

Human cognitive enhancement: expectations, ethics and identity

- a national multidisciplinary seminar

11.30- 5.00 Tuesday 20th June 2006

Conference Room (R505) of the ESRC Research Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE), Library Building, London School of Economics

Recent advances in neuropharmacology open up the real prospect of improving human cognition, altering mood and enhancing other mental attributes. Drugs such as Prozac, Ritalin and Modafinil are widely used to treat serious medical conditions, but are also being taken for recreational and other non-medical purposes. Furthermore, other new medicines are in development that may improve attributes such as memory. These developments raise important social, ethical and policy questions.

To date, much of the debate on cognitive enhancement has been led by either bioethicists, concerned with normative questions about whether it is right to enhance mental capabilities, or transhumanists keen to build future visions of 'better humans'. In particular, these discussions have focused on questions of benefits and risks, social justice versus the rights of the individual, and the balance between therapy and enhancement. This debate also touches on how these technologies should be governed and to what extent they should be under the control of the medical profession or available as consumer products. The potential of drugs to enhance cognition has started to be recognised by government and policy makers. For example, the OST Foresight report 'Drug Futures 2025? Horizon Scan' took seriously the prospect of cognitive enhancement, as did a recent collection of essays from Demos. An important question in this context is: what is realistic to expect of these new technologies, and what role do these hopes play in shaping current policy?

In contrast to questions of whether these powerful new drugs should be developed and who should control them, sociologists and social psychologists have been particularly interested in issues relating to identity and authenticity. For example, does the taking of Prozac change someone's personality in a fundamental way? Who is the authentic child – the one on Ritalin who can concentrate and is less impulsive, or the same child who suffers from the symptoms of ADHD when not taking the drug? At the heart of these debates lie questions of what is normality and how our identities and subjectivities can be transformed.

Important insights about the use and experience of taking these drugs can also be gained from the work of clinicians involved in the use of these medicines for the treatment of ADHD, depression and forms of cognitive impairment. Here questions about the risk, benefits, meanings and transformative power of psychopharmacology come into sharp relief.

This seminar aims to bring together leading researchers from the fields of clinical medicine, social psychology and sociology to consider the prospects for cognitive enhancement, the social and ethical issues raised, and questions about the potential transformation of selfhood and identity.

Speakers:

- *Professor Barbara Sahakian* (Department of Psychiatry, School of Clinical Medicine, University of Cambridge) – 'Neuroethical issues in cognitive enhancement'
- *Dr Ilina Singh* (BIOS Centre and Methodology Institute, LSE) – 'The joys of badness and madness: What is the 'character of (an enhanced) childhood'?'
- *Dr Scott Vrecko* (BIOS Centre, LSE) - 'The neuropolitics of enhancement'

The meeting will be Introduced by Professor Nikolas Rose (Sociology/ BIOS Centre, LSE) and chaired by Dr Paul Martin (IGBiS, University of Nottingham) and is the third in an ESRC funded seminar series on Neuroscience, Identity and Society

About the Neuroscience, Identity and Society seminar series:

Neuroscience is creating a wealth of new knowledge about the workings of the brain/mind and the biological basis of normal and abnormal cognition and behaviour. These developments raise profound questions for both individuals and society. There is a pressing need for critical reflection on neuroscience's claims and their social implications. Neuroscience directly challenges the social sciences, through its reconstruction of ideas of human agency, human affects and desires, normality and abnormality, the basis of social interaction and the foundations of society. The Neuroscience, Identity and Society seminar series will map out this challenge, seek areas of potential common ground, and stimulate critical engagement. In doing this, it is hoped that social scientists will make a major contribution to debates within the neurosciences themselves.

Aims:

- Analyse the development of contemporary neuroscience from a range of different disciplinary perspectives;
- Assess the implications of new scientific knowledge about the working of the brain/mind for individuals, society and public policy, and explore the challenges this poses to the social sciences;
- Investigate the possible contribution of the social sciences to key debates within the neurosciences;
- Map the state of the field in social studies of neuroscience and develop agendas for further research.

Postgraduates and junior scholars are encouraged to attend and participate in the series. A number of student travel bursaries are available.

Organisers: Dr Paul Martin and Professor Robert Dingwall (IGBiS, University of Nottingham), Professor Nikolas Rose (BIOS Centre, LSE)

Booking details: Numbers will be strictly limited to ensure plenty of opportunity for participation, so please book early. To register your interest and request a booking form please contact: neuroseminars@nottingham.ac.uk. Further information about the series can be obtained from the series web site www.neuroscienceandsociety.org