The Ethics of Project MKUltra

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The topic of whether or not the American government has the people’s best interest in mind is one that is often debated. In a way, it is one of the fundamental arguments that divide the major political parties. Regardless of political affiliations, one would hope the American government, at the very least, does not actively pursue harming members of its populace. Unfortunately, the United States has developed in the past programs one could argue do just this. While this may not be the overt purpose and end goal behind the programs, it occasionally has been the end result. One such program is the Project MKUltra established by the CIA during the Cold War.

**MKUltra**

At this point Project MKUltra, or simply MKUltra, is a thing of legends in some circles. It is a favorite of conspiracy theorists. It has been cited as the program responsible for a number of boogeyman-type situations such as morgellons disease, Manchurian Candidate-type mental programming, and even instances of mass paranoia such as the “gang-stalking” phenomenon. Things of this nature have no basis in fact. The truth, however, is certainly not without its own ethical shortcomings.

**CIA and MKUltra**

After the Cold War was starting to gain momentum, the CIA received intelligence Russia had began employing the use of hallucinogenic drugs in its efforts. People began hearing about “brainwashing”, a tactic the Communists in Russia were apparently doing in order to fight the US. In turn, the CIA began its own study of the uses of similar drugs such as LSD. The participants were often unaware they were being administered the drug and were observed behind two way mirrors during their drug trip (Thomas, 1993). These efforts increased throughout the 1950’s and into the 1960’s. Ultimately the program was officially dissolved in the early 1970’s. In the end the program was terminated because the results were deemed too unpredictable to justify continuing (“Lawsuit Forces CIA Confession”, 2016). In the meantime, however, MKUltra branched out from simply testing the effects of drugs to many types of behavioral modifications such as sleep deprivation, isolation, hypnosis, and other forms of psychological torture (McCoy, 2007). Its purpose was ultimately “to investigate whether and how it was possible to modify an individual’s behavior by covert means” (Lemov, 2011, p 67).

**Ethical objections**

While the American people do not generally object to receiving small doses of fluoride in their drinking water, the legacy of MKUltra leaves a question unanswered: how would we feel if our government continued to actively attempt to influence our decisions and mental processes through behaviour-modifying drugs (Sententia, 2003)? The very act of doing so takes away the Constitutional freedoms afforded to the American people. It is one thing for someone to be a participant in a study which ends in a less than favorable result. This person has chosen and agreed to participate in the study. This is a key point. Many of the participant in the MKUltra study did not give consent to being involved. Some were purposefully misled to the study’s purpose.

Anyone in the healthcare profession can attest that this is a terrible thing. It is disrespectful of the person’s rights. It is also illegal. The term “torture” has been used often to describe the acts that were made during the MKUltra studies. The idea that America’s own government was performing such acts upon its own people is unthinkable, regardless of its intended purpose. When ethics come into question during situations such as these, it is often asked “do the ends justify the means?” In this case the answer is a definite no. Even though America was afraid of the Communists and needed to “one-up” their clandestine espionage efforts, it does not begin to justify what it did to so many American people.

**Conclusion**

There is a lot to learn from Project MKUltra. Unfortunately, most of it is what *not* to do. What began as a kneejerk reaction to perceived threats from Communist Russia developed into a broad program studying a number of effects on the human body and psyche. The ethical considerations of their efforts did not seem like much of a concern. They did what they did because they could. And because they were the government.

**References**

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