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Toward a Social Psychology of Professional Military Interrogation

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The essence of successful interrogation is the relationship between interrogator and source. This relationship does not need to be friendly, but it does need to provide something of value for both interrogator and source. This article reviews elements of theory and research in social psychology that can illuminate the nature of the exchange, including the human costs to the interrogator in developing and using an intense human connection.

To a hammer, everything looks like a nail; to a psychologist, every kind of human activity looks like psychology. Thus, I aim here to unpack some of the psychological issues involved in the practice of military interrogations. For access to these issues, I thank the participants in the conference of psychologists and interrogators that was sponsored by Psychologists for Social Responsibility at Georgetown University, November 10 through 12, 2006.

SUCCESSFUL INTERROGATION: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERROGATOR AND SOURCE

The key importance of the relationship with the source is evident in many of the comments made by interrogators. “The headway we make just by acknowledging them as a human being takes us far!” “The source wants to talk; it’s my job to become the person he wants to talk to.” “Don’t mirror the body posture of the source unless you want to put him at ease.” Related is the recognition that, if an interpreter is needed, the interpreter may be better placed behind the source, so that the attention of the source is not distracted from the interrogator.

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A new U.S. Army Field Manual for Human Intelligence Collection (FM 2-22.3) was issued September 6, 2006. Chapter 8, “Approach Techniques and Termination Strategies,” begins as follows:

Regardless of the type of operation, the initial impression that the HUMINT [human intelligence] collector makes on the source and the approach he takes to gain the source’s cooperation will have a lasting effect on the continuing relationship and the degree of success in collecting information. (p. 8-1)

The foundation of this relationship is indicated in section 8.6:

People tend to want to talk when they are under stress and respond to kindness and understanding during trying circumstances. For example, enemy soldiers who have just been captured have experienced a significant stress-producing episode. The natural inclination is for people to want to talk about this sort of experience. If the Enemy Prisoner of War [EPW] has been properly segregated and silenced, the HUMINT collector will be the first person the EPW has a chance to talk to. This is a powerful tool for the collector to use to get the subject talking. (p. 8-2)

The stress of capture and incarceration includes the stress of separation from familiar sources of social support: organization and orders, friends and family. Major change, especially traumatic change, is a source of uncertainty. Old ways are inadequate; new ways not yet found. In the attitude-change literature, major life change is often cited as “unfreezing” beliefs and values.

Strong uncertainties can be the occasion of strong emotions. There is fear about what will happen next to one’s self, or what will happen to comrades and loved ones. For a soldier or militant there is also the shame of having been captured. For some prisoners there may be anger toward those perceived as responsible for their current predicament: anger toward their regime, their organization and its leaders, even toward comrades who failed them. The interrogator aims to uncover these emotions and use them to get the source to talk and keep talking; in this dialogue, the interrogator aims to become the reliable source for answering the interrogatee’s uncertainties.

**OPINIONS AND EMOTIONS ANCHORED IN SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

These same ideas are prominent in social psychological theory and research. Beginning with applied research on persuasion in World War II, Kurt Lewin and his students came to the conclusion that opinions are anchored in groups and that successful persuasion targets relationships rather than individuals. Only a brief introduction to this research can be presented here.

**Group Dynamics Theory**

In Leon Festinger’s (1950) group dynamics theory, the social reality value of the group is the value of consensus about questions of value. What is beautiful and what is ugly? What is right and what is wrong? What is worth living for or dying for? Who am I, and what does my life mean? How is my life any different from the life of that squirrel I passed this morning, dead by the side of the road? What does it mean that I am going to die? These are central human concerns for which science and engineering have no answer. Consensus is the only antidote to uncertainty, and the interrogator aims to use and answer the uncertainties of a prisoner removed from his normal social supports. According to the interrogators, this is also a factor that leads to abuse on the part of the interrogator when moral leadership is lacking.

Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory went further in exploring the human need to validate opinions and evaluate abilities in comparison with others. Festinger’s (1954) principle of comparison is similarity: We want to compare most with those who are similar to us, especially those slightly better than we. Interrogators use this principle in positive approaches that emphasize similarity: joining in anger against those who wronged the source, joining in pride about the virtues and accomplishments of the source, joining in concern for the well-being of the source’s family and comrades.

**Social comparison of emotion.** The similarity principle emerges again in extensions of social comparison theory to validation of emotional experience. Schachter (1959) threatened individuals with electric shock, and showed that they sought the company of similar others—facing the same shock—to reduce uncertainty about whether their feelings were appropriate. Results also indicated that the company of similar others produced a significant reduction in fear. The latter result is familiar to any sergeant who has tried to keep soldiers from bunching under fire (e.g., “Spread out! One grenade will get you all!”).

Schachter and Singer (1962) went on to argue that cues from others can even determine what emotion we experience, as when unexplained arousal is interpreted as anger in the presence of an angry person. Interrogators aim to provide such cues when they encourage and join in emotions that will forward rapport and cooperation.

In short, the key insight of successful interrogation—interrogation as relationship—is echoed in social psychological theory and research. From this insight flows the need for communication. Relationships are established via communication, and the first principle of interrogation is to open communication.
RELATIONSHIP APPROACHES IN INTERROGATION

The interrogator avoids questions that can be answered "yes" or "no." It is important to get the source talking and to get the communication flowing. A psychologist might say that it is difficult to shape the behavior of a non-behaving organism. The source has to begin to talk for an interrogator to shape the talk in useful directions.

FM 2-22.3 (Field Manual, 2006) offers brief descriptions of 18 approach techniques. Each is a path toward developing rapport and control to facilitate information collection. Each implies a different kind of relationship between interrogator and source. Only the most common approaches are referenced here.

The new manual is explicit that an interrogator cannot present himself as a medic, Red Cross representative, chaplain, journalist, or member of the U.S. Congress. However, interrogators often misrepresent themselves in other ways. "I'm the administrative officer, I'm here to process your forms and get you moved on to a regular POW camp." The interrogator begins with simple and easy questions to establish in the source the habit of response to questions. This leads naturally into the direct approach.

Direct Approach

The direct approach is to assume the right to ask questions, begin with easy and unthreatening questions, and then move to questions of more military significance. It is important to ask some questions with already known answers to check the truthfulness of the source. It is also important not to give away what important pieces of information are not already known to the interrogator.

Interrogators are advised to begin with the direct approach and to continue with it unless the source refuses to continue. In previous conflicts, the direct approach was found to be sufficient for about 90% of sources. For Islamic militants, however, the direct approach is much less useful. Potential sources with a commitment to Islam are likely to see themselves already as potential martyrs who can be defiled by contact with infidels. This is not a perspective conducive to answering questions from a military interrogator.

Beyond the direct approach, a few forms comprise 90% of other approaches to interrogation: incentive, emotion up or down, pride and ego up or down, and futility. Other approaches, such as false flag and the TV-favored good cop, bad cop, are rarely practiced.

Incentive Approaches

The incentive approach is to trade something the source wants for information. The incentive can be as blatant as cash or as subtle as positive regard, a smile, or a cigarette. It can include the removal of a perceived or real punishment as well as presentation of something positive. Entitlements cannot be denied but can be treated as rewards: "Here, sit down and write your mother a letter."

Research in the psychology of learning has developed a four-way categorization of incentives: presenting or taking away a negative stimulus and presenting or taking away a positive stimulus. This categorization could be useful in anticipating the psychological impact of different forms of incentives. In general, the use of punishment is associated with less control of behavior because punishment often leads to avoidance or freezing, and these behaviors may interfere with the desired response.

Fear-Down and Emotional Love Approaches

Expressing emotions is good for talking, and so good for the interrogation. Reassuring the source that he is safe—will not be tortured, is in humane hands—can make the interrogator a positive figure, even a father or mother figure. Concern for comrades can be turned to helping them surrender. Concern for family can be turned to helping end the conflict as soon as possible by giving information that will end the conflict.

Pride and Ego-Up, Ego-Down, and Emotional Hate Approaches

Raising the status of the timid and humiliating the proud are alike in offering opportunities for the interrogator to encourage talk and develop rapport. Rapport is two-way communication. It does not have to be positive in tone to be effective. Expressing pride can lead to talk about individual and unit strengths and accomplishments. Even expressing hate for the interrogator can be put to work if the source talks out his hate.

Futility Approach

In this approach, the interrogator aims to convince the source that his cause is hopeless; there is no sense prolonging the pain and suffering of the conflict. The futility approach can often be used as an opening gambit. "Your side is losing. Proof? You’re captive in my camp, I’m not captive in your camp."

When a cause is lost, further suffering in the conflict is only a horrific waste. Why let others, especially your comrades, suffer further? If the source can help bring the conflict more quickly to its inevitable end, this is the decent choice, the humane choice, the rational choice. The source should join the interrogator in trying to save others, especially comrades, from unnecessary pain and death.
We Know All and File and Dossier Approaches

In the we know all approach, the interrogator aims to give the impression that he and his side already know almost everything the source knows that could be worth knowing. This requires that the interrogator keep the initial conversation along lines about which much is in fact already known—the identity of the source’s unit, its leadership and personnel, its tactics, its previous successes and failures. When the source talks down one of these lines, the interrogator can bring him up short with corrections or amplifications that convey a sense of omniscience. The interrogator can look bored; he is going through the motions with a worthless source.

Sometimes the source can be motivated to one-up the interrogator by finding something the interrogator does not already know. More often the source can be demoralized with a special form of futility: Why bother to try to keep anything back from someone who already knows everything? Why get in trouble for lying when the lie is sure to be detected?

Closely related to the we know all approach is the file and dossier approach, which requires an interrogator to invest in considerable homework. The investigator must be able to show that he already knows a great deal about the source: his family, his friends, his enemies, his colleagues, his activities, his history, and his experience. The investigator may pause occasionally to consult a thick document that seems to offer unlimited detail about the source.

The file and dossier approach is basically a we know all approach directed specifically against the source as an individual. The goal is the same: to develop a sense of futility that undermines resistance to the interrogator. File and dossier is limited in practice by the time and effort required to amass personal details; but, for long-term or high-value sources, the effort may be justified. Westerners subjected to thought reform in Chinese prison cells, for instance, report interviews with “judges” who refer to thick files that seem to contain information about their every movement and contact before their arrest (Lifton, 1961, pp. 21, 49).

RELATIONSHIP PSYCHOLOGY AND APPROACHES TO INTERROGATION

Each of the approaches described earlier implies a different quality of relationship between interrogator and source. The direct approach is the most business-like—a continuation of the command authority of the EPW, but with the interrogator now in command. Incentive approaches can range from impersonal and commercial to personal and emotional, depending on the value exchanged (better living conditions vs. personal warmth). Fear-down and emotional love approaches imply a warm and supportive relationship. Emotional pride and ego-up approaches call for respect; ego-down approaches call for contempt. We know all and file and dossier put the interrogator into a position of detached superiority.

The importance of the relationship between interrogator and source is particularly evident when the relationship fails. If a negative approach (fear up, ego down) does not work, it is often necessary to change interrogators. The same interrogator who threatened or humiliated a source usually cannot recover the relationship enough to change to a more positive approach. Even a new interrogator will face special difficulties in developing rapport with a source after the source has experienced a failed negative approach.

PSYCHOLOGY OF RELATIONSHIPS—SIX BASES OF SOCIAL POWER

Another way to think about different approaches to interrogation is to consider how they draw on different bases of social power. In its simplest version, French and Raven’s (1960) theory of social power distinguishes six bases of interpersonal influence:

1. and 2. Reward power and punishment power are obvious and understood by interrogators as incentives.
3. Expert power is influence based on special skills or knowledge, and interrogators employ his kind of influence in the various forms of the futility approach.
4. Legitimate power is based on organizational or normative superiority such that one person is acknowledged by another as having the right to lead or direct. Interrogators assume this superiority in the direct approach; a source who answers the first few questions is accepting the direction of the interrogator. Reciprocity is a special form of legitimate power; the interrogator has the right to something in return for the cigarette accepted by the source.
5. Referent power is based on personal attachment; we are more likely to do something for someone we like. Interrogators are aiming for referent power when they aim to become a friend or father or mother figure for their sources.
6. Finally, information power is based on offering new perceptions, a different worldview, a new identity. Interrogators may not often have the time required to work on information power, which aims for the deepest kind of influence. According to French and Raven, only information power produces truly internalized persuasion; the other bases of social power all depend on the maintenance of a relationship between the one influencing and the one influenced.

One interrogator at the conference suggested that information power is the type of power that is most effective with hard-core Islamists and other ideology-based extremists. A source with strong ideological commitment is not easily moved by
direct authority, incentives, emotional manipulations, or futility arguments. Faced with such a source, an amateur is likely to turn to torture. A professional interrogator will turn to information power.

Sometimes it is possible to use the source’s ideology against him. This requires some background knowledge, as when trying to cite Marx against a Communist. With an Islamic militant, a line of questioning might go as follows: “Do you believe there is no God but Allah?” “Do you believe that nothing happens without the will of Allah?” “Then Allah wills that you are here talking with me today? Then you should work with me.” Although FM 2-22.3 (Field Manual, 2006) includes ideological values under emotional approaches, it seems likely that religion is a combination of internalized belief and emotional commitment that will not yield to purely emotional approaches.

Understanding interrogation in relation to application of different forms of social power yet leaves an anomaly. Sometimes an interrogator will cede power for information. This occurs in the pride and ego-up approach in which the interrogator makes himself look inferior to the source to get the source talking and keep him talking. In the next section, a different theory of social relationships offers some help with this anomaly.

**PSYCHOLOGY OF RELATIONSHIPS—FISKE’S (1991)**

FOUR MODELS

Conceptually, the different approaches to interrogation—direct, incentive, fear down, and so forth—are not directly associated with the nature of the relationship the interrogator seeks with his source. Is use of material incentive consistent with a friendly relationship with the source, for instance? Or does use of material incentive undermine the power of more psychological incentives such as respect and friendliness?

Fiske’s (1991) theory of social models may be useful in this regard. According to Fiske, at any given moment any social interaction can be described in terms of one of four models:

1. In the community-sharing model, no one keeps track of contributions or inputs but all in the model can take what they need. Families and good friendships operate, in many moments, according to the community-sharing model.

2. In the equality-matching model, strict reciprocity of contributions or inputs are maintained. Contributions have to be of the same kind so that equivalence can be determined by inspection. Turn-taking in dinner invitations, borrowing, and labor exchange often operate in the equality-matching model.

3. In the authority-ranking model, inferiors owe respect and support to superiors and what is less often realized, superiors owe assistance and protection to inferiors. Parents in relation to children and clan leaders in relation to clan members often operate in the authority-ranking model. Here is where pride and ego-up approaches may get a foothold; the source made to feel superior can feel an obligation to help the inferior interrogator. This is a special form of reciprocity in which contributions or inputs are not equivalent but complementary. Respect directed upward is returned by help directed downward.

4. Finally, in the market-pricing model, exchanges are denominated in ratios such as provided by money or time. The cigarette offered to the source is worth its money value among prisoners, which might be considerable. The same cigarette might signal a friendly relation between interrogator and source in the community-sharing model, a favor to be reciprocated in the equality-matching model, or a benefit from superior to inferior in the authority-ranking model. The models are subjective, not determined by the observables of exchange.

The strong assumption in Fiske’s (1991) theory is that any human relationship is operating on only one of these models at any given time. It might be useful to think about how this assumption plays out in the relationship of interrogator and source. Similarly, the four models might be useful in categorizing the 18 approaches to interrogation detailed in FM 2-22.3 (Field Manual, 2006). As already noted, each approach implies a different relationship between interrogator and source and a different quality of emotional connection between interrogator and source. The direct approach, for instance, seems to depend on instantiating a model in which the interrogator is the superior side of an authority-ranking relation.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL INTERROGATORS**

The experienced interrogators in the seminar were notably attractive and congenial individuals. They appeared outgoing, relaxed, and straightforward. They displayed high verbal skills; they told stories, and told them with verve. They seemed to like people and to like meeting new people. They showed little difficulty in meeting and interacting with a very different kind of crowd than their own—a collection of PhD psychologists who might be more at home with books than with soldiers.

I have been careful to characterize the interrogators in terms of appearance and action, rather than at the trait levels that would be conveyed by describing them as high IQ, or extroverts, or low on anxiety. The successful interrogator is a chameleon who can select a persona and stay watchful and unmoved within that persona, even when acting out emotions ranging from love and respect to cold contempt, anger, and even hate. To be a successful interrogator is to be a salesperson, selling not just one self but as many selves as may be needed:
I am no man’s slave, but I have made myself a slave to all, in order to win the more for Christ. To the Jews I have made myself as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those who live under the law I have come as one under the law, in order to win those who are under the law—not that I myself am under the law. To those who live without the law I have come as one without the law, in order to win those who are without the law—not that I am really under no law in relation to God, for I am bound by the law of Christ. To those who are weak I have made myself weak, so as to win the weak; in fact, I have become all things to all people, in order that, one way or another, I may rescue some of them. But I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share its blessings with others. (1 Cor. 9:19–23)

Substituting “U. S. Army” for “Christ” and “Gospel,” St. Paul describes a successful interrogator.

For individuals who are not saints, the interrogator’s skills can have a downside. The interior costs of pretending but withholding empathy can be considerable. It is possible to lose the feeling of authenticity in feeling and expressing empathy in relationships outside of work. Should an interrogator turn his skills toward improving what can be gotten from colleagues, friends, spouses, or children? All interrogators feel this tension; each draws his or her own line to separate life and work. Some interrogators cannot turn off the analysis stage and can only commit to not using the emotional openings that come their way from friends and family.

Another aspect of the empathy problem is the danger of identifying with the source in a way that interferes with full exploitation of the source. As therapists must deal with transference and counter-transference, interrogators must deal with the attachment of the source to the interrogator and the human tendency to reciprocate this attachment. The difference is that the therapist has the luxury of aiming for the best interest of the client, whereas the interrogator is required to aim for the best interest of the military he serves.

Thus, the interrogator must find a space between empathy and exploitation, between feeling empathy and using empathy. The interrogator cannot be a psychopath or sociopath—someone defective in empathy, who sees other human beings only as means to his own ends. Rather, the interrogator must be an artist of empathy while maintaining at least some of the distancing of a sociopath. The challenge for the interrogator is to maintain a distance that does not lose sight of the humanity of the source.

Inversely, according to one participant, the interrogator can be seduced into “falling in love with the source.” This comes about when the interrogator begins seeing the source as a friend as a result of the rapport-building; the relationship distorts judgment. The interrogator then believes the source completely and is easily fooled.

There is reason to believe that normal human beings find it difficult to find and keep the ideal medium distance. Zimbardo’s (1971) “prison experiment” famously showed that individuals assigned the task of monitoring and controlling others were, in just a few days, lost in their new roles. Many “guards” slid down the slippery slope from control to sadistic misuse of their power over individuals who had been assigned the role of “prisoners.”

Interrogators must walk the edge of this slippery slope with every source. Individuals who can maintain this kind of self-control are unlikely to make good spit-and-polish soldiers, or to find enthusiasm for superiors who do not understand the demands of their work. The Army understands the physical risks of being shot at better than the psychological risks of being an interrogator.

CONCLUSION

Interrogation is an applied science, more akin to engineering than to physics. Good engineering embodies physical principles in a combination that is efficient and aesthetic. Similarly, good interrogation employs psychological principles in an artful combination that builds on the unique personalities of interrogator and source. Psychologists can make some of the relevant principles more explicit, but can no more prescribe their application than a physicist can build a bridge.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Clark McCauley is a professor of psychology at Bryn Mawr College and a co-director of the National Consortium for Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). He is a social psychologist interested in stereotypes, group dynamics, and intergroup conflict. His recent research has focused on political radicalization, terrorism, and genocide.

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This article addresses the following conundrum: How do abusive interrogations persist in the "War on Terror" over the practical objections of senior interrogators? Although the behavior of interrogator and interrogatee and the conditions of detention occupy the limelight in public controversies, every defense-related interrogation is deeply embedded in a web of organizational precedents and procedures. This article examines three major elements, providing organizational and psychological insights: (a) interrogation experts are positioned too low in the military hierarchy to govern interrogation protocols; (b) with the invasion of Iraq in 2003, sudden demand for interrogators exceeded the supply, resulting in low standards for selection, training, and placement of new interrogators; and (c) political and military authorities have promoted unwarranted exemptions to successful non-abusive interrogation protocols.

We address the following conundrum: How do abusive interrogations persist in the "War on Terror" over the practical objections of senior interrogators? Although the behavior of interrogator and interrogatee and the conditions of detention occupy the limelight in public controversies, every defense-related interrogation is deeply embedded in a web of organizational precedents and procedures. Decades of social psychological research have confirmed the power of organizational process generally to prevail over individual autonomy and shape behavior, and thus to set the stage for the potential use of abusive techniques in interrogation.

To illuminate the web of precedents and procedures that support abusive interrogations, we examine three major organizational factors:

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