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# Viewpoint | Can sticks and stones break bones?

## Dean of Arts & Sciences shares some thoughts on the motives behind and the effects of hateful speech

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"Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me!" Many of us learn this little ditty as children as a way of dealing with verbal assaults and developing resilience.

If only it were true! It's not.

Many of us have not been targets of serious hateful speech; for those of us who have not, it may be something of an abstraction. After all, the First Amendment to the United States Constitution protects free speech, and so, for many, the issue ends there.

But for those who have been the targets of hateful speech - often members of groups that are or have been oppressed, perhaps over a period of many years - such speech is much more than an abstraction.

Laura Leets of Stanford University studied people's patterns of responses to hateful speech. Her elegant study, published in the prestigious peer-refereed journal, *The Journal of Social Issues* (2002), found that "when short- and long-term consequences were anticipated, the patterns had striking commonality with other types of crises (e.g., rape, burglary, domestic violence, assault, robbery)."

In other words, words did break bones, at least, metaphorically. Short-term consequences were more likely to be emotional and long-term consequences attitudinal. Typical short-term emotions in response to hateful speech are anger, denial, a feeling of disbelief, and a feeling of violation or vulnerability. Typical longer-term attitudinal changes are one's becoming more defensive and vigilant toward threats.

All this may sound rather scientific and abstract. Permit me to give a concrete example: When I was an undergraduate, I was taking my dinner to a table when I passed a table occupied by students I did not know. As I was passing, a woman at the table, not observing me, made a rather blatantly anti-Semitic comment to the other students at the table.

I was stunned and hurt. I slowed down, waiting for someone at the table to react with a sense of outrage. But no one said anything and the conversation passed on to other topics. I was perplexed. Should I say something? Should I let it go? Was it any of my business?

After all, the comment was not directly addressed to me, and I was not even at the dinner table. I let it go. To this day, I am conflicted as to whether I should have. But for my remaining years in college, my attitude toward the campus and the people on it changed.

I found myself wondering: Were there other people making anti-Semitic comments? Were they acting on

their comments? Was I a target without even realizing it? Was I somehow being treated differently without anyone's saying anything? My comfort level was greatly diminished.

To this day, almost 40 years later, I still feel outrage when I think about the experience. And that was just a single anti-Semitic comment over the course of an otherwise wonderful and positive college career.

Perhaps it might seem like an overreaction to worry about the physical consequences of hateful speech. But especially to members of groups with a history of persecution, such worry does not seem like an overreaction at all. To African-Americans, who for many years were treated as property rather than as human beings and who were actively persecuted by the Ku Klux Klan and other hate groups, hateful speech in the past has led to action.

In my own history, many of my relations in Austria wondered, not all that many years ago, whether they should worry about the hateful speech about Jews and other minority groups emanating from their compatriots of the 1930s. Some left; others stayed, believing that things would never go beyond hateful speech. Those of my relatives who stayed in Austria never lived to tell me their tale. My own mother barely made it out.

As a scholar, I became interested in hate and hateful speech and began appreciating even better the harm that hateful speech causes. In my book, "The Psychology of Hate" (2005), I argued that hate comprises three components: negation of intimacy, passion and commitment.

Negation of intimacy refers to emotion-based feelings that people of the targeted group are not like us. It is alleged that they are inferior and easy to despise because they do not reach our own standards of superiority or even humanity. If they are in, say, a particular environment, often it is claimed that they are there for the wrong reasons and hence should not be there at all.

Passion is the heat of hate: the kind people feel when they experience road rage or when they feel a need to fight against or flee from a target individual or group.

Commitment is a cognitive/attitudinal rationale a perpetrator has for hating the target: for example, the belief that people in the target group are of an inferior caste or otherwise do not belong. Note that negation of intimacy is a feeling; commitment is an attitude or belief.

How do people come to hate other people? My analyses of a number of hate-based incidents have led me to suggest that hate has several potential causes.

First, people may have false beliefs about others that generate hate.

Second, people may envy other people or their possessions, and may even use hate as a way of taking action to acquire those possessions.

Third, people may enhance their own diminished self-esteem by derogating and hating others.

Fourth, sometimes cynical leaders seek to unify their own followers by inciting group hatred toward an individual or another group and rallying their followers around the cause.

Fifth, hatred may provide a sense of meaning, albeit a warped sense, to people who otherwise lack meaning in their lives.

Finally, hatred may be a reaction to fear of a group; rather than try to understand or deal with the person or

group, one decides to hate the target individual or group.

Hateful speech not only reflects hate, but also incites it. Expert propagandists such as Joseph Goebbels, head of Nazi propaganda campaigns, and the not-so-expert ones we may confront in the environments in which we live not only express their feelings of loathing through speech, but also incite hate through that speech.

In the extreme, most genocides are preceded by hate-based propaganda. Fortunately, such genocides are rare. But to those who become their victims, their rarity provides no succor.

Hateful speech shocks the conscience. Its naked assault on a targeted individual or group is often garbed in fancy clothes: for example, "scientific" analysis, exercise of free-speech rights, stating an "unpleasant" truth, or whatever. But at its core, it is rotten; no matter what the garb or where it continues, it spreads its rottenness throughout the environments in which it occurs.

It is like the fruit that starts with just a little spoiled part, and quickly becomes spoiled in its entirety. Those who create hateful speech may or may not understand the consequences of their actions on others.

Unfortunately, they often do not much care, concentrating instead upon the benefits that accrue to them, such as a more favored place among the members of the reference group or groups with whom they share similar views. So what many people find disgusting, shocking to the conscience, and just plain embarrassing to the community, the perpetrator may actually find quite a nice step up the ladder he or she seeks to climb in life.

What should a citizen do in the face of hateful speech?

First, we must recognize that, at least in our country, free speech is protected. And well it should be, because once a country or institution starts suppressing speech, where will it stop? Will, say, any anti-government speech suddenly be subject to censorship because it inspires disrespect for the government?

Suppression is not the answer. More hateful speech is also not the answer in that it just makes a bad situation worse. Rather, the answer to negative, hateful free speech is positive, uplifting speech.

It is the strong affirmation on the part of all who care, supporting individuals or groups who are attacked, and expressing outrage and condemnation of the hateful speech that has offended the standards of decency, respect for others, and care for humanity that we embrace. The best response is a ringing affirmation of free speech in the service of uplifting, not besmirching, what makes us all human.

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