

[Coddling of the American Mind Review](#)  
[How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a](#)  
[Generation for Failure](#)

Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt

Recently my wife and I went to Portland, Maine with three other neighbor couples for a charity event. All four of us couples have kids between 20 and 30 years old. While we were walking around Portland the four of us guys started to talk about how our kids don't know how to do things that we could do when we were their age. I'm talking about things like if the "Check Engine" light comes on it doesn't mean the car is about to explode or the engine is going to melt down. Or how to balance a checkbook. Or unplug a toilet. We all agreed that we as parents had a hand in this by doing too much for our kids. We did so much for our kids, thinking that we were helping when in fact we were hindering their ability to deal with life's challenges.

One of those challenges includes being able to deal with political opinions that are deemed dangerous or unsafe. I brought up how some colleges and universities cancelled speaking engagements of conservatives such as Ben Shapiro or Charles Murray (who probably would classify himself more as a libertarian). Or, if these speakers tried to deliver their speech they were shouted down by the vocal contingent of student or even physically threatened. My friends were completely unaware of these incidents.

During our conversation I brought up a book I had just finished that claims our kids have been taught three key ideas that are setting them up for failure. The book? The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and First Amendment expert Greg Lukianoff. The Amazon summary of the book nicely captures their thesis and explanation how these ideas became prevalent.

[T]he new problems on campus have their origins in three terrible ideas that have become increasingly

woven into American childhood and education: *What doesn't kill you makes you weaker; always trust your feelings; and life is a battle between good people and evil people.* These three Great Untruths contradict basic psychological principles about well-being and ancient wisdom from many cultures. Embracing these untruths—and the resulting culture of safetyism—interferes with young people's social, emotional, and intellectual development. It makes it harder for them to become autonomous adults who are able to navigate the bumpy road of life.

Lukianoff and Haidt investigate the many social trends that have intersected to promote the spread of these untruths. They explore changes in childhood such as the rise of fearful parenting, the decline of unsupervised, child-directed play, and the new world of social media that has engulfed teenagers in the last decade. They examine changes on campus, including the corporatization of universities and the emergence of new ideas about identity and justice. They situate the conflicts on campus within the context of America's rapidly rising political polarization and dysfunction.

Quoting directly from the book: "Many university students are learning to think in distorted ways, and this increases their likelihood of becoming fragile, anxious, and easily hurt."

These "untruths" as the authors label them, contradict ancient wisdom, contradict modern psychological research on flourishing, and harm individuals and communities.

The authors point to an influential idea lying behind the idea of unsafe ideas and language. They refer to a 2017 The New York Times essay by Lisa Feldman Barrett, professor of psychology and emotion researcher at Northeastern University, in which

Barrett claims: "If words can cause stress, and if prolonged stress can cause physical harm, then it seems that speech – at least certain types of speech – can be a form of violence."

The authors disagree. They hold that verbal harm does not equal violence. "Interpreting a campus lecture as violence is a choice, and it is a choice that increases your pain with respect to the lecture while reducing your options for how to respond." "As Marcus Aurelius advised, 'Choose not to be harmed – and you won't feel harmed. Don't feel harmed – and you haven't been.'"

So how did we get to this point? Lukianoff and Haidt identify six trends: "the rising political polarization and cross-party animosity of U.S. politics, which has led to rising hate crimes and harassment on campus; rising levels of teen anxiety and depression, which have made many students desirous of protection and more receptive to the Great Untruths; changes in parenting practices, which have amplified children's fears even as childhood becomes increasingly safe; the loss of free play and unsupervised risk-taking, both of which kids need to become self-governing adults; the growth of campus bureaucracy and expansion of its protective mission; and an increasing passion for justice, combined with the changing ideas about what justice requires."

[NOTE: please see a table at the end of this post that captures the key untruths and their counter ideas.]

Lukianoff and Haidt do an admirable job ferreting out these trends but if I had to criticize this book I'd say that Lukianoff and Haidt don't identify the deeper premises behind the subjectivity prevalent in universities and culture. (Note: I'm not saying everything can be reduced only to the prevailing ideas. Trying to avoid the mistake of reducing everything to one dimension.) I think they miss one source of these three Great Untruths. I think we need to look a bit deeper, to philosophy. While most of us don't deal directly with philosophical trends I believe universities are a major transmission belt for ideas where young people can flock to the

ideas pushed by their professors. The kids are impressionable and idealistic at the same time so they're susceptible to latching onto ideas that sound good but haven't been tested in the world outside of the cloistered school.

So where do these Great Untruths come from and why are most people unable to refute them? For a possible explanation I recommended another book to supplement *The Coddling of the American Mind*. I'm referring to Stephen R. C.

Hicks, [Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault](#). What is postmodernism? Here is how postmodernism is described in Wikipedia.

"[P]ostmodernism is generally defined by an attitude of skepticism, irony, or rejection toward the meta-narratives and ideologies of modernism, often calling into question various assumptions of Enlightenment rationality. Consequently, common targets of postmodern critique include universalist notions of objective reality, morality, truth, human nature, reason, language, and social progress. Postmodern thinkers frequently call attention to the contingent or socially-conditioned nature of knowledge claims and value systems, situating them as products of particular political, historical, or cultural discourses and hierarchies. Accordingly, postmodern thought is broadly characterized by tendencies to self-referentiality, epistemological and moral relativism, pluralism, and irreverence.

Hicks provides this: "Postmodernism, [Frank Lentricchia](#) explains, 'seeks not to find the foundation and the conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change.' "The task of postmodern professors is to help students 'spot, confront, and work against the political horrors of one's time.'"

"Metaphysically, postmodernism is anti-realist, holding that it is impossible to speak meaningfully about an independently existing reality. ... Epistemologically, having rejected the notion of an independently existing reality, postmodernism denies that reason or any other method is a means of acquiring

objective knowledge about that reality. Having substituted social-linguistic constructs for that reality, postmodernism emphasizes the subjectivity, conventionality, and incommensurability of those constructs. Postmodern accounts of human nature are consistently collectivist, holding that individuals' identities are constructed largely by the social-linguistic groups that they are a part of. ... Postmodern accounts of human nature also consistently emphasize relations of conflict between those groups; and given the de-emphasized or eliminated role of reason, postmodernism accounts hold that those conflicts are resolved primarily by the use of force." [This was written in 2004 but accurately describes what Lukianoff and Haidt say is happening in universities today.]

"In education, postmodernism rejects the notion that the purpose of education is primarily to train a child's cognitive capacity for reason in order to produce an adult capable of functioning independently in the world. That view of education is replaced with the view that education is to take an essentially indeterminate being and give it a social identity. Education's method of molding is linguistic, and so the language to be used is that which will create a human being sensitive to its racial, sexual and class identity." [Hence the focus on language and microaggressions.]

To summarize, postmodernism says that there is no objective truth. Therefore, your feelings are as valid, if not more so, than critical, objective thinking, especially if you're feeling oppressed. Power is used to "correct" the legacy of white male "supremacy." Therefore it's OK to suppress certain ideas and speakers because their ideas are dangerous, discredited, aggressive and oppressive. Power trumps truth because truth doesn't exist; feelings trump reason and logic.

Lukianoff and Haidt offer some solutions to counter the ill effects of the Great Untruths. One tool is to engage in "productive disagreement." "It is part of the process by which people do each other the favor of counteracting each other's confirmation bias." "[L]earning how to give and take criticism

without being hurt is an essential life skill. When serious thinkers respect someone, they are willing to engage them in a thoughtful argument.”

Another tool they recommend: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). “CBT teaches you to notice when you are engaging in various ‘cognitive distortions,’ such as ‘catastrophizing’ (If I fail this quiz, I’ll fail the class and be kicked out of school, and then I’ll never get a job . . .) and ‘negative filtering’ (only paying attention to negative feedback instead of noticing praise as well.”

Basically they’re offering tools for us to be a bit more objective. Some might argue that it’s impossible to be perfectly, completely objective, given how many biases inherent in our mind, but I maintain (and I think Lukianoff and Haidt would agree) that our lives will be better and our political discussions a bit less contentious if we strive to be more objective even if we fall short of perfection.

Bottom line: this is an important book. I can’t recommend it highly enough. I’m pleased to say that this book appears to have done well both in terms of sales and in the discussion it has generated on Twitter. Bravo!

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I’ve put this table from the book at the end because it lays out a good overview of the great untruths, sounds psychological counter principles and related wisdom.

<b>Psychological Principle</b>	<b>Wisdom</b>	<b>Great Untruth</b>
Young people are antifragile.	Prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child.	What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker.
We are all prone to emotional reasoning and the confirmation bias.	Your own worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own thoughts, unguarded. But	Always trust your feelings.

<b>Psychological Principle</b>	<b>Wisdom</b>	<b>Great Untruth</b>
	once mastered, no one can help you as much, not even your father or your mother.	
We are all prone to dichotomous thinking and tribalism.	The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.	Life is a battle between good people and evil people.