

Mitchell's Musings 6-29-15: Can We All Get Along? – Part 2

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In last week's musing, I discussed the issue of academia's struggles with such matters as "micro-aggressions" and "triggers."¹ Basically, the message was that university policies around such matters have the tendency either to provoke external ridicule – political correctness gone wild – or abuse by university administrators. Those are the downsides.

What I did not provide in that musing was what university administrators should do – as opposed to what they shouldn't do. Of course, sometimes it is enough just to point out what shouldn't be done. However, university administrators do receive complaints about alleged micro-aggressions and apparently do feel compelled to do something. Furthermore, what got me to thinking further about this matter was a public radio broadcast here in the Los Angeles area which was triggered (pun absolutely intended) by an op ed in the *Los Angeles Times* by libertarian-leaning UCLA law Prof. Eugene Volokh. His op ed was basically taken from a blog he wrote called the *Volokh Conspiracy* which is carried by the *Washington Post* website.² As you might expect, Volokh's op ed and the earlier blog post opposed the micro-aggression training program at the University of California that was mentioned in last week's musing. Subsequently, the *Los Angeles Times* published an editorial essentially endorsing the Volokh position.

The broadcast featured as guests Prof. Volokh and Prof. Derald W. Sue of Teachers College at Columbia University. Volokh essentially repeated the stance taken in his op ed; Prof. Sue took the position that micro-aggressions were real. But he went off track in two ways. First, accepting Sue's point – it remains unclear that universities should take steps that suggest to students and faculty that individuals who say things that seem innocent on their face ("Where were you born?"), or even controversial or provocative things about public policy ("Affirmative action is racist"), should be threatened with penalties.

¹<http://employmentpolicy.org/page-1775968/3400944#sthash.gMa9n9EC.dpbs>

²The broadcast ("Airtalk" on KPCC) can be heard at http://media.scp.org/audio/upload/2015/06/24/Microaggressions_-_Should_they_be_censored_on_college_campuses-d855f9ab.mp3. The original Volokh blog posting is at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/06/16/uc-teaching-faculty-members-not-to-criticize-race-based-affirmative-action-call-america-melting-pot-and-more/> and his op ed is at <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0623-volokh-uc-microaggressions-20150623-story.html>. The *LA Times* editorial is at <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-microaggression-what-not-to-say-at-uc-20150624-story.html>.

Second, when asked about such statements that are said to be micro-aggressions such as “America is the land of opportunity,” Prof. Sue said that particular statement wasn’t true because not everyone who comes to America has *equal* opportunity. But there is nothing in the statement “America is the land of opportunity” that requires the interpretation that “America is the land of *equal* opportunity.” The statement presumably can simply mean that there is more opportunity in America than in some other places (which is presumably a major reason why folks immigrate to the U.S.).

In effect, the conversation veered off from the topic of whether a specific statement might be taken as a “micro-aggression” and whether something should be done to repress it, if so, to whether the statement was true under Prof. Sue’s interpretation. There are statements that are true – “you’ve gained a lot of weight” – but that might not be the best thing to say to someone. We all know that there are statements in everyday conversation that aren’t necessarily true, but sometimes can be the best thing to say. “You look great” said to someone returning after a long illness may not be strictly true, but it can be encouraging to the recipient.

The micro-aggression idea is really a subcategory of a large body of work in psychology and other fields – nowadays even in economics – that involves framing and subtle “nudges” that can influence behavior. My favorite example is a presentation I heard a few years ago by a colleague at UCLA describing an experiment. As I recall it, Asian female student volunteers were randomly divided into three groups and given a math test. Before the test was administered, some students were asked a question about what language their parents spoke at home – a reminder of race/ethnic background. Another group was asked if their dorm was co-ed, a reminder of being female. The third control group was asked a neutral question: something about phone access in their dorm.

The purpose of the experiment was to see what impact the stereotypes of Asians being good at math, but women being poor at math, would have on the results of the math test given to students who fell into both categories (Asian and female). Those students reminded of being Asians scored best. The neutral group came out in the middle. And the group reminded of being female scored the lowest. Apparently, a seemingly-irrelevant question to math produced a behavioral response in math performance.

The math experiment is only one of many such cases. In fact, there is a substantial literature documenting these types of results. There are behavioral labs in universities devoted to research in this area. But note that the behavioral response to what was done in the math experiment could have

positive, as well as negative, outcomes. Doing better than the control group on a math test was surely a positive outcome. Put another way, the students reminded indirectly of being Asian were “triggered” to perform better. Perhaps the students in the group who were indirectly reminded of being female by a seemingly-neutral question could be viewed as being the victims of a “micro-aggression.”

Clearly, advertising and marketing are longstanding fields entirely devoted to the notion that what is said – even if irrelevant to a rational choice by consumers - can influence behavioral responses. And there has been no secret about that fact for decades. In the 1950s, for example, there was a popular book – *The Hidden Persuaders* – devoted to informing the public that it was being manipulated in subtle ways that were seen as positive by advertisers but perhaps negatively by the consumers of those advertisements.

Some forms of insurance are denoted by the bad thing they insure against: fire insurance, collision insurance, flood insurance, earthquake insurance. However, there is a reason why what is called “life insurance” is not called “death insurance” even though such insurance is taken out against the risk of dying. In principle, whether you should buy life/death insurance should have nothing to do with its label. But obviously those who sell insurance think that the label matters and that death is not a popular subject. Similarly, there is a reason why opponents of the estate tax call it the death tax instead. Presumably, the label put on a tax should not affect appropriate choices of fiscal policy. But someone evidently thinks that having a tax with “death” in its name it will influence legislative outcomes.

So if you are a university administrator, what can you do to improve “campus climate” without getting yourself into situations where you are held up to ridicule or find yourself defending the indefensible? The fact that condemnation of campus anti-micro-aggression/trigger policy excesses is now moving from libertarian blogs to mainstream news sources (such as the *LA Times* editorial page) should be a warning to university administrators. Mandatory training sessions that resemble authoritarian re-education camps are definitely NOT the way to go. Orwellian investigations without reasonable due process are not the way to go. So what is the way to go?

Academics like research; that’s what they do. The kinds of behavioral studies such as the math experiment noted above *if presented as just that* – interesting research studies – would attract the attention of many academics. So why not start by making such research widely available? Such an effort might well attract an audience – even among the more socially-challenged members of the community. It might even influence their behavior. But the emphasis should not be only on the negative – which is

the focus of the “micro-aggression” approach - since the research in fact points to a range of responses, positive and negative, to subtle cues and framing. There are micro-encouragements – the research suggests – as well as micro-aggressions.

Beyond the circulation of research information, administrative interventions should focus on situations of explicit exclusion. Recently, for example, a high-profile scientist mused in public that women in scientific laboratories were trouble because they caused romantic relationships to develop that diverted lab attention from research.³ That statement was more than a micro-aggression. A university would be remiss in having a person who made public exclusionary remarks of that type as a director of a research center, a department chair, a dean of a school, or heading some other program. Remarks of someone in charge of a university program that he/she doesn’t care to deal with members of group X (race, sex, religion, national origin, etc.) should disqualify that person from a leadership position.

You don’t need elaborate experiments to see that targeted individuals might well feel unwelcome in a research program, department, or school led by someone making such exclusionary remarks.

Universities are bound by law and acceptance of federal funding to ban discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, national origin, etc. So administrative action might well be warranted when someone in charge of a university program makes exclusionary remarks of that type since they violate university policy and legal obligation.

Exclusionary remarks might also work to discourage students from enrolling in someone’s classes. If you say you don’t want to deal with group X or that group X is trouble, surely someone in group X would have to worry about being in your class. But positions on sensitive public policy issues such as affirmative action cannot be taken as exclusionary by themselves *unless there is firm evidence that alternative viewpoints are not presented or tolerated in the classroom.*

There has to be a rule of reason applied and, if you are a university administrator, you are going to have to determine what is reasonable, particularly in the light of traditional values of academic freedom. (Sorry, but if you are an administrator, that is what you are paid for – reasonable judgments.) If you need a more definite rule than that, consider this one: As a university administrator, when you move away from explicit statements of exclusion and get into the realm of micro-aggressions, you would be well advised to avoid actions that make yourself the subject of editorial derision.

³<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3117648/Ban-women-male-labs-distracting-cry-criticised-says-Nobel-prize-winner-Sir-Tim-Hunt.html>