

GES1041 / GESS1029

Meritocracy in Singapore

LECTURE 4

DARYL OOI

Week 4: Do elites deserve prizes?

Required reading:

- ***Kenneth Paul Tan. 2010. 'The transformation of meritocracy'. In Terence Chong (ed.), *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
<http://linc.nus.edu.sg/record=b3282838>**

Supplementary resources:

- Institute of Policy Studies 30th Anniversary Panel IV: 'Dialogue'
<https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/events/details/ips-30th-anniversary-diversities-new-and-old>
- Donald Low. 2014. 'Good meritocracy, bad meritocracy'. In *Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus*. Singapore: NUS Press.
<http://muse.jhu.edu/book/31014>
- Tan Ern Ser. 2015. *Class and Social Orientations: Key Findings from the Social Stratification Survey 2011*. Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies. Chapters 4 and 5 on 'Success Factors' and 'Social Mobility'.
<https://doi.org/10.25818/ycg7-dpns>
- Teo You-Yenn. 2017. *This is What Inequality Looks Like*. Singapore: Ethos Books. Chapter on 'Differentiated Deservedness'.
<http://linc.nus.edu.sg/record=b3796741>

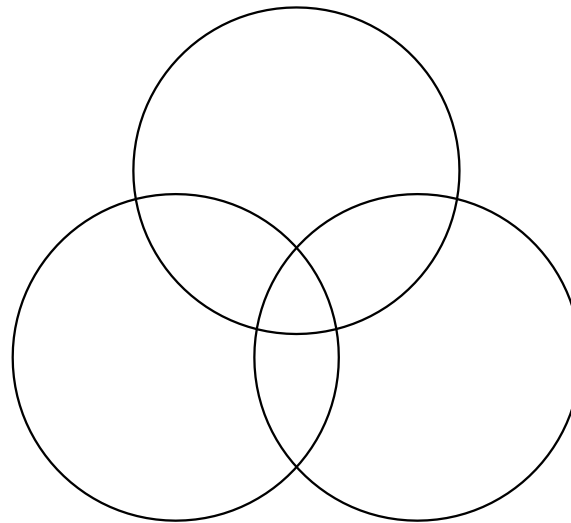
Overview

1. **Review: tools, models, concepts**
2. Analysis: transformation of meritocracy
3. Ethical Toolbox: moral dialogue
4. Assignment: Journal Entry 2 (Meritocracy)

Three moral clusters

Person-centred values
 \approx the good owed to a person

Calculations of **well-being**
 \approx what's good for a person



Virtues of character
 \approx the good in a person

A model of ethical analysis

1. **The self-reliant Singaporean**
 - Self-reliance as virtue
 - Employment and basic needs
2. Social scientific analysis
 - Dependence on unpaid labour
 - Exploitation of low-wage labour
 - Poverty and public goods
3. Ethical analysis
 - Loss of self-respect and dignity
 - Self-reliance and its conditions
 - Self-reliance and solidarity

Five objections to inequality

1. Suffering or severe deprivation
2. Stigmatising differences in status
3. Unacceptable power or domination over others
4. Unequal starting places
5. Unequal shares of socially produced benefits

Overview

1. Review: tools, models, concepts
2. **Analysis: transformation of meritocracy**
3. Ethical Toolbox: moral dialogue
4. Assignment: Journal Entry 2 (Meritocracy)

Video: 'Defining elites' (clip)



<https://youtu.be/BNg-bhnpaug?t=2890>

Tan's approach to meritocracy

1. **Diverging concerns:** 'Meritocracy is an essentially unstable concept, binding aspects that work together in productive tension.' (Tan 2012, 272-3)
2. **Shifting balance:** 'Over the decades, the delicate balance between the contradictory egalitarian and elitist aspects of meritocracy...has shifted towards a market-driven concern with rewarding the winners, leaving the losers more skeptical about their own prospects for upward mobility.'
3. **Destabilising conditions:** 'Today, meritocracy and its macho manifestations are coming under strain as fast-globalizing Singapore gears up to deal with new forms of national crisis, alternative sources of information and beliefs about merit, and widening income inequality...'

Four aspects of meritocracy

1. Equal opportunities
2. Resource allocation
3. Competition
4. Reward

The structure of meritocracy

1. What are the **principles** of this system?
2. What are its **criteria** of merit?
3. What are its **mechanisms** in use?

Aspect 1: Equal opportunities

- **Fair selection:** 'Meritocracy can be thought of as a system of selection that is blind to race, gender, sexuality, age, or class differences where these attributes should not matter. However, blindness to differences should not extend to cases where real advantages and disadvantages are ignored, where some kind of positive discrimination may be necessary.' (274)
- **Equal starting points:** 'What matters is that there is equality of opportunity, at least where starting points are concerned. No one, therefore, should be systematically excluded from opportunities to pursue their life plans, achieve their potential, and profit from their success; and from basic resources such as safety, housing, education, and health that will be necessary for these.'

Aspect 2: Resource allocation

- **Efficient allocation:** ‘A second aspect of meritocracy relates to efficient resource allocation. Here the focus is on “revealing” the best person for the job, rather than giving people equal opportunities. The former focuses on outcomes, while the latter focuses on fairness.’ (275)
- **Resource scarcity:** ‘Notionally, meritocracy is efficient because it identifies individuals with valuable qualities and qualifications and matches them to the appropriate roles and positions in the market and in the state. Such a system finds an easy fit in Singapore’s survivalist culture that constantly identifies resource scarcity as a key limitation.’

Aspect 3: Competition

- **Competition and effort:** ‘Competition is a third aspect of meritocracy and one that is closely related to the question of incentives and effort. Meritocracy does not only sort out scarce talent, it also encourages talented people to compete with one another for position, reward, and prestige, and in that way to try harder than they otherwise would.’ (276)
- **Individual development and social value:** ‘Human capacities are thus developed to their potential and society can potentially benefit from the kind of competitiveness that brings out the best in everyone.’

Aspect 4: Reward

- **Incentive and recognition:** ‘A fourth aspect of meritocracy, and one which provides the incentive for competition, is reward. Reward for individual merit can take the form of rank, job positions, higher incomes, or general recognition and prestige. But other than a prize to drive competition, reward can also be seen as recognition of talent and compensation for one’s effort.’ (278)
- **“Market rates”:** ‘As the opportunity costs of choosing a public sector career began to rise, talented Singaporeans needed to be offered higher “compensation” which would also act as an incentive to join the civil service...Legislation to peg these salaries to a “market rate” was swiftly passed.’

Exercise: ‘The structure of meritocracy’

Principles of system	Criteria of merit	Mechanisms in use
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Equal opportunity for talents2. Efficient allocation of talents3. Optimal development of talents4. Just reward for merit	Not race, gender, sexuality, age, or class	Penalties for workplace discrimination Social provision of basic needs

Overview

1. Review: tools, models, concepts
2. Analysis: transformation of meritocracy
3. **Ethical Toolbox: moral dialogue**
4. Assignment: Journal Entry 2 (Meritocracy)

Three norms of fruitful dialogue

- **Listen.** ‘Avoid the automatic comeback...and work for better understanding. Ask questions, and mean them. Restate others’ views to make sure you “get it” – later you can ask for the same consideration back. Expect that you have as much to learn as they do.’ (Weston 2018)
- **Connect.** ‘Seek *common ground*. Approach differences against a background of probable agreement. Recognise complexity on the other side (and yours). Don’t polarize. There are no simple “yes” and “no” positions.’
- **Welcome.** ‘Look for first steps and partial measures. No problem is going to be resolved all at once. Think constructively; make suggestions.’

Two kinds of moral dialogue

Fruitless dialogue	Fruitful dialogue
<p>Dominate!</p> <p>Polarise!</p> <p>Win!</p>	<p>Listen to the other side.</p> <p>Connect with the person.</p> <p>Welcome opportunities.</p>

Overview

1. Review: tools, models, concepts
2. Analysis: transformation of meritocracy
3. Ethical Toolbox: moral dialogue
4. **Assignment: Journal Entry 2
(Meritocracy)**

Prompts on meritocracy

- Which passage in our readings on meritocracy moved or frustrated you most? Write about its ethical significance.
- Kenneth Paul Tan writes about the “inherently unstable concept of meritocracy which binds together such potentially incompatible aspects as equality of opportunity, efficient resource allocation, competition and reward” (274). Discuss the ethical dimensions of any one aspect which is pertinent to your everyday life.
- Which one(s) of Scanlon’s (2003) objections resonate the most/least with you? Discuss why.
- Imagine a campaign in Singapore against ‘a tyranny of the capable and clever’.
- Design your own prompt.

To my future children

I will probably only be able to afford to send you down the conventional path of education in Singapore. If it is the same then as it is now, I hope you remember this. Remember that you are worthy, regardless of your academics. In the midst of the rat race and competition, hold on to your virtues of character — they are what define you more than the letters on your report card. If you are disadvantaged for being [blanked out] in our system, I hope you continue to stay proud of your heritage. You are more than your grades. Scores do not define you. If you have not yet come to understand the full weight of what I posit, I hope this gives you a glimpse of what I mean...

...Many of us, in the pursuit of perfect scores, sacrifice sleep and mental health for grades. When can Singapore come to realise that it's not worth it?"

Week 4 Online activities

1. Word cloud

https://PollEv.com/free_text_polls/hGYTvDfIBRMFlUKi4Vw3U/respond

2. Quick question on Moral Dialogue Norms

https://PollEv.com/multiple_choice_polls/W4I89DQu9iFxxnTbksM6r/respond

3. Q&A

<https://PollEv.com/discourses/HeibRfpJDlychrRFldk5o/respond>

Thank you.

Instructor

Daryl Ooi darylloi@nus.edu.sg

Tutor

Nicholas Loo nick.loo@nus.edu.sg

Zoom hours

Fri 12-2pm (via LumiNUS Conferencing)