

THE CIA-LSD STORY IN RETROSPECT

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MEDICAL SCIENCE WITHOUT COMPASSION: PAST AND PRESENT

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It is not a pretty story, but then the very mention of the CIA conjures up nasty business -- concerns far removed from the Ivory Tower of Science. Yet, as we know only too well, the world of science does intermesh with the world of affairs, politics, and power, and more often than not these worlds may collide in terms of their implicit and all too frequently unexamined assumptions and value systems. This was obviously the case in the USA when, during the 1950s and 1960s, some major breaches in the conduct of human experimentation occurred.

These breaches were not limited to the administration of LSD and other psychoactive or unproven drugs to unsuspecting persons (soldiers, college students, and psychiatric patients) as guinea pigs, but involved a long list of other macabre interventions, such as radiation, harassment substances, and paramilitary devices and materials. In some experiments, certain drastic forms of sensory deprivation and immobilizing drugs, such as curare and Sernyl, were also used. In other experiments, sensory deprivation was combined with so-called "psychic driving" techniques, the brainchild of Dr. Ewen Cameron, a prominent psychiatrist of his day, in which psychiatric patients were exposed to the intensive repetition (16 hr. a day for six to seven days or more) of prearranged verbal signals while receiving intensive electric shocks. Rather risky undertakings, based on harebrained, pseudo-scientific ideas and most certainly a clear breach of ethics. The use of various modes of indirect

personality assessment procedures and invasive techniques was also highly questionable. Mercifully, some techniques, such as neurosurgery (for the purpose of exploring the pain center), were apparently ruled out as too dangerous.¹

The guilty parties, who entered into a Faustian-like pact with the CIA, compromising their scientific credo, belonged to several distinct categories, categories that became less and less distinct with time. There were, first of all, the so-called CIA Technical Staff, scientists among them, which in the case of the behavioral sciences (a term I shall use to include a variety of disciplines in the life sciences as well as the social sciences and mental health fields) was very limited in number. In fact, the person who quickly rose to become the head of the CIA's Mind-Control unit, Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, a protege of the CIA Director himself, Richard Helms, was a pharmacologist with a biochemistry doctorate who had served in the Technical Service Division's chemical wing, working with germs and other unspeakable weaponry. But Dr. Gottlieb soon found a cadre of willing psychologists and psychiatrists as fully committed hired hands or, in some instances, as consultants, on call when the need arose. It was principally this more limited group that crossed the usually untraversed chasm between the CIA's Technical Division and the Operational Division, the latter being the division whose agents are responsible for field operations, those who actually do the dirty work.²

The second category consisted of a sizable number of scientists, many of whom were, or at least claim to have been, blissfully unaware of their connection to the CIA. (One ought to note, for what it's worth, that according to the CIA, one-fourth

of the American scientists who were approached by the CIA agreed to work for it!)³ They were the recipients of grants from a few private medical research foundations, three or four in all, that served as secret conduits for research funding, by and large of the pure science variety, but research that held immediate or potential interest for the CIA.

Some scientists received grants for work that clearly had little if any CIA relevance; however, their projects and publications, which typically acknowledged the foundation grant, served as a cover. Their names added luster to the CIA front foundation, making the foundation's work seem legitimate. This was so in the case of Carl Rogers, for example, the well-known founder of client-centered therapy; B.F. Skinner and Hans Eysenck, world renowned psychologists, are other examples. Other scientists clearly knew whence the funding derived and, indeed, were in direct communication with CIA agents or became regular consultants. A few of them served as pipelines of information for the CIA. They kept the CIA posted on what was happening in the laboratories, journals, and scientific meetings that might be of potential interest. A sort of science spy network, as it were -- all very, very secret, as "national security" was presumably at stake as well as the reputation of the CIA-associated scientists.

But I ^{am getting} / ahead of my story. I ought first to indicate my own interest and role in this sordid business. I shall briefly describe how I fit in, while moving the more relevant story along. I was a graduate student in psychology at McGill University (Montreal, Canada) in 1952, when I was solicited to serve as a subject in an experiment which was to pay \$1/hr and

which required that I set aside several days. In need of money and with a virtuous impulse to help a fellow graduate student complete his dissertation research, I agreed. The experiment, as I learned several years later, was the first of many -- generically known as sensory deprivation. I was isolated in a small sound-proofed room and requested to lie as motionless as possible, in a supine position, wearing translucent goggles. No activity, no sensory stimulation except for an occasional test procedure over an intercom system to evaluate my mental functions. This went on, in my case, for 24 hours. As I recall, it was a rather boring experience, broken by sleep and stretches of fantasy-filled reveries, but not an especially dramatic, stressful, or debilitating one. Though I had given my "informed consent," I was not given much in the way of a satisfactory "debriefing." I was only given a rather general rationale for the study -- certain hypotheses concerning the relationship of the sensory system and cortical functioning were being tested -- but certainly not told the whole truth, which as I was to learn later, was the exploration of so-called brainwashing techniques. The study was in fact a piece of contract work for the Canadian Department of Defense and was highly classified.⁴

In 1954, still a graduate student but now in New York, I was employed as a research psychologist at Cornell Medical Center-New York Hospital, within a unit named the "Human Ecology Program," nominally housed in the neurology department and headed by a most eminent professor of neurology, Dr. Harold G. Wolff, known for his pioneering work on headaches, pain, and psychosomatic disorders. (Dr. Wolff had served as editor-in-chief of the AMA's Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry and, in 1960, became

president of the American Neurological Association.) My assignment was to participate in an interdisciplinary project studying the adaptation of 100 Chinese men and women to life in America. They represented a group of Chinese who had come to the USA on a temporary basis to pursue postgraduate work in a variety of fields. In consequence of the Communist take-over, our government decided to block the return of these men and women, most of whom were thus stranded in the USA without their families and faced with an uncertain future. I and the rest of the staff were investigating this "experiment in nature" -- the stress of geographic dislocation and its adaptational consequences -- in order to determine the "ecological aspects of disease," in Dr. Wolff's original phrasing. My role on the interdisciplinary team was to assess the Chinese by a fairly standard battery of personality and intelligence tests. The anthropologist and the sociologist interviewed them about cultural and kinship issues, while a psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst plied their special types of probing questions. In return for their participation in our project, the Chinese received a complete physical -- free of charge -- something they very much appreciated. They were also motivated intrinsically by a desire to tell us about China and Chinese culture, if not about their own interrupted lives.

Little did I know then that my work with the Chinese had been designed by others for an entirely different end. Only in 1977, more than twenty years later, upon receiving a call from an investigative reporter who wished to interview me about my involvement with the Human Ecology Program, did I learn the truth. To my shocked surprise, I found out that the program I had been a part of had been totally financed by the CIA. The

real aim of the Chinese project -- and the reason for its generous funding, I now learned -- was to ferret out potential agents for future assignments in China. (Incidentally, the Chinese project was duly replicated, using Hungarian Freedom Fighters of 1956, this time with the surreptitious aim of studying the characteristics of "defectors.")

Subsequently it was revealed that only Dr. Wolff, and perhaps one or two of his staff and others high up in the university and hospital administration, knew of the behind-the-scenes role of the CIA. It seems that Dr. Wolff was a personal friend of Allan Dulles, then the CIA Director. The lure of continuous, large-scale funding, which could be diverted to a variety of other and more traditional research projects under Dr. Wolff's direction, must have been very attractive to this totally science-absorbed, emotionally detached, and ascetic workaholic. Of course, patriotic sentiment undoubtedly played a significant role given the temper of the times. In 1955, in response to Wolff's enthusiastic and grand vision of the "synergistic partnership between science and the CIA," the Agency enlarged the CIA-funded study program into a research foundation (the money presumably coming from rich private donors and former patients, but actually from the CIA) which became known as the "Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology," with Wolff as president. Through this CIA-controlled funding mechanism, Wolff extended his and his staff's efforts on behalf of the Agency, efforts which now went far beyond Cornell. Wolff was expansive in his scientific dream, to say the least. For instance, he wrote the CIA that once he had figured out "how the human mind really worked," he would tell the Agency "how a man can be made

to think, feel and behave according to the wishes of other men, and conversely, how a man can avoid being influenced in this manner."⁵

In retrospect, there were several peculiar events during my two years with the Human Ecology Program that ought to have aroused my suspicion that things were not what they seemed. The first was an intense interest Dr. Wolff showed in my experience as a subject at McGill, something I had only casually mentioned once. He wanted every detail, and eventually he urged me to duplicate the experimental set-up at the hospital, using the more drastic stimulus reduction technique provided by water immersion. This was a technique developed by John Lilly, whose frontier brain research at NIH was of intense CIA interest, but who apparently had refused their approaches because he found secrecy inimical to the scientific process. Little did I know that Dr. Wolff's desire to grill me about my sensory deprivation experience was triggered by his preoccupation with brainwashing techniques, of interest to the CIA, for whom he was preparing a comprehensive report.⁶

It was the notion of "brainwashing" that, in Marks' phrase, helped Americans "pull together a lot of unsettling evidence into one sharp fear" and served as the starting point for the CIA's involvement with the behavioral sciences.⁷ In the early 1950s, rumors were flying about various exotic, mysterious techniques (dubbed "brainwashing" in a 1950 Miami News article planted by Edward Hunter, a CIA agent with a journalist cover) supposedly practiced by the Russians, the Chinese, and the Koreans to extract confessions for public show trials. Just conjure up the picture of the bizarre public confession of Cardinal Mindszenty

in 1949, who appeared zombie-like, as if drugged. The USA was in the midst of cold-war hysteria and propaganda battles were being fought around the globe. Anti-communism was at its highest pitch, and so was McCarthyism. No wonder the CIA was on the alert, trying to assess what was happening. They were trying to determine exactly how the Russians, Chinese, and Koreans interrogated their prisoners, how they extracted confessions. Were they using drugs, hypnosis, sensory deprivation, subliminal or extrasensory communication, stress techniques of some sort? If so, "our side" had to know for defensive and, ultimately, for offensive purposes.

This laid the seed for the CIA's Mind Control program which, for Richard Helms, was actually a continuation of his earlier OSS work during WW2, in which drugs such as marijuana, and psychological ploys, had also played a role. In fact, several of the initial staff recruited for this CIA unit were former OSS staff members experienced in the derring-do of clandestine work and its science-fiction-like, imaginative, and sometimes lurid escapades. The CIA's Mind Control program, known at various points in the 1950s and 1960s by the cryptonyms BLUEBIRD, ARTICHOKE, MIDNIGHT CLIMAX, MK-ULTRA, MK-DELTA, among several others, eventually funded 185 non-government scientists at 86 institutions, some of the most prestigious universities and hospitals in the USA, at about \$25 million. Its arena of interest, which began with the search for a truth drug or hypnotic method as an aid in interrogating enemy agents, broadened by leaps and bounds once "brainwashing" had become a focal concern. In a 1953 document, for example, Dr. Gottlieb listed subjects he expected one contracting scientist to

investigate with the \$85,000 the Agency was paying him. Dr. Gottlieb wanted "...operationally pertinent materials along the following lines:

- a. Disturbance of memory
- b. Discrediting by aberrant behavior
- c. Alteration of sex patterns
- d. Eliciting of information
- e. Suggestibility
- f. Creation of dependence."

A tall order, to say the least.

A second potential clue that the Human Ecology Program was involved in some extraneous business was a meeting I attended in 1955, along with some 30 psychologists and psychiatrists, most of them quite prominent in their field. They were all recipients of some past or current grant money from the Society For Human Ecology for their research. The meeting was called to order by one of the administrators of the society (a psychologist and retired major-general), who alerted us to the confidential nature of the topics to be discussed and said that we were free to leave at any time if the matter held no interest for us. In my own case, I left fairly early upon hearing the gist of the task at hand: we were asked to help prepare a manual on the interpretation of non-verbal behavior (signs, cues, gestures, etc.) for use by CIA agents in debriefing American visitors to the USSR (who might have met various high-ranking officials about whom valuable intelligence regarding health/illness status, personality, and attitudes could be generated indirectly). I left because I had no stomach for the preoccupation with the East-West conflict nor for clandestine work. But I also thought

it was a foolish and unrealistic undertaking: what could we as psychologists validly and usefully deduce about another person by second-hand reports of external behavior? Better ask Gypsy palm readers, hypnotists, car salesmen, or their ilk -- they are, I suspect, far better commonsense psychologists, superior "menschenkenner," than the professionals in the behavioral science field.

When in 1977 the New York Times carried a series of headline stories exposing details of the CIA's secret Mind Control program, I was not at all surprised to read that the CIA had, indeed, pumped headwaiters, fortune-tellers, prostitutes, hustlers, con artists, psychics, hypnotists, and others for their collective wisdom on how to assess and manipulate people. A magician apparently was also on the CIA payroll for the purpose of teaching agents how to slip LSD surreptitiously into someone's drink at a party.⁸

Administering LSD without informed consent was among the worst offenses perpetrated by the CIA-connected scientists -- psychiatrists and psychologists among them. The CIA's technical staff (that is, those scientists who worked for the CIA) certainly knew enough from the published LSD research to know that the variables of experimental set and setting play a major role in mediating the effects. They knew it was possible to predict the general effects of a certain dosage level for a given type of person under given laboratory conditions, but what about natural, field conditions? This had never been systematically investigated because it was clearly not feasible to study this question under prevailing standards of professional ethics. Nevertheless, the CIA scientists went ahead. They felt it was a

sufficiently important question in light of national security considerations. According to some accounts, as many as 50 people, including CIA agents themselves, several foreign agents, soldiers, and people deliberately picked up in bars and brought to a "safe house" by prostitutes, were given LSD or other hallucinogenic drugs without their knowledge, serving as unwitting CIA guinea pigs.⁹ Though the records of these surreptitious experiments were ordered destroyed by Richard Helms in 1973 -- on the eve of the first Senate investigation -- we do know that there were at least two suicides as a direct result of the mind-distorting drug experience. A lawsuit by the family in connection with one of them is still pending as are at least four other lawsuits by former soldiers.¹⁰

One particularly gruesome experimental run was conducted by the research director at the Federal Drug Facility in Lexington, Kentucky, Dr. Harris Isbell. Here inmates were rewarded with either the drug of their choice -- usually cocaine or heroin -- or early release if they volunteered. He personally administered LSD in increasing dosages to seven men for some 70 days to test tolerance levels! He has never permitted any interviews.¹¹ Incidentally, the pivotal figure in the CIA, Dr. Gottlieb, not only has refused any interviews, but, after the initial press attention and his resignation in 1973, he fled, living abroad for several years. He eventually returned in 1977 to testify in closed chamber before the Senates Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, having been granted immunity from criminal prosecution.¹² According to his colleagues, Gottlieb is a "tinkerer...he likes to fiddle with things....he has never made a decision on his own...not a guy who would make waves with

authority....he has a singular talent, much needed within the CIA, the ability to take a complicated scientific problem and explain it in terms that his non-scientific superiors could understand."¹³ It was obviously this talent that his patron, Richard Helms, a non-scientist, valued. One might also infer that it was Richard Helms, the boss, who gave the orders and Gottlieb, the tinkerer, who carried them out. As a tinkerer, in the tradition of the technician, he focused more on means than on ends. This same quality of "tinkering" was true also of the CIA's chief psychologist, with whom I became personally familiar when he worked under cover on the Chinese project at Cornell.

What were the after-effects, if any, in the more than 1000 college students, prisoners, mental patients, and army personnel who were subjected to LSD or similar drugs under a variety of conditions, with varying degrees of informed consent or explanation of potential risk factors? We simply do not know. The army, which along with other military services conducted its own as well as CIA-inspired research on LSD, was instructed by congress to do a follow-up.¹⁴ The results have, to my knowledge, not become public yet.

Much of the published work on such topics as LSD or sensory deprivation was carried out under quite legitimate auspices, governmental and otherwise. Not everything in these areas of research was tainted by CIA moneys. In my own case, soon after leaving Cornell's Human Ecology Program I conducted a series of 8-hour sensory deprivation studies at NYU's Research Center for Mental Health that I believe were quite benign. The subjects were carefully pre-screened volunteers, college students, air force pilots, and unemployed actors, who were, of course, told

they could terminate the experiment at any point if they so wished and that they would receive a full account of the purpose of the experiment and its results. Our research was of purely theoretical interest to us, exploring individual differences in response to perceptual and social isolation within a psychoanalytic perspective. The US Air Force, which funded some of the research, saw in it a useful space-flight analogue and used our findings as part of their over-all effort in selecting the initial batch of astronauts for the Mercury space program.¹⁵ Under a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, we also did some basic work on individual differences in LSD effects as a function of personality predispositions. Again, we followed strict ethical guidelines, obtained informed consent, explained the risks, and had the necessary medical remedies (i.e., Thorazine) in the event a subject wanted to terminate the LSD effects quickly. Also, I should make it clear that we used a minimal dose -- 100 micrograms. Like other researchers we were intrigued by the notion of a model, reversible psychosis, and thought we might learn something about the structure of abnormal thought processes.¹⁶

In considering the total body of classified research conducted by or for the CIA that had as its overriding aim the control and manipulation of behavior, two questions suggest themselves: what motivated the scientists to work covertly on questionable projects; and what, in the end, was the yield in knowledge of these studies?

To do full justice to the first question would, of course, require fairly intimate familiarity with the personalities of these scientists, and their motivational underpinnings, conscious

as well as unconscious. A difficult task at best, especially as most of them have refused even an interview. Only one, to my knowledge, has acknowledged (in a legal deposition 26 years later) that what he had done in his capacity as a CIA psychologist "was a foolish mistake. We shouldn't have done it...I'm sorry we did it because it turned out to be a terrible mistake."¹⁷ Were they men bent on evil? Decidedly no, in my view. Though we have no calculus of evil, my contention is that they were not deliberately out to cause harm or destruction, nor did they seem especially sadistic according to the available evidence. They certainly cannot readily be compared with those who participated in the unparalleled cruelty of the concentration camp experiments. They did not view their subjects as subhuman, as intrinsically inferior, or as persons whose lives were "unworthy of life." When things went wrong, in the case of the first suicide in 1953, it was clearly an accident and was viewed as such. They lied, they deceived, they caused psychological harm, they violated basic interpersonal trust and affronted human dignity, but commit deliberate murder or other unspeakable physical injury -- no.

Some were earnest, boy-scout-like patriots who consented to do something they knew was unethical because they were persuaded it would further national security. Or they were in it for the perverse thrill or excitement that, for some people, goes hand-in-hand with covert activity. Others, such as Dr. Wolff, Dr. Cameron, and Dr. Isbell were caught up in the world of scientific abstraction and professional career goals, having lost touch with day-to-day human encounters and emotions. For many scientists, including those in the behavioral fields, a process

of "dehumanization" becomes almost inevitable: subjects become data points, adding to the sample size; detachment and perhaps even arrogance holds sway, certainly a lack of emphatic sensitivity.

Parenthetically, I might note that recently the normative paradigm of scientific inquiry, positivism, has come up for an increasing critical attack, especially by feminist philosophers of science, for example Sandra Harding, Genevieve Lloyd, and Evelyn Fox Keller. They argue that positivism, in its emphasis on control, manipulation, dispassionate objectivity, and decontextual analysis, promotes an illusion of distance or separation between the knower and the known. A process of dehumanization, in this view, is a by-product of strict adherence to dispassionate scientific method.¹⁸

The CIA-backed scientists undoubtedly were aware of the Nuremberg Code of 1947, which stipulates that medical research should be intended to improve the lot of mankind and should be conducted only on persons who consented after being informed of the nature and risks of the experiment. Although this code was adopted by the USA in 1953, the finer points of that code was yet to be fully disseminated and debated in governmental, academic, and research circles, and had in any case not filtered down from the purely medical realm to the socio-behavioral. Unlike the situation at the present time, characterized by strict federal and institutional regulations and in-house ethics boards, in general there were insufficient formal controls and consciousness-raising among scientists about ethical issues in all their manifold and complex ramifications. The basic issue requiring constant attention from all of us is, of course, the

age-old question: when may a society, actively or by acquiescence, expose some of its members to harm in order to seek benefits for them, for others, or for society as a whole?¹⁹

As for the second question I posed above: What, indeed, was learned from these experiments? Was the yield worth the cost? According to the CIA's own verdict, very little, if anything, was learned that was of operational value. Whether marijuana, sodium pentathol, LSD, mescaline, alcohol, sensory deprivation, hypnosis, or stress -- singly or in combination -- the behavioral findings were found unstable, unreliable, and unpredictable in their specific manifestation. In a way this is, as Marks points out, the saving grace of the behavioral scientist. In this connection, Marks cites an apt piece of irony, voiced by Dr. Martin Orne, a long-time CIA consultant and a psychiatrist specializing in hypnoses research: "We are sufficiently ineffective so that our findings can be published."

In my view, behavioral scientists fail miserably as Svengalians and should forever ban power (prediction and control) as their underlying philosophy of science goal. The goal of understanding ought to suffice, even if it does not carry with it the prestige of the natural sciences. There is today an increasing recognition of the bankrupt status of large segments of psychological and behavioral research, especially research conceptualized and conducted in the positivist tradition. It is clearly a tradition that has fostered a view of human subjects in experiments as external objects towards whom something is done; the subject is placed in a vulnerable and disempowered position, rather than as a partner in the joint pursuit of knowledge, in a truly transactional, essentially social process. If the debacle

of the CIA-inspired research has led to the recognition of these and other philosophically-based issues, it will have served some value.²⁰

When the American public was informed of the CIA's behavioral science program, first by the media through persistent and courageous investigative reporting, then by various senate committee hearings, a loud outcry of outrage ensued, a sign that Americans have a healthy revulsion against being pushed around and controlled, especially by sneaks. Heads rolled at the CIA. Helms was fired. Gottlieb resigned and disappeared. Wholesale shredding of documents and attempts at cover-ups took place, with the names of the undercover scientists among the first to disappear -- they had been promised anonymity! God only knows what was in those documents in addition to the revelation found in the 16,000 (albeit heavily censored) pages released under the Freedom of Information Act to investigative reporters. I experienced my own special outrage because I had unwittingly worked for them (on the Chinese project). My informed consent had not even been requested. An ironic twist for a psychologist, indeed.

Among the many colorful headlines and editorials in the ^{New} York Times that neatly summed up the American feeling was the one that simply stated: "Control the CIA, Not Behavior."²¹ One can only hope that the centralized administration that was instituted subsequently within the CIA, and the tightening of Congress's monitoring function of covert activities, as well as tighter rules adopted by many universities and research centers vis-a-vis classified research and human experimentation in general, will prevent any repetition of this sort of glaring infraction of

human rights.

Finally, it is my fervent hope that researchers, whether in the natural or behavioral sciences, no longer concern themselves solely with the advancing their science. In their single-minded preoccupation with science, pure or applied, they tend to deny or, at least, underestimate the place of ends, goals, and values in their relationship to science. In this regard, I can only echo a point made by Carl Rogers in 1956 in his debate with Skinner on "the control of human behavior," when he warned that without careful scrutiny of the ends, goals, and values that lie outside our particular scientific endeavors, we are all much more likely to serve whatever individual or group has the power.²²

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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Medical Science without Compassion

Introduction

Benno Müller-Hill

The Witnesses

Rudolf Vrba

**Personal Memories of Activities of SS
Physicians in Auschwitz and Birkenau**

Hermann Langbein

**Experiments on Human Beings in Nazi
Concentration Camps: Observations and
Reflections of a Witness**

Nazi Germany

Michael Kater

**The Crisis of Physicians and Medicine
in Nazi Germany**

Henry Friedlander

From Euthanasia to the Final Solution

The Empire of Japan

Sheldon H. Harris

**Japanese Biological Warfare Experi-
ments and Other Atrocities in Manchu-
ria, 1932-1945, and the Subsequent
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Charles G. Roland

**Perception's One-Way Mirror: Allied
POWs, Japanese Captors, and the
Geneva Convention**

Perpetrators and Company

Peter Chroust

**The Letters of Friedrich Mennecke:
Documents of a Medical Killer**

Dan Bar-On

**The Paradox of the Morality of an
Auschwitz Physician and his Son: Is
Medicine now more vulnerable or more
immune to Genocide?**

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