

Americans support the idea of tenure, though they may not fully understand it (Gross & Simons 2006).

One final note: While it is cute of Ceci et al. to refer to de Waal's work with apes, it is, of course, completely irrelevant. Although some animal behavior is indeed quite similar to that of our own, ideas such as tenure and academic freedom are totally human concepts, and we can learn little about such behavior by studying nonhuman animals, even our closest relatives, the chimpanzees. We say this with some authority, as one of us is a comparative psychologist.

## Tenure and the political autonomy of faculty inquiry

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**Abstract:** This commentary discusses several problems with the target article by Ceci et al. First, the results admit of an alternative interpretation that undercuts the conclusion drawn. In addition, a number of points, the research should be supplemented by examining situations in which there is no tenure-granting policy. Finally, 60% of the questions are concerned with whistle-blowing, but the issues involved in such cases make them much less relevant to the assessment of tenure than the authors suppose.

*Under this administration there has been an unprecedented interference in scientific processes, and President Bush has directly avoided implementation of a law designed to guarantee scientific independence. One of his 750 "signing statements" bypassed implementation of the law. . . . It is good for academics and scientists to speak out forcefully – which, unfortunately, most of them are reluctant to do.*

— Jimmy Carter (2006)

Discussions of tenure often proceed by anecdote or imprecise, general impressions. For example, college presidents may complain of "lazy, incompetent" faculty who "ruin" their campuses but cannot be removed (Fogg 2005). Given the ease with which such charges can be made, Ceci et al. are to be applauded for undertaking a serious empirical study of a major issue regarding tenure, that is, the relationship between tenure and the exercise of free speech. Nonetheless, the study falls far short of their goal of casting doubt on whether tenure does effectively protect free speech in the academy.

One problem is that the experimental results admit of a very different interpretation; namely, that tenure does allow a genuine independence of inquiry from political pressures external to the professorate, if not in other cases. The authors report themselves puzzled by why a significantly higher number of respondents marked "the strongest answer" in Question 4 (thus indicating that controversy does not impede research); however, Question 4 was the only question not explicitly concerned with reactions among one's colleagues. Thus, the difference in that response may well be explained just by the contrast between external pressure and that which comes from the possibility of upset or angry senior colleagues.

Such independence from external pressures is often regarded as the central point of tenure. As Jonathan Knight of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has remarked, tenure allows colleges "to provide the best education to students 'by ensuring to faculty they need not be worried about outraged trustees or legislators . . . if they want to explore controversial notions'" (quoted in Fogg 2005). Perhaps, as President Carter laments (in the epigram quoted at the beginning of this

commentary), too few faculty are actively speaking out in support of unfettered research, but the authors' work indicates that faculty view one another as largely politically autonomous.

Another problem is the absence of any investigation of what happens in institutions which do not grant tenure. It is clear now that with some topics, such as evolution and stem cell research, both teaching in schools and research elsewhere have been seriously affected by government pressure; we also have recently seen efforts to override or even suppress scientific research in federal institutions on matters such as "Plan B" birth control (Harris 2005) and climate warming (Revkin 2006). Quite severe restrictions on government funding of artistic expression are also well known (Dubin 1993). It appears, then, that not only are faculty prepared to exercise their independence, but also that research agendas can otherwise be adversely affected.

Among the pressures on the professorate that are external to the faculty, some become embodied in the institution. Lawrence Summer's resignation as Harvard's president and the withdrawal of the first-choice presidential candidate at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, (Rainey 2006) reflect the desire trustees can have to prioritize supposed organizational skill over scholarly goals, as well as the fact that tenured faculty may be prepared to speak out against resulting decisions that are thought to subvert academic values. I was, in fact, president of a faculty senate at the end of a troubled administration, which ended after a very negative faculty climate survey. Given the reactions that came from the board of regents, the main city newspaper, and many others, it is reasonable to conclude that tenure had a very important role for those transmitting the news of widespread faculty disapproval.

Part of what can lead faculty to oppose administrators is the perception that heavy influence is being exerted in areas involving teaching and research, where the administrators have little understanding. For example, a university administrator with the central goal of increasing grant revenues may bring considerable blind pressure to bear on the content of research – and do so without even any clear understanding of the difference between clinical and theoretical inquiry. Tenure can certainly play an important role in protecting research and teaching.

The strong "independent" response to Question 4 can be seen as even more significant when we notice that three of the five questions have to do with reporting colleagues for malfeasance. Whistle-blowing is not invoked in the usual defenses of tenure, and there are good reasons why it should not be part of a test of the success of tenure granting. There are both societal and institutional factors working against reporting colleagues. Among other things, several careers can be pointlessly damaged or even ruined if the whistle-blower gets it wrong.

Given the relative faculty freedom from external demands, what should we make of a reluctance to teach courses that senior faculty disapprove of? This is a difficult issue, because it is not clear that junior faculty would generally be well advised to choose their courses independently of more senior views. Equally, it is unclear how to assess the authors' conjecture that the lure of tenure is silencing junior faculty. It is a causal hypothesis, while the survey just gives us correlations. At a minimum, comparative research should be done between tenure/tenure-track faculty and similar teachers, researchers, and writers or artists not in such positions.

Another strong reason for looking at institutions that do not grant tenure is that the very fact of generations of scholars having had tenure in institutions that do grant it may have created a fairly open academic atmosphere in those places. Instead of indicating that tenure does not support freedom of expression, the responses on the survey could mean that faculty members generally do not feel compromised enough for there to be a significant payoff in angering colleagues. In this regard, it is unfortunate that many of the authors' examples are drawn from political correctness battles. It is my own judgment that a number of the instances mentioned are not cases of responsible

academic research. For example, the assertion that homosexuals do not generally have children appears questionable (Editors of *Advocate* [2006]) – but an adequate argument for my general assessment would certainly exceed the limits imposed here.

NOTE

Carter (2006) cites Drew (2006).

## The heuristic value of controversy in science

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**Abstract:** Ceci et al.'s (2006) findings remind us that tenure rarely serves its intended purpose. I argue that tenure often fails in part because many faculty members possess an insufficient appreciation for the heuristic value of controversy in science and other disciplines. Using two case examples from clinical/personality psychology, I show how controversial positions can draw sharp criticism while facilitating scientific progress.

Ceci et al.'s (2006) findings remind us of a sobering fact: the institution of tenure, although designed primarily to safeguard unpopular positions (Menand 2001), frequently fails to serve its intended purpose. Here I offer one partial explanation for their results, namely, many academics' insufficient appreciation of the heuristic value of controversy. In the interests of space, I focus on scientific controversies, although most of my conclusions apply in equal force to other domains of academia (e.g., humanities).

As a collection of fallible human beings, the scientific community is subject to the same social psychological processes, such as groupthink, confirmation bias, and ingroup–outgroup bias, that can impede decision-making in other groups (Rosenwein 1994; Shadish & Fuller 1994). In reading Ceci et al.'s (2006) findings, it is difficult not to be reminded of the classic work of Schachter (1951), who asked groups of nine participants to discuss the most appropriate disposition for “Johnny Rocco,” a juvenile delinquent. The potential interventions for Rocco ranged from extremely harsh to extremely lenient. The group member who advocated for a position diametrically opposed to the majority (the “deviant”) was disliked the most, and was peremptorily ignored by other group members following unsuccessful efforts to “set him straight.”

To the extent that Schachter's (1951) findings extend to the Ivory Tower, there are ample grounds for concern. The history of science teaches us that controversies can play a valuable role in facilitating progress. Many mainstream scientific positions began as fringe views that were initially repudiated by the majority (Shadish et al. 1994), with Wegener's theory of continental drift and Alvarez's more recent theory of an asteroidal cause of the extinction of dinosaurs (Rosenwein 1994) being paradigmatic examples. Even controversial positions that are substantially incorrect can facilitate scientific progress by forcing researchers to rethink their cherished assumptions and adduce more compelling evidence for their assertions.

Moreover, researchers who advance minority positions may, like Schachter's deviates, be shunned by many of their colleagues. Yet some may make significant scientific contributions. In their psychological analysis of Apollo moon scientists, Mitroff and Fitzgerald (1977) found that a subgroup of what they termed “Type I scientists” (scientists who relished theoretical speculation) were regarded by their peers as controversial, even abrasive. Yet these individuals were the most likely to be rated by these peers as among the most valuable scientists in the Apollo program. Their colleagues' comments about them

are illustrative: “They are examples of the lunatic fringe”; “X and Y make people extremely mad but they also spur them on. They are the creative vanguard” (Mitroff & Fitzgerald, p. 665).

We can appreciate the heuristic value of controversy in science by examining two prominent controversies in my own field of clinical/personality psychology. Both controversies have proven valuable for scientific progress, although many colleagues criticized the scholars who instigated them for fomenting unproductive debates.

After examining numerous studies of personality trait measures, Mischel (1968) concluded that the prevailing view of traits as pervasive, cross-situationally consistent dispositions was unwarranted. For a decade or more, Mischel's review threw the field of clinical/personality psychology into disarray by raising serious questions concerning the predictive utility of widely used trait measures. Following several thoughtful critiques (e.g., Bem & Allen 1974; Block 1977; Wachtel 1973), the challenges raised by Mischel were largely resolved by Epstein (1979), who found that trait measures can exhibit predictive utility for behaviors across situations, but only when these behaviors are aggregated into stable response classes. That is, traits are often helpful for predicting long-term behavioral trends, but are rarely helpful for predicting isolated behaviors.

Some accused Mischel (1968) of cultivating a straw man debate or “pseudocontroversy” (e.g., Carlson 1984) that did little to advance the field's conceptualization of traits. Nevertheless, as Kenrick and Funder (1988) observed, Mischel's anti-trait position, although too extreme in certain respects, exerted a salutary impact on psychology. His trenchant critique prompted many trait researchers to reevaluate their fundamental assumptions, leading them to adopt a more nuanced view of the cross-situational consistency of behavior.

Thirty years later, Rind and colleagues provoked an even more incendiary controversy by reporting the results of a meta-analysis concerning the relation between self-reported child sexual abuse (CSA) and adult psychopathology (Rind et al. 1998). Drawing on a quantitative synthesis of 59 studies on over 15,000 college participants, Rind et al. found that across 18 symptom domains, the correlations between CSA and later maladjustment were uniformly weak, with *r*s ranging from .04 to .13. Rind et al.'s results and conclusions contradicted widely held views regarding the ubiquity of CSA's negative sequelae. Not surprisingly, they were roundly denounced by academics (e.g., Spiegel 2000), radio talk show hosts (e.g., Dr. Laura Schlessinger), a past president of the American Psychiatric Association, and, in a bizarre twist, both houses of the United States Congress (Lilienfeld 2002; Rind et al. 2000). Some of Rind et al.'s critics went so far as to contend that their findings should never have been published. Although several criticisms of Rind et al.'s analyses, such as the authors' exclusive reliance on nonclinical samples and on self-reports of CSA (e.g., Ondersma et al. 2001), raised reasonable questions, most others were easily rebutted (Rind et al. 2001).

Despite – or perhaps because of – the acrimonious controversy it engendered, Rind et al.'s (1998) meta-analysis has prompted a reexamination of the etiological role of CSA in models of psychopathology. In the wake of their findings, some authors have issued renewed calls for attending to the importance of resilience in adjustment to trauma (Sommers & Satel 2005; Wright et al. 2005). Still others have begun to examine the causal role of CSA using genetically informative designs, such as studies of monozygotic twins discordant for a history of CSA. This research suggests that CSA probably increases risk for subsequent psychopathology, but perhaps only when the abuse involves direct genital contact (Kendler et al. 2000).

I would be remiss not to mention one critical caveat. Science is an inherently conservative enterprise in which most unconventional views are initially regarded with skepticism (Merton 1942). This feature of science is not entirely irrational, because most neoteric ideas have yet to accumulate a track record of