

The Dubious Merits of Meritocracy

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the prevalence and impact of the social norm of meritocracy in a variety of social contexts, including the workplace and in the criminal justice system. The paper explores the substantial body of research that reveals how meritocracy is associated with increased acceptance of inequality as well as negative attitudes.

“The criminal justice system in the U.S. treats you better if you’re rich and guilty than if you’re poor and innocent.”¹ So said United States Senator and 2020-election Presidential candidate Cory Booker after the sentencing of political consultant Paul Manafort for fraud and tax evasion to 47 months in prison. In the wake of the sentencing, Booker and other policy experts criticized the short term as unjust due to its leniency, particularly given that federal sentencing guidelines recommend 19 to 24 years in prison for such crimes.²

To Booker, the sentence reveals a deep-seated flaw in the United States criminal justice system that favors the wealthy and condemns the poor, thereby violating our nation’s creed of “liberty and justice for all.” According to Booker, “you can tell a lot about a country by the way it incarcerates.”³ He exemplifies this point by citing trends in countries like Russia to imprison political opposition, trends in countries like Turkey to imprison the media, and trends in the United States to incarcerate “the poor, the addicted, the mentally ill, the survivors of abuse and sexual assault, and black and brown people.”⁴

Indeed, social scientists have discovered that ethnic minorities are incarcerated to a much greater extent than whites, despite similar rates of criminal behavior between groups across a variety of offenses.⁵ Specifically, African Americans, Puerto Rican Americans, and Native Americans represent the highest incarceration rates of any ethnic group, thereby suggesting a disproportionate impact of criminal justice on certain populations.⁶ A series of studies extending from 1998 to 2004 assessed the impact of race on criminal sentencing among black and white defendants, and discovered that the former tend to receive harsher criminal sentences, including a greater likelihood of being sentenced to death.⁷

Also worth noting is the degree to which incarceration occurs in the United States relative to other countries. According to the International Center for Prison Studies, one-third of all women incarcerated in the world in 2013 were based in the United States.⁸ Although the First Step Act represents bipartisan consensus that reform is necessary to the nation’s criminal justice system,

enduring progress will require a level of examination that extends beyond the language of law into the social, cultural, and psychological factors that breed inequality. The goal of this paper is therefore to explore such factors in the context of ethical frameworks.

Considerable research has been conducted to assess the prevalence and impact of implicit bias in a variety of social contexts, much of which reveal daily patterns of discriminatory attitudes and behavior toward racial and ethnic minority groups. With regard to law enforcement, for example, studies reveal that black individuals are shot by police more quickly and frequently than white individuals – a phenomena referred to as “shooter bias.”⁹ In studies of the “trolley dilemma,” homeless and drug addicted individuals are generally perceived by participants as more “acceptable” to sacrifice than individuals of higher social status,¹⁰ and in the context of health care, studies reveal patterns of discriminatory practices toward black and other ethnic groups.¹¹

Although considerable attention is paid to the impact of implicit prejudice in these studies, less investigation seems to surround the underlying factors that form group-based prejudice. Through what lens do we perceive, justify, and perpetuate status differences among racial and ethnic groups? The course of this research has led me to consider one factor in particular: the social norm of meritocracy.

Cambridge Dictionary defines meritocracy as “a social system, society, or organization in which people get success or power because of their abilities, not because of their money or social position.” Meritocracy has been exalted at both ends of the political spectrum in the United States for creating an ‘even playing field’ that provides citizens with equal opportunities to achieve social mobility and economic success. As such, meritocracy is widely perceived to be an impartial system that affords social status and rewards to individuals on the basis of their talent and hard work rather than sex, race, or social class.¹² As researcher Gonçalo Santos Freitas cites, meritocracy “encourages people to work hard and reach their potential, which will result in benefits not only for the individual but also for society, as it reduces corruption and improves rates of economic growth.”¹³

Not only is meritocracy extolled in theory, research suggests that it is considered by most Americans to represent a common practice. A 2016 study of social attitudes by the Brookings Institute indicates that 69 percent of Americans agree with the statement that “people are rewarded for intelligence and skill.”¹⁴ The response represents the highest percentage of 27 participant countries and illustrates the extent to which Americans believe that economic rewards follow the merits of effort, intelligence, and skill.¹⁵ Of course, adoption of meritocracy is not exclusive to the United States. According to a 2009 survey of British social attitudes, 84 percent of respondents consider hard work to be ‘essential’ or ‘very important’ to the attainment of success.¹⁶

As a social ideal, meritocracy follows the “Fairness or Justice Approach,” which argues that all individuals should be treated equally.¹⁷ However, as moral philosopher Tom Regan states, an ideal moral judgment is just that – an ideal. Despite its perceived virtues, a substantial body of research reveals that meritocracy is associated with “higher justifications and stronger acceptance of inequality,” as well as negative attitudes toward low status groups.¹⁸ For example, a 2015 experiment

revealed that participants demonstrated considerably less support for programs that attempt to reduce social inequality when primed with status-legitimizing beliefs.¹⁹

A similar study conducted by economists at the University of Minnesota and Maastricht University in the Netherlands revealed that subjects who participated in games of skill were less inclined to redistribute prizes than participants who engaged in games of chance.²⁰ A comparable study by Beijing Normal University discovered that participants in a game of skill were more likely to support earned entitlements if they were on the receiving end, suggesting a tendency to evaluate merit in self-serving ways.²¹ Finally, three experiments conducted among 445 participants revealed that managers in meritocratic organizations tend to distribute greater rewards to male employees over equally qualified female employees.²² By contrast, such bias was not identified among organizations that did not explicitly adopt meritocracy as a core value. The experiments found that managers tend to evaluate candidates based on who they *feel* has the greatest potential or most closely mirrors themselves – even if they are unaware, thus perpetuating the status quo through implicit bias.²³

Taken in the context of criminal justice, meritocracy may engender unfavorable decisions toward low status groups, who are more likely to be considered guilty and sentenced to harsher penalties than high status groups.²⁴ Multiple studies reveal a pattern of bias in criminal and legal decisions due to stereotypical associations between race and certain crimes.²⁵ Participants of one study, for example, were found more likely to attribute a defendant's behavior to external factors if the crime was not typical of his or her race. Conversely, participants imposed more severe penalties on defendants who were charged with crimes perceived to be typical of their race.²⁶

The collective findings of these studies are both surprising and ironic, given the 'even playing field' that meritocracy intends to promote. According to Castilla and Benard, a "paradox of meritocracy" occurs due to an inflated sense of judiciousness that accompanies merit-based practices, along with a general failure to examine implicit bias.²⁷ In the context of social reform, meritocracy can engender an indifferent if not punitive attitude toward poor and marginalized populations whose misfortune is haphazardly attributed to personal defects rather than systemic issues and, of course, the vagaries of chance.

In terms of rationale, meritocracy ignores the perennial function of chance in the equation of one's success or failure, and appeals to uncritical assumptions that "the rich are rich because they are talented and hard-working, and the poor are poor because they are ineffective, lazy and weak."²⁸ As a consequence of these assumptions and the ensuing belief that social status is a reflection of one's merit, meritocracy often serves to legitimize status differences and justify the status quo.²⁹

In the context of more recent events, the authenticity of meritocracy has been called into question following a college admissions scandal announced in March 2019 by the Justice Department in which wealthy parents paid millions of dollars in bribes from 2012 to 2018 to place their children in prestigious universities.³⁰ Therefore, from the perspective of ethical frameworks, while meritocracy may rhyme with the approach of "Fairness and Justice," history reveals a pattern of the opposite.

Worth noting is that the term meritocracy was coined by British sociologist and politician Michael Young in a dystopic novel that he published in 1958 entitled *The Rise of Meritocracy*.³¹ The novel was

intended as a social satire that depicts a world in which social class is replaced by a hierarchy that rewards individuals based on rigid testing standards, which ultimately reestablishes the old class system and leads to revolt. According to the author one year before his death, the book was intended to be a warning.³²

In basic terms, meritocracy poses a problem due to the fact that, as philosopher Alain de Button succinctly stated in a 2009 TED Talk, “we are surrounded by snobs.”³³ De Button defines a snob as “anybody who takes a small part of you [be it merit-based or otherwise] and uses that to come to a complete vision of who you are.” He further suggests that while society in the United States embodies a spirit of equality – often in the name of meritocracy – its history reflects deep inequalities that carry profound psychological implications.

For example, De Button cites a correlation between “a society that tells people they can achieve anything and the existence of low self-esteem,” which is reflected in rising rates of suicide and depression among developed countries with individualistic cultures such as the United States. As a consequence of meritocracy and the emphasis placed on individual success or failure, “Your position in life seems not accidental but merited and deserved, which makes failure seem devastating.”³⁴

Given the substantive issues related to meritocracy, society may benefit from complimenting the Fairness and Justice Approach with something akin to the Common Good Approach, which states that “the interlocking relationships of society are the basis of ethical reasoning” and that “respect and compassion for all others -- **especially the vulnerable** -- are requirements of such reasoning.”³⁵

Within society, differences of elevation among people are inevitable. However, differences in social rank should not be random or unjust as this would likely lead to class struggles. By adhering to the Common Good Approach, individuals may be more inclined to support laws that promote the welfare of everyone as opposed to an elite minority. Through this perspective, society may be more capable of identifying “common conditions that are important to the welfare of everyone,” including underrepresented populations, which studies reveal are often more vulnerable to systemic abuse.

Given the complexity and deeply-embedded nature of these issues, no single solution is likely to be effective, although the first, most practical step would seem to be acknowledging the dubious merits of meritocracy itself. Philosopher Richard Rorty speculated that the best chance we have of social reform is to eschew the dogma that only ideology can replace ideology, as well as the assumption that there must be one theoretical solution to problems of social injustice.³⁶ This, he argues, may encourage more reformist experiments.

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