

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](#)

...research, ... against people of color and other vulnerable groups in early psychedelic research. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 48(10), 728-737. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2021-107262>

Stranger than Fiction

After the Second World War, the CIA recruited 1,600 German physicians and scientists to help develop technologies for use against the Soviets in the Cold War (Operation Paperclip). This included fifteen dedicated Nazis, where six had stood trial at Nuremberg for human rights violations. Their expertise arose from the manufacture of chemical weapons for the Third Reich, including the toxic nerve agent sarin. One of the German chemists, Richard Kuhn, brought LSD to the attention of the CIA in 1948, and it was soon tested as a tool for enhanced interrogation against Soviet spies who had been captured by Nazis. When MK Ultra was formally established in 1953, some of the German physicians and scientists continued to consult in this operation. Over 80 public and private research institutions, including many universities, hospitals, and prisons, were provided with MKUltra CIA funds, knowingly or unknowingly, to conduct human experimental research with LSD on civilians, prisoners, and patients.

Although most of this research took place in the US, some occurred in Canada. Undeterred by morally questionable research methods, the head of the Allan Memorial Institute of McGill University, Donald Ewen Cameron, led what became Project 68 in MK Ultra. Dr. Cameron believed he could cure schizophrenia by reprogramming an individual's psyche through a process involving chemically-induced sleep for days or months, electroshock therapy to reduce patients to a "vegetative state," and high doses of LSD — all without patient knowledge or consent. Patients came out "depatterned" – stripped of their memories, incontinent, and unable to live outside of an institution.

MK Ultra provided ample fodder for intriguing material that was used for the Marvel Universe. Projects like MK Ultra were the inspiration for Captain America, with [The Winter Soldier \(aka Bucky Barnes\)](#) exemplifying the hopes of the MK Ultra research project.

Documentary Reveals Disturbing Facts

People of color and inmates were used as guinea pigs in brutal drug research trials.

The Narcotic Farm

Kenneth I Levis

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