Stereotypical White intellectual and academic superiority aligns well with the American ethos individualism and earned achievement, the opposite of what many White Americans perceive affirmative action to be. But when confronted with college rejection or low test scores, White college applicants can place blame on Black students and affirmative action instead of taking responsibility for their own personal failings.
For now, race-based affirmative action in US higher education remains constitutional, as the Supreme Court ruled in June via *Fisher v. University of Texas II*. Still, one fact remains evident: for many Americans, the idea of any Black applicant being more qualified to attend any predominantly White university than any White applicant is simply inconceivable. Despite the comparative closing of the academic achievement gap since the 1960s, the rise of a Black middle class, and the increase in college graduation rates for students of color, the assumption remains that Black students especially are underqualified for admission at most universities. The question is, why does this assumption persist in spite of the mostly positive historical and statistical evidence? The stereotype of White intellectual and academic superiority when compared to

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Americans of color has been baked into the cake of the White id for centuries. It's a stereotype that aligns well with the American ethos of individualism and earned achievement, the opposite of what many White Americans perceive affirmative action to be. When the reality of college rejection or a lower-than-average test score collides with this stereotype, however, the result can lead to White college applicants blaming Black students and affirmative action instead of taking responsibility for their own personal failings.

Claude Steele, social psychologist and University of California at Berkeley Executive Vice Chancellor, has done groundbreaking work on the subject of self-affirmation and stereotype threat over the past 30 years. As Steele wrote in his 1999 article “Thin Ice,” stereotype threat is “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype.” Steele added that everyone “experiences stereotype threat. We are all members of some group about which negative stereotypes exist.” Steele has applied most of his research to students of color and women students at the high school and higher education levels.

Yet as Steele said, stereotype threat can easily apply to prospective White college students as well. Abigail Fisher and her anti-affirmative action counterparts Barbara Grutter and Allan Bakke all experienced rejections in the higher education admissions process. The University of Texas-Austin rejected Fisher because of her low class ranking, GPA, and SAT scores in 2008. The University of Michigan Law School rejected Grutter in 1995 because of her low LSAT scores. Bakke’s University of California at Davis Medical School rejection in 1973 and in 1974 had more to do with ageism (he was 33 at the time) than any other factor. Because the stereotype of White intellectual superiority is a positive and strong one, fulfilling this stereotype would not bring about any psychological threat to White individuals. Universities rejecting applicants such as Fisher, Grutter, and Bakke would yield what I will call an anti-stereotype threat for these individuals. That is, the threat of not living up to what American culture expects of them—and what they expect of themselves—as White students. The anti-stereotype would be a rejected White student who could not outperform Black students admitted to an elite public institution. This anti-stereotype is a threat to a White college applicant’s identity as one who is...
intelligent and talented, a view which college acceptances would have validated. The idea that performance, community service, leadership, critical thinking and other abilities and intrinsic factors played a more significant role in the admissions process than race-based affirmative action is a bridge too far for many opponents of affirmative action. Individuals like Fisher, Grutter, and Bakke simply could not accept a reality in which they are not as intelligent as their White counterparts, much less African American ones.

The stereotype of White intellectual and academic superiority when compared to Americans of color has been baked into the cake of the White id for centuries.

This idea of stereotype threat can lead to what Steele and others in his field call “disidentification.” According to Steele, this is a “psychic adjustment” made to lessen the pain involved in stereotype threat “by ceasing to identify with the part of life in which the pain occurs.” The evidence for this among rejected White applicants like Fisher, Grutter, and Bakke has been their act of bringing lawsuits to court over affirmative action since the mid-1970s. In the very act of filing such suits, they shifted their identity from being a person unqualified for admission into a specific institution to into a new identity: victims of state-sanctioned racial discrimination. In taking them to court, these individuals not only sought to force elite public higher education institutions like the University of Texas, the University of Michigan, and the University of California, Davis to admit them as students. In the process, Fisher, Grutter, and Bakke wanted to show these schools and the world that they in fact fit the positive stereotype of highly intelligent Whites, who happened to be done in by affirmative action. In identifying as victims, they cannot be seen as an anti-stereotype (a rejected White application due to insufficient qualifications) or a stereotype (a racist who believes in White intellectual superiority). These lawsuits, at the
least, have saved them from facing the pain and embarrassment of their rejections. Winning these lawsuits confirmed the view of themselves as on par intellectually with their White counterparts.

Take Allan Bakke, for example. The first successful Supreme Court case to challenge the idea of holding slots specifically for any race or ethnic group in 1978 began because an overzealous assistant dean at the University of California at Davis Medical School encouraged Bakke to seek his remedy in the courts. 

All evidence pointed at the time to blatant age discrimination and bad timing. But then assistant dean Peter Storandt attempted to dissuade the 33-year-old Bakke away from this consideration, pushing Bakke instead toward racial discrimination. In a July 1973 letter, Storandt said, “I am enclosing a page that describes the basic approach used by the medical school at Davis in evaluating applicants who have ‘minority’ status.” Storandt even urged Bakke to “correspond with Prof. Robert Joling...an attorney.” Storandt had defused a contention of age discrimination—and a potential anti-stereotype threat—by helping Bakke see the issue as one purely about race-based affirmative action.

Bakke’s response to Storandt’s initial letter in August 1973 is telling. The letter shows Bakke in the midst of both anti-stereotype threat and a shift toward disidentification. In Bakke’s case, the anti-stereotype threat was that he simply wasn’t good enough or young enough for admission into University of California at Davis Medical School when compared to White and especially Black applicants. Bakke said that his “plan of action” would have two goals: “to secure admission for me and to help answer the legal questions about admissions practices which show racial preference.” This statement is evidence of Bakke’s disidentifying, representing himself as an injured party because of race-based affirmative action, rather than because of age discrimination or his lack of qualifications. In this explanation, fault lay not with him, but with a class of students less qualified than Bakke, and a policy to accept these students over him.
Through the anti-affirmative action organization the Center for Individual Rights, Barbara Grutter took the University of Michigan Law School to court after the school rejected her application in 1997. Grutter had a number of diversity factors in her favor that likely would have led the University of Michigan Law School to admit her. Among these factors were Grutter being “one of nine children, the daughter of an itinerant, financially struggling Protestant minister,” not to mention Grutter’s age, gender, parental status, and business experiences. But the 43-year-old Grutter chose not to highlight any of these factors in her application materials. As Grutter said in an interview in June 2006, she “did not think it would be appropriate, 18 years later, to build my law school application around whining about those difficulties; the facts were indeed there for anyone to see.” Grutter saw herself as a superior applicant, one who didn’t need the “handout” of affirmative action. Even at the application stage, Grutter was under anti-stereotype threat, not wanting diversity factors to play any role in her acceptance at University of Michigan Law School.

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The rejection, though, led Grutter to see herself as a victim of racial discrimination, and not one of her own intellectual delusions of grandeur and perceived status as a high-achieving White woman. As Grutter said during a speech to a group of University of Michigan undergraduates in October 2005, “I had struggled with sexist behavior far too long to simply turn around and meekly accept discrimination on yet another basis. That is not progress!” Grutter dismissed the fact that University of Michigan Law School
admitted only 19 out of 141 students with similar GPAs and LSAT scores (including only three Black applicants). Grutter disidentified herself, representing herself as a superior applicant who experienced racial discrimination when compared to three Black students whom the University of Michigan Law School had accepted. Grutter, however, lost her Supreme Court battle in 2003. She never did attend law school.

Like Grutter, it is clear that Fisher also faced anti-stereotype threat both in terms of race and in terms of her family background in her path to two anti-affirmative action Supreme Court cases since 2008. “There were people in my class with lower grades who weren’t in all the activities I was in, who were being accepted into UT, and the only other difference between us was the color of our skin,” Fisher said in a video published by the Project for Fair Representation, the organization litigating Fisher’s case. She also said in the 2012 video, “I dreamt of going to UT ever since the second grade. My dad went there, my sister went there and tons of friends and family.” The anti-stereotype threat of Fisher actually being unqualified, as evidenced by these statements about her Black classmates and her immediate family, was too much to bear.

But, like Bakke and Grutter, Fisher disidentified herself as the injured party. She came to see herself as the one whom the University of Texas should have rightfully accepted. For Fisher, the idea that any Black applicant had gained acceptance into the University of Texas over her was itself tantamount to racial discrimination. Only 47 applicants (42 of whom were White) with the equivalent of Fisher’s GPA and SAT score made the cut for the 841 slots reserved for freshmen who didn’t meet the 10-Percent plan criteria in 2007-08 (a 94.4 percent rejection rate), contradicting her original claim.

Stereotype threat and its companion, disidentification, play a similar role in shaping the identities and responses of Whites in higher education as they do with African Americans regardless of gender and class, and with women regardless of race. As for whether race-based affirmative action survives or dies in 2016, for the purposes of stereotype threat and the White id, this is almost irrelevant. For every Bakke, Grutter, and Fisher, there are millions of
Whites who remain unconvinced of Black intellectual capacities. They cling to the stereotype of White educational and intellectual superiority. These challenges ultimately show how fragile the White id and America’s ideals are when confronted with stereotype threat, and not just for admission into a college or university. Competing for higher paying jobs on Wall Street and Main Street, on Broadway or in Hollywood and losing out to Americans of color can also illuminate such fragility.

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