Margaret Talbot’s “Brain Gain” as well as Morein-Zamir and Sahakian’s “Professor’s little helper” offer well-informed perspectives on the use of non-prescribed cognitive-enhancing drugs and their role in the 21st century. Both articles understand the reasoning behind the obvious increase in use of neuroenhancers, but also seriously question what role these drugs will have in our already competitive culture. These articles reveal a possible dark side to the widespread use of cognitive-enhancing drugs by discussing the overworked and pressure-filled situations they will create.

In order to fully understand the scope of how “cosmetic neurology” is creating an extremely competitive culture, both articles spend ample time describing the positive aspects of these drugs. In Talbot’s article, she uses results of scientific research to show how these drugs enhance our cognitive abilities. Those who took the neuroenhancing drug modafil “performed better on several tasks...and were better in recognizing repeated visual patterns” than those who received a placebo (Talbot, 514). Sahakian and Morein-Zamir also outline the positives of neuroenhancers, stating that cognitive enhancers which have minimal side effects and increase our focus “would be unlikely to meet much objection” (Sahakian and Morein-Zamir, 2). By offering the positive side of neuroenhancing drugs in their articles, the authors create a well-rounded argument and appear to be more convincing and reliable by not being one-sided.

One of the many negative effects of “cosmetic neurology” is the pressure people will feel to take these drugs as they become more common. In “Brain Gain,” Talbot reveals the pressure people will experience at work. She offers a short anecdote explaining how a worker is “worried about ‘a rising star at our firm’ who was ‘using unprescribed modafil to work crazy hours’” (Talbot, 508). Such situations put immense pressure on those who do not take neuroenhancing drugs and make they feel as if they must overcompensate for their normal levels of cognitive function. “Professor’s little helper,” offers similar concerns about the pressure neuroenhancing drugs “create,” if other children at school or colleagues at work are taking cognitive-enhancing drugs, will you feel pressure to give them to your children or take
them yourself?” (2). The dark side of cosmetic neurology can be seen as extremely similar to the dark side of cosmetic enhancement for beauty, “the drive for self enhancement of cognition is likely to be as strong if not stronger than in the realms of “enhancement” of beauty and sexual function” (Sahakian and Morein-Zamir, 2). Both articles outline the many pressures created from the use of neuroenhancers to emphasize that although these drugs will increase our function and concentration, they will create intense pressure to take neuroenhancers or compensate for not taking them.

As the market for neuroenhancing drugs expands, not only will people feel pressure to take the drugs, they will also feel pressure to work harder, creating an “even more overworked and driven” culture than what is already present (Talbot 518). Both articles discuss a possible grim future if neuroenhancers become the norm in society. “Professors little helper” warns us of an “overworked 24/7 society pushed to the limits of human endurance,” a seemingly impossible exponential increase of the current overworked society we experience today (2). The authors emphasize that these neuroenhancing drugs will have a more powerful role in our society as they become more available. “The baseline competitive level is going to reorient around what these drugs make possible, and you can choose to compete or not.” (Talbot 514)

In “Brain Gain” and “Professor’s little helper,” the authors offer very similar perspectives on how cognitive-enhancing drugs will effect our society. They reveal the many positive aspects the drugs have in relation to cognition and functioning, but warn readers of the potential dark side of how these drugs will effect our society as a whole. As pressure to perform better, longer, and faster in the workplace and school increases, “we have to take drugs to keep up” (Talbot, 518)