

The Political Influence of Language and Free Speech

Recognizing the power of language has led to psychologists and intellectuals to question the extent of language's power, especially when under an oppressive force's control. Mostly in an academic setting, questioning the influence of white language supremacy and proper usage of terms such as "microaggression", demanding critical thinking in addressing these concepts. Lukainoff and Haidt's *"The Coddling of the American Mind"* concentrates on the rise of political correctness and the usage of language including trigger warnings and microaggressions leading to the detriment of both physical and mental health to university students today. Lukianoff and Haidt's argument is based on the assumption that free speech exists; yet, they both fail to recognize the economy behind free speech, or the lack of jurisdiction over the "free" aspect of free speech. Their arguments use opinion-based statements under the guise of concrete evidence, making them appear deceptive, encouraging an emotional response from the reader, rather than think critically about the situation. Using evidence from theorists Stanley Fish and Franz Fanon, free speech is actually hidden under the guise of white supremacy language, and has become a political tactic used by both liberals and conservatives to obtain control over language through favor from the general public.

According to *The Coddling of the American Mind*, trigger warnings and microaggressions contribute to the repression of professors' and well-educated adults' unalienable right of speech. Lukainoff and Haidt explain this with examples that display the effects of this movement to repress the right of speech across campuses. They also condemn the rise in behavior that has caused the growth in desire for censored material and courses from sensitive university students; in using opinion-based language, they attempt to persuade their audience to protest the use of trigger warnings and microaggressions in colleges and universities based on the conclusion that vindictive protectiveness is the reason for trigger warnings and microaggressions. However, both Lukainoff and Haidt fail to recognize that language used by the oppressor or someone in close proximity to whiteness can and will have an impact on an oppressed group. When Stanley Fish addresses the shakiness of the first amendment and free speech, he recognizes the consequences of how speech can be used. He quotes supreme court justice Elena Kagan, "Everything we do sends a message and everything we say has an effect... freedom of speech is not a discrete value," (Fish 6). This means that despite the objective principle behind freedom of speech granting security under the law, this does not guarantee the nonexistence of consequences from family, friends, or anyone else in proximity to the language used. In an example used in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, an Israeli born student is charged with racial harassment by their university for yelling at a group of black sorority women saying "shut up, you water buffalo". Arguing that in this student's country of origin, this phrase was mistakenly perceived as a racial slur, when it initially served to express his frustration with the black sorority members; Lukianoff and Haidt claim that this was one of the "absurd examples" of one of colleges' attempt to prevent harmful speech to women and minority groups. In this case, what Lukainoff and Haidt fail to do is recognize intersectionality in this example; black women are a double minority as they face discrimination in two areas: race and sex. Technicalities aside, the Israeli student used that language with intention to harm that group of

black sorority members. Instead of thinking critically about the situation, the authors failed to recognize how proximity to whiteness plays a significant role in the dynamic between the Israeli student and the group of black women. Despite exercising his right to free speech, some critical thinking would lead to the conclusion that the first amendment does not guarantee evasion from consequences previously mentioned by Stanley Fish. Lukainoff and Haidt's arguments and their credibility has been tainted with their usage of persuasive language and using opinion-based statements permit them as factual evidence to gaslight the audience into thinking that students are more motivated by politics than the preservation of their mental health.

The continuity of the concept that the oppressor's language has more power over the language of the oppressed, an interesting point made by Lukainoff and Haidt is the unfair power dynamic that comes from the phrase "I'm offended" that has been perceived by them as "an unbeatable trump card" that can opt any responsibility out of the party that was being offended. Yet this statement implies a power dynamic that doesn't exist in our current society, as the oppressed would never be able to find themselves on equal footing with their oppressor. Franz Fanon goes into detail about this dynamic, arguing that "... a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language," (Fanon 9). This also applies to other minorities as well, as anyone that has experienced oppression from white supremacy language has been subjected to learning how to navigate the world and assimilate to the demands of white supremacy.

In this pursuit of proximity to whiteness, Fanon argues that there is a loss of self specifically within the black man after putting on the 'white mask' and infiltrating in white spaces in hopes of being seen and respected by the white man. Leading to the inability of the black man to define himself out of proximity to whiteness; instead, he is trapped in an endless cycle to the white man's gaze which frames the black man and creates a hierarchy as well as superiority. What authors Lukainoff and Haidt fail to recognize due to their privilege as straight white men is the academic discrimination that students belonging in a minority group experience while attending university. When addressing microaggressions, they argue that the increased focus on microaggressions that are emotion-based would lead to the suppression of constructive conversations among campus members. However, in attempting to converse with their oppressor, a member of a minority group is oftentimes gaslit for voicing their discomfort with certain language to which the participant in the gaslighting can hide under the facade of 'discussion or debate'.

Lukainoff and Haidt also disregard the responsibility of academic institutions in subjecting their minority students to some fraction of microaggressions. In Asao B. Inoue's CCCC Chair's address transparently states that teachers and academic institutions "...perpetuate racism and white language supremacy..." simply by continuing to only accept the language of the oppressor as one with scholastic validity, as shown through rigid grading systems that punish students of color. The concept that white people can perpetuate white supremacy simply with their presence is why recognizing the plight of being a member of a marginalized group is necessary to understand the purpose of recognizing microaggressions in an academic setting. Lukainoff and Haidt also diminish the power of language by insinuating that those triggered by microaggressions need to practice 'emotional reasoning', as if it is a mere insult that can be brushed off. The reality is most microaggressions are rooted in severe racism and white supremacy and even if the comment was made without ill intent, the delivery is what causes the

most harm. Students that are minorities are constantly enduring harm from white supremacy, the least thing administration can do for these students is to recognize their position of power and work to recognize microaggressions.

Lukainoff and Haidt usage of Ad Hominem throughout *The Coddling of the American Mind* has them using examples that ranged from having partial to complete bias due to being derived from personal opinion and then using pathos to evoke emotion from the readers, which discourage critical thinking and using context for why colleges and universities have become hyper-sensitive to microaggressions and trigger warnings. The usage of diction such as “policing” creates a negative connotation, and increasing the thought that trigger warnings and microaggressions lead to depression and anxiety with little research done to support this. Their inability to recognize that speech has power and consequences, and that speech cannot be inherently ‘free’ as there are societal and academic consequences for individuals if they were to attempt to exercise their first amendment rights.

Works Cited

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