

Meritocracy? Ask yourself

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Abstract

Meritocracy refers to a governmental or other administrative system wherein appointments and responsibilities are assigned to individuals based on their merits, which are determined through objective evaluations or examinations. Merit can be earned by either intellectual or manual labour, as each person has his or her own talents. Nevertheless, there is no absolute definition of merit because both intelligence and skill are relative. In our current society, individuals can, theoretically, reach any goal in a meritocratic system. Indeed, merit should be the basis on which resources are allocated. This said, personal beliefs, bureaucratic complications, national regulations, and other human characteristics obscure the obvious superiority of this approach. Members of groups, including societies, often support and follow an individual who adheres to the group's norms rather than one who may be more deserving of such loyalty but who does not adhere to the shared rules. Individuals in a meritocratic system feel valued, believe their abilities are recognised, and have incentives to improve their professional performance. In such a context, individuals experience their environment as fair and feel more confident about themselves, others, and their work. Individuals working under such conditions are very likely to have higher levels of motivation, engage in more collaborative behaviour, show greater flexibility and experience enhanced well being compared with those operating in a system that is perceived as not based on merit. This paper presents an integrated discussion of meritocracy and poses seven questions that may improve our understanding of this concept.

Keywords

Aptitude, behaviour, job satisfaction, motivation, professional competence

Meritocracy refers to a governmental or other administrative system wherein appointments and responsibilities are assigned to individuals based on their merits, which are determined through objective evaluations or examinations.¹ Merit can be earned by either intellectual or manual labour, as each person has his or her own talents. Nevertheless, there is no absolute definition of merit because both intelligence and skill are relative. This premise is crucial to understanding the difficulties involved in matching people with jobs. Individuals who achieve more should be rewarded and promoted and, it has been argued, that individual potential is linked to both environmental and hereditary factors.²

This paper presents an integrated discussion of meritocracy and poses seven questions that may improve our understanding of this concept.

Influence of meritocracy on daily life

Individuals in a meritocratic system feel valued, believe their abilities are recognised, and have incentives to improve their professional performance. In such a context, individuals experience their environment as fair and feel more confident about

themselves, others and their work. Individuals working under such conditions are very likely to have higher levels of motivation, engage in more collaborative behaviour, show greater flexibility, and experience enhanced well being compared with those operating in a system that is perceived as not based on merit.

Systems that are not perceived as merit-based encounter a variety of problems, some of which may vary according to individual personality differences. Indeed, some individuals may experience constant frustration, lack of motivation and anger; if not appropriately channelled, these can lead to agitation, anxiety and burnout.

A non-meritocratic system offers fewer incentives to improve professionally, which affects both the most

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talented individuals – whose achievements may be ignored or even sabotaged – as well as average workers.

Perceiving an environment as not merit-based potentially contributes to reduced self-esteem and can drain workers of energy, rendering them victims of their own learned helplessness and placing them in positions of inferiority.

Meritocracy and national policy

The development of a meritocratic environment in workplaces can also be facilitated by policies and governmental actions. Indeed, the governments, institutions, professional organisations and unions in some countries actively promote the welfare of workers. For example the interests of Swedish workers and professionals at every level are represented and protected, and their annual income is higher and increases at a more rapid rate compared with workers in other countries (e.g. European countries). These favourable conditions are attributable to the commitment and efforts of Swedish unions and organisations representing healthcare professionals.³

Other examples of worker-oriented politics can be found in other Northern European countries, which are more likely than Central and Eastern European regions to have merit-based systems.⁴ According to data from the 2015 Human Development Report (HDR), the 10 countries with the highest Human Development Index (HDI) are Norway, Australia, Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, the US, Canada, New Zealand and Singapore.⁵ The HDI is a composite index that assesses human well-being along three dimensions of human development: (1) the ability to lead a long and healthy life, (2) the ability to acquire knowledge, and (3) the ability to achieve a decent standard of living.⁵ The 2015 HDR notes the following: '*Work enhances human development by providing income and livelihood, by reducing poverty and by ensuring equitable growth*'.⁵

Seven questions about meritocracy

We are proposing that you ask yourself seven questions to investigate the extent to which your profession has the characteristics of a potentially merit-based environment.

- (1) Are your authority and status at work commensurate with the effort and time you devote to work?
 - A. No
 - B. Yes
- (2) In your experience, does the level of education of workers in your position positively affect their career advancement?
 - A. No
 - B. Yes

- (3) Do you believe that your team recognises that you have used or are currently using personal resources (time, budget) to enhance your professional skills?
 - A. No
 - B. Yes
- (4) The conditions in my professional environment do not contribute to my career advancement or professional growth.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
- (5) Have you had the opportunity to advance at work based on your skills or on your motivation to perform or interest in your work?
 - A. No
 - B. Yes
- (6) In your career, have you ever been promoted based on your specific request or explicit interest (justified by the possession of the requisite skills)?
 - A. No
 - B. Yes
- (7) Have you ever thought that you were the target of discrimination based on your personal characteristics (e.g. gender, age, personal beliefs) or your previous professional experiences?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No

Responses: A

The concept of meritocracy can be controversial. Indeed, if you answered 'A' to questions 1, 3, 4, and 7 you are probably experiencing some discomfort in this domain. Questions 1 and 3 refer to the quality of the relationship between you and your managerial staff, whereas questions 4 and 7 address your personal perceptions about the barriers in your daily professional life.

Responses: B

It seems that career advancement and merit-based work conditions could be facilitated by either organisational and/or environmental variables. If you answered 'B' to questions 2 and 5, it is very likely that your personal resources are appreciated. By answering 'B' to question 6, you are confirming that your interest in your profession is recognised in the form of the potential for career advancement.

The need to define more representative models of meritocracy

In our current society, individuals can, theoretically, reach any goal in a meritocratic system. Indeed, merit should be the basis on which resources are allocated. This said, personal beliefs, bureaucratic complications, national regulations and other human characteristics obscure the obvious superiority of this approach. Members of groups, including societies, often support and follow an individual who adheres to the group's norms rather than one who may be

more deserving of such loyalty but who does not adhere to the shared rules.² As a result, almost all of us have experienced a situation in which we perceive that someone is getting an undeserved benefit. This kind of insight reflects the human capacity for critical thinking, but it is not sufficient for achieving true understanding in contexts that are perceived as non-meritocratic. On the one hand, an individual has unique personal capacities; on the other, the society/group has its own rules. Individuals tend to underestimate or overestimate their own capacities, but such perceptions are mediated by personal expectations and reinforced or challenged by the environment. The balance between these types of feedback is fragile, and the information they provide is often contradictory. Research on the existence and perceptions of meritocracy in European countries has reported that 68% of 1274 medical professionals were certain that discrimination was present in medical science, and a considerable number of these respondents reported personal experiences with career discrimination in European hospitals and universities.¹ Lack of a merit-based system and limited investment in research have been described as major concerns related to the development of research in Italy. At the same time, the use of peer-review procedures has been identified as a potentially beneficial approach to the fair allocation of funds to researchers.^{6,7} However, our focus on the importance of using merit-based criteria to make decisions about both research and funding should not obscure the fact that workers in other fields also perceive the need for the use of such criteria in their domains.

It is important to note that our assumptions are limited insofar as they are strongly influenced by cultural, personal, and demographic factors. Indeed, gender,⁸ age, health status, as well as psychological state, which is influenced by the events of daily life, can constitute major confounding factors in investigations of perceptions of meritocracy, particularly in the workplace. Thus, the assumptions made in this article should be explicitly and carefully considered rather than construed as the basis for a validated instrument for determining the extent to which a given system is merit-based. Again, perceptions of meritocracy are influenced by a number of factors, such as personal experiences, personal background, educational level, and so on. However, despite the tentative nature of such inquiry and the limitations associated with investigations of meritocracy, we believe that such research should continue, given that it enhances our

understanding of the mechanisms that, in daily life, interfere with our professional growth. It should also be noted that meritocracy, and perceptions thereof, can dramatically differ across countries and cultures. At the same time, issues related to meritocracy and perceptions thereof have been attracting increasing interest as society in general is becoming increasingly competitive. In this context, it is important to develop models that are more representative of this phenomenon. Working from the perspective outlined in this article, we can all contribute to the development and enrichment of our professional goals.

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