Jonathan Haidt | The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure
August 21st 2018

INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Haidt is the author of the New York Times bestseller, The Righteous Mind, and is one of the most cited intellectuals in the media. A professor at NYU's Stern School of Business, Haidt is also the founder of Heterodox Academy, an organization consisting of some of the nation's most respected professors that is committed to viewpoint diversity in higher education. He's been named a "top global thinker" by Foreign Policy magazine, and his TED talk on moral foundations of liberals and conservatives has been viewed over 2.6 million times.

WHY DO I CARE?

On a personal level, I am upset over the ways in which social discourse has devolved and by how our relationships have become more tribal. I've grown distant with two very close friends during the last two years, as I found their behavior, intolerance, and bias personally insulting and emotionally unbearable. I would say that I am more objective, open-minded, tolerant, and politically independent at this stage in my life than ever before, and yet, I find myself politically at odds with more people than ever before. I’m upset by the way in which people are treated online and by the manner in which their reputations are destroyed and their ideas and opinions shouted down. I am upset by the bullying culture of the Left, and the embrace of victimhood and virtue signaling over dignity and self-reliance. I’m unhappy with the identity politics that is being used by left and right in order to support, amplify, and validate what feel like increasingly radical agendas divorced from intellectual accountability.

I care about this subject because, like many Americans, I feel like something has gone terribly wrong in how we talk to and treat one another. I feel that we have made less and less room for thoughts and ideas that offend us to such an extreme that we often misinterpret the intentions and even the words of other people. Language is essential for the progression and evolution of culture, and culture is foundational to social progress. If we want to navigate our political future in a way that will lead to a more equitable and well-adjusted society, we need to make room for the variety of people's thoughts, feelings, and experiences.
THREE BAD IDEAS

You begin the book with a parable about a fictional sage named Misoponos, who you concocted for the purpose of making a point. The point had to do with what you call “the three Great Untruths,” labeled below. In order for an untrue proposition to be classified as “great,” it must meet three criterions. It must (1) contradict ancient wisdom (2) contradict modern psychological research about wellbeing and (3) harm the individual and communities who embrace it. *** Moral cultures are “a consensual hallucination.” ***

1. Origins — Q: What caused you to write this book? Q: Where did the idea originate from? Q: How long had that idea been germinating in your mind and in the mind of your co-author, Greg Lukianoff, before you put pen to paper? Q: What was the transition like from writing the Atlantic article to writing the book?

2. Expertise — Q: What is your background? Q: What is Greg’s background? Why do you feel that the two of you are well qualified to discuss this issue?

3. The Untruth of Fragility

3.1. Antifragile - You cite all sorts of people in the book, but I took particular notice to your reference of Nassim Taleb’s term “antifragile,” used to describe complex systems (including people) that not only can cope with stress and adversity, but that actually require challenging circumstances in order to develop properly. This led to a discussion about the rise of “safetyism” and “safe spaces,” as well as something you call “concept creep,” which refers to the way in which something that used to be very narrowly defined has broadened in its application (e.g. violence was once a term understood strictly in physical terms, but has now broadened to include situations where words are understood as being “violent”). Q: What is “concept creep?” Q: What is “safetyism?” Q: What does antifragile refer to, and why did you choose to put such an emphasis on it?

3.2. iGen & Safetyism – You mention the work of Jean Twenge, when referencing the higher rates of anxiety and depression seen in Millennials. She focuses on the negative impact of social media on developing children. We will come back to this later in the interview.

4. The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning


4.2. Microaggressions – What are microaggressions? Q: How do they relate to trauma and to the reinforcement of negative loops?
The Untruth of Us versus Them

5.1. Dean Spellman – One of the many bizarre stories you recount in the book is the case of Mary Spellman, the dean of Claremont McKenna College, near Los Angeles. The video of students berating Spellman includes a parent who praises the students and openly berates Spellman for seeming to fall asleep during the course of this extemporaneous mob trial, a young Asian, female student who is silenced (another student approaches her in order to stop her from speaking) for stating that “black people can also be racist” and that “we should not judge people by their skin color but by their actions.” All of this, over a written response to a student that seemed (at least to me) to be expressing concern for the student’s well-being. The student took this as some kind of “microaggression,” posted the letter online, and a tsunami ensued. Eventually, Spellman felt compelled to resign. How can we manage to understand what is going on here? It seems impossible to believe...

5.2. Two Kinds of Identity Politics – You draw a distinction between what you call “common-humanity identity politics” and “common-enemy identity politics.” Q: What is the difference between these two and why did you feel it was important to emphasize them?

5.3. White Male Privilege – What do we make of the double standard in how identity politics create a “safe space” for racism against white people, particularly straight, white men? (e.g. the case of Sarah Jeong, who was hired by the NYTimes, despite a history – at least one full year between 2013-2014 – of tweeting out insanely racist things about white men) Q: Where did this concept of “white male privilege” come from, and what does it mean?

5.4. Intersectionality – This is an intellectual framework that teaches students to see multiple axes of privilege and oppression that intersect. Q: First, does anyone else find it objectively ridiculous that we are plotting our privileges on a graph? Q: Second, does it occur to anyone that this might be reinforcing one’s view of him or herself as “a victim” who needs to “be protected” from “oppressors?”
BAD IDEAS IN ACTION

6. **Intimidation and Violence** — One of the things that we have seen in recent years is the rising visibility of leftist extremist groups like Antifa (antifascists) and BAMN (By Any Means Necessary), who mobilize their members to attack speakers or right-wing groups whose ideas they disagree with. An alarming example you cite in the book is an incident that occurred on the Berkley campus following an invitation made to Charles Murray. The invitation was extended by a student group, and Allison Stanger, a political science professor agreed to question Murray after the talk. The talk was effectively shut-down by protesting students, who physically attacked Murray and Stanger. Stanger required physical therapy for the next six months. In a later op-ed she wrote, recounting the incident for the NYTimes, she said, “What alarmed me most was what I saw in the eyes of the crowd. Those who wanted the event to take place made eye contact with me. Those intent on disrupting it steadfastly refused to do so. They couldn’t look at me directly, because if they had, they would have seen another human being.” Q: How many Americans, do you think, are aware of these violent incidents and the tepid response by university administrators? Q: What do you think most Americans would think about this if they understood what was going on at University campuses?

7. **Witch Hunts** — You mention the work of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, when attempting to identify certain metrics for what constitutes a “witch hunt.” There were two that really stuck out to me, namely that charges are often trivial or fabricated and that there is a fear associated with defending the accused. I’ve directly experience both of these, though not in a way that even remotely resembles a witch hunt. However, before this interview, I posted a series of articles, along with my corresponding thoughts. One of those was a link to your 2015 Atlantic article, and another was a link to an article about the de-platforming of Alex Jones. In both cases, the reactions against my comments were extreme by any measure. I couldn’t understand where people managed to find offense. Similarly, I have found myself afraid to speak my mind, even when I know that my intentions are not malicious, but simply that my views may be taken out of context. Q: How much of this is a result of the fact that people don’t even bother to read the articles about which they offer comment? Q: It seems that people in social media are like roaming gangs looking for someone to assault.

8. **Retractions & Firings** — One of the things that we have seen a bunch of in recent years are demands for people to be fired and for articles/invitations to be retracted. Q: You mention the retractions in your book, but I wonder if you see a connection between these two? Q: Is there just a general expectation today that offensive words should not be uttered and offensive people fired?

9. **Loss of Political Diversity** — You provide some statistics in the book that show a massive increase between 1996 and 2011 of far-left professors on college campuses. Q: What
accounts for this growing divide along political lines and how much of a role has it played in the problem you have chronicled in the book?

10. **The Case of Evergreen** — The case of [Bret Weinstein](#), a politically progressive biology professor at the historically progressive Evergreen State College, may be the most disturbing one in the book. A “Day of Absence” was scheduled by students in order to highlight racial injustice, where white people were expected not to appear on campus. **Q:** What was the rationalization behind this day of absence, and how could something like this be allowed to happen in America, today?

**HOW DID WE GET HERE?**

11. **Rising Outrage** — You point out that since the 1970’s, Americans have been self-segregating into politically homogenous communities. You also discuss the rising levels of polarization seen in America since the 1990’s until today, and make the point to emphasize that the current environment is less the exception and more the rule. During this same period, the media environment has also become more extreme, with the rise of cable news channels like Fox and MSNBC, Americans have been able to complement their physical clustering by entering a sort of intellectual bubble (social media has taken this to the next level). Add to this the divisions seen in congress since the Clinton-Gingrich period, and it can start to feel like the perfect storm of political dysfunction and outrage. **Q:** How important is the interaction between campus culture and the broader culture in America? **Q:** Is most of the influence one-way, or is what is happening on campuses today also influencing the broader culture? **Q:** Is there less of a delay on the influence of college campuses on American society than there used to be because of social media and the need by bias news organizations to find ever more outrageous stories to cover?
12. **Anxiety and Depression** — If one is to take the statistics in your book at face value, there would seem to be a rising epidemic of anxiety and depression overtaking the iGeneration. Not only that, but suicide rates are also up, and the rates of suicide and depression vary significantly across gender (boys are more likely to take their own lives, while girls are more likely to report feeling depressed). A 2016 report by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, using data from 139 colleges, found that by the 2015–2016 school year, half of all students surveyed reported having attended counseling for mental health concerns. The report notes that the only mental health concerns that were increasing in recent years were anxiety and depression, confirming these upward trends with a different dataset. The number of college students who describe themselves as having a mental disorder increased from 2.7% to 6.1% for male college students between 2012 and 2016 (that's an increase of 126%). For female college students, it rose even more: from 5.8% to 14.5% (an increase of 150%). Whether or not all these students would meet rigorous diagnostic criteria, it is clear that iGen college students think about themselves very differently than did Millennials. The change is greatest for women: One out of every seven women at U.S. universities now thinks of herself as having a psychological disorder, up from just one in eighteen women in the last years of the Millennials. These years also saw a rise in self-reports of anxiety as the reason for seeking help. One large survey of university counseling centers found that only 37% of students who came through their doors in 2009 and prior years had complained about problems with anxiety—roughly on a par with the two other leading concerns, depression and relationships. But beginning in 2010, the percentage of students with anxiety complaints began to increase. It jumped up five points in 2013 (to 46%), and it reached 51% in 2016.

Anxiety is now by far the leading problem for which college students seek treatment. These years also saw substantial increases in rates of self-injury and suicide among college students. **Q:** What is going on here? **Q:** What are the factors that are contributing to rising levels of anxiety and depression among this generation? **Q:** How much of this can be attributed to social media? **Q:** How much of it might be due to other factors that we are not diagnosing? This generation seems to also express a great concern with the state of affairs in the world. **Q:** Could iGen’s sensitivity to issues of social justice, combined with their “learned helplessness” be making them more anxious and depressed?
13. **Paranoid Parenting** — You recount the story of Lenore Skenazy in the book, otherwise known as “America’s Worst Mom.” Q: What does the reaction of the public to the story of Lenore Skenazy and her son Izzy, say about the way that parenting and childhood has changed in America? You cite the abduction of Etan Patz and the abduction, two years later of Adam Walsh (son of America’s Most Wanted, John Walsh), as a turning point in the “paranoid parenting.” The perception became that risks to children were going up. Q: What was the reality? You also make a point to emphasize the role of the state in punishing parents who reject this call for overprotection. You share some anecdotes of parents who were arrested for leaving their kids at home, unattended. Q: How do you explain this increased presence of the state in family affairs? Is this overall, a bad thing?

14. **The Decline of Free Play** — I love what you have to say about the importance of improvised, free play vs. structured play, where parents or some authority figures organize kids into teams or other activities. Q: What do we know about how play helps the developing brain of a child? Q: How has the competitive mindset of parents who try and get their kids “on track” early for primary and secondary school influenced the decline of free play? Q: What can be done about this?

15. **The Bureaucracy of Safetyism** — You make a GREAT point in the book about how, in an age where a four-year college degree can cost more than $200,000 (indeed, at NYU, if you factor in room, board and other feeds, the price comes to $283,5232) students are no longer students, they are customers, and the customer is always right. I remember college tuition at NYU in 2000 being less than $40,000, and that was seen as insanely high at the time. I came into college right around the time that John Sexton became President of NYU. The school devoted a tremendous amount of money to outfitting the school with all the latest amenities and features. No matter how nice it is to have an extra university rec center or coffee lounge, it’s much more important to have an affordable education. The rise of the bureaucracy in universities is something that I know has happened in medicine as well, and much of that has to do with the “cover your ass,” motivations of limiting liability. Q: What is going on here with the costs across instructions where the bureaucratic layer is taking up more and more of the costs? Q: Also, what’s up with the bias response hotline at NYU?
at 4% annual interest, a student would be paying nearly $1,000 per month for life, without ever paying down principle***

16. The Quest for Justice — There are some fascinating statistics of which I was not aware, dealing with the relationship between political affiliation and birth year. It turns out that there is a small cluster of people who came of age in the late 1960’s who are unusually progressive for their demo. Apparently, you think there is something similar happening now, and that adolescents who came of age between 2009-2018 had an experience (whether personal, through the media, or both) of injustice that shaped their political affiliations. You draw a distinction between two different types of justice, both of which fall under what we call “intuitive” justice. These are distributive justice (the perception that people are getting what is deserved) and procedural justice (the perception that the process by which things are distributed and rules are enforced is fair and trustworthy). You take this a step further and draw a distinction between what you call “proportional-procedural social justice” and “equal-outcomes social justice.” This is a subject that has gotten more attention recently, particularly in light of the rising popularity of people like Jordan Peterson, who has been outspoken about the ills he feels are associated with chasing “equality of outcome.”

Q: Are our norms around justice changing in America? Q: Are more people adopting the view that justice is about socializing outcomes rather than ensuring that people are treated fairly and that they are rewarded proportionally to what they have put in?

WISING UP

17. Wiser Kids, Universities, and Societies — Q: How can we learn to raise more resilient children, create better learning environments at our universities, and build wiser societies?