



We're All Victims Now

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The quiet majority perturbed by the rise of victimhood culture need to speak out more often, writes sociologist Tiffany Jenkins.

Shortly after midnight on Monday, 4 March 2013, a female student reported seeing someone dressed in a Ku Klux Klan outfit on the campus of the private liberal arts college, Oberlin, Ohio. Campus security officers and the Police Department sent out a search party immediately. In the predawn hours, Oberlin's president, Marvin Krislov, cancelled all classes. In their place, the university would run a teach-in on racism, and there would be a gathering in the campus chapel. An email to all students explained why:

We are here to notify you all that there has been yet another bias and racist event on campus. A person wearing KKK regalia was spotted on South Campus around midnight near the ELC and South. This has been another event in a string of several reflecting a terrible pattern of racism, prejudice, queerphobia, antisemitism and other



bias attacks that are happening on Oberlin's campus. At this time, advocacy, support and solidarity are necessary emotionally, physically and spiritually.

As the hours passed, the authorities didn't find anyone in KKK garb. The police did find a woman wrapped in a blanket. They drew the conclusion the student making the report may have been mistaken. A few weeks later it also transpired that the pattern of prejudice mentioned in the university email was not what it seemed. Two progressive students had daubed the campus with racist graffiti, to underline the problem of racism. Even then, it was as if both corrections hadn't happened. A college spokesman said even if the sighting of a hooded figure could not be confirmed, the daylong discussion of racism was justified.

These events inspired Bradley Campbell, Associate Professor of Sociology at California State University, and Jason Manning, Associate Professor of Sociology at West Virginia University, to look deeper into campus culture. A private liberal college—with a reputation for progressive activism—housing a KKK chapter was unlikely, so they were puzzled by the credulous response to the reported sighting.

As sociologists of morality, when they read the Oberlin College website asking students to report microaggressions, they were intrigued. Counselling psychologist and diversity specialist, Derald Wing Sue, who is credited with promoting the concept, defined microaggressions as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group”. “Where are you from?” is a common example, as it suggests they may be from somewhere else.

For Campbell and Manning, the invitation extended by the university to students to find slight in everyday interactions, even when unintended, rejected the conventional moral norm. It is a departure from what they describe as dignity culture, summed up by the childhood saying: sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.

Laughing at the outlandish examples of campus conflicts is easy. More difficult is assessing their significance. They appear to be the result of the activism of a small but vocal group of students at prestigious institutions. Many observers think they will grow out of their extreme stances, which are unreflective of the rest of the student population.

Other commentators question the relevance of these incidents and events for society. They are sceptical that these skirmishes matter beyond the university. Campbell and Manning's groundbreaking book, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), refutes these positions and more. By taking a step back to understand the roots of these conflicts, and how quickly and how far their influence has spread, the authors show why they matter to all of us. They conclude we are witnessing a revolution in moral culture, which will shape much of our lives. As political commentator Andrew Sullivan said, “we all live on campus now”.

The authors make a distinction between three moral systems: cultures of honour, dignity, and



victimhood. The first two concepts have a long history in the social sciences; the last is their innovation and describes what they argue is on the ascendency today.

On 11 July 1804, the US Vice President Aaron Burr killed the former Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, in a duel. Hamilton shot first, but missed Burr, hitting a tree instead. Burr then shot Hamilton, who died the next day. In a letter written beforehand, Hamilton explained why he accepted Burr's challenge, to protect his reputation, that: "the ability to be in [the] future useful ... would probably be inseparable from a conformity with public prejudice in this particular".

REPUTATION IS EVERYTHING

In honour cultures, a man's reputation is everything. In the Old West or for the street gangs of *West Side Story*, a man who did not fight back in response to insults or aggression would lose all honour. Honour cultures tend to develop where legal authority is weak.

Rather than relying on the law, a reputation for toughness is an effective deterrent against attack, and insulting someone helps establish one's reputation for bravery. There is a tendency to be verbally aggressive and to be quick to slight. Violent conflict is frequent, as this is a way to compete for and gain respect. As the rule of law broadened in the 18th and 19th centuries, honour cultures gave way to dignity culture, the moral code for which is almost the mirror opposite. Rather than honour, people have dignity. Insults might provoke offence and be considered rude, rather than establish a reputation for bravery.

With dignity culture, it is commendable to have a thick skin which allows one to shrug off slights and even serious insults. Here the conflicting parties rely on non-violent, democratic methods to solve their problems. They may only turn to the law as a last resort.

Dignity culture is the moral system of the West that most of us know. It's the culture in which everyone is morally equal. It's the culture of self-help, and of agency. However, it is also under challenge.

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'we all live on campus now'

In October 2015, Professors Erika and Nicholas Christakis of Yale University became the target of protests by students who accused them of creating an "unsafe space", when, in response to concerns about wearing culturally insensitive costumes for Halloween, Erika sent students an email questioning whether the university should regulate what students wear.

In her carefully composed, 883-word email, titled *Dressing Yourself*, she asked: "I wonder if we should reflect more transparently, as a community, on the consequences of an institutional (which is to say: bureaucratic and administrative) exercise of implied control over college students". She elaborated, that in her role as an educator concerned with the developmental stages of childhood and young adulthood, she wanted to defend play-acting, and the university as a space of transgression.

People offended by the costumes should either “look away”, she suggested, or simply, “talk to each other”.

You might think students at one of the world’s top universities would be pleased with her defence of their capacity for autonomous and independent thought, and that fancy dress outfits weren’t worth worrying about. But a group took umbrage at her email, and the wearing of Halloween costumes, which they said was part of a broader culture of racism.

When Erika’s husband, Nicholas Christakis, a professor of social and natural science, defended her, the students confronted him and filmed the angry incident. Racial protests consumed Yale’s campus and propelled a national conversation about free speech. By December, they had both resigned.

That is one of many examples Manning and Campbell present that illustrates the new moral culture: victim culture, which combines some aspects of honour and dignity culture. Like honour culture, people in victimhood culture have a high sensitivity to slight. They’re touchy, and always on the lookout for offence. But, as in a dignity culture, people generally refrain from violence in favour of relying on some authority figure or other third parties. They complain to the administration at their university, to law, or to the media. It’s not enough to be upset by something: that upset needs to be recognised by official parties.

In this emerging moral culture, social status is not accrued by virtue and accomplishments, but by victimhood. Individuals must search out and emphasise their oppression as a claim for social standing. People are incentivised to see their everyday experiences as harmful, to see racism everywhere or identify some other kind of victimisation. This means people will continually invent new types of offence: hence, microaggressions, which makes informal interactions between people freighted and difficult. In turn, privilege is a vice, for which people apologise. Those lacking in victim status may apologise, or try to discover it. Take, for example, Senator Elizabeth Warren’s tenuous claim to Native American heritage.

Moral cultures do not arise from nowhere. In *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Anxious Age* (Routledge, 2003), sociologist Frank Furedi identified the turn towards a therapeutic version of the self, one that is fragile and requires recognition, as tied in part to the withering away of political culture and the failure of left-wing movements.

THE LEFT TURNED INWARDS

Ideas of social transformation and reform still animated the early 1960s. However, when the left gave up on their aim of changing society, they turned inwards, to critiquing language and culture, and trying to enact behavioural change. And although victimhood culture was originally a left-wing phenomena, to a degree, the right, on and off campus, have ended up embracing it too.

Today, social problems are interpreted through a psychological prism. Young people are encouraged to explain all kinds of challenges, including the most everyday, through the language

of mental health. They are encouraged to find and inflate emotional harm and difficulties, rather than find a way through them. This is why, though sometimes their outbursts appear cynical, they also may be genuine, because that is how they have been socialised. When my stepson was anxious about his exams and sought help, his university framed it as a mental health problem. They prescribed medication and counselling. Instead, university authorities should have told him that pressure is difficult, but manageable. They also could have advised him to spend more time in the library.

When the remit of a university is protecting rather than teaching students, their intellectual life is limited, if not eliminated. Essential and foundational texts—including the 1897 classic *Suicide: A Study In Sociology* by French sociologist Émile Durkheim— have been removed from the A-level syllabus because the subject might cause undue distress to students. Scholarship is hampered. The publisher Hodder Education recently withdrew some sociology textbooks from publication, because of statements made about the behaviour of particular minority groups: the work of sociology is increasingly off limits.

Indeed, within the academy, the problem is so significant that any attempt to analyse victimhood culture is understood as an attack on victims. That makes this book not only urgent, but brave.

It is essential to defend the legal principle that someone is innocent until proven guilty

Victimhood culture is on the rise but incomplete as a moral culture. It faces resistance and criticism, and not just from the politically conservative. Former US President Barack Obama criticised the silencing of conservative speakers. But do not underestimate its influence. Developments that include the consultation of ‘sensitivity readers’ by mainstream publishing houses suggest it is migrating from campus into society.

As I write, the focus of the most powerful country in the world is on dramatically diverging accounts of what two teenagers did or did not get up to in a bedroom more than three decades earlier. On Capitol Hill, #MeToo threatened to derail the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh, President Trump’s nominee for the Supreme Court. Members of the Senate tried to base a decision about whom to appoint as a judge to the highest court in the United States, on a reading of one alleged abusive act he committed, before he was an adult.

Dr Christine Blasey Ford, professor of psychology, alleged that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her 35 years ago at a pool party in Maryland when he was 17, and she was 15. In her testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee, which was broadcast live online, she was dignified but distressed as she recalled that he had pressed himself against her in a dark room; she had thought he was going to rape her; and he had laughed at her with his friend, who was also present. Gulping back angry tears, Kavanaugh protested his innocence. He denied anything happened. He says he wasn’t even at the party and points out Professor Ford cannot remember when or where precisely the assault took place, and has no witnesses to support her account of events.

As hearings began, #KavanaughHearings trended, prompting survivors of sexual violence to tell

their stories, with hashtags #BelieveWomen and #BelieveSurvivors. The day after, the Supreme Court steps were strewn with flowers in support of Dr Blasey.

Women must be treated as adults, and judged by the same standards as men

On Twitter, thousands of women stated her testimony made them cry. *The Rise of Victimhood Culture* doesn't reflect on #MeToo, but it appears to contain elements of victimhood culture. In this alleged incident we have a woman who—if what she says happened, happened—was encouraged to interpret an ugly grope by idiot teenage boys as trauma, and defining to her identity into adulthood. With the mantra “I believe women”, few commentators felt permitted to question the veracity of her story or in any way think about the act proportionally.

Saying the incident should not define either of them for life was difficult. Due process, which is fundamental to the functioning of liberal democracy, was temporarily cast aside.

This issue isn't just about Kavanaugh, it's about principles we uphold in public life. It's essential to defend the legal principle someone is innocent until proven guilty. And that women are treated as adults and the social and emotional equivalent of men, and judged by the same standards. Violence and sexual assaults occur, but serious crimes are trivialised by being presented as on a continuum with messy and unwanted advances.

The constant reiteration that women are victims and men are violent perpetrators pits men and women against each other and, in the process, infantilises women and makes them fearful of the world. Though victimhood culture threatens to recast our everyday experiences through the lens of fragility, and to poison relations between people, in many cases, the problem is not so much the behaviour of a small group of activists, but the absence of a confident opposition.

The quiet majority perturbed by these developments need to speak out more often.

We need to call for perspective, to challenge those seeking offence and who find affirmation in victimhood, and provide a sensible language in which to confront it. Finally, we need to take our lead from Erika Christakis. Sometimes people need to talk to each other.

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*Her most recent book is *Keeping Their Marbles: How Museums Acquired the Treasures of the Past and Why They Should Keep Them* (OUP, 2016).*