

## Ivory Tower Fantasies about Affirmative Action

ELLEN BERREY  
 University of Toronto  
 ellen.berrey@utoronto.ca

## Introduction

In a provocative 2002 essay, political scientist Jennifer Hochschild asks: why has affirmative action been so central to the American culture wars, more so than wage discrimination, underfunded public schools, and a litany of other social issues that have far greater impact on more black Americans?<sup>1</sup> And why have social scientists paid affirmative action so little empirical attention, in contrast to the deep philosophical and legal thinking on the topic? The answer, she says, is that contention over affirmative action is really about the American Dream, so the facts of the policy are irrelevant. Americans project their deep-seated assumptions onto affirmative action: it represents an affront to individuals' hard work, which should determine who rises and falls, or it represents the boost black Americans need to be on equal footing with their long-advantaged white counterparts. One unfortunate upshot, Hochschild laments, is that we don't know much about the complexities of who does affirmative action, how they do it, and who gets hurt or helped.

Natasha Kumar Warikoo's *The Diversity Bargain, and Other Dilemmas of Race, Admissions, and Meritocracy at Elite Universities* is the latest book to answer this call. Rather than evaluating the implementation or effects of affirmative action, Warikoo interrogates what it *does*: how does affirmative action in admissions factor into elites' understandings of race and merit? The book is a timely and crucial intervention, given the recent course of affirmative action politics and the scholarly knowledge we have accumulated to date.

*The Diversity Bargain, and Other Dilemmas of Race, Admissions, and Meritocracy at Elite Universities*, by **Natasha K. Warikoo**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 320 pp. \$26.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780226400143.

## The Last 15+ Years of Affirmative Action Politics

Since Hochschild's 2002 publication, right-wing opponents of affirmative action have turned up the political heat in court and at the ballot box. Top public universities are the focus of contention. In litigation brought by opponents, U.S. Supreme Court decisions in *Gratz* (2003), *Grutter* (2003), *Fisher I* (2013), and *Fisher II* (2016) did not end affirmative action in admissions but further limited its use. New cases against Harvard University and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill are winding their way through the courts. Opponents also have achieved bans on the policy in five additional states, so now universities and other government institutions in a total of eight states are forbidden from considering race, ethnicity, and gender in admissions and employment decisions. At the moment, the fate of affirmative admissions looks bleak, with the Trump administration's legitimization of white victimhood and the likely retirement of a liberal Supreme Court justice during Trump's term. All the while, workplace affirmative action, which was the subject of far more attention in the 1980s and 1990s, has receded into the background. In large part, this is due to opponents' success at curtailing federal funding and oversight and winning court cases that restrict its use.

Also since 2002, the issue of affirmative action has been further reified as a debate about access to the elite—that is, top universities. The debate takes place primarily

<sup>1</sup> Her essay was a revision of a 1999 piece by the same name published in *The Cultural Territories of Race: White and Black Boundaries* (Lamont 1999).

between well-resourced operatives on two opposing sides, channeled into formal legal and political forums. Opponents' arguments have not changed radically except, in the new Harvard and UNC litigation, to amplify the less common argument that affirmative action discriminates against Asian Americans. Conservative and libertarian challengers contend that so-called racial preferences are unconstitutional discrimination against white people and Asian Americans and violate their individual liberties. Affirmative action, they say, is antithetical to meritocracy, as characterized by students' SAT scores and GPAs.

Liberal and centrist defenders have clearly coalesced around the position that considering race in admissions generates the instrumental benefits of "diversity" (note that they avoid the much-maligned term "affirmative action"). According to their diversity rationale, a racially mixed student body enhances schools' educational missions, national interests, and the economy. As defendant in *Gratz and Grutter*, the University of Michigan elaborated this diversity rationale by building on Justice Lewis Powell's opinion in the 1978 *Bakke* case. In its 2003 *Grutter* decision, the Supreme Court codified it. The Court decided that considering race in admissions is constitutional so long as the goal is diversity, a compelling governmental interest. The court has continued to invalidate the legal viability of arguments for affirmative action that many progressives prefer: remedying social inequality, advancing integration, or providing role models of professionally successful people of color.

### What We Know about Affirmative Admissions

Affirmative admissions has always been a policy for selective colleges and universities, which by definition reject a substantial portion of applicants. It was first voluntarily adopted at elite universities starting in the 1960s by top administrators who were inspired by the black civil rights movement and were politically pressured by the small but growing cohort of students of color on campus (Stulberg and Chen 2014). We still know very little about its use in the 19

mostly southern states that, until as late as the 2000s, were under court order and then consent decrees to do affirmative action because they had refused to stop sponsoring racial segregation in higher education (but see Shaw 2016).

Following a period of broader use, affirmative admissions has again become an elite policy. In 2014, approximately 35 percent of selective colleges and universities publicly stated that they considered race in admissions, down from 60 percent in 1994 (Hirschman and Berrey 2017). The most prestigious private institutions and public institutions in non-ban states—like Brown University and University of Virginia—have stuck with the policy, as has the next tier of high-status private institutions.

One inventive scholarly approach contextualizes the consideration of race in relation to other admissions preferences to bring to light important if less controversial considerations. Mitchell Stevens's 2007 ethnography reveals how admissions staff at an elite college give overwhelming preference to athletes, preference that far surpasses their favorable treatment of applicants of color. Taking a quantitative approach, Thomas Espenshade and colleagues (2004) find that applicants get a bump on a 1600-point scale for being African American (230 SAT points), Latino (185), an athlete (200), or a child of alumni (160).

While many scholars use this quantified conception of affirmative action to measure the magnitude of any favoritism for African American and Latino applicants, it is deeply flawed. Standardized test scores weigh foremost in admission to top law schools (Espeland and Sauder 2016), but undergraduate admissions staff at elite schools rarely rely simply on formulaic calculations. What's more, the scholarly use of test scores validates conservatives' distorted notion of merit. Ample research now documents that test scores correlate with parental income (Dixon-Román, Everson, and McArdle 2013), not necessarily with academic ability. Critical analyses have established that elite admissions functions both as an engine of white favoritism and, in the words of one former admissions officer, class warfare (England 2017).

Other new research upholds the finding that race-conscious affirmative action

successfully grows the ranks of African Americans attending and graduating from elite universities (Alon 2015). When bans go into effect, top public institutions in those states experience dramatic drops in black student undergraduate and graduate enrollment, although black undergraduate enrollment increases at less selective public universities (see, e.g., Hinrichs 2012). Black and Latino student activists have mobilized direct actions and issued demands to draw attention to campus discrimination; those at prestigious public universities in ban states point to their dwindling numbers and isolation.

Critics of affirmative action, most notably economist Richard Sander, have advanced “mismatch theory”: the idea that affirmative action hurts black students who attend selective schools because they are less likely to major in the sciences or graduate (Sander and Taylor 2012). This claim was echoed by Justice Antonin Scalia in the *Fisher I* oral arguments. Sociologists have mostly refuted mismatch theory. African American students actually graduate from top schools at higher rates than athletes or children of alumni and at rates comparable to their white counterparts, although they earn somewhat lower grades (Massey and Mooney 2007). Economists are more equivocal. Arcidiacono and Lovenheim (2016:7) identify some complicated trade-offs but conclude that the lack of data makes it “difficult, if not impossible, to say whether the purported beneficiaries are actually made worse.”

One of the hardest nuts to crack—for scholars, anxious applicants, and right-wing opponents alike—is figuring out precisely how undergraduate admissions staff at American colleges and universities account for race in their decisions (decision-making criteria are relatively more transparent at many elite universities overseas, including at Oxford University, as Warikoo explains). As interview studies show, admissions administrators understand diversity management as central to their job responsibilities and professional norms (Lipson 2007). What they report doing sounds a lot like what the Supreme Court has instructed: they intentionally consider student diversity, broadly conceived as

background characteristics, racial and otherwise, because it enhances institutional excellence (Lamont and Silvas 2009). Daniel Hirschman and I had to abandon our interview study of undergraduate admissions decision-making in the early stages because we just could not get administrators to move past their public-relations speak. And why would they? The black box of admissions protects them from liability, public scrutiny, and (as Harvard is now arguing) revealing insider secrets. As Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote in her dissent in *Gratz*, about the University of Michigan’s point-based system for undergraduate admissions: “If honesty is the best policy, surely Michigan’s accurately described, fully disclosed College affirmative action program is preferable to achieving similar numbers through winks, nods, and disguises.”

Admissions decision-making is probably better observed than narrated. Scholars have fruitfully looked to the historical record (Karabel 2005) and used experimental designs (Bastedo and Bowman 2017). In her ethnography of admissions selections for highly competitive graduate programs, Julie Posselt (2016) finds that faculty members rely heavily on an unacknowledged colorblind conception of merit—especially, applicants’ GRE scores and the prestige of their undergraduate alma mater—which favors white and male applicants and notably hurts those from China.

Political contention over affirmative action and the migration of “diversity” beyond the law on the books also have been relatively easier to document. Right-wing political mobilization, abetted by liberals’ capitulations, has successfully appropriated legal tactics used by civil rights advocates and popularized colorblindness (Okechuwu forthcoming). Emaciated by attacks, affirmative action now is primarily useful as a rhetorical tool for defenders of white supremacy (Moore 2018). Those attacks have put radical activists in the compromised position of making civil rights claims to defend an elitist, accommodationist policy (Berrey 2015b). Both in and out of court, organizational leaders have alit on the warm-fuzzy discourse of diversity as an explanation not only of their admissions or human resources processes but as part of their organizations’

essential identity (Berrey 2015a). University administrators have institutionalized diversity regimes that rely heavily on benign affirmations of diversity and organizational staging of the bodies of people of color (Thomas 2017) as well as the emotional labor of diversity practitioners, who tend to be women of color (Ahmed 2012). The cumulative effects for the reproduction of race and class inequalities are disturbing and tragic.

If that's the organizational story, what do people actually think about affirmative action? Americans' responses to opinion polls continue to hinge on the wording of the question, although they are consistent over time. More than two-thirds of respondents (and an even greater percentage of white respondents) prefer that admissions decisions are made "solely on the basis of merit," without consideration for an applicant's racial background "to help promote diversity."<sup>2</sup> But more than two-thirds also favorably view "affirmative action programs designed to increase the numbers of black and minority students."<sup>3</sup> Affirmative action continues to loom large in the imaginations of aggrieved white middle- and working-class conservatives, much in the way that Jennifer Hochschild postulated. In her 2016 ethnography, Arlie Russell Hochschild found that Tea Party supporters lump black people whom they presume to be beneficiaries of affirmative action together with black people presumed to receive welfare, as well as immigrants, Muslims, female professionals, and former President Barack Obama—all of whom are, purportedly, abetted by the federal government and are thwarting hard-working white people's shot at the American Dream.

### What White (Elite) Students Want

Enter here *The Diversity Bargain*. Warikoo's study hits the sweet spot where national intrigue meets now-and-future power brokers. She bases her argument on 143 interviews with undergraduate students at

three top universities: Brown, Harvard, and Oxford. By inviting these students to talk about admissions, affirmative action, campus diversity programming, and their cross-racial campus experiences, Warikoo effectively surfaces their understandings of meritocracy, race, diversity, and fairness. The white students at Brown and Harvard are the analytic centerpiece of the book. American students of color and Oxford students, who are predominantly white, primarily are points of comparison. Warikoo's approach is to identify and explain, but not judge, students' perceptions.

*The Diversity Bargain* is, at its core, about elite reproduction and the maneuvers of whiteness it entails. While we can't assume that every Brown and Harvard student is from the upper crust, they will soon have pedigrees that provide on-ramps to powerful jobs (Rivera 2015). We should know what current and future elites think about their own good fortune and social inequality. The nation's wealth is concentrated in increasingly fewer hands, and the wealthy exercise outsized influence over cultural meanings, policy, and decision-making, to their economic advantage (Khan 2012)

Foundational to the book's analysis are the three central "race frames" that students use, which Warikoo characterizes as reflective of individual and group perception and also influenced by the campus environment. A number of the white American students and nearly all the Oxford students employ a colorblind frame: race, they claim, is irrelevant and is best ignored. A larger number of white American students and most American students of color invoke a diversity frame: race is a cultural identity that makes the world a better place through the expression of different viewpoints and social practices. And almost half of the American black and Latino students, primarily those at Brown, draw on a power analysis frame: race is a basis of unjust inequalities that should be actively resisted. Warikoo's analytic set-up captures the flexibility of these frames. In particular, students bend the diversity frame in multiple directions, as some combine it with colorblindness and others with power analysis.

Zeroing in on the white American elite students, we learn that their interpretations

<sup>2</sup> See <http://news.gallup.com/poll/193508/oppose-colleges-considering-race-admissions.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/10/31115611/10-24-2017-Typology-release.pdf>.

of affirmative action are refracted through their astounding if unsurprising sense of entitlement. Their mostly superficial conceptions of race and their fears of appearing racist also are influential. Their understandings of affirmative action rest on many self-serving fantasies (my word choice, not Warikoo's). One salient fantasy is of meritocratic admissions. They believe they earned their seat at Brown or Harvard (at Oxford, too) by virtue of their own individual hard-earned achievements, as the proverbial best and brightest.

Another fantasy expressed by the white Americans students, and the one that Warikoo makes the cornerstone of the book, is that students of color are on campus for the benefit of white students. These white students wager a diversity bargain: they will go along with affirmative action so long as it works to their personal advantage. They want campus experiences where they get to interact with students of color. Their normative expectation is that students of color should integrate into predominantly white environments, to enhance their own (white) campus experiences—but that does not happen enough because, they believe, students of color “self-segregate” (see also Byrd 2017). The American black and Latino students, too, extol the diversity of perspectives, groups, and practices on campus, but they do not feel obliged to satisfy their white counterparts' egocentric wants as they navigate discrimination and white foolishness.

The white students hold on to yet another fantasy: affirmative action hurts them when it's not helping them, because it can disadvantage them when competing for jobs and other goodies. We can see here that conservative operatives' framing of affirmative action as “reverse racism” has gained real traction. While Warikoo's agenda is not social critique, her findings speak to critical race scholarship that shows how the white normativity expressed through diversity rhetoric makes a lot of misery for students of color (Moore and Bell 2011; see also Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick 2004).

*The Diversity Bargain* is a carefully constructed, incisive book. It stays true to the empirical data to develop smart, accessible, important findings. Warikoo's insistence on presenting what students think and say,

even if it makes some readers cringe, was the right choice for this study. Her identification of students' uses of race frames is persuasive, although the numbers sometimes get too small to make meaningful claims. Further, by sticking to a conception of frames that is largely divorced from power dynamics or ideology, Warikoo misses the opportunity to fully realize the theoretical payoffs of her study by advancing our understanding of the racist valences of elite reproduction. Yet Warikoo's work still shines on many fronts, and she has impressively brought her insights to the wider public through her writing for outlets like *The Boston Globe*, *The Conversation*, and *The London Review of Books*.

The research for *The Diversity Bargain* took place in a relatively more optimistic period, under the presidency of Barack Obama. What can we learn from this book about the current political moment of emboldened and explicit white nationalism? Extending from Hochschild's original insights about the salience of the American Dream, we can reasonably predict that, as many of these students go on to run the government and the private sector, they will continue to see themselves as more deserving than others, and they will support functionally discriminatory policies that rest on the self-important, misguided notion that an individual's hard work, foremost, is what gets them ahead. Another chilling insight is that these elite white students share a sentiment that buoys Trump's nativist support: social policy, whether on affirmative action, immigration, or criminal justice, should foremost serve the interests of white Americans.

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