

# The uses and misuses of psychological practices in order to achieve national security objectives

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## The uses and misuses of psychological practices in order to achieve national security objectives

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***“The world of official intelligence involves activities in many gray areas of moral thought” (Andregg, 2007)***

### Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in interest in how Security Services around the world operate from a Humanitarian perspective. In particular, the interrogation of prisoners has been grabbed by the media and claims of torture by certain agencies have been met with widespread public condemnation. The world of intelligence and national security has come to be judged by the same ethical standards as that of world of trade, but is this appropriate? Being able to demand Fairtrade chocolate has led many to believe that there is a possibility of Fairtrade intelligence and national security. The possibility of asking the enemy a question and getting an honest answer immediately is unrealistic at best. In intelligence and national security, the protection of the State is paramount and for this reason, the first part of this paper is concerned with the theory of Realism.

There are ethics and Codes of Conduct that govern professional practice and Psychology is no exception. The second part of this paper introduces these to allow the content of the main section to be viewed from both sides. The main section discusses experimentation by Security Services and the implementation of methods adopted in areas that they were not primarily intended for, in particular as interrogation techniques. Finally, it will be concluded that for achievement of certain national security objectives to be attainable, morals and ethics need to be placed in the same context as the worlds in which intelligence and national security actually work.

### Part One: Realism

The second half of the Twentieth Century was marked by progress in international cooperation. The number of Treaties and Conventions signed up to by governments around the world was on a scale never seen before and as a result, Realism seemed to fade into the background while Liberalism came to the fore. However, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the significance of Realism made a come-back in International Relations. As far as intelligence and national security is concerned, the premises of Realism have arguably been the most relevant and this has never changed.

Like most theories of International Relations, Realism has many sub-schools of thought. However, the main tenets that are true in all are those of egoism and anarchy and their place at the forefront of power and security[1]. States are generally rational and are at the core of all significance[2]. In short, the State is the main actor and the interests of the State are paramount in any interaction with other actors. The power of the State is determined by its capabilities in terms of offence, defence, technology, and science.

According to Realism, a States behaviour in relation to protecting itself can be summed up with the Security

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Dilemma: "Given the irreducible uncertainty about the intentions of others, security measures taken by one actor are perceived by others as threatening; the others take steps to protect themselves; these steps are then interpreted by the first actor as confirming its initial hypothesis that the others are dangerous; and so on in a spiral of illusory fear and unnecessary defences"[3]. This Security Dilemma is of key importance in this paper.

Theorists of Classical Realism such as Hans Morgenthau view ethical issues as irrelevant to the behaviour of States and thus to the study of International Relations: "the actions of States are determined not by moral principles and legal commitments but by consideration of interest and power"[4]. This is reinforced by Art and Waltz, "States in anarchy cannot afford to be moral. The possibility of moral behaviour rests upon the existence of an effective government that can deter and punish illegal actions"[5]. Although there are international laws, courts and tribunals, a State is able to refuse its jurisdiction and protect its citizens from prosecution. In other words, there is no "effective government that can deter and punish illegal actions" on an international basis. Consequently, States are more or less free to ignore moral principles in order to achieve their national security objectives.

## Part Two: Ethics and Codes of Conduct in Psychology

The ethics and Codes of Conduct relating to psychological practices can be divided into two categories. Firstly there are those relating to human experimentation and secondly there are those relating to general psychological practice. In both the former and the latter, the foundations are largely a consequence of the Nuremberg Trials. When the details of Nazi experimentation emerged, steps were taken to ensure that similar conduct would not occur or at least, if it did, it would not be by accredited scientists and medical professionals or on the same scale. One of these steps was the publication and implementation of the Nuremberg Code.

The Nuremberg Code consists of ten directives relating to experimentation on human participants. Each of these directives is relevant to this essay and will be considered when examining the uses and misuses of psychological practices in achieving national security objectives. The essence of the ten directives is as follows:

- 1) Voluntary informed consent from the participant has to be given and this is the responsibility of the experimenter.
- 2) The experimental aim should be to provide results that will benefit society and that the results cannot be achieved through any other means or study.
- 3) The experimental design should be based on the results of animal experimentation and historical knowledge of the disease or problem that is being investigated.
- 4) The experimental design should avoid unnecessary harm to the participant's mental and physical health.
- 5) No experiments should be conducted if there is priori reason to believe that injury or death will occur. The exception being when the participant is the experimenter themselves.
- 6) The degree of risk should not exceed that of the humanitarian importance of the problem being investigated.
- 7) Proper preparations and facilities should be provided to protect the participant.
- 8) Only scientifically qualified persons will conduct the experiment.
- 9) The participant can withdraw from the experiment at any point.
- 10) If, during the experiment, the likelihood of injury, disability or death increases, the experimenter must terminate the experiment.[6]

Over the decades, there have been revisions of the directives applicable to scientists and medical professionals but

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the essence, as provided above, have remained constant. For example, the British Psychological Society (BPS) has strict research ethics that now include the use of the participant's data, deception, debriefing and confidentiality[7]. The inclusion of deception allows psychologists to carry out experiments in situations that are controlled but need to appear as realistic to participants in order to measure genuine response to stimuli. For instance, forensic psychologists may need to replicate a crime being committed but will distract the participants with a different task in order to study the reliability of eye witness testimony. In such cases, the participants need to be informed of the genuine nature of the experiment at the earliest opportunity. The inclusion of deception is not for the harmful exploitation of unwilling participants.

In the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA), an experiment must be approved by an ethics committee before it can be conducted. This is to ensure that the research ethics have been adhered to and that the welfare of every participant is sufficiently protected[8].

While research ethics are concerned with experimentation, Codes of Conduct are concerned with general psychological practices. In the UK, the BPS bases its Code of Conduct on four key tenets: respect; competence; responsibility and; integrity. Each of these has a number of standards, some of which are similar to many of those mentioned in the research ethics. Respect includes the standard of general respect (relating to social and cultural differences), the standard of privacy and confidentiality, the standard of informed consent, and the standard of self-determination. Competence includes the standard of the awareness of professional ethics, the standard of ethical decision-making, the standard of recognising the limits of competence, and the standard of recognising impairments. Responsibility includes the standard for general responsibility and continuity of care, the standard of protection of research participants, and the standard of debriefing research participants. Finally, integrity includes the standard of honesty and accuracy, the standard of maintaining personal boundaries and, the standard of addressing ethical misconduct[9].

The American Psychological Association (APA) provides the Code of Conduct for Psychologists practicing in the USA. These are very similar to those of the BPS but are divided into 5 General Principles: Principle A – Beneficence and Nonmaleficence; Principle B – Fidelity and Responsibility; Principle C – Integrity; Principle D – Justice and; Principle E – Respect for People's Rights and Dignity[10].

Research ethics and Codes of Conduct are set by governments, institutions and professional societies. Any professional who fails to adhere to the respective ethics can be faced with losing their accreditation and, in some cases, criminal proceedings. However, when the work of some professionals from the medical sciences takes place in the secretive environment of national security, are the same ethics and Codes of Conduct relevant or is it more a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'? When it is proposed that certain activity, while to the detriment of an individual, is necessary for reasons of national security, are lessons from the past ignored? Conversely, do national security objectives provide an opportunity for scientific investigation and progress that outweighs the risk of individuals, whether the scientist or the participant? Or, do the terms 'uses' and 'misuses' have different meanings in different situations? These questions will be considered in the following part of this paper.

## **Part Three: The uses and misuses of psychological practices in achieving national security objectives.**

In 1949, Archbishop Josef Mindszenty was put on trial in Hungary[11]. He was accused of conspiracy, treason and offences of various other laws implemented by the Communist government. For years previously, Mindszenty had been openly opposed to Communism and he was not one to shy away from a fight[12]. As a result, his confessions and regret for not conforming to the Communist norms came as a surprise if not a total shock to his supporters and to the observing international press. The man who was presented during the trial was the polar opposite of the man who had been arrested. For many observers, the trial was an echo of the Moscow Show Trials in the 1930s, during which a number of Trotsky supporters confessed to and were subsequently executed for nonsensical accusations[13]. The Mindszenty trial reinforced concerns and questions regarding what was making individuals behave in ways so dramatically different to their standard behaviour. Rumours of extreme torture, mind control and drugs swept through Western Intelligence Agencies and these intensified during the Korean War in the 1950s with confessions being extracted by the Chinese Communists from captured US Airmen for things that were known to be

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completely false[14]. The hunt for whatever the mystery variable had began.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> April 1950, CIA director Richard Hillenkoetter created Project BLUEBIRD, which would become Project ARTICHOKE in 1951 and eventually Project MKULTRA in April 1953. The four Project aims were as follows:

- 1) "Discovering means of conditioning personnel to prevent unauthorized extraction of information of them by known means.
- 2) The possibility of obtaining control of an individual by the application of special interrogation techniques.
- 3) Memory enhancement.
- 4) Establishing defensive means for preventing hostile control of Agency Personnel." [15]

Admittedly, these goals do not appear to be anything more than standard defensive methods, especially considering the bizarre confessions being made by US Airmen in the Korean War. However, a follow-up document provides a more detailed account on how these goals may be achieved: "...special or unorthodox methods such as brain damage, sensory stimulation, hypnosis, so-called "black psychiatry", Pavlovian conditioning, "Brainwashing" or any other methods having pertinence for such procedures as interrogation subversion or seduction." [16]

The defence programme soon became an offensive programme for use on foreign agents to which the Realist premise of the Security Dilemma directly applies. Although there was no solid evidence that the Soviets were using similar techniques, the rumours suggesting that they did have such capabilities was enough to warrant similar methods by the CIA. This is confirmed by a study that occurred under ex-President Herbert Hoover which stated: "We are facing an implacable enemy who avowed objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable longstanding concepts of 'fair play' must be reconsidered. We must...learn to subvert, sabotage, and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated and more effective methods than those used against us" [17]. This marked the beginning of a 23 year investigation into mind-control techniques by the CIA.

The first stop was the investigation of Truth Drugs. This was not a new area of interest. In the United Kingdom, Psychiatrist William Sargant and Physician J. Stephen Horsley had treated shell-shocked soldiers returning from the Second World War with barbiturates [18]. The affect of this was that the patient was able to recall the events that had occurred in battle despite the appearance of amnesia before the administration of the drug. This was something that interested the Security Services to the extent that they suppressed the publication of a paper by Sargant as it might aid the Germans should they happen to become aware of it. The declassification of documents in 2006 suggested that Mi5 had used the barbiturate Evapam Sodium on Rudolf Hess in an attempt to make him talk [19]. What he revealed, if anything, was not disclosed. The concern of this paper, however, is what occurred after the Second World War, when the Nuremberg Code was implemented.

In the UK, the Security Services did not appear as enthusiastic as their counterparts in the USA. Although they were kept informed of developments and the results of experimentations occurring at the Royal Waterloo Hospital, there is no evidence that they sponsored any of the Truth Drug investigations. The testimony of a Psychiatrist employed by Mi5 at the time states that it was more or less seen as a pointless exercise and resources would be best allocated on more productive projects: "you might as well stick a pin in somebody's testicles and expect an answer as give someone a truth drug and expect an answer." [20]

The investigations that occurred at the Royal Waterloo Hospital were not experiments in the true research sense. The drugs that were administered were done so on a variety of patients with a variety of problems as potential treatments. The effects of the drugs were monitored and other applications for the drugs were hypothesized. The investigations were also carried out by qualified and accredited medical professionals in a patient-protective environment. The nature of the investigations was for the treatment of patients rather than the potential usefulness to the Security Services. The investigations would have occurred regardless of the intentions and interests of the

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Security Services.

It was a slightly different story in the USA where the CIA had teamed up with the US Army, Navy and Air Force to achieve the goals of Project BLACKBIRD. Teams of 3 men were assembled and according to a 1951 CIA document were to “conduct at the overseas bases operational experiments utilising aliens as subjects” potential subjects were identified as “potential agents, defectors, refugees and, POWs”[21]. The “operational experiments” were based on the administration of a cocktail of drugs, barbiturates and amphetamines, designed to utilise the qualities of both and enabling the unwilling participant to reveal all[22]. In a number of cases, subjects collapsed or required hospitalization[23]. The men in the teams were largely uneducated at college level, let alone qualified in medical science. Many of them undertook evening classes in hypnosis in the hope of being able to control their subjects.

Barbiturates are a sedative that, in low doses, have a calming effect on an individual. This effect is produced by the activation of certain neuromodular receptors in the brain[24]. In high doses, the individual will have difficulty in walking and talking, lose consciousness, and enter a coma and death[25]. There is a very fine line between a dose high enough to have physical affects and a fatal dose[26]. Amphetamines are antipsychotic drugs that block receptor molecules in the brain that are stimulated by the transmitter substance, dopamine[27]. An individual who has been administered amphetamines can experience hallucinations, usually auditory, although these are not immediate[28]. Despite this, the CIA thought nothing of using unqualified persons to administer doses to unwilling participants.

The search for a Truth Drug by the American Agencies also involved the funding of research projects in Universities and other research facilities. Although there was some success in these experiments, once the findings were applied to unwilling participants, they were found to be at best, unreliable. In one case, a Professor spent over \$300,000 of funding from the CIA in identifying the cocktail of drugs that was already in use as the most effective[29]. When tests on ‘real’ participants were carried out, the reported effects were the opposite of what was observed in experimental conditions. The ‘trial’ ended with the Professor taking the cocktail himself but rather than becoming subdued and in the control of the agents, he ended up playing the piano and flirting outrageously with his secretary which was brought to an abrupt end when his wife appeared[30].

Over the next 20 years, Project MKULTRA delved into areas such as psychic driving and hypnosis. The goals had altered somewhat from trying to find a truth drug to compete with the Soviet Union to creating the ideal agent to carry out assassinations[31]. This change resulted in a change of required participant as even the CIA admitted that medical professionals with expertise in certain areas would be more suited to carrying out experimentations than unqualified agency personnel. Patients of mental institutions, drug addicts and criminals were all used as unwilling participants in CIA-funded investigative experimentation.

The key player in psychic driving was Dr Ewan D. Cameron, chief psychiatrist at Royal Victoria Hospital, Montreal[32]. Experimentation carried out by Dr Cameron was primarily focused on creating a *tabula rasa* in the mind of patients with psychological problems. These patients included people suffering from depression and serious neurological disorders such as schizophrenia. ‘Treatment’ of these patients included repeated electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT), drugs and sensory deprivation. The aim was to eliminate all memory of the patients and start again, creating a ‘new’ brain without the negative conditions for which they were admitted to the hospital. If this could be achieved, the CIA would be able to create agents who could be ‘wiped clean’ after each mission, thus eliminating the chance of revealing anything during interrogation by the enemy. This would also mean less accountability for actions such as assassinations: if the agent could not remember who they were working for or what they had done, they could not be traced back to the Agency. This would also be highly beneficial for members of the Armed Forces during times of war and would prevent similar occurrences to what had happened during the Korean War.

However, as Dr Cameron was to discover, the human memory cannot be erased and reconditioned to suit a master. ECT involves a brief surge of electric current being passed through the patients head through electrodes attached at either side of the temple (nowadays it is usually applied solely to the right hemisphere)[33], which causes the patient to have a seizure, not unlike those experienced by patients with epilepsy. Historically, it has been used to treat patients with severe depression if antidepressants have failed or to provide immediate reduction of symptoms whilst

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antidepressants take effect. Besides relief from symptoms such as those related to depression, ECT can cause permanent memory loss and effect cognitive performance[34]. The effects are achieved through the biochemical consequences of the induced seizure. Any usual treatment with ECT is done as infrequently and as at low a voltage as possible due to the side-effect of memory loss, each session would consist of one electric shock. However, it was this side-effect that Dr Cameron and the CIA wanted to exploit. Consequently, patients in the Royal Victoria Hospital were treated with 6 successive shocks each day for at least 30 days[35].

In addition to this, once patients were no longer able to identify who they were, where they were, or why they were there, Dr Cameron began with the 'reorganisation' stage. This stage was essentially the administration of drugs to sedate patients, such as the African poison Curare[36], and installing helmets fitted with earphones that played repetitive messages such as "No. It's not true that my mother-in-law is trying to poison me. She is a very nice woman"[37]. Patients were not allowed to interact with each other and spent most of their time in isolation with only the recordings as stimulation. In essence this stage was sensory deprivation.

Sensory deprivation is when all or as much external stimuli as possible is eliminated[38]. The effects can include hallucinations and psychosis depending on the amount of time stimuli is restricted for[39]. The absolute maximum time recommended by psychologists is 6 hours[40]. These effects are also consistent with social isolation over a long period of time[41].

With the effects of prolonged ECT and sensory deprivation well documented, Dr Cameron was soon ostracized from the world of Psychiatry and Psychology and even the CIA[42]. Complaints from family members and patients themselves ended this period of experimentation and the CIA's search for the perfect agent. Project MKULTRA was eventually abandoned in 1973 and most of the documents were destroyed on the orders of CIA Director, Richard Helms. After over 30 years of investigation and experimentation, the CIA had concluded what the British Security Services had maintained: "Agent running is an art, not a science"[43].

Despite the overall failure of Project MKULTRA, many of the techniques that were discovered and exploited are still reportedly used, most notably in interrogations. The KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual, declassified in 1997, makes use of sensory deprivation, sleep deprivation, debility and the use of personal phobias[44]. Each of these were also on the list of approved techniques to use on detainees at Guantanamo Bay[45].

From a Humanitarian point of view the use of unwilling subjects to participate in experiments carried out by unqualified staff was a direct violation of the research ethics laid down in the Nuremberg Code. Although it could be argued that as the experimenters were not medical professionals, they were not bound by the Code, both research ethics and Codes of Conduct state that the person carrying out the experiment or practice must be qualified to do so. In recent times, interrogation by the Security Services is carried out in the presence of qualified psychologists and other medical staff. The process is made as ethical as the situation allows.

There has been much progress in medical sciences on the application of drugs and the conclusion that has been reached by many professionals is that there is no such thing as a Truth Drug. Nevertheless, in 2002, former CIA director William Webster recommended that trials of such drugs should be administered to detainees in Guantanamo Bay[46]. As far as intelligence and confessions gained from prisoners using this method is concerned, it would be inadmissible in a court of law and a conviction would be unlikely. However, the national security objective is to protect by all means necessary and those involved, if discovered, would tend to be protected by their government from prosecution.

As far as national security is concerned, the CIA was reacting to claims and rumours about what the enemy were capable of and they would stop at nothing until they had discovered what the capabilities were. This is still the case at present and will always continue to be the case. These are not new thoughts; Machiavelli stated that "when the safety of one's country wholly depends on the decision to be taken, no attention should be paid either to justice or injustice"[47].

However, ethics and Codes of Conduct are not completely ignored by Security Services despite media reports to

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the contrary. The techniques that are presently used by Western Intelligence Agencies have been tested and studied in experimental conditions. They are designed to cause discomfort and although they may result in short-term psychological problems, these are not permanent. With this in mind, "gray areas of moral thought" become less gray.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the CIA's venture into medical science is the full circle that followed. Project MKULTRA was originally launched to compete with the enemy, to be able to get parties of interest to talk. Attention then turned to creating the perfect agent who could be programmed to carry out specific tasks and then have their memory of the task eliminated. 30 years after the Project was closed, the methods discovered during its lifetime are being used on the enemy to make them talk.

## Conclusion

Experimentation by Security Services is the subject of many a conspiracy theory and it is easy for the truth to get lost, especially in the modern technological age. One internet search for MKULTRA using Google search engine produced over 226,000 results, the first five pages of which were for conspiracy theories[48]. Although most of these make outrageous claims that would be difficult for any educated person to believe, some are more convincing. It is of little wonder that so many have misconceptions about what has gone on and are quick to jump to conclusions about unethical practices and inhumane treatment. The main consideration should be that despite the Nuremberg Code, the era of MKULTRA was one of scientific advancement and one where ethics and Codes of Conduct were still in infancy. Dr Cameron was pursuing his idea of psychic driving before the CIA took notice and with all probability would have continued if they hadn't. The details may seem grotesque but the results provided much understanding about how the brain works and this is the case for many of the other experiments.

One should not compare the experiments of MKULTRA or the use of interrogation techniques with those used by the Nazis in the Second World War. The environments and rights of prisoners ensure that those held in the West are not subjected to sadistic tendencies of individuals. Each technique needs to be approved by medical professionals, legal professionals and the upper echelons of government before it can be administered. In addition to this, logbooks of treatment are kept and monitored so that any case of inhumane and unethical treatment beyond what is necessary can be dealt with appropriately.

As far as research ethics and Codes of Conduct are concerned, elements of MKULTRA were clearly breached and continue to be so in the interrogation of detainees and enemy combatants. However, intelligence and national security are Realist in nature and the treatment of the enemy is bottom of the list of priorities, if on the list at all. 'Uses' and 'misuses' needs to be put in the context of what the aims are. In Psychology, this is to gain understanding of the brain, its functions and its behaviour. In National Security, this is to protect and advance the interests of the State.

It would be easy to condemn the Security Services for immoral behaviour but to do so with only one side of the story and from only one viewpoint would be naïve. The full story of what really goes on will only ever be known by those who are there and it will only be written about by the victors. The general public will never know how many lives are saved through the use of interrogation techniques. There will never be Fairtrade intelligence and national security. While the average person will condemn the use of techniques such as sensory deprivation to gain information, the same person would probably go to further extremes to protect those closest to them. In its simplest form, that is what National Security is. It protects its own. As do you. As do I.

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