

BOOKS *et al.*

## NEUROSCIENCE

# Cruel and unuseful punishment

Psychological studies call into question the efficacy of enhanced interrogation techniques

By **Richard J. McNally**

Following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration secretly authorized the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” to compel suspected terrorists to divulge threats to America’s national security. Widely regarded as a euphemism for torture, these techniques included depriving detainees of sleep, food, clothing, and toilets for prolonged periods while forcing them to assume painful positions in frigid isolation cells. Some suspects were subjected to “waterboarding”—terrifying episodes of interrupted drowning in which water is poured over a cloth covering the nose and mouth. Outrage occurred when these practices became public, and the moral reputation of the United States was damaged throughout the world.

While denying that these practices qualified as torture, the Administration and its allies also invoked the “ticking time bomb” defense to justify their efforts. In this thought experiment, law enforcement officers have seized a suspected terrorist who harbors information about an imminent attack on American soil. Should interrogators torture the detainee, forcing him to disclose details of the attack? Or should their moral aversion to inflicting temporary pain cost the lives of countless innocent civilians? Advocates of enhanced interrogation argue that, although torture is abhorrent, we must do whatever we can to prevent acts of terrorism.

Legal scholars have published persuasive moral rebuttals to the ticking time bomb defense for torture (1). Yet does torture actually work? To be sure, it can compel people

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A protestor kneels on the ground outside the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Pasadena, California.

to confess to crimes and to repudiate their religious and political beliefs. But there is a world of difference between compelling someone to speak and compelling them to tell the truth. As Khalid Sheikh Mohammed said, “During the harshest period of my interrogation I gave a lot of false information in order to satisfy what I believed the interrogators wished to hear in order to make the ill-treatment stop.” Yet the assumption underlying the ticking time bomb defense is that abusive questioning reliably causes people to reveal truthful information that they would otherwise refuse to disclose. Few scholars have scrutinized this assumption—and none with the rigor, depth, and clarity of Shane O’Mara in his excellent book, *Why Torture Doesn’t Work: The Neuroscience of Interrogation*.

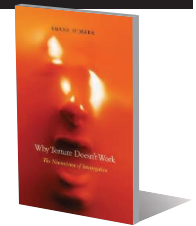
O’Mara is professor of experimental brain research at the University of Dublin’s Trinity College and director of its Institute of Neuroscience. Although he agrees “with the moral, ethical, and legal case against torture,” his argument against it occurs within an empirical, consequentialist framework, not an ethical one. Invoking the relevant science, he shows that torture undermines the very neurocognitive mechanisms requisite for recalling veridical information from memory.

The book’s subtitle underestimates its range. In addition to neuroscience, O’Mara draws on cognitive, social, and clinical psychology to document his case against the efficacy of torture. After providing an accessible survey of the brain circuits that mediate cognitive functions, O’Mara reviews studies in which volunteers were exposed to moderate levels of emotional stress, pain, sleep deprivation, and cold temperatures and then asked to recall the details of various hypothetical scenarios. Despite their motivation to recall and disclose this information, subjects exposed to such stressors performed far worse than control subjects. Other studies involving volunteers from elite

## Why Torture Doesn't Work The Neuroscience of Interrogation

Shane O’Mara

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Special Forces units who were subjected to intense, abusive mock interrogations confirm the neurocognitive deficits that occur under these conditions.

For obvious reasons, there are no randomized controlled trials comparing the relative efficacy of enhanced interrogation techniques with traditional interrogation. However, it is reasonable to assume that if subjects exposed to relatively moderate stressors exhibit pronounced neurocognitive impairments, then torture will surely make matters much worse.

O’Mara debunks the hyperbolic promises of functional magnetic resonance imaging and other questionable methods of detecting deception and discusses the collateral emotional damage suffered by many perpetrators of torture, including posttraumatic stress disorder and unremitting guilt. In the book’s closing chapter, he shows that the most reliable method for obtaining factual information from detainees is to foster rapport and use nonabusive questioning.

O’Mara advises counterterrorism officials to heed the advice of Napoleon Bonaparte, who said, “The barbarous custom of having men beaten who are suspected of having important secrets to reveal must be abolished.... The poor wretches say anything that comes into their mind and what they think the interrogator wishes to know.”

## REFERENCES

1. Y. Ginbar, *Why Not Torture Terrorists?* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008).

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