Everybody's Crying Mercy When They Don't Know the Meaning of the Word

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Here is a tweet from mid-March following an announcement from the producers of Netflix's *The Crown* that they had paid the male lead substantially more than the woman playing what could be deemed the title character:

> This is how TV works. People who are getting a break and don't have quotes make less than people who do. It is usually not about gender. It is often illogical. She should have gotten that raise for second season for sure. They always make you fight an ugly battle for it.[1]

The tweeter is Judd Apatow, producer and creator of many television and films.

The two responses from women writers zoom in on the "It is not usually about gender" portion of the tweet. First: "TV doesn't *have* to work this way,"[2] which addresses the assumption that if it is not usually about gender, the way it works is not discriminatory and, therefore, must be logical. Nell Scovell, herself a seasoned television creator and writer, relates her own experience that counter-narrates that assumed normativity:

> Here's what I hear every time I try to negotiate: "the offer is take it or leave it." Negotiations are a game for men and often non-existent for women. I've made as much as 75% less than a man doing the same job, and I've had no choice but to say okay.[3]

She gets told when she comes in tough that this is the offer and she does not want to be labeled "difficult", "demanding", or "bitchy."

Apatow, who is in the executive seat and who has benefitted in the press as a supporter of female writers/creators (let's say Jenni Konner and sometimes

problematically Lena Dunham), makes an epistemic claim about "how television works" and indirectly that we all know (equally) that salary decisions aren't usually about gender. Scovell's correction is to the second part, the part that includes her in a group of knowers that she disclaims. Her knowledge comes from being in the seats where claims of worthiness are routinely denied, where she is told to her face that she is fungible, and where she hears these conversations (the same ones he is in) with different effect.

To return to Applebaum's university setting, I agree with her that the idea of epistemic in/justice is helpful in this context. However, rather than focus on the microagressions themselves, I want to look at the effects of the repetitive epistemic discounting that comes from microagressions, aggression-aggressions, and the downright bullshit of hegemony and privilege. Much of the whinging about snowflakes, coddling, etc. is simple projection, and another dollop of it is a not-altogether-irrational reaction to feeling accused of a crime in one's very being (that gets followed up by a high level of defensiveness).

I think for those who want to address these effects of cutting off acknowledgement, there are a few things to keep in mind. For one, nothing is new. There have always been conflicts, many of them quite public and fractious, on college campuses. Second, in large part because of the internet and social media, colleges, like most other "old" (or should I say, "established"?) institutions, are prone to *react* rather than act before there is an actual crisis. And I know that many places have crisis management teams, but frankly most of them operate like a phone tree—who gets notified when and who is responsible for this or that move works way better in a storm or truly unpredictable event. It is my view that much of the student protest or conflict about speakers should not come as such a surprise to campus leaders in the ways it seems to in many circumstances.

I was in middle school when Kent State happened on May 4, 1970. The kids in the famous pictures looked like the teenagers I knew and admired. Family friends had a son involved in the takeover of Straight Hall at Cornell the year before. I probably romanticized those struggles; by the time I went to college, U.S. involvement in Vietnam was over, Nixon was out, and every elite school had a Black house. The courts had ruled that students had the right to

wear black armbands to protest the War and that school newspapers had certain rights to publish controversial opinions.

I was in one of the first classes of women at Dartmouth, and during the spring party weekend, some frat lads dazzled the crowd with their rendition of "Our Co-hogs"[4] (to the tune of "This Old Man"), and many of us —grizzled veterans of rating cards flashed in the dining hall or having our doors burned, buzz sawed, or kicked in—we booed and got on with life, advocated for equal access in admission while wearing t-shirts proclaiming Pyrofeminism with the acronym "BTMFD" (Burn the Mother F*ckers Down), and formed women-centric or gay/straight artist collectives. My point being that we missed the marching, but we had to confront the struggles nevertheless.

So I know that I have to press my empathy buttons anytime my instinctual reaction to students is "suck it up, buttercup." I recognize that many of the problems look the same: autonomy, the ability to make decisions and advocate for oneself, calling out the powerful for not living up to the ideals they used to recruit, getting away from home and working through the maturational process among your peers and a few just-interested-enough adults. But, context is everything.

I say this with absolutely no nostalgia; I am not one of those who believe that college students (or high school students or 5 year olds) "used" to be awesome but now are the worst. College students who are digital natives have a very different set of tools for their world, and that digital world moves fast and ruthlessly. Social media mimes community, but sets the conditions for anonymous rebuke, bullying, targeting, mob rule, and extreme social sanctions, like doxxing. Twitter encourages the sharpening of wit and the quick riposte rather than careful analysis and considered response. (I know, I am an "old"). Misdirected texts or tweets can lead to social group annihilation; retweeting someone else's opinion without thinking can lead to loss of jobs or allies. Or it can lead to a campus racial explosion.

Partially, I am saying that I do not know whether the technology *causes* the communication lapses and the difficulty with making a prolonged prose

argument or whether the technology has just propped up the proclivities already being born. And those modes of connectivity, whether gaming or Twitter or the comment section on [Name Any Topic].blogspot.com, allow one to create an avatar that for some people gives them the courage to go beyond being rude to being cruel and to harassing, even when one is not sure who is on the other end of the jab (or knowing who *is* there without having to own up to your own self, as in the case of celebrities or public figures or journalists or authors).

No matter what kind of institution one is leading, I believe that it is imperative to create ethically guided principles in advance to help institutions get out of the brambles.

1. Ignore everyone (including the Attorney General) who insists that students are pampered children with "fragile egos" or that something called "identity politics" is ruining your campus.
2. Carefully analyze everything you (institutionally) say about welcoming diversity and wanting inclusion, etc.
3. Develop campus dialogues about what students think these statements mean, as well as what faculty and staff think.
4. Develop language and venues to unpack concepts like "safe spaces." Sometimes it is a real ask for immediate assistance from trauma sufferers. Sometimes it is an ask for multiple spaces to be in community with people who will not ask you to speak for all Muslims or all Lesbians or all Asians. And it may be that some students are asking not to be offended.

I think that some folks want to act as though that last case is the only possibility. And I think they make a straw man, as the dean at my graduate alma mater, University of Chicago, did by producing his famous/infamous letter[5] instructing that there be no intellectual safe spaces on campus, no trigger warnings, etc.

In theory, I agree that universities have no intellectual mission if it is not mining ideas—disrupting accepted theory or philosophical argument or replacing well-worn histories with new data and artifacts and understanding. Not only scholars on the faculty, but also our students ought to be able to

engage with us and with each other in the rough and tumble of IDEAS that often leads to insights or new translations or new artwork or new discoveries. Otherwise there is no reason to leave home.

But that is not all that there is in the classroom or the lab or the studio.

There are the ideas and questions and assumptions that have not been questioned or are considered immune to challenge. There are other people who assume because of brown or black skin color one can be admitted solely because of "affirmative action." (I also just now discovered on the interwebs that quite a few people believe affirmative action also gives *free college tuition* to Black and Latinx people!) There are faculty who think that the same class presentation from 1970— when most of the students were white males from the same geographic region— can suffice for a class that is diverse on almost every possible dimension. Then they are shocked when certain students will not participate in class discussions. As someone who has been teaching in the college classroom for almost 30 years, I do not think that classrooms can be "safe spaces" *from the ideas that animate the course.* I think that "safe" connotes something less sharp than students' actual demand: *that we reexamine and reorganize if necessary the spaces of instruction to remove the atmosphere of an endurance test* for some students while other students bask in the comfort of privilege of knowing that their speech is always already protected. This goes beyond race or ethnicity, although on my particular campus the Black students have been vocal about what has been for them the classroom equivalent of "driving or walking while Black." Students and their teachers should be open to being shaken by ideas, but not by behavior (which may include speech) that obstructs the very possibility of learning, in part because it delegitimizes one as a learner and a knower.

"Everybody's Cryin' Mercy"
Mose Allison (1973)[6]

I don't believe the things I'm seein'
I've been wonderin' 'bout some things I've heard
Everybody's crying mercy

When they don't know the meaning of the word

A bad enough situation
Is sure enough getting worse
Everybody's crying justice
Just as soon as there's business first

Toe to toe, touch and go
Give a cheer and get your own souvenir

Well you know the people running round in circles
Don't know what they're headed for
Everybody's crying peace on earth
Just as soon as we win this war

Straight ahead, gotta knock 'em dead
So pack your kit, choose your own hypocrite

You don't have to go to off-broadway
To see something plain absurd
Everybody's crying mercy
When they don't know the meaning of the word

Nobody knows the meaning of the word

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1 Judd Apatow, Twitter post, March 13, 2018, 9:58p.m, https://twitter.com/JuddApatow.
2 From "Emma Stone's Fashion Moves," *Show Your Work Podcast,* March 19, 2018, https://podcasts.apple.com/lu/podcast/emma-stones-fashion-moves/id1183089072?i=1000406879617.
3 Nell Scovell, Twitter post, March 14, 2018, 5:55a.m., https://twitter.com/NellSco.; quoted in *Show Your Work Podcast*, March 19, 2018.
4 Co-hogs = Co-eds
5 Scott Jaschik, "The Chicago Letter and Its Aftermath," *Inside Higher Education*

(August 29, 2016), https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/08/29/u-chicago-letter-new-students-safe-spaces-sets-intense-debate. (Last accessed June 4, 2019.)
6 "Everybody's Cryin' Mercy." Words and Music by Mose Allison. Copyright (c) 1995 Audre Mae Music. All Rights Administered by BMG Rights Management (US) LLC. All Rights Reserved Used by Permission. Reprinted by Permission of Hal Leonard LLC.