

Meritocracy and Gender in Education Discourse: Language Matters

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to provide an answer to the question: to what extent the word "meritocracy" is justified and correct for all modern societies especially post-Soviet countries. The focus of our attention is on the meritocracy in education discourse in the post-Soviet space namely in Ukraine, which some scholars view as a phantom and others as objective reality. Russian and Ukrainian research works on elite and meritocracy as academic issues are deficient regarding quantitative and, what is more important, qualitative indicators of the total historiography of post-Soviet space on the whole. Regarding methodological approach Kim German (2010) claims that they are divided into two camps rooted in the classical sociology: meritocratic (normative-value) and authoritative (status-functional). Over the last decades in post Soviet Union studies, there appeared a number of areas which investigate the formation and functioning of political, regional, entrepreneurial, academic and cultural sub-meritocratic elites. The goal is to contribute to a better understanding of merit-based education systems and gender disparities at universities.

*Keywords:* gender; meritocracy; merit-based education discourse.

# MERITOCRACY AND GENDER IN EDUCATION DISCOURSE

## Meritocracy and Gender in Education Discourse: Language Matters

In the first decades of the twenty first century education in post Soviet Union countries has been perceived as the 'saviour' of the meritocratic ideal. In this paper I will first investigate some of the implications of the lasting emphasis that has been placed upon education in Ukraine, in the pursuit of a just and equal society. Initially, I will present two main strands of thought vis-a-vis meritocracy.

Secondly, I will show how these different approaches have shaped the pertinent debate. I will consider the main line of reasoning related to the achievement of gender equity in education, laying out some of the contradictions and tensions in donor discourse and policy efforts, and pointing out some of the disjunctures between policy assumptions and the complexities of household decision made in different contexts. The education of women in particular is seen as providing the key to securing intergenerational transfers of knowledge, and providing the substance of long-term gender equality and social change.

Thirdly, I'll argue that any analysis of advances in female education can be achieved requires sophisticated conceptual frameworks and tools, which unpack the intersections and interlinkages between social and economic aspects of exclusion. In particular I argue that the meritocracy through educationdiscourse can potentially conceal inequalities and injustices in the contemporary market-driven Ukrainian society.

Finally, 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.

### **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 have a clear understanding of what these notions mean. 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.

Undoubtedly, Russian and Ukrainian research works on elite and meritocracy as academic issues are deficient regarding quantitative and, what is more important, qualitative indicators of the total historiography of post-Soviet space on the whole. Regarding methodological approach Kim German (2010) claims that they 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 intellectual, then moral 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

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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 (Scully, 1997: 413) has received great attention since the term was popularized by Young (1994) in 1958. 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. Because meritocracy has been culturally accepted as a fair and legitimate distributive principle in many advanced capitalist countries and organizations (Scully, 1997), scholars have sought to assess the extent to which equal opportunity and meritocratic outcomes have been successfully achieved in society (Arrow, Bowles, and Durlauf, 2000; Dench, 2006).

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 relations. This approach is revealed in the theory of an Italian sociologist G. Mosca (1994). His concept of a ruling class offers us 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. G. Mosca notes that the ruling class is present in any society disregarding ethical principles which have a negative or positive influence on the society.

In post-Soviet Union studies over the last decades, there appeared a number of areas which investigate the formation and functioning of political, regional, entrepreneurial, academic and cultural sub-meritocratic elites. Researches on political elites were carried out by Ashin G.K. (1985), Ponedelkov A.V., Starostin A.V. (2001), Kryshtanovskaya O. (2004), Gaman-Golutvina O.V. (2006), Kang Phyon Ki (2006), Kim German (2010) and others.

As for meritocratic elite studies in Ukraine, these are represented by reference books in different spheres of economy, culture, education and politics. Among them we can single

out the work of A. Hrycak (2001). However, it is too early to speak about a conception of elite studies as a separate academic area either in Ukraine or in other post-Soviet countries. State research centers do not include any analysis of the modern Ukrainian meritocratic elite among their priorities, and there is no independent initiative aimed at developing meritocratic elite studies.

Thus a generalized verdict on the state of elite studies in the post-Soviet space is as follows. Firstly, the discourse of the meritocratic elite is attracting the attention of political science scholars and sociologists. Furthermore, the investigation level of different aspects of elitism and its functioning is characterized by quantitative asymmetry. Secondly, Post-Soviet meritocratic elite scholars are using theoretical and methodological approaches of Western science. Thirdly, the modern meritocratic elite of the post-Soviet space did not appear spontaneously. It is appropriate to provide some historical preconditions before returning to the direct analysis of meritocratic elite formation within the Ukrainian education system.

### **Meritocratic Trends in the Ukrainian Education System**

One of the key factors affecting the essential characteristics of the meritocratic elite is the system of its formation. Meritocratic elitogenesis reflects the aggregate relationships within a state system and is considered to be not only a technology but also a specific political and socio-cultural institution with its own laws of development. Meritocracy in the post-Soviet space including Ukraine is undergoing the process of formation. The modern meritocratic elitogenesis in education is pre-conditioned by a number of factors in the sphere of politics, having both synchronic and diachronic character: processes of recruitment; incorporation and rotation in the higher echelons of power; increasing effect of the heritage of the traditional tribal society; decreasing inertia of the Nomenklatura of the Soviet past (Kim German 2010). The mechanisms of incubation, selection and acceleration of the rising generation in the state elite have not lived up to the expectations. As a result the issue of the

quality level of the new generation elite in Ukraine remains unsolved. Lack of a constructive dialogue between the political elite in power and academic elite is blocking one channel of rotation (Hrycak, 2001). Meritocratic studies in neighboring Russia are in the process of becoming a separate academic area. As for Ukraine it is just an embryo. The initiation and development of this area of study, which has a great practical importance, depends both on the willingness of the state and the determination of committed researchers and enthusiasts. The agenda includes the establishment of a specialized academic subdivision (departments, sectors, centers) for the study of topical issues of formation and the functioning of the academic meritocratic elite in Ukraine.

### **Mapping the Policy of Merit-Based Education Discourse**

The goal of the universal merit-based basic education in developing countries like Ukraine has grown out of the recognition of the importance of equipping nations and individuals owning capacities and tools required to respond to the demands of changing economic structures. In particular, the rapidly changing patterns of employment and skills requirements in the global economic system have a great influence on education systems. The intrinsic value of education is also emphasized in terms of how it increases the political awareness of individuals (Jenkin, 2012; Hrycak, 2001). Investing in education is one of the fundamental ways which can help the nation improve social and economic standards of living.

### **Gender Aspects in Merit-Based Education Discourse**

In what follows, my main concern is to examine the gender differences in merit-based education discourse (MBED), not from the standpoint of its history or of its philosophical or ideological implications, but rather from the standpoint of its sociolinguistic viability. Progress towards an MBED could be said to require *three* main processes of change:

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- the association between individuals' gender origins and their educational attainment must increasingly reflect *only* their level of ability - as other factors that might prevent the full expression of this ability are removed or offset;
- the association between individuals' educational attainment and the level of qualifications acquired through education becoming of dominant importance in academic selection procedures; and
- the association between educational attainment and level of academic success must become *constant* (or uniform) for individuals of differing gender.

What I'd like to show now is that these three processes of change are not in fact going ahead in the way that those who would favour the idea of an MBED might wish to see. This I aim to do by drawing on research in which I am currently engaged. Said research is confined to Ukraine; but findings of the kind I shall present are certainly not specific to Ukraine, as I shall from time to time indicate.

First, then, I consider the association between gender and educational attainment, and the extent to which this reflects only demonstrated ability. In this regard, I want to refer to results from research conducted on gender differentials in Ukraine, and in one crucial academic transition: i.e. the transition made by post graduate students and researchers, as against the alternative of leaving full-time education for the labour market or staying on in university to take more academic courses and continue their academic career.

Gaps between male and female participation in the academic sphere and higher education are common to both developing and industrialized countries (UNESCO, 1995). While they may be narrowing in some cases, persistent gender stereotyping results in women being segregated into specific areas of study, which further reinforces norms regarding appropriate social and economic roles for women that discriminate against them in gaining



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access to jobs on an equal basis with men. Ukraine is not an exception. Women are typically encouraged to pursue humanities, education and health sciences, whereas men are pushed toward education in mathematics and the sciences, which have a strong vocational link (Saith and Harriss-White, 1998). Thus, even where women break barriers in terms of access to tertiary education, cultural norms shaping their relationship to the wider world of economic opportunity are not necessarily left behind.

### **Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis**

According to Judith Butler (Judith Butler, 1990), gender, as a category of social difference that structures society, is not a static category but a performative one; one that by its very nature requires change and reinterpretation in order to retain its analytical and cultural utility. Gendered mores have the ability to help construct and order social relations as historical circumstances change. Yet, as a set of relational categories made real by social performance, gender can neither be understood as something natural and unconflicted, nor as something consciously assumed by individuals choosing freely between identities. Rather, gendered categories are an aggregate of constantly-changing cultural understandings and social negotiations which, far from being purely descriptive, strongly tend to produce the phenomenon they set out to describe. This discursive model of gender analysis—wherein description and reiteration of categories, standards, and ideals tend to produce their own subjects - also means that “power is not only imposed externally but works as the regulatory and normative means by which subjects are formed. Gendered discourses have the power to create categories that structure society, and often determine how people navigate a wide range of social, legal, and economic interactions.

### **Diagnosing Ukraine’s Gender Case**

To begin with, female scientists are of the utmost importance due to the fact that the majority of linguists in Ukraine are women. Indeed, up to sixty percent are women, and most

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of them work as researchers. They hold positions all the way to the top but there is still few women holding high position. Even if the majority of linguists in Ukraine are women, there are some problems regarding gender inequality in the Ukraine, but there are also chances of improvement.

Moreover, in everyday life there are more inequalities and also pressure on women. Ukraine is an orthodox country, this is the reason why women in science fall victim to the prevailing notion that their work is not valued once they have kids. Also, women are expected to mostly dedicate themselves to their family and put their work in the background. This social role, that women have to play, takes a lot of time and most women can't focus on their career development.

Moreover women suffer the brunt of oppressive social notions which expects them to marry by a specific time, no later than 25 years old. This social code implies that people do not pay attention to whether or not a woman really wants to be engaged so early on in her life. Society is less concerned about her career or academic achievements. As a consequence, feelings of inferiority and depression appear in women who do not conform to the norm. Nonetheless, nowadays there is a growing number of female scientists and researchers who don't want to fold under social rules because they would like to be successful in their career and be a model for other women (Vlasenko, N.S., Vinogradova, Z.D., and I.V. Kalachova (2000).

Scientific achievements made by women are considered a child's play, where female scientists cannot earn a respectable income. People tend to consider that only men can reach high levels in their careers; taking as an excuse that "this is not for women, they should stay at home and take care of their kids." This is a standard way of thinking in Ukraine. In a nutshell, promoting equality should be important and represent a major stake for all people. The world is surrounded with problems which call for changes in human perception in order

to improve the current situation. The overall conclusion is that a considerable number of people tend to shy away from accepting the importance of female scientists and their help.

### **Meritocratic University and Gender**

The idea that our social world and working life are becoming individualized has been under discussion for a few decades (Beck 2000; Bauman 2001). Some participants in the debate have regarded the change as positive (Castells 2004), 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 (Beck 2000; M. Nikunen Bauman 2001). Even stronger arguments have been made by Sennett (1998), 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 (McDowell 2008). 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 (Nikunen, 2012: 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 (Bagilhole and Goode 2001; Bryson 2004a). 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 (Bryson 2004b).

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 (Bagilhole and Goode 2001). 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 (Clegg 2008). 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 (Lynch, Crean, and Moran 2010).

In Ukraine, like in Finland, meritocratic ideas have not impacted upon women’s work/family (or work/life) balance or on ideals of motherhood to the same extent as, for example, in the UK: women in Ukraine are not so strongly encouraged to leave the home in favour of paid work. Furthermore, mothers with careers are criticized in the media for being selfish, and they are expected to take at least one year’s family leave. These familial norms are applied to mothers irrespective of education or class background (Nikunen, 2012: 716-717). Academic women may experience normative pressure to take long periods of leave, and men to take at least paternity leave – but good day care provision and the values of academic work also play a role. Furthermore, academic workers’ perceptions of their own employability (including the security of their existing positions) and questions of money also affect their decision-making.

### **Language Matters: Data and Analysis**

The research material consists of 32 semi-structured interviews with academics working on short (three years or less) fixed-term contracts or stipends, gathered during the spring and summer 2013 (following the research done by Minna Nikunen (2012: 713-729). The informants are mainly contract researchers (20 women and 12 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 Ukrainian 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 (Nikunen, 2012).

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. Giving meanings (mobilizing discourses) is important because it can be consequential: how one conceives her or his own situation directs her/his actions. 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 (2012: 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 (Nikunen, 2012; Korpi and Levin 2001).

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

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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 effect 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 (Nikunen, 2012: 722).

So, 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 Ukraine, 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.

### **Conclusions and Future Study**

The merit-based women education in Ukraine is seen as key means of securing gender equality in the society. Gendered meritocratic discourses have the power to create categories that structure society, and often determine how people navigate a wide range of social, legal, and economic interactions. I believe that merit-based education discourse is getting stronger in our society, and that classical university values can also be integrated with it: they are not diametrically opposed as it is sometimes presented. Academic freedom can take new forms under conditions of precariousness. Furthermore, the idea of meritocracy – also deeply individualist – is easily incorporated into the university system (Lynch, Crean and Moran



2010). Institutions such as universities should be more like enterprises, and individuals should act like entrepreneurs. Both individualization and enterprise culture foster the meritocratic ideal.

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