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# Science

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The Gut  
**INNER  
TUBE  
OF LIFE**

125  
YEARS OF GLOBAL  
Science

AAAS



SPECIAL ISSUE

## THE GUT: INNER TUBE OF LIFE

A colored barium x-ray image of the colon of a patient in the early stages of Crohn's disease. A special section explores the diverse biology of our gut, including the abundant yet largely unknown microorganisms it harbors, its normal functions of digestion and delivery of nutrients, and diseases to which it is prone. [Image: Gjlp/Photo Researchers Inc.]

Volume 307  
25 March 2005  
Number 5717

### INTRODUCTION

1895 The Gut: Inside Out

### NEWS

1896 The Dynamic Gut  
What's Eating You?  
1899 A Mouthful of Microbes

### VIEWPOINT

1902 No Organ Left Behind: Tales of Gut Development and Evolution  
D. Y. R. Stainier

### REVIEWS

1904 Self-Renewal and Cancer of the Gut: Two Sides of a Coin  
F. Radtke and H. Clevers

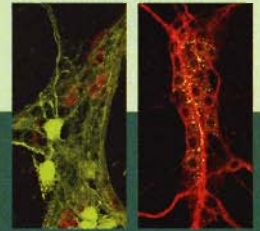
1909 The Gut and Energy Balance: Visceral Allies in the Obesity Wars  
M. K. Badman and J. S. Flier

### Foldout: The Inner Tube of Life

1915 Host-Bacterial Mutualism in the Human Intestine  
F. Bäckhed, R. E. Ley, J. L. Sonnenburg, D. A. Peterson, J. I. Gordon

1920 Immunity, Inflammation, and Allergy in the Gut  
T. T. MacDonald and G. Monteleone

Related Editorial page 1839; Reports pages 1955 and 1976



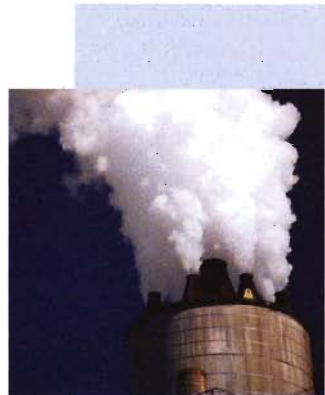
For related online content in SAGE and STKE, see page 1833 or go to [www.sciencemag.org/sciext/gut/](http://www.sciencemag.org/sciext/gut/)

## DEPARTMENTS

- 1833 SCIENCE ONLINE
- 1835 THIS WEEK IN SCIENCE
- 1839 EDITORIAL by Ian T. Johnson  
Cancers of the Gut and Western Ills  
*related Inner Tube of Life section page 1895*
- 1841 EDITORS' CHOICE
- 1844 CONTACT SCIENCE
- 1847 NETWATCH
- 1893 AAAS NEWS AND NOTES
- 1979 NEW PRODUCTS
- 1989 SCIENCE CAREERS

## NEWS OF THE WEEK

- 1848 PALEOANTHROPOLOGY  
Discoverers Charge Damage to 'Hobbit' Specimens
- 1848 ETHICS  
Doctors Pay a High Price for Priority
- 1849 CAREER TRANSITIONS  
Panel Throws Lifeline to Bio Postdocs
- 1851 SCIENTIFIC MISCONDUCT  
Researcher Faces Prison for Fraud in NIH Grant Applications and Papers
- 1851 SCIENCE SCOPE
- 1852 GENETICS  
Talking About a Revolution: Hidden RNA May Fix Mutant Genes
- 1852 PALEONTOLOGY  
*Tyrannosaurus rex* Soft Tissue Raises Tantalizing Prospects  
*related Report page 1952*
- 1853 ASTRONOMY  
Alien Planets Glimmer in the Heat
- 1854 PALEOCLIMATE  
Ocean Flow Amplified, Not Triggered, Climate Change  
*related Research Article page 1933*



1858



1878

- 1854 PROTEOMICS  
Protein Chips Map Yeast Kinase Network
- 1855 MAGNETIC IMAGING  
Atom-Based Detector Puts a New Twist on Nuclear Magnetic Resonance
- 1857 ECOLOGY  
Savannah River Lab Faces Budget Ax
- 1857 PROPOSITION 71  
Proposed Legislation Threatens to Slow California Stem Cell Rush

## NEWS FOCUS

- 1858 EPIDEMIOLOGY  
Mounting Evidence Indicts Fine-Particle Pollution  
How Dirty Air Hurts the Heart  
Regulations Spark Technology Competition  
*related Perspective page 1888*
- 1861 U.S. EDUCATION RESEARCH  
Can Randomized Trials Answer the Question of What Works?
- 1864 ASTRONOMY  
American Astronomers Lobby for the Next Big Thing
- 1865 INFECTIOUS DISEASES  
True Numbers Remain Elusive in Bird Flu Outbreak
- 1867 RANDOM SAMPLES

## LETTERS

- 1873 Abuse of Prisoners at Abu Ghraib D. Colquhoun; R. Persaud; V. J. Konečni; D. C. Musch. Response S. T. Fiske, L. T. Harris, A. J. C. Cuddy. Reinventing the Wheel in Ecology Research? R. W. Flint and R. D. Kalke. Response D. Raffaelli et al. A Central Repository for Published Plasmids M. Fan et al.
- 1877 Corrections and Clarifications

Contents continued ▶

## Letters to the Editor

Letters (~300 words) discuss material published in *Science* in the previous 6 months or issues of general interest. They can be submitted through the Web ([www.submit2science.org](http://www.submit2science.org)) or by regular mail (1200 New York Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA). Letters are not acknowledged upon receipt, nor are authors generally consulted before publication. Whether published in full or in part, letters are subject to editing for clarity and space.

## Abuse of Prisoners at Abu Ghraib

**IN THEIR POLICY FORUM "WHY ORDINARY people torture enemy prisoners"** (26 Nov. 2004, p. 1482), S. T. Fiske and colleagues suggest that almost anyone could have committed the Abu Ghraib atrocities (1). They go on to say, "lay-observers may believe that explaining evil amounts to excusing it and absolving people of responsibility for their actions. . . ." Any humane person should react to their "explanation" in exactly this way. I think they make the mistake of trying to divorce "science" from politics in an area where the two are inextricably mixed. There is no mention in their Policy Forum of the fact that the U.S. Department of Justice advised the White House that torture "may be justified" (2-4); that the "war on terrorism" renders obsolete Geneva's strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners and renders quaint some of its provisions (2-4); or that torture was endorsed at the very highest levels of the government and military (5). Is it really irrelevant that General Miller is quoted (6) as saying that prisoners are "like dogs and if you allow them to believe at any point that they are more than a dog then you've lost control of them"? Why was none of this mentioned?

Studying the effect of "one dissenting peer" may be relatively harmless academic amusement, but if you really want to stop this sort of thing what you need are leaders, both political and military, who have the moral fiber to make it absolutely clear that abuse and torture are intolerable in a civilized society. Sadly, the political and military leadership did exactly the opposite in this case. Fiske *et al.* should have said so.

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### References and Notes

1. The conclusion is pretty dubious, as it appears to be heavily dependent on meta-analysis, the poor man's substitute for doing proper research.
2. D. Priest, R. J. Smith, *Washington Post*, 8 June 2004, p. A1 ([www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A23373-2004Jun7.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A23373-2004Jun7.html)).
3. Full text of the Gonzales memo is available at <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/4999148/site/newsweek/>.

4. A compendium of relevant government documents: K. J. Greenberg, J. L. Dratel, *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib* (Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 2005).
5. R. J. Smith, J. White, *Washington Post*, 12 June 2004, p. A1 ([www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35612-2004Jun11.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35612-2004Jun11.html)).
6. Brigadier General Janis Karpinski said that current Iraqi prisons chief Major General Geoffrey Miller—who was in charge at Guantanamo Bay—visited her in Baghdad and said, "At Guantanamo Bay we learned that the prisoners have to earn every single thing that they have." She said, "He said they are like dogs and if you allow them to believe at any point that they are more than a dog then you've lost control of them." "Iraq abused" ordered from the top," *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3806713.stm>.

**THE ATTEMPT BY SCIENTIFIC PSYCHOLOGY TO explain mayhem like Abu Ghraib** ("Why ordinary people torture prisoners," S. T. Fiske *et al.*, Policy Forum, 26 Nov. 2004, p. 1482) emphasizes findings from academic studies on the power of social context. Just one example of where Fiske *et al.*'s account misunderstands what social psychology really has to say about Abu Ghraib comes from the authors' citation of Stanley Milgram's classic *Obedience to Authority* experiments (1).

Actually, Milgram was cautious about the possibility of extrapolating the "obedience paradigm" to real-life atrocities (2). He once wrote back to an enthusiastic young replicator of his results, "it is quite a jump... from an experiment of this sort to general conclusions about the Nazi epoch, and I, myself, feel that I have sometimes gone too far in generalising. Be cautious about generalising." (3).

Instead, Milgram suggested that the true explanation of evil like the Holocaust was linked to his experiments by their demonstration of "a propensity for people to accept definitions of action provided by legitimate authority. That is, although the subject performs the action, he allows authority to define its meaning." [(1), p. 145].

Authority figures of governments headed by George Bush and Tony Blair define what is happening, in Iraq and across the world, as a "war on terror" involving certain nations and peoples who pose an immediate threat to us because they are mad and/or evil and bent on our total annihilation. The public and the army may accept the official definition of our predicament unquestioningly, which in turn natu-

rally legitimizes extreme force to be used against our "enemy."

If U.S. psychologists and scientists are going to stray outside of the narrow confines of the laboratory and attempt to explain the appalling behavior of its citizens abroad, science is ill-served by accepting unflinchingly the definitions of "situation" and "enemy" provided by politicians.

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### References

1. S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (Harper & Row, New York, 1974).
2. Letter to Miss Harriet Tobin, 9 April 1964, Stanley Milgram Papers, Yale University Library, Manuscripts and Archives.
3. T. Blass, *The Man Who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram* (Basic Books, New York, 2004).

**THE POLICY FORUM "WHY ORDINARY PEOPLE torture prisoners"** by S. T. Fiske *et al.* (26 Nov. 2004, p. 1482) has provoked a great deal of discussion among social psychologists.

Much of it has been concerned with the seemingly excessive number of half-baked social-psychological ideas that can be invoked, post hoc, to "explain" Abu Ghraib—or any other social phenomenon.

However, the skeptical reactions to the Policy Forum mirror it in failing to ask a more fundamental question, which concerns the politics of science: Why is it that American social scientists become galvanized to explain evil as something that can be committed by "anyone," given a particular "context," only when Americans commit the atrocities?

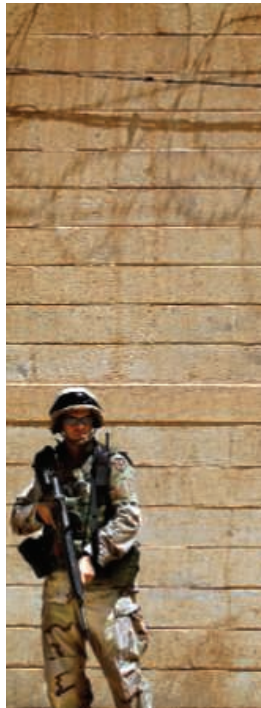
The point here is that the might (or spin) of American social science has seldom been invoked to semi-excuse (in the popular mind) others' atrocities. "They," these others, are simply genetically and

historically assumed to be evil or savage.

There is a shadow over Fiske *et al.*'s paper: The rest of the world may well think that American social science works for the U.S. State Department.

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## LETTERS

**IN THEIR POLICY FORUM "WHY ORDINARY people torture enemy prisoners"** (26 Nov. 2004, p. 1482), S. T. Fiske *et al.* point out that abhorrent actions such as those that occurred at Abu Ghraib can be prevented by "even one dissenting peer." This brings to mind a statement made by Elie Wiesel in his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are in danger, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant." Would that we all could remember this and act accordingly, when under the prevalent influence of conforming pressures.

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### Response

**OUR CRITICS RAISE TWO PRIMARY OBJECTIONS** to our Policy Forum: the nature of the evidence and the scope of the conclusions.

Konečni expresses skepticism for which he presents no evidence: He implies that our summary of peer-reviewed, published meta-analyses by respected scholars represents a fringe perspective, claiming that our article "provoked a great deal of discussion among social psychologists"; in fact, there has been little discussion on any social psychology list-serve, e-mail, or newsletter to that effect as far as we know. Konečni suggests that the principles invoked in our article (aggression under stress, prejudice against outgroups, conformity to peers, obedience to authorities, and step-by-step social influence) are "half-baked": These principles are supported not only by the meta-analyses across dozens of studies, but each also is widely accepted as a fundamental scientific principle.

Colquhoun objects that meta-analytic evidence is the "poor man's substitute for doing proper research." I would challenge him to do that research, because social scientists have not been permitted to examine the evidence and interview the perpetrators and victims. In the absence of new data, the cumulative evidence of research indeed helps to account for the events. Our purpose was not to conduct fresh research but to publicize a reliable database that might

have averted these events, had the right people cared to look. It might still help to avert future such actions by Americans and by others.

Persaud protests extrapolation from laboratory studies to real-life atrocities. But would he have us ignore the decades of replications across cultures and settings—both laboratory and field—that indicate the power of stress, prejudice, peers, authorities, and commitment?

Konečni demonizes our inferred politics and urges us to identify other torturers around the world. Colquhoun urges us to take stronger, more explicit political stands. In contrast, Persaud chastises us for "stray[ing] outside the narrow confines of the laboratory."

We think that the implications of the evidence are self-evident, but our brief as scientists is to report the evidence. We believe that the evidence speaks for itself, and we think that science is more credible when it acts as an honest broker, presenting the available, reliable data but refraining from arguing for a particular political solution. We reiterate our already published stand: The evidence indicates that the individuals are responsible, yes, because sometimes (rarely) they can and do resist social

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