


# The Ideological Bullying of Students Must Stop

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By  [Robin Koerner](#) August 2, 2023 [Education](#) 10 minute read

I recently completed nearly 400 interviews with applicants for the signature summer school programmes of an educational institution for which I serve as Academic Dean.

All of the interviewees – most aged 16 or 17-years-old and largely self-selected for intelligence and interest in the humanities – knew upfront that our concern as an educational organization, and therefore my concern as an interviewer, was to assess each student’s intellectual honesty, intellectual humility, ability to think critically, and capacity to engage productively ideas with which they disagree.

Every interviewee had been sent a letter that told them to expect to be challenged with potentially provocative and uncomfortable opinions and to cancel their interview if this was not something they relished. Each interview also began with my telling the applicant, “Since my job is to challenge you a little, I am likely to be playing ‘Devil’s advocate’ so you should not infer anything I really believe from anything I say in the next 20 minutes.” Only when the student has signaled his or her understanding does the interview proceed.

I then invite almost all of them to share with me whichever belief of theirs they feel least able to share fully and honestly with their peers on account of the consequences that they would expect as a result. In response, students from the Anglosphere (UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand in descending order of number of applicants) raised one topic much more frequently than any other: gender ideology.

The numerous dozens of instances in which students brought up this issue supported fascinating inferences concerning the impact of gender ideology on children today.

First and most obviously, gender ideology is the topic on which young people feel least able to share their honest opinion in full – relative to any other that they can think of.

Second, the “unspeakable” opinion that most of the students who raised the topic of gender held concerned specifically trans-identifying people in sports. Every single one of this subgroup claimed that basic fairness demands that transwomen, being (biologically) male, should not be allowed to compete against females in sports. No student who offered an opinion on this particular topic held a contrary view.

## **What Is Gender?**

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During the course of the subsequent conversation, almost all of those students would make it clear that there is such a thing as sex, which they would specify as male or female.

Most of those would at some point use the word “gender” – and I would typically take the opportunity to ask what that word means.

Things would then go one of three ways. In order of descending frequency:

1. The student would define gender as an asserted identity that would (directly or indirectly) involve a claim about being female or male. Under further questioning and consideration of analogies, the student would ultimately (and often uneasily) admit that someone who makes an identity claim that is at odds with physical reality is (whatever else it may be) simply wrong.
2. The student would define gender in terms of self-identification (to be x is to identify as x) and subsequently realize under questioning that the only way out of a circularity is to define x in terms of something non-subjective (in the real world). Most would then fail to do so, realizing that they had already contradicted themselves.

The above two outcomes represented the majority of conversations with students on gender, indicating that most had unquestioningly absorbed gender-ideological claims without having any coherent understanding of them or even having thought critically about them.

3. The students who were able to give a workable definition of gender were by far the smallest group; they did so by defining gender essentially as a claim made on account of a person's desire to be regarded as conforming to expectations that other people have of male and female persons. (E.g. I am a woman, defined on gender rather than sex, if I feel more comfortable if others' expectations of me were typical of their expectations of women than of men, even if I am male.)

Of course, no student articulated the third definition so technically (I have the advantage here of as much time and thought as I need to provide a precise formulation), but this was the essence of the only definition for gender that did not eat itself in either self-contradiction or meaninglessness (circularity).

Certainly, even this third, superficially coherent definition of gender raises a problem: can a gender be *any* self-identification that provides increased comfort on account of a belief of other people's expectations with respect to it? For example, can "fish" be a gender just because I would be more comfortable being responded to as (I believe) people tend to respond to one? What about "king," if I feel magisterial, or "black person?" Under challenge with those examples, no student believed that any of those things were gender – but also no student could provide any coherent and non-contradictory basis for limiting gender to identifications that were related in some way to sex (including traits heretofore regarded as typically masculine or feminine).

Thus, in a corner of their own making, those students who had come this far in the discussion could do no more than declare that they accept gender as supervening on exclusively sex-related expectations only because "that is just the way it is today." In other words, they were admitting that the prevailing notion of gender, which they were using, was incoherent.

That realization makes what follows all the more serious.

## **Impact of Epistemic Bullying**

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As I conducted more such interviews, it became increasingly clear that perhaps the most consequential aspect of gender ideology for our students (and for the society that they will be both part of and responsible for) was best demonstrated by consideration of how we should respond to people who make claims about their gender and, specifically, make requests about how others should refer to them.

The following is a representative example created from various pieces of those interviews to capture the main elements from most of them.

"If I asked you to call me "she," would you do it?"

"Yes, out of respect."

"Don't I look and sound like a man to you?"

“Yes.”

“So you’d tell a lie out of respect?”

“Yes. It doesn’t really hurt me to do it.”

“Great. So you’d call me “His Majesty” out of respect. I mean, I often feel like a king.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s different.”

“How so?”

If the conversation got this far, then it was in most cases at around this point that the student would make a claim of moral and epistemic consequence.

Specifically, recognizing that he or she could identify no clear principle that made my claim to be a woman more true than my claim to be a king, the student would tell me that the difference lies in the treatment they would receive in calling me one vs. the other.

Effectively, “I’d call you “she” because of the consequences I would face if I do not... but the consequences are different if I don’t call you ‘His Majesty’.”

The consequences that were named by the students included “being ostracized,” “exclusion from university,” or “not being able to get the job that I want.”

After a few goes through this, I suggested to one applicant, “If I understand you correctly, you’re telling me that how you talk about gender is really determined by how effective the bullying is.” The applicant agreed. I subsequently made the suggestion to other interviewees. From memory, none disagreed.

Depending on the time remaining in the interview, that was sometimes the end of it. However, some students who had a little time left on the interview clock would make a further comment about having to decide “where to draw the line” (a phrase I heard repeatedly) – either the line that limits the size of the lie they would be willing to tell, or the line that marks the size of the reputational cost they would be willing to bear. Some asserted that the “pronoun lie” was a “white lie,” of the kind we tell all the time.

With those students whom I thought could benefit from it, I would push the point further: “How about drawing the line somewhere before the mutilation of children?” (Remember: they had already been warned that the interview might be provocative.)

A minute or two’s back-and-forward would then proceed on the possibility of a causal link between exposing children to the idea that males can be women and females can be men (on the one hand) and medical interventions with lifelong detrimental consequences after minimal clinical psychological assessment (on the other).

Some would stop in their tracks and admit a somber realization of the moral necessity of speaking their own truth in their dealings with themselves and others – including when it came to claims about gender; others took the point but then honestly reaffirmed that despite it, the effectiveness of the bullying that they currently face and are threatened with will continue to cause them to go along with gender ideology, despite its potential damaging consequences to children; yet others, shocked to be told of some of the recent events around GIDS and the Tavistock clinic (for example), would acknowledge how little they knew about this and the importance of finding out more.

## Conclusion

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My takeaway from these interviews is that gender ideology is doing much of what its detractors fear and its proponents seek – at least among our young people.

It is infiltrating schools and bullying young people into voicing compliance with, or at least punishing dissent from, views that they cannot justify to themselves when invited to do so in an epistemically neutral and non-judgmental environment.

Although this bullying does not seem to have undermined young people’s basic moral instincts for fairness (without exception, they are against males competing against females in sport because it is “unfair”), it has critically undermined their basic moral instinct for honesty.

Moreover, young people now find themselves using ideologically laden terms that are at odds with their own experience, as they discover very quickly when asked to share their experiences and opinions truthfully, in confidence, and without fear of criticism or retribution.

As is likely obvious from the foregoing, the teenagers with whom I have been having these conversations about gender ideology are generally at the top of their cohorts. Because of the nature of the program for which they were applying, there is a great deal of self-selection on intelligence.

However, the interviewee whose opinion on gender ideology most warrants precise quotation was only 11-years-old:

Me: “Are there any topics that you hear being talked about a lot that you are particularly interested in or [that make you] think that you don’t get what everyone is [talking] about?”

Interviewee: “LGBTQ stuff.”

Me: “Ah ok. What about that? What do you hear about that and what are your questions or disagreements?”

Interviewee: “We talked about it in school and ... I feel like people are encouraging people to be LGBTQ.”

Then, during the subsequent discussion,

Me: what else did you see that made you wonder, “Why are they encouraging this?”

Interviewee: Because I feel like it’s a very popular topic and a lot of people are talking about it and a lot of people are saying they are LGBTQ. But if you went back 50 years ago, it was almost nobody.

Me :Why do you think young people like you – so many more of them – are saying they are [LGBTQ]?

Interviewee: Maybe because they think it is cool or something. Maybe they are seeing it a lot everywhere. So they think that if everyone is talking about it, it must be a good thing to be; it must be cool, so “I’m going to do it”.

Me: Do you think that is a general thing in life – that people, especially young people, think that if something is being talked about a lot, it’s cool so people want to get on the bandwagon?

Interviewee: Yes.

To be able to interview 400 intelligent children and ask them for the opinion that they are most scared to share with their peers is a great privilege. It is also extremely telling.

We don’t need to speculate about the moral and epistemic damage done to children when educational institutions, and our culture more broadly, demand compliance with orthodoxy, punishing the exploration of truth and the honest expression of sincerely held opinions and personal experiences. All we have to do is make being honest safe for kids – and then let them tell us.

## Author

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