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John R. Shook & James Giordano

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Consideration of Context and Meanings of Neuro-Cognitive Enhancement: The Importance of a Principled, Internationally Capable Neuroethics

John R. Shook, University at Buffalo
James Giordano, Georgetown University Medical Center

Conrad, Humphries, and Chaterjee (2019) have examined and analyzed public opinions about cognitive enhancement (CE) for various purposes. They gather good evidence that framing metaphors and contexts of discourse have significant influence on social attitudes toward the use of CEs in varied circumstances. We support this sort of empirical study, and find its main results to be plausible and unsurprising. Judgments about CEs are formed within both personal and social contexts, and assessments of CEs must take contexts of capability and performance into account (Mihailov and Savulescu 2018; Shook and Giordano 2014; Shook et al. 2014).

As regards public policy, much formative work on the roles of metaphor and framing language has been done by George Lakoff (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 2008). Briefly, Lakoff explains how framing establishes—and thus enables the contextual application of—language that fits a particular worldview. He notes both that value-laden metaphors are pervasive in all languages, and that much of public discourse is somewhat “preframed” in terms of a given moral viewpoint.

Lakoff rebuts the notion that moral viewpoints are subjective and apart from the social context of ongoing public discourse. Likewise, what is heard in public discourse is not simply the aggregate of personal viewpoints, as if the public and private spheres do not continuously affect each other. Rather, public discourse and personal opinion are intermingled in ongoing transactions, dynamically exerting mutual and reciprocal effect(s). Personal opinions can seem firmly established and stable in the short term, and this can be reflected in data from restricted temporal sampling. But such personal views can change with time and effect. Indeed, Conrad and colleagues affirm that metaphorical

discourse can shift individual opinion: “Metaphors may be more likely to sway people’s opinion toward public policy even if they do not change individual behavior” (Conrad, Humphries, and Chaterjee 2019, 43). Thus, one “take-away” from their study is that morality-laden metaphors can and do influence people’s judgments, at least to certain degrees. The authors conclude by providing the straightforward stance that (a) policies toward CEs should be socially responsive by reflecting public attitudes about CE use; (b) public attitudes toward CEs can be ascertained through surveys applying frameworks to distinguish various attitudes; and (c) surveying with frameworks can assist efforts to craft policies that take distinct public attitudes into account.

This straightforward stance about public attitudes is not the whole story, and we wish to explore some important considerations for neuroethics. First, we do not feel confident that the authors offer a fully warranted conclusion about the significance of their study for setting policies towards CEs. Second, we suggest that neuroethical discourses must both be aware of the effects of framing metaphors on public attitudes, and should be proactive toward managing and resisting such framings, as when seeking to formulate and standardize ethical positions about CEs.

We agree with the authors that public attitudes surely should not be ignored. However, “socially responsive” policies are not necessarily “socially responsible” by promoting what is good and right for the public. Eliciting public attitudes on an issue may not always measure what the public already regards as being “best.” To be sure, a greater lesson from this article, apropos the work of Lakoff, argues against such a naive stance.

Address correspondence to John R. Shook, Department of Philosophy and Graduate School of Education, University at Buffalo, 135 Park Hall, Buffalo, NY, USA. E-mail: jrshook@buffalo.edu

1. Per Conrad and colleagues, along with Lakoff, metaphors can certainly effectively express moral judgments about using CEs.
2. Per Conrad and colleagues, morality-conveying metaphors are easily placed into frameworks that provide messages to people in order to elicit their (positive, negative, neutral) reactions.
3. Per Lakoff, morality-conveying metaphors are commonly effective for framing policy issues in a positive or negative manner to elicit public affirmation or rejection.
4. Combining Conrad and colleagues with Lakoff, public attitudes about the morality of CEs can be influenced by framed moral messaging accessible to the public.
5. Taking points 1–4 together, it appears that crafting framed moral messaging can both elicit public views about CEs, and potentially shape public judgments for/against CEs.

Neuroethical engagements and address must be sensitive to the broader implications from that final conclusion. Public judgments about the morality of policies can be influenced by framed moral messaging accessed by the public. Public attitudes about the morality of CEs could shape policies for CE use, and preframed moral messaging about CEs can shape policies for CE use. If preframed moral messaging about CEs will be influential, as this line of reasoning suggests, then neuroethics is confronted with a choice: Either follow current public attitudes (as they shift and sway), or follow ethical standards of its own for evaluating CE policies. And we do not see this choice as a false dichotomy.

We doubt that a third alternative could be viable. If there were one, it would start from the idea that society could discern analogies between CEs and familiar drugs, by which to morally judge each novel CE accordingly. Yet society can just as easily select analogies according to prior moral views (an ease in evidence with Conrad and colleagues), so public attitudes would still prevail. In fact, public verdicts about CEs may be mostly about which preframed moral metaphor wins the “meme race” within a society.

Neuroethical discourses could not be wholly impervious to moral metaphors, which may partly account for the extant disagreement among neuroethicists when evaluating CEs. Neuroethical evaluations could consult normative standards apart from prevailing social views, thereby raising above social relativism, if the field could commit to a unified set of moral norms in the face of powerful social attitudes and the moral metaphors that sustain them. We believe that such commitment sustains the second alternative: that neuroethics should apply ethical standards of its own for evaluating CE policies.

These ethical standards for neuroethics need not be invented anew. Ethics is intended to protect capacities for autonomy, dignity, and morality. Scholars of neuroethics have accordingly advocated ethical standards to

guide the quest for genuine enhancement (see, e.g., Clark 2014; Glannon 2011; Heinrichs 2012; Maslen et al. 2014; Shook and Giordano 2014).

In this way, neuroethical discourses need not echo whatever enjoys temporary public approval, nor participate in swaying public attitudes with moral framings, no matter how academic in tone. Neuroethical considerations of CEs and their appropriate uses can prescind simple social conventionality. Furthermore, deep neuroethical analyses can afford a much-needed counterbalance to one-sided moral framings for CEs. In this way, we believe that both public discourses and policy deliberations can benefit from the practical wisdom of pragmatic neuroethical address.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they do not have any competing interests. ■

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