Correcting political correctness

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residential candidate Ben Carson has argued that political correctness is "dangerous". Like hand tools and prescription drugs, moral norms can certainly be dangerous if misused. It is a mistake to dismiss the importance of cultural responsibility, however. We all play a role in shaping the social environment, so we have an obligation to create the kind of culture necessary for justice. In that sense, scoffing at "political correctness" is also dangerous.

Comedians often like to push the envelope of offensiveness. Some indignantly decry what they believe to be oversensitivity and censorship. When people are criticised, the defensive language of "free speech" often arises, but without warrant. Many cases that call for greater cultural respectfulness have nothing to do with limiting private citizens' freedom to speak. When a public school principal grossly disrespects students, however, putting them down as minorities or women, for example, the question that arises concerns his or her suitability to serve as principal.

Cultural sensitivity has to do with symbols, language, beliefs, practices, and institutions.

Critics of "political correctness" often consider its norms to be a kind of micromanagement of people's lives. A "Bias-Free Language Guide" produced at the University of New Hampshire offered a good example of what critics called overstepping. The guide, now removed from the university's Web site, said that the word "American" is "problematic". The fact that an effort to strive for a just culture was imperfect or unsuccessful, however, does not imply that the goal was wrongheaded. A few troubling examples help make the point.

In 2015, nine African Americans from South Carolina were murdered in their house of worship for a racist motive. A number of southern states stopped flying their Confederate Battle flags on public grounds. In Mississippi, reactionaries who want to keep the Confederate Battle flag emblem in the canton of the state flag have labelled progressive efforts "political correctness" run amok.

At the national level, many Americans defend the use of the name "Redskins" for a football team, after the US Patent and Trademark office decided not to renew the team's trademark. Imagine naming a team the Mississippi

Blackskins. What about the Alabama [N-words]? Repeating the kinds of responses that come up for "Redskins" fails to work for these examples: "What's the big deal?" "Don't they have free speech?" "I grew up cheering for them!"

Culture matters and has a profound effect on people. Studies about names on résumés have illustrated concrete consequences of cultural prejudices. In Mississippi, young people have

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voted to take down the Mississippi flag at the state's flagship institution. They argued that they cannot all feel welcome at a university that flies a symbol of white supremacy on the campus flagpole. The Louisiana Supreme Court has agreed that a defendant in their state cannot expect equal protection of the law in courthouses over which the Confederate Battle flag flies.

Some cases can be subtler, of course. When men in the workplace call a woman "sweetie", she might reasonably feel that she will not be treated the same as the men in the office. That is the sort of example of a call for sensitivity that exasperates critics of "political correctness". The point is clearer to them, however, when the word at issue is "toots".

"Political correctness" as a term is awkward. The first problem is that what it criticises is often not political. The term "cultural" is a better fit. The word "correctness" is also often ill-suited. "Correctness" suggests alignment with right behaviour, but there are circumstances in which many different ways of acting are acceptable,

while some are not. "Respectful" and "acceptable", in that sense, are better terms than the word "correct". In the big picture, the ultimate concern is justice. It is clearly unacceptable to teach kids to count with *The Ten Little [N-word] Boys*, for example, yet there is no one or few select books that are the right ones to use.

In pursuing a just culture, we might consider terms like "culturally respectful" or "acceptable". The converse would be "disrespectful" and "unacceptable". These terms have force and clarity when we consider what symbols the government ought to protect publicly with federal registration of a trademark, for example.

American philosopher John Dewey frequently argued that democracy ought to be understood as a way of life, not as a mechanism of governance. It is cultural. That doesn't settle the matter of when some language, belief, or practice is culturally acceptable. Our values and public discourse decide that. While "political correctness" can sometimes be championed carelessly, furthermore, its motivations appreciate the crucial need for a culture of justice.

Further reading: Morton White's *The Philosophy of Culture: The Scope of Wholistic Pragmatism* and Kwame Anthony Appiah's *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*

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