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The Band-Aid:
An Analysis of the Effectiveness of Politically Correct Language in American Society

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If the norm of using politically correct language is supposed to be uniting America as a nation, then why do we seem to be more divided over issues like race, gender, and sexuality than ever before? I propose that politically correct language is not working because it's essentially functioning like a Band-Aid on a wound; PCL fixes our social issues on the surface, but does not have the capacity to heal them in and of itself. Only once we recognize both the necessity and insufficiency of PCL can we begin to truly heal our country's social wounds and find unity.

If Donald Trump is famous for one thing, it is his way with words. Even before his entrance into the political sphere, the billionaire was known for unapologetically speaking his mind, and for using stark, brazen, highly controversial discourse to do so; but last November, his distinctive and, at times, offensive rhetoric was the catalyst for the unearthing of one of the most bitter, aggressive, and crucial debates America has seen in years: the debate regarding political correctness.

Ironically, even though the term is being used more than ever before in academia, social media, and politics, it seems that American society cannot seem to come to a consensus as to what, precisely, "political correctness" is. This is partly due to the fact that, since its conception in the 1960s ("Imagined Tyranny" 51), the term has grown more and more colloquial, and has been used to cover a broader and broader range of ideas and concepts. Today, political correctness is most commonly used as a catch-all term referencing a leftward-leaning set of ideas, attitudes, or beliefs about discrimination-based personal factors ("Peer Review" 150-151); however, at its root, political

correctness is not only an ideology, but a form of language. According to the Encyclopedia of Political Communication, politically correct language (or "PCL") is "language that seems intended to give the least amount of offense, especially when describing groups identified by external markers such as race, gender, culture, or sexual orientation" (Roper 575). It is a characteristically careful and delicate style of speech, a linguistic walk on eggshells motivated by the deep desire to eliminate inequality, elitism, and the victimization of certain people groups via language ("Peer Review" 152). It is also intended to promote unity, non-offense, and diversity in the presence of a number of social issues, including racism, sexism, environmentalism, mental and physical disability, socioeconomic class and feminism ("Peer Review" 151).

With such noble goals, it is no wonder that this style of speech has become the new norm in American society today; however, as is the case with the emergence of many new norms, American citizens have developed very polarized opinions about it. Some love PCL, insisting that it is a necessity

for a healthy, functioning, and equal society, as it protects the dignity of minorities and helps to prevent individuals from using their First Amendment rights to harm others (Taylor). However, those who are pro-PCL seem to be the minority, as it appears the vast majority of people in academia, politics, and even the public vehemently oppose PCL for multiple reasons. Donald Trump is one of the loudest voices in this majority (having run for president on an anti-political correctness platform), and has used his Twitter account to express the majority's opinion that "being politically correct takes too much time" (@realDonaldTrump "Being politically correct…") and that "political correctness prevents good people from reporting terrorism before it happens" (@realDonaldTrump "Political correctness prevents..."). Millions of other Americans staunchly oppose PCL on the grounds that the new norm is an encroachment on their right to freedom of speech, and that the lexicon of PCL panders to those who are thin-skinned, prompting people to seek out offense where none was intended (Roper 575). Many against PCL also commonly liken it to a shady politician's political jargon—mere rhetoric meant more to deceive the public and cover up problems than to protect the feelings of minorities.

This fiery controversy stems from the reality that, while most people on both sides agree that PCL's goals are pure and desirable, the PCL norm does not seem to be accomplishing these goals. At its root, this type of language seeks to establish unity, diversity, equality and justice—values that are dear to our country, and a great source of national pride. And given that the use of PCL has become the social norm in American society today, one would think that we would be more unified as a country, and that by using PCL, we would be making more progress towards its ideals. However, this past year's political season and the aftermath of Donald Trump's election serve as clear evidence that our country is deeply divided. This then leaves conservatives and liberals alike with one simple, frustrating question—a question that, if we are to have any hope of truly making progress towards the ideals of PCL, must be answered: why is PCL not accomplishing the goals that it was intended to accomplish? After reviewing much research examining the linguistic and

psychological underpinnings of PCL, I have come to the conclusion that PCL isn't working because it is essentially functioning as a Band-Aid on the wound of America's social issues. Though a Band-Aid covers and disguises a wound, it cannot in and of itself heal it; in a similar way, though PCL maintains a surface-level peace and non-offensive discourse in American society, it cannot in and of itself heal America's social problems because it cannot change the underlying attitudes and beliefs causing them. Rather, the PCL norm merely perpetuates or even worsens these harmful attitudes and beliefs.

Of course, many more progressive, leftward-leaning individuals disagree with the very premise of this debate, insisting that the PCL norm *is* accomplishing its goals of unity and diversity, because it is successfully maintaining general peace and civility in political discourse and social interactions. To support this claim, citizens like Langston Taylor—writer for the *Tampa Bay Times* newspaper—first cite the way in which the norm acts as a safeguard against needlessly offensive speech in discourse. Though the PCL norm is a source of frustration and resentment for many citizens, Taylor makes the point in his 2016 article "Why Political Correctness is a Good Thing" that "whenever someone feels handcuffed by political correctness, those handcuffs are likely protecting and respecting someone else" (Taylor); in other words, while the PCL norm might be viewed as a burden by many academic and public communities, it is actually a crucial construct that helps to prevent the verbal harassment of minorities and other vulnerable groups in everyday social situations.

Further supporting these pro-PCL citizens is research demonstrating that the PCL norm can promote social peace and civility not only by eliminating offensive speech, but also by eliminating factors that tend to inhibit positive social interaction—specifically, the factor of interpersonal tension. In one study entitled "Creativity from Constraint? How the Political Correctness Norm Influences Creativity in Mixed-Sex Work Groups," researchers from Cornell, Washington, Berkeley, and Vanderbilt Universities came together to study how instituting a salient PCL norm in a mixed-sex work setting would affect the tension and uncertainty that many members experienced when communicating

with the opposite sex, as well as the group's overall creativity. In the end, they found that the PCL norm "reduces otherwise high levels of uncertainty in mixed-sex groups and signals that the group is predictable enough to risk sharing not only more ideas but also ideas that are more novel" (Goncalo et al. 20)—in essence, that a PCL norm can reduce tension in a mixed group of people, which increases group creativity. In theory, these results could apply not only to tension levels in mixed sex groups, but also to tension levels in mixed race, religion, or sexuality groups as well. Assuming this is the case, then the PCL norm proves to be an invaluable tool for achieving peace and civility in a multicultural nation, as it reduces the interpersonal tension that is responsible for so much social conflict within our diverse nation.

While these arguments for the PCL norm's effectiveness certainly inspire optimism, there is a catch to the unflinchingly positive view of PCL. Although I wholeheartedly agree that the PCL norm is a necessity in our society given the way in which it keeps our discourse civil and non-offensive, as well as how it can reduce interpersonal tension, the problem with PCL is that maintaining surface-level harmony *is all it does*. The norm is as effective at healing America's social problems as a Band-Aid is at healing a cut: all it can do it cover and disguise the problem. This is not to say, of course, that PCL norms are useless and that we as a society should simply abandon them; on the contrary, PCL norms are necessary to do the good work of preserving broad societal standards of decorum. But in order to truly bring about unity and resolve social issues such as racism and sexism, superficial social interactions are not the only thing that must change about American society. Rather, the individual *attitudes* and *beliefs* perpetuating the harmful social issues must be dealt with in order to truly heal them—and the unfortunate reality is that PCL is incapable of doing so.

The explanation as to *why* PCL is unable to truly change the harmful attitudes and beliefs at the root of America's social issues lies in both PCL's psychological and linguistic nature. From a psychological perspective, the PCL norm's inability to change a person's opinions can be explained by the basic psychological principle of conformity. In

her textbook *Social Psychology and the Christian Perspective*, clinical psychologist and associate professor of psychology Angela M. Sabates defines conformity as "the act of changing one's behavior in response to real or imagined social pressure" (215)—specifically (as Sabates notes), the social pressure to conform to group norms. PCL is one such group norm, and as it has grown more and more universally accepted in recent years, the pressure placed on American individuals to conform to it has grown enormous. And though there is no universal law or iron-fisted dictator demanding that everyone adhere to the PCL norm, the social pressure to do so is so intense that it is not uncommon for individuals to feel as though they are, in fact, being forced to conform. As a result of this feeling, individuals engage in what is known as *public conformity*—a phenomenon in which individuals conform superficially to the group purely out of the desire to be accepted by (or to protect themselves from the harassment of) the larger group. However, as Sabates notes, "public conformity often results in a superficial change in observable behavior without an actual internalized change in attitude or belief" (215). Thus, when individuals conform to the PCL norm simply out of the desire to avoid becoming a social pariah, these individuals are very unlikely to *actually* change their private, socially harmful attitudes because of it. This would explain why the PCL norm manages to foster pro-social and non-offensive discourse, and yet is simultaneously failing to achieve its goals and solve the social issues in America today, as this psychological approach reveals the PCL norm's inability to change the harmful attitudes responsible for America's social problems at the individual level.

A linguistic perspective of PCL also offers an explanation for why PCL is unable to change socially destructive attitudes and beliefs—an explanation that author Ben O'Neill offers in his 2011 journal article entitled "a Critique of Political Correctness". In this article, O'Neill points out the fundamental problem with PCL's process of semantic change—the problem referred to as "The Euphemism Treadmill" (282). According to O'Neill, words relating to some personal condition or characteristic (for example, the word "retarded") become offensive when they are used as insults, because doing so falsely implies that

the condition or trait is something to be ashamed of. The purpose of PCL, then, is to replace those now offensive terms with brand-new, non-offensive terms, and by doing so to eliminate the source of a lot of social discord. The issue with this, as O'Neill points out, is that merely referring to a condition or a trait by a different name changes neither the underlying social realities of the situation, nor the implicit attitudes towards the condition or trait (286). For example, simply referring to a poor person as "economically disadvantaged" will neither increase their income, nor change any negative attitudes another might harbor about such a person.

The only thing that the PCL system changes is the number of potentially offensive vocabulary words available to the "bullies" (as O'Neill calls them). Inevitably, they catch on to the new lingo, and begin to use the politically correct words offensively. This then necessitates the creation of *new* politically correct terms, which will soon be used derogatorily, which will subsequently lead to the production of new terms, which will be abused, and so on, resulting in a never-ending cycle of replacement that never makes actual progress (the "Euphemism Treadmill") (282). Over time, the words themselves will change, but the harmful connotations will stay the same. Thus, the continual use of PCL makes for technically peaceful and politically correct conversations throughout society, but does so without actually changing the underlying, socially detrimental attitudes or negative opinions, which would explain why so far, PCL has been an ineffective treatment for America's social wounds.

Of course, while one does not expect a Band-Aid to cure a wound in and of itself, one *does* expect it to at least prevent the wound from getting any worse. Similarly, one would expect PCL to at least prevent the spread of adverse attitudes and beliefs. However, PCL somehow manages to defy these expectations, as a study performed by researchers at the University of Montana entitled "When Self-Censorship Norms Backfire: The Manufacturing of Positive Communication and Its Ironic Consequences for the Perceptions of Groups" demonstrated that PCL norms have the potential not just to perpetuate, but also to actually *worsen* the negative attitudes and stereotypes at the heart of America's social issues.

In this study, published in *The Journal of Basic and Applied Social Psychology* in 2009, the researchers wanted to test and see whether or not self-censorship norms can actually lead a person's communication about a certain group to be more negative. They conducted three experiments in which they had participants read a fictitious account of a positive dialogue between a group of friends about the "Sigma Sigma Sigma fraternity", in the middle of which one of the group members introduced either a fraternity member, an unaffiliated and well-known friend, or a stranger. The participants were then asked to rate on a scale of one to nine the extent to which the positive talk about the Sigma Sigma Sigma fraternity was due to actual group opinion, or merely the presence of fraternity members. The results showed that "participants were more likely to attribute the positive statements about the Sigma Sigma Sigma fraternity to something other than the communicators' real beliefs when a fraternity member was present... than when he was absent" (Conway et al. 340), and that "participants were more likely to later talk disparagingly about the fraternity when a fraternity member was present at the initial discussion…than when he was absent" (Conway et al. 340). In other words, when the self-censorship norm was instituted (i.e., the presence of the fraternity member), the reader was able to sense that the expressed attitudes of the group were not necessarily legitimate, which not only invalidated the positive opinions, but actually led more harmful and negative opinions to be voiced later on, after the fraternity member had left.

Given that the PCL norm is a type of self-censorship norm, these results are particularly worrying for our society. If these results are applicable to the PCL norm (as I believe they are), it would mean that although PCL continues to maintain the pretense of positivity, diversity, and equality in conversation, it is entirely possible that in reality no one believes that this pretense is true. This superficial consensus merely delegitimizes the goals of PCL, perpetuates the problematic opinions, and even worsens them—a fact that is evidenced by how, in censoring their beliefs and true opinions, the participants actually ended up communicating the censored beliefs even more (Conway et al. 344). In the end, these findings demonstrate that the PCL norm

has the dangerous tendency to backfire, and that it can actually promote the spreading of stereotypes and group-directed negativity, rather than reduce it.

Ultimately, after examining both the psychological and linguistic underpinnings of the PCL phenomenon, it becomes clear that the answer as to why PCL is failing to "do its job" and unite America is found in the phenomenon's very nature. In order to make any true progress in solving America's social issues (i.e., racism, sexism, classism, etc.), we need a system that will not only ensure peaceful, surface-level decorum, but also change the harmful individual attitudes and opinions at the heart of these social issues. And however repressive it may feel, the PCL norm is undoubtedly excellent at and necessary for maintaining peaceful and non-offensive societal standards. However, as most of the aforementioned psychological and linguistic research has evidenced, though the PCL norm might encourage (or even demand) conformity, it cannot change individual attitudes in and of itself; rather, PCL merely adds new potential insults, and perpetuates harmful attitudes via silent social communication. At the end of the day, it is because of this inability to change detrimental attitudes that PCL is, by its very nature, incapable of solving anything but surface level aspects of America's social issues.

Recognizing this is crucial if we as Americans are to intentionally pursue the values of unity, equality, diversity, and justice that are so dear to us. Because if it is truly the case that the PCL norm is not solving our social problems, then all Americans—liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats—desperately need to start approaching the problems differently. If we are to be united as a nation, we cannot be bickering over the usefulness of PCL or the PCL norm; rather, we must both acknowledge the system's necessity and admit its insufficiency. Only then will we have the freedom to explore new solutions, and only then will we be able to stop trusting in a Band-Aid that will not work and start searching for an actual cure.

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