

Editor’s Forward to the Article “Psychologists and the Use of Torture in Interrogations” and Invited Comments about That Article

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In early 2006, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), the society that produces *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* (ASAP), charged a task force with examining the research on interrogations and drafting a statement for Council review. During the Council discussion of the proposed statement, President Shinn raised a fundamental general issue to consider, asking, “To what extent do we want to say that torture shouldn’t be done because there is research that says so, and to what extent will we say so based on an ethical point of view?”

The task force report was shared with the Council at its June 2006 meeting. The report, focused on research on interrogation and confessions, was presented by task force chair Mark Costanzo, and its other members, Ellen Gerrity and M. Brinton Lykes. The report and its recommendations were endorsed by the SPSSI Council at that same meeting. The article that appears here, co-authored by Costanzo, Gerrity, and Lykes, is a revision of the task force report. Even though it is not exactly the document endorsed by the Council, it is substantively consistent with what was endorsed.

Although the SPSSI Council seemed largely of one mind in support of this perspective, it has not been so for all psychologists. As a result, ASAP invited

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comments on the article from individuals holding differing positions on the issue. Invited respondents were provided a copy of the article by Costanzo et al. and were asked to comment on it, to challenge or extend its arguments, or to take other positions on the issue. Some of the articles focused directly on the content of the Costanzo et al. article, whereas others emphasized other substantive points that add to the richness of the discussion. As readers can see from the set of comments, *ASAP* has comments representing a wide range of views, which should help readers develop and refine their own positions. We hope that linkages and interplay among research, practice, and policy, which are prominent in the contributions to this special issue of *ASAP* and historically have been core elements of policy statements of SPSSI, will inform and shape reader opinions. Nothing would be better than to have these articles be a springboard for additional comments in *ASAP*, further conversations within and across professional societies, and program sessions at professional meetings. We hope that further discussions continue to promote divergent views in respectful and informative ways. This special issue is intended to be a catalyst for productive exchanges and analysis, not a conclusion to the debate.

For the remainder of this introduction, we turn from process to content issues. First is the issue raised by SPSSI President Shinn in the SPSSI conversations about how to balance ethics and research findings. Ethics and other values will exist regardless of what the research shows. Examining the research evidence is particularly interesting in circumstances such as this, for it potentially gives social scientists an opportunity to separate their scientist side from their values side by how they respond to data.

An important question to ask is whether having data that demonstrate effectiveness or ineffectiveness of coercive influence strategies during interrogations would change beliefs. That is, how influential can data be when they conflict with strong values, personal convictions, and beliefs about ethics? For those who strongly hold a position that opposes involvement in settings where coercive approaches may be used, the issue is not simply about effectiveness, but about tactics appropriate and consistent with their values. For those in favor of allowing use of techniques that might be considered coercive, different values may be involved, such as the importance of gaining information that can save lives and benefit society as a whole.

Second is the issue of what the most appropriate way is to protect one's values and way of life. Even where there is general agreement about what is and should be valued, there are persuasive arguments supporting very different perspectives about how a society protects its values. On balance, there is no reason to expect that reasonable people can ever agree on a single position. We have tried to construct prototypes of competing arguments in the next couple paragraphs.

On one side, there is the view that if a country chooses to engage in behaviors like those of its enemies (which in this instance seemingly include placing a lesser

value on lives, willingness to endure pain and death, and to inflict pain and death on others for causes in which one believes, and a marked lack of respect for people holding different values), there is little to separate it from its enemies. At this point in time, the United States hopefully engages in conflicts not to capture land or resources or to oppress others, but to protect principles, values, and way of life. If so, not losing conflicts is, at its core, about sustaining a way of life and a set of values. To the extent that the United States is fighting on behalf of its values, those values need to be manifested in conflicts in the same ways they are in everyday situations within society. Deviating from them compromises those values. Conflicts are not an excuse for behaving immorally or for abusing others.

On the other side are views arguing that in today's world, the enemies do not care about U.S. values, and are not influenced by those values being manifested. They are not going to model U.S. behaviors. They do not judge behaviors by how ethical the behaviors are, but by how those behaviors affect them. In effect, behaviors are important only insofar as they make it more or less difficult for the enemies to be successful. They do care about whether or not the American people possess commitment and dedication to their beliefs that rival theirs. Those enemies need to believe that respect for others with differing views does not mean that the United States will let outsiders threaten things that culturally are valued. Commitment to U.S. values will be manifested by a willingness to protect U.S. society and its beliefs at all costs, and saving lives and protecting innocent people may require engaging in actions that personally are viewed as distasteful. To the extent that one views interrogations as persuasion or influence (e.g., Koslowsky & Schwarzwald, 2001; Raven, 1993), viz., trying to obtain information that an individual will not provide spontaneously or willingly, interrogations are not likely to be easy or pleasant, yet the United States needs to obtain information that contributes to the greater good by saving lives and protecting innocent people. Ultimately, it is through power that U.S. values exist.

A third issue, methodological in nature, is about hypothesis confirmation and disconfirmation. It perhaps provides opportunity for producing spirited and engaging discussion in introductory methods classes. The issue is whether arguing against coercive methods requires proving the null hypothesis. That is, evidence that is not fully convincing (that is not " $p < .05$ ") would be taken as support for the position that coercive methods are ineffective. However, practical consequences of a failure to reject the null hypothesis can be profound. Even coercive methods that do not achieve the consistency of the effect to obtain conventional statistical significance can save many human lives if those methods are occasionally effective. Is this a case in which the potential costs of a type II error outweigh the costs of a type I error? Our methods texts also teach us that we should examine the consequences of accepting different types of errors (type I and type II errors). In this case, one could make the case that the consequences of drawing various conclusions are very different.

To illustrate, consider a scenario that, for the sake of example, assumes testing the effectiveness of techniques called “coercive.” If social scientists were to conclude that coercion works better than other approaches when it does not, it would be recommended for use, albeit ineffectively, inflicting unnecessary suffering on prisoners. Coercive interrogations would yield essentially the same information as would interrogations without coercion—unless coercive approaches actually are less effective. If, in contrast, social scientists conclude that coercion does not work better when it actually is more effective, they lessen the capacity to obtain potentially important information that might in this instance even limit or prevent terrorist attacks. One could make the argument that in this instance the potential costs of accepting the null hypothesis (loss of lives of innocent Americans) seem substantially greater than the costs of not accepting it (use of coercion on presumed terrorists). Potentially implicit in that argument is valuing some lives (those of innocent Americans) more highly than lives of others (presumed terrorists). But even that is not clear, for it is confounded by numbers—for the numbers of innocent Americans affected could be many times greater than the numbers of presumed terrorists interrogated. Even if one disagrees with the consequences described in the scenario above and would construct the type I/type II scenario differently, we need to be wary of methods that require us to accept the null hypothesis of no differences among different approaches, particularly if our conclusion is based upon studies failing to reject the null hypothesis at a particular level of significance.

A second methodological issue related to the first and that has been touched on already is the importance of significance and effect sizes. What size of effect is important? Could effects that do not reach statistical significance be important? Of course the answer is yes. Some medical studies have demonstrated that nonsignificant effects are meaningful when applied to populations. To illustrate, within a population of 1000 prisoners, all it would take is one individual with critical information who would behave differently and provide that information when exposed to coercive persuasion. Overall effectiveness of the persuasion techniques may not be great, but, if the information is crucial, successfully extracting it could be very important. At the same time, simply extracting the information is not enough. The magnitude of the information compared with the total amount of information that is extracted/provided (much of which may be incorrect) is small. And the chances of the information from that individual being used correctly seem relatively low when the information provided is not corroborated by information from others, for it literally would be one in one thousand. But low probability does not mean that the information definitely will be ignored, particularly in the wake of 9/11. As an example, the recent “NFL football stadium threat” message was treated as noteworthy even though it had no corroborating evidence or earmarks of a serious threat, and turned out to be inaccurate.

In summary, the issues discussed in this set of articles are made complex by value and ethical issues and by methodological complications. The articles

in this special issue of *ASAP* address a broader set of issues than those we have mentioned. They raise general issues about the nature and role of psychology as a science, as well as about the specific topic of coercive methods of interrogation. They examine different roles taken by psychologists, sometimes as clinician, sometimes as behavioral scientist, and raise issues about relations between actions of individual psychologists and trust in and respect for psychologists in general. Some remind readers that the issue is not new, that ethics and morality in a diverse world are complex to define, and that decisions of a single professional society will not eliminate behavior, even if those decisions make some behaviors "illegal." Others focus on the absence of evidence that coercive techniques work, and still others focus on complexity of the interrogation setting and the varying capacities in which psychologists can be engaged. Unfortunately, no perspective about or approach to these issues can promise to protect innocent citizens from harm. On balance, the Costanzo et al. article and the different comments on it provide a rich set of varied and interesting perspectives. As noted in some comments, the debate potentially is limited, for information on practical effects of interrogations is classified and not available for inclusion in the debate. At some point in the future, intelligence materials from this era will be declassified. At that time, it will be interesting to see a complete picture of what approaches were used in interrogations, the information they yielded, and how they affected prisoner and interrogator behaviors.

We hope readers will be stimulated by the contributions to *ASAP*, and that those contributions promote healthy debate as well as reflection about how well social science methods serve policy needs. If there is an important point for psychologists, it may be that at this point in time we have indirectly been given a challenge, which is to expand our understandings of human behaviors to a point at which we are able to obtain information from others of all backgrounds without use of coercion. What it requires is extending models of power and influence across cultures and to out-group influencers. If influence requires creating shared identity as has been argued by Simon and Oakes (2006), then the task for social scientists will be particularly hard. Someone will have to determine how to use "soft" tactics of social influence where only "harsh" tactics have been effective (Ellemers, van Rijswijk, Bruins, & de Gilder, 1998; Schwarzwald, Koslowsky & Allouf, 2005). Although it seems a daunting challenge, it perhaps could be done, and would make virtually all of this discussion moot. What could be better!

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