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Developing Social Empathy with Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this chapter are to demonstrate the need for social empathy in a democratic society, identify polarization barriers, and explore how American higher education can be a leading agent for developing social empathy. The United States has seen a recent rise in political tribalism, and it now faces rising antipathy between those holding polarized perspectives. Higher education is uniquely situated to address these problems. Like a mixing bowl, college is a place where students of all backgrounds can be combined in deep discourse at a key point in their psychological development. However, higher education has struggled to fulfill its potential, as efforts toward diversity have rarely achieved their goals. Utilizing the concepts of social empathy (Segal, 2018) and honest diversity (Manji, 2019), a new approach to diversity work in higher education may hold the key to establishing the sector's prominence in developing a society of diverse people who can function respectfully toward one another.

Keywords: Polarization, Incivility, Political Tribes, Social Justice, Inclusion, Diversity, Bruce Kimball, Identity Development Theory, Contact Hypothesis, Moral Courage College, Cornel West, Robert George

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in the United States serves as a social mixing bowl on a grand scale. Each year, hundreds of thousands of students leave their homes and move to a campus. While many study locally, most do not, choosing rather to move around their state, region, country, or world to pursue the next stage of education with diverse other students. Indeed, this collegiate interaction across differences can lead to significantly positive outcomes at the individual level, such as subsequent career success, life satisfaction, and civic participation (Luo, 2021). How, then, does this interaction relate to the proper role of higher education in a democratic society? Engaging deeply with others who have differences across various axes of diversity contributes to the civility and the de-polarization of society.

Interactions in a civil society must transcend insults, such as "snowflakes" or "Republicraps." Discourse on social media and in article comments easily leads to the demonization of others who believe, identify, or act differently, leading people to shelter in digital bubbles where they hear only from those who are likeminded. As Inazu (2016) pointed out: "Instead of shutting down or avoiding those with whom we

disagree, confident pluralism suggests that we can and should allow space for meaningful difference and the opportunity for persuasion" (p. 84).

Higher education is an outstanding vehicle for delivering such deep social engagement, bringing people together through the classroom and student life, who would have otherwise never interacted. These axes of diversity include demographics of heritage (such as race and ethnicity), sex and gender (biological sex, gender identity, sexual orientation), place (geography, culture), belief / worldview (politics, religion), temporality (age, generation), socioeconomic status, and many others. Without direct exposure to others of difference, social empathy—"the ability to understand people and other social groups by perceiving and experiencing their life situations" (Segal, 2018, p. 4)—is impossible.

Despite its potential, higher education has not fully realized its capacity to develop social empathy, often struggling with perceptions of enforced homogeneity of thought. Heterodox Academy (n.d.) rose to a position of prominence as a voice running counter to a perceived "rise of orthodoxy within scholarly culture—when people fear shame, ostracism, or any other form of social or professional retaliation for questioning or challenging a commonly held idea" (para. 1). Whether one accepts Heterodox Academy's diagnosis of the problem or its prescribed solution, its rise is an indicator that higher education is not immune to incivility or polarization.

As society and higher education in the United States have reached a point where tensions are again boiling over, what hope can be found? In this chapter, the author will demonstrate the need for social empathy in a democratic society, explore polarization barriers to the development of social empathy, and suggest how American higher education can become a leading agent to foster social empathy.

BACKGROUND

This section examines the recent history of purpose in higher education, specifically regarding its responsibility to society. While Thomas Jefferson notably drove early American higher education to develop patriotic citizens who embodied the values of the new republic, this vision faded quite rapidly. The recent approaches of Veblen, Kerr, and Kimball take important steps toward our present situation. Veblen's disinterested pursuit of knowledge posits the quest for objective truth as the only relevant consideration for higher education, with no regard for citizenship. While Kerr also set forth knowledge generation as an ultimate goal, he recognized that this enterprise is a human one. His "multiversity" described the many communities that inhabited each institution. Lastly, Kimball blended Veblen's pursuit of knowledge with Jefferson's civic approach, describing the bifurcated purpose that is most common in higher education today. Taking Kimball's argument from conceptual to practical, one is left to identify what the citizenry needs and how higher education may develop that. This author will argue that society now most urgently needs citizens who are capable of social empathy toward others of difference.

Thorstein Veblen and the Disinterested Pursuit of Knowledge

Veblen (1918/2012) noted that higher education held "great intrinsic value" (p. 1) within its host society. In his early 20th century thinking, Veblen saw higher education as a defining mark of what it meant to be civilized, and this endeavor was guided by the pursuit of the "exact sciences" (p. 8) by "mature scholars and scientists" (p. 18). Veblen distinguished between the higher learning associated with universities and more rote training institutions (e.g., teachers' colleges) that were designed to instill "such knowledge and habits as will make their pupils fit citizens of the world in whatever position in the fabric of workday life they may fall" (p. 20).

This societal benefit was, however, only a serendipitous by-product of the singular purpose for higher education—"the disinterested pursuit of knowledge" (p. 225). An institution had "no responsibility for its students' fortunes in the moral, religious, pecuniary, domestic, or hygienic respect" (p. 21).

Thus, Veblen's approach to higher education in the United States might well be described as idealistic and impractical. In his design, the objective pursuit of absolute truth achieved through science was like a train running over anything and anyone in its path, decrying such obstacles as unscholarly staff or softened language. Despite his approach, he noted that American universities were accountable to the public for funding and enrollment; thus, one should not be surprised that Veblen's ideal of the pure pursuit of knowledge—no matter who is offended or run over along the way—fell out of practice, despite maintaining a hold on the hearts of some scholars and pundits to this day.

Clark Kerr and the Multiversity

Clark Kerr, an economist turned chancellor and president within the University of California system, conceptualized higher education as the pursuit of knowledge being intermixed with civic responsibilities. He described American universities as being "so many things to so many different people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself" (Kerr, 1963, p. 9)—a state of being that he termed the "multiversity." He traced several strands of thought that led to this complex institution. The first strand he identified was the Greek conception that the pursuit of knowledge was the chief end of higher education. The next strand was that of the Middle Ages, wherein "the university came to be a center for the professions, for the study of the classics, for theological and philosophical disputes" (p. 10) and such institutions were characterized by hierarchical structures in a residential environment. From there, the German research university model appeared in the 1800s to advance science. However, given the political climate of that day, the pursuit of scientific knowledge was intermingled with nationalism. This intermingling was quite relevant to the modern American situation, because, though many institutions fancy themselves to be dispassionate research centers, they also serve to advance the society that funds that pursuit of knowledge. While the American adoption of the research-based model came in the late-1800s and early-1900s, a concurrent movement for land-grant institutions was afoot. To Kerr, this divergence produced two educational pathways, "one elitist, the other democratic" (p. 15). The great development that Kerr saw defining American higher education was the Wisconsin Idea that developed shortly before World War I. Under this approach, the University of Wisconsin system came to "serve the whole state" as "new contacts with the community were created" (p. 16). The student affairs profession arose concurrently, with an emphasis on developing the whole person among undergraduates.

Kerr's conception of a mixed system—the multiversity—represented a transition in thinking about higher education in the United States. Diversity was built into the DNA of this model, albeit incompletely with many populations being excluded. The structural diversity, however, eventually led to a degree of demographic diversity for students, spurred by the post-World War II "GI Bill." He described many of these points of diversity also as points of tension: "[Higher education] serves society almost slavishly—a society it also criticizes, sometimes unmercifully. Devoted to equality of opportunity, it is itself a class society. A community . . . should have common interests; in the multiversity, they are quite varied, even conflicting" (p. 19).

Kerr's conception of diversity was quite typical for his era; that is, while he regularly expressed admiration for the equality of opportunity presented to those with adequate merit, he glossed over the gross structural inequalities of the day. Though he once noted such a concern about American higher education as "problems related to public service—cultural programs, urban extension" (p. 106), the Civil Rights Era had not yet reached its climax nor had schools desegregated in much of the country. While his multiversity was a diverse community, there was still only a narrow band of those communities who were

welcomed. Yet, Kerr's multiversity was an important evolution from Veblen's singlemindedness, now considering the people of the institution and not just the knowledge being generated.

Bruce Kimball and the Bifurcated Purpose

While it is obvious there has never been a centrally coordinated system of American higher education, Bruce Kimball (1995) argued that there was also not even a unifying purpose. Rather, he traced the bifurcated American ways of thinking about higher education back to Cicero and Socrates, to orators and philosophers. Kimball argued that these two approaches to higher learning exist in dynamic tension throughout the United States, uniquely blended by each individual and institution.

The philosophical tradition was rooted in ancient Greece as a tireless pursuit of truth. While all educational efforts, including these philosophical ones in ancient Greece, have a reciprocal influence with their surrounding society, this approach treats impacts on society as a by-product rather than an end goal. The pursuit of pure truth must then be the sole objective and evaluation of effectiveness for higher learning. If these conditions are met, then one would infer the results to be beneficial to society, but again, that would an incidental by-product. In contemporary American higher education, this is most easily observed in the ethos of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.

In stark contrast, the oratorical tradition recognized several purposes of higher learning, and the education of citizens stood slightly above the others. This was to be accomplished through ordered interchanges between individuals of differing perspectives, trying their arguments against each other's in a public forum. Here, the truth was determined—potentially differently—by consensus and each individual, rather than a tentative conclusion arrived at through the clean execution of a scientific method. Today, one would observe that most clearly in the humanities and social sciences.

Kimball rejected arguments that either approach was the singular answer; rather, he saw these two approaches forming a spectrum, wherein some individuals and institutions were at either extreme while most blended the two. Thus, Kimball's analysis portrayed the purpose of higher learning as being situated at the nexus of the two—the "debate" and "paradoxes" (p. 2) where they met.

This analysis is reasonable. It recognizes the true diversity of the American non-system of higher education. Unlike a country with a centralized, controlling agency, higher education in the United States is organized differently across the many states, localities, and private boards, with great deference given to the individual faculties. The ethos perceived by an observer would vary based on location, the type of institution being observed, and the academic programming being considered. As argued by Kimball and this author, the purpose for higher education in the United States is plural, lying at a careful balance between the dispassionate pursuit of truth across the many disciplines and the development of citizens to function in a democratic society.

Summary

Thus, Veblen's and Kerr's conceptions are rejected, though not as incorrect but rather as incomplete. Under Kimball's historical argument, higher education can fulfill its societal purpose only when the needs of the American democratic society are actually known. Kimball recognized that these needs would vary over time directly with societal changes, and so it is the responsibility of scholars to identify and articulate those needs within a given moment. This author will argue that the current societal need that should be central to higher education's civic mission is the development of social empathy.

DEVELOPING SOCIAL EMPATHY IN SOCIETY THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

The Current Need for Social Empathy

The United States has reached another crisis point in its history. Despite efforts to better integrate society, such as the desegregation of schools in the late 20th century, people of difference are increasingly isolated—both through systemic impacts and voluntarily as groups withdraw from one another. The negative effects of this isolation have been most profound on the members of groups with less power, as they are often systematically excluded from adequately funded K-12 education, selective admissions in higher education, employment opportunities, and many other such factors that contribute to success in life.

Isolation of Social Groups

As one considers the separation of groups within a society, their mind might jump to the Jewish ghettos in Nazi Germany or Apartheid in South Africa. In the United States, one might think of Native American reservations, wherein tribal members were forcibly relocated from their ancestral lands to be coerced into living the American (White) way. Other U.S. examples are the segregation of people of color during the Jim Crow Era or the "don't ask, don't tell" policy of excluding sexual minorities from military service. Focusing on these involuntary and extreme examples, however, has helped create and perpetuate voluntary isolation by social groups.

Voluntary isolation occurs when a social group's members withdraw from broader societal engagement to interact only with one another to the greatest extent feasible. This has, of course, far more subtle impacts than involuntary segregation, but the effects have still proven to be toxic over time.

Before continuing with the idea of voluntary isolation, it is important to recognize that there are still systemic factors at play that have perpetuated the legacy of involuntary segregation. For example, one might view Lincoln's famed Emancipation Proclamation and then the Union victory in the Civil War as slamming the brakes on racism; in fact, this understanding does not align with the historical record. Rather than metaphorically slamming on the brakes, those events were more analogous to taking one's foot off the gas. Brakes actively stop the motion of a vehicle, and that certainly seems to be what the words of Lincoln's order proclaimed. However, shortly after, the need for the 13th through 15th Amendments to the Constitution (abolition of slavery, granting citizenship, and ensuring voting rights) became abundantly clear. People of color across the country then suffered mightily under the Jim Crow laws of the late-1800s and early-1900s. It was only the act of slavery that had been abolished, but the residual racism of that system carried forward with great momentum. The severity and frequency of overt racism in the United States is far less in 2021 than it was in 1859; however, it still is put on display by individuals and re-emergent white supremacy movements. More pervasively though, systemic racism still impacts the lives of people of color in 2021. One example is the impact of "redlining" the "good" versus "bad" housing districts based on race by mortgage companies (Glantz & Martinez, 2018). Systemic racism does not rely on consciously racist attitudes or actions—though they do still exist; rather, it relies on that momentum of the car with neither brakes nor gas being applied.

It is easy for a person living inside their own bubble of voluntary isolation from people of difference to dismiss the lived experiences of others. This cuts in all directions, as in the hypothetical example below:

> A white suburbanite— identified as Marilyn—and a person of color relocating from an urban setting—Carlos—can equally have no idea about the other. Marilyn, hearing a news story, dismisses reports of redlining as exaggerated, having no personal experience. The cognitive biases that affect all humans have been honed to believe what is seen, not what is told. Later that month, the accounting firm where Marilyn works hires Carlos as a new accountant. Marilyn and Carlos strike up a casual friendship in the first month he works there, while he is living in a hotel and looking for a home to buy as his family relocates. Marilyn perceives Carlos as smart and

collegial, only seeing him in a positive light. One day, Carlos tells Marilyn that he has made an offer on a house down the street from where she lives, and both are sure that the offer will be accepted. They will be neighbors! However, a few weeks later, Carlos finds out he has been denied for a mortgage. Marilyn sees Carlos as in a parallel position as she was just two years ago when she was hired and moved her family to their current neighborhood. Carlos suspects he may have been impacted by redlining, and after a lengthy investigation and lawsuit, this suspicion is upheld in court. Carlos is awarded damages, but the psychological and professional impacts on him and his family are lasting. Marilyn then realizes her error in so swiftly dismissing the news story she had heard about redlining.

In the above example, Marilyn lacked social empathy for Carlos. She had interpersonal empathy for him as a co-worker and friend, but she did not understand the broader impacts of his identity on his lived experiences until she witnessed them personally.

Such a lack of social empathy should not be seen as pejorative toward individuals. As in Marilyn's case, her human psyche simply could not give the same credence to what she heard on a news story as to what she observed herself. This vignette could be re-written with the same characters and backstories but cutting in a very different way. Marilyn could have been struggling to repay crushing student loans, because her parents were farmers and FAFSA calculations barred her from Pell Grants due to land calculations despite the poverty of her lived experience; meanwhile, Carlos could have been able to graduate debt-free due to Pell Grants and a scholarship program for Latinx students at his institution. In that scenario, Carlos might have lacked social empathy for rural farmers due to his exclusively urban background.

Social empathy is bigger than any one person is likely to cultivate on their own. There are simply too many axes of diversity in a pluralistic society to understand all the others, and this is now compounded by the voluntary isolation of people into bubbles of the likeminded. Higher education is uniquely positioned to develop social empathy toward others. Though one individual might not directly encounter every combination of the axes of diversity, higher education is a mixing bowl for people of difference. Make no mistake: social empathy will not develop efficiently if students are left to do this on their own. Only through intentional curricular and student affairs programming will institutions develop social empathy among their students.

Rising Antipathy

In a recent iteration of their Battleground Poll, the Georgetown University Institute of Politics & Public Service (2020) found that almost two-thirds of Americans, regardless of their placement on the political spectrum, believed that political interactions were becoming increasingly uncivil, and they rated the nation 6% closer to being on the edge of another civil war than they did in 2019. Findings from the Pew Research Center (2020) reinforced the depth of disagreement, as 80% said they disagreed with the other side about the very nature of American values and what the goals for the country should be.

This social antipathy often comes to the forefront in anonymous internet interactions, with even professional sites not being immune. *Inside Higher Ed* recently rescinded their open commentary on articles, largely due to the "coarsening of interpersonal discourse" in the comments section that "have become a deterrent for a significant number of our readers and have lost much of their value" (Jaschik & Lederman, 2020, para. 3).

Polarization refers to a shift in the social narratives and ideologies of a society toward more extreme ends of the political spectrum rather than the middle. Hawkins et al. (2018) noted that members of each political tribe hold very consistent views on specific issues, increasingly enforcing that consistency of

belief among those who identify with them. Also on the rise is the characterization of other tribes as enemies—magnified by the distance separating the two tribes.

This antipathy has not skipped academia. Institutions of higher education have traditionally been the petri dishes for social experiments, and this has historically led to a great deal of conflict. The 1960s and 1970s were notable for the very visible conflicts that appeared on campuses, such as the U.S. Army National Guard shooting on the Kent State University campus in 1970. The 2010s again became an era of notable conflict on campuses, though more of a cold war between ideologies than overt expressions of violent confrontation.

Polarization Barriers to Social Empathy

Unique Narratives and Lexicons

One polarization barrier is that the political tribes have developed their own narratives and lexicons that are not understood by the others. The linguistic divergence in the last 10 years of the United States has evolved in a pattern analogous to the development of different languages.

Languages diverged as social groups split off from one another. While together, their ancestors spoke a common parent tongue; however, as social groups moved apart geographically and with no means of long-distance communication, they began to develop new words and ways of speaking that fit into their new setting. A group isolated from the ocean during the Bronze Age would have no need for nautical terminology in the same way that coastal traders would. Thus, while they might have retained a degree of commonality, their language would have begun to reflect their new isolated settings and cultural developments. Now, despite likely living in close proximity to people of difference in a democratic society, Americans have isolated among those who are likeminded, resulting in their hearing the words others speak but not necessarily understanding their meaning or connotation.

While one might think the politicization of speech as only a recent phenomenon, that is not the case. George Orwell, most famous for his books *1984* and *Animal Farm*, observed a redefinition of words for political purposes by those across the political spectrum. Shortly after World War II, he wrote:

> In certain kinds of writing . . . it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking meaning. . . . [Some words] are strictly meaningless, in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly even expected to do so by the reader. . . The word *Fascism* has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies 'something not desirable'. The words *democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice* have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another. . . . Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different (Orwell, 1946, pp. 257-258). . . Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. (p. 265)

He perceived that most arguments made about society "consist largely of euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness" (p. 261). Such obfuscatory language was then used to manipulate opinion in favor of political positions and actions that otherwise would have been opposed, as in his examples of purges in communist Russia and continued colonial rule of India by the British.

Digital Bubbles

A second polarization barrier is that the algorithms of mass media, social media, and search engines have created "bubbles" in which individuals are fed information that aligns with what they have previously consumed (Kish, 2020; Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020). Eady et al. (2019) found that when Americans make conscious decisions about media consumption, they tend to focus more on keeping certain points of view *out* rather than on ensuring they are exposed only to their preferred views. That is, most consume media of varying points on the ideological spectrum but exclude those too dissonant with their own views.

Whether the result of external algorithms feeding curated content or internal decision making to exclude certain content, the result is the same—citizens are living in a feedback loop designed to reinforce what they already believe. While the details and analysis of such bubbles are an important topic of study in their own right, the practical point of concern remains—the mischaracterization of and animosity toward those who are different.

Lack of Understanding About How Others Live and Think

The third polarization barrier is a simple lack of understanding about others. This is an extension of the combined issues brought on by isolation of social groups, digital bubbles, and miscommunications across a growing definition-and-meaning divide in the English language. Previously, the author noted that social empathy is contextualizing others' lived experiences as impacted by their identities (Segal, 2018). Simply, one cannot contextualize the lived experiences of another without actually knowing what those experiences are.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The traditional collegiate years immediately following high school are an immensely important time for identity development. Erickson (1950) was the most significant early progenitor of identity development theory. Erickson argued that one's identity progressively developed in a fixed order through eight stages, with each stage characterized by a dichotomy and transitions sparked by crises. Those stages were trust-mistrust, shame-doubt, initiative-guilt, industry-inferiority, identity-identity diffusion, intimacy-isolation, generativity-stagnation, and integrity-despair.

However, Erickson's theory proved difficult to empirically test, and so Marcia (1966) sought to update Erickson's model through experimentation. Especially during the period when one leaves childhood and steps toward adulthood (Erickson's identity-identity diffusion stage), Marcia (1966) identified four distinct sub-stages that were neither progressive nor in a fixed order: identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and identity diffusion. Marcia (1980) similarly found crises—explorations of new values from those with which one was raised—and then a commitment to one's new beliefs as factors that affected transitions of identity development.

From Erikson's (1950) original theory to the most current conceptions of identity development, it is clear that the period of transition from childhood to adulthood is crucial to the development of one's own values and practices. In the United States, this transition commonly occurs on the campus of a higher education institution, and thus those institutions are uniquely positioned to affect the future course of civic engagement in a society through inculcating social empathy in their students at this crucial juncture in their development.

Higher Education's Solution to Unique Narratives and Lexicons

Over time, the American political tribes have developed their own narratives and lexicons that have led to miscommunication. A major contributing factor is Haslam's (2016) "concept creep," wherein old

definitions begin to include new phenomena or are applied to much less extreme instances. That is not to suggest that either side is right or wrong; rather, when one group uses a term to mean a certain thing and another group uses the same term to mean a related but different thing, it is inevitable that miscommunication will occur, eventually leading to deeper conflict. As a present example, conservatives have tended to retain traditional dictionary definitions from the late-1900s or earlier for diversity-related terminology, while progressives have re-defined important terms to fit with what they see as a more informed understanding (e.g., the term "racism" only being applicable to those of the majoritarian identity as opposed to a person of any identity enacting race-based bigotry, discrimination, or violence).

Rigorous higher education serves an important role here through its insistence on defining terms, specificity, and citing sources. These ideas are the bedrock of solid academic writing taught from freshman composition courses through the doctoral dissertation, though students must be taught to apply these ideas beyond academic assignments. It is not that terms may not be redefined—that is a normal process in the evolution of language—but rather that, at times of definitional transition, speakers and writers must always clarify what exactly they mean as they use such terms. This has, however, become far less common in society, as people are unaware that the terms are changing and others' views have affected the differing definitions.

Higher Education's Solution to Digital Bubbles

The impacts of *direct interaction with* another group about their beliefs and *hearing about* another group's beliefs from a secondary source are very different. Inside of a digital bubble, one hears about others, but higher education can cause students to hear directly from members of those other groups.

Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis suggests that the key to breaking down barriers of bias and prejudice is direct intergroup engagement. Reinforced by subsequent research, the contact hypothesis continues to be key in the study of intergroup relations within a society. Recent research also reinforces this specifically in the higher education setting. Garvey et al. (2020) noted the following:

> Regardless of their level of engagement with the residential environment, White residential students expressed experiencing diversity through interaction with peers, including student groups, friend groups, and social experiences. It follows that increasing students' opportunity to engage with students of Color within the context of their residence halls could have positive implications for increasing White residential students' diversity appreciation. (p. 500)

Similarly, Strother et al. (2021) found that collegiate roommates' ideologies tend to move closer together over time, rather than getting more polarized.

The thoughtful exposure to others in classroom and student affairs settings can powerfully counteract these bubbles. In such settings, students are required to develop evidence-based arguments for their own positions, carefully listen to other positions, and then critique all perspectives—including their own—based on lines of evidence and reasoning. American higher education forms a great mixing bowl where this can occur. Domestic students engage with various international perspectives. Urban students take their sociology class with rural students. White students live in residential facilities with students of color. Students, faculty, and staff are forced to engage with each other regularly and deeply across any and all differences. Fulfilling their proper role, higher education professionals should craft learning activities and assessments that force students to get beyond bubbles of like-minded argumentation and enter into sustained engagement with those holding different perspectives, thereby increasing rigor and developing social empathy.

Higher Education's Solution to the Lack of Understanding How Others Live and Think

The United States is a large country with stark regional and rural-urban divides. The student of color who has never left their homogeneous neighborhood in Chicago is parallel, in this aspect, to the White student who has never left their town of 700 residents in rural Kansas. Both reside in the same country, but they may have no understanding of how the other lives beyond movies and stereotypes. For example, the role of firearms in these two settings could hardly be more different—from an instrument of random death wielded against innocent people to an instrument of food provision and protection from harm. As these hypothetical students meet in the mixing bowl of higher education, they may be provided—for the first time—with direct exposure to how the other lives, how they think, and how they developed their beliefs. There could even be profound benefits to a study-"abroad" program *inside the United States* where students spend time studying in a geographic area fundamentally different from their own.

Higher education brings those in the crucial stage of nascent adult development together from across all demographic groups in a way that no other force or entity does. This is the first step to social empathy, and with careful cultivation, institutions can take this basic knowledge from interaction into deeper contextualization. As differing students return to their homes, they will bring new perspectives on what others in this country and world actually live like, rather than stereotypes or media portrayals.

Social Empathy-Based Diversity Work on Campus

Increasingly, the body of research suggests that, however noble our goals may be, the recent approach to diversity in higher education has worked against developing social empathy—and by extension, has undermined the very goals of our diversity initiatives themselves. The means must not be held sacred as if they were ends. Higher education must then assess what it is doing in order to more effectively reach those ends of diversity through social empathy.

Foundationally, we must evaluate programming on its effectiveness at accomplishing its own stated goals. For diversity efforts in the higher education sector, we would then want to examine questions such as these: Does diversity training decrease negative attitudes and behaviors related to others across the axes of diversity? Do administrators focused on diversity work (and that diversity work itself) increase diverse representation in student recruitment, hiring, and promotion on campuses? There is a well-established body of research addressing these and similar questions, and their findings suggest the traditional way of doing diversity work has been ineffective. For the massive amount of funding and energy devoted to diversity work in business, government, and education, research suggests no relationship—or even a slight *negative* relationship—between those efforts and actual improvements for minoritized groups. The greatest practical beneficiaries of the current approach to diversity work as it is currently practiced appear to be those employed in diversity work and the institutions themselves—not those whom the work is supposed to be helping. To then continue the status quo of diversity work in the face of overwhelming research against its effectiveness is to perpetuate the power structures that are being spoken against. A tainted vaccine without practical benefit is, definitionally, no vaccine at all.

Dobbin and Kalev (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of research on institutionalized diversity training in business and higher education, and they found that "hundreds of studies dating back to the 1930s suggest that anti-bias training doesn't reduce bias, alter behavior, or change the workplace" (p. 48). The general approach to training has not, however, adjusted as research has been conducted on it. It is particularly alarming in higher education—as the industry of research—that such practices would simply continue forward based on belief rather than a research-driven approach to accomplishing goals. Dobbin and Kalev found five common reasons why such training approaches have failed: short-term interventions do not produce real changes in people, anti-bias training reinforces rather than eliminates stereotypes, the training programs are presented so confidently that participant belief in the presentations themselves

reduces actual behavioral changes, the training leaves majoritarian group members feeling attacked or excluded, and people naturally tend to subvert that which they are ordered to do.

In terms of practical impact, such diversity training programs in higher education tend to be effective only at providing institutions with a legal / public-relations cover of "doing something" to promote diversity and making progressive majoritarian group members feel positive.

What then follows here may feel a bit shocking to those involved in diversity work in higher education. This has not been written from a normative perspective (i.e., what should be the case) but rather purely pragmatic (i.e., what produces effective results).

As Dobbin and Kalev (2018) identified, a major issue with the common approach to diversity in higher education today is that it leads to those in majoritarian groups feeling unwelcome, which is counter to social empathy. This perception then affects reality by reducing buy-in for diversity efforts from those with the power and most able to effect change (Cooley et al., 2019; Dover et al., 2016; Manji, 2019; Plaut et al., 2019).

In one example, Dover et al. (2016) found that organizations' assertions of being pro-diversity were assumed to be anti-White by White job applicants. It is important to pause here and acknowledge the ease of dismissing this behavior pejoratively as a manifestation of White fragility and being ephemeral compared to the struggles that people of color have faced and continue to face in the United States. The substance of those perceptions by White applicants may or may not be factually correct in any given setting; however, the perceptions themselves are very real and reflect an underlying psychological response common across humanity. When an individual perceives the achievement of their goals to be inhibited, a reflexively defensive stance will be taken against that external influence. It is precisely this defensive stance that often inhibits the realization of diversity goals. While it might feel good to lay blame on groups that one might believe should be blamed and those claims might be factually correct, without having and acting upon social empathy toward those in majoritarian groups, efforts will be limited due to resistance.

al-Gharbi (2020) articulated this problem of perception particularly well, describing how diversity training programs

> often depict people from historically marginalized and disenfranchised groups as important and worthwhile, celebrating their heritage and culture, while criticizing the dominant culture as fundamentally depraved (racist, sexist, sadistic, etc.). People from minority groups are discussed in overwhelmingly positive terms, while people from majority groups are characterized as typically (and uniquely) ignorant, insensitive or outright malicious with respect to those who are different than them. Members of the majority group are told to listen to, and validate, the perspectives of people from historically marginalized or disadvantaged groups—even as they are instructed to submit their own feelings and perspectives to intense scrutiny. In short, there is a clear double-standard in many of these programs with respect to how members of dominant groups (typically men, whites and/or heterosexuals) are described as compared to members of minority groups (i.e. women, ethnic/ racial minorities, LGBTQ employees). The result is that many members from the dominant group walk away from the training believing that themselves, their culture, their perspectives and interests are not valued at the institution—certainly not as much as those of minority team members. (paras. 18-19)

al-Gharbi's perspective should not be taken to suggest that research on concepts like White fragility should stop or that it is somehow morally wrong to bring up. However, it is important to note that the tone and approach that are often used suggest that majoritarian groups are uniquely flawed when those problems are common across all humanity. The impacts of those flaws are certainly magnified by power,

and thus it is right to be concerned about the greater negative results from their existence in majoritarian groups; however, we should not imply that a human problem is a unique problem to one group.

The distinction of addressing humanity-wide flaws rather than a majoritarian-only problems is subtle but crucial. Addressing humanity-wide flaws has the benefit of reducing their impact coming from *both* majoritarian and minoritized identities. This is not to proffer bothsidesism. Nazism is rightly deemed a moral evil, but the root causes were hate and fear, which are humanity-wide flaws. Targeting our efforts toward the human flaws that are underlying causes of symptomatic problems in majoritarian groups is both efficacious and less likely to trigger an automatic defensive response.

Whether administrators or those doing diversity work think that there *should* be efforts at inclusion directed toward majoritarian groups or not, doing so helps bypass natural defensive mechanisms built into the human psyche of every individual. Coalition building with majoritarian group members will be more efficient and effective at creating their social empathy toward others than engaging in finger wagging against majoritarian identities. And, as Manji (2019) pointed out, this is also honest diversity in the sense that there are actual efforts directed at including everyone, regardless of their identity.

This could manifest as encouraging majoritarian groups to celebrate their own identities alongside oppressed groups. Rather than dedicated *spaces* for specific identity groups, this might mean framing spaces as a place for students of all identities to celebrate their own background (e.g., devoting that space for a period of time to each student identity group). By framing spaces in this way, several diversity ends will be accomplished. First, all minority groups in the student population (e.g., 20 students who identify as Hmong) can be represented rather than just those with the largest populations (e.g., Latinx). Second, the defensive reflex of majoritarian students is far less likely to be triggered (as those of British background are celebrated the same as those of Puerto Rican background), causing them to be even more likely to learn about and celebrate other identities—i.e., develop social empathy.

Granted, this still would leave the problem of dismantling systemic barriers, such as racism. While it might feel good to directly attack it, this approach has also failed to accomplish its goals—not insignificantly evidenced by the ongoing need for efforts to dismantle it after more than 200 years of American history. This would appear to be a result akin to taking ibuprofen for a sinus infection—addressing the symptoms only and not the root cause. Tracing the root cause here is quite simple. A standard human tendency across time and groups of people is in-group preference or favoritism, wherein "people act more prosocially towards members of their own group relative to those outside their group" (Everett et al., 2015, para. 2). The reverse side of this tendency, then, is a bias against those of other groups. This bias easily accelerates into bigotry as a belief of innate inferiority of other groups. When one group gains sustained dominance within a specific cultural setting, that bigotry quickly becomes systemic. Bigotry problematizes the common human flaw of in-group preference; therefore, that is the root problem to which our attention in higher education should be directed, rather than group-specific or context-specific manifestations.

Returning to the prior pharmaceutical illustration, ibuprofen may produce a short-term positive feeling against a sinus infection, but an appropriate antibiotic to treat the bacterial infection will produce the long-term health gains. It is morally just to do the most good for the most people with our efforts, and that means attempting to address social problems closest to their root causes.

Addressing the concept of bigotry can produce those long-term gains against systemic racism (and other axes of diversity and oppression beyond race). If all bigotry were eliminated, all racism would also be eliminated, but the converse is not true. Bigotry is the root of the problem—and removing one bitter fruit (racism) does not destroy the root. Because bigotry is not unique to one group, it can be addressed across all racial and ethnic lines, avoiding the defensive mechanism that arises from finger wagging at one

group. Because the power of majoritarian groups creates the most negative impact from bigotry, addressing the underlying problem (bigotry rather than racism/sexism/etc.) will do the most good for oppressed groups. It has the added benefit of also alleviating some of the problems between minoritized groups or directed at the majoritarian group—problems that arise from bigotry.

Higher education diversity efforts of the last two decades have suffered greatly from the treadmill effect—a lot of effort but not really getting anywhere. The research suggests that higher education can best promote social empathy with subtle-yet-significant changes. First, employ the true and full definition of inclusivity as you design spaces and programming—from the least represented group to the majoritarian group. This must be done in such a way that affinity groups are not erased and students can still find safety among those with shared identities. Second, seek to address the underlying causes of social antipathy that are common across groups rather than honing in on just the most overt and problematic symptom (e.g., bigotry at the root of systemic racism).

Exemplars of Practice

Two examples of diversity efforts in higher education demonstrate how the lessons of this chapter might manifest in practice.

Moral Courage College

The Moral Courage College (2021) was founded by Irshad Manji at New York University and is now housed at Oxford University. The organization is a practical implementation of the ideas expressed in her book, *Don't Label Me: How to Do Diversity Without Inflaming the Culture Wars* (2019). The underlying philosophy is grounded on two key factors.

First, she argued for the importance of "honest diversity," which she defined as happening with "relationships that recognize the plural sides of each being, including the different points of view within any group" (Manji, 2019, p. 184). This is contrasted with labeling others and inhibiting points of view, even if those come from majoritarian positions. She argued that the approach of labeling, as in DiAngelo's (2018) proposition of White fragility, is actually contrary to diversity and undermines the attainment of diversity outcomes. The distinction, then, is one of shaming versus coalition building. For her, there is honesty in diversity work by not attacking the powerful but bringing them into the chorus of voices being promoted, as opposed to treating diversity like a zero-sum game. This helps create their buy-in for efforts to lift up the oppressed.

Second, she called for meaningful engagement across ideological lines. In one example, a Presbyterian college student recalled their interpersonal interaction with a secular humanist student about their beliefs: "Once we were able to break down that boundary [of not interacting with people of different beliefs] . . . and look at each other as people, I recognized that a lot of our ideals and values are really similar" (Moral Courage College, 2016). In another example, the Moral Courage College (2017) brought together college-age Mississippians to discuss the possibility of changing their state flag. Many of the statements made by people on both sides of the issues echoed what one would have heard through popular news or social media. However, rather than inflaming tensions, the calm but serious conversations led to social empathy. In effect, actual interpersonal engagement on key ideas was far more useful than online interactions or secondary sources.

Two keys for practice emerge from the Moral Courage College. First, seek to reframe diversity initiatives around the commonality of all people and groups (tendencies to label, cognitive biases, etc.), rather than appearing to attack one group. No doubt—the broader impacts of these common flaws coming from groups with power is greater than from groups without power, but Manji's approach humanizes

individuals from those more powerful groups. Rather than inciting the standard human response of defensiveness or counterattack (fight-or-flight), they become much more willing to join a coalition in which they *feel* welcomed and valued. Second, utilize student affairs programming with the overt goals of teaching students how to have civil interactions on difficult issues and then bring about those civil interactions.

Chloé Valdary's Theory of Enchantment (2020) works from a similar set of premises and prescriptions.

Cornel West and Robert George

Dr. Cornel West is a professor of public philosophy and African / African-American studies at Harvard University and identifies as a public scholar of extremely progressive ideology. Dr. Robert George is a professor of jurisprudence and politics at Princeton University and identifies as a staunch conservative. Despite the distance between their political beliefs, the two maintain a very public friendship, speaking at institutions and to media outlets across the country about engagement across difference. Their friendship reflects a high degree of social empathy between the two. They serve as an excellent model for institutions, both in how to interact across difference and how to select speakers who promote social empathy among students.

George and West (2017) issued a joint statement reminding their readers, "All of us should be willing—even eager—to engage with anyone who is prepared to do business in the currency of truth-seeking discourse by offering reasons, marshaling evidence, and making arguments" (para. 4). Engaging with another is not a one-way endeavor—it is a matter of speaking *with* rather than speaking *at*. It involves iterations of carefully listening to others' reasoning and then presenting your own. Such listening and time-sharing are vital to the development of social empathy. While it would be easy for these two prominent scholars to trade rhetorical barbs initially and then dismiss the other, their sustained approach of listening to the other developed a friendship based on an understanding of the other both as an individual and in the context of their lived experiences.

Later, they extended their original statement into a profound call for developing social empathy out of our current state of social antipathy (George & West, 2020). They called for self-examination as much as critique of others, fair consideration of people and events in the past, and the respect of all groups. As a foundation, people must "will the good of the other for the sake of the other, to treat even our adversaries as precious members of the human family" (para. 15). Without this basic personal commitment of goodwill toward others, social empathy is impossible, as there will be no listening, understanding, or care developed. People need to "recognize and acknowledge that there are reasonable people of goodwill who do not share even some of our deepest, most cherished beliefs" (para. 12). This is a vital step in de-stigmatizing the other. It is also not to say that there are not people acting unreasonably or against goodwill on all sides, but it avoids demonizing anyone simply for disagreement and loose associations. As a third step toward social empathy, they call for us all to "recognize our own fallibility" and "consider with an open mind and heart points of view that challenge our beliefs" (para. 11). A person's belief that they are omniscient or always right serves to invalidate the experiences of others. If, for example, a person does not believe that racism exists in the United States in 2021 and that there is no possibility of their being wrong, then they will easily conclude that those who disagree with them are subversive and without reason. However, all humans operate with incomplete data sets. They cannot know what others see and experience without sharing those very experiences. Then, as an extension from social empathy, people must give the benefit of doubt to those of difference and see them "as partners in truth-seeking and fellow citizens of our republican order, not as enemies to be destroyed" (para. 13). West and George's personal and professional relationship serves as a model of social empathy, which higher education may develop through intentional co-curricular programming.

Higher education professionals also need to present fewer one-sided speaking events and instead follow West and George's model of practice. Such events might range from speakers in a single classroom to an annual series sponsored by student affairs and even to what is encouraged practice among student groups. Their model shows a path to social empathy. West and George profoundly disagree with each other on many core beliefs, and yet they continue to interact civilly. This stands in contrast to having events on one side of campus and counter events on the other, and that practical distinction is important. While this separation is common and practically simple, it also works against developing social empathy through the contact hypothesis, as students are physically segregated based on belief. Further, separating students by ideology negates the educational experience of seeing different points of view argued directly. To be certain, this means that those in higher education selecting speakers on divisive issues must ensure that all involved are committed to civility, evidence / reasoning, and discourse. However, doing so shows students that understanding one another is as important as the substance of the issue being debated, leading toward the development of social empathy.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Given the rapidly evolving natures of higher education and democracies in the 21st century, there is a great need for research about the nexus of those two. Specifically, there is a need to design and evaluate diversity programming in higher education that directly seeks to develop social empathy among students. As each institution sits in the particularity of its own situation, more case studies are needed to analyze various approaches to diversity programming in order to identify a breadth of options shown to be effective.

CONCLUSION

A lack of social empathy is at the core of the current social divide in the United States. Higher education should serve as a primary agent for developing social empathy in society. It is structurally set-up to do so, but it has not yet achieved what it is capable of. Through implementing research-based approaches to diversity work in higher education, higher education may yet help stem the tides of polarization and social strife.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Bigotry: Ascription of negative traits to an entire group based on a stereotype or a small sample.

Diversity: The presence of a variety of identities and perspectives rather than homogeneity.

Diversity Work: Professional work devoted to promoting diversity.

Inclusion: An intentional effort to welcome all identities and perspectives; typically directed toward bringing minoritized groups into full participation within an organization or society.

Polarization: A shift in the social narratives and ideologies of a society toward more extreme ends of the political spectrum rather than the middle.

Majoritarian Identity: An identity with a majority of power and that is dominant within a society or place.

Minoritized Identity: An identity that has been made subservient, marginalized, and/or oppressed by the majoritarian identity in a society or place.