Why Torture Doesn’t Work: The Neuroscience of Interrogation, by Shane O’Mara

Book of the week: Ethics aside, no useful information is to be gained from ‘coercive questioning’, says Steven Rose

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By Steven Rose (/author/steven-rose)

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A mock interrogation: ‘all the evidence is that it takes many days and weeks of torture to begin to extract information, veridical or otherwise, from an unwilling prisoner’

In July, the American Psychological Association – after years of prevarication, and just too late for inclusion in Shane O’Mara’s
book – issued an apology for its collusion with the US government in enabling the torture, or, as it delicately put it, "enhanced interrogation", of detainees. Most of its senior staff, including the ethics director, resigned, and its former president, the editor of the journal Ethics & Behavior, is under pressure to follow suit. The APA apology is for unethical conduct; it does not speak to the efficacy or otherwise of waterboarding, sensory deprivation, rectal feeding, sexual humiliation or the rest of the panoply of procedures adopted by the CIA in its interrogation of prisoners seized from the killing grounds of Iraq and Afghanistan and rendered, often with the UK’s connivance, to its worldwide network of secret camps.

By contrast, O’Mara, professor of experimental brain research at Trinity College Dublin, puts ethical issues to one side to ask whether such methods can work – work, that is, in the sense of providing interrogators with vital information that could not be acquired by any other means. There are many reasons why people torture other than to acquire information: punishment, revenge, anger and sadism among them. The British squaddies whose torture and killing of hotel receptionist Baha Mousa in Basra in 2003, condoned as it was by their senior officers and a medic, were said to have been angered by the previous mob killings of six military police. All the soldiers involved were acquitted at court martial save one, a corporal, found guilty of inhumane treatment. These reasons are outside O’Mara’s remit.

So does torture work? O’Mara’s source material for the methods and uses of torture derive largely from the so-called Torture Memoranda describing the CIA’s interrogation methods, which were released by US President Barack Obama in 2009, and on Ian Cobain’s account of British techniques developed for use against IRA prisoners in his 2012 book Cruel Britannia: A Secret History of Torture. O’Mara’s answer, spread through eight chapters and some 300 pages, is simple, and summed up in the book’s title. No, it does not, and it doesn’t do the mental health of the torturers much good either.

Indeed, extracting veridical information from an unwilling victim turns out to be very difficult. As O’Mara points out in his review of the evidence, an interrogator can’t even tell if a person is lying; the classical polygraph, or lie detector, which relies on the assumption that a person who is lying will sweat under questioning, is notoriously unreliable. Direct measurement of
signals from the brain, by electroencephalography or functional magnetic resonance imaging, despite being aggressively marketed by companies such as No Lie MRI, are scarcely better, except under carefully controlled laboratory conditions.

Surprisingly, in this otherwise exhaustive review, O'Mara makes no mention of psychologist Paul Ekman's widely touted claim— which draws on Charles Darwin's original analysis of the expression of the emotions, and was bought into by the FBI—that lying evokes minute flickers of facial musculature. But this too turns out to have an accuracy not much better than chance.

Having pointed to the problems of veracity, O'Mara reviews in turn each of the main torture methods discussed by Cobain and the Torture Memoranda: the uses of stress, pain, drowning, heating, starving and sleep deprivation and the likelihood that a person exposed to any of them would truthfully reveal otherwise hidden information. As a neuroscientist, he proceeds by reviewing the research literature on the effects of each of these procedures on brain and body physiology. Indeed, so detailed are his reviews that one sometimes gets the feeling that he is using the issue of torture to provide the framework of a teaching text for neuroscience students.

The short answer for each of the torture procedures he describes is simply no; they weaken, disorient and confuse the prisoner, distort their sense of time and render them prone to confabulate even if they are willing to answer their interrogator's questions. O'Mara quotes an unlikely source of wisdom, long predating the neuroscientific evidence: "The barbarous custom of having men beaten who are suspected of having important secrets to reveal must be abolished. It has always been recognised that this way of interrogating men, by putting them to torture, produces nothing worthwhile. The poor wretches say anything that comes into their mind and what they think the interrogator wishes to know." The author of this supremely common-sense view? Napoleon Bonaparte, in 1798.

Some years ago, the BBC Radio 4 programme *The Moral Maze*, confronting the question of the ethical and legal prohibition of torture, raised the familiar issue of the "ticking bomb". In this scenario, a prisoner knows where a bomb is located, and if he refuses to confess there will be widespread devastation. Should this not justify obtaining the information by any means necessary? For some members of *The Moral Maze*'s panel, it was
a no-brainer; utilitarianism trumped ethics. Here, O'Mara neatly and pragmatically disposes of the ethical debate. All the evidence is that it takes many days and weeks of torture to begin to extract information, veridical or otherwise, from an unwilling prisoner. By which time, of course, the bomb would have long exploded.

O'Mara then turns to the question of why torturers torture. What is sadly clear is that, by and large, torturers are not abnormal but normal people. In the sort of artificial laboratory games dreamed up by psychologists, obedience to the authority of a white-coated scientist is sufficient for volunteer subjects to administer apparently life-threatening electric shocks as punishment for giving incorrect answers. I have always had my doubts about these much-quoted experiments, which date back to Stanley Milgram in the 1960s. Those administering the sham shocks surely know they are taking part in an experiment and that real damage to the apparent victims would not be permitted. But the experiments have now been repeated in different forms in several countries and produce similar results, and so my optimism must yield to the data. As has become all too clear, in exceptional circumstances, ordinary men and women, from the camps of Nazi Germany to the US prisons in Afghanistan, seem capable of the most heinous of acts of violence against others. What is involved here is sometimes called “othering”, or dehumanising the victims: Jews and Slavs were vermin, and Afghans and Iraqis “ragheads”.

Finally, O'Mara asks, instead of torturing, why not talk? The Stockholm effect, in which hostages come to sympathise with their hostage takers, applies in reverse, too. A terrifying example comes from the “show trials” in the Soviet Union in the 1930s in which old Bolsheviks, for decades comrades in arms to Lenin and then Stalin, confessed to the most improbable crimes of sabotage, of having being British intelligence agents and more. Why did these committed Communists seemingly willingly confess to such absurdities? They knew the trial judgment and their doom was inevitable. The process is brilliantly described in Arthur Koestler's now largely forgotten novel *Darkness at Noon*, to which O'Mara makes brief reference. Endless talks with their KGB interrogators, coupled with sleep deprivation, were crucial.

Despite all the evidence, torture, in this violent age, sadly looks likely to persist. But if the aim of the torturers is to extract
information, they should read O'Mara's book and adopt gentler methods. CIA and the rest of you, read and note. Neuroscience says your methods don't work.

**Steven Rose is emeritus professor of biology and neurobiology at the Open University, and co-founder of the Brain Research Association, since renamed the British Neuroscience Association. He is co-author, with Hilary Rose, of *Genes, Cells and Brains: The Promethean Promises of the New Biology* (2012, 2014).**

**Why Torture Doesn't Work: The Neuroscience of Interrogation**

By Shane O'Mara

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**The author**

Shane O'Mara, professor of experimental brain research at Trinity College Dublin and director of the Trinity College Institute of Neuroscience, lives in Dalkey, “with my wife, Maura (a lawyer), and our daughter. They are both amazing – enough said!”

His journey to work by train, he adds, “has to be one of the best in the world – along the arc of Dublin Bay, with the occasional dolphin and seal for company. Dalkey is one of the most beautiful little villages in Ireland, with a wonderful book festival, and lots going on besides.”

O’Mara recalls: “My parents moved around a bit when I was a child, but settled in Galway when I was about 8 years of age. Galway was and is a great place to live; it is perched on the edge of the Atlantic, with the next city to the west being Boston – at least as far as Galwegians are concerned! It is sufficiently large and distant from the centripetal forces of Dublin (as the capital city) that it has an independent life and identity of its own. There was and is always lots going on, and it has always attracted lots of free-thinking outsiders to what was generally a very culturally tolerant milieu.

"I think a certain amount of moving around in childhood perhaps conferred a slight capacity to look at situations and
problems slightly differently. It contributed also to a certain adaptability to changing circumstances, too.”

He was “not an especially studious student in school – I was easily diverted, and found sticking to the curriculum challenging. Nor was I especially sporty. I was lucky in one particular respect, though: I was and continue to be a voracious and varied reader. Galway had a lovely city library in the old courthouse building (it has long since relocated), and I loved going there. It also had some wonderful secondhand bookshops - The Peddler (now long gone, but then always crammed with every sort of book), and Kenny's (now an online only bookshop), which had an astonishing variety as well.

“I attribute my initial interest in the brain to a book my father gave me, Carl Sagan’s *Broca’s Brain: Reflections on the Romance of Science*, at the age of 14 or so. It led me to reading [widely] in psychology and neuroscience. It showed me a different way of thinking: empirical, evidence-based, deductive and inductive. Sagan's gentle voice and writings have hugely influenced me, especially in their insistence on the centrality of empirical evidence.”

O'Mara adds: "Politically, I have never recovered from my early encounter with George Orwell. His novels (especially *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), essays and reportage have always infused my political thinking. *The Road to Wigan Pier and Down and Out in Paris and London* are suffused with a kind of descriptive writing that lives long in one's mind. And the clarity of his writing...He left me with a particular loathing for all forms of authoritarianism and totalitarianism, and also with a great suspicion of the simplistic claims of utopians. I also loved the Modernist poets (especially T. S. Elliot and Thomas Kinsella), and the very remarkable vision of that isolated proto-Modernist, Emily Dickinson. I also read lots by Bertrand Russell, Karl Popper and Peter Medawar.”

At NUI Galway, where he undertook his undergraduate studies, O'Mara says he was a “determined” student: “entranced by what one could know, loving conversation about ideas but also about empirical evidence to test those ideas - the essential requirement to do science. I read as widely as I could – often off the curriculum, but nonetheless, enjoyably. I thoroughly enjoyed university life – and still do!”
He left Ireland for the University of Oxford for his doctoral studies. “NUI Galway and Oxford were a study in contrasts and similarities. I was lucky in NUI Galway in that I was in a small department with a small number of teaching staff, all of whom were highly dedicated to our education. It was an experience that would be difficult to ensure now, given the increase in student numbers, and the consequent rise in staff-to-student ratios. And Galway is a great student city! I got a great generalist undergraduate education, and a particularly deep exposure to statistics, which has always stood me in good stead. NUI Galway was also where I met my wife-to-be – so I thank it for that too!

“Oxford was a wonderful experience. I was very lucky again, I think, in the department and research group I worked in. I learned to do a type of research that suited me personally, and to be able to do this research in a fantastic environment – one that was busy, where data and theory were a matter of constant debate, and where the facilities for the kind of integrative brain and behaviour research I was interested in doing were the best in the world. I also learned so much about the other things central to academia: grant-writing, publication, and the like. My time in Oxford deeply influenced me as a researcher. It also left me with some important, life-long friends, for whom I am very grateful.”

What if he were given the power to oblige any one person, or group of people, to read Why Torture Doesn’t Work?

“I think the people I would want to read this book are the mid-to senior level policymakers – these are often anonymous, but are centrally important to the business of governance and administration. After all, who had really heard of Jay Bybee or John Yoo – outside of a small circle – before the Torture Memos were released? They frame the positions, devise the strategies, provide the arguments and position papers, and are responsible for writing the memos that end up as policies and procedures and laws.

“In particular, I would discuss the central premise of the book – that empirical evidence located within the theoretical framework of the brain and behavioural sciences, dispassionately analysed and presented, should be at the heart of policymaking regarding interrogation practice and intelligence work. This is quite a different way of thinking compared to the casuistry and ideologically driven thinking of so
many who participate in these matters. I think some would be willing to change their minds – if they are actually willing to allow what they think to be driven by the insistent demands of empirical reality and not ideology."

With respect to the report on the American Psychological Association’s participation in the US government’s use of torture, what did O’Mara find most surprising about it?

“The APA report is a remarkable document, and a fantastic read. What struck me forcibly on reading it was the way APA officials seemed to be entranced and bewitched by the fact that a major, powerful and wealthy entity of the state was paying very close attention to what they did and said. And they loved it! And it was a disaster for them. In truth, my book should have been written 10 or 12 years ago by a high-level task force constituted by the APA. It’s not as if the knowledge was not available – albeit often hidden behind the paywalls blocking access to the APA’s own journals! There are also a few standout individuals who attempted to do the right thing, despite the cards being stacked against them. Jean-Maria Arrigo in particular has been rightly hailed as a human rights heroine for her efforts.”

Which of the accomplishments of the Trinity College Institute of Neuroscience, where he is director, is O’Mara proudest of?

“The collective endeavour by what is now about 50 or so PIs to create a research institute of major international standing – which is self-sustaining and renewing, and which has attracted colleagues and students from all over the world. It would not be fair to pick on any one particular piece of current research, given the breadth and depth of our activities. What I would commend, however, is the way we have sustained the fundamental work on the understanding of brain function, and attempted to couple that to particular disease conditions.”

What gives O’Mara hope?

“Lots and lots of things: life itself, first and foremost. Our astonishing capacity to learn, and haltingly, to recognise our own mistakes. Our gradual coming to terms with our cognitive biases. The slow spread of democracy; the slow, if halting, retreat of totalist, authoritarian ideologies around the world (if you take the long view). The recent marriage equality referendum here in Ireland. The gradual retreat of superstitious and magical thinking. My train trip to work everyday. My train
trip from work every day! Seeing my wife and daughter waking every morning. Long walks on cold sunny days. Randomised-controlled trials. Vaccines. The gradual lifting of great fractions of the world out of extreme poverty. The spread of education and learning. Open debate, free speech and the clash of, and testing of, ideas. Evidence-based thinking. A willingness to admit the limits of current knowledge, coupled with the determination to push those limits back; a willingness to learn from error. And books, books, books!”

Karen Shook

POSTSCRIPT:
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