Annalena Oppel   February 19th, 2025

How race shows up in meritocratic belief systems

In a meritocracy, success results from talent and hard work alone; other circumstances do not matter. But how is this meant to make sense for racialised minorities whose talent and hard work, historically, have been largely decoupled from reward? For young Black adults in South Africa, the very idea of meritocracy rests on a precarious kind of "double consciousness", argues **Annalena Oppel**.

Meritocracy – the belief that success is the result of hard work and talent – is baked into the dominant narrative around progress in Western societies. In our daily lives, we encounter meritocratic ideals all the time: in the notion of the American dream, in Forbes' list of "richest self-made women", in sayings like "work hard, play hard" and "from rags to riches" – each of these examples celebrating and reinforcing the idea of individual exceptionalism. In political domains, meanwhile, striving towards a meritocracy is often seen as a pathway to more just and equitable societies – perhaps especially in the era of globalisation.

Equating success with hard work and talent seems fair in principle. But does this narrative conceal as much as it reveals? Meritocracy places no weight on the importance of the circumstances we are born into or face throughout our lifetime that are beyond our control. Instead, it puts the focus squarely on the individual: if you try hard enough and have enough talent, you will succeed.

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This means that meritocratic belief systems offer simplistic ways of rationalising and justifying structural inequalities that tend to deteriorate individuals' chances and choices in life. Of course, unequal circumstances can be used to reinforce meritocratic ideals: "overcoming hurdles" is a celebrated element of the meritocratic success narrative. But the empirical reality is that structural inequalities largely contradict the "self-made meritocratic hero" logic, because circumstances do matter.

Tracing back the rise of meritocracy (and the silence on race)

In its original conception, meritocracy was not intended as an ideal or utopia. When Michael Young coined the term in his book, The Rise of the Meritocracy, published in 1958, it was merely seen as a new narrative that lends comfort to those already in advantageous positions. Advantages created by former aristocracies received a new script without replacing the roles on the stage or the basic set-up of the stage itself.

Young's book focuses on Britain. Yet it makes no explicit reference to race or racism, nor to Britain's history of colonialism. It therefore overlooks a complex connection between Northern aristocracies and their colonial histories. Even today, the link between racism and meritocracy rarely leads to deeper discussions about the politics and foundations of meritocracy. Instead, the focus often centres on an exploration of a normative clash between the self-made meritocrat and affirmative action policies which seek to rebalance historical disadvantages (eg, linked to race, gender, and so on) through positive discrimination. Yet in reality, race and racism are intertwined with the very idea of the self-made meritocrat.

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Looking at meritocracy through the lens of symbolic racism – forms of racism whose dominant theme is "not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences" – offers some insight here. Moving away from physical racialised stereotypes, symbolic racism focuses on

cultural, behavioural and social differences that serve as markers of "othering" – labelling certain behaviours as typical of a particular racialised group, and in turn using this as a basis for social and political coercion and discrimination. For Black people, this has often resulted in a "double consciousness", being forced to view themselves through two lenses: their own self-perceptions and the perception imposed by a society that sees them according to certain presumptions and expectations. Ultimately, that societal perception is one of inferiority, thus hindering the development of a positive self-identity.

In South Africa, one form of double consciousness that prevails is the "Coconut" narrative. "Being a coconut" is typically used as a negative label for those who deviate from established cultural norms within Black communities: having a foot in the black and white worlds, but acceptance in neither. When a member of the Black community appears Black on the outside but white on the inside, it means that they have adopted white habits, symbols and cultural traits like enjoying Shakespeare or Coldplay – and so to have "defiantly forced your way into a space previously inaccessible due to racism".

The self-made meritocrat, I would argue, constitutes one of these formerly inaccessible spaces since, historically, hard work and talent were largely decoupled from reward for black individuals through dehumanising systems and oppressive structures.

How race shapes beliefs about meritocracy among South Africans today

Looking at the meritocratic beliefs of 365 young South African professionals today, we can see how a double consciousness shapes self- versus other- evaluations of success.

Figure 1 shows that when asked about their own success ("Self-view"), individuals tend to attribute notably higher scores to meritocratic factors – hard work and talent, shown in green and blue – compared to non-meritocratic factors such as political connections and family wealth (orange and red bars). By contrast, when thinking about others, the perceived importance of meritocratic factors shrinks while the importance of non-meritocratic factors increases. This is shown for two groups: "Others-Black" (thinking about Black success) and "Others-White" (thinking about white success). When thinking about Black South Africans, this is especially true for political connections (which score 20 points higher compared to the "Self-view"). When thinking about white South Africans ("Others-White"), family wealth is deemed to be especially important (18 points higher than the "Self-view").

Figure 1: Perceptions on getting ahead in life

Figure 2 shows the same data, only here it is broken down by the race of the respondent. Respondents who identified themselves as white generally maintain a more meritocratic view of success across all racialised groups – the green and blue bars scoring consistently higher than the orange and red bars. By contrast, respondents identifying as Black assign significantly lower importance to talent and hard work when thinking about white South Africans (and significantly higher importance to political connections and family wealth); they also assign greater importance to political connections and family wealth for other Black individuals compared to how they evaluate themselves, though to a lesser extent as compared to white South Africans. These findings perhaps reflect the historical reality mentioned above, where hard work and talent were largely detached from reward both for Black individuals (due to their oppression/exploitation) and for white individuals (due to their role as oppressors). Such an extractivist system of production was skewed to favour white individuals regardless of their talent while offloading hard work onto black individuals, denouncing the existence of their talents.

Figure 2: Perceptions on getting ahead in life – broken down by respondents' racial self-identification

Overall, these findings suggest that meritocracy remains a topic that is open to interpretation. The differential scores for factors driving success (self vs others, and how this breaks down across racial lines) emphasise the importance of what constitutes success *for whom*, and how historical forms of discrimination can manifest today in more subtle and complex ways.

For on the face of it, historical 'Non-meritocracies' differ markedly from present-day 'Meritocracies'. But digging deeper, present-day 'Meritocracies' seem to echo similar dominance structures as before. In particular, the recognition of talent and hard work as meritorious requires their 'whitening': both in terms of adopting the white point of view on this topic (Figure 2 shows the greater adherence to meritocratic principles, across racialized groups, for white South Africans) and in terms of moving away from the historically reality (felt most of all by Black South Africans) in which reward was barely existent despite their talent and hard work.

The greater adherence to meritocratic principles for white South Africans is also consistent with a downplaying of the importance of structural barriers to success. While those structural barriers are acknowledged for *others* by Black South Africans, they are reported to matter less for oneself. Hence their "double-consciousness" around the determinants of success may reflect a desire to claim a more positive narrative concerning one's own success, with the knock-on effect of reinforcing the individual agency narrative that if you only try hard enough, you can make it. Such a view, of course, actively discourages the consideration of structural barriers being at play (let alone taking action to remove these barriers).

Taken together, these findings call for the need to rethink and reimagine framings of success in more realistic and collective ways, taking racialisation into account.

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