On The Coddling of the American mind: Should we talk more about drugs?

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In *The Coddling of the American mind*, psychologist Jonathan Haidt, New York University, and Greg Lukianoff, president of Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, present a compelling account of multiple socio-cultural forces that converge on the arguably over-sensitive campus culture in the US. The authors argue since the 1980s in America, there has been a sharp rise of a new philosophy of child-rearing and child-education called “safetyism.” That is because of the multiple graphic and sensational events of child abduction and school-shooting during that time. The authors argue the “free range” kids, who can freely run around their neighborhood, are no longer common. Kids have to play under parents’ supervision becomes a strict social norm and, in some places, even instituted into the legal framework. It sounds like a good idea but in practice, it means the kids don’t learn to peacefully solve social conflicts on their own, but start to rely more only authority as a tactics. Ten to fifteen years down the line, over-protective parenting and schooling produces a generation of sensitive college kids (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019).

The authors also argue the arrival of social media also creates intense social anxiety, stress, and even depression among young adults. The culture of virtue signaling and the intense peer-pressure online create a situation, in which, students with the loudest mouths and the most extreme view start to take over the discourse, enforcing new norms and rules, and forcing others to salute the same flags, so to speak.

I agree with the authors up to the point of the emergence of the “*cancel culture*.” I can see how these socio-cultural forces produce the cancel culture, where students call for cancelation of public speakers whose views they don’t like. But Haidt and Lukianoff’s account doesn’t explain the violence that comes so readily with the new over-sensitive campus culture. In so many campus protests, students turn into mobs and violently attack people they consider the enemy. More recently, it appears such over-sensitive poised-to-violence culture has spread over the US in violent protests that came after the death of George Floyd.

It seems to me, in the book, there should be more of the culture of drugs in America. For example, how parents start to resort heavily to pharmaceutical solutions for their kids’ mental problems: hyperactive attention, attention deficit disorder, stress, anxiety, etc. It looks to me a generation of drugged-up young adults, who have all the penned-up frustration, should at least be among the explanatory factors. Of course, over-protective parenting-schooling and anxiety induced by social media use might also be the cause for the overuse of drugs to treat problems that can be dealt with nonpharmaceutical.

The problem with drugs use is that once a population gets to a point that they feel they must rely on drugs to function normally, the dynamic of group interaction changes completely. I want to draw an analogy with the gun issue. Once a person is carrying a gun, the underlying dynamics of his subsequent encounters with any potential conflicts change completely. With a gun, any potential conflict can escalate into life-or-death situation for all parties involved. The drugs use is kind of similar to that dynamic in that way. Once we have many people who are drugged up and experience penned-up frustrations, it changes the interaction with each other and everyone else as well: all conflicts can quickly escalate and get out of control. And in a group situation, it only takes a few unhinge people to take over and ruin any chance of peaceful resolution of conflict.

In addition, I also think that all of those socio-cultural forces interact with each other: the change in philosophy of the schooling and parenting, the arrival of social media, the prevalence of drugs use to treat mental health problems, etc. As such, it is important to understand how socio-cultural values and their interactions underlie our collective worst moments (Vuong et al., 2020; Sapolsky, 2017).

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References

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