Dunning, James Flynn, Maryanne Garry, Roddy Roediger, Walter Block, Analucia Dias Schliemann, and Scott Lilienfeld.

Open Peer Commentary

Intellectual conformism depends on institutional incentives, not on socialized culture

DOI: 10.1017/S0140525X06009137

Li Bennich-Björkman

Department of Government, University of Uppsala, SE-751 20 Uppsala, Sweden.

Li.Bennich-Bjorkman@statsvet.uu.se **http://www.statsvet.uu.se**

Abstract: The study by Ceci et al. shows that academic behavior associated with the core principles of intellectual freedom is more shaped by institutional incentives than by organizational culture. From an organizational theoretical point of view, this is quite an unexpected finding, not least because we do believe universities to be fairly strong and explicit cultures that should be successful in socialization.

In their highly intriguing article, Ceci et al. ask whether tenure is justified and investigate the topic by presenting an innovative scenario survey to a representative sample of academics. My commentary dwells on the broader conclusions that can be drawn from the study both politically and theoretically. Depending on the expectations you have, the results at which the authors arrive can be interpreted in fairly divergent directions, underpinning both a pessimistic as well as a more optimistic view with respect to tenure. The authors themselves appear to take a rather pessimistic stand that is primarily based on the degree of conformism and compliance to "group-think" demonstrated in the survey by assistant and associate professors on their way to, or even in the possession of, tenure. Hence, no doubt the study proves that the tenure-track system fosters academic behavior that is far from the ideal of academic freedom, if the latter is understood as comprising independence of mind, intellectual courage, and nonconformism, except when the highest echelon – the full professorship – is reached. The authors are worried that an academy that is not able to instill the norms of academic freedom beyond a minority of its professionals is in trouble. But, as stated earlier, that depends on the expectations you have.

In contrast, I was struck by the degree to which full professors actually were believed to act independently in the two case scenarios out of the five that specifically aimed at capturing the principles of academic freedom rather than general ethics: trying to make public controversial research results and teaching courses regarded for some reason as problematic among colleagues. Not only did full professors themselves believe that faculty in their category would behave with integrity to a greater extent than would those in other ranks, but so did the other two categories in the study. Given the fact that universities generally are highly hierarchical organizations, sometimes even described in terms of being "feudalistic" and built up around networks and small coteries of scholars fighting each other while depending strongly on in-group loyalty, it is encouraging to note that despite such an organizational environment, nonconformism is nevertheless an expected behavior once the institutional preconditions exist to safeguard it.

The most important finding that Ceci et al.'s study shows is exactly this: Academic behavior associated with the core principles of intellectual freedom in the end is more shaped by institutional incentives than by direct socialization. Although junior staff on their way to tenured positions are definitely believed by all categories to behave in ways that can best be described as conformist or politically correct, the study demonstrates that this pattern of behavior fades away as dependency on colleagues diminishes. It is not an instant break with earlier behavioral patterns, as even tenured associate professors are believed to succumb to external and collegial pressures to a higher extent than could be expected, but it is a clear tendency. Interestingly enough, this change in behavior is not believed to appear at all to the same extent when the three scenarios focusing on more general ethical concerns are brought into the picture. Here, all categories of professor instead behave in a way that indicates the existence of a negative *esprit de corps*: not reporting on cheating or harassing colleagues.

Paradoxically, the results lead to the conclusion that the university system is both a weak and a strong organizational culture. In the earlier and formative phases of an academic career, being more or less forced into behaving in an overly conformist way should, according to both culturalist thinking and organizational theory, socialize persons into a behavioral pattern that should be sticky over time. Learned behavior, on both an individual and an organizational level, usually turns into norms that are quite tenacious and thus hard to change.

However, that is not the case here. Although with some time-lag, behaviors do change in quite a substantial manner, going from conformist to nonconformist when the norms of academic freedom are concerned. From an organizational theoretical point of view, this is quite an unexpected finding, not least because we do believe universities to constitute a fairly strong and explicit culture that should be successful in socialization. The study discussed here points in the direction of American universities being cultures in which double standards are upheld.

The norms of academic freedom, such as integrity, independence, and – far and foremost – nonconformism, survive on a meta-level even after years and years of behavior by oneself and others which does not at all live up to these norms. It is the changes in the institutional arrangements, then – that is, being tenured – that finally make behavior correspond more to the meta-norms. However, though I here emphasize how important institutional incentives seem to be, this is not to deny that socialization does play a part. The depressing results found by Ceci et al. regarding tenured associate professors who are believed to still behave in conformist ways, point to direct socialization effects being in play – effects that only successively decrease.

They do decrease, however, and the arrangements liberating the individual scholar from having to please his or her colleagues either out of direct pressure or out of anticipation of future career opportunities are what contribute to this change.

In contrast to the European university systems, and, in particular, the Swedish one which I know best, the American tenure-track system strikes me as being based on a more pragmatist perception of both individual human nature and how organizations function. Generally, individuals are group-oriented and depend to a large extent on being approved of and liked by the group. Even though persons attracted to an academic career may be below average in this respect, that is, be somewhat less willing to adapt, being active in an hierarchical organization like the university necessarily exercises a lot of group pressure. Thus, the institutional counter-forces to fight individual and organizational tendencies to conformism must be radical. Tenure offers a solution. It does not solve the problem regarding conformism on the lower levels, but, as the study shows, tenure is a result of the effects of the institutional incentives preceding it. In the Swedish system, the equivalent to tenure for full professors was abolished ten years ago. The institutional incentives today are to a large extent promoting collegial and ideological conformism, as there are few academic positions where research is included. Instead, research is to an absolute majority financed through applications to external funds. In such a system, not even the full professors can escape collegial and ideological pressures.

In the light of what Ceci et al.'s study shows, the American tenure-track system still seems quite superior.

Why ask if tenure is necessary?

DOI: 10.1017/S0140525X06009149

Jane L. Buck
68 Welsh Tract Road, #109, Newark, DE 19713.
buck@count.com

Abstract: Although the target article is groundbreaking and creatively conceived, there are troubling questions regarding its methodology and conclusions. The sample in the authors' study was drawn from a popular magazine's lists; there is no recognition of the fact that most faculty are now off the tenure track; and comparisons are made with the British system with no supporting data.

I begin with a disclaimer. I write from my perspective as the most recent past president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the premier defender of tenure in the American academy.

The target article, although ambitious, groundbreaking, and laudable in many respects, raises a number of questions about its methodology and conclusions. Why did the authors choose to select their sample from lists of purportedly superior institutions published in a popular magazine when they might have sampled from a list of all the institutions in the country? The fact that the lists are of questionable validity for judging the quality of an institution is almost irrelevant.

The overwhelming majority of students in the United States attend and receive their degrees from postsecondary institutions that would never come within hailing distance of such lists. Not only are almost two-thirds of faculty members employed in institutions that do not appear on such lists, but they are employed off the tenure track. It would be of great interest to know how at-will employees – which is what most American faculty now are – would respond. Having made the choice to sample as they did, however, the authors might have provided a list of the participating institutions without violating the anonymity of their respondents. That information would be most helpful, not only in judging the instant article, but also in designing future studies.

It is almost always preferable, of course, to employ an experimental rather than a correlational design, and the difficulties attendant on doing so in a study of this type need not be catalogued here. Issues of response bias are also all too familiar. Nonetheless, a more direct measure of faculty behavior would seem to have been preferable, even at the cost of foregoing the advantages of an experiment. What is the relative incidence among tenured, tenure-eligible, and at-will faculty of actual self-censorship in the arenas of teaching and research? What is the incidence of overt and covert threats to academic freedom among those groups? Of course, simply asking the obvious and straightforward questions risks biased responses, but it might yield more potentially useful data.

The suggestion that the tenure system, because of its high reward value, might engender the paradoxical effect of decreasing the exercise of academic freedom must be addressed. It is not simply the denial of a reward, as the target article suggests, but in many instances it is the end of an academic career. One must keep in mind the consequences of a denial of tenure, especially in the current academic job market.

The unexpected finding that rank is a better predictor of hypothetical behavior than tenure status is difficult to explain, and the authors' suggestion that age and experience or differences in professional socialization might account for it is an attractive hypothesis.

Granted that questions regarding confronting sexual and research misconduct are and should be of great concern to the profession, they are not, strictly speaking, issues of academic freedom but, rather, of professional ethics. Nowhere, to my knowledge, does the AAUP (or other associations, for that matter) claim that tenure is either a guarantor or protector of ethical behavior in situations such as those described in the survey instrument. Admittedly, one might reasonably infer that to be the case, but it is not ordinarily put forward as a defense of the tenure system. As the authors opine, the reasons for respondents' reluctance to confront unethical behavior are probably both myriad and complex. The social and diplomatic skills necessary to deal with errant colleagues are not ordinarily taught as part of a graduate program.

The suggestion that tenure might not be necessary to protect academic freedom on the grounds that tenure no longer exists in the United Kingdom, where academic freedom appears to thrive, is startling. That no data are provided in the target article to reinforce the claim is problematic, but the unstated assumption that the two systems are directly comparable is simply wrong. The differences between the British and American university systems are legion. The sheer size of the American academy, coupled with its heterogeneity, is the first and most obvious. Depending on the criteria used to identify them, there are more than 3,000 or more than 4,000 postsecondary institutions in the United States. They can be classified in a bewildering number of ways: by size, purpose, method of control (public, private, for-profit, religious, and so on), degrees granted, and so forth.

Although the AAUP would not suggest that enlightened labor legislation or a well-negotiated collective bargaining agreement could substitute for tenure, it is the case that most British faculty are represented by strong unions and protected by law. The situation in this country is that the vast majority of our faculty members are not unionized – even when unionization would be their preference –because they are either employed in public institutions in states that do not permit public employee collective bargaining, or employed in private institutions whose faculty are effectively barred from unionizing as a result of the 1980 Supreme Court Yeshiva decision. Recall that this decision found, most astonishingly, that the faculty of Yeshiva University are "managers" and, therefore, ineligible to bargain collectively under the protection of the National Labor Relations Act.

Nonetheless, I end on several positive notes. The target article is, indeed, both groundbreaking and innovative. As is often the case, some of the more interesting results were to be found in the interactions rather than the main effects, and these results should have heuristic value. It is gratifying that no support was found for the notion that the granting of tenure turns Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde. And from the standpoint of good reporting, I was delighted to see the distinction drawn between statistical and practical significance – one that is too seldom made.

The economic justification for academic tenure

DOI: 10.1017/S0140525X06009150

H. Lorne Carmichael
Department of Economics, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario K7L3N6, Canada.
carmykle@qed.econ.queensu.ca **http://www.econ.queensu.ca/pub/faculty/mini/carmykle.php**

Abstract: The ocean of academic knowledge is now so wide and so deep that university administrators must rely on the incumbents in their departments to identify and train new hires. This is in direct contrast to a sports team, where management can readily identify new talent. It follows that aging academics get to enjoy tenure, whereas older athletes do not.

The target article by Ceci, Williams, and Mueller-Johnson (Ceci et al.) makes it clear that academic tenure is not sufficient for academic freedom. Of course, the purely logical case for