

Campus Culture Wars and the Sociology of Morality

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Abstract

In 2014 Comparative Sociology published our analysis of microaggression complaints – a comparative and theoretical piece addressing microaggression complaints as a form of social control indicative of a distinct moral culture. The article attracted a surprising amount of attention in popular media, and with this attention came confusion and controversy. Here we respond to popular accounts of our work, addressing common criticisms and confusions as well as the sociological question of why the article produced such strong reactions. We conclude by clarifying the sociology of morality’s role in moral debates and suggesting ways that sociological knowledge can inform debate and guide reform.

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For a more extensive treatment of the subject, see our book [*The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars.*](#)

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Introduction

In December 2014 *Comparative Sociology* published “Microaggression and Moral Cultures” (Campbell and Manning 2014), in which we addressed the then-new phenomenon of university students and campus activists using online forums to publicize instances of so-called microaggressions – verbal slights and offenses that while individually minor and often unintentional were presented as evidence of the systematic oppression of minority groups. We described how aspects of the phenomenon corresponded to larger categories of conflict and social control, and how aspects of social structure explained why conflict and social control took on this form rather than some other. The article was an exercise in the comparative sociology of morality, arguing that what people find morally offensive and how they respond when offended vary enormously across different societies or parts of society. To this end it concluded by describing three different “moral cultures” – cultures of honor, cultures of dignity, and cultures of victimhood – each defined by a particular pattern of moral conflict and social control. We proposed that the last of these – victimhood culture – exists in its purest form on college campuses and is exemplified by microaggression complaints and other phenomena indicating a high sensitivity to intercollective slights and a tendency to handle such slights through public complaint.

The article has since attracted a great deal of popular attention. After moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt described and praised our work on his blog *The Righteous Mind* (Haidt 2015a), columnists at *The Atlantic* (Friedersdorf 2015a), *The New York Times* (Wayne 2015), *The Washington Post* (Barbash 2015), and elsewhere wrote pieces discussing it, *Time* published a piece in which we applied our argument to current campus controversies (Campbell and Manning 2015c), several radio programs (e.g., KABC Radio 2015; National Public Radio 2015) and an online podcast (*Art of Manliness* 2015) featured interviews with us, one of us took part in a panel discussion on the topic of microaggression and campus culture at UC Irvine (Southern California Public Radio 2015), and many interested readers corresponded with us privately. One result of this flurry of attention was a great deal of feedback on the article, as interested parties endorsed, critiqued, or extended aspects of our argument. The response was mostly positive, and even some of

the critics provided useful suggestions and astute observations. But there were also many misunderstandings of our argument and of the sociology of morality. In the following pages we address some of these misunderstandings, and we discuss how the patterning of the reactions to our article can itself be understood with the sociology of morality.

The Concept of Microaggression

Some responses to our work revolved around the concept of microaggression. Interviewers such as Matt Townsend of Brigham Young University Radio (2015) asked what counts as a microaggression and whether the term applies only to intentional offenses or unintentional ones. Some who contacted us about our work asked if microaggressions were on the rise or if they were “the new face of racism” (Watanabe and Song 2015).

We emphasize here that our subject matter is not why people commit offensive acts, but why acts are defined as offensive and what kinds of responses they will provoke. Our work is part of a long tradition in the sociology of morality that recognizes the enormous variability in what people define as morally wrong. From Emile Durkheim’s (1982; 1984) work on crime and legal sanctions, to the labeling theory of deviance (e.g., Becker 1963), to Donald Black’s (1976, 1998, 2011) theories of conflict and social control, sociologists have long recognized that what people treat as deviant varies enormously across time and place. In the contemporary United States, for instance, shaving one’s beard is not wrong, but in Afghanistan under the Taliban, it was both a sin and a crime. Virtually anything can be deviant, and even when people in two settings agree that something is morally wrong, the degree of offense it provokes – its moral seriousness – can vary enormously. An act such as adultery or blasphemy may be a mere peccadillo in one setting but a capital crime in another. The offensive conduct might also be conceptualized in different ways – as a damage to be repaid, a crime to be punished, a sin to be expiated, a social disruption to be repaired, or a symptom of illness in need of cure (Black 1976:4-6). And all of this variation happens even at much smaller scales within the same nation or time period as ways of defining and responding to wrongdoing vary across settings, relationships, and interactions. The same violent act that is dismissed as mere roughhousing between two juvenile siblings might be classified as the

crime of assault if it occurs between adult strangers. Conduct that wins praise on the streets of the inner city would produce condemnation in a corporate boardroom. And a question that seems perfectly innocent to a coethnic might be taken as a subtle gibe when spoken to someone from another cultural group. This sort of variation is at the heart of the comparative sociology of morality.

Moral variation of this kind is well illustrated in the labeling of behaviors as microaggressions. What makes a word or deed a microaggression is only that someone takes offense and conceptualizes it as such. Perusing the list of words and actions that have been referred to as microaggressions reveals that anything from asking people where they are from, to correcting a student's spelling, to using the term "politically correct" might be called a microaggression (Barbash, 2015; Flaherty 2013; Hasson 2015b). Even microaggression complaints themselves can be microaggressions. Microaggression is that which is so labeled.

This is not to say that no words or deeds are objectively likely to cause offense. Every society has statements widely known to be insults. And many microaggression complaints deal with acts that most people would agree are deviant – insulting, offensive, or at least socially awkward. But such deviance, particularly if unintentional, is usually conceptualized differently – as rudeness, tactlessness, ignorance, or as a lack of social skills. Journalist Megan McArdle (2015) observes that "the debate over microaggressions often seems to focus on whether they are real." "This is silly," she says, because "they've always been real; only the label is new." But the new label is important, as it indicates a new way of conceptualizing and handling the offense. It is no longer the fleeting offense of one individual against another, but something that illustrates and perpetuates the long-term oppression of an entire social group. It is also something that, even if completely unintentional, is classified as a species of aggression – acts of intentional hostility commonly seen as more serious than accidental affronts. The offense is severe – an act of victimization that demands serious redress and that is a matter for public complaint and official action. This way of defining and responding to deviant behavior is distinct from complaining about mere rudeness, and it suggests the workings of a distinct moral culture.

The Concept of Moral Culture

The concept of moral culture also attracted much commentary and criticism. For example, on Haidt's (2015a) *Righteous Mind* blog, commenter Sarah asks about whether all three cultures we discuss – honor, dignity, and victimhood culture – are actually distinct moral systems, and Steve Ruble wonders “what the objective evidence for an actual shift in the cultural moral code would look like.” Other critics point out that the types of conflict and social control we use to characterize a particular moral culture are not universal within the societies to which we attach the label. For instance, moral philosopher Regina Rini (2015) and science fiction author Nick Wolven (2015) both point out that the violent retribution we identify as a defining characteristic of honor cultures is not something that was accessible to all members of those societies. Thus in most honor settings women are not able or expected to pursue their grievances through violent aggression, and so their grievances – a large proportion of those that occur in the society – must be handled otherwise. Likewise, Rini notes that even in societies with the stable systems of law that are conducive to dignity culture, some segments of the populace may be excluded from legal protections. A related point is that patterns of behavior we describe as characteristics of one moral culture might be found in others as well. For example, oppressed people throughout history might have complained of slights from the majority in ways that resemble modern microaggression complaints (Rini 2015, Wolven 2015).

Here we must clarify that in our usage “moral culture” is a shorthand way of describing patterns of conflict and social control that are more frequent in one social setting than in another. We of course recognize that the societies we label as sharing the same sort of moral culture are not internally homogeneous. Even within an honor culture, for example, there will be immense variation in what sparks conflicts and how they are handled. Not every conflict in an honor culture involves people taking violent retribution for slights against their social stature; nor does every insult in an honor culture provoke violence. But such patterns will be more prevalent than in a dignity culture. Indeed, what we are drawing attention to in our discussion of these moral cultures is what is most distinctive about the moral life of different settings – not what is most typical. The practice of dueling in

the antebellum U.S. South and elsewhere is a classic example of honor culture not because it was the most common way of handling conflict in these locations, but because it is a pattern that is largely confined to these locations and that distinguishes them from contemporary middle class suburbs and college campuses. The same could be said for the practice of complaining to the public or to authorities about microaggressions. It might not be typical of how conflicts are handled on college campuses in the contemporary U.S., even those where the phenomenon is most frequent, but it is distinctive.

Such distinctiveness, of course, is a matter of degree. As we note in a response to commenters posted on *The Righteous Mind* blog:

Certainly many of the things we identify as characteristic of victimhood culture can be seen in the past. Just about every society in history has had people complaining and appealing to third parties. For that matter, just about every society has had violent aggression, direct negotiation, tolerance, avoidance, and so forth . . . But we doubt college students today are as likely to worry about maintaining a reputation for toughness and pugnacity as young men in the antebellum South, and they're certainly less likely to fight duels. Similarly, we think they are more likely than young people 50 or 60 years ago to complain to the public or to authorities about being hurt by offensive remarks. (Campbell and Manning 2015b)

The question is one of the relative prominence of certain patterns of deviance and social control. Has a pattern of moral life become prominent enough to engender new terminology, such as "microaggression"? Has it given rise to widely known folk sayings, such as "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me"? Has it been enshrined in written codes of conduct, such as manuals of dueling etiquette or rules prohibiting offensive speech? Others might disagree on how to classify such variation, preferring to divide, merge, or completely replace the categories we employ. But the variation will remain.

We also emphasize that the concepts of honor and dignity are not our original creations. There exists a large volume of work by anthropologists, psychologists, and social historians on the concept of honor (Cooney 2012). Many have contrasted honor and dignity by examining the decline of classical honor and rise of dignity as evidenced

by increased disapproval of and the eventual extinction of dueling, the greater persistence of honor norms in Southern U.S. culture as evidenced by greater support for moralistic violence than in the U.S. North, and by conducting experimental studies displaying that people from honor- and dignity-based cultures have different reactions to slights and different ways of judging character (e.g., Ayers 1984:Chapter 1; Nisbett and Cohen 1996; Leung and Cohen 2011). Those who seek more evidence of changing moral systems earlier in Western history can begin with the works we cite, in our original article and here.¹

Our concept of victimhood culture, on the other hand, lacks such an extensive pedigree. Though we are likely not the first to use the term, our definition of this culture – as one “in which individuals and groups display high sensitivity to slight, have a tendency to handle conflicts through complaints to third parties, and seek to cultivate an image of being victims who deserve assistance” (Campbell and Manning 2014) – is an original creation we developed to contrast the patterns of conflict and social control we saw on several college campuses with the patterns that prevail in other times and places. And it is this concept that attracted the most controversy of all.

The Concept of Victimhood Culture

Some criticisms of the concept of victimhood culture are along the lines discussed above, questioning whether the phenomena we identify by that term are new enough and prevalent enough to merit being described as a new or distinct moral culture. Writing in *New York Magazine*, Jesse Singal goes so far as to propose that not only is there little new about the microaggression complaints we take as examples of this moral culture, but whatever is new about them is likely just a passing moral fad, with neither the widespread distribution nor the longevity to merit being called a new kind of moral culture. The fad, he argued, had already fizzled, and recent pushes at universities to address microaggressions only mean “some university administrations seem to have flown off the rails a bit” (Singal 2015). To this we can only say that

1 They might also explore works investigating the continued importance of family and personal honor in the contemporary Islamic world (e.g., Cooney 2014) or among young men in poor black neighborhoods (e.g., Leovy 2015), and the moral clashes between these cultures and those of the Western middle class.

if this moral culture is a fad, it is one that is still going strong.

Victimhood Culture on College Campuses

Some of the microaggression websites we discussed in the article are now inactive, but students on Twitter and in other forums still make microaggression complaints. Indeed, the same sensitivity to slight that gives the term microaggression such widespread currency has given rise to new jargon for describing more specific kinds of verbal oppression. For instance, the term sweat shaming, pointing out a woman's sweatiness (Moyer 2015a), and many other variants were recently added to the more familiar slut shaming and body shaming (Peters 2013). Another new kind of offense is cultural appropriation. At the University of Ottawa, concerns about the appropriation of Indian culture led to the cancellation of a yoga class for the disabled (Moyer 2015b). And after complaints from students, Clemson University recently apologized for the "Maximum Mexican" event held by the school's cafeteria, at which the staff wore sombreros and served Mexican food (Hasson 2015).

Along with the sensitivity to slight goes a tendency to handle conflicts through appeals to third parties. Sometimes appeals to third parties may simply be a matter of seeking support and validation from one's social media network and other distant sympathizers, but for campus activists the focus is often on compelling authoritative action from administrators. For example, the student government of Ithaca College has called for the school to create an electronic microaggression reporting system (Popp 2015). And increasingly officials have become involved to some extent. For example, the University of California system has begun teaching faculty to avoid microaggressions, including "I think the most qualified person should get the job" and "America is a melting pot," and its regents have considered a policy guaranteeing everyone at the university the right to be free from "expressions of intolerance" (Volokh 2015a; 2015b).

Students might also try to shame authorities into taking stronger measures. At the University of Missouri, the president and chancellor both resigned in the face of student protests accusing them of not taking sufficient action when African American students reported being the target of racial slurs (Gaude, Jr. 2015; Severn 2015). Failing to take drastic action against these verbal oppressors made these officials oppressors in their own right, according to students who appealed to

still higher authorities and public opinion at large to pressure them out of their jobs.² Notably, one protester resorted to a hunger strike – a tactic that, as we discussed in our original article, wins sympathy from others by victimizing the self. And win sympathy it did, as the conflict drew the attention of the governor of Missouri and sparked protests at colleges across the U.S. (Hartcollis and Bidgood 2015). It may have even inspired a student at Claremont McKenna College in California to threaten a hunger strike when offended by an email written by the school’s dean, who quickly offered her resignation when accused of verbally victimizing the school’s Latina population (Margolis 2015).

Professors Erika and Nicholas Christakis of Yale University did not immediately resign when students accused them of creating an “unsafe space” for questioning whether the university should be involved in regulating potentially offensive Halloween costumes, but Nicholas did respond to protests and demands for his resignation by offering an apology in which he said he had “disappointed” the students who took offense when he attempted to engage them in dialogue about the issue rather than endorsing their grievances (Worland 2015; Stanley-Becker 2015). The targets of complaints often capitulate in this manner and sometimes themselves endorse further regulation from above. One student sanctioned for wearing a culturally insensitive Halloween costume, for example, stated that he agreed the university should do more to regulate what costumes students wear (Coyne 2015), while professors at Occidental College are at the time of this writing considering implementing a system enabling students to accuse them of microaggressions (Soave 2015).

Victimhood as Moral Status

Other criticisms, however, are less concerned with the existence of this culture than the way we conceptualize and describe it. For example, after publishing a piece in *The Atlantic* about our article, journalist Conor Friedersdorf wrote several follow-up pieces discussing readers’ reactions (2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2015d). One of these gave voice to

2 Among the protestors demands were that the president “acknowledge his white male privilege,” and one result of the uproar was that campus police now urge students to call them in cases where someone uses racial slurs (Severn 2015; Nelson 2015).

the critics of our concept of victimhood culture, most of whom take umbrage at the term itself and its juxtaposition to honor and dignity. One reader calls it “tenuous and capricious,” and says our labeling of the culture “is itself a microaggression,” actually “closer to a real aggression” because “it seeks to diminish our voices to ones without ‘honor’ and ‘dignity.’” Another says that we “have chosen very positive words in ‘dignity’ and ‘honor’ as well as a rather charged, potentially negative one in ‘victimhood.’” Still another says, “‘Honor’ is a good thing. ‘Dignity’ is a good thing. ‘Victimhood’ is not” (quoted in Friedersdorf 2015d).

These criticisms and others like them (e.g., Mukhopadhyay 2015) suggest a confusion about our use of the term victimhood. Each moral culture we discuss emphasizes a particular kind of moral status. Honor is a status that comes from a public reputation for physical bravery and that others can destroy through insults or slights. Dignity is a status said to inhere in all humans and that cannot be taken away by others, though it can perhaps be diminished by failure to recognize one’s own inherent worth and act accordingly. As with other features of these moral cultures, these differences in emphasis are a matter of degree. For example, physical bravery is a virtue almost everywhere, but it has an exaggerated importance in honor cultures. It is in honor cultures that it becomes much easier to be labeled a coward, and more fateful. Men might then ignore competing virtues – such as peacefulness, prudence, and charity – as they violently defend their honor. It is not necessarily that honorable people do not value these things. They may even have some conception of dignity – the inherent worth of all persons. But these values and beliefs might not be enough to prevent them from worrying about their public reputation or violently attacking those who threaten it.

We posit that victimhood is a kind of moral status based on suffering and neediness, something that makes one sympathetic and deserving of help and concern. Like honor and dignity, this form of status exists in a wide variety of contexts, though it plays a much greater role in some than in others. Those involved in a culture of victimhood might also value dignity and perhaps even elements of honor. But to a greater degree than elsewhere they emphasize the moral worth that victims have and their allies might share in, but that oppressors and those who are blind to their privilege do not.

That this form of status exists is certain. Usually people gain or

lose moral status when they receive commendation for praiseworthy behavior or condemnation for deviant behavior (Black 1976:111-112; Cooney 2009:110-111). But it is easy to see why similar processes would lead people to esteem those who are the targets of deviant behavior, even if they have done nothing praiseworthy. Holding the victim of an offense in higher regard can be a way of reversing the harmful effects of the offense or otherwise expressing our condemnation of the offense and our empathy for the victim. We might go out of our way to be good to those who have “been through a lot” in an attempt to compensate for their suffering or because we hesitate to add to it. We may be quicker to notice or exaggerate their good qualities and slower to point out their flaws. We may be slower to accept criticisms against them and quicker to side with them against their enemies.

The moral status of victims varies substantially across social settings. In honor cultures, being harmed or oppressed can be a source of shame. To outsiders, the degree to which victims attract condemnation rather than sympathy might be shocking. For example, in some honor settings, a rape victim might be executed by her own kin because public knowledge of her victimization has so damaged the family’s honor (e.g., Hall 2015).³ Picture the opposite extreme: a setting in which there is a high level of deference to and concern for those who have been hurt, oppressed, or in any way disadvantaged. Certainly any offense against them would seem especially odious, as would any failure to fully take their side in the conflict. We might condemn banter that makes them uncomfortable as a species of *microaggression*. We would worry that exposure to any reminders of their oppression would *trigger* their trauma. We might condemn any suggestion that their own actions contributed to their victimhood as morally offensive *victim blaming*.

3 This is certainly an alien form of morality to many campus activists and their sympathizers, who are more likely to view someone who publicly talks about being sexually assaulted as a hero for bringing attention to the problem, and to vilify anyone who questions her story as a rape apologist who furthers the structural oppression of women. In dignity cultures, victimization is, on average, closer to being morally neutral. Some kinds of victimization (including rape) sometimes still carry stigma, but it is not as extreme as in honor culture. Other kinds or instances will generate concern and sympathetic deference, but not to the degree found in victimhood cultures.

We certainly would not minimize their victimhood or contest their definition of the situation by telling them to be thick skinned, to ignore slights, and to interpret others' actions in the best possible light. We might instead demand that authorities do something to protect them from all of these threats and remedy their situation, perhaps by creating *safe spaces*. And those who see themselves as oppressed might agree, urging others to be conscious of their *privilege*, circumspect in their words, and to take action on their behalf.

Of course this describes the environment of college campuses today. This is the pattern of moral life – hunger strikes over racial slurs, protestors demanding a president admit his privilege, calls for safe spaces and trigger warnings to protect minorities and victims of traumatic experiences – that we call victimhood culture, and we use that term to highlight the fact that the moral status of the victim is greater than in other social settings. Note that this does not mean people in these settings completely reject dignity or even honor – again, we are talking about a matter of degree.⁴ Still, we believe this is the best term to describe the phenomena we are talking about and to make the kind of comparisons that are central to our argument.

Alternative terminology might cause less offense, but suggested alternatives tend to evince a misunderstanding either of our argument or of the culture in question. One of Friedersdorf's (2015d) correspondents suggests *empathy culture*, for example, but empathy is more an expression of the ideals of dignity, which emphasize the equal worth of everyone. The empathy encouraged in a victimhood culture is directed toward designated victims and is in fact closely joined to disdain for their oppressors. We see this in what Greg Lukianoff and

4 Critics who complain of an asymmetry in our labeling should consider the possibility that an honorable person who also has some notion of dignity would likely take offense being told they are not part of a "dignity culture," thinking that one is making a judgment about their inherent worth. They might even think this perceived insult dishonors them as well. In the early phases of dignity culture, someone who vehemently opposed the practice of dueling would not necessarily have argued that honor was unimportant, or that they valued honor less than the duelists. Rather, they might have argued that honor should not depend on public reputation or be defended by force. They might thus have been highly offended if described as lacking honor, even while they used that term in a way that matches our definition of dignity.

Jonathan Haidt (2015) refer to as “vindictive protectiveness,” the idea that students need to be shielded from discomfort and that punishment is in order for anyone who interferes with that goal. An empathy culture, we assume, would encourage empathy for police, professors, university presidents, Mormons, whites, hedge fund managers, evangelicals, gun owners, coal miners, Southerners, men, and many others in addition to Asians, blacks, Latinos, women, LGBTs, and others who make it onto the microaggression lists.⁵

Solidarity culture, proposed by Rini (2015), is no better. She says the culture of solidarity is ancient, that it has always been the culture of the oppressed, but she does not actually put forth an argument that the oppressed ever were or are now more solidary than other groups. Are the adherents of the culture more solidary than, say, kinship groups in tribal societies or military or police units in modern societies? She might have in mind the use of phrases such as “in solidarity” by some groups of activists, but the fact that someone ends an email this way is not an indicator of high solidarity. It is more likely a low-cost action to associate oneself with some cause, such as endorsing an opinion on social media – exactly the kind of minimal collectivization that occurs when solidarity is relatively low. And as we argue in our article, it is social atomization, not solidarity, that leads people to turn to social media as a venue for expressing their grievances to a wide array of strangers.

Since we are not abandoning our terminology, let us be clear: Our conception of victimhood as moral status does not imply anything about the motives or psychology of those who claim to have been hurt

5 For example, the University of California faculty training document that law professor Eugene Volokh (2015a) discusses lists 52 possible micro-aggressions. Almost all specify one or more groups as the victims. These are Asian Americans, blacks, Latinos, LGBT persons, Native Americans, people of color, women, and (in only one example) the blind. The ones for which the document does not specify a victim are mostly general empirical or political statements – for example, “Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough,” “Affirmative action is racist,” or the aforementioned “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.” These can presumably be microaggressions no matter whom they are addressed to, but the same logic is at work: Statements opposing affirmative action are microaggressions, but not statements supporting affirmative action, even though either position might offend those who disagree.

by others. To say that being recognized as a victim raises one's moral status does not imply that any particular victim is cynically taking advantage of this fact. It does not imply that any particular victim sought out or enjoys whatever status victimhood conveys. Nor does it imply that this status outweighs any other disadvantages they might have. But it does recognize that being able to attract sympathy, support, and praise is a kind of social resource – a form of status.

Likewise, when we speak of a victimhood culture as one in which aggrieved individuals are more likely to portray themselves as victims and emphasize their oppression, we are not saying that these grievances are not legitimate or that anyone who points out their marginality is being dishonest. Many who advertise their disadvantage or neediness are factually correct about their situation. But it is still of sociological interest that they would advertise it in this fashion, when in other settings they might hide such things or at least not emphasize them to the same degree. Whatever terminology we use, we can ask why the moral life of today's college campuses varies from what is found elsewhere.

The Structural Explanation

Focusing on our classification of moral cultures, most critics have neglected the fact that our article was an exercise in explanatory sociological theory. Drawing from previous theory and research on conflict and social control, we proposed relationships between elements of social structure and the features of microaggression complaints. Our work utilized a strategy developed by sociologist Donald Black (1976, 1995, 2011) that uses the social structure of a conflict – such as the relative status of and social distance between disputants and third parties – to explain how conflicts are handled and that uses the structure and fluctuation of human relationships to explain why conflicts erupt in the first place and why some are more serious than others. We even note in our conclusion that the moral cultures we identify are not free-floating ideas, but rather products of social conditions, including the degree of inequality between the disputants and the presence, status, and social distance of third parties.

It is thus somewhat ironic that some who criticize our conception of moral cultures do so by making valid sociological points that are compatible with this framework. Rini (2005), for example, emphasizes

that duels were fought between men of equal standing, and that structural inferiors could not challenge distant superiors in the same way – for example, an African American slave could not challenge a plantation owner to a duel. She is certainly correct that highly stratified conflicts are handled differently than those between equals, and that many types of honor conflict are more likely among the latter.⁶ The stratified nature of complaints helps explain why peasants and slaves throughout history have resorted to covert or non-confrontational ways of handling grievances, such as theft, property destruction, running away, and even self-injury (Baumgartner 1984). Rini also makes the intriguing claim that what we call victimhood culture has always been the moral culture of the oppressed. We think this is partly true – that the poor, ethnic minorities, and others marginal to mainstream society have always had many of the complaints now conceptualized as microaggressions. Furthermore, upward grievances – what M. P. Baumgartner (1984) calls “social control from below” – are often handled with appeals to third parties or with tactics (such as self-mutilation or fasting) that emphasize or increase the low stature of the aggrieved (see also Manning 2012; 2015:158).

Rini is correct to identify these similarities, and the extent of continuity between oppressed cultures of the past and what we see now coming from campus activists is a worthwhile topic of investigation. But recall again that victimhood culture is a matter of degree, and we do see a difference between the culture of the oppressed in highly stratified settings and what is happening on college campuses. Slaves and peasants rarely stage public protests, shout complaints from the town square, or post lists of accumulated slights and offenses in public view.⁷ Women

6 Rini is likewise correct that, even in settings where honor has subsided, dignity ideals have proliferated, and people tend to turn to courts to handle severe conflicts, those on the bottom of the social scale may be denied access to law. This helps explain why, as we note in our article, enclaves of honor exist in poor and minority communities, where law is often weak or distrusted (see Cooney 1998:Ch.2, Leovy 2015).

7 The extreme inequality and upward nature of the grievance undermines the degree of partisanship to such an extent that the aggrieved do little to seek it. It also makes the slow partisanship of settlement by legal authorities virtually impossible – what Southern court would ever accept a slave’s case against his master? As Rini inadvertently suggests in her concept of “silent witnessing,” the involvement of third parties in such cases rarely goes beyond gossiping and grumbling to one’s close associates.

in rural Afghanistan do not lecture men in their village on the evils of mansplaining, sweat shaming, and male privilege. Closer to conflict in the contemporary U.S., the African American civil rights movement did not involve a departure from the ideals of dignity, particularly not the injunction to ignore unintentional slights. No oppressed group seems to have developed a full-fledged culture of victimhood, and this is not surprising given our theory. We see the culture as arising where people are atomized, equal, and diverse, and where they have access to authoritative settlement and many weak ties. Historically few disempowered people have lived in such settings. Also consistent with our theory is the fact that the current culture of victimhood does not emanate from those in our society who are most disempowered, but from the relatively privileged – mostly students at highly selective universities and some white collar urban professionals.

The structural relationships we propose are what make our article an exercise in the sociology of morality and what gives our work its widest significance and applicability. The question is not so much whether or not any other social location in human history has produced anything resembling victimhood culture; the question is whether, when one sees these patterns of conflict and social control in other times and places, they occur under the structural conditions we describe.

The Appeal of the Article

Why did an exercise in the sociology of morality attract so much attention? We believe part of the answer lies in victimhood culture's rapid rise to prominence in recent years. We have spent our entire adult lives at universities, as students and then professors, and we had never heard of microaggressions before early 2013 or trigger warnings before early 2014. Almost no one had. Campus activists have since had major successes, and their concepts and practices have gained much wider currency. Microaggression, McArdle (2015) notes, was "an offense most of us didn't even know existed" that "suddenly we were all afraid of being accused of." Such rapid change is often as interesting as it is confusing. To those who interact with victimhood culture but are not fully immersed in it, the subject is close enough to be relevant but distant enough to be strange and in need of explanation (Black 2000). Indeed, for many, especially those outside of the academy, the more extreme manifestations of victimhood culture must seem like

the manners and customs of some foreign land. The conflicts that arise as campus activists encounter opposition and detractors are also interesting, perhaps bewildering.

Those seeking to understand this new culture or contextualize campus debates had little available to help them. The academic articles by proponents were little more than propaganda, while the polemics of opponents offered condemnation without insight. Many were hungry for a better understanding of what was going on, and our contribution was to place the debate in a larger context. Those who had strong moral reactions to the focus on minor slights could now see this as an alternative morality, one with its own logic, that in this respect resembled the honor cultures of the past. They could better understand their own views, too, as emanating from the ideals of dignity, which had replaced honor in the past and now conflicted with the newer culture of victimhood.

Clearly, many commentators saw intellectual value in our work and welcomed a comparative analysis that provided tools for understanding current moral conflicts. To some extent, critical responses occurred for the same reason, as readers found our questions important but our answers insufficient. But why has so much of the criticism focused on our concept of victimhood culture? Why do some commenters apparently see it as pejorative and our work as morally offensive, to the point of accusing us of “real aggression” against others (Friedersdorf 2015d)?

Sociology as Deviance

People rarely try to explain why people hold beliefs and positions they think are correct. We believe in something because it is true, and it is only the errors of those we disagree with that need explaining (Bloor 1976). Any attempt to scientifically explain one’s own closely held beliefs and strong moral reactions might thus seem not only bizarre but almost sacrilegious. Our morality is sacred, and subjecting it to sociology can be an act of serious deviance.

Reactions to the sociology of morality, just like reactions to other deviant behaviors, vary across moral cultures. For instance, we might expect those in victimhood settings to be especially likely to take offense to such analysis and more likely to describe the offense as a kind of

aggression against a disadvantaged group.⁸ Beyond sensitivity to slight, though, there are two particular aspects of victimhood culture that we believe make our analysis especially unwelcome among supporters.

The Cultural Contradictions of Victimhood

We note above that several commenters took offense to our conception of victimhood as social status. We believe this was partly based on a misunderstanding, and we have attempted to clarify what we mean by this concept. But we suspect there is a deeper reason the concept causes such consternation: Inherent tensions – cultural contradictions – arise from the attempt to elevate victims and denigrate their oppressors. Coming to the aid of the disadvantaged reduces their disadvantage, at least slightly. That is, victimhood culture entails partisanship toward perceived victims, and the ability to attract partisans is a kind of advantage in a conflict. But to acknowledge this is to undermine the Manichean distinction between victims and oppressors that characterizes the culture. It might seem strange, but the campus activists thus fail to account for their own efficacy in the settings they inhabit. As those activists mobilize on behalf of those they see as oppressed, universities begin to implement many of the policies they push for, and many others adopt their moral framework. In these settings victimhood becomes increasingly attractive. How could it be otherwise?

Perhaps the adherents of victimhood culture experience cognitive dissonance from their conferral of status on victims. If so they must experience much more as they lower the statuses of those they see as oppressors or as the privileged. Just as supporting victims confers some advantage on them, punishing their victimizers or restricting their behavior confers some disadvantage. This is an inevitable consequence of this kind of culture, but it is such a challenge to the culture's core ideals that victimhood adherents have developed a specialized vocabulary defining offenses in a way that prevents speaking of members of dominant groups as victims. They might define racism so that blacks by definition cannot ever be racists or whites victims

8 As English professor Alexander Reid (2015) puts it, “In an all-too-predictable social media irony, the response to Friedersdorf’s first article is to claim injury over the microaggression in the term ‘victimhood culture.’”

of racism (Neff 2015), sexism so that women cannot be sexist or men victims of sexism (Davoran 2015), and even censorship so that “the oppressed by definition cannot censor their oppressor” (Dean-Johnson et al. 2015). That these terms have different meanings outside of these circles illustrates another reason why our analysis might be especially deviant.

The Unconventionality of Victimhood Culture

The reason has to do with the relative newness and unconventionality of victimhood culture. The new morality is not universally accepted even on the campuses where it is most influential, and it is even more unconventional elsewhere. Most extreme among some segments of the far left, it is criticized not only by conservatives but also by moderates and liberals such as Jonathan Chait (2015), Amitai Etzioni (2014), Jonathan Haidt (2015), Greg Lukianoff (2014; Lukianoff and Haidt 2015), John McWhorter (2014), Barack Obama (Nelson 2015), and Jonathan Rauch (2014), as well as libertarians such as Ronald Bailey (2015) and Megan McArdle (2015).⁹ Particularly when

9 Thus the clash of dignity and victimhood is not simply a clash between conservatives and liberals like the culture wars addressed by sociologist James Davison Hunter (1991). If it were, there would likely be less debate about it on college campuses, given the rarity of conservatives in these environments (Duarte et al. 2015; Gross and Fosse 2012). Many liberals oppose the extreme manifestations of victimhood culture, and many conservatives themselves claim victimhood, as the logic of victimhood tends to spread (Campbell and Manning 2015b). Still, the new conflict may line up to some extent with Jonathan Haidt’s more recent framework for analyzing political conflicts. Haidt (2010) shows that liberals, more so than conservatives, emphasize the first two dimensions of a five-dimensional moral template consisting of care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/submission, and sanctity/degradation. It may be that those who embrace victimhood culture emphasize the care/harm and fairness/cheating dimensions over the other three to a much greater degree than anyone else. It is noteworthy that campus activists use the language of harm – aggressions, safety, etc. – and that they do so even in situations in which their reactions seem to derive from some other moral dimension. A safe space, for example, seems to serve as a place of sanctity that would be degraded by the presence of heretics and unbelievers, but it is conceptualized as a place of “safety” free of “harmful” speech and “aggression.”

the debate moves outside of the academy, proponents of this culture encounter resistance, including resistance from those who might be sympathetic to the problem of microaggressions but also concerned with competing values like freedom of speech or who are otherwise reluctant to abandon the norms of dignity culture.

Social movements often face the problem of winning allies and responding to critics, and the more unconventional the movement, the greater the difficulty in forming broad coalitions of support.¹⁰ There is thus a great incentive for many activists to downplay their more unconventional positions and emphasize commonalities with mainstream culture when they address outsiders. Their opponents, on the other hand, have an incentive to paint them as extreme and unconventional. Given such pressures and practices, any analysis that draws attention to a moral culture's newness, that cites for illustration some of its more extreme manifestations, and that draws contrasts between that moral culture and the mainstream, is likely to be taken as an exposé or smear campaign.¹¹

10 A radical political movement, for example, might find that disruptive protest tactics increase its legitimacy among core supporters but alienate more moderate allies (Elsbach and Sutton 1992; see also Snow 1979). Sometimes this leads to the use of what philosopher Nicholas Shackel (2005) has called *motte and bailey* doctrines. A *motte and bailey* castle consists of the courtyard, or *bailey*, the desirable land where people spend their time, and the *motte*, a mound in the center with a stone castle on top. When under attack, people may retreat to the *motte* and lose the *bailey*, but always return to the *bailey* when it is safe. In the same way people may hold doctrines that are difficult to defend when challenged (*bailey* doctrines), so rather than attempt to defend them, they retreat and talk only about their less controversial ideas (*motte* doctrines), returning to the more exciting ideas when the challenge is over (Shackel 2005; see also Alexander 2014). Thus, on campus, activists might busy themselves arguing outright against free speech and academic freedom as impediments to protecting the disadvantaged from verbal harm (e.g., Dean-Johnson et al. 2015; Korn 2014), but then elsewhere their supporters might claim that no one is talking about limiting free speech or academic freedom.

11 Since we are discussing continua of variation, one might also highlight similarities between victimhood and dignity cultures, pointing out that dignity's emphasis on restraint and not giving offense is consistent with an

The newness of victimhood culture thus accounts for the positive interest in our analysis as well as some of the hostility. Those who are relative outsiders to victimhood culture – particularly those who are skeptical or critical of it – are most likely to want clarification and explanation. Those who are more involved in the campaign against microaggressions and in related activism are more likely to find our work morally suspicious if not offensive, and first seeing it described in articles written by those who are openly critical of their efforts no doubt strengthens the negative association. In this sense the attention given our analysis is due to its being drawn into the very clash of dignity and victimhood that it describes. But critics should note that our original article does not condemn or criticize microaggression websites, safe spaces, trigger warnings, or appeals to third parties. It makes no value judgments at all.¹²

Morality and Value-Free Sociology

Sociology is the description and explanation of social life. Because descriptions and explanations are not value judgments – statements about what is morally right or wrong – sociology is value-free. This does not mean sociologists are not influenced by their values, that they do not use their values in determining what to study and how to study it, or that sociology has no relevance to moral debates. But value judgments are not sociology (Black 2013; Campbell 2014a, 2014b; 2015:6, 221, n. 6).

These distinctions become especially important to the sociologist studying things like deviance and morality. Examining moral judgments is entirely different from making moral judgments. To say that honor gave way to dignity in nineteenth-century America, or to explain why it did so by identifying the social conditions associated with each, judges

injunction to avoid microaggressing. Indeed, in our article we mention the possibility of viewing victimhood culture as a variation of dignity culture (Campbell and Manning 2014:715). And as discussed above, attaching special status to those who suffer is not entirely unique to modern victimhood culture. For example, on the positive valuation of suffering in Western tradition, see Nietzsche (1998).

12 We have, however, published an editorial elsewhere stating our commitment to academic freedom and preference for norms of dignity we believe conducive to that freedom (Campbell and Manning 2015a).

neither honor nor dignity. It says nothing about whether men should fight duels, how much to condemn cowardice, the appropriateness of taking offense at slights, or the merits of viewing people as all having equal worth. This is no doubt obvious, but some descriptive and explanatory statements are easier to mistake for value judgments. We might say that honor cultures are more violent than dignity cultures, and readers might take that as a condemnation of honor cultures. In this case readers would be assuming that we condemn honor because they assume we condemn the violence it produces. But the statement itself would not justify this. Understand too that value-free statements such as the idea that honor leads to violence can be relevant to moral debates, but only to the extent that people share common values. And even when people do, the facts are seldom dispositive since moral debates are often about tradeoffs – how to balance competing values.

Sociologist Max Weber recognized that sociology cannot answer what many consider the most important question of all: “What shall we do and how shall we live?” (1958:143). Given this, Weber asked, what is the value of sociology? He concluded that it can provide clarity in moral decision making (1958:151). Those who have strong moral reactions to clashes of moral cultures might now be better able to understand their own reactions as well as those of their critics or opponents, and this may help them clarify points of agreement and disagreement. Furthermore, though sociology cannot tell us how to evaluate an action or its consequences, it can inform our moral decision making by telling us what consequences an action is likely to have. And while we believe that clarity is worthwhile in itself, regardless of whether it alters anyone’s course of action, we do think that empirically testable ideas raise important questions for moral decision makers.

Clarifying the Campus Culture Wars

One place where empirical clarity might be relevant to the current campus culture wars is in measuring the extent to which certain types of verbal slight cause harm. Harm can be defined in many ways, but to the extent that people can roughly agree on conceptual and operational definitions, they might be able to at least agree on the extent of the problem. Again, this would not necessarily end the debate, as protecting students from verbal slights necessarily requires curtailing freedom of speech, and even two people who value both might assign

different weights to each value when making their moral calculus. But among those who are similar in their values, such information might be important.

Note that any such research would need to look at empirically defined offenses – such as a particular statement or use of a particular slur. Otherwise the researcher could not distinguish the harm inflicted by an offense from the harm of defining something as offensive. Lukianoff and Haidt's (2015) piece in *The Atlantic* was perhaps the first to point out that taking offense could potentially have harmful effects on the aggrieved. The authors noted that teaching students to magnify the importance of things or to label others as aggressors goes against the principles of cognitive behavioral therapy (often found to be effective in treating anxiety and depression) and suggest that doing so is likely to cause or exacerbate mental health problems. Likewise, attempts to shield students from anything that might “trigger” their trauma can hamper their ability to overcome trauma. To the extent this is correct, the policies that activists propose to ameliorate harm may be not just ineffective but counterproductive.

Lukianoff and Haidt's (2015) argument points to a possibility not often considered in campus debates, which tend to focus on balancing the interests of those who might be harmed by microaggressions with the interests of those whose freedoms would be curtailed by anti-microaggression policies. Now we must question whether such policies would benefit anyone at all, and whether they would in fact harm those they are intended to help. Sociological analysis raises a similar question.

Those who campaign against microaggression on campus often have the stated goal of minimizing intercollective conflicts. Rini (2015), for example, says the goal of microaggression policies is “a culture in which no one is denied full moral recognition.” Since the idea is that even perceived slights deny people full moral recognition, what she is hoping for is a world without offense, a world without conflict. Sociologists might immediately think of Emile Durkheim, who wrote in the nineteenth century about the impossibility of such a world: “Imagine a society of saints, a perfect cloister of exemplary individuals.” In such a society, he said, “faults which appear venial to the layman will create there the same scandal that the ordinary offense does in ordinary consciousness” (Durkheim 1982:100). That the extremely tolerant and diverse environments of college campuses, where what might be called macroaggressions are rare, has led to concern with microaggressions

almost perfectly illustrates Durkheim's principle.

Donald Black's (2011) theory of conflict also tells us that any human society will have conflict. Black says that social changes, both small and large, cause conflict – beginning or ending a relationship, rising or falling in status, accepting or rejecting an aspect of culture. In this view, conflict will exist as long as social life exists. Conflict is inevitable, but it is also variable. To reduce conflict, reduce its causes. One cause of conflict is conflict itself, as ways of expressing and handling grievances provoke new grievances in turn: “Punishment might cause more crime by a criminal, for instance, or it might cause someone else to retaliate against those who inflicted the punishment. Conflict causes more conflict, possibly continuing far into the future” (Black 2011:9).

One way to reduce conflict is to attempt to avoid giving offense – to follow norms of restraint and politeness. But another way is to avoid taking offense – to be tolerant of others and restrained in one's response to slights. Honor cultures are intolerant of slights and demand a severe response. They thus maximize conflict, allowing a single insult to escalate into a chain of retaliatory violence. Dignity cultures minimize the conflict resulting from insults by admonishing people to ignore verbal slights and avoid violence altogether. Since victimhood culture continues dignity's reliance on third parties, increased violence is not likely to be the problem, but abandoning the tolerance of minor offenses, even unintentional slights, will magnify conflict and likely produce chains of unending recrimination. Microaggression complaints encourage less tolerance for slight, and they invite backlash and counterclaims of victimhood. As McArdle points out, “it is very, very hard to establish a rule that only some groups are entitled to be free from offense – because the necessary corollary is that it's fine to worry the other groups with a low-level barrage of sneers, and those groups will not take this lying down” (2015). The likely result of the increased social control of microaggression complaints is not the kind of culture Rini and others envision; it is instead a culture rife with animosities, with ethnic conflict even more pronounced.

This is not to say that this resolves the moral debate if we are correct. Conflict is not always undesirable compared to other options, nor tolerance desirable. Recall that dignity culture encourages the toleration of verbal offenses, but not of violence. The idea is that some

offenses are too serious to tolerate. Many victimhood adherents likely believe something similar about microaggressions. Law professor Catharine Wells says, “The time has come to recognize the harm that microaggressions cause to women and people of color. There is an old saying about sticks and stones and words that never hurt, but these words are hurtful” (2013:337). She sees the physical pain and injury from “sticks and stones” as equivalent to the emotional hurt said to result from microaggressions.

Sociology cannot tell us whether victimhood culture is right to blur the line between violence and speech or whether dignity culture is right to see them as ethically distinct. Sociology’s potential benefits are considerable, but they are connected to its limitations. Sociology can provide clarity in moral disputes, but it cannot solve them. To claim that it does so is to confuse things and thus fail to benefit from any clarity it might have provided. Our analysis of victimhood culture, if it is true, can add to our understanding of debates about microaggression and other phenomena, but whether it is true or false does not depend on how people decide to evaluate those phenomena. Nor does an acceptance of our analysis require a particular evaluation. It could coexist with several different responses to victimhood culture: condemnation, partial acceptance, full acceptance, or praise.

Conclusion

We ended “Microaggression and Moral Cultures” with a touch of fatalism. The conflict over microaggressions would continue, we said, with each side making “its case, attracting supporters and winning or losing various battles.” But we emphasized that moral ideas are reflections of social organization.” Victimhood culture “arose because of the rise of social conditions conducive to it, and if it prevails it will be because those conditions have prevailed” (Campbell and Manning 2014:718). Elsewhere we said to “expect more protests to come, more conflicts, and more regulation of students’ lives” (Campbell and Manning 2015c). And it does seem that victimhood culture is here to stay. The conditions in which it flourishes – atomization, diversity, equality, strong and stable authority, and access to modern communication technologies – seem to be spreading. But we have no crystal ball. Knowing the conditions that give rise to victimhood can help us imagine a likely trajectory, but the future is not certain enough

or the theory precise enough to say exactly how far victimhood culture will develop. Will victimhood prevail over dignity as dignity once did over honor? Will the “sticks and stones” aphorism come to be seen as a relic of a cruel past? Will people come to see the notion of having “thick skin” when slighted or insulted as morally foreign, perhaps crazy, the way we now view duelists and others in honor cultures who so readily faced physical danger? Or will the conflict instead continue for a long time, with small but influential groups of victimhood adherents controlling the universities while dignity mostly prevails elsewhere? Or might victimhood even recede to some extent, and with it the talk of microaggressions, trigger warnings, and safe spaces?

The latter scenario seems unlikely, but those who favor this outcome would do well to draw from our analysis. Knowledge of the physical world enables the development of technology that allows for all sorts of unlikely things, from cell phones to space flight. Knowledge of the social world can likewise enable the development of sociological technology. Altering moral culture requires altering social structure, and those whose goal is to halt victimhood culture might begin by identifying the aspects of its social structure that would be the easiest or most desirable to change.

It seems unlikely that most opponents of victimhood culture would want to reduce diversity and equality or to eliminate modern communications technology. But any way of limiting authority would also undermine victimhood. Strong, stable authority creates moral dependency, and moral dependency becomes more extreme the more involved authorities are in subordinates’ lives. With the increase of “helicopter parenting” in recent decades, students may be entering universities fearful of independence and primed to expect intervention and protection. Economist Steven Horwitz (Forthcoming), for example, says that unsupervised play, which children have less and less of, is important in enabling them to learn valuable skills such as handling conflict on their own. If that is the case, moral self-sufficiency can begin at home, so critics of the new campus culture might support the “free-range parenting” movement (Skenazy 2009). They might explore other possible ways to promote independence, too, such as the Japanese practices of “caring by waiting” and “standing guard,” in which a teacher, though present, does not intervene in preschoolers’ conflicts until it seems absolutely necessary (Hayashi and Tobin 2011; see also

Jacobs 2015).

More importantly, reducing victimhood culture would involve altering the structures of the universities. In his discussion of *legal overdependency* – overreliance on law – Black (1989) points out that we often deal with drug dependency in one of two ways: by providing a substitute, like methadone for heroin addicts, or by simply cutting off access to the drug, the “cold turkey” approach. Likewise where people are dependent on law, one strategy is to provide them with alternative forms of dispute resolution, and another is to simply restrict their access to law – for example, by repealing laws or restricting the behavior of legal officials (Black 1989:Chapter 5). We might deal similarly with students who begin their higher education accustomed to dependence on authority. The analog of a methadone plan would prepare students gradually for a world full of offense and disagreement. This might involve some kind of intervention by authorities in dealing with perceived microaggressions and other minor conflicts, but it would have to be temporary. Perhaps certain kinds of counseling or mediation services could be available for new students only, with the expectation that more experienced students could deal on their own with political disagreements or inadvertent slights. Reformers would need to decide whether to provide such alternatives or to expect incoming students to go cold turkey and abandon right away the notion that the university should protect them from emotional discomfort. Either way, they would need to stop and even reverse the expansion of authority.

In the United States, constitutional free speech protections limit the reach of administrators at state universities to some extent, but even there many restrictions remain in place, such as “free speech zones” that relegate controversial speech to small parts of the campus (Lukianoff 2014:Chapter 3). More expansive speech protections and other policies limiting administrators’ involvement in certain aspects of students’ lives would remove the incentive to appeal for their help. Another way of reducing administrators’ power would be to reduce their numbers. Over the past 40 years, faculty and student enrollment increased by about 50 percent, while the number of administrators increased by 85 percent and their staff by 240 percent (Ginsberg 2013:25). The expansion of administrative authority is a condition conducive to the growth of moral dependency among students. Moreover, many of the new positions were created specifically to deal with the concerns of

campus activists and others who share their perspective, and those who fill these positions tend to be carriers of victimhood culture. Even amid a recession and state budget cuts, for example, the diversity-related administration of the University of California expanded. In 2010 UC San Francisco hired a vice chancellor of diversity and outreach. In 2011 UCLA hired a dean for campus climate. In 2012 UC San Diego hired a vice chancellor for equity, diversity, and inclusion. Each of these was a newly created position (MacDonald 2013). And the tendency is for such positions to proliferate. At UC Davis, there is “a Diversity Trainers Institute under an administrator of diversity education, who presumably coordinates with the Cross-Cultural Center. [UC Davis] also has: a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center; a Sexual Harassment Education Program; a diversity program coordinator; an early resolution discrimination coordinator; a Diversity Education Series that awards Understanding Diversity Certificates in ‘Unpacking Oppression’; and Cross-Cultural Competency Certificates in ‘Understanding Diversity and Social Justice’” (Will 2012).

As administration expands, its reach tends to expand, and we see ever greater involvement in the lives of students – speech codes and many other mechanisms for dealing with offenses and offering protections that are unavailable to adults in the wider society, where people must normally tolerate offenses or deal with them on their own unless the offenses are serious enough to use the courts or call the police. At the behest of many of the students, the university becomes a normative outlier, and not because its members “follow truth wherever it may lead,” in Thomas Jefferson’s words. It becomes an environment not of robust debate but of atypical sensitivity, an environment intended to protect against certain kinds of offenses to a degree seldom seen among adults. Right now universities continue to move in this direction despite opposition, but the trend is not unstoppable. Reverse the expansion of administration in higher education, find ways to limit the numbers and the authority of administrators, and perhaps the extreme form of victimhood culture will wither away.

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