

# Ethical Questions in Mind-Control Experiments

By **BOYCE RENSBERGER**

New disclosures about the Central Intelligence Agency's now defunct program to conduct experiments on human beings in a search for methods of controlling their thought and behavior have raised a storm of ethical questions. Did the subjects of the tests know what was being done? Were they informed of the risks and did they have a chance to refuse to cooperate without fearing reprisals?

**News  
Analysis**

Can research aimed at damaging or controlling a healthy human mind ever be ethical—even if the objective is to defend Americans against enemy attempts to control the minds of prisoners of war or American diplomats?

The light in which such questions are approached today is different from that in which the C.I.A.'s experiments were begun in the 1950's. At least 20 years of consciousness-raising by the civil rights and human rights movements separate 1977 from the earliest days of the C.I.A.'s fears that the Russians and the Chinese had developed exotic means of controlling behavior.

Yet, the intelligence officials who started the experiments were much closer to the days of the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals that produced the first internationally recognized code governing human experimentation.

The Nuremberg Code of 1947 said medical research should be intended to improve the lot of mankind and should be conducted only on persons who had been informed of the nature and risks of the experiment and who had consented. The code was adopted by the United States Government in 1953. Adm. Stansfield Turner, Director of Central Intelligence, yesterday told a Senate hearing

that the C.I.A.'s mind control experiments began that same year.

In some of the experiments, Admiral Turner said, people did not know they were being experimented upon, a situation directly contrary to the Nuremberg Code and to every subsequent set of ethical guidelines promulgated by a recognized body.

Since the promulgation of the Nuremberg Code much of the debate over the ethics of human experimentation has turned on the question of how much information a person must be given before his consent is asked. In some cases the doctors themselves may know little. Can a person with no special background in pharmacology or biochemistry or physiology understand enough about an experiment to be considered sufficiently informed?

A second major point still hotly debated is what constitutes consent. Prisoners and mental patients, many ethicists argue, are not really free of the implied pressure that if they consent they will be released sooner or that if they refuse they will be hurt somehow. Many of the C.I.A. experiments involved prisoners and mental patients.

Studies have frequently found that "informed consent" procedures can be hasty, perfunctory acts.

For example, in one study at a major university medical center 51 pregnant women who had consented to participate in a test of a new labor-inducing drug were questioned after the test had begun. Of the 51 women, 20 did not realize until they were interviewed that they had agreed to participate in research.

## Risks and Benefits

If this can occur among patients in the care of personal physicians at a time of heightened sensitivity about the ethics of research, the adequacy of the consent procedures the C.I.A. researchers said

they used in some of their experiments 20 years ago may be open to question.

Medical researchers often disagree over what constitutes a worthy experiment, balancing the degree of risk with the promise of benefit. Dr. Bernard Barber, a Barnard College sociologist who specializes in science and the ethics of human research, has posed a number of hypothetical research projects to large numbers of scientists and asked whether they would approve such experiments.

Typically, where the risk to subjects is high, most scientists say they would not approve or perform such studies. But upward of a fourth of them consistently say they would.

Just last year, Dr. Barber concluded from his surveys of the ethical standards of biomedical scientists in major institutions, that "there is indeed inadequate ethical concern that is reflected in excessively risky procedures."

A psychiatrist who has had personal knowledge of the nature of Soviet and Chinese "brainwashing," the activity the C.I.A. said it was responding to, is Dr. Robert J. Lifton of Yale University.

"I feel psychological research should never be used on behalf of destructive techniques," Dr. Lifton said in an interview. He said it was morally wrong for psychiatrists and other specialists in the mind and behavior to engage in such research.

Dr. Lifton, who wrote a book on brainwashing entitled "Thought Reform," said that in the 1950's many behavioral researchers let the Communist-fearing mood of the times run away with them. "During that time," he said, "people became fascinated with aspects of mind manipulation without exploring the possible consequences of their involvement in such research."