

## **Academia's PC police**

By Nick Cater, The Australian, 18 August 2015

We are indebted to Sydney University's Wom\*n's Collective for an update on the sexually orientated minorities we should not offend.

It seems only yesterday that the initials LGBT — lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender — covered the range of predilections that might qualify for protected status.

### **LGBTQIA+**

Now we are told in a special Wom\*n's Edition of campus newspaper *Honi Soit* that we must extend our sensitivities to LGBTQIA+. Care should be taken to avoid hurting the feelings of anyone who identifies as queer (“all individuals who fall outside of gender and sexuality ‘norms’”), agender (“someone who identifies as a gender other than a binary gender”) and something beginning with I. Let's hope the expansion of the acronym has been halted with the addition of “+”. The paradox of minority politics is that once race, cultural identity, disability and gender are added to the list, the marginalised members of society form a comfortable - majority.

The few who remain, straight white males for example, are members of the kyriarchy, defined by the Wom\*n's Collective as “a set of connected social systems built around domination, oppression and submission; the intersecting structures of racism, sexism, ableism etc”.

Victimhood in today's universities is a position replete with privilege and status. It is a licence to take offence and thereby to shut down any argument that causes discomfort.

### **A demand for a confession, retraction, and apology**

“‘I'm offended’ is not an invitation to a debate but a demand for a confession, retraction, and apology,” *Claremont Review* editor Charles R. Kesler writes in a despondent editorial. “How different is the spirit of ‘I disagree’.”

Political correctness is back, if it ever went away, and is seeping out from universities into the broader culture.

Once-respectable bodies such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics are now mindful of causing offence. Three years ago the ABS slipped a trigger warning into its archived Commonwealth Year Books warning that they might contain “language or views which ... may be considered to be inappropriate or offensive today”.

Facebook, presumably in response to complainants, recently put a “graphic photo” trigger warning over an image of a gazelle being mauled by Cecil the Lion.

### **No right to appeal**

There is no right to appeal against the ad-hoc justice system that enforces these unwritten rules, yet the consequences of transgression, magnified by social media, can destroy reputations.

Consider the charge sheets written in the past three months. Our greatest Olympian, a woman of 78, is castigated as racist for her remarks about an ill-disciplined tennis player; booing a football player is condemned as “100 per cent racist”; Eddie McGuire is taken to task for calling Victoria’s Sports Minister John Eren “a Mussie”, yet if he’d called Fred Nile a Bible basher it no doubt would have been OK.

### **A linguistic weapon to silence opponents**

The days when it just seemed silly and sanctimonious are long gone. True character and purpose of political correctness is apparent to all; it is nothing less than “mental tyranny”, as Doris Lessing once called it, a linguistic weapon to silence opponents and enforce a dull conformity of the academic Left.

On a modern university campus one barely has to open one’s mouth to be in trouble. The PC police are now targeting “micro-aggression”, the casual humiliation of a minority group. Marginal transgressions of the rules of appropriate speech are handled as serious crimes by disciplinary tribunals.

At the University of California at Los Angeles, 25 students held a sit-in to protest against micro-aggressive grammatical corrections made by education professor Val Rust. A student who had capitalised the word indigenous in her research paper was alarmed to see it changed to a lower-case “i”.

Students accused Rust of contributing “to a hostile class climate” that was “part of a larger, institutionalised climate on campus.” Rust knew what he was up against and did not even try to fight back.

“I humbly dedicate myself to listening and to learning from this experience,” he told the *Examiner*. “Together, as a community, we will work towards just, equitable, and lasting solutions. Together, we shall heal.”

In the US, and presumably in the not too distant future in Australia, lecturers are required to issue “trigger warnings” before uttering anything that may conceivably cause a strong emotional response.

“Increasingly, professors must ask themselves not just ‘What is the best way to teach this material?’ but also ‘Might the most sensitive student in the class take offence if I say this, and then post it online, and then ruin my career?’” writes social psychologist Jonathan Haidt.

Don’t even joke about it. Comedian Chris Rock, who is black, as it happens, told *New York* magazine last year that he stopped playing gigs at colleges.

### **You can’t say ‘the black kid over there’**

“You can’t say ‘the black kid over there,’ he lamented. “No, it’s ‘the guy with the red shoes.’ You can’t even be offensive on your way to being inoffensive.”

The justification for such heavy-handed intervention is to create “safe spaces” that shield emotionally vulnerable students from anything that may make them feel uncomfortable.

Haidt and lawyer Greg Lukianoff label this excessive caution “vindictive protection”; it harms not just academic learning and the climate of free speech but, ultimately, the students themselves. “It prepares them poorly for professional life, which often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong,” they write in the latest *Atlantic Monthly* in an essay headlined “The Coddling of the American Mind”.

### **We encourage students to develop extra-thin skin**

“What are we doing to students if we encourage them to develop extra-thin skin in the years just before they leave the cocoon of adult protection and enter the workforce?” write Haidt and Lukianoff.

Trigger warnings and supposed micro-aggressions are, then, another way of cotton-wooling the kids.

The free-range childhoods enjoyed by any Australian over 40 have been shut down. Playgrounds have been sanitised, peanut butter banned from school lunches and, if the wowsers get their way, fast-food stores will carry the same restrictions as R-rated movies.

We appear to be overcome by “an epidemic of fragility”, writes Columbia University professor Todd Gitlin, yet learning cannot be conducted in a comfort zone.

“Discomfort drives education,” he writes. “Discomfort and its odd-duck partner, reason.”

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