

Psychologists, Under a Historian's Lens

A scholar asserts that key figures in the discipline had ties to torture

BY THOMAS BARTLETT

AS THE AMERICAN Psychological Association debates whether its members should be involved in so-called coercive interrogation, Alfred W. McCoy is trying to get psychologists to own up to their past.

Mr. McCoy, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, is the author of *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation From the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Metropolitan Books, 2006). The book is a detailed indictment, brimming with outraged accusations—what one reviewer called “a flashlight beaming into the dark closets of government.”

It is also a book that has come under fire for alleged distortions and overstatements. Mr. McCoy has been criticized for suggesting that two towering figures in the discipline, Donald Hebb and Stanley Milgram, worked with the Central Intelligence Agency. He has also been accused of being too quick to see nefarious connections between psychologists and the government, and of basing grand conclusions on skimpy evidence.

In a paper to be published next month by the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, he takes on his detractors and digs further into the “deep, dark” history of psychology.

“If you don’t diagnose the disease,” asks Mr. McCoy, “how can you find the cure?”

SHOCKS IN THE DISCIPLINE

One of the psychologists whom Mr. McCoy fingers in *A Question of Torture* as a possible CIA collaborator is Stanley Milgram, who died in 1984. Milgram is best known for the obedience-to-authority experiments he conducted at Yale University in the early 1960s. He showed that subjects were willing to press a button to deliver an electric shock to another person simply because someone posing as a researcher told them to. No one

Continued on Following Page

Chronicle of Higher Ed. 7 Sept. '07

Continued From Preceding Page
was actually shocked; it was all a ruse. But the subjects thought it was real, and some of them were willing to continue pressing the button even as the person being "shocked" begged and screamed for mercy.

The experiments, which many critics later deemed unethical, were an attempt by Milgram to understand how seemingly ordinary Germans, once they became Nazi officers, could have committed atrocities.

In his book, Mr. McCoy points to circumstantial evidence to suggest that Milgram's experiments may have been supported—at least indirectly—by the CIA. Among the works he cites is a biography of Milgram, *The Man Who Shook the World*, by Thomas Blass, a professor of psychology at the University

of Maryland-Baltimore County. The book mentions, for instance, that Milgram had subsequent grant applications turned down by the National Science Foundation—which Mr. McCoy sees as evidence that the CIA may have been responsible for supporting his early obedience research.

Mr. Blass was taken aback that Mr. McCoy would cite his book to support allegations against Milgram, allegations he considers baseless. In a lengthy rebuttal in the behavioral-science journal this year, he went after Mr. McCoy's book for "questionable presentational devices" and "plain misstatements of fact."

During his years of research, Mr. Blass writes, he "never came across the slightest suggestion" that Milgram was involved with the CIA.

He also recently submitted a

Freedom of Information Act request to the agency asking for any information related to Milgram. The response he received said there was none.

SENSE AND INSENSIBILITY

Along with Milgram, Mr. McCoy names Donald Hebb as a psychologist who worked on controversial

ble for groundbreaking research on sensory deprivation.

In one of Hebb's experiment, subjects were placed in a lighted, soundproof chamber. They wore goggles to diffuse the light, along with large, padded gloves. They rested their heads on U-shaped foam pillows. A constant, low-level noise hummed in the background.

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experiments in collaboration with the CIA for more than a decade.

Hebb, who died in 1985, was a pioneer in studying the effects of environmental conditions on cognitive development. He was also responsi-

Within just a few hours, the subjects—all male college students—found that they couldn't think clearly. After a prolonged period in the chamber, they experienced powerful, disturbing hallucinations and panic attacks.

Most subjects dropped out of the test; it was simply too much.

The significance of Hebb's research is not in dispute. But was his motivation purely academic, or was he, too, working with the CIA?

Mr. McCoy argues that it was the latter, and that Hebb willingly collaborated with the agency in developing interrogation techniques.

But Richard E. Brown, a professor of psychology at Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, who is working on a biography of Hebb, disputes Mr. McCoy's conclusions.

In a nine-page article, also published in the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, he takes Mr. McCoy to task for a list of supposed errors. Mr. Brown's main argument is that there is simply no proof that Hebb worked for the CIA. While his work was built upon by other researchers, and sensory deprivation has been used in interrogations, that was never Hebb's purpose, says Mr. Brown. "Hebb did invent it, but he didn't invent it for that," he says.

He also charges Mr. McCoy with sloppy research: "His dates are scrambled. He's got stuff in there that's kind of crazy."

For example, Mr. Brown says, the account of Hebb's work in Mr. McCoy's book is not in chronological order, making it seem that "Hebb worked with others when he did not." In another case, Mr. Brown chastises Mr. McCoy for getting the title of a *New York Times* article wrong. But a quick Nexis search shows that Mr. McCoy was correct.

Jean Maria Arrigo doesn't go as far as Mr. Brown. Ms. Arrigo, an independent social psychologist who studies the ethics of political and military intelligence, says there's "a lot of really good work" in Mr. McCoy's book, which she reviewed for the journal *PsycheCritiques*, published by the psychology association.

She describes her own politics as "way far left" and expresses sympathy for Mr. McCoy's aims, but has reservations. "I felt that the gist was generally right, but that he overgeneralized and got some of the details wrong," she says. "I would say that it's scholarship that has been

skewed a little too much by political passions."

Another review, by Anthony J. Marsella, an emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Hawaii-Manoa, was more positive. In an e-mail message, he writes that Mr. McCoy "has done an admirable job in scholarship and documentation," and that "when he wonders or raises possibilities, in my opinion he does so responsibly."

DIGGING DEEPER INTO HISTORY

Mr. McCoy defends himself against his critics and levels fires, allegations in a paper titled "Science in Dachau's Shadow: Hebb, Beecher, and the Development of CIA Psychological Torture and Modern Medical Ethics," to be published in October. He argues that, despite Mr. Blass's contention, the circumstantial evidence linking Milgram to the CIA is compelling. While he concedes that he has no hard proof he believes that Mr. Blass "muddle simple matters of fact" in order to defend Milgram.

As for Hebb, Mr. McCoy calls the case open-and-shut. "Hebb willingly and knowingly collaborated with the CIA," he declares. "It's as clear as can be."

In his forthcoming paper, Mr. McCoy cites notes from a 195 meeting between Hebb and CIA representatives at a Ritz-Carlton hotel in Montreal. In the record of the meeting, according to Mr. McCoy, Hebb suggests that by "cutting off all sensory stimulation ... the individual could be led into a situation whereby ideas, etc., might be implanted."

That and other quotations, Mr. McCoy says, prove that Hebb knew that his work would be used by the CIA for interrogation and brainwashing. "Brown insists that the measures were largely defensive," says Mr. McCoy. "If you read the minutes, it's clear the point of this research was offensive."

Mr. McCoy calls Mr. Brown an "unreliable reporter" and suggests that he may be too fond of the subject of his biography. "He wants a man without feet of clay, and the facts simply do not bear it out."

What does it matter whether a long-dead psychologist helped the CIA develop interrogation techniques? For Mr. Brown, it matters because such allegations could permanently—and, in his view, unfairly—mar the legacy of a brilliant researcher. "Look at Web sites now and they say Hebb is the father of torture," Mr. Brown says. "There have been a lot of repercussions because of McCoy's book."

But the stakes here are more than historical. Mr. McCoy argues that it's necessary for psychologists to come to grips with the past, to "critique and correct."

There is, he believes, a direct line between the work of psychologists like Hebb and what has happened at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. The discipline, he says, was "steered in a certain direction" and remains off course. "They were exemplars of the entire profession," Mr. McCoy says. "Even the best were tainted."

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A book by Alfred McCoy (left), a history professor at the U. of Wisconsin at Madison, has sown discord among some scholars for its accusations that two eminent psychologists, Stanley Milgram and Donald Hebb (below, in 1971), had connections to the CIA. Mr. McCoy's critics have charged that his book overstates the evidence that the psychologists' work figured in the development of CIA interrogation techniques. The author has fired back in a new paper that extends his argument that psychologists have an obligation to examine their history to "critique and correct" past errors.



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