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## Why Concepts Creep to the Left

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Last year I cowrote an essay with Greg Lukianoff titled “The Coddling of the American Mind” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Lukianoff and I analyzed several new concepts that have been spreading rapidly around the academy—but almost nowhere else in American society. The two most colorful are “Trigger warnings” (warnings given to students before professors assign readings that might reactivate painful memories in survivors of trauma) and “microaggressions” (words, questions, or even facial expressions that have the effect—often unintended—of making another person feel marginalized, different, or excluded). A search for these terms on Google Trends shows that they were barely mentioned before 2012 but have been rising rapidly in popularity since late 2013.

These terms are part of a new conceptual package that includes all of the older concepts long referred to as “political correctness” but with greatly expanded notions of harm, trauma, mental illness, vulnerability, and harassment. These concepts seem to have expanded in just the way that Nick Haslam (this issue) describes—horizontally, to take in new kinds of cases (such as adding the reading of novels to the list of traumatizing activities), and vertically, to take in ever less extreme versions of older cases (as is made explicit by the prefix “micro” in the word “microaggression”). In this conceptually augmented political correctness, the central idea seems to be that many college students are so fragile that institutions and right-thinking people must all work together to protect vulnerable individuals from exposure to words and ideas that could damage them in a lasting way. If this protection requires banning certain speakers from campus, or punishing student newspapers that publish opinions that upset the dominant campus sensibility, then so be it.

But the reactions to the “Coddling” article—in essays, blog posts, and commentary on the original post—has revealed a large generational gap. As far as I can tell, the vast majority of Americans older than 40, including progressives, and including progressive professors, dislike the illiberal tendencies of the new

political correctness. They do not share the view that college students must be shielded from words, books, and visiting speakers. These older progressives value freedom of speech to such an extent that they oppose efforts to shut down student newspapers or shout down professors or visiting speakers. President Obama himself recently spoke out against “coddling” and in favor of vigorous cross-partisan debate on campus (see quotes in Haidt, 2015). There has been hardly any published criticism of the “Coddling” article, but what little pushback there has been has come almost exclusively from current college students and from humanities professors younger than 35 (e.g., Manne, 2015).

Why is this? Why has this new and expansive sense of student fragility spread so rapidly, but only among millennials who are currently living or working on college campuses? Lukianoff and I tried to explain the recent spread of trigger warnings and microaggression theory by examining broad historical trends, such as increases in protective parenting that began in the 1980s, and we examined more recent changes in federal laws that pressured universities to overpolice language use on campus. But Haslam’s explanation of concept creep provides a large and crucial missing piece of the story. In this article I expand upon a point that Haslam (this issue) raised only briefly at the end of his target article: Concept creep has happened primarily to concepts related to a left-liberal moral agenda. As he noted on p. 14: The concept creep phenomenon broadens moral concern in a way that aligns with a liberal social agenda by defining new kinds of experience as harmful and new classes of people as harmed, and it identifies these people as needful of care and protection.

I position concept creep within the recent historical trend of rising political polarization, particularly “affective partisan polarization,” which refers to the increasing hostility felt by partisans toward people on the other side. I tell this story in three graphs. Together, the trends in these graphs can explain why concepts of trauma and victimhood have undergone such rapid expansion on university campuses and among psychologists. In brief, the loss of political diversity in many universities—and in psychology in particular—at a time of rising cross-partisan hostility has amplified the already powerful process of motivated reasoning. Concepts are morphing to become ever more useful to

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in this article can be found online at [www.tandfonline.com/hpli](http://www.tandfonline.com/hpli).

“intuitive prosecutors” (Tetlock, 2002), who are prosecuting their enemies in the culture war.

### Graph 1: Political Polarization Is Rising in Congress

The U.S. Congress went through a period of historically low polarization from the 1920s through the 1970s, as shown in Figure 1, which plots the degree to which a legislator’s votes on major issues can be predicted if all one knows about that legislator is his or her placement on the left–right dimension. Ideology has become steadily more powerful as a predictor of voting, particularly since the 1980s. Before the 80s, politics was more flexible; the existence of conservative Democrats (mostly in the South) and liberal Republicans (mostly in the Northeast and Northwest) made it much easier than it is today to create bipartisan coalitions in support of major projects and reforms. But for a variety of reasons (described in Haidt & Abrams, 2015), the parties began to shuffle and purify themselves in the 1970s so that by the 1990s the Democrats had become the liberal party and Republicans were the conservative party. Cross-overs, and even moderates, were less and less welcome, particularly in the Republican Party.

### Graph 2: Affective Partisan Polarization Is Increasing Among Americans

As the two parties were sorting themselves along the left–right axis, what it meant to be a Republican or a Democrat changed, and hostility to the increasingly purified and increasingly extreme “other side” intensified. Figure 2 shows data from the American

National Election Survey, from the “feeling thermometer” section in which a representative sample of Americans are asked to rate how warm or cold they feel toward various groups and institutions in American society. The top two lines show that Americans have held steady in their generally positive ratings of their own party. The bottom two lines show that there has been a steady drop in how they feel about the other side. It is interesting to note that in the 1980s, cross-partisan ratings were only a little bit below 50—not very “cold.” But the decline began to accelerate after 2000, particularly for Democrats responding to the Republican party of George W. Bush and the war in Iraq.

The net effect has been a sharp rise in public expressions of anger and incivility, at the elite level (e.g., a Republican congressman shouting “You lie!” to President Obama) as well as at the mass level (as seen in populist movements such as the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street). What effect might this national trend of increasing cross-partisan hostility have had on university life? How might it have changed psychology in particular?

### Graph 3: Psychology Is Becoming Politically Purified

In 2011, I gave a talk at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology in which I argued that social psychology was becoming a “tribal moral community” bound together by moral commitments to social justice and progressive ideals. I described ways in which the absence of conservatives in the field made it harder to do good research. I was later joined by four other social psychologists (Jose Duarte, Jarett Crawford, Lee Jussim, and Phil

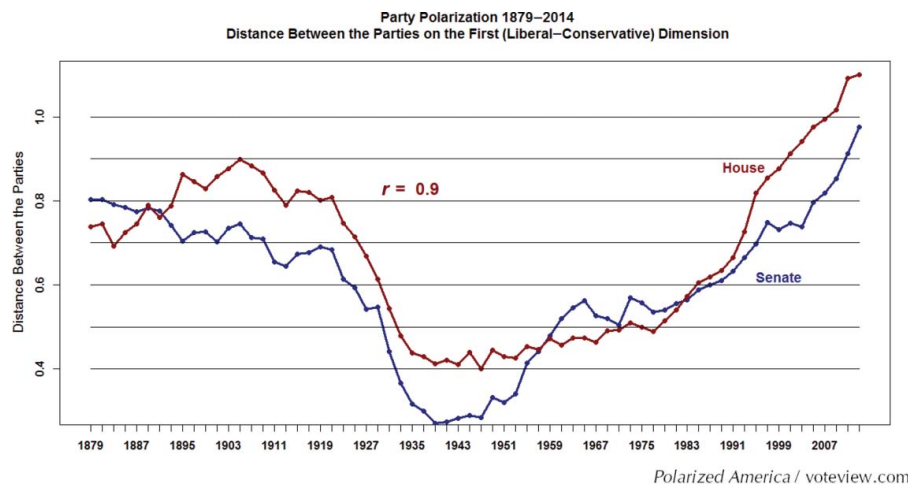


Figure 1. Political polarization in the U.S. Congress has risen since the 1980s. Source: McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal (2006), updated graph retrieved from [http://voteview.com/Polarized\\_America.htm](http://voteview.com/Polarized_America.htm) on October 24, 2015.

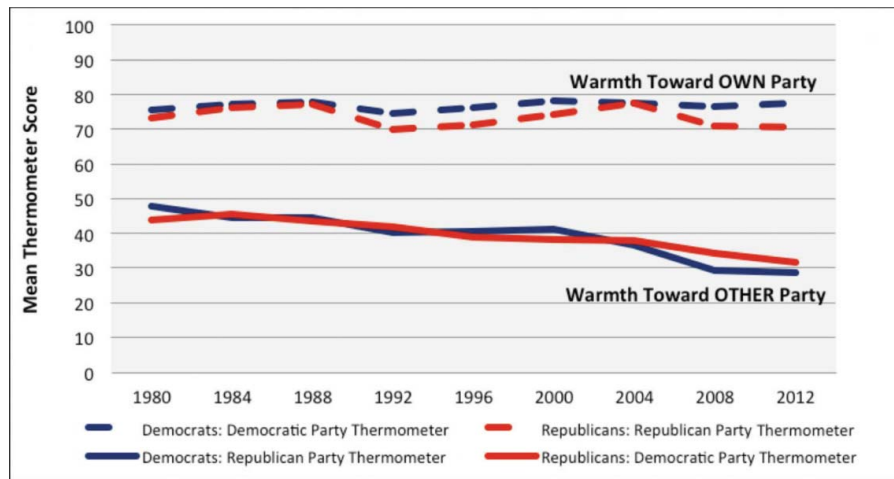


Figure 2. Affective partisan polarization: Americans increasingly dislike the other side, compared to their own side. Note. Data from American National Election Survey, graphed by Sam Abrams.

Tetlock), as well as one sociologist (Charlotta Stern) in laying out a more formal and complete argument. Our article (Duarte et al., 2015) was titled “Political Diversity Will Improve Social Psychological Science.” In that article, Charlotta Stern pulled together all extant published information on the political identities of academic or research-oriented psychologists, and she plotted all available data points on a single graph. The graph, reprinted as Figure 3, stunned us. We had not realized just how rapidly psychology had changed in the 1990s when the Greatest Generation (which had some political diversity in it) retired just as the Baby Boomers were coming to dominate the field.

The diamonds on the left side of the graph represent psychologists’ recollections of which party they voted for in prior presidential elections, as assessed in the early 1960s (McClintock, Spaulding, & Turner, 1965). The ratio of voting for Democrats versus Republicans mostly ranges from 2:1 to 4:1, and a similar ratio was found for self-reports of being liberal versus conservative—4:1—as late as 1990. But after 1990, whether the question is party preference or ideology (liberal-conservative), the ratio skyrockets. Psychology is rapidly purging itself of all political diversity.

I do not believe it is problematic when an academic field leans left, as psychology did before the

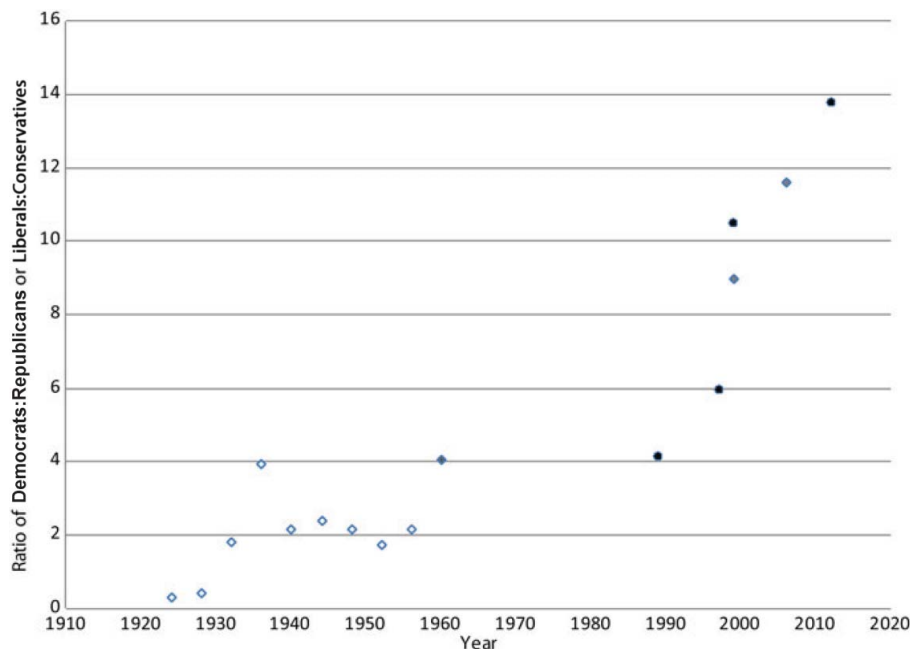


Figure 3. The rising ratio of Left to Right in psychology. Note. Circles show ratios of self-reports of liberal versus conservative. Diamonds show ratios of self-reports of party preference or voting (Democrat vs. Republican). See Duarte et al. (2015) for further explanation.

1990s. In a free society, few fields will end up with perfectly proportional representation by politics, gender, race, or other criteria. As long as there are sure to be *some* conservatives (or women, or African Americans) to review papers, speak at symposia, and otherwise challenge the biases and prejudices of the dominant group, the scientific process of institutionalized questioning can function.

But when the ratio of liberals to conservatives rises above a certain point (5:1? 10:1?), we get a phase change. People start to assume that everyone in the room shares their politics. They start making jokes, from the lectern, about conservatives. They create a hostile climate, and the few remaining nonliberals begin to hide their views. Nonliberal graduate students and assistant professors are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, as many have told me (see their stories at Haidt, 2011).

In the process of writing our political diversity paper, we learned that psychology is not unique in undergoing a political purification process with rising hostility toward political minorities. Most fields in the social sciences and humanities seem to be experiencing these trends (Klein & Stern, 2009). This makes sense if the rising cross-party hostility shown in Figure 2 is a national trend.

### Creeping Concepts for an Intensifying Culture War

Looking at the three figures and then returning to Haslam's (this issue) article, we can now see the underlying processes that might be driving concepts to the left. I don't need to review for this readership the power and ubiquity of motivated reasoning and the confirmation bias. I just add that these processes—which are usually studied in individuals acting on self-serving motives—often become much stronger when individuals are embedded in groups that are locked in combat with other groups (for a review, see Haidt, 2012, Chap. 4). Intense tribalism is fundamentally incompatible with open mindedness and the search for truth because changing your mind—or merely acknowledging nuance—becomes treason.

So let us imagine ourselves hovering over any great American research university at any time in the last 15 years, looking down and observing as a few hundred faculty members in the humanities and social sciences go about their work. Their academic fields are becoming more politically homogeneous, and the attitudes of everyone around them are becoming gradually more hostile toward conservatives and Republicans. A large minority of these professors directly study politically charged topics such as race, gender, power, and marginalization. How might their

scholarship be influenced by the trends shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3?

Tetlock (2002) summarized a great deal of research on social cognition by saying that people sometimes become “intuitive prosecutors,” with a “prosecutorial mindset” that can get switched on and off as needed. He said that we often strive to be fair, as prosecutors, but he noted how “blatantly biased ingroups are toward outgroups” (p. 461). If we allow that many academics studying politically charged topics might, at least sometimes, be in “intuitive prosecutor” mode, then we can expect them to make three kinds of conceptual moves that would be helpful in prosecuting the perceived enemies of social justice (i.e., conservatives, and members of “privileged” groups).

1. *Maximize the victim class.* A good prosecutor will strive to recruit ever more groups to register complaints against the accused. This might explain the ever-lengthening list of groups and identities that fall under the protection of diversity and inclusion policies. This is a form of horizontal creep in the concept of victimhood.
2. *Maximize the damages.* A prosecutor has a stronger case if she can show that the damages done to victims are far graver than they appear at first sight. Thus scholars from across the academy have an incentive to find new ways in which members of allegedly victimized groups are harmed by current practices. This prosecutorial imperative might explain the creeping concepts of “marginalization” and “exclusion” (horizontal creep), as well as the constant lowering of the criteria (vertical creep) for harm in general and trauma in particular that Haslam described in his essay.
3. *Minimize the defendant's defenses.* In criminal cases, most serious charges require *mens rea*—a “guilty mind.” You can't convict someone of murder or assault if the harm was entirely unintentional. But if you develop a new legal theory that removes the need for *mens rea*, you can vastly increase your conviction rate. This is one of the central innovations of microaggression theory. Microaggressions are defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, *whether intentional or unintentional* [emphasis added], that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Indeed, Haslam specifically notes that many creeping concepts, including abuse, bullying, and discrimination, have shed their older requirements for *mens rea*, requiring only a subjective assessment by the apparent victim. Unlike courts of law, in academic settings a lack of intent—or even the

presence of good intentions—is no longer a valid defense against charges of racism, sexism, or other crimes. All that matters is that a member of a protected group felt marginalized. This is why we are increasingly hearing from left-leaning professors who write essays with titles such as “I’m a liberal professor, and my liberal students terrify me” (Schlosser, 2015).

To sum up, if an increasingly left-leaning academy is staffed by people who are increasingly hostile to conservatives, then we can expect that their concepts will shift, via motivated scholarship, in ways that will help them and their allies (e.g., university administrators) to prosecute and condemn conservatives. We can expect academic concepts to “creep” in ways that increase the number of victims and the damages those victims suffer, and in ways that make it ever harder for *anyone* to defend themselves against ugly moral charges. Such politically motivated scholarship may sometimes originate in humanities departments rather than in psychology, but it draws heavily on psychological concepts and research, and it feeds back into the six streams of creeping psychological research that Haslam (this issue) reviews.

### Rising Danger for Psychology

Haslam (this issue) lists a number of dangers to psychology from left-ward concept creep. I just want to make Haslam’s warning more vivid by asking readers to imagine a situation in which the politics is reversed (see Tetlock, 2005, on turnabout tests).

Suppose that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was traditionally a right-leaning organization, like most law enforcement organizations. Suppose conservatives outnumbered liberals by about three to one from its founding in 1908 through the 1990s. But suppose that during the administration of George W. Bush the agency began to lean much further to the right. After the 9/11 attacks, the agency’s culture became extremely hostile to liberals and Democrats, who were widely associated with the gravest threats to the nation. By 2012 the ratio of conservatives to liberals was 14 to 1 (as in Figure 3). Do you suppose this transformation might affect the way the FBI did its job, or would you trust the agency’s professionalism to keep politics out of law enforcement? Might the agency shift its resources toward conservative priorities, such as fighting terrorism and moral decay, while ignoring liberal priorities such as abortion clinic bombings, civil rights infringements, and environmental crimes? And might we begin to see law enforcement concepts creeping to the right, such that more and more citizens fall under suspicion of entitlement cheating, abetting illegal immigration, or

subverting American values? Perhaps we’d even see the creation of brand-new legal concepts such as “micro-treasons,” defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, *whether intentional or unintentional*, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward the United States of America.”

Most important: How would you *feel* about this new FBI? Would you trust it and believe its pronouncements? Would you support its continued operational independence, or would you want Congress to demand reform?

Psychology (like almost all of the other social sciences and humanities) has a serious problem. Haslam (this issue) shows us that our concepts are creeping to the left in ways that make psychology ever more appealing to the left and ever less appealing to the right. I have shown that our membership is creeping to the left as well, as part of a broad national trend of rising affective polarization. Will we just sit back and let our field drift, or will we take charge and try to reverse these trends?

In Duarte et al. (2015) we offered a variety of steps that psychology can take. The essential first step is to examine *why* psychology is so committed to diversity. We have a highly refined set of concepts for describing the benefits of diversity. We have argued since the 1980s that all institutions, organizations, and industries should embrace diversity, not in order to right past wrongs but to make themselves better. We should embrace our own teachings. It would take only small changes to our policies and our thinking to recognize that the kind of diversity psychology (and the rest of the academy) most desperately needs is diversity of viewpoints. (For more on the benefits of viewpoint diversity, please visit [www.HeterodoxAcademy.org](http://www.HeterodoxAcademy.org))

### Note

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