

Psychedelic Science

MK Ultra and Research Abuses



There is a growing resurgence in the study of psychedelic medicines for the treatment of various mental health and substance use disorders. However, certain early investigations into these substances are marred by questionable research methods, abuses against the research participants, as well as covert U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) financial involvement.

Project MK Ultra is the code name given to a program of experiments on human subjects that were designed and undertaken by the CIA to develop mind control techniques. The MK Ultra funds were often distributed to universities and other institutions under the guise of research grants.

We sought to understand whether people of colour and other vulnerable populations were exploited during the first wave of psychedelic research in the US during the 1950–1970s. To do so, we reviewed available psychedelic research studies, paying close attention to ethical standards for research at that time. Variables of interest included race and ethnicity of participants, population vulnerability of the populations, drug administration conditions, consent, and coercion.

As an example of coercion, prisoners at the Addiction Research Center (ARC) were told that in return for volunteering in a research study, they would be paid in either time off of their sentence or drugs (i.e., heroin). They could either take these drugs upon completion of the study or save them in their 'bank account' for later 'withdrawals.' Many studies used high risk experimental designs without clearly articulating the potential benefits to participants or benefits to science that would justify the risk. For example, many studies documented high dose administration of psychedelics to incarcerated people and/or people with psychotic disorders. The researchers seemed to be interested in tolerance and cross-tolerance between different psychedelics, meaning that the psychedelics were often administered chronically, in combination, and at very high doses. Further, researchers routinely described participants as if they were animals, using restraints during dosing sessions and refusing to allow them to discontinue, despite extreme distress.

This important project draws attention to the history of research abuses against people of colour in Western psychedelic research in an effort to rectify these injustices. This research is also a call-to-action to urge current psychedelic researchers to prioritize culturally inclusive and socially responsible research methods going forward.

Publications

Strauss, D., de la Salle, S., Slosower, J., & Williams, M. T. (2022). [Research abuses against people of colour and](#)

