

GENDER AND EDUCATION IN MERITOCRATIC DISCOURSE: LANGUAGE MATTERS

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Оглядова стаття є спробою дати відповідь на питання: якою мірою обґрунтовано і прийнято сучасними суспільствами поняття "меритократія". Дослідження комунікативних тактик дискурсу сприяє кращому розумінню меритократичної освіти, що базується на власних заслугах і досягненнях та формуванню гендерної політики в університетах.

Ключові слова: *гендер, освітній дискурс, меритократичний дискурс, комунікативні тактики.*

This paper is an attempt to provide an answer to the question: to what extent is the word "meritocracy" justified and correct for all modern societies. The goal is to contribute to a better understanding of merit-based education systems and in shaping gender policies at universities through meritocratic discourse communication tactics.

Keywords: *gender, meritocracy, education discourse, meritocratic discourse, communication tactics.*

Introduction

In the first decades of the twenty first century education in US has been perceived as the 'saviour' of the meritocratic ideal. In this paper I will investigate some of the implications of the lasting emphasis that has been placed upon education in US, in the pursuit of a more just society. I believe this study helps to fill a significant gap in literature about organizations and inequality, by investigating the central role of merit-based education systems in shaping gender disparities in university systems. Using language data, I empirically establish the existence of this bias and show that gender differences continue to affect the university system after performance ratings are taken into account. This finding demonstrates a critical challenge faced by the many universities who adopt merit-based practices and policies.

1. Meritocracy and Elite: Debate Matters.

At present the words "elite" and "meritocracy" have become fashionable and can be heard everywhere. However, neither academic works, nor the mass media (to say nothing of everyday speech) have a clear understanding of what these notions

mean. So much so that they are often used as having similar, sometimes mutually common, compatible meanings. Some researchers state that a meritocracy is elite by itself and it is a ruling class, i.e. a stratum possessing power. Others think that meritocrats are those who managed to achieve impressive success. However, meritocracy does not match either group though individual representatives of the above-mentioned groups can become elite.

Regarding methodological approach Kim German [3: 69] claims that elite and meritocracy as academic issues are divided into two camps rooted in the classical sociology: **meritocratic** (normative-value) and **authoritative** (status-functional).

Representatives of the *meritocratic approach* (V.Pareto, J. Ortega and M. Weber) which historically appeared earlier, treat meritocracy and elite as the same notion and define it as the "superiority" (first intellectually, then morally and so on) of some people over others. According to V. Pareto (1848-1923), Italian sociologist and economist who introduced the term "elite" in 1902, power and wealth presuppose that people who claim to belong to the elite should possess certain qualities: military valour, proper origin, personal dignity, art of management etc. These ideas were later clearly expressed in the works of a Spanish philosopher and social thinker J. Ortega (1883-1955). He referred to the elite as those who possess intellectual or moral superiority, and supreme responsibility. In other words, formation of the elite, according to this group of scholars, is a consequence of the natural selection of the most capable.

The idea of meritocracy as a social system in which merit or talent is the basis for sorting people into positions and distributing rewards [8: 413] has received great attention since the term was popularized in 1958 by Young [10]. Advocates of meritocracy stress that in true meritocratic systems everyone has an equal chance to advance and obtain rewards based on their individual merits and efforts, regardless of their gender, race, class, or other non-merit factors.

The *authoritative approach* to the research of meritocratic and elite groups is represented in the theories of G. Mosca and R. Mills and is based on the main categories of the structural-functional analysis of social ties. In its most logical aspect

this approach is revealed in the theory of an Italian sociologist G. Mosca (1994). In his concept of a ruling class he offers to consider the elites as a social minority who are more active in the political sphere than the majority, and who take the function of management upon themselves. At that G. Mosca notes that the ruling class is present in any society irrespective of sticking or not sticking to certain ethical principles which have a negative or positive influence on society.

Thus a generalized verdict on the state of elite studies in the American space is as follows. Firstly, the discourse of the meritocratic elite (in its many forms but mainly in the political sphere) is attracting the attention of political science scholars and sociologists. Furthermore, the degree of study of different aspects of elitism and its functioning is characterized by quantitative asymmetry. Secondly, American meritocratic elite scholars are using theoretical and methodological approaches of European science. Thirdly, the modern meritocratic elite of the US space did not appear spontaneously to fill an empty space, therefore, before turning to the direct analysis of meritocratic elite formation within the American education system it is appropriate to provide some historical preconditions for it.

2. Meritocratic Trends in the American Education System.

The goal of universal merit-based basic education in developed countries like the USA has grown out of the recognition of the importance for equipping nations and individuals with the capacities and tools required to respond to the demands of changing economic structures. In particular, the fast-changing patterns of employment and skills requirements in the global economic system are making multiple demands on education systems. Basic education is also recognized as providing the means to social development ends – such as improving health conditions and status, enhancing political awareness and participation. In addition to its instrumental value, the intrinsic value of education is also emphasized, particularly in terms of how it increases the agency and choice of individuals. This translates into their participation in securing better quality lives and prospects for themselves and for future generations, as well as the wider socio-political environment [4]. Investing in education is seen as one of the fundamental ways in which nation states and their

citizens can move together to achieve long-term development goals and improve both social and economic standards of living. This is born out by data, which indicate that high levels of education and development are positively correlated.

3. Meritocratic University and Gender.

The idea that our social world and working life are becoming individualized has been under discussion for a few decades [2]. Some participants in the debate have regarded the change as positive, and have glorified individual freedom, the creativity it produces and the rise of the new knowledge economy. However, ideas relating to individualization, such as the idea that market risks are now taken by the employee rather than the employer, have critical potential. Even stronger arguments have been made by Sennett [9], who suggests that the loosening of the ties between work and the individual leads to ‘the corrosion of character’. Thinkers on both sides of the debate have been accused of overemphasizing change over continuity [6]. It is true that there are some continuous trends, and that the nature of work–life has not changed entirely (from material to immaterial work, for instance).

Minna Nikunen [4:715-725] argues that while there are also continuities in academic work, the individualization associated with neoliberalism is a crucial factor. In order to emphasize current policy, the neoliberal agenda to transform welfare society has been called ‘enterprise culture’. Institutions such as universities should be more like enterprises, and individuals should act like entrepreneurs. Both individualization and enterprise culture foster the meritocratic ideal.

Meritocracy means that career advancement and rewards depend on merit. However, many regard meritocracy as no more than an ideal, since one’s academic career and success are affected by more than just one’s individual achievements [1]. There are many forms of support – peers, colleagues, superiors, supervisors, mentoring, networks and so on – and reputation and recognition are connected to support and patronage from senior colleagues.

Sometimes it is not easy for contract researchers to gain recognition, even when they are research active. One reason for this is that it is often the project leaders who get the credit for ‘their’ researchers’ work. In relation to gender, it has been

claimed that it is easier for men to get this kind of support and to gain recognition. Furthermore, the degree of support one receives from home and intimate relationships is also gendered, partly because of men's and women's different obligations at home. While the ideal of meritocracy rests on the idea that everyone is equal, in reality people do not have the same obligations or starting points. Questions of affirmative action, equality, childcare and work/life balance can therefore become problematic when viewed through the lens of this ideal [5].

4. Language Matters: Data and Analysis

The research material consists of 28 semi-structured interviews with academics working on short (three years or less) fixed-term contracts or stipends, gathered during the spring 2013 in Towson University (Maryland, US). The informants are mainly contract researchers (18 women and 10 men). They also include workers in teaching positions, and both PhD students and those holding doctorates.

The informants were from three different university departments, which inhabit different positions in the US academic labour market, best illustrated through a description of the differences between the fields. In the context of the current emphasis on technical applicability, research funding has been increased in the field of technical sciences, the natural sciences have also made some funding gains, and the humanities have gained the least. According to PhD-holders themselves, graduates with recently completed PhDs in technical sciences occupy the best positions in the labour market, natural scientists the second best, and humanities PhDs the worst. There is also a clear difference between men and women in the natural sciences, with men having better career prospects than women [7].

However, these differences do not make the data representative: the aim was to hear different voices and to investigate the communication tactics they employed in their responses. The overall aim of qualitative analysis is to understand human communication strategies, for instance to find out the meanings the informants give to their actions while implying certain tactics.

The informants were categorized according to whether they consider their work to be (1) insecure, (2) quite insecure, (3) quite secure or (4) secure. Comparisons

between different disciplines, ages and gender groups were then made, mainly in relation to a feeling of security. For the purposes of this article I have picked out three themes from the interviews suggested by Nikunen [7: 718]:

- (1) What the informants feel is the most important thing about their work;
- (2) How equal the informants think that their workplace is, and whether they think gender has an effect on work or career;
- (3) Whether the informants think that having (or not having) children affects men's and women's careers in general, as well as their own careers in particular.

Responses to these themes were categorized and investigated to discover the most common communication tactics used to describe a career in academia; the best aspects of the work; how informants think that universities treat men, women, mothers and fathers; and how they expect parenthood to affect their careers.

The informants use both *positive* and *negative* tactics representing aspects of precarious freedom. Some think that fixed-term contracts are merely a form of organizing work, and that they are free to leave after their contract ends or have fewer responsibilities than those in more secure or permanent positions. Others see their position as insecure and even hope for more responsibility. However, not even those who feel secure regard their fixed-term jobs as stepping-stones to permanent jobs, as can be the case in other work environments, since permanent jobs are so scarce at university [7].

According to the interviews, the overall picture was that informants appreciated the temporal and spatial flexibility of their work. It was often commented that this aspect compensated for insecurity and low pay. The term 'freedom', and sometimes even 'academic freedom', was often used in that sense. However, the term 'academic freedom' was usually used to describe the ability to decide for oneself how and what to research – to be autonomous:

...An additional benefit of working at the university is flexibility. This occupation affords you flexibility not only in the types of activities you engage in, but also within how the activity is performed. There is relatively no structure put on the topics that you can research and learn about. For example, as a researcher you get

to decide what types of questions you will research, what you teach (to some degree), and what service activities you perform (again, to some degree). If you are a person that likes learning, then being a university member can be very rewarding (male humanities researcher).

In several interviews the university was referred to as a good place to work if you have children. Some informants said they had chosen academia because it offers better possibilities for combining work and family life. Informants also made reference to their partners' work situations: if the partner had a temporally and spatially demanding job, the flexible worker in the family could end up being the one who had to put their own work on hold to take care of sick children. Women use positive tactics while describing more serious difficulties in combining work and family; their tiredness and the difficult arrangements they have to make; and the fact that they are doing just enough at work to cover necessary requirements and putting their greater aspirations to one side while their children were young:

Q: How did having young children affect your PhD thesis?

A)...*I had two kids while I was in graduate school, yet managed to finish my MA thesis and PhD in six years. I think that many of the lessons I learned by being a graduate student with a family continue to be crucial to my success today...*(female humanities researcher).

B). *I started my PhD without children and got pregnant in my first term. Three years down the line I now have two children and a half completed PhD. The only way I could keep up the hours for the PhD was to work on it most evenings after my youngest went to bed. This is fine in theory but it places quite a strain on family life and particularly on my relationship with my husband. Plus you never really find the time to relax and spend time on yourself* (female humanities researcher).

Women with children also expressed greater fear than men about the consequences on their own careers. However, the failure of some people to recognize that men with children had also taken time off work, taken care of their children, and been flexible in relation to the family, suggested that some gendered interpretations were at play [7: 722].

Conclusion

After conducting this part of the research we can claim that the workplace is seen as equal, because everybody is measured by the same standards and everyone has the freedom to choose. Gender equality discourse is strong in the USA, although equality is often presented as something that has already been achieved. It seems that merit-based education discourse is used to describe one's own actions and plans. Gender favouritism was presented as the opposite of meritocracy. If there is no straightforward gender discrimination, the university is meritocratic. Thus the possibility of social support –whether exclusive or inclusive – was ruled out of the picture.

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