autonomous decision making”; Ethical Standard 3.08, Exploitative Relationships)

12. Psychologists consult when they are facing difficult ethical dilemmas. The Task Force was emphatic that consultation on ethics questions and dilemmas is highly appropriate for psychologists at all levels of experience, especially in this very challenging and ethically complex area of practice. (Preamble to the Ethics Code, “The development of a dynamic set of ethical standards for psychologists’ work-related conduct requires a personal commitment and lifelong effort to act ethically...and to consult with others concerning ethical problems”; and Ethical Standard 4.06, Consultations)

The Task Force drew several other conclusions:

- The development of professional skills and competencies, ethical consultation and ethical self-reflection, and a willingness to take responsibility for one’s own ethical behavior are the best ways to ensure that the national security-related activities of psychologists are safe, legal, ethical, and effective.
- It is critical to offer ethical guidance and support especially to psychologists at the beginning of their careers, who may experience pressures to engage in unethical or inappropriate behaviors that they are likely to find difficult to resist.
- APA should develop a process whereby psychologists whose work involves classified material and who need ethical guidance or consultation may consult their national organization for assistance and support.
- Psychologists should encourage and engage in further research to evaluate and enhance the efficacy and effectiveness of the application of psychological science to issues, concerns and operations relevant to national security. One focus of a broad program of research is to examine the efficacy and effectiveness of information-gathering techniques, with an emphasis on the quality of information obtained. In addition, psychologists should examine the psychological effects of conducting interrogations on the interrogators themselves to explore ways of helping to ensure that the process of gathering information is likely to remain within ethical boundaries. Also valuable will be research on cultural differences in the psychological impact of particular information-gathering methods and what constitutes cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.
- The Task Force noted a potential area of tension between conducting research that is classified or whose success could be compromised if the research purpose and/or methodology become known and ethical standards that require

debriefing after participation in a study as a research subject. (Ethical Standards 8.07, Deception in Research, and 8.08, Debriefing) APA should identify and further examine the ethical dimensions of such tensions.

- Psychologists working in this area should inform themselves of how culture and ethnicity interact with investigative or information-gathering techniques, with special attention to how failing to attend to such factors may result in harm.

The Task Force engaged in vigorous discussion and debate and did not reach consensus on several issues:

- *The role of human rights standards in an ethics code.* While all Task Force members felt that respect for human rights is critical, some task force members felt strongly that international standards of human rights should be built into the ethics code and others felt that the laws of the United States should be the touchstone.
- *The degree to which psychologists may ethically disguise the nature and purpose of their work.* While all members of the Task Force agreed that full disclosure of the nature and purpose of a psychologist's work is not ethically required or appropriate in every circumstance, members differed on the degree to which psychologists may ethically dissemble their activities from individuals whom they engage directly.
- *Whether the discussions of the Task Force should have been made available outside the Task Force.* Some members believed that sharing the substance of the discussions, debates, and disagreements of the Task Force would be helpful to others in fostering the development of professional ethics in other areas of national security. Others felt that not sharing information beyond this report and other public statements would facilitate richer and more productive exchanges during the Task Force meeting. The Task Force voted on this issue. By a vote of seven to one, with one abstention, the Task Force voted to limit what information is disclosed concerning its deliberations to this report and other public statements made by the Task Force as a whole.

III. Recommendations

The Task Force recommends that APA:

1. Publicly reaffirm its 1986 Resolution Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment.
2. Develop a document that will serve as a companion to the 12 statements contained in this report, for the purpose of providing illustrative examples and commentary. Such a document will be especially important if APA adopts the statements as guidelines or if the Ethics Committee deems the statements appropriate interpretations and applications of the Ethics Code.
3. Continue to examine the goodness of fit between the Ethics Code and this area of practice. While the Task Force believes the Ethics Code is fundamentally sound and adequately addresses the great majority of ethical dilemmas that arise in national security-related settings, there are certain aspects in which the Code does not speak as well to this area of practice as the Code speaks to other areas of practice. The Task Force believes the Ethics Committee could undertake this task.
4. Develop a process to offer ethics consultation to psychologists whose work involves classified material and who seek ethical guidance.
5. Continue to develop a strong relationship with psychologists working in national security-related settings, with special attention to the unique ethical challenges these psychologists confront in their daily work, and collaborate with organizations having national security-related responsibilities to promote psychological practice consistent with APA Ethical Standards.
6. Forward a copy of this Task Force Report, or a summary of the report, to the United States Department of Defense and other relevant government agencies and bodies, as the government develops policy on these complicated and challenging ethical issues.
7. Encourage psychologists to engage in further research relevant to national security, including evaluation of the efficacy and effectiveness of methods for gathering information that is accurate, relevant, and reliable. Such research should be designed to minimize risks to research participants such as emotional distress, and should be consistent with standards of human subject research protection and the APA Ethics Code.
8. Recognize that issues involving terrorism and national security affect citizens in all countries and so encourage behavioral scientists to collaborate across disciplines, cultures, and countries in addressing these concerns.
9. Consider supporting the creation of a repository to record psychologists' contributions to national security. Such information, divided into classified and unclassified sections, could serve as a historical record and a resource concerning how psychologists involved in national security-related activities have met the ethical challenges of their work.

10. View the work of this Task Force as an initial step in addressing the very complicated and challenging ethical dilemmas that confront psychologists working in national security-related activities. Viewed as an initial step in a continuing process, this report will ideally assist APA to engage in thoughtful reflection of complex ethical considerations in an area of psychological practice that is likely to expand significantly in coming years.