

**MERIT VS PRIVILEGE: UNDERSTANDING UNEQUAL
OPPORTUNITIES**

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Abstract: *This article criticizes the concept of meritocracy in modern life. Meritocracy — the system in which people's achievement is solely based on their merits, in other words, individuals 'earn what they get' in society and their social status reflects what they have done and contributed. However, this system is not fair to everyone, as it ignores people's backgrounds and unequal opportunities that some groups of people can have from birth.*

This article explores how factors like social class, access to high- quality education, and nepotism can outweigh merit, leading to unfair results despite individuals are making equal efforts. The paper begins by explaining the basic idea of the meritocracy and then compares this social belief to the real barriers that can be faced by many people from disadvantaged backgrounds including limited access to prestigious education. Special attention is given to the nepotism, a clear contrasted idea that is about prioritizing personal connection over merit.

Throughout the article, the author will explain how privilege plays a major role in one's success across most of the fields using real-world cases. Hard work matters; it is an undeniable fact, but it is not always enough in a system where someone's start line is another person's 2-3 year effort.

The article concludes with an emphasize on the need to redefine the term success, taking into consideration systematic inequality. Because it is the only way that societies can move forward is a model where merit pays off. This work adds to wider academic discussions on social fairness, access, and the viability of performance-based systems.



Keywords: *meritocracy, social inequality, privilege, nepotism, success, education, equal opportunity.*

Introduction

In contemporary academic and social discourse, the idea of meritocracy has become increasingly widespread. Meritocracy refers to the concept that individuals achieve success through personal effort, talent, and dedication rather than through privilege or status. Under this logic, if the person fails, they didn't try hard enough, or if someone is very successful, it is just because of the hard work without acknowledging how much advantage and investment they may have from the beginning. This system is often viewed as a fair system where rewards are earned through effort, promoting equal opportunity. However, in real life this system fails because of the complexities of modern society. People don't begin life with the same advantage; in other words, everyone starts their race from a different line. Some are born into wealthy families that provide access to top-tier education, financial stability, and social connections, while others grow up in environments where basic human needs are limited and thinking about higher education feels like an impossible dream.

This paper explores the limits of meritocracy and how nepotism continues to influence outcomes across different fields. The aim is to explain that while hard work is important, it is not always enough where privilege plays a dominant role.

The term meritocracy was originally introduced by British sociologist Michael Young in his satirical book *The Rise of Meritocracy*. The book didn't support the idea but instead criticized the system where individuals with power and status were assumed to be the most capable, reinforcing social inequality and elitism. Despite the author's original critical intent, the term has been reinterpreted positively, often used to demonstrate fairness and equal opportunity.

In *The Tyranny of Merit*, a political philosopher, Michael Sandel, revisits the critics of Young and states that meritocracy can lead to arrogance among those who succeed and feelings of shame or inferiority among those who fail. He highlights that such system often disregards the influence of external factors like luck,



background, and privilege, which shape individual opportunities. Likewise, sociologist like Annette Lareau, in her book *Unequal Childhoods*, how social class of the family and parenting approaches influence a child's early access to educational resources and social life.

The Illusion of Equal Opportunity

Modern society loves to indoctrinate the phrase 'everyone has a chance'. It sounds fair and inspiring. But in reality, access to opportunity is far from equal. The idea that success is simply about hard work overlooks how unfair the playing field truly is. Two students may sit for the same test, but one was tutored privately by real professionals in his field, in a comfortable environment without worrying about money, while another dropped out of school to help his parents financially, or was busy with household duties while adults were at work. Are they really competing fairly?

The most dangerous part of such an illusion is that it shifts all blame and responsibility onto the individual. If someone fails, it is assumed that they just didn't try hard enough. But what if the system never gave them a chance to begin with? Insofar as society continues to pretend that everyone has the same start line in the race, meritocracy will remain as appealing illusion, not based on real life.

Hidden Power of Nepotism in Contemporary Society

In the system that values talent and effort, the idea of nepotism contradicts the whole concept of meritocracy. Nepotism is showing favoritism towards one's family, friends, or other related people regardless of their qualifications, often seen in hiring processes. Despite the emphasis on transparency and personal skills, many job positions continue to be filled based on relationships. Whether it is in politics, entertainment, business, or even in education fields, decisions are made through the personal ties.

People often believe that if someone is in a high-ranking position, they have reached it through hard work. However, in reality, there are many cases where those roles were not earned by fair competition while hiring but because of family links or favoritism. For example, a candidate who doesn't have skills, experience, or even



proper proof that they can do the job may be hired just because they are the cousin of the CEO instead of the candidate with stronger qualifications. The most dangerous thing about nepotism is that most people pretend it is normal and fair. People don't admit it, but it is obvious through the consequences: losing chances, hating the system, and not trusting anyone. As we are living in a society that makes people believe that the way of success is hard work, nepotism secretly helps elite people to stay ahead without even trying.

Meritocracy in Education

Education is considered the best way to be successful through merit. Systems like standard exams and scholarships are mostly promoted as evidence of equality. Nevertheless, students don't come from the same background. A child of wealthy parents receives knowledge from an elite private school with the best teacher in the country and support from their tutors and parents, while their opponent is a student from a small town who studied in an under-resourced public school with limited support.

The term 'merit' itself becomes quite controversial when we closely look at the whole picture and understand what is actually rewarded in those tests. Instead of assessing pure intellect, exams are mostly about external factors such as access to preparatory resources, learning the testing format instead of the knowledge itself, and even language proficiency. For instance, an immigrant student may fail the exam despite having strong analytical skills just because of the language barrier.

Such conditions question the existence of equity in education. Students from privileged backgrounds can perform well on the test, not necessarily because of their intelligence and talent, but just because they are well-equipped to meet the standards of 'merit'.

Impact of Meritocracy on Mental Health

While meritocracy is often considered a motivating idea, it can have serious psychological consequences, especially for those who fail to fit into the system. These individuals see failure as a personal fault, and they start to believe that they are not enough and that they do not deserve success. As a result, they lose their



confidence and are emotionally drained. This mindset creates pressure that people carry on their shoulders. For people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, this burden is much heavier. They need to work twice as hard just to be equal to others. When results of their efforts don't match their expectations, it may lead to frustration, burnout, and loss of motivation to continue.

Additionally, meritocracy makes people who succeed feel superior to others and see their achievement as completely self-earned, ignoring external factors. This can lead to arrogance and a lack of sympathy towards those who struggle. In extreme cases, their reaction to the people who cannot feed themselves resembles the historical indifference of, *Let them eat cake*'. In this way, the ideal of meritocracy not only places emotional pressure on individuals but also ruins connection between people and damages social unity.

Conclusion

The system of meritocracy may appear fair and motivating on the surface, but in reality, it ignores the deep-rooted inequalities that influence people's lives. It makes people believe that every person has the same starting point and that the effort they put in determines their success. However, this article has explained that social background, access to education, and concepts like nepotism and favoritism continue to control who gets the lead, overlooking how simple people worked hard to be acknowledged.

Success is not always a reflection of pure hard work. It is often shaped by hidden privileges. Unless societies address these underlying inequalities, the system of meritocracy will continue to be a comfortable mask for wealthy people to use to justify their high positions. Achieving true fairness means building a system where people have the same chances and compete in the race with equal opportunities to succeed not only on paper but in real life.

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