

ECONOMICS

Sociology

Chang-Hee Kim,
*School of Management and
 Communication Republic
 Polytechnic,
 Singapore, Singapore,
 E-mail: jk.jaydenkim@gmail.com*

Yong-Beom Choi,
*Division of Social Welfare
 Baekseok Arts University,
 Seoul, Republic of Korea,
 E-mail: ybchoi@bau.ac.kr*

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HOW MERITOCRACY IS DEFINED TODAY?: CONTEMPORARY ASPECTS OF MERITOCRACY

ABSTRACT. This study aimed to develop a deeper understanding of contemporary aspects of meritocracy based on a qualitative meta-synthesis of the scholarly literature. Eighteen empirical studies of meritocracy in various disciplines were reviewed for this study. Thematic analysis revealed three main higher-order themes with six sub-themes that described the characteristics of meritocracy today. The findings present an overview of the current issues considered by meritocracy studies and provide a foundation for the ongoing debate over the necessary conditions for a better meritocracy.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Meritocracy as a social system

Meritocracy is a social system in which advancement in society is based on an individual's capabilities and merits rather than on the basis of family, wealth, or social background (Bellows, 2009; Castilla & Benard, 2010; Poocharoen & Brillantes, 2013; Imbroscio, 2016). The idea of meritocracy has received much attention since British sociologist Michael Young first coined the term in 1958. In particular, meritocracy has increasingly been recognized as a positive system in Western societies, and the ideology has been tightly coupled with the notions of capitalism and egalitarian values, which are fundamental to the concept of the "American Dream" (Sealy, 2010). However, from a different viewpoint, a number of scholars (Bell, 2012; Poocharoen & Brillantes, 2013; Babcock & Freivogel, 2015; So, 2015; Zhang, 2015) have reported evidence that the initial concept of meritocracy primarily emerged in Asia first, indicating an antecedent to the meritocratic practices of Western societies. Hobson (2004) argued that the concept of merit initially started in China and came to the West via Confucian texts.

In modern society, meritocracy has allowed low status group members to dream about improving their social status, economic class, and place in the hierarchy, implanting the ideology that everyone has a chance of succeeding if they cultivate the required abilities

(Wiederkehr *et al.*, 2015). In this vein, meritocracy has served as an engine of meritocratic upward mobility for maintaining social order and calming social unrest. As a governing principle, meritocracy has also permeated a number of Asian countries that are heavily influenced by Confucianism, such as Singapore, Korea, and China. Correspondingly, studies of meritocracy have been conducted in many different disciplines including business, public administration, education, psychology, and so forth, in an attempt to understand the social and cultural factors around us.

1.2. Meritocracy today

Much has changed since Young coined the term “meritocracy” in 1958. People around the world have undergone the harsh reality of ideological confrontations, globalization, financial crises, and the consequent inequality problems. In conjunction with recent salient events, people’s beliefs about and perceptions of meritocracy have fluctuated in society in recent years (Corbett, 2013; Reynolds & Xian, 2014; Newman *et al.*, 2015). Accordingly, much of the current literature on meritocracy pays particular attention to revisiting or redefining the concept (Young, 1998; Young, 2006; Pappas & Tremblay, 2010; Reyes, 2013; Reynolds & Xian, 2014; UNDP, 2015). Allen (2011) even claimed that the initial principles of meritocracy had already changed, insisting that the system that Young originally described no longer exists. In recent years, there has been a vigorous debate on what constitutes a correct, inclusive, and fair form of meritocracy given the evolving sociopolitical circumstances in Singapore. What kind of meritocracy are we witnessing at this moment? This study attempts to address this question. The authors argue that there is a substantial need for discussion and reflection on the contemporary aspects of meritocracy. Hence, the main purpose of this study is not to discover or provide another definition of meritocracy; rather, it is to describe several aspects and characteristics of meritocracy today, based on a review of the descriptions found in the scholarly literature. This comprehensive review is expected to enhance our understanding of meritocracy and to stimulate a debate on the necessary conditions for contemporary meritocracy.

2. Methodology

2.1. Selection of relevant articles

To achieve this study’s objective of describing the characteristics of contemporary meritocracy, a systemic review of studies of meritocracy was conducted as follows. First, the authors used the keyword “meritocracy” to search for relevant references on the Web of Science. Second, the selection of articles was restricted to peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles listed in the Social Science Citation Index; peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles with the phrase “meritocracy” in the title; articles written in English; article using an empirical approach (qualitative or quantitative); and articles published between 2014 and 2016. The articles in the Social Science Citation Index were used because the index is the traditional point of reference for this type of research analysis. The primary literature search identified 280 publications, 47 of which were published within the specified dates. A further 26 publications were excluded as they were not in the Social Science Citation Index, and 3 were excluded because they did not delineate the specific aspects of meritocracy. Finally, 18 empirical studies reporting on meritocracy in various disciplines were identified for this review.

2.2. Analysis of the selected meritocracy studies

Thematic analysis was used as a qualitative meta-synthesis approach in this study. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and analyzing patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Noyes and Lewin (2011), thematic analysis is suitable for aggregating and summarizing qualitative data to address the research questions posed by researchers. Thematic analysis specifically provides an opportunity to code and categorize data into overarching themes from the initial data for analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Hence, the final outcome of thematic analysis tends to be a summary or a thematic map derived from the findings of primary studies. The outcome generally helps researchers to summarize the key features of a large body of data. Various types of data, including transcripts of focus groups or interviews, can be used for analysis due to the natural flexibility of the method (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Rice and Ezzy (1999, p. 258) identified “careful reading and re-reading of the data” as a major process in thematic analysis for identifying themes. Attride-Stirling (2001) also proposed three steps in thematic analysis, starting with dissecting a text into meaningful segments for coding.

However, Braun and Clarke (2006) and Clarke and Braun (2013) provided more recent and detailed arguments related to the six phases of thematic analysis: becoming familiarized with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The authors exhaustively followed these six phases to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. The texts of each selected article on meritocracy were examined to determine whether they articulated the definitions, aspects, and characteristics of meritocracy. The authors began by reading the transcripts of the selected primary studies several times, and attempted to capture the meaning of the descriptions of meritocracy in each study. After coding each line of the descriptions, the authors categorized these codes into semantic and conceptual categories (themes) and subsequently generated clear definitions and named each category (theme). Finally, the authors reflected on whether the created themes represented all of the coded data properly, as a way of reviewing the themes. The derived themes showed coherent patterns relevant to the research questions posed by the authors.

3. Findings and Discussion

The present study summarized 18 studies of meritocracy to identify the various characteristics of contemporary meritocracy. Each study delineated the specific aspects of meritocracy from various disciplines. As shown in *Figure 1* and *Table 1*, three main higher-order themes with six sub-themes were derived, and the themes, descriptions, and cited articles are summarized as follows. The three themes were *Concepts of meritocracy*, *Features of meritocracy*, and *Considerations of meritocracy*.

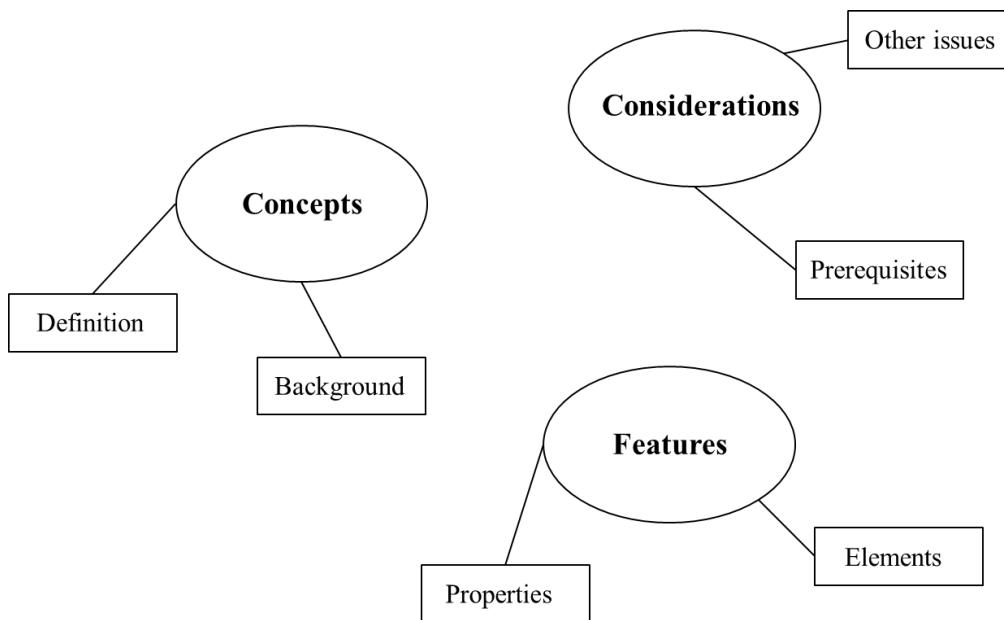


Figure 1. Final thematic map, showing the three main higher-order themes

Table 1. Derived themes and their descriptions

Higher-order theme	Sub-theme	Description	Cited article
Concepts	Definition	Meaning, purposes	1, 3, 5, 8, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18
	Background	Historical background	1, 3, 4, 7, 11, 13, 15, 16
Features	Properties	Basic attributes, functions	1, 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18
	Elements	Basic principles, influence factors	4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17
Considerations	Prerequisites	Prior conditions for a successful system	1, 3, 4, 7, 11, 16
	Other issues	Disputable issues	1, 2, 3, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16

Notes: A full list of cited articles (selected studies) is presented in the Appendix.

3.1. Concepts of meritocracy

Analysis of the meritocracy research revealed that the term “meritocracy” was first used in the book “The Rise of the Meritocracy,” written by British sociologist Michael Young in 1958. He described “merit” as one’s IQ plus effort, and “meritocracy” as a society in which the new elite class would socialize only with those from similar social backgrounds and economic classes. He criticized society as a dystopia in which merit is solely determined by IQ plus effort, and argued that inequality may be rampant in society due to one’s measurable merit. Indeed, it has been considered that the term “meritocracy,” as used by Young, had somewhat negative connotations to satirize the ways of ruling at that time.

Today, however, the term “meritocracy” is used in a more desirable and constructive way to mean an equal society (Lipsey, 2014). There is, ironically, a strong belief that success is a valid indicator of personal effort and performance (Wiederkehr *et al.*, 2015). From this point of view, the idea of meritocracy as an ideology and a system in which rewards are impartially distributed according to individual talent has gained support from people at the bottom of the social ladder in a given society (Chong, 2014; Newman *et al.*, 2015). In this

vein, many researchers (Lipsey, 2014; Martin *et al.*, 2014; Talib & Fitzgerald, 2015; So, 2015; Au, 2016) have argued that a meritocratic society should provide “equality of opportunity” to every member of society, regardless of social position, economic class, gender, and race.

As the meaning of meritocracy became more positive in its transition from Western societies, researchers started linking it to the notions of political ideology, capitalism, and the “American Dream” in response to the contemporary social atmosphere (Panayotakis, 2014; S’liwa & Johansson, 2014; Newman *et al.*, 2015; Wiederkehr *et al.*, 2015; So, 2015; Cobb II & Russell, 2015). Panayotakis (2014), in particular, insisted that the meritocratic illusion was largely amplified by the public education system in the United States and other capitalist countries. Likewise, in the political arena, some politicians have recently adopted the idea of equality of opportunity as their central creed (Lipsey, 2004).

In China, meanwhile, significant progress has been made in promoting meritocracy in public human resource management since the late 1970s (Zhang, 2015). As noted by Zhang (2015), China was the first country to introduce meritocratic management to the public sector. So (2015) similarly provided a critical account of exam-based meritocracy in the Taiwanese public sector, and concluded that the exam-based meritocracy system differed from that used by Western countries to manage their public servants.

The meritocratic ideology has also been applied to private organizations, where it is commonly linked to performance management and promotion based on individuals’ contributions to the organization (Barbosa, 2014). S’liwa and Johansson (2014) claimed that the meritocratic management style has long been implemented in Western organizations’ human resource policies to address impartial recruitment, selection, and promotion in compliance with meritocratic premises rather than the arbitrary appointment and promotion of individuals.

Taken together, the authors inferred that meritocracy is a system and an ideology strongly supported by people today. People’s aspirations of success through hard work have completely changed the original dynamics of meritocracy as a dystopia. Meritocracy has been a popular theme in various research fields, such as business, education, psychology, and public administration. Given the original interpretation, meritocracy certainly fosters individual competence together with “equality of opportunity” to establish an impartial nation and an organization in the long run. As shown previously, the cases of Taiwan and China illustrate this point clearly in terms of public management.

3.2. Features of meritocracy

According to Young’s introduction to meritocracy, its two fundamental features are “impartial competition” and “equality of opportunity” (Talib & Fitzgerald, 2015). If meritocracy is not accompanied by equality of opportunity, it will never achieve the desirable society that all people dream about. Hence, in an ideal meritocratic society, it is possible to actualize social mobility through a fair and transparent system that reduces potential corruption. In this sense, So (2015) concluded that the values of “equality” and “fairness” are usually included in the employment principles of many Anglo-Saxon countries.

At this point, one may suppose that people living in a meritocratic society would strongly agree with the quotation, “My efforts will never betray me,” because they enjoy the fruits of hard work (S’liwa & Johansson, 2014). If so, meritocracy should be a necessary prescription for the appropriate use of people’s talents in achieving their own goals and those of their organizations (Panayotakis, 2014). In line with this, Barbosa (2014) also pointed out that meritocracy today is used to increase organizational productivity by facilitating constructive competition between employees.

However, according to Reynolds and Xian (2014), there are two hidden categories in a meritocratic society: meritocratic elements (e.g., hard work, ambition, having a good education) and non-meritocratic elements (e.g., family wealth, family background, knowing the right people) for the purpose of getting ahead in life. Clycq, Ward Nouwen, and Vandenbroucke (2014), Warikoo and Fuhr (2014), and Zhang (2015) also supported this view. In other words, the way people perceive the hidden non-meritocratic elements may be important for maintaining transparent meritocracy, which is strongly endorsed by “equality of opportunity”. Although meritocracy rejects nepotism, patronage, and corruption, the findings of most of the selected studies mirror the reality of today’s society. A number of studies (Reynolds & Xian, 2014; Clycq *et al.*, 2014; Zhang, 2015) have argued that it is a matter of not only social context, but also people’s way of life or culture. Such a reality has both helped and hindered the creation of an equal opportunity society.

In summary, the research evidence on the benefits of meritocracy is quite clear. Meritocracy is a vehicle for social mobility and encourages people to do their best to achieve the ultimate goals of society. Furthermore, it reduces corruption in organizations through transparent management, and people are objectively rewarded by reaping what they have sown based on their merits and talent. Yet, some research data still show that meritocracy goes hand in hand with a focus on one’s family, upbringing, and social background together with particular sociocultural contexts. Therefore, one question about Young’s “impartial competition” and “equality of opportunity” still remains: how can we resolve the issues that are coupled with the non-meritocratic elements that may arise from a meritocratic society? This question is addressed in the next section.

3.3. Considerations of meritocracy

Based on the authors’ analysis, “equality of opportunity” was identified as the most significant aspect of meritocracy. Numerous studies (Panayotakis, 2014; Lipsey, 2014; Martin *et al.*, 2014; Talib & Fitzgerald, 2015; So, 2015) have highlighted that equality of opportunity is a dominant value for creating harmony in a meritocratic society. There are two prerequisites for a meritocratic society: transparency and impartiality. More specifically, those who have more talent and merit than others must be accompanied by “noblesse oblige,” given their social position and economic class. The leaders of a society certainly must recognize that development happens only where an impartial and transparent service treats every member of society equally. In this context, Newman *et al.* (2015) stated that “inequality is proportional to abolition of the people’s belief in meritocracy.”

Aside from the previously mentioned points, it is important to note that the application of meritocratic systems heavily relies on agreement as to what constitutes merit and how to measure it (Sliwa & Johansson, 2014). One possible implication of this is that the concept of merit may vary from nation to nation and institution to institution according to the given circumstances (Park & Liu, 2014). So does meritocracy. It is thus a matter of understanding how merit is defined, what meritocratic policies are applied, and how meritocracy is operationalized in different contexts and different cultures. Last but not least, as Reynolds and Xian (2014) asserted, people’s beliefs about meritocracy are not static. We have already witnessed the discrepancy between Young’s definition of meritocracy and other contemporary definitions. More research is needed to understand how peoples’ perceptions of meritocracy may change over time.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this study, we examined contemporary aspects of meritocracy by analyzing 18 scholarly publications from various fields of the social sciences. This study was the first to undertake a qualitative meta-synthesis to further understand contemporary aspects of meritocracy. However, it might have been subject to some limitations. Given the nature of the research method, the authors might have missed many of the nuances provided by each study because they considered only the descriptions stated in each paper for coding and categorization, rather than the meaning of each work as a whole.

Nevertheless, what we can conclude from this study is that non-meritocratic elements are clearly considered to play an important role in access to opportunities. In contrast to Young's introduction to meritocracy, which is tightly coupled with the principle of impartial competition, contemporary meritocracy has largely disregarded non-meritocratic elements such as family background and social networks, yet it is important to bear in mind that these factors can cause severe inequalities within society, such as limited access to social capital and resources. Hence, the rising significance of non-meritocratic elements may not hinder equality of opportunity, but instead may present "different starting points." This flies directly in the face of the foundations of a meritocratic society. As long as we support meritocracy, we should investigate further how we can resolve the issue of the different starting points caused by non-meritocratic elements.

Second, meritocracy as a social system is still evolving. The conception of merit within a society may vary according to the context and culture. The practice of meritocracy may show a great deal of variation between Western and Asian countries, as do individuals within and between these contexts. Lee Kuan Yew, well known as a "founding father" of Singapore, strongly believed in the need for a culture of meritocracy to build up an effective civil service and promote economic growth with social development. The authors speculate that the "Lee Kuan Yew's meritocracy" seems to be well adapted to Singapore's peculiar context involving Confucian principles of governance.

This study introduced many questions in need of further investigation. What is now needed is a study to understand how merit is defined, what meritocratic policies are applied, and how meritocracy is operationalized in different contexts and cultures. With these aspects of contemporary meritocracy, we hope to encourage a central debate on how to promote a better, meritocratic society and to achieve greater clarity in future studies, regardless of the specific research area.

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Appendix

Table 2. A full list of cited articles (selected studies) for this study

No.	Author	Journal
1	Panayotakis (2014)	American Journal of Economics and Sociology
2	Park & Liu (2014)	The Journal of Higher Education
3	Barbosa (2014)	RAE-Revista de Administração de Empresas
4	Lipsey (2014)	Political Quarterly
5	Chong (2014)	Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education
6	Reynolds & Xian (2014)	Research in Social Stratification and Mobility
7	Martin <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Ageing & Society
8	Warikoo & Fuhr (2014)	British Educational Research Journal
9	Ronsini (2014)	Television & New Media
10	Clycq <i>et al.</i> (2014)	British Educational Research Journal
11	S'liwa & Johansson (2014)	Organization
12	Talib & Fitzgerald (2015)	Critical Discourse Studies
13	Newman <i>et al.</i> (2015)	American Journal of Political Science
14	Wiederkehr <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Frontiers in Psychology
15	Zhang (2015)	Australian Journal of Public Administration
16	So (2015)	Australian Journal of Public Administration
17	Cobb II & Russell (2015)	Journal of Education Policy
18	Au (2016)	Educational Policy