

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

corroborated predictions (Raup 1986). Moreover, most novel scientific explanations, especially those that contradict well-established paradigms, are probably wrong (Sagan 1995). Nevertheless, the scientific community must walk a fine line between harboring legitimate doubts toward controversial ideas, which is justified, and dismissing them out of hand, which rarely is (see Beyerstein's [1995] distinction between methodological and pathological skepticism).

Scholars who generate controversies in journals or classrooms can often expect to encounter resistance, and at times even stiff opposition, from colleagues. As a consequence, an undetermined number of academic scientists may shy away from unpopular stances, particularly in the early stages of their careers. In the long run, this suppression of controversy is likely to be detrimental to scientific progress. One suspects that if more academics were intimately familiar with the history of scientific controversies, they would be more willing to brook, and even actively embrace, their gadfly colleagues. In turn, more faculty members might feel free to pursue the controversial lines of inquiry that tenure ostensibly guarantees.

Tenure is a necessary – not a sufficient – condition for controversial research

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Abstract: The Ceci et al. article is consistent with tenure being a necessary condition for controversial research. In the absence of tenure, as in the United Kingdom, professors have been fired and suspended for politically controversial issues. There are a variety of reasons why tenure does not ensure that professors will engage in controversial research, including career interests and the desire to be liked.

I am not really surprised by the findings of the study, but I do question whether the results imply that tenure should be abolished. It seems obtuse to use the finding that assistant professors are often silenced by the fear of a negative tenure evaluation to come to the conclusion that tenure does not result in advertised benefits. On the face of it, there is the opposite implication: Tenure is a necessary condition for engaging in controversial research.

It is also obtuse to use the finding that associate professors are only marginally more likely to “ruffle feathers” as an argument against tenure. Obviously, promotion is also a resource that is dependent on an evaluation process, so it is not surprising that people without tenure and full professor status would be less likely to rock the boat. In order to make a convincing argument against tenure, one would have to show that full professors would be just as likely to engage in controversial research whether or not they had tenure – that tenure is a necessary condition for engaging in controversial research. This was not tested in the present study and it could not be tested in the United States. However, tenure in the United Kingdom has been abolished, and the authors note that, “after all, the United Kingdom abolished tenure for all appointments and promotions that came after November, 1987, yet it would seem that their professoriate remains strong and vibrant.” However, Chris Brand was dismissed from his position at the University of Edinburgh,¹ and Frank Ellis has been suspended from the University of Leeds,² both for reasons related to the issue of race differences in intelligence. Such examples surely serve to intimidate professors engaged in research that touches on issues related to current political orthodoxy.

In fact, as the authors themselves note, professors in the United Kingdom are evaluated for their research, and it is easy to imagine that professors wanting positive evaluations would not want to offend their colleagues. The strength and vibrancy of the British professoriate is thus unlikely to extend to controversial issues that conflict with the ideologies of university administrators. The pitfalls of lack of tenure can also be seen in the case of Andrew Fraser of Macquarie University in Sydney.³ Fraser, who was on a one-year pre-retirement contract, was suspended from teaching after making comments on race differences in intelligence and criminality.

The most parsimonious interpretation of the data is that professors will not engage in controversial research if it will impact negatively on evaluations, either for tenure or promotion. The findings of this study are consistent with supposing that tenure is a necessary condition for doing controversial research. They also show what we already know – that tenure is not a sufficient condition for doing research or teaching ideas that depart from current orthodoxy. The fact is that tenure is only one of many resources that academics value that may be endangered by displeasing the powers that be. The authors mention valuing harmony and avoiding criticism from respected colleagues, but engaging in controversial research may mean no more invitations to deliver papers at other universities or important conferences. In fact, controversial professors may not be able to publish their work at prestigious academic or commercial presses. (Indeed, Chris Brand's book, *The g Factor*, was “de-published” by John Wiley after it had been on sale for six weeks in the UK, and Deakin University refused to publish Andrew Fraser's peer-reviewed article on race differences.) Or they may even have difficulty getting their work published at all. They will not be invited to the good parties, or get nice summer fellowships, or get asked to serve as dean or in a future administration in Washington. Or maybe their sources of funding will dry up. As a professor commenting on the lack of academic debate over a recent paper by John Mearshamer (University of Chicago) and Stephen Walt (Harvard), critical of the Israel Lobby, noted: “People might debate it if you gave everyone a get-out-of-jail-free card and promised that afterward everyone would be friends” (in Fairbanks 2006). Professors who engage in controversial research know they are “going to jail,” but with tenure, at least it's not hard time.

NOTES

1. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Brand.
2. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4838498.stm>.
3. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Fraser_\(academic\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Fraser_(academic)).

Tenure is justifiable

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Abstract: The target article by Ceci et al. provides some interesting results regarding how faculty might react to difficult social dilemmas, but it has little to say about tenure and its effect upon academic freedom. This comment discusses briefly what we know about tenure, and employment protection more generally, and why it may be in a university's best interest to hire tenured faculty. The comment concludes by pointing out that the results make a rather useful contribution regarding the difficulty of eliciting information on malfeasance in organizations, an area of enormous importance. For example, the results may help us understand why the government has introduced rewards for the reporting of fraud under the whistle-blowing provisions of the Federal Claims Act.

Ceci et al.'s Abstract for the target article concludes with the statement, “These findings challenge the assumption that