

## Making Academia Safe for Unsafety



**T**HERE is now a lot of talk about the ‘safe’ classroom, and more generally about the ‘safe’ society, as the two are obviously connected. It may raise some eyebrows that there is even a need for such talk (instead of only a need for action). After all, surely no one is willing to defend bullying, sexism, racism, or the use of violence in education? Isn’t the requirement of safety morally self-evident? Evidently not.

First of all, who gets to define what is safe and unsafe? Is it enough that I ‘feel’ unsafe to support my claim that you should change your behaviour? In the words of Professor Marcel Levi at the Free University Amsterdam, who complained about his students, and his subordinates, in the Dutch newspaper *Het Parool* (12-11-2022): “Everyone who doesn’t get his way (..) immediately starts complaining that he ‘doesn’t feel safe’. After a performance review in which you received calm and well-considered feedback on your performance, a subordinate can immediately report to a confidential adviser that this manager makes you feel unsafe and you may even complain about transgressive behaviour”. He later apologized for his column, with which he “didn’t want to hurt anyone”.

Is some unsafety, not an inevitable byproduct of critical thinking and the questioning of received truths, both hallmarks of academic *Bildung*? And more generally, is some level of unsafety, not a necessary condition to grow up into an adult, to learn to deal with the vicissitudes of life, to become tough enough to stand on one’s own feet without

protective parents hovering in the background? Like professor Bas van der Putte at the University of Amsterdam, who wrote in the university magazine *Folia* (09-11-2022) that students need to be taught to be a bit tougher: “The angry outside world is full of (...) socially unsafe situations in which you can feel uncomfortable, but with which you have to deal.”

#### BEING TOUGH?

So, how to pick our way in this debate? To start with the demand for a little toughness, which connects the complaints by both professors. Recently we cautiously raised the question with a few millennials if the term ‘being tough’ still meant anything to them. We were very happy we had done so cautiously because we were quickly informed that if anyone was entitled to ask that question, it wouldn’t be us. In their eyes, we are boomers, even though we are officially too young for that. According to young people, boomers had everything easy: work, money, jobs, houses, pensions – everything fell in their laps. And as a thank-you to the world, they ruined the climate by consuming like crazy, so now there is nothing left for millennials and generations after them. ‘Easy for *you* to say *we* should be tough? Come on....’

The fact that one of us got his first permanent job when he was 36 years old, and the other only got tenure when she was 55, does not fit into this picture. But more interesting than finding out who had it easier, is creating some clarity in the debate about safety, by distinguishing three types of problems that fall under the label of social unsafety. Only when that is clear, we can determine whether some toughness is in order or not, and what that toughness then amounts to.

#### RACISM AND SEXISM

There are three types of problems that fall under the label of social unsafety. First, racism, sexism and (sexual) harassment. All these have

been outlawed a long time ago but have not disappeared from society. Still, there is much more openness about these sources of social unsafety nowadays and that is a great achievement. When one of us was sexually harassed as a student she kept silent out of shame and then changed studies. That would be different now. Thanks to the brave revelations that constituted the #MeToo movement, a cesspool of sexual misconduct and other forms of harassment has opened up. Powerful men in high-profile positions in the cultural sector, media, journalism and science are exposed, with the row around the now infamous Dutch talk show host Matthijs van Nieuwkerk as the latest example. In these professions, positions are prestigious and scarce and performance criteria are diffuse. It is no coincidence that these contexts are disproportionately characterized by harassment cases.

It has only recently become clear on what scale transgressive behavior occurs and how much women in particular suffered and still do. As mentioned, sexism, racism and (sexual) harassment are prohibited by law, but more and stricter policies are still urgently needed. Also, at the universities. Overall, powerful men are still protected, and victims much less or not at all, according to the university-wide action group 0.7 (@0point7), which speaks for the many untenured staff at the modern university.

#### WORK PRESSURE

A second type of problem that falls under the heading of social safety concerns work pressure, pressure to perform, fear of failure and burnout, and barriers to complaining about this. In our work as professors and department chairs, we notice how much students and young employees suffer from these pressures and fears. Hierarchy makes them afraid to speak up or address leadership. After all, people 'higher up' do have the power to use your statements against you.

The concept of social safety does help students and young staff to raise the issue of work and performance pressure collectively. Until recently, pressure was part and parcel of university life for an employee. Now it is also a problem for management. This too is a great emanci-

patory achievement. Not all executives and directors are taking responsibility yet, so there is still a lot to do, but the standard is shifting.

Complaints about work pressure hold up a mirror to everyone working at universities: why is it normal that scientists work unpaid overtime every day throughout their working lives? Work pressure at universities has increased sharply in recent decades because the growth in student numbers has not been compensated by a similar increase in funding. Why is it normal to feel permanent work pressure and performance pressure and regularly walk along the abyss of burnout? Are universities not simply guided by macho norms like biting your lip and ignoring one's feelings? Why do we accept this? Maybe because the generation we both belong to entered the labor market during a time of wide-spread unemployment? Because from early on a sense of permanent redundancy was instilled in us? As a result, we find ourselves to still be surprised and grateful when someone is willing to offer us a job. Other generations will have different ghosts to wrestle with. For example, growing up in a world of social media where everyone competes to appear the happiest, most beautiful, and most successful cannot be good for your sense of self-esteem.

However, the call for protection against work pressure does also raise questions. Can one ever be proud of achieving one's own goals, in work or beyond without sometimes exhausting oneself and (almost) going beyond one's limits? Can one ever perform to one's own satisfaction without encountering significant resistance and overcoming it with vigour? In the end, the challenge is how to test one's limits without transgressing them.

#### POWER INEQUALITIES

The third and final form of social unsafety is created by offensive terms, images and ideas originating from people belonging to a more powerful, culturally dominant group. Power does not have to corrupt, but it does tend to blind. Those in power often do not consider themselves powerful. It's like riding a bike with the wind in your back. You are proud of your excellent health condition, until you turn around

and feel the strength of the wind blowing in your face. As a result, powerful people easily underestimate how difficult it can be for others to express their minority opinions or feelings. A good example of this lack of sensitivity is provided in the opinion piece by Bas van der Putte, whom we mentioned above. He grumbles that students complain in educational evaluations that it is unsafe if the teacher asks them for their opinion. “They indicate that this makes them stressed in class, that they are no longer able to concentrate properly and (..) that the teacher creates an unsafe climate and that he is totally unsuitable for teaching. Awareness of the feelings of the lecturer who reads this seems to be less clear.” (*ibid.*) We agree with his last point: students indeed often do not realize how qualifications in course evaluations keep teachers awake at night. But this should not obscure the problem that it is often difficult to give your opinion to more powerful people like your teacher or your boss. This awareness seems missing in the columns written by Levi and Van der Putten. The lack of reflection on their position of power blinds them to the courage it takes to speak out.

#### LUKIANOFF AND HAIDT

A similar blindness can be found in *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018) by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt. They argue that the call for social security is a demand for overprotection by a hypersensitive, pampered “snowflake generation.” They signal a dangerous obsession with security in the current generation of students. This obsession is in their view based on the misconception that young people are vulnerable souls; that feelings express deep truths; and that life is a battle between good and bad people.

All misconceptions, say Lukianoff and Haidt. People are more resilient than they seem or claim to be. Feelings can deceive when they are based on false assumptions. People are rarely unequivocally good or bad. We become happier, healthier, stronger, and more likely to achieve our goals when we seek challenges, are kinder to others, and learn to see nuance rather than polarization.

Lukianoff and Haidt explain the modern obsession with safety by pointing to a number of social trends. The increasing animosity between political parties, which citizens take as an example. A growing passion for perceived social justice: a term or image is considered offensive when anyone *feels* it that way, regardless of how it is intended. And a more protective upbringing, in which children grow up being permanently supervised by grown-ups and in which they are taught not to take risks.

The paradoxical consequence of this safety obsession, the authors believe, is an increase in fear and a call for ever more protection, which only makes young people even more vulnerable and less resilient. They detect this perverse mechanism especially in the iGen, the internet generation born in or after 1995. From an early age, these youngsters mirror themselves daily online and via social media to ideal others. This is especially destructive for iGen girls, who therefore suffer more from anxiety, depression and suicide than previous generations. Do not offer these young people more social security, but challenge them more is the call of Lukianoff and Haidt.

Their diagnosis is not entirely convincing. For instance, Lukianoff and Haidt miss the obvious point that the iGen does play a lot without parental supervision: as children, they spent a lot of time on the Internet, which is not a safe place at all and where they were exposed to all kinds of threats. The opposite can therefore also be argued: this generation could have profited from more social security, not less.

#### SAFEGUARDING UNSAFETY

Still, the question of whether you can broaden your horizons without struggling with resistance and aversion to strange, perhaps offensive texts and terms, seems justified. Van der Putten and Levi may be right that something is lost when a learning environment becomes a protective environment. Isn't learning a matter of both safety and challenge, even if that challenge can feel unsafe? We think so. However, to safeguard the type of unsafety that is conducive to learning, truth finding, and personal growth, it is important to distinguish it from

the other three types of unsafety. We must fight racism and sexism, work stress, and power hierarchies where the powerful silence those with less power. All three aspects of the increased attention for social safety that we distinguished can be seen as valiant attempts to eradicate the negative effects of power inequality in the capillaries of our society. In other words: as signs of emancipation. Van der Putte, Levi, and Lukianoff and Haidt all underestimate this important achievement of our time.

The term social safety addresses more subtle expressions of power inequality than overt intimidation and discrimination. For a long time, it was considered perhaps a bad thing, but still inevitable that women or people with a migration background had to put up with sexist and racist 'jokes'. After all, these were claimed to be simply fun, so one was a bad sport if one took offense. It was considered normal and inevitable to be scolded and belittled at will in sports or in the media, or that bosses and supervisors behaved erratically and out of control. It is a huge achievement that all this is no longer considered and accepted as normal. The term social security has contributed to this important change in moral sensitivity.

We therefore plead for a more investigative attitude, especially in the case of (older, white, established) scientists such as the aforementioned gentlemen and ourselves. We can make an effort to put ourselves in the shoes of younger generations who grew up in a completely different world than we did and who offer us the opportunity to see our own weirdness more clearly. Bringing together issues such as discrimination, sexual harassment, work stress, and hurtful language forces us to look at them in a new way, starting from the feelings of those who experience them. With the term social insecurity, the power of definition shifts: there is something to say for letting the people who are the subject of the joke determine whether it is offensive, at least when they are not in a position of power. A sexist joke or rash use of the word 'slave' may not be meant to be hurtful, but it can be experienced as such and that is sufficient reason to pause and reflect. We think this reversal of power of speech and definition is a step forward. This reversal is still

in progress and deserves our broad support, as it exposes experiences that have long been suppressed due to a lack of legitimacy and shame.

What are policymakers and administrators to do with this? Decisive and forceful action, of course, against what has been outlawed for so long already: racism, sexism and (sexual) harassment. It is important to be open to signals and to stand next to victims. But we think strong policy measures may be premature in the case of the two other aspects of social safety – work pressure and the fear of protesting against it, and insecurity in expressing your opinion and criticizing offensive language. We think it is for the time being more prudent to listen carefully and to investigate. In the case of work pressure, we need to find a balance between (self)exploitation and testing one's limits. In the case of speaking out in public or speaking truth to power, it is unavoidable that that will require some courage and we do need to find and create places where people, old and young, can learn, test, and exercise that virtue. Furthermore, that you deserve to be listened to is not the same as that you are right. The reversal of norm and right of judgment is a great achievement, but cannot be the end point, as is clear from two recent examples.

Leiden University recently removed a painting of elderly gentlemen smoking cigars from the Academy Building, following a tweet from an employee who had been annoyed by it. The university board seems to have given in to the 'risk regulation reflex': not to investigate a problem further, but to immediately try to solve it. Hoping that the problem would thus go away. However, a conversation about the meanings at stake and the feelings evoked by the painting would have been far more productive. Something similar happened at an American university where a student filed a complaint of disrespect after her lecturer showed a fourteenth-century image of the prophet Mohammed during class. (see *NRC 14-01-2023*) The lecturer wanted to show that Muslims had not always been forbidden to depict the prophet. She had informed the students in advance and had received no objections. Nevertheless, the university agreed with the complaining student and ruled that the lecturer had behaved "inconsiderate, disrespectful and Islamophobic". This board too seems to have given in to the risk regulation reflex. The



perspective of the subordinate, less powerful party is extremely relevant, but can never be the only and final benchmark. By agreeing in advance with the (often less powerful) complainant, emotions are elevated to a deeper truth and not to one – only one - source of information for ethical consideration. Feelings matter, but so should intentions and other reasons.

Feelings do not come from the gut but from the brain. You can adjust them if you have knowledge of intentions. If the student knows that the teacher did not show the image to hurt, but to place contemporary norms in a historical perspective, that she wanted to take feelings into account by warning in advance, then the anger can, and should, subside. It would have been preferable if the board had invited the complainant and the teacher to investigate intentions and feelings in more detail and to adjust them if necessary. And to jointly make an ethical assessment: should protection against unpleasant or hurtful experiences outweigh the usefulness of an instructive, disruptive enrichment of horizons? Only after listening and carefully assessing the complexities of a case does it make sense to make policy.

The same goes for the widely noticed insecurity of many students if they are asked to voice their opinion. Why is it that so many feel not up to that task, and claim it as their right to be an onlooker, not a participant in the discussions that make up the heart of an academic culture? Why is it that we find that students more and more claim the right to only get exam questions that allow for a standardized answer and thus only test whether one can slavishly reproduce information rather than, as should be fitting in academia, whether one is able to critically reflect? Has this to do with the fear of a generation that grew up with the Internet, where nothing one says or writes or shows will ever disappear from your record? Or does it have to do with a lack of confidence that one matters and counts, after comparing one's life on social media with a zillion others who all seem to live happier and more successful lives? We don't know the answers, but we do think that such questions deserve to be put on the agenda and discussed openly to help fight the wave of anxiety that is marring the lives of many young people today.

Complaints against work pressure, performance pressure, hierarchy, and the problematic use of words - just like complaints against sexual harassment - are signs of the refinement of the emancipation struggle for humane, more egalitarian relationships. Indications of a new phase in a long progressing line of democratization, which runs from protests from labour unions against capitalists, from patients against paternalistic doctors in the 1960s and 1970s, from women against sexual violence in the 1980s and 1990s, from Dutch citizens with a migration background or a disability against labor market discrimination.

The struggle for more egalitarian, democratic relationships in which one's position does not restrict one's right to speak, is now penetrating the very capillaries of society. The more sensitive we become to power and inequality, the more subtle our perceptions will become of what power and inequality do and what we do to each other. And the more open and equal conversations about feelings, sensitivities, power and achievements can become.

Provided we do not tackle social insecurity with quick judgments and policy rules, but with open and investigative conversations. Only then will we manage to create safe spaces where people can truly be invited to seek out the thrill of letting go of the false safety of one's dogmas and lazy convictions.

## REFERENCES

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