

Psychological Pressure

DID THE APA COMMIT INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL?

Through the *Hoffman Report* (apa.org/independent-review/index.aspx), it has recently come to light that the American Psychological Association (APA) — the governing body of psychology — in collusion with the Department of Defense, used its power to support the use of torture.



These actions by the APA are clear examples of institutional betrayal, defined by Carly Smith and Jennifer Freyd of the University of Oregon as actions or inactions taken by an organization that harm individuals that trust or depend on the institution. The institutional betrayals in this case are many and numerous, as detailed in the 565-page Hoffman report. The individuals harmed are diverse: members of the APA, psychologists, students, people who seek and/or need mental health care, people who are societally minoritized, people who were tortured.

Through these actions, the APA has shown itself to be incapable of being behaviorally committed to human rights and ethics as a result of incompetence, malicious intent or both.

Additionally, the ability for the APA to show true leadership amidst constant financial, status and political pressures is in deep question. Concerns of right and wrong appear not to have been entertained by those in the ultimate positions of power in the organization. The APA appears to have been swayed — as the Hoffman report indicates — to replace a discussion of ethics and human rights with a strategy of PR and political favor, thus betraying all who trust or depend on APA and the psychology profession in the U.S.

With these betrayals, the APA demonstrated an apparent limited mindset to the context: a total absence of notice or consideration of the disproportionate harm that persons of lower social status experience as a result of the U.S. Department of Defense's use of torture (as defined by international law per the Geneva Convention and others). The APA appears not to have incorporated the U.S. dominant culture of discrimination and bias against people who are not American and/or who are Muslim and/or who are mistaken to be Middle Eastern or Afghan: people who had yet to be found guilty of any crime and some of whom are undoubtedly innocent of any wrongdoing.

These individuals were further vulnerable because they were outside of the, albeit imperfect, protections of the U.S. criminal justice system. Thus, APA contributed to fostering justified mistrust that some of these and other cultural minorities have of U.S. systems, governmental and otherwise.

The APA squandered the opportunity to demonstrate leadership in human rights, ethics, morality, integrity and equality. It ignored the chance to protect those who were not in a position to protect themselves and chose instead to protect itself and its members (in the short term), of whom the average demographic is white, middle-aged and educated.

Several members of the APA directly implicated by the Hoffman report have left the organization. Perhaps additional exits will follow. As the APA attempts to both publicly and internally deal with the damning evidence of supporting torture — along with subsequent denials and ad hominem attacks against whistleblowers — the question remains: How can the APA right these wrongs?

Freyd, Smith, myself and others have proposed institutional reparations, such as apologizing and correcting fixable problems with transparency. The APA has begun to take such steps. Perhaps to be added to these institutional reparations is demonstrating an understanding of the scope of the problem. This includes 1) identifying and correcting the organization's priorities — *and culture* — that contributed to the years-long institutional betrayals and 2) identifying other places where these factors are contributing or could contribute to additional harm by the organization.

Amidst feelings of shock, betrayal, anger and hurt following the revelations that the APA was complicit in torture, each of us can examine our own roles in the organizations in which we are members. We can take this opportunity to prepare ourselves to choose — when internal and external pressures dominate our thoughts — to have the courage to do the right thing.

Jennifer M. Gómez is a doctoral candidate in the UO Department of Psychology and coeditor of the Journal of Trauma & Dissociation special issue, Self Injury & Suicidality: The Impact of Trauma & Dissociation.

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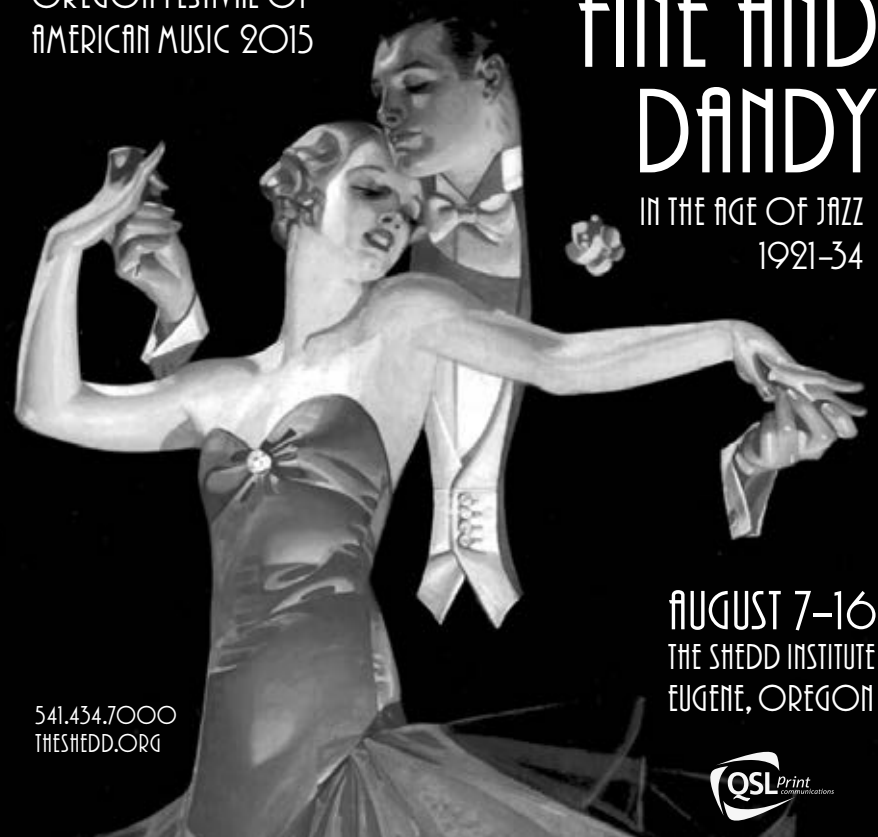


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