

Trauma drama: The trouble with competitive victimhood

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Abstract

Writing a college-application essay has become a rite of passage for high-school seniors in the United States, one whose importance has expanded over time due to an increasingly competitive admissions process. Various commentators have noted the disturbing evolution of these essays over the years, with an ever-greater emphasis placed on obstacles overcome and traumas survived. How have we gotten to the point where college-application essays are all too frequently competitive-victimhood displays? Colleges have an understandable interest in the disadvantages their applicants may have suffered, but this interest – and the awareness of it among both applicants and their advisors – has led to a ‘race to the bottom’: in order to thrive (or even survive) in a particular competitive context, participants are forced to continuously lower relevant standards in a game of one-upmanship. With college essays, the competition is among high-school seniors for admission, the one-upmanship is an ever-escalating effort to persuade admission committees of one’s greater disadvantage, and the relevant standards being lowered are *honesty*, *privacy*, and *dignity* – or so I shall argue. As we will see, this particular race to the bottom imposes unequal costs on certain groups and has implications stretching well beyond collegiate admissions.

Keywords

College-application essay, competitive victimhood, dignity, honesty, privacy, race to the bottom

Writing a college-application essay has become a rite of passage for high-school seniors in the United States, one whose importance has increased over time due to an ever-more-competitive admissions process. Many commentators have pointed out the disturbing evolution of these essays over the years, with more and more emphasis placed on obstacles overcome and traumas survived. This evolution has been encouraged by the essay

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prompts themselves. Consider, for example, the first two prompts for the 2021–2022 Common App:

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience? (Common App, 2022)¹

Both applicants and those who advise them have taken the hint. In an article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Anne Trubek, former director of a college-access program at Oberlin College, laments the phenomenon of ‘trauma-drama essays’, that is, ‘tough luck tales . . . on topics like having been evicted from your home, having a parent in prison, having supported your siblings, survived abusive homes . . .’. As she notes, students are not simply imagining the expectation that their essay should be a ‘confession of past degradation’: she quotes Jamie Ealy, dean of admissions at Berea College, admitting that ‘it’s more impressive when the kid has dealt with adversity’. Trubek points out the ethical bind that this expectation puts advisors in:

Family violence, raising younger siblings, and foster care? [Applicants] consider those shameful family secrets, the last things they want to discuss with potential colleges. By pushing them to reveal their horror stories, I risk taking away their dignity. But by not pushing, I may be hindering their chances for acceptance to their dream school. (Trubek, 2007)

More recently, applicants themselves have started to speak out about this ethical bind and its psychological effects. In a recent guest essay in *The New York Times*, high-school senior Elijah Megginson protests that these confessional expectations lead to ‘students of color trying to become poster children for trauma and pain’:

In my life, I’ve had a lot of unfortunate experiences. So when it came time for me to write my personal statement for college applications, I knew that I could sell a story about all the struggles I had overcome. Each draft I wrote had a different topic. The first was about growing up without my dad being involved, the second was about the many times my life was violently threatened, the third was about coping with anxiety and PTSD, and the rest followed the same theme . . . As I kept rewriting my personal statement, it kept sounding clichéd. It was my authentic experience, but I felt that trauma overwhelmed my drafts. I didn’t want to be a victim anymore.

When he asks a friend why she ‘wrote about her hardships’, she replies ‘because I had to get into school and advisers emphasized, like, sell your pain’ (Megginson, 2021).

How have we gotten to this point, where college-application essays have too often become competitive-victimhood displays?² Colleges have an understandable interest in the disadvantages that their applicants may have labored under, but this interest – and the awareness of it among both applicants and their advisors – has led to a ‘race to the bottom’: in order to thrive (or even survive) in a particular competitive context, participants are forced to continually lower relevant standards, in a game of one-upmanship (or,

rather, one-downmanship). Readers are no doubt acquainted with this phenomenon from other contexts. To take another academic example, consider grade inflation, which often results in contexts where departments must compete with each other for students and faculty members must compete with each other for good student evaluations (Eaton and Eswaran, 2008). A less parochial example is the well-known tendency of local governments, in competition with one another, to offer tax breaks to firms who agree to locate in their jurisdiction, often leading to fiscal stress and the under-provision of public services (Mast, 2020). In the college-essay context, the competition is among high-school seniors for college admission, the one-upmanship is an ever-escalating effort to persuade the admissions officers of one's greater disadvantage, and the relevant standards that are lowered are *honesty*, *privacy*, and *dignity* – or so I shall argue. As we shall see, this particular race to the bottom imposes disparate costs on particular groups and has implications stretching well beyond academic admissions.

Honesty

Returning for a moment to Elijah Megginson's guest essay in the *NYT*, notice what he says about the traumas recalled in his personal statement: 'it was my authentic experience' (Megginson, 2021). At first blush, this may seem a strange thing to emphasize, but as another *NYT* article points out,

the pressure to exaggerate, embellish, lie, and cheat on college applications has intensified . . . The high-stakes process remains one largely based upon trust: very little is done in the way of fact-checking, and on the few occasions that officials do catch outright lies, they often do so by chance.

Christopher Hunt, a college-essay consultant, is quoted saying that these officials have '12 minutes to read an application. They're not fact-checking'. In theory at least, applicants face harsh penalties for cheating, from admission revocation to criminal prosecution, but because the odds of detection are so tiny – and because officials are so hesitant to pursue any but the most egregious cases – the potential gains from dishonesty are large (Hartocollis, 2018).³

Applicants who succumb to such temptations are rightly blamed for it, but the universities that so strongly incentivize dishonesty in the application process are at fault too. Trust is a precious commodity in academia, particularly in testing (the taking *and* the grading) and research. To begin a student's experience of tertiary education with this kind of race to the bottom is not just tragically counterproductive but of questionable necessity, given the existence of more reliable measures of disadvantage – a point to which I will later return.

So far, I have focused on honesty toward *others*, but I think another, less obvious kind of honesty is put in jeopardy through existing college-admission processes: honesty toward *oneself*. Anne Trubek, in her *CHE* article, worries about the 'psychic risks of encouraging students to mine difficult personal experiences' (Trubek, 2007). These risks can take many forms, some of which I will discuss later, but the one I want to address now is the risk of self-deception. To begin, consider the hoary but still useful distinction between choices and circumstances. Choices are emblematic of our agency, involving

our actions, plans, ambitions, and aspirations. Circumstances, on the other hand, are the unchosen conditions of our agency, which may either enable agency if they are good circumstances or undermine it if they are bad. Rawls distinguishes between ‘social, natural, and fortuitous contingencies’ (Rawls, 2001: 55), and we might similarly categorize circumstances in this way: social (e.g. familial or racial background), natural (e.g. innate (dis)abilities), and fortuitous (e.g. good luck, like winning a lottery, or bad luck, like being in an accident). How well our individual lives go, of course, is a complex function of our choices and circumstances, both good and bad.

So far, so familiar. Notice, though, what the admissions-officer expectations about college essays demand of the applicant: namely, that they focus upon their life’s *bad circumstances* and *good choices*, that is, that they retell their life story as one of overcoming adversity through heroic struggle. As Jay Caspian King has remarked, student applicants know that they have to ‘present themselves as testaments to strength in the face of unending challenges’ (King, 2022). The reverse side of these expectations, however, is that they push the applicant essayist to downplay, and even ignore, *good circumstances* and *bad choices*, that is, to conceal not simply their social, natural, and fortuitous gifts but also their bad decisions, some of which surely involved the frittering away of those same gifts. Consequently, these expectations lead applicants to distort their own personal histories for the sake of college admission. More worryingly, to the extent that applicants internalize these rather partial narratives, they may deceive themselves about their own lives and those of others in ways that are dangerous. Megginson himself emphasizes the way that these essays and analogous kinds of public performances emphasizing our heroic struggles to overcome adversity can ‘become an internalized mind-set’ (Megginson, 2021). If they do, we are very likely to *overestimate* the extent to which the world, as well as other people, have undermined us (generating a sense of victimization and feelings of resentment) and to *underestimate* the extent to which our problems are of our own making (thus minimizing our own responsibility and assuming a posture of virtuous innocence).

The social-psychology literature on competitive victimhood (CV) reinforces these worries. For example, Noor et al. (2008) find that CV not only reduces the willingness to forgive others but also leads to more positive evaluations of violence; moreover, these effects are stronger the more strongly that people identify with their victim status. Noor et al. (2012) also find that CV reduces feelings of responsibility for inflicting harm. Phillips and Lowery (2015) discover that when whites are reminded of their various social and economic advantages, they tend to report higher levels of personal hardship, almost as a sort of mental compensation or balancing. Finally, Craig et al. (2012) note that when sexism is made more salient experimentally, women show greater racial bias, that is, when they reflect upon their own victimhood, they become more prone to victimize others. All of this CV research suggests that a stronger sense of victimhood increases resentment and bias and suppresses an appropriate sense of responsibility, both individual and social. Official expectations for college essays simply reinforce all these tendencies by turning the applicant’s attention to their bad circumstances and good choices, that is, to their virtuous victimhood. Whether the social costs of these expectations, in both the forms just surveyed and the loss of trust discussed earlier, are worth bearing in exchange for the social benefits of whatever insights they provide into applicants’ more hidden disadvantages is a question to which we will turn in the article’s conclusion.

Privacy

In this section and the next, I will make the idealizing assumption that there is no dishonesty in the college-application process, be it to self or others, in order to focus on other problems with the process – problems that would exist, and be just as severe, even in the absence of dishonesty.⁴ What might these other problems be? One that is mentioned repeatedly in discussions of college admission is the privacy violation involved in writing application essays, at least given admission-officer expectations and the consequent race-to-the-bottom nature of the process. King, in his own assessment of this process, condemns the ‘trauma contests’ involved and says that ‘the hardships a person might have faced . . . may be none of the admissions committee’s business’; he later asserts that ‘these students should be afforded a measure of privacy’ (King, 2022). In a like vein, Trubek speaks ruefully of the ‘shameful family secrets’ that the process manages to leverage from student applicants (Trubek, 2007).

Whether this leveraging constitutes a privacy violation depends upon which conception of privacy we use. Consider, for example, Judith Jarvis Thomson’s canonical treatment of the right to privacy (Thomson, 1975). Thomson maintains

that the right to privacy is itself a cluster of rights and that it is not a distinct cluster of rights, but itself intersects with the cluster of rights which the right over the person consists in and also with the cluster of rights which owning property consists in. (p. 306)

On this understanding of the right to privacy, the right is wholly derivative of proprietary rights over our persons and possessions; therefore, we could only violate it by violating these more basic rights, for example, by using someone else’s body, reputation, and property, without their consent. Critics of the college-admissions process regularly use terms like ‘forcing’ (Megginson, 2021) and ‘pushing’ (Trubek, 2007) to describe how secrets are prised from applicants, but this metaphorical language obscures the fact that applying to college is a voluntary decision made under competitive conditions (among applicants *and* schools), such that it is hard to see it as anything but consensual. At least on Thomson’s understanding of privacy rights, it is difficult to identify a privacy violation in the college-admissions process.⁵

Thomson’s conception of privacy might be appropriate for a *legal* understanding of privacy rights, but as the previous comments by King and Trubek indicate, it fails to capture some powerful and persuasive intuitions about the wrongness of the college-application process. Perhaps one way to capture these intuitions without calling into question the relevance of Thomson’s conception for legal matters is to move toward a broader conception, one more appropriate for an *ethical* reading of privacy rights. Consider, for example, Andrei Marmor’s recent and more general conception of a right to privacy, one that protects our key interest in

shaping our interactions with others . . . [by] having a reasonable measure of control over ways in which we present ourselves to others and the ability to present different aspects of ourselves, and what is ours, to different people. (Marmor, 2015: 7)

Why is this kind of control so important? Marmor considers three principal reasons, two of which are particularly relevant for our purposes here. Marmor’s first reason, which draws on the work of James Rachels (1975),

pertains to our ability to create and maintain different kinds of relationships with different people. What is important here . . . is the difference in patterns of social behavior and social expectations that different kinds of relationships require . . . *Different kinds of social expectations about what aspects of yourself to reveal to others are constitutive of different kinds of human relations.* It is constitutive of friendships that friends are expected to be relatively open with each other, sometimes revealing intimate information that they would not be willing to share with just about any random person. *Similarly, certain expectations of distance and concealment are constitutive of professional relations between people . . .* Without having some control over things you reveal about yourself and ways in which you do it, different kinds of relationships with people would be much more difficult to create and maintain. (Marmor, 2015: 8; emphasis added)

In other words, controlling which aspects of yourself to reveal and how to do it is a crucial element in creating and maintaining different kinds of relationships, which are themselves partially defined by social expectations of the same. Marmor's second, closely related reason is that

intimacy involves considerable costs, such as responsibilities and the need to care for the other. When those responsibilities and willingness to care are voluntarily undertaken, they foster good relationships. But when they are imposed involuntarily, especially on a large scale, the results might be quite oppressive. We can only operate in the complex societies we live in if we are allowed to deal with others at arm's length, keeping some distance. (Marmor, 2015: 9)

That is, when we choose to reveal certain things about ourselves, we not only create the conditions for certain kinds of relationships but also commit ourselves *and others* to associated duties of care, which can be quite burdensome; the right to privacy thus involves *inter alia* some ability to choose and thereby limit such responsibilities through selective self-revelation.

With this as background, we are now in a much better position to see the privacy violations involved in admission-officer essay expectations and the race to the bottom that these expectations trigger. Put simply, there is a terrible mismatch between the 'confession of past degradation' that admissions officers expect, in order to aid their evaluation of disadvantage and worthiness, and the fundamental nature of the professional relationship between admission committees and applicants (Trubek, 2007). Applicants are pressured by such expectations to reveal intimate, perhaps shameful aspects of themselves. Such revelations may be appropriate in a close personal relationship or even in the right kind of professional relationship, for example, that between a psychiatrist and their patient. But an admissions committee is not – or, rather, should not be – in that kind of relationship with their applicants: such professional relationships generally involve 'certain expectations of distance and concealment', as Marmor puts it, and admissions committees possess neither the expertise nor the willingness to respond appropriately (*viz.* in a way consistent with social expectations of care and concern) to such harrowing revelations. College applicants are not patients, and admission officers are not psychiatrists; moreover, applicants do not choose to reveal these things about themselves in the hope of contextually appropriate care and concern, but rather for the sake of acceptance into an institution of higher learning – and they do so

only because they feel compelled to do so. All of the relational conditions for such revelations to be socially appropriate are missing.

As damning as this description may seem, it actually *understates* the severity of the privacy violation involved. To continue with the psychiatric (dis)analogy, when patients disclose intimate, even shameful things to their psychiatrist, they do so in the context of a long, trusting relationship, voluntarily entered in order to receive appropriate attention, care, and concern from a skilled and committed fiduciary. The relationship between applicants and admission committees is like a cruel parody of the psychiatric relationship, where intimate revelations are also required, not by a trusted fiduciary offering care but instead by a faceless, impersonal bureaucracy appraising disadvantage. The problem is not just that there is no long-standing relationship of trust and care but that there is hardly a relationship at all – just revelations provided as inputs into an admissions algorithm run dispassionately by academic administrators.⁶ Disturbingly, the closest analogy I can think of is not the psychiatric relationship but rather the confessional one: a confessor, possibly unknown to the penitent, sits behind a concealing screen, listening to confessions and offering formulaic responses *ex cathedra* ('we regret to inform you of your failed bid for admission . . .'). Again, however, this analogy understates the privacy violation, because at least in the confessional case, the penitent is already a member of the community, sharing its long-standing beliefs and rituals with the confessor, but an applicant is on the outside, seeking to enter the community, and cannot be assumed to know, much less endorse, that community's beliefs and rituals. In accordance with Thomson's argument, there may be no legal wrong here, but the ethical wrong is severe and deeply problematic, at least if we take Marmor's understanding of the right to privacy seriously.

Dignity

Another problem persistently mentioned in discussions of college-admission essays is the dignity harm to applicants. As Trubek (2007) says of the ethical bind of advisors like herself, 'by pushing them to reveal their horror stories, I risk taking away their dignity. But by not pushing, I may be hindering their chances for acceptance to their dream school'. King similarly notes that asking students to 'perform their trauma' is inconsistent with both their 'privacy and dignity', a pairing to which I will return later in this section (King, 2022). Once again, these moral intuitions seem right, but as with privacy, it is unclear precisely what the dignity violation here is – in part, perhaps, because the concept of dignity has various interpretations and associated conceptions. In order to clarify and verify these intuitions, we need to explore different conceptions of dignity, and in the course of doing so, we shall see that the *existence* of a dignity violation here does not hinge tightly upon the particular conception of dignity being used but that its precise *nature* does.

Unsurprisingly, the philosophical literature on dignity has deep Kantian roots. Kant largely detaches dignity from its connections to monarchical, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical social status, offering instead an egalitarian conception of dignity grounded upon our shared capacity for moral lawgiving: Kant distinguishes between things that have a 'price' and those that have a 'dignity', where the latter is 'raised above all price';

‘autonomy’, the capacity to give moral law to oneself, is ‘the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature’ (Kant, 1996: 84–85 [GMM 4:434–6]). Kant thus universalizes dignity, recognizing in every rational being the high status that was previously the preserve of political and religious elites. Rachel Bayefsky has noticed, though, that this conception carries with it duties of properly dignified behavior as well as rights to respect (Bayefsky, 2013: 816–819). In order to act consistently with ‘the dignity of humanity within us’, we must avoid, among other things, ‘complaining and whining, even crying out in bodily pain’ (Kant, 1996: 558 [MM 4:436]). So is it dignified, then, to ‘sell your pain’ (Megginson, 2021), to ‘perform your trauma’ (King, 2022), and to confess ‘past degradation’ and ‘reveal . . . horror stories’ (Trubek, 2007)? As Adam Etinson says in a Kantian vein, ‘humanity itself is an office (or “dignity”) human beings must live up to’ (Etinson, 2020: 374); if so, then such revelations from college-essay writers are inconsistent with the dignity of that office.

As the experts have emphasized, though, ‘universities that encourage students to write such hard-luck stories . . . share the blame’ (Hartocollis, 2018), so we must explore more recent takes on dignity to understand the particular wrong that colleges and universities are committing when they suborn students in this manner. Etinson, for example, argues that human dignity is fundamentally about ‘social standing’ and that violations of it ‘characteristically humiliate, shame, or degrade’; accordingly, what human dignity ‘demands is that we avoid subjecting others to gross humiliation or degradation, and that we help protect them from such harm too’ (Etinson, 2020: 363). To degrade means to ‘reduce from a higher to a lower rank, to depose from a position of honor and estimation’ (Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online, 2022); to demonstrate respect for their equal social standing, we must steer clear of such status wrongs. When colleges through their expectations enlist student essay writers in a race to the bottom, pressing them to reveal intimate, shameful, and even humiliating details about their pasts, they degrade them, reducing them from the status of competent agents to damaged patients. Although this degradation is not, strictly speaking, a public spectacle, everyone knows what is going on behind study doors; moreover, the students themselves realize exactly what they are doing, and talk to each other and their advisors about it, as we have seen. Furthermore, the very things students are being so strongly encouraged to write about are what I earlier called ‘bad circumstances’, that is, ‘conduct or conditions (like poverty) that are outside of an agent’s control’; as Etinson goes on to note, however, ‘societies routinely stigmatize unchosen predicaments’ (Etinson, 2020: 375). This being so, normally socialized students would feel that they were degrading themselves in writing about such things, even if the production of these essays were an entirely private affair.⁷ Finally, to link these worries back to Marmor’s conception of privacy, the unease and shame that these writing exercises induce are the result of the breach of privacy that is necessarily involved in them: they intrude into intimate domains that the applicant does not want to expose, especially to a bureaucratic other who demands confessions for evaluative purposes unrelated to care and concern.

This bond between privacy and dignity, to which the King quote earlier alluded, is explored with great thoroughness by Ian Carter in his well-known work on ‘opacity respect’ (Carter, 2011). For Carter, opacity respect is ‘*evaluative abstinence* – that is, a refusal to evaluate persons’ varying capacities’, especially emotional and other psychological ones, beyond the basic minimum needed to establish agency (Carter, 2011: 550, 553). As Kant

himself recognized, such abstinence is an essential feature of respect: Kant observes that respect, unlike love, requires us to keep ‘a proper distance’ and that even between friends, ‘we must be blind to the other’s faults, for otherwise he sees that we have lost respect for him, and then he also loses respect for us’ (Kant, 1996: 585 [MM 6:470], 1997: 207 [LE 27:452]). Why, however, would such distancing and even willful blindness regarding others’ incapacities be necessary for respect? Carter distinguishes between two kinds of dignity: the first, which he calls ‘dignity as agential capacity’, can be understood as the dignity associated with the capacity for self-government, be it prudential or (as Kant maintained) moral; the second, which he calls ‘outward dignity’, he understands in a sense

that is closer to ordinary language: dignity as a feature of a person’s character, behavior, or situation. Following Aurel Kolnai, we can say that dignity in this second sense depends on a person’s possession of an array of qualities that include those of ‘composure, calmness, restraint, [and] reserve’. (Carter, 2011: 555)

Outward dignity, as we saw earlier, is the kind of dignity inconsistent with ‘complaining and whining, even crying out in bodily pain’ (Kant, 1996: 558 [MM 4:436]). As Carter goes on to argue, though, *outward dignity requires opacity respect*:

Outward dignity can also be understood as a feature of a person that is incompatible with certain kinds of appraisal by others. Thus, often when a person loses outward dignity the reason is that she is inappropriately *exposed*, where the exposure in question is to evaluations of certain of her features by certain people in certain situations – features that would not normally be, or ought not normally be, evaluated by those people in those situations . . . In the case of the human body, outward dignity involves a literal covering up with clothing or veils or paint; in the case of persons considered as bundles of agential capacities, it involves the maintenance of what Kolnai calls a certain ‘distance’ . . . (Carter, 2011: 555–556)

Carter acknowledges that such exposure might be a crucial aspect of intimate relationships, but he also notices that ‘we tend to view public assessments of people’s internal capacities as particularly inappropriate where the source of those assessments is scientific or otherwise authoritative’ (p. 557).

As we have already seen, such authoritative assessments are part and parcel of the college-admissions process, in which students are required to reveal the sort of bad life circumstances that might undermine their agency to an admissions committee charged with evaluating disadvantage. The resultant anxiety and shame threaten students’ ‘composure, calmness, restraint, and reserve’, their outward dignity, and consequently constitute a kind of opacity disrespect. The privacy wrong involved in such intrusions – that students must expose aspects of themselves that should only be exposed in personal or therapeutic relationships characterized by attention, care, and concern – is also a dignitarian harm. The race to the bottom that college-essay expectations have created is not just an indignity itself but a suborning of undignified behavior by students.

Conclusion: The disadvantage of disadvantage

As I have demonstrated over the course of this article, colleges’ expectations that applicants reveal intimate details of their lives to admission officers evaluating disadvantage

trigger a race to the bottom, characterized by profound violations of honesty, privacy, and dignity. Applicants are incentivized to lie not only to admissions committees but also to themselves, distorting their own perceptions of their personal histories and stoking feelings of victimhood, resentment, and virtuous innocence. Moreover, the often shameful biographical details thereby harvested from applicants are the unwholesome fruits of a bureaucratic process that inappropriately intrudes into their private lives and, to add insult to injury, makes them complicit in the intrusion. Finally, colleges degrade their applicants by effectively treating them – or having them treat themselves, rather – as injured patients rather than competent agents, undermining their outward dignity by unwanted exposure.

Even if such races to the bottom were limited only to college-application essays, this article would still be of great interest, given that nearly two-thirds of US high-school graduates enroll in college (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2022). They are much more widespread than that, though, as a moment's reflection will confirm. In academia and beyond, for example, job applicants are encouraged to share stories of their struggles against adversity, which are used as measures of resilience or (as with university applicants) of disadvantage. Political candidates on the hustings similarly regale voters with their own personal tragedies and experiences of racism, sexism, poverty, and so on, all as a way of connecting with them and their own experiences and demonstrating vulnerability and a sympathetic capacity. Each of these cases is characterized by the same competitive tendency toward embellishment and oversharing, with the same dignitarian harms; they differ mainly in the culpability of the audience for the harms thereby caused.

Something to notice in the college-essay case (but in the others as well, *mutatis mutandis*) is that the costs of this race to the bottom are not equally distributed across all the affected groups. Some kinds of disadvantage, like belonging to an historically oppressed social group (e.g. women, African Americans), are relatively visible and verifiable. Others may be invisible but are still easy to verify (e.g. familial socioeconomic status, via parents' tax records). Yet others are invisible *and* difficult to verify (e.g. a long history of parental physical abuse). I offer this rough trichotomy of disadvantages in order to point out that in the race to the bottom, some groups (e.g. wealthy white males) will be much more strongly incentivized than others to rely upon difficult-to-verify personal traumas and tragedies in their college essays. Other groups, after all, can rely more heavily on their comparatively verifiable, even visible disadvantages. Consequently, we ought to expect the former to show greater dishonesty toward both themselves and others, as well as to suffer greater privacy invasions and dignitarian harms, than the latter, *ceteris paribus*.

I conclude my article with another, perhaps more troubling observation. If trauma contests have such high costs, then a natural response would be to end them by eliminating college essays or redirecting their writers (e.g. by choice of essay questions) toward more salubrious topics. One problem with such a response, however, is that it would tilt the playing field, so to speak, in favor of those with visible, verifiable disadvantages, who do not need college essays to convey their bad life circumstances to admissions officers. Some readers might be unbothered by this, thinking that the disadvantages of gender, race, class, and so on are so much more serious than other disadvantages that

little would be lost by not taking the latter into account. But why is the disadvantage wrought by a childhood filled with sexual abuse any less debilitating or any less deserving of compensatory action than one filled by gender or racial discrimination? My own sense is that we are caught in a bind here: either we permit college-essay trauma dramas, with all of their associated costs in terms of honesty, privacy, and dignity, or we prohibit them, thereby leaving many severe disadvantages unaddressed and uncompensated, in violation of horizontal equity.

Maybe there is no bind after all, though, as a third option remains, however unpalatable it might appear: we could simply drop consideration of disadvantage in college admissions, selecting instead on some other basis (or bases), such as the likelihood of academic success as measured by *non-invasively* derived indicators like standardized-test scores and grade point averages. (Another possibility would be to admit students by lottery, which would disregard all disadvantages *and* all advantages.) By doing so, we would avoid both trauma contests and horizontal inequity . . . but only at a cost that many would deem intolerable. Fully assessing this suggested trilemma is beyond the scope of my article, but I should point out that we cannot reach any final conclusions about trauma contests without dissolving the trilemma – or making a hard choice among three rather unattractive options.

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Notes

1. This phenomenon is not limited to undergraduate-admissions essays: the University of California, Davis, graduate admissions ‘Personal History and Diversity Statement’ likewise encourages applicants to speak of their ‘challenges’ (University of California (UC), Davis, 2022).
2. For a review of the extensive literature on competitive victimhood in the field of social psychology, see Young and Sullivan (2016). I will return to this literature later in the article.
3. A former admissions official at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School recalls a case in which an applicant wrote ‘a moving essay about his mother’s death’ but had his admission revoked when the school called his home by chance . . . and his mother answered. Even the leaders of private prep schools have ‘doctored transcripts and fabricated up-from-hardship stories on college applications’, prompting F.B.I. investigations (Benner and Green, 2019).
4. If readers are skeptical of such idealizations, they can assume instead that college officials increase their enforcement efforts by an order (or two) of magnitude, which would be difficult and expensive but certainly feasible and would be likely to significantly reduce dishonesty, at least to the point where other problems would come into clearer view. Of course, one reason

these other problems would then be easier to see is that such increased enforcement efforts, unlike the idealization imagined above, would likely exacerbate them: less dishonesty would only be purchased with greater violations of privacy and dignity via an intrusive enforcement regime. There are no free lunches in tertiary education.

5. Having said this, it would be a mistake to overstate the degree of competitiveness between colleges and universities. The use of the Common App already suggests a measure of coordination, even collusion. Moreover, in January 2022, 16 elite colleges and universities (including Brown, Chicago, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Duke, MIT, Penn, and Yale) were accused in a federal lawsuit of ‘conspiring to reduce the financial aid they award to admitted students through a price-fixing cartel’ (Saul and Hartocollis, 2022). The less competitive the ‘producer’ side of the educational market is, the less appropriate it might be to describe the application process as consensual and thus privacy respecting on Thomson’s understanding of the term.
6. Colleges could attempt to leverage this same bureaucratic detachment to reduce the privacy violation, for example, by making applications anonymous to admissions committees (‘blinding’), as many colleges already do. Doing so would perhaps ameliorate the privacy violation, but by less than we might believe. First, any attempt to verify the claims made in the essays would require pulling back the veil, so to speak. (See the previous section.) Second, the very process of writing these essays regularly forces students to make shameful revelations to advisors and consultants, who are generally not psychiatrists – as is also the case with admissions officers. Finally, even if the privacy issue could be largely dealt with, many severe problems would remain, including dishonesty toward oneself (see previous section) and, not unrelatedly, the psychological damage that reliving traumatic experiences through confessional writing can do (see next section).
7. To quote Trubek (2007) again,

Trauma-drama essays also assume that the trauma has been overcome, but for some students, painful experiences are still harrowing. The research on trauma and writing suggests that writing about, say, a parent’s drug abuse may cause the writer either to be re-traumatized or to dissimulate. Counseling students to be ‘candid and personal’ while tackling topics they consider embarrassing or disturbing gravely misunderstands how we process trauma.

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