Books Forum Introduction

Cognitive enhancement: Human advancement, degradation or pseudo-problem?

Reviews Editor Nicolas Langlitz

Department of Anthropology, New School for Social Research, New York, USA.

E-mail: LanglitN@newschool.edu

BioSocieties (2010) **5**, 476.

doi:10.1057/biosoc.2010.35

For many years, the public debate over the ethics of so-called cognitive enhancement was dominated by somber prognoses of a Brave New World rapidly approaching, as more and more people came to use psychopharmaceuticals such as Ritalin or modafinil to improve their intellectual performance. More recently, however, better-disposed attitudes toward non-medical uses of neuroenhancers have been voiced by those in prominent positions across national contexts. In the journal *Nature*, a group of eminent Anglo-American scientists advocated responsible consumption by the healthy (Greely *et al*, 2008). In the United States, the Academy of Neurology sanctioned the prescription of cognitive-enhancing drugs to patients without diagnosed mental disorders (Larriviere, 2009). And, at about the same time, a high-ranking interdisciplinary panel of German experts called for a more liberal regulation of such non-medical applications (Galert *et al*, 2009).

In the Books Forum of this year's first issue of *BioSocieties*, pharmacopsychologist Boris Quednow (2010) dismissed the entire normative controversy over cognitive enhancement as a 'phantom debate', calling into question its empirical foundations. In a review of the volume *Neuro-Enhancement: Ethik vor neuen Herausforderungen* (2009) edited, among

others, by members of the German expert panel mentioned above, Quednow contested neuroscientifically that effective cognitive enhancement was possible. He also questioned whether the use of Ritalin, modafinil and other psychotropic drugs for enhancement purposes was really on the rise.

In this issue, the Books Forum follows up on this provocation by presenting responses of *BioSocieties* readers to Quednow's review. Two of the editors of *Neuro-Enhancement: Ethik vor neuen Herausforderungen*, Bettina Schöne-Seifert and Davinia Talbot, also respond.

We are fortunate that Schöne-Seifert and Talbot also agreed to step into the role of reviewer for this Books Forum. As medical ethicists they read two books on the history of amphetamines, Nicolas Rasmussen's *On Speed: The Many Lives of Amphetamine* and Hans-Christian Dany's *Speed: Eine Gesellschaft auf Drogen*, both of which they critique for giving insufficient thought to the possibility of 'rational neuroenhancement'. We hope readers appreciate these efforts to push cognitive enhancement beyond predictable binary arguments.

References

- Galert, T. *et al* (2009) Das optimierte Gehirn. *Gehirn&Geist* (11): 1–11.
- Greely, H. *et al* (2008) Towards responsible use of cognitive-enhancing drugs by the healthy. *Nature* 456(7223): 702–705.
- Larriviere, D., Williams, M.A., Rizzo, M. and Bonnie, R.J. on behalf of the AAN Ethics, Law and Humanities Committee (2009) Responding to requests from adult patients for neuroenhancements: Guidance of the ethics, law and humanities committee. *Neurology* 73(17): 1406–1412.
- Quednow, B. (2010) Ethics of neuroenhancement. A phantom debate. *BioSocieties* 5(1): 153–156.
- Schöne-Seifert, B., Talbot, D., Opolka, U. and Ach, J.S. (2009) *Neuro-Enhancement. Ethik vor neuen Herausforderungen*. Paderborn, Germany: mentis.

Nicolas Langlitz is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the New School for Social Research in New York. His work focuses on psychopharmacology, especially the current renaissance of hallucinogen research, and the epistemic culture of neurophilosophy.