Psychology and the 'War on Terror'*

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SUMMARY: Psychological knowledge has been used increasingly in wartime in recent years. This article reviews the evidence for its use in interrogation, surveillance, statistical modelling of suspects and psychological operations and outlines some suggestions for action which might be taken by critical psychologists and others.

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The military uses of psychology

all knowledge is political and the refusal of politics is a political act (Wilden, 1972, p. xxii).

Some years ago I published a short article on how psychologists had been co-opted into many war efforts (Harper, 1995). I quoted some studies carried out during the Vietnam war—Bourne's (1969) study of stress in US combat troops and Cotter's (1967; 1970) use of ECT without muscle relaxants in a bizarrely horrific reinforcement experiment in a Vietnamese mental hospital. Helen Spandler's recent article highlighted a number of important aspects of the current Gulf war: the impact on psychiatric patients in Iraq; the damage done to soldiers and civilians both emotionally and through chemical poisoning; as well as the insufficiency of a narrowly psychiatric response to such issues (Spandler, 2003). In this article I want to update what is known about the use of psychological techniques in interrogation and the uses to which psychological knowledge is put but I want to extend this by looking at how psychology may be used in euphemistically entitled 'psychological operations' not only on the battlefield but also at home in the media. Warfare has, no doubt, always used propaganda to great effect and this is especially so in cultures dominated by modern communications technology. The attacks in New York on 11 September 2001 were an example of the propaganda potential of military operations as Rampton and Stauber (2003) have argued. In this article though, I will not be focusing on the use made of psychological knowledge by networks like Al-Qaeda. Rather I will be focusing on the use of that knowledge by Western, especially British, governments and organisations. I want to argue that there is a continuum of psychological knowledge used in the current War on Terror: from the extreme of interrogation techniques and battlefield psychological warfare through to more indirect uses in Public Relations campaigns and the use of the media to spread disinformation which has the effect of preparing the public for the ratcheting up of the security state and to gain support for, and undermine opposition to, military campaigns.

Psychology, torture and interrogation

As a result of the War on Terror we have been repeatedly informed that 'the gloves are now off' and this has particular implications for the use of interrogation techniques. At the time of writing there are approximately 660 detainees (including teenagers) held at the US base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. They are not considered to be Prisoners of War, but rather as 'unlawful combatants' by the US and the main reason for their being held in Cuba seems to be that their detention on the US mainland would be illegal. At Guantanamo they are regularly interrogated. There are also many detainees held in other countries (e.g. in Pakistan and the Middle East) in similarly unclear legal conditions—the UK currently has a number of detained foreign nationals. There are also detainees held by coalition forces at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan and in many other countries where US and UK intelligence officials are involved in interrogations but with few legal safeguards.

Shallice (1972) has argued that psychologists have a special responsibility for some British interrogation techniques which appear to have been produced by the 'conscious use of available scientific knowledge' (1972, p.387). These techniques provoked a public outcry when used following a mass arrest by Ulster security forces in 1971. Twelve of 342 arrested men were subjected to several techniques which appeared to serve as pre-interrogation procedures. This included placing a black bag over their heads ('hooding'); being made to stand against a wall with their hands held high above their heads and legs apart for up to 16 hours at a stretch and being deprived of sleep for the first two or three days. In addition, the rooms where the men were left had recorded 'white noise' played in them and the men were made to wear boiler suits (perhaps to reduce tactile stimulation). It was also alleged that the men's diets were severely restricted to occasional administrations of dry bread and cups of water (British Medical Association, 1986, pp.15-16; Shallice, 1972, p.388). The British Army termed this 'interrogation in depth' and the methods used (hooding, noise bombardment, food deprivation, sleep deprivation and forced standing positions) were known collectively as the 'five techniques' (Hogg, 2003). At the time, the UK government stated that these procedures were necessary in order to 'provide security for detainees and guards', an 'atmosphere of discipline' and to prevent inter-prisoner communication (BMA, 1986, pp.15-16). These are exactly the same explanations given by Guantanamo staff. Defence Minister Lord Carrington said the only people subjected to these techniques were 'thugs and murderers' (Hogg, 2003)—echoes of the current situation again: US President George Bush has said that the Guantanamo detainees are 'bad men'. Commenting on the Northern Irish interrogations, Anthony Storr, however, wrote:

the hooding and the continuous noise were designed not to isolate the men from each other but as a deliberate method of producing mental disorientation and confusion. (BMA, 1986, p.16)

Despite the fact that both a government and a privy counsellors' majority report recommended the continued use of these techniques, Prime Minister Edward Heath accepted Lord Gardiner's minority report (in which he noted that the 'five techniques' were originally used by the KGB in the 1930s) damning them (BMA, 1986, p.18). This may have been related to the fact that the Irish government was in the process of taking the British government to the European Commission of Human Rights (Hogg, 2003).

The BMA (1986), Shallice (1972; 1984) and Watson (1978) all note that these techniques appeared to have been designed in the early 1960s in the midst of burgeoning sensory deprivation research. Both Watson and Shallice make a direct link between this research and the interrogation techniques. Shallice observes that 'not surprisingly, psychologists, by investigating the nature of brainwashing have improved it' (1972, p.387). Watson notes that the earliest researchers on sensory deprivation included Donald Hebb of McGill University who was carrying out (classified) work for the Canadian Defense Board (1978, p.267). Both Watson (1978) and Greenfield (1977) have documented military funding of psychology research not only into sensory deprivation but also into the phenomenon of 'brainwashing' which appeared not to be benign but a way of providing the US military with more effective interrogation techniques. In fact, Greenfield (1977) has illustrated how the Human Ecology Fund was set up and backed financially by the CIA in the late 1950s. Originally organised to finance research into 'brainwashing' at Cornell Medical School, it developed its remit and by 1957 Carl Rogers was on the board of the organisation receiving some grants for his work on psychotherapy. He has commented:

It's impossible... to realize what it was like in the 1950s. It seemed as though Russia was a very potential enemy and as though the United States was very wise to get whatever information it could about things that the Russians might try to do, such as brainwashing people. (Greenfield, 1977, p.10)

Others in receipt of Human Ecology Fund grants included Edgar Schein, Edward Hall, Martin Orne and sociologist Jay Schulman (who was one of only two of Greenfield's interviewees to have received CIA funds unwittingly). Shallice (1984) also includes Erving Goffman in this list. Is this all ancient history?—

there seems to be relatively little sensory deprivation or brainwashing research going on today. The links between psychology and the Intelligence Community continue today—the CIA even advertises for social and clinical psychologist posts on its website—but, instead, the techniques studied are of a more high-tech nature. I'll draw on three main examples to suggest that the links between psychology and the military-intelligence-industrial complex remain as strong today: surveillance; statistical prediction of behaviour; and, especially, the development of psychological operations.

Surveillance technologies

Sherrard (1991) investigated why there was so much psychological research done on face recognition and concluded that this was because it was applicable to electronic surveillance techniques. In particular it is directly applicable to Closed Circuit Television surveillance—the UK has the highest density of CCTV cameras in the world. London's Newham Borough Council was one of the first authorities to employ a sophisticated CCTV system called Mandrake, whereby the 140 CCTV cameras are linked to software which can identify faces and compare it to a database of individuals considered to be 'of interest'. Face recognition and 'man-machine interface' (sic) were surpassed by no other research areas in the probability of an individual project receiving funding (80 per cent) according to Sherrard's research based on the 1987 edition of Current Research in Britain/Social Sciences. In addition, the US military are extremely interested in visual cognition, having spent 32 per cent of the 1980s 'Star Wars' Strategic Defense Initiative funding on 'Surveillance, Acquisition, Tracking and Kill Assessment' using parallel distributed processing modelling—another area of research which was mainly supported by military funding (Bowers, 1990, p.136). Having encountered political and technical problems this is now enjoying a resurgence with the move to new Missile Defence systems. Shallice (1984) has described the wide variety of psychological research topics that military and security services have funded including interrogation, 'brainwashing', 'mind-control', and voice and face recognition. Evans et al. (1991) detail an enormous amount of military-funded research in British higher education including funding of psychology departments. Ackroyd et al. (1977) have described a huge range of repressive techniques many of which are based on psychological theories applied in military and security settings. It is likely that current research draws heavily on psychological knowledge.

Statistical prediction of behaviour

One of the most worrying new technologies is that devised by the Information Awareness Office at the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARDA) in the US Department of Defense. Originally called Total Information Awareness it has gone through a number of politically-induced name changes. Next it was called Terrorism Information Awareness and then the program was supposedly cancelled although ARDA's new Novel Intelligence from Massive Data (NIMD) program seems to be a replacement. Goldenberg (2002) notes that the purpose of TIA is to trawl through huge amounts of data on US citizens in order to 'predict potential terrorists by tracking a lifetime of seemingly innocuous movements through electronic paper trails' for example 'academic transcripts, prescription drugs, telephone calls, driving licences, airline tickets, parking permits, mortgage payments, banking records, emails, website visits and credit card slips'. It was run by Admiral John Poindexter who played a central role in illegally channeling funds from Iranian arms sales to Contra guerillas in Nicaragua and was convicted of lying to Congress. Poindexter was forced to resign in August 2003 over another IAO project and Congress has cut the funds allocated to TIA and banned it from focusing on US citizens without congressional oversight (Borger, 2003). Given that previous attempts to block this project have foundered it is likely that it will continue under its new title: NIMD. Of course, the attempted prediction of behaviour through statistical modeling and computations has a long history in psychology and it is, again, likely that this project will be drawing on psychological knowledge. Of course, it is interesting that both research in surveillance and TIA/NIMD technologies is largely conducted by businesses under contracts to government agencies since this decreases

the amount of direct accountability for their work.

Psychological warfare: Information and perception warriors

There is a third main use of psychological knowledge by the security state: the use of psychological operations and these are used in both overt and covert ways. Overtly, the British Army maintains a psychological warfare unit: the 15 (UK) Information Support Group. Its name changed from 15 (UK) PSYOPS Group in order to distance its work from so-called 'black' and 'grey' propaganda operations which it is claimed are 'not practiced today' (Jolly, 2001). It has a permanent staff of eight drawn from three services and a reservist group of 28 people drawn from the media, broadcasting and publishing. It is mainly involved in designing leaflets dropped to enemy troops and setting up radio stations. In March 2003 BBC News online reported that it had set up a radio station in Basra, run by Lt Col Mason, deputy chairman of Choice FM in London. The use of psychological operations by the US military is far more substantial than its British counterparts.

However, alongside these overt and openly reported operations it is clear that there are other more covert uses of psychological operations: propaganda for the citizens of countries sending forces abroad. In *Weapons of Mass Deception* (Rampton and Stauber, 2003) the authors detail a number of these. Remember the story about Iraqi soldiers removing babies from incubators in Kuwait in October 1990? One of the witnesses to the US Congressional Human Rights caucus, Nayirah, a 15 year old Kuwaiti girl, gave tearful evidence about this but what was not reported at the time was that she was the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the US and her evidence had been coached by Lauri Fitz-Pegado, the Vice President of Hill & Knowlton, one of the world's largest PR firms. This company had set up a front organization (a common PR strategy well-known to those observing how pharmaceutical companies set up 'patient's groups' to campaign for a particular company's products)—Citizens for a Free Kuwait—to which the Kuwaiti government channeled $11.9 million in six months (Rampton & Stauber, 2003). PR consultant, John W. Rendon has worked on extensive Iraq-related activities under contract to the Pentagon and the CIA including distributing American flags and the flags of other coalition countries to Kuwaiti residents to welcome coalition troops in Kuwait during the first Gulf War. He has described himself as an 'information warrior' and a 'perception manager'. The Pentagon defines perception management as the combination of 'truth projection, operations security, cover and deception' (Rampton and Stauber, 2003).

One of the main targets of such operations is the public at home in Western countries via the use of the media. One key technique is to get the media to focus on particular stories and to ignore others. John Pilger recently noted how, in the run-up to the current Gulf War, the media had been distracted by reports of what now appears to be a much-exaggerated threat of Iraqi possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction and thus failed to recall statements like those made by both Colin Powell in February 2001 and Condoleeza Rice in April 2001 that Saddam Hussein had been contained and did not pose an immediate threat (Pilger, 2003). However, alongside the publication of official reports it is clear that a more covert PR war has been waged using psychological operations techniques. One example was the February 2003 dossier presented to some journalists in private briefings written by the UK government's Coalition Information Centre headed by Alistair Campbell, then the Head of Communications Strategy at No.10 Downing Street. It was this dossier which unattributably used decade-old research from a PhD thesis obtained off the World Wide Web, strengthened the language to exaggerate the threat and merged it with information from the Intelligence Community. The aim of this was clearly to present 'new evidence' to make the case for stopping the UN inspections conducted by Hans Blix and to enable preparations for war against Iraq. David Cornwell, writing under his pseudonym of John le Carre, notes how successful this campaign was:

How Bush and his junta succeeded in deflecting America's anger from bin Laden to Saddam Hussein is one of the great public relations conjuring tricks of history. But they swung it. A recent poll tells us that one in two Americans now believe Saddam was responsible for the attack on the World Trade Centre. (le Carre,

It is also clear that the security services regularly hold unattributable briefings with selected journalists about the current threat posed by terrorists in support of arrests made under current terrorism legislation (Bright, 2002; Cohen, 2002)—at the time of writing there are seven foreign suspects detained in the high security HMP Belmarsh. Rampton and Stauber note how the chief Nazi propagandist Hermann Goering described that a population could be incited to support war:

... the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country. (p.137)

It is interesting that many psychological operations at home are conducted by PR agencies. Whilst these may employ psychologists we can see that the use of psychological knowledge is more subtle—it may be drawn on to construct more effective messages in order to have psychological effects (e.g. to support military operations) but be used by anyone. In this context what, as critical psychologists, can we do? I think we should begin by taking these techniques seriously, analyzing them within their political and cultural context, understanding their functions and effects and resisting them either by co-opting them or by exposing them.

Resisting psychological operations I: Cultural and political analysis—the promotion of fear of the other as a justification for defensive and offensive operations

In his analysis of Cold War rhetoric, Kovel (1986) argued that, by projecting hostile intent onto other nations, it helped sustain the military-industrial complex and the nuclear state. This effect can be seen more generally, thus, in his history of MI5. Bernard Porter (1992) noted that accounts of IRA bombing campaigns seemed to 'justify the role of MI5 and the Special Branch' (p.200). Indeed, with the demise of the USSR as a threat to national security, terrorism has become the officially-recognised priority of British security services (Norton-Taylor, 1993; Rimmington, 1994). Post-September 11 the Security State has grown massively. For example, the number of UK Special Branch officers (police officers with responsibility for security, intelligence, subversion and terrorism) has gone from 1,638 in 1978 to 2,220 at the beginning of the 1990s to at least 4,247 by February 2003 (Statewatch, 2003). A recent BBC TV series *TrueSpies* revealed how many of the stories previously seen as paranoid (e.g. surveillance of trade unionists and peace campaigners) turned out to have been more accurate than previously supposed.

Fear-generating processes also have consequences at a more domestic level. For example, Lopez (1991) has described how the cultivation of fear has led to the militarization of everyday life, with increasing emphasis on personal security and safety leading to political conservatism. Such a context can lead to the dominance of a 'text of fear' which then organises the experience of life, with people increasingly retreating to the private space of home, guarded by the technology of the security industry (Lopez, 1991). This has a number of effects which are both economic (witness the growth in personal and home security alarm systems) and cultural (with society becoming dominated by suspicion and observation—the development of *Neighbourhood Watch* schemes in the UK is symptomatic of this). Noam Chomsky has made a similar point in a comment on the US international War on Drugs policy:

The more you can increase fear of drugs and crime and welfare mothers and immigrants and aliens and all sorts of things, the more you control people. Make them hate each other, be frightened of each other and think that the other is stealing from them. If you can do that you can control the people. (Noam Chomsky in López *et al.*, 1996, p.14)

Adam Curtis' excellent 2002 BBC2 series *The Century of the Self* illustrated the extent of co-operation between big business and the new profession of Public Relations—founded in the US by Sigmund Freud's

American nephew Edward Bernays, drawing on many of his uncle's insights. Curtis' thesis was that, in an affluent West, people no longer consumed out of need—instead corporations decided to sell by capitalising on people's desires and so we saw clever PR practitioners linking images of smoking with liberation: for example, cigarettes became 'torches of freedom' for women. Of course, this can also work by playing on people's fears. In his 2002 film, *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore pushes this further by arguing that there is a link between the promotion of fear and consumer Capitalism. In other words, fear sells.

If fear-generating techniques are used in times of relative peace, they become much more overt in times of conflict—we have only to look at the kind of language used. Thus Billig (2001) has noted how the language of war was quickly mobilised in the US immediately after the World Trade Centre attacks as a way of attempting to categorise the incomprehensibility of the events. The Bush administration has intentionally drawn on dichotomous rhetoric—attempting to draw a dividing line between 'us' and 'them'. Ironically the rhetoric of Al-Qaeda follows a similar pattern. Cronick (2002) has shown rhetorical similarities between the rhetoric of George Bush and Osama Bin-Laden: the creation of a dichotomy between 'them and 'us'; the creation of a homeland; winning the approval of the audience; and citing the support of religious texts and God.

Resisting psychological operations II: Action strategies

Having developed an analysis of the context and effects of psychological operations what positive action can be taken? In one interview Sheldon Rampton has suggested a number of effective counter-strategies: to understand how propaganda works; to seek information from a wide variety of sources (and not just a narrow diet of mainstream media); and not to simply be passive recipients of the media but to actively engage in the real world and in active means of communication like debate and dialogue (Rampton, 2003). To this end I have listed below a variety of websites that aim to provide a wide variety of information on: abuses of human rights; the security state; the Gulf War; propaganda; and campaigning organizations in which critical psychologists might wish to be involved. To Rampton's list one might add the need to reveal and question the implicit assumptions underlying political discourse. It is also important to delineate the networks of power and interests at work influencing governmental policy (see, for example the work of the Oxford Research Group) and to organize education and action campaigns against those networks. Within the discipline of psychology we can seek to influence journal editorial policies so that authors are required to state any interests or funding involved in their studies.

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World wide web links

Amnesty International: http://www.amnesty.org/

BBC TV True Spies website: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/true_spies/default.stm

Disinfopedia: http://www.disinfopedia.org/

The Fire this Time: http://www.firethistime.org/

Information Warfare Site: http://www.iwar.org.uk/psyops/

International Committee of the Red Cross: http://www.icrc.org/

Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture: http://www.torturecare.org.uk/

Oxford Research Group: http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/welcome.htm

PR Watch: http://www.prwatch.org/

Privacy International: http://www.privacyinternational.org/

Psychologists Acting with Conscience Together (PsyAct):

http://www.vanderbilt.edu/community/psyact/

Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR): http://www.psysr.org/

Psychology and peace issues: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/papcar

Scientists for Global Responsibility: http://www.sgr.org.uk/

Statewatch: http://www.poptel.org.uk/statewatch/

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