

2017

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Remy Meir

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Recommended Citation

Meir, Remy (2017) "Is the New College Student Study Habit Ethical," *Inquiro, the UAB undergraduate science research journal*: Vol. 2017: No. 10, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/inquiro/vol2017/iss10/2>

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Is the New College Student Study Habit Ethical

Author: Remy Meir

Do you want to maximize your productivity by increasing your concentration? While the classic study aid is a caffeine buzz for those all-nighters, the demanding university environment has driven many students to find a more intense fix. Students are now turning to illegal usage of prescription pills, such as Adderall and Ritalin, to meet these demands. Surveys show that around 25% of college students use study-enhancing drugs¹. They choose these “smart drugs” because of student stories and research evidence which claim that the drugs boost cognitive function and allow a person to study for hours with full concentration¹. This is the ultimate goal for many college students: to develop a method to master the information taught in the most effective and efficient manner

So how do these drugs work? Some work by blocking dopamine or noradrenaline reuptake in the brain, thus keeping these neurotransmitters in the synaptic cleft longer and leading to increased activity². Perhaps the most famous smart drug, Adderall, works to mimic dopamine, epinephrine, and norepinephrine³. Dopamine activates the reward center of the brain to create feelings of pleasure; epinephrine activates the sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for the body’s “fight or flight” response, to trigger a sense of alertness and focus; and norepinephrine increases communication between neurons³. Together, these interactions account for the purported increase in focus and concentration among students. However, this study tactic is not without controversy.

The ethics of the use of these drugs in academia has become an increasing concern. One school of thought suggests that human improvement is not only necessary for societal gain, but should be pursued at all costs, even by artificial means⁴. This permissive viewpoint allows for student use of these drugs by the rationale that education itself is a form of cognitive enhancement, so it is undetermined if a line can really be drawn where the enhancement should stop. Students strive to achieve high class ranks to be the most competitive for their future careers. It can be argued that grades and résumés were developed to fulfill the societal desire to assemble the strongest and most efficient workforce possible. If this is true, then why should students be stopped from maximizing their potential in their pursuit to become better workers? Supporters of this view might argue that we should allow intelligent thinkers to be as productive as possible because it benefits society⁵. It is believed that these benefits would show themselves in the form of advancements – whether technological or any other that would make life easier and more enjoyable. With these ideals, it would seem that society ultimately thrives when it enables students to enhance their productivity in the classroom.

The alternative view, also known as the restrictive view, regards cognitive enhancement as a means for sustaining, and perhaps even widening, socioeconomic disparities. Theoretically, this would occur because the poor would have limited access to these enhancers, while the rich could freely use them to their advantage. This view deems these drugs acceptable for therapeutic use, but not for enhancement⁴. Proponents of this ideology claim that therapy allows those who are burdened by disease or disability to be raised to be on equal playing fields, whereas enhancement serves to intensify the skills of the already healthy. The purpose of medicine is to heal the unhealthy, not to transform the healthy into gods⁵. The restrictive view is driven by the belief that everyone should be granted equal opportunities to achieve the same goals, and achievements should be based on merit, rather than a person’s ability to afford a pharmaceutical⁶. It seems unfair that students who struggle to pay their student loans should have to bear the burden of this further expense. This argument is strongly centered on the egalitarian concern that all people are equal, and that the use of cognitive enhancers may allow for the continued, or potentially worsened, division of people due to socioeconomic status.

One challenge for the egalitarian position concerns the distinction between aids like self-medication and hiring a personal tutor. Once again, it comes down to who can afford to invest in their academic success. A student’s ability to hire a private tutor or to afford an MCAT preparation course demonstrates the current prevalence of socioeconomic inequalities in education. Supporters of the restrictive view express the same concerns about doping in sports: access to these drugs is limited, and success is based on an athlete’s ability to alter one’s body⁵. However, this comparison can be somewhat misleading. Athletes often aim to gain fame, win awards, and/or to be the greatest at their sport. In education, however, students aim to fully learn and master the material being studied. While learning is still a form of competition, learning is driven by the need to apply this knowledge in one’s career. Thus, a college student’s end goal is to attend graduate or professional school or to secure a job that will in some way benefit society. Even those driven by personal gain tend to achieve their successes by developing things that are beneficial and/or necessary for society, such as the development of new technologies. If we compare sports and education, one is strictly driven by personal gain, and one is driven by the partnership of personal and societal gain.

It may be argued that “smart drugs” reduce character-building opportunities by making an enhanced person less likely to fail, but is this potential loss unethical? In a society built on competition and fueled by inequality, it seems that cognitive enhancement is not unethical and is a simple next step towards achieving our goals more efficiently. Why does society endorse efficiency and effectiveness while at the same time denying people the tools to do just that? While the current practice of using these cognitive enhancers in academics is frowned upon, I think that it will soon become commonplace. Society may soon accept the use of cognitive enhancing drugs as a way to meet the ever increasing demands of school and future careers.

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