

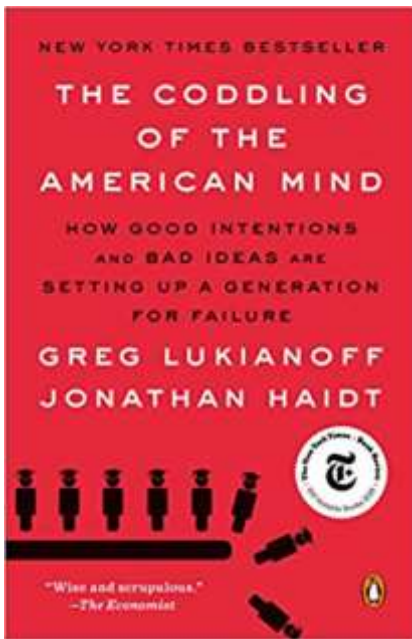
Honest and Open Debate Vs Identity Politics and Microaggressions

a review by Dick Burkhardt of

The Coddling of the American Mind:

How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure

By Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2018)



This is a much needed and thoughtful book which tackles head-on the counter-productive aspects of the politics of identity and microaggression, especially as it has arisen in academia over the last 6 years. It is very good at analyzing the roles of social media, parenting, and societal pressures in producing this developing crisis.

Yet the book does not delve into the underlying economics, such as the forces escalating economic inequality in the US over the last 40 years. And in the end Lukianoff and Haidt adopt a Steven Pinker type view for sunny prospects versus the skepticism of Jared Diamond and Peter Turchin, based on the rise and fall of past civilizations. That is, there is a lot more going on than ignorance of “Cognitive Behavioral Therapy” (Lukianoff’s field).

The authors conclude that today’s teenagers are simply too immature for college, in addition to being overly anxious and depressed and lacking in coping skills. Both over-protective parenting and social media are too blame, with girls being hit much harder due to how social media magnifies their competition for “relationships, reputations, and social status” (p. 155). Good recommendations include limits to 2 hours a day of screen time, a “gap year” of work or service after high school, and intentional increases in time for unstructured “free play”, including normal childhood risks, as in the “Free-Range Kids” movement.

Once in college, especially in places like Berkley, many of these “iGen” kids want protection from “free speech” that might include “microaggressions”. But this can make them even more anxious and depressed. And when certain subjects cannot be openly and honestly debated, the truth gets buried by a tribal politics of winners and losers. In this sense what’s happening on campuses reflects the polarization of national politics. It also constitutes a retreat among many advocates for justice of MLK’s highly successful focus on our “common humanity”. One thing that Lukianoff and Haidt do not pursue is how all this is already spreading to other arenas, such as some churches and media.

The whole point of “Cognitive Behavioral Therapy” is to counter the “cognitive distortions” which produce anxiety and depression by carefully constructed microaggressions to enable patients to think and discuss more constructively and rationally about things which cause them discomfort or despair. That is, guided engagement works, while avoidance often maintains fragility and unhappy episodes.

One of the most visible and destructive forms of tribalism that we are seeing today is the “witch hunt”, which seeks to severely censure, or even excommunicate, anyone who appears to question the party line. Typically, only minor transgressions are involved, such as unfortunate choices of wording. Lukianoff and Haidt document several such instances from recent years. I have been personal witness to such an incident, in a liberal church setting of all places. In fact this book itself played an important role in that incident.

And here’s where Lukianoff and Haidt could have gone much deeper. Because it is not just US society that is under enormous stress – it is happening globally due to rapid and highly visible but unsustainable economic growth that has left behind vast numbers of people. Though the ruling classes have been successful at suppressing or diverting this stress for decades, the frustrations of those left behind, or even just fearful of being left behind, have come to a head and are boiling over. Tribal politics has reared its ugly head where ordinary politics has failed. This book is a welcome wakeup call, and I hope for many more to follow.