The Unwisest Idea on Campus: Commentary on Lilienfeld (2017)

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The term *microaggression* has swept through the academy in English speaking countries in the last two or three years. Lilienfeld (2017, this issue) has done the academy a great service in analyzing the concept and showing why it is not ready to serve as the scientific basis for new policies and programs being rolled out at many universities. In this commentary, I will extend Lilienfeld's analysis and show why the "microaggression program" (as I'll call the combination of theory and on-campus applications) is more damaging and less salvageable than Lilienfeld suggests. In fact, it may be the least wise idea one can find on a college campus today.

To write my first book, *The Happiness Hypothesis* (Haidt, 2006), I read a large number of ancient texts and extracted every psychological claim I could find. I organized ancient wisdom into 10 "great truths." It's hard to identify the one greatest truth of all time, but surely one of the top three most important, most generative, and most life-improving psychological insights, discovered by thinkers in all major civilizations, is the importance of appraisal:

> The whole universe is change and life itself is but what you deem it. (Marcus Aurelius, 1964; *Meditations*, 4:3)

> What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind. (Buddha, *The Dhammapada*, in Mascaro, 1973)

The ancients knew that we don't react to the world as it is; we react to the world as we construct it in our own minds. They also knew that in the process of construction we are overly judgmental and outrageously hypocritical; we urgently need to reduce our moral certainty and cultivate generosity of spirit:

> Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? . . . You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. (Matthew 7:3–5)

> It is easy to see the faults of others, but difficult to see one's own faults. One shows the faults of others like chaff winnowed in the wind, but one conceals one's own faults as a cunning gambler conceals his dice. (Buddha, *The Dhammapada*)

The microaggression program teaches students the exact opposite of ancient wisdom. Microaggression training is—by definition—instruction in how to detect ever-smaller specks in your neighbor's eye. Microaggression training tells students that "life itself is exactly what you think it is—you have a direct pipeline to reality, and the person who offended you does not, so go with your feelings." Of course, the ancients could be wrong on these points, but the empirical evidence for the importance of appraisal and the ubiquity of bias and hypocrisy is overwhelming (I review it in chapters 2 and 4 of *The Happiness Hypothesis*). As Lilienfeld shows, the empirical evidence supporting the utility and validity of the microaggression concept is minimal at best.

I think the section of Lilienfeld's article that should most make us recoil from the microaggression program is the section on personality traits, particularly negative emotionality and the tendency to perceive oneself as a victim. These are traits—correlated with depression and anxiety disorders—that some students bring with them from high school to college. Students who score high on these traits perceive more microaggressions in ambiguous circumstances. These traits therefore bring misery and anger to the students themselves, and these negative emotions and the conflicts they engender are likely to radiate outward through the students' social networks (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). How should colleges (and other institutions) respond to the presence of high scorers in their midst? Should they offer them cognitive behavioral therapy or moral validation? Should they hand

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them a copy of *The Dhammapada* or a microaggression training manual?

It's bad enough to make the most fragile and anxious students quicker to take offense and more self-certain and self-righteous. But what would happen if you took a whole campus of diverse students, who arrive from all over the world with very different values and habits, and you train all of them to react with pain and anger to ever-smaller specks that they learn to see in each other's eyes?

And what would happen if the rise of the microaggression concept coincided with the rise of social media, so that students can file charges against each other—and against their professors—within minutes of any perceived offense? The predictable result of welcoming the micro-aggression program to campus is turmoil, distrust, and anger. It is the end of the open environment we prize in the academy, where students feel free to speak up and challenge each other, their professors, and orthodox ideas. On a campus that polices microaggressions, everyone walks on eggshells.

And what will happen to a democracy as students graduate from college and demand that microaggression training be implemented in their workplaces? Might entire democracies be tipped into a state of constantly rising grievance mongering, mistrust, and demands for silencing the other side? If you think American democracy is polarized and dysfunctional in 2016, just wait until the baby boomers have aged out of leadership positions and the country is run by a millennial elite trained at our top schools, which immersed them in a microaggression program for 4 years.

Education should help students to cultivate wisdom. We can't teach wisdom directly, but we can teach habits of thinking, learning, and interacting that will, over time, make our students more nuanced in their thinking and more effective at dealing with each other and with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. An essential first step that every college should take is to renounce the microaggression program and discourage faculty and administrators from even using the term. Instead, colleges that care about fostering diversity and inclusion should ask themselves: How can we teach students to give each other the benefit of the doubt? How can we cultivate generosity of spirit?

One answer is to teach ancient wisdom instead of microaggression theory. (For an example of how schools can do this, please see the Heterodox Academy Viewpoint Diversity Reading list, at: heterodoxacademy.org/diversity-reading-list.)

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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