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MERITOCRACY

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Meritocracy can be understood as a *system* and an *ideology* that stipulates that people should be selected to positions (of employment, education, government, positions of power, etc.) on the basis of their effort, talent and/or achievements. Meritocracy is confirmed by degrees, diplomas, certificates or relevant experience, which should translate into the capabilities needed for the position or office. The term meritocracy comes from Michael Young's book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* published in 1958.[1] The book was created as a critique of meritocracy and a warning against using it. Ironically, the word was adopted into the English language without the negative connotations.

Both the term and the idea of meritocracy have become cornerstones of discourses about how universities, governments, institutions and employers should run their organisations. While the exact idea of how meritocracy should be conceptualised may differ depending on one's political orientation, there seems to be an almost unchallengeable consensus on the need for meritocracy, in one form or another, across the entire political spectrum.

Given this imbalanced debate, the chapter will present only a few arguments in favour of meritocracy and instead concentrate on critiques, improvements and alternatives. We hope to offer food for thought to supporters of meritocracy. While some of these critiques may not completely deny meritocracy, they can be useful in the efforts to improve selection processes that are currently practised. Thus, our first aim is not only to *clarify*, but also to *rebalance*, the public debate on meritocracy. Secondly, we hope to help higher education practitioners to better understand, reshape and utilise meritocracy in their effort to improve gender diversity, equity and inclusion.

This chapter will firstly discuss the fundamentals of meritocracy and why the idea is so popular. It will then question the present hegemonic assumptions that support meritocratic processes, arguing that some of them hinder social justice

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instead of promoting it. After this overview, the chapter will examine how meritocracy is applied to the particular case of higher education. Finally, reflecting specifically on higher education, it will discuss how we can rethink the idea of merit and fairness, taking into consideration the societal role of higher education in the creation of the common good.

Fundamentals of meritocracy

In its most literal sense, meritocracy means governing by merit, with the word *merit* originating from Latin to mean 'deserving'. Thus, the basic understanding of meritocracy stipulates that only an individuals' merit should justify their choice for positions of influence. In other words, people should not be differentiated by any undue privilege in selection processes. Such selection is one of the fundamentals of the idea of *equality of opportunities*, and it is this notion that is supported, at least theoretically, by all sides of the political spectrum. However, its conceptualisation differs depending on the political inclination. The point, then, is not whether equality of opportunities is good or bad, but what it actually means and how it should be implemented.[2] In these debates, the intersections of privilege with talent, effort and achievements are often discussed and nuanced.

Undue advantage associated with family ties or social networks, i.e., nepotism, are the most obvious types of privilege that are usually, at least formally, forbidden. However, one may question if *social luck* should be seen as undue privilege – such as, for example, being raised in a wealthy family and receiving better formal education (i.e., achievements) or being gendered or racially identified in a society that considers one gender or race superior. Going further, one may question if *natural luck*, such as innate talents, should be seen as undue privilege. Those wanting to eliminate undue advantages stemming from social and natural luck may postulate that only effort should be considered as merit. However, basing selection on effort alone could lead to choosing people who put in considerable effort but are not actually good at their job. Thus, the idea of the needs of the position and, by extension, the needs of organisations and even the needs of society, given higher education's social role, comes into question.

The difference here is about whom we consider as the beneficiary of the selection process. Choosing someone based on their merit values how much they individually deserve that place. On the other hand, awarding the place to someone whom we expect to deliver better social impacts acknowledges that it is not the individual that deserves the place, but rather society that 'deserves' having them there.

This reflection demonstrates that it is not easy to define what merit is. Since we are not only thinking of rewarding individuals, but also considering the social gains in the processes of selection, these processes must take into consideration not only effort, but also individuals' possibilities of achievements for the common good. Later in the chapter, we will discuss how this can challenge the current ways in which we operationalise meritocracy.

Advantages of meritocracy

Until very recently – and, in practice, even today – people's right to hold positions of power was directly associated with their family ties and networks (social capital). However, as time progressed, this has been challenged. Ideas and policies supporting that people's *effort, talent* and/or *achievements* should define selection processes have become hegemonic. Thus, nepotism is no longer welcome, and meritocracy has taken centre stage.

Beyond nepotism, meritocracy also promises to be an antidote to other unfair biases in selection processes such as sexism, racism and buying or bribing a way into institutions. In this sense, meritocracy is a social evolution since it avoids praising someone solely for their connections and instead values their individual efforts.

Disadvantages of meritocracy

Our main critique of meritocracy, as it is conceptualised and practised today, is that it actually impedes efforts to achieve social justice and, thus, it does not improve gender diversity, equality and inclusion. We point out three arguments in particular. Firstly, meritocracy is most commonly based on a formal rather than substantive equality principle. Secondly, meritocracy is not objective; rather, merit is set by those in power, which it serves to maintain that power. Finally, meritocracy leads to a lack of solidarity.

Formal equality of opportunities

Adopting Rawls's[3] notions of formal and substantive equality of opportunity into the world of higher education, meritocracy normally considers that only talent, effort and achievement should be the basis for selection in the context of work (recruitment and promotions) and study (recruitment and assessment). That is to say, apart from affirmative action, people's background, such as gender, race, class and other characteristics, should not be a discriminatory factor concerning whether they are allowed to compete for work or study and how they are assessed.[4]

Formally, everyone has equal opportunities if they are equal (or similar) in all relevant aspects. However, in real life, gender, race, class, sexuality, dis/ability and other characteristics do impact our ability to acquire quality education, work experiences, quality health care, fair treatment in courts and so on. This means that, arriving at the point of selection for a job or opportunity to study at a university, we are not starting from the same point and/or some groups in society are more likely to reach the required merit first. Thus, by disregarding historically created inequalities, the formal equality principle, on which meritocracy normally stands, perpetuates these inequalities. Formal equality of opportunities in meritocracy is just that – formal.

Unobjective selection criteria and biased practice

The requirements for admissions, recruitment and assessments, that is, the merit that one must achieve, are presumed to be objective, with the (challengeable) assumption that objectivity is a virtue to be adhered to.[5] Meritocracy puts the emphasis on meeting the merit, rather than questioning how it became the merit. However, feminists and critical race theorists have pointed out that merits are in fact subjective, as they are selected and established by people belonging to majoritarian groups (e.g., white men) and, thus, serve to preserve their power and privilege.[6] Moreover, as we argue in the next section, meritocracy is not actually adhered to, with privileged/majoritarian groups often being treated more favourably. Hence, meritocracy is merely a discourse used to maintain and justify the *status quo* of extreme inequalities.

Lack of solidarity

The side effect of meritocracy and its discourses is that they stimulate an individual behaviour that can be very deleterious. Social justice depends on solidarity and empathy, with empathy being the key building block of solidarity. Societies in which individuals only think of and work for themselves and their families do not help to create conditions for the disadvantaged to improve their lives. This idea was the main thesis of Michael Young's original work on meritocracy.[7] A system based on merit in a society that is not equal will lead to the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Those who meet the supposedly 'objective' merits are being rewarded accordingly and accumulate their privileges. For example, those who do well in school gain access to top universities, which in turn provides them with top resources, the best professors, the best learning environments, and the best industry links. Hence, they get better paid jobs and so on. In turn, the justification of such inequalities as supposedly fair – i.e., based on people meeting allegedly 'objective' merit – and thus, being rewarded accordingly leads to a lack of empathy and solidarity.

Meritocracy in practice in higher education

In this section, we discuss, with links to relevant theories, how meritocracy plays out in practice based on the three criticisms from the previous section.

Meritocracy, being based on the *formal* equality of opportunities, perpetuates historically embedded inequalities from wider society. This is evident when examining the demographics of staff and students, which show inequalities along the lines of gender, race, class and so on. For example, at British universities in 2021 the proportion of women who were professors was only 28.3% (as opposed to the 50% that we should expect) and for women of colour this was only 2.7%, which is lower than their proportion in British society as a whole at around 8%.[8] On the student side, black students are much less likely to attend Russell Group of universities (elite, research intensive institutions) than other institutions.[9] If we

assume that meritocracy is truly followed in these selection processes, then it ends up perpetuating wider societal inequalities, as opposed to improving social justice.

Meritocratic requirements are actually *subjective* and, therefore, favour certain groups. Vague concepts have been shown to be part of the meritocratic language, often without questioning why they are there or who put them there. For example, the concept of 'fit' is a common requirement in faculty recruitment in American universities, and yet this is a very subjective notion that opens the door to cloning bias, or *homophily*, resulting in recruiting people who resemble those hiring them, i.e., those from the already overrepresented gender, racial and class groups.[10] Another example may be that of admissions tutors for fashion programmes valuing more applicants presenting haute-couture portfolios over those with sports-wear portfolios.[11] Thus, the selection process favours those with upper-middle class values. Bourdieu explains this, providing a challenge to the notion of meritocracy, through his theorisation of *field* (a space, such as university, with unwritten rules), *cultural capital* (an individual's cultural practices, knowledges and competences, recognised in a particular field) and *habitus* (an individual's or institution's deeply embedded dispositions, norms and values).[12] Combining this with an intersectional framework, Jackson-Cole and Chadderton argued that the unwritten rules of the field of higher education recognise and privilege majoritarian groups based on gender, race, class and so on, deeming meritocracy merely a discourse, rather than an actual practice.[13]

Moreover, meritocracy is not actually always adhered to. That is, merit is not always required of those from majoritarian backgrounds. For example, in the UK, students from fee-paying schools are not just more likely to achieve higher grades and, consequently, more likely to apply to Oxbridge (Oxford and Cambridge Universities), they are also more likely to be accepted and are accepted even if they have a *lower* grade point average than applicants from state-funded schools.[14] This suggests that students from private schools, who are more likely to be white and from more affluent backgrounds, benefit not only from good education and better career advice, thus accumulating privileges, they are also less likely to be expected to meet the merit. Following a Bourdieusian analysis, it can be argued that this is because applicants' habitus and cultural capitals are similar to those of the admissions officers, who recognise them as fitting in with the unwritten rules of the field and, as gatekeepers, grant them access to the field.[15] This bending of admissions rules is also observable at the postgraduate level. Some universities in the UK, despite professing to be meritocratic, have been shown to lower admission standards (merit) for externally funded international PhD applicants, justifying this with their financial needs.[16] The same offer was not extended to students from less privileged backgrounds. This is to say that universities do not stick to meritocracy for privileged groups, particularly if this benefits the institutions. Academic faculty are also affected by the lack of meritocracy in practice, often linked to it being mitigated by what is referred to as *unconscious bias*. For example, women have been found much less likely to have their research proposals approved in order to gain access to the Hubble Space Telescope when the reviewers could identify the principal investigator as a woman, in contrast to when the applications were anonymised.[17]

Finally, meritocracy leads to a lack of *solidarity* towards the disenfranchised groups. This can be understood as two-fold. On an individual level meritocratic discourses lead to a lack of empathy for those who do not meet the supposedly 'objective' criteria. For example, Warikoo and Fuhr conducted 46 in-depth interviews with students from Oxford University, demonstrating their understanding of the inequalities in access to educational experiences that facilitate admissions to Oxbridge.[18] Despite this, the interviewees believed in the fairness of the recruitment processes (i.e., meritocracy) and were against any changes to make admissions more equitable. On a collectivist level, meritocracy leads to a lack of solidarity with the needs of society. For example, by prioritising individual merit in recruitment, meritocracy may shut off the possibility of hiring someone with a greater potential to contribute to the common good, especially when it can improve the lives of those most vulnerable.

Rethinking meritocracy

Meritocracy, that is to say, the act of setting certain requirements (merit), seems almost inevitable in higher education. However, how and what is set as merit can be questioned and changed. In this section we present some ideas for diversity, equity and inclusion practitioners to challenge meritocracy. We argue that the hegemonic assumptions of meritocracy can be unfollowed in order to help the efforts towards social justice and the common good.

Firstly, we suggest basing meritocracy on a fair (or substantive) equality of opportunities.[19] Proponents of substantive equality argue that in a society unequal according to gender, race and class, formal equality is not enough. As such, categories of difference that impact our chances of accessing quality education, housing, healthcare and more should be taken into consideration during the assessment of merit. One way that this could be done is through affirmative action.[20]

However, in many countries, some types of positive discrimination are not allowed, including in the UK where a practice of 'contextualised admissions' is common instead. Contextualised admissions means that when assessing applicants for study, their background is taken into consideration. This requires changing how we define and assess effort. Currently, assessment of effort is mostly understood as the achievement of a particular standard or grade. Nevertheless, we can define effort using the concept of 'journey travelled'. Take two individuals applying for university. Person one achieves a very good final grade after attending a school that provides quality education and where many pupils achieve very good grades, whereas person two achieves a good final grade after attending a school that does not boast a supportive learning environment and where few students achieve high grades. It can be argued that person two had to put in considerably more effort (i.e., longer journey travelled) to achieve a good grade than person one did. Therefore, it may be just to award person two with extra points during the admissions process.

Some readers may feel an immediate sense of scepticism, thinking that the above change would simply lead to a different form of injustice, i.e., a system that

penalises pupils for their privileged background. Therefore, we propose that within university settings, admissions, as well as faculty recruitment, cases should not be considered in isolation and purely individualistically, but rather collectively, with the common good in mind. Higher education, particularly public higher education, plays a significant role in knowledge production, which contributes to the advancement of society as a whole. Moreover, greater diversity (of gender, race, class, etc.) has been argued to bring societal benefits, such as diversity of thought (intellectual progress), greater productivity, bigger financial gains, social integration and more.[21] Therefore, university places (for staff and students) can be argued to be a public good that should be distributed in a way that guarantees benefit to most people, in particular those from the most disenfranchised groups.[22] Thus, admissions and recruitment systems that deal with each round of assessment in a collective way, with the common good and diversity as key elements of the equation, could guarantee a mix of all backgrounds entering higher education. This means that the socially and naturally lucky who can work for improving society would also have a chance of being selected, due to their potential for achieving socially desirable outcomes (common good). In that new system, some applicants from majoritarian (privileged) backgrounds would be disadvantaged compared to the current system (which presently disadvantages minoritised groups), but overall more people, and in particular more people from disenfranchised groups, would have better access to higher education. In turn, this would lead to greater fairness, as described by Rawls, social progress and common good. This idea has been tested in other fields, such as health care. For example, batch-recruitment for nursing positions has been shown to increase the diversity of successful applicants.[23]

In addition to challenging how we define effort to achieve merit, we can also question the merit itself, including its objectivity; the concept of fit for purpose; who set the merit to be what it is; why; and with what consequences. We postulate that the current conceptualisation of 'excellence' in higher education serves the purpose of maintaining the status quo of gendered, raced, classed (and so on) inequalities.[24] For example, education puts a huge emphasis on written forms of assessment, deeming oral forms of expression as secondary. While there are clear benefits to written text, the focus on it means that certain groups are disenfranchised, for example those stemming from non-Western, orally based traditions of knowledge production or people with dyslexia. The ability to write and read was for a long time reserved for the privileged few and accompanied by discourses of supposed intellectual superiority. Until today, access to quality education that allows for the development of good writing and reading skills is heavily dependent on one's background. Thus, the privileged few set the standard, or merit, in (higher) education as supposedly objective, but in reality it disenfranchises many groups.

Finally, we encourage practitioners to interrogate to what extent meritocracy is actually followed at their institutions. We suggest going beyond simple training on unconscious bias to examine how bias may play out in institutional data.[25] For example, are men more likely to receive professorial nominations despite having

fewer publications, fewer years of experience or even fewer degrees than women? Some studies suggest that may be the case.[26] Demonstrating how meritocracy functions as a discourse that protects the privileges of majoritarian groups, rather than an actual practice of equalising opportunities, can be a powerful impulse for institutions to rethink it.

We have argued that meritocracy, as it currently stands, contributes to reproducing historically embedded inequalities and impedes efforts towards achieving social justice, including greater gender diversity, equity and inclusion. We encourage practitioners to challenge meritocracy's assumptions around individual effort, achievements and talent with the common good in mind.

Questions for discussion

- How can a contextualised system of admissions be introduced at my institution?
- Can student admissions, staff recruitment and promotions be designed in a collective way, with a common good and diversity in mind?
- Who has set the merit, and why did they set it? Does it really serve the purpose it claims to serve, and what are its consequences?
- How can merit be re-imagined for greater common good?
- Does my institution stick to meritocracy for the privileged groups and/or use it as a barrier for disenfranchised groups?

Suggestions for further reading

- For more about privileges perpetuated by meritocracy: Jackson-Cole, D. and Chadderton, C., 2021. White supremacy in postgraduate education at elite universities in England: The role of the gatekeepers. *Whiteness and Education*, 1–19.
- For more about principles of justice: Rawls, J., 2001. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Cambridge, MA, London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- For more about a foundational critique of meritocracy: Young, M., 1958. *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Notes

1 Young 1958
2 Goldmeier 2018
3 Rawls 2001
4 See Duarte, this volume
5 See Andreassen, this volume
6 Gillborn 2008; Gillborn and Ladson-Billings 2009
7 Young 1958
8 Advance HE, 2021a; See also Schmidt, this volume
9 Advance HE, 2021b
10 White-Lewis, 2020
11 Burke and McManus, 2011

12 Bourdieu 1984, 1997
13 Jackson-Cole and Chadderton 2021
14 Montacute and Cullinane 2018
15 Jackson-Cole and Chadderton 2021
16 Jackson-Cole and Chadderton 2021
17 Johnson and Kirk 2020
18 Warikoo and Fuhr 2014
19 See Fjørtoft, this volume
20 See Duarte, this volume
21 McKinsey & Company 2020
22 Rawls 2001
23 Kline 2021
24 See Maxwell, this volume
25 See Berndt Rasmussen, this volume
26 E.g., Santos and Dang Van Phu 2019

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