

a few forbidden words, including a racially charged word. And by doing so, I was accused of committing an act of racial violence.”

Kaminer, whose position on the issue has been critiqued, took issue with the idea that “offensive words” could be considered “the same as discrimination.” In her conversation with *HuffPost Live*’s Marc Lamont Hill, a Morehouse College professor, she defended her use of the word in the context of the discussion and spoke out against the so-called “censorship” to which academics have been subjected.[‡]

Do you think that even in an academic setting, using a racial slur to explain its function in literature is an instance of racial violence? If so, would

using the term to explain its offensiveness and hurtfulness also be unacceptable? If not, why not?

[‡]Rahel Gebreyes, “Author Wendy Kaminer Defends Her Use of a Racial Slur During a Free Speech Panel,” *HuffPost*, June 5, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/wendy-kaminer-racial-slur-free-speech_n_7521858.html. © 2015 Oath Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States. The printing, copying, redistribution, or retransmission of this content without express written permission is prohibited.

READINGS

Why It’s a Bad Idea to Tell Students Words Are Violence

JONATHAN HAIDT AND GREG LUKIANOFF

Of all the ideas percolating on college campuses these days, the most dangerous one might be that speech is sometimes violence. We’re not talking about verbal threats of violence, which are used to coerce and intimidate, and which are illegal and not protected by the First Amendment. We’re talking about speech that is deemed by members of an identity group to be critical of the group, or speech that is otherwise upsetting to members of the group. This is the kind of speech that many students today refer to as a form of violence. If Milo Yiannopoulos speaks on the University of California, Berkeley, campus, is that an act of violence?

Recently, the psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett, a highly respected emotion researcher at Northeastern University, published an essay in *The New York Times* titled, “When is speech violence?” She offered support from neuroscience and health-psychology research

for students who want to use the word “violence” in this expansive way. The essay made two points that we think are valid and important, but it drew two inferences from those points that we think are invalid.

First valid point: Chronic stress can cause physical damage. Feldman Barrett cited research on the ways that chronic (not short-term) stressors “can make you sick, alter your brain—even kill neurons—and shorten your life.” The research here is indeed clear.

First invalid inference: Feldman Barrett used these empirical findings to advance a syllogism: “If words can cause stress, and if prolonged stress can cause physical harm, then it seems that speech—at least certain types of speech—can be a form of violence.” It is logically true that if A can cause B and B can cause C, then A can cause C. But following this logic, the resulting inference should be merely that words can cause physical harm, not that words are violence. If you’re not convinced, just re-run the syllogism starting with “gossiping about a rival,” for example, or “giving one’s students a lot of homework.” Both practices can cause prolonged stress to others, but that doesn’t turn them into forms of violence.

Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, “Why It’s a Bad Idea to Tell Students Words Are Violence,” *The Atlantic*, July 18, 2017. © 2017 The Atlantic Media Co., as first published in *The Atlantic Magazine*. All rights reserved. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Feldman Barrett's second valid point lies in her argument that young people are antifragile—they grow from facing and overcoming adversity:

Offensiveness is not bad for your body and brain. Your nervous system evolved to withstand periodic bouts of stress, such as fleeing from a tiger, taking a punch or encountering an odious idea in a university lecture. Entertaining someone else's distasteful perspective can be educational. . . . When you're forced to engage a position you strongly disagree with, you learn something about the other perspective as well as your own. The process feels unpleasant, but it's a good kind of stress—temporary and not harmful to your body—and you reap the longer-term benefits of learning.

Feldman Barrett could have gone a step further: This "good kind of stress" isn't just "not harmful," it also sometimes makes an individual stronger and more resilient. The next time that person faces a similar situation, she'll experience a milder stress response because it is no longer novel, and because her coping repertoire has grown. This was the argument at the heart of our 2015 essay in *The Atlantic*, "The Coddling of the American Mind." We worried that colleges were making students more fragile—more easily harmed—by trying to protect them from the sorts of small and brief offensive experiences that Feldman Barrett is talking about.

Feldman Barrett then contrasted brief experiences of offensiveness with chronic stressors:

What's bad for your nervous system, in contrast, are long stretches of simmering stress. If you spend a lot of time in a harsh environment worrying about your safety, that's the kind of stress that brings on illness and remodels your brain. That's also true of a political climate in which groups of people endlessly hurl hateful words at one another, and of rampant bullying in school or on social media. A culture of constant, casual brutality is toxic to the body, and we suffer for it.

We agree. But what, then, are the implications for college campuses?

In Feldman Barrett's second invalid inference, she writes:

That's why it's reasonable, scientifically speaking, not to allow a provocateur and hatermonger like Milo

Yiannopoulos to speak at your school. He is part of something noxious, a campaign of abuse. There is nothing to be gained from debating him, for debate is not what he is offering.

But wait, wasn't Feldman Barrett's key point the contrast between short- and long-term stressors? What would have happened had Yiannopoulos been allowed to speak at Berkeley? He would have faced a gigantic crowd of peaceful protesters, inside and outside the venue. The event would have been over in two hours. Any students who thought his words would cause them trauma could have avoided the talk and left the protesting to others. Anyone who joined the protests would have left with a strong sense of campus solidarity. And most importantly, all Berkeley students would have learned an essential lesson for life in 2017: How to encounter a troll without losing one's cool. (The goal of a troll, after all, is to make people lose their cool.)

Feldman Barrett's argument only makes sense if Yiannopoulos's speech is interpreted as one brief episode in a long stretch of "simmering stress" on campus. The argument works only if Berkeley students experience their school as a "harsh environment," a "culture of constant, casual brutality" in which they are chronically "worrying about [their] safety." Maybe that is the perception of some students. But if so, is the solution to change the school or to change the perception?

Aggressive and even violent protests have erupted at some of the country's most progressive schools, such as Berkeley, Middlebury College, and Evergreen State College. Are these schools brutal and toxic environments for members of various identity groups? Or has a set of new ideas on campus taught students to see oppression and violence wherever they look? If students are repeatedly told that *numerical disparities are proof of systemic discrimination*, and a *clumsy or insensitive question is an act of aggression* (a "microaggression"), and *words are sometimes acts of violence that will shorten your life*, then it begins to make sense that they would worry about their safety, chronically, even within some of America's most welcoming and protective institutions.

We are not denying that college students encounter racism and other forms of discrimination on

campus, from individuals or from institutional systems. We are, rather, pointing out a fact that is crucial in any discussion of stress and its effects: People do not react to the world as it is; they react to the world as they interpret it, and those interpretations are major determinants of success and failure in life. As we said in our *Atlantic* article:

Rather than trying to protect students from words and ideas that they will inevitably encounter, colleges should do all they can to equip students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control. One of the great truths taught by Buddhism (and Stoicism, Hinduism, and many other traditions) is that you can never achieve happiness by making the world conform to your desires. But you can master your desires and habits of thought. This, of course, is the goal of cognitive behavioral therapy.

We wrote those words in early 2015. We were responding to stories from across the country about new demands that students were making for protection from the kinds of offensiveness that Feldman Barrett says are “not bad for your body or brain.” We explained why we thought that widespread adoption of trigger warnings, safe spaces, and microaggression training would backfire. Rather than keeping students safe from harm, a culture of “safety” teaches students to engage in some of the same cognitive distortions that cognitive-behavioral therapy tries to eliminate. Distortions such as “emotional reasoning,” “catastrophizing,” and “dichotomous thinking,” we noted, are associated with anxiety, depression, and difficulty coping. We think our argument is much stronger today, for two reasons.

First, our article was published in August of 2015, a few months before a wave of campus protests began at Missouri, Yale, and dozens of other schools. Those protesters usually demanded that their universities implement an array of policies designed to keep students “safer” from offense—policies such as microaggression training supplemented by the creation of systems for reporting and punishing microaggressors, along with the creation of more ethnic- or identity-based centers. We expect that these policies—whose effectiveness is not supported by empirical evidence—will, in the long run, lead students to feel even less

“safe” on campus than they did in 2015, because they may increase the number of offenses perceived while heightening feelings of identity-based division and victimization. Some evidence also suggests that diversity training, when not carefully and sensitively implemented, can create a backlash, which amplifies tensions.

Second, we wrote our article at a time that saw hints of a mental-health crisis on campuses, but no conclusive survey evidence. Two years later, the evidence is overwhelming. The social psychologist Jean Twenge has just written a book, titled *iGen* (which is short for “internet generation”), in which she analyzes four large national datasets that track the mental health of teenagers and college students. When the book is released in August, Americans will likely be stunned by her findings. Graph after graph shows the same pattern: Lines drift mildly up or down across the decades as baby boomers are followed by Gen-X, which is followed by the millennials. But as soon as the data includes iGen—those born after roughly 1994—the rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and suicide spike upward.

Is iGen so different from the millennials because the former faces more chronic, long-term stress? Have the country’s colleges suddenly become brutal, toxic places, increasingly hostile to members of various identity groups? Some would argue, as Twenge does, that social media changed the nature of iGen’s social interactions. But if social media is the biggest cause of the mental-health crisis then the solution lies in changing the nature or availability of social media for teenagers. Making the offline world “safer” by banning the occasional stress-inducing speaker will not help.

We think the mental-health crisis on campus is better understood as a crisis of resilience. Since 2012, when members of iGen first began entering college, growing numbers of college students have become less able to cope with the challenges of campus life, including offensive ideas, insensitive professors, and rude or even racist and sexist peers. Previous generations of college students learned to live with such challenges in preparation for success in the far more offense-filled world beyond the college gates. As Van Jones put it in

response to a question by David Axelrod about how progressive students should react to ideologically offensive speakers on campus:

I don't want you to be safe, ideologically. I don't want you to be safe, emotionally. I want you to be strong. That's different. I'm not going to pave the jungle for you. Put on some boots, and learn how to deal with adversity. I'm not going to take all the weights out of the gym; that's the whole point of the gym. This is the gym.

This is why the idea that speech is violence is so dangerous. It tells the members of a generation already beset by anxiety and depression that the world is a far more violent and threatening place than it really is. It tells them that words, ideas, and speakers can literally kill them. Even worse: At a time of rapidly rising political polarization in America, it helps a small subset of that generation justify political violence. A few days after the riot that shut down Yiannopoulos's talk at Berkeley, in which many people were punched, beaten, and pepper sprayed by masked protesters, the main campus newspaper ran five op-ed essays by students and recent alumni under the series title "Violence as self defense." One excerpt: "Asking people to maintain peaceful dialogue with those who legitimately do not think their lives matter is a violent act."

The implication of this expansive use of the word "violence" is that "we" are justified in punching and pepper-spraying "them," even if all they did was say words. We're just defending ourselves against their "violence." But if this way of thinking leads to actual violence, and if that violence triggers counter-violence from the other side (as happened a few weeks later at Berkeley), then where does it end? In the country's polarized democracy, telling young people that "words are violence" may in fact lead to a rise in real, physical violence.

Free speech, properly understood, is not violence. It is a cure for violence.

In his 1993 book *Kindly Inquisitors*, the author Jonathan Rauch explains that freedom of speech is part of a system he calls "Liberal Science"—an intellectual system that arose with the Enlightenment and made the movement so successful. The rules of Liberal

Science include: No argument is ever truly over, anyone can participate in the debate, and no one gets to claim special authority to end a question once and for all. Central to this idea is the role of evidence, debate, discussion, and persuasion. Rauch contrasts Liberal Science with the system that dominated before it—the "Fundamentalist" system—in which kings, priests, oligarchs, and others with power decide what is true, and then get to enforce orthodoxy using violence.

Liberal Science led to the radical social invention of a strong distinction between words and actions, and though some on campus question that distinction today, it has been one of the most valuable inventions in the service of peace, progress, and innovation that human civilization ever came up with. Freedom of speech is the eternally radical idea that individuals will try to settle their differences through debate and discussion, through evidence and attempts at persuasion, rather than through the coercive power of administrative authorities—or violence.

To be clear, when we refer to "free speech," we are not talking about things like threats, intimidation, and incitement. The First Amendment provides categorical exceptions for those because such words are linked to actual physical violence. The First Amendment also excludes harassment—when words are used in a directed pattern of discriminatory behavior.

But the extraordinary body of legal reasoning that has developed around the First Amendment also recognizes that universities are different from other settings. In a 2010 decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit—*Rodriguez v. Maricopa County Community College District*—Chief Judge Alex Kozinski noted "... the urge to censor is greatest where debate is most disquieting and orthodoxy most entrenched ..." then explained the special nature of universities, using terms that illustrate Rauch's Liberal Science:

The right to provoke, offend, and shock lies at the core of the First Amendment. This is particularly so on college campuses. Intellectual advancement has traditionally progressed through discord and dissent, as a diversity of views ensures that ideas survive because they are correct, not because they are popular. Colleges and universities—sheltered from the currents of popular opinion by tradition, geography, tenure and

monetary endowments—have historically fostered that exchange. But that role in our society will not survive if certain points of view may be declared beyond the pale.

In sum, it was a radical enlightenment idea to tolerate the existence of dissenters, and an even more radical idea to actually engage with them. Universities are—or should be—the preeminent centers of Liberal Science. They have a duty to foster an intellectual

climate that separates true ideas from popular but fallacious ones.

The conflation of words with violence is not a new or progressive idea invented on college campuses in the last two years. It is an ancient and regressive idea. Americans should all be troubled that it is becoming popular again—especially on college campuses, where it least belongs.

Restoring Free Speech on Campus

GEOFFREY R. STONE AND WILL CREELEY

Censorship in the academic community is commonplace. Students and faculty are increasingly being investigated and punished for controversial, dissenting or simply discomforting speech. It is time for colleges and universities to take a deep breath, remember who they are and reaffirm their fundamental commitment to freedom of expression.

The past academic year offers a depressing number of examples of institutions of higher education failing to live up to their core mission. At Northwestern University, for example, Professor Laura Kipnis endured a months-long Title IX investigation for publishing an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in which she discussed a high-profile sexual assault case. Just a few months later, her fellow professor, Alice Dreger, courageously resigned in protest over Northwestern's censorship of a faculty-edited medical journal.

In a similar vein, Louisiana State University fired Professor Teresa Buchanan after nearly two decades of service for her occasional use of profanity, which the university suddenly deemed "sexual harassment," and Chicago State University enacted a new cyberbullying policy to silence a blog that was critical of university leadership.

At Iowa State University, administrators censored T-shirts created by the university's student chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana

Laws. The Regents of the University of California are considering adopting a "Statement of Principles Against Intolerance" that would ban "derogatory language reflecting stereotypes or prejudice." Other institutions are considering banning so-called "micro-aggressions" or requiring "trigger warnings" to protect students from having to confront potentially upsetting ideas and subjects. Still others have withdrawn invitations to speakers who have taken positions that some members of the community find unpleasant, offensive or wrong-headed—a practice President Obama criticized this month, saying that leaving students "coddled and protected from different points of view" is "not the way we learn."

Restrictions on free expression on college campuses are incompatible with the fundamental values of higher education. At public institutions, they violate the First Amendment; at most private institutions, they break faith with stated commitments to academic freedom. And these restrictions are widespread: The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education's most recent survey of college and university policies found that more than 55 percent of institutions maintain illiberal speech codes that prohibit what should be protected speech. For students and faculty, the message is clear: Speaking your mind means putting your education or your career at risk.

Enough is enough. Our colleges and universities should redeem the promise of the new academic year by reaffirming their commitments to freedom of expression.

Geoffrey R. Stone and Will Creeley, "Restoring Free Speech on Campus," *Washington Post*, September 25, 2015. Reprinted by permission of the author.