The coddling campus

Craig A. Harper believes the road to (political) hell is paved with good intentions...

Should we be allowed to express controversial or offensive ideas, even when we know that they could cause upset to some who are exposed to them? It's an issue of particular concern to academics and public intellectuals all around the Western world right now.

The freedom to express controversial opinions or explore sensitive topics, such as the scientific basis of gender or the links between ideological or religious doctrines and violent extremism, has become an increasingly debated public issue. When thinking about this trend, I ask two questions: Why is this happening? and What does it tell us about our psychological development?

In this piece, I focus on how these debates about 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' opinions to express begin in academic activist movements, and are typically allowed to thrive on university campuses. In doing so, I look at how our current generation of students have been raised, and outline how a potentially fruitful new personality construct – 'offence sensitivity' – can help us to understand the psychological forces that are driving our increasingly polarised political landscape. Further, I examine our own practice as psychologists in fostering these ideas and allowing them to come to fruition. My overarching aim is to map some emerging trends in North American


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academia, and to provide some suggestions for reducing their effects before they take too firm a hold on our own practice in the UK.

Defining the problem

Commentators have been raising concerns about potential infringements on freedom of expression for a number of years now. While clearly there are some occasions where free speech is lawfully and rightfully curtailed under Article 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998 (e.g. the incitement of violence, or libel), the concerns raised have focused on the idea of so-called 'politically incorrect' topics being formally and informally censored.

There is no institutional context where this has been more hotly debated than in higher education. High-profile social media posts have drawn attention to controversial views expressed by several academics being met by fierce opposition. In our own field, these trends have been most clearly observed in the Canadian context. In 2015 we saw the dismissal of Dr Kenneth Zucker from the Center for Mental Health and Addiction's Child Youth and Family Gender Identity Clinic in Toronto. By any standard Dr Zucker is an international authority on the development of gender identity: he has authored more than 100 peer-reviewed publications, edited the prestigious journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, and headed up the group responsible for producing the 'Gender Dysphoria' entry in the DSM-5. However, his resistance to the 'gender affirmative' approach – the practice where transgendered children are actively encouraged to live as their identified gender as opposed to being offered therapeutic input to explore the sources of potential gender-based identity issues – led some to label his practice as 'reparative therapy'. Similarly, Dr Jordan Peterson (University of Toronto) has also faced backlash and protests at speaking events after his refusal to use gender-neutral pronouns in his classes. A respected clinical psychologist, Dr Peterson objected to what he saw as the forced use of such terms through the Ontario-based Bill C-16, which expands hate crime laws to explicitly encompass gender identity and gender expression.

What about on our own shores? The online magazine Spiked.com commissions an annual review of freedom of speech on British university campuses. The results for 2017 should serve as a wake-up call. Of the 115 universities ranked, just seven were given the green light on Spiked's traffic light system; and 73 received a red rating, meaning that they were judged as overtly hostile to the principle of freedom of expression. Examples of formal policies include those related to so-called 'safe spaces' (where speakers whose viewpoints are considered offensive or upsetting are at best asked to modify their language, or at worst prohibited from speaking at all) and 'trigger warnings' (where students are required to be warned about any potentially upsetting material – typically around sexual violence and mental illness – before this material is presented). While the enactment of trigger warnings is not in itself necessarily a bad thing (I warn students before I show images relating to my research or teaching on controversial topics like paedophilia, predominantly as a way to focus their attention on the topic at hand rather than on the novelty of having naked cartoons projected on to the screen in front of them), the argument being made is that 'safe spaces' go against some of the core principles of higher education – openness to, and exploration of, new ideas in the pursuit of new and objective knowledge.

The majority of these Spiked classifications were driven or in some way influenced by the ratings attributed to student unions. Let's not pretend, though, that these trends are purely student-driven. Inbar and Lammers (2012) reported that only around 5 per cent of social and personality psychologists are politically conservative (both as a broad descriptor and in relation to appraisals of specific policy positions). Noted psychologist Jonathan Haidt has discussed the same concern, and his Heterodox Academy, in these pages.

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Our 'liberal lean' is potentially damaging in two areas. First, as we're reviewing others' work we may intuitively appraise it more favourably if it corresponds to our worldview. Second, if we are speaking to students about a body of research that uniformly supports a particular political argument (e.g. that stereotype threat, rather than personal choice, drives gender-based differences in STEM subjects: Shapiro & Williams, 2012), this inevitably feeds into students' perceptions about not just how the world *is*, but also what they *should* do to change it.

Historical and cultural antecedents

In her 2008 book *A Nation of Wimps* Hara Estroff Marano begins to reveal some of the historical roots of the current campus-based striving for 'safety'. Marano explains how parents have, over the past 20 years, become more and more concerned with protecting their children from external harms. This trend is also discussed by Erica Burman in the latest edition of *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. From my own research, it's clear that this shift may stem in part from high-profile scandals involving serious (typically violent and sexual) offences against children (e.g. the Megan Kanka case in the US, and the Sarah Payne case in the UK).

Has this approach to protecting children from external harm translated into a tendency to try to protect them from any form of (physical or psychological) discomfort? In a 2014 paper located within the sociological literature, Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning argued that young people's emerging dependence on rules and structure (typically from parents as they grow up) as a source of certainty gives rise to a propensity to look to external agents to settle minor disputes. In this context, a sense of victimhood (as is a common theme in campus-based politics: Haidt, 2016) becomes virtuous – if you are a victim, you have a right to be protected, and your aggressor should be punished for their actions.

That being said, what is classified as 'aggression' is now also a topic of debate. The emergence of so-called 'micro-aggressions' (Sue et al., 2007) has begun to dilute what is classified under this label. Using this framework, subtle snubs, slights and insults that are perceived to implicitly communicate some degree of hostility or derogation are considered to be acts of aggression. Scott Lilienfeld's recent review of this area of work highlights a number of shortcomings, not least the fact that perceived micro-aggressions are just that – perceived on the part of the receiver.

Add to these ideas a cultural shift that is affecting the current generation of students: the ubiquity of online social media. With 88 per cent of young people regularly using Facebook, according to the Pew Research Center, social relationships are now increasingly being formed and maintained online. More specifically, around 60 per cent of these young people use Facebook as their primary source of news. While it's great that people have access to more information, this trend makes it easier than ever for people to become part of so-called 'echo chambers', where entire online social networks can be constructed around pure ideological principles and viewpoints (Bakshy et al., 2015). Instead of needing an external agent such as a parent or teacher to arbitrate interpersonal or ideological conflict, young people can now simply click a button to 'unfriend' people with whom they have such disagreements with.

The presence of these online echo chambers gives rise to an emerging personality construct that I'm currently researching – *offence sensitivity*. Due to a lack of political variety in our modern social networks, we are not learning the truth about *who* our political outgroups are, or how to deal with ideological disagreement. Naturally, this builds barriers to constructive political and intergroup relations.

Existing social psychological frameworks serve as a useful analogy for these phenomena. Gordon Allport's seminal intergroup contact hypothesis asserted that stereotypes and prejudice can be broken down through exposure to outgroup members. Without such contact, stereotypes are allowed to flourish, and perceptions (rather than realities) guide our judgements. However, with repeated exposure, automatic responses to outgroups can be broken down and replaced with new appraisals that are based on knowing these individuals.

Applying this framework to our existing political climate, we can see how liberals view 'right-wing' viewpoints as being inherently xenophobic in nature (due to particular media portrayals and accompanying self-perpetuating online discussions), while conservatives view 'left-wing' opinions as being grounded in a lack of national pride and emotional hysteria.

Opposing opinions thus become viewed and appraised through the lens of these stereotypes. Further, members of the ingroup are also aware of the stereotypes held about them by the other side, in line with stereotype threat theory (for a review, see Schmader et al., 2008). Both sides end up in a state of hypervigilance when negotiating contradictory opinions. In turn, this leads ingroups to feel like these viewpoints are personal attacks, and facilitates hostile responses being enacted.

Personal and social effects

I believe that our current cohorts of students have been raised in a social environment where protection from potential harm has been the order of the day. While this is certainly a good thing – particularly when considering the adverse psychological effects of experiencing physical, emotional or sexual abuse (Springer et al., 2003) – this protectionist trend may have permeated into a sense of entitlement to be free from any form of discomfort.

At the most fundamental level, it has been observed that this entitlement, coupled with the enactment of policies to prevent being confronted by events, information or any other stimuli that have the potential to trigger an adverse emotional response, is directly at odds with recommended practices to build psychological resilience and prevent mental ill health (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Using a classical conditioning paradigm, the use of gradual exposure to potentially triggering stimuli forms a part of trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy and is a recommended treatment option for post-traumatic stress disorder in the NICE clinical guidance.

What this means is that by 'coddling' those calling for safe spaces, we risk making their sensitivity to such stimuli worse. While these effects may not emerge in the short-term (if university campuses are sanitised of such triggering stimuli, then emotional distress will

Key sources

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not be triggered by these issues), this 'vindictive protectiveness' (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015) prevents students from developing the requisite level of psychological resilience to be able to confront such triggers when they emerge into the wider world.

Over time, repeated and reinforced emotional appraisals of individuals from different ideological standpoints become automatic and intuitive – consistent with Gawronski and Bodenhausen's (2011) associative-propositional model of attitudes. As our social networks become increasingly ideologically pure, our encounters with those who may have different viewpoints becomes more restricted. Thus when these contrary opinions are encountered, they are met by automatic negative appraisals – both in terms of the content of these opinions and of the individuals expressing them. Such emotional states then spread via 'contagion' (see del Vicario et al., 2016).

I contend that, viscerally, opinions that fundamentally challenge our view of how the world *ought to be* – particularly in relation to issues such as constitutional rights and intergroup relations involving societal minorities – lead to feelings of offence, which in turn contribute to hostile attributions and punitive responses being enacted towards those who express contrary opinions. With this in mind, the prevalence and severity of offence sensitivity may be found to vary within and between groups. Those who are more central to an ideological group may express such sensitivities in a more pronounced way than those who are more peripheral. Similarly, we might also see differences in the effects of offence sensitivity as a function of how extremely it manifests. For instance, it might be reasonable to predict that increased levels of offence sensitivity would be linked to more hostile attributions being made about those who express contrary opinions, with this in turn being associated with increased support for censorship (so-called 'cultural authoritarianism': Massey, 1992).

We might therefore expect offence sensitivity to peak at the extremities of the political spectrum, due to the level of emotional and moral investment that these individuals have in their ideological worldview. This prediction is in line with the horseshoe model of political orientation, where those at the far-left and far-right are psychologically closer to each other than they are to those in the political centre (see Jean-Pierre Faye's 2002 book *The Center of Politics*). From this hypothesised model, we can see how offence sensitivity, through a combination of ideological investment and hostile attributions of those expressing differing viewpoints, can contribute to increasing levels of political polarisation at a macro societal level.

'I've always been interested in politics. As a teenager I was a committed "progressive", and could not understand the views of those who disagreed with me on issues such as the welfare state, immigration and criminal justice reform. All this changed when I read Jonathan Haidt's 2012 book *The Righteous Mind*. After reading this book, I became committed to understanding the psychology behind different worldviews and ideologies. I'm now certain that intellectual diversity is vital to social progress and constructive debate, which is the reason I am a member of the Heterodox Academy, and encourage my students to consider issues from a range of different positions.'

Craig A. Harper
is at Nottingham Trent University
craig.harper@ntu.ac.uk

The way forward?

With these arguably damaging effects of offence sensitivity at both the personal and societal level, I would argue that it is appropriate to build psychological resilience into the university experience at every possible level. Rather than fostering a climate of political orthodoxy, it may be a positive move to provide students with the opportunity to engage in constructive (and potentially uncomfortable) political debates. Advancing this change is the reason that many academics (myself included) have joined the Heterodox Academy – an organisation that promotes the idea of viewpoint diversity in university classrooms. The aim of this movement is to expose students to a range of different opinions, and to encourage them to think about issues and debate people from different ideological persuasions. After all, the whole point of gaining a university education is to broaden your horizons – not to simply embrace a homogeneous view of the world.

We tend to follow American trends around 18 months after they take hold across the Atlantic. With this in mind, would it not be sensible to be proactive and begin to safeguard our institutions against such movements now? This might mean offending some students in the short term. However, by presenting a range of viewpoints in lecture halls and seminar rooms, we can together help to better prepare our students for life in the 'real world', where people might not be as accommodating of personal feelings when expressing their opinions as those in a more academic setting. Further, we can help to develop graduates with the potential to effectively communicate (and negotiate) with actors on both sides of the political spectrum, and who have the ability to have a real influence on the policy landscape as they develop through their careers.