

GES1041 / GESS1029

Meritocracy in Perspective

LECTURE 5

DARYL OOI

Week 5: Meritocracy in perspective

Required reading:

- *Amartya Sen. 2000. 'Merit and justice'. In Kenneth Arrow, Samuel Bowles, & Steven Durlauf, *Meritocracy and Economic Inequality*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
<http://assets.press.princeton.edu/chapters/s6818.pdf>

Supplementary resources:

- ChannelNewsAsia. 2018. 'Regardless of Class' (documentary).
<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/video-on-demand/regardless-of-class>
- David Miller. 1996. 'Two cheers for meritocracy'. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 4(4): 277-301.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.1996.tb00053.x>
- Richard Arneson. 2015. 'Equality of opportunity and meritocracy'. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/equal-opportunity/#EquOppMer>
- Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller, Jr. 2009. *The Meritocracy Myth (Second Edition)*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield. Chapter 2 on 'On Being Made of the Right Stuff: The Case for Merit'.
<http://linc.nus.edu.sg/record=b2991639> (e-book)



Topics 1 and 2 - Inequality and Meritocracy (AY2021/2022 Sem 2)

Posted by Daryl Ooi on 11 Feb 2022 6:53 am.

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Here are some resources that you may find useful - based on tutorial discussions, dialogue sessions and/or some conversations with students.

1. What counts as basic needs (2021 discussion)

- Here's the study [itself](#).
- Here's a [news report](#) of the study.
- Here's a [response](#) from the Ministry of Finance.

2. Financial Aid (Equalising starting places or optimal development of talent?)

- Report on "NUS steps up financial aid for Singaporean students from low-income families", CNA 08 Feb 2022. [Just out](#).

3. 'Hidden' Inequalities?

- Report on "Why do security guards get abused more than others?" CNA 21 Jan 2022. [Read here](#).

Here's some recent reports to get the ball rolling. If you know of useful articles or resources you'll like to share, feel free to post them here!



Forum Discussion: [Resources for Sharing](#)

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Overview

1. **Review: inequality and meritocracy**
2. Toolbox: dialogue norms
3. Analysis: effects of elitism
4. Analysis: merit in incentive systems

Journal on inequality

While reading the news a few days ago, a particular headline caught my eye - "Man who didn't want to lose \$100 work incentive jailed for refusing sick leave, Covid-19 swab test". The first thought that popped into my mind was "Why would he do that for just \$100? He probably had it coming..." and "COVID-19 is still an ongoing problem for the entire Singapore, how could he be so irresponsible?". **Being born in an upper-middle class family, I never really had to worry about expenses or fulfilling basic needs like food, healthcare and shelter. In fact, I had become so comfortable with not having to worry about my day-to-day living that when I first saw the headline, I immediately made judgments about his behaviour based on my own position in society.** Other netizens on online forums echoed my initial thoughts, viewing Rahim as a selfish individual deserving of the 5 weeks jail term that was meted out. **Upon further reading, however, I realised that I had judged his actions too quickly...**

Journal on inequality

... For context, Rahim, a pest control technician, had had a cough for about three weeks and was thus asked to take a swab test and stay home. However, these instructions were ignored and he went ahead to visit multiple locations as well as had lunch with colleagues. He explained during court that this was because employees were promised an extra \$100 each month for being punctual and not taking any emergency or medical leave...

Journal on inequality

.. Was what he did right or wrong? Well, he had neglected the virtue of being a law-abiding citizen and also put at risk the physical health of his close contacts and the community by potentially contributing to the virus spread and prolonging the pandemic. He had also failed to fulfill the social responsibility expected of him and his obligation as a citizen and member of the society to help curb the spread of the virus. As such, in the eyes of the government and the law, what he did was wrong and the consequences are just. **As a [Blanked out] major who is also studying [Blanked out]**, I am also more inclined to subscribe to arguments that prioritise the well-being of the community and population at large and therefore understand the potential gravity that his actions could have had. However, after gaining a better understanding of his background, I came to realise that he had prioritised the \$100 incentive to supplement his low monthly wage of only \$1500 so that the fundamental needs of both him and his two children could be met, and this included paying hospital bills for multiple chronic illnesses. **These trade-offs between the well-being of the community versus the well-being of Rahim and his family demonstrate an apparent conflict between individual and community interests**, which also apply to other low-wage workers (LWWs) who have made similar choices. (Anon).

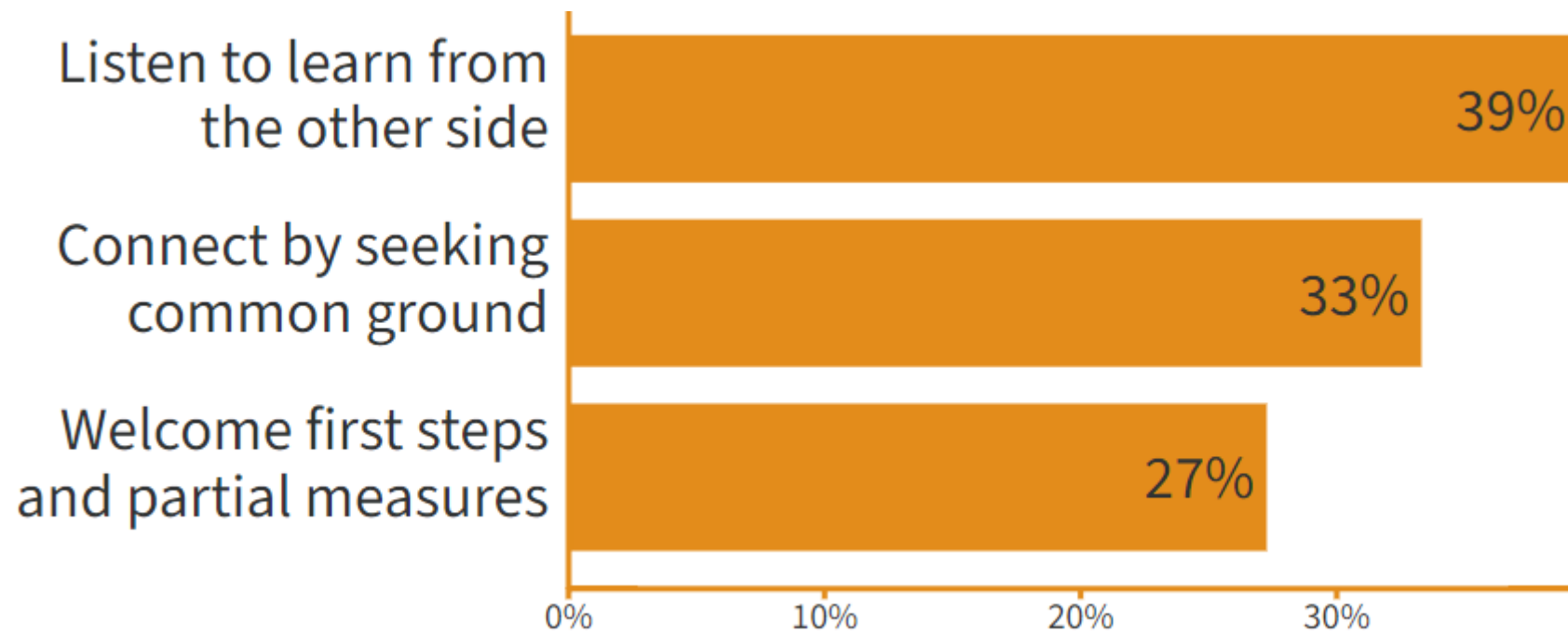
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Three norms of moral dialogue

1. Listen to learn from the other side	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify different values and interests• Clarify different cultural meanings• Develop space for <u>mutual understanding</u>
2. Connect by seeking common ground	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify background of agreement• Clarify points of disagreement• Develop space for <u>social negotiation</u>
3. Welcome first steps and partial measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Propose constructive changes• Highlight neglected possibilities• Develop space for <u>practical compromise</u>

Which norm do you think is hardest to honor?



Video: 'The mixed classroom'



Channel News Asia, Regardless of Class Documentary

How can we use the 3 norms to continue this dialogue?

- <https://PollEv.com/discourses/YigmQC6uVAW4EhP5CB1hf/respond>



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The structure of meritocracy

Principles of system	Criteria of merit	Mechanisms in use
1. Equal opportunity for talents	Not race, gender, sexuality, age, or class	Penalties for workplace discrimination Social provision of basic goods
2. Efficient allocation of talents	Ability	Qualities and qualifications for jobs
3. Optimal development of talents	Effort	Competition for rewards
4. Just reward for merit	Ability and effort	“Market rates”

The effects of elitism

- **Insider dominance:** ‘Elitism often sets in when the balance shifts significantly in favour of rewards, particularly when the winners, fearful of competition, try to set the rules of the game in their favour so that they can continue winning and make the winners’ circle more exclusive. From within that circle, the elite start to develop an exaggerated sense of superiority, overvalue their own capabilities, define merit in their own image, and treat the masses with disdain and despair.’ (Tan 2012, 279)
- **Outsider scepticism:** ‘Those outside the winners’ circle may start to lose faith in the system when equal opportunities and upward mobility appear to be eclipsed by a market-driven obsession with reward and status.’

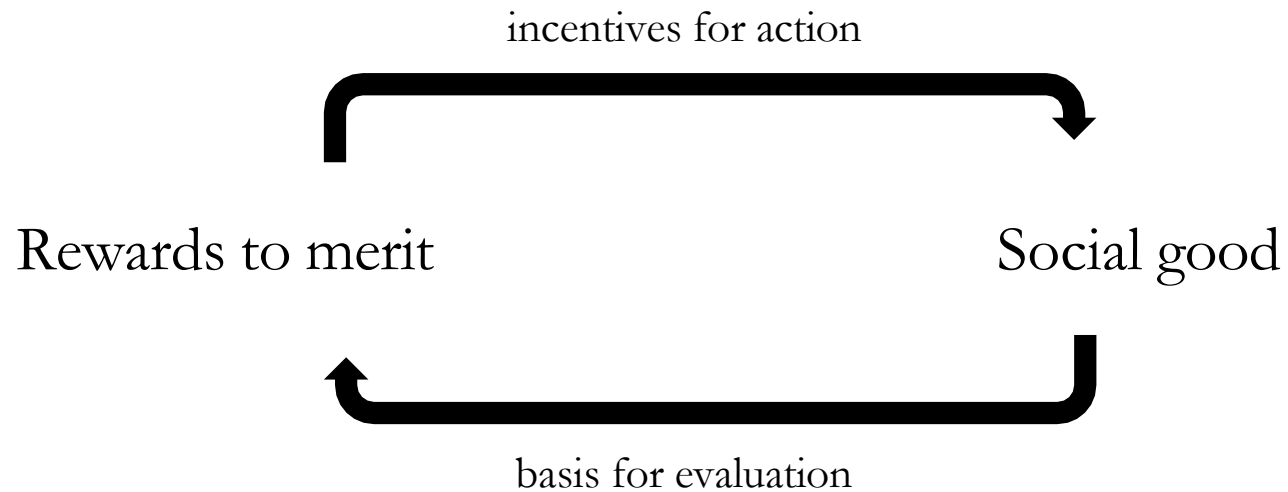
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Sen's approach to merit

1. **Contingent concept:** 'The idea of meritocracy may have many virtues, but clarity is not one of them. The lack of clarity may relate to the fact...that the concept of "merit" is deeply contingent on our views of a good society.' (5)
2. **Incentive system:** 'The idea of merits in this *instrumental* perspective relates to the motivation of producing better results. Actions are meritorious in a derivative and contingent way, depending on...the good that can be brought about by rewarding them.' (8)
3. **Inflexible forms:** '...the tendency, in practice, to characterize "merit" in inflexible forms reflecting values and priorities of the past, often in sharp conflict with conceptions that would be needed for seeing merit in the context of contemporary objectives and concerns.' (5)

Merit in an incentive system



Three 'ad hoc' features of meritocracy

1. Personification of merit
2. Entitlement to reward
3. Neglect of distribution

Feature 1: Personification of merit

- **Focus on persons:** ‘Conventional notions of “meritocracy” often attach the label of merit to people rather than actions. A person with standardly recognized “talents” (even something as nebulous as “intelligence”) can, then, be seen as a meritorious person even if he or she were not to use the “talents” to perform acts with good consequences or laudable propriety.’ (12)
- **Acceptance of inequalities:** ‘Personification can encourage meritocratic acceptance of—rather than resistance to—inequalities of achievement (often along racial and ethnic groupings), which are present in many contemporary societies.’ (12-13)

Feature 2: Entitlement to reward

- **Strict entitlement:** ‘An incentive argument is entirely “instrumental” and does not lead to any notion of intrinsic “desert.”...In a meritocratic system, however, this distinction gets blurred, and the established and fixed nature of the system of rewards may generate the implicit—sometimes even explicit—belief that the rewards are “owed” by the society to the meritorious persons.’ (13)
- **Rewarding talent:** ‘When this idea of desert is combined with rewarding “talents” as such—indeed, even the possession of talents (rather than the production of desirable results with them)—the connection with the incentive rationale of meritocracies is fairly comprehensively severed.’

Feature 3: Neglect of distribution

- **Distribution as a good:** ‘If the results desired have a strong distributive component, with a preference for equality, then in assessing merits (through judging the generated results, including its distributive aspects), concerns about distribution and inequality would enter the evaluation.’ (13)
- **Neglect and bias:** ‘In most versions of modern meritocracy, however, the selected objectives tend to be almost exclusively oriented toward aggregate achievements (without any preference against inequality), and sometimes the objectives chosen are even biased (often implicitly) toward the interests of more fortunate groups (favoring the outcomes that are more preferred by “talented” and “successful” sections of the population). This can reinforce and augment the tendency toward inequality...’ (14)

Upcoming assignments

- Journal Entry 2 (Meritocracy)
- Reading Quiz 2 (Meritocracy)

Week 5 Online activities

1. Word cloud

https://PollEv.com/free_text_polls/bUCwanQ8WbLhH658RTohG/respond

2. Dialogue poll

<https://PollEv.com/discourses/YigmQC6uVAW4EhP5CB1hf/respond>

3. Q&A

<https://PollEv.com/discourses/xbPvQ6o6UrwOmVgg0l6nc/respond>

Thank you.

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Zoom hours

Friday 1200-1400 (via LumiNUS Conferencing)