



Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Research in Social Stratification and Mobility xxx (2014) xxx–xxx

Research in Social
Stratification and
Mobility

<http://elsevier.com/locate/rssm>

Perceptions of meritocracy in the land of opportunity

Jeremy Reynolds*, He Xian

University of Georgia, United States

Received 9 August 2013; received in revised form 24 February 2014; accepted 5 March 2014

Abstract

For years, sociologists have studied mobility patterns and status attainment to determine empirically how well societies meet meritocratic ideals. Few studies, however, have examined whether people believe they live in a meritocratic society. In this paper, we use the 1987 and 2010 General Social Survey to examine people's perceptions of meritocracy in the U.S. Although most Americans agree that getting ahead depends on meritocratic elements like hard work, their beliefs vary in strength. They disagree even more about the importance of non-meritocratic elements such as family wealth, and race. Furthermore, Americans layer these beliefs on top of each other to create a variety of perspectives on meritocracy. Young, upper class Whites are most likely to see the U.S. as a place where meritocratic elements rule. Older, lower class minorities, in contrast, are most likely to believe that non-meritocratic elements dominate. There are also Americans who believe strongly in both types of elements and those who do not believe strongly in either.

© 2014 International Sociological Association Research Committee 28 on Social Stratification and Mobility. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Stratification beliefs; Meritocracy; Mobility; GSS

1. Introduction

Social scientists have a long-standing interest in meritocracy. Indeed, generations of authors have studied countries around the world looking for objective measures of how open and meritocratic societies are. In this paper, we examine a related but rarely studied issue: whether people *believe* they live in a meritocratic society.

Beliefs about the stratification system are important for a number of reasons. They influence people's judgments about the fairness of inequality (Hadler, 2005;

Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl, 2011; McCoy & Major, 2007; McNamee & Miller, 2009: 1–4). They influence support for policies related to income inequality (Kluegel & Smith, 1986), health (Kwate & Meyer, 2010), crime (Thompson & Bobo, 2011) and workplace inequality (Light, Roscigno, & Kalev, 2011). Beliefs about meritocracy even seem to influence the behavior of the U.S. Supreme Court (DeSario, 2003).

American beliefs about meritocracy are particularly interesting because of the contrast between what Americans believe and what they experience (McNamee & Miller, 2009). The belief in meritocracy is described as part of the dominant American ideology (Marger, 2008: 216; Rothman, 2005: 71), and Americans are more likely than people in other countries to think mobility is tied to effort and skills and less likely to think it is tied to family wealth (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins,

* Corresponding author at: Department of Sociology, 116 Baldwin Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-1611, United States. Tel.: +1 706 583 8072; fax: +1 706 542 4320.

E-mail address: jeremyr@uga.edu (J. Reynolds).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2014.03.001>

0276-5624/© 2014 International Sociological Association Research Committee 28 on Social Stratification and Mobility. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

2008). Actual mobility patterns, however, suggest that non-meritocratic factors may actually be more important in the U.S. than in other countries. A person's educational and economic outcomes, for instance, are more closely tied to one's family of origin in the U.S. than in many other industrialized countries (Beller & Hout, 2006; Ermisch, Jäntti, & Smeeding, 2012; Jäntti et al., 2006). This contrast between what Americans believe and what they experience makes their beliefs especially interesting.

American beliefs about meritocracy are also interesting because there are good reasons to suspect that they may have changed in recent years. In the last few decades, Americans have seen the proliferation of nonstandard employment contracts, rising income inequality, a string of corporate scandals, a major economic recession, and a tax-payer funded bailout of Wall Street. Some authors summarize the situation by suggesting that the American Dream has been "downsized" (McNamee & Miller, 2009: 11–16). These events may prompt Americans to question whether hard work and ability still are the keys to success. Americans, however, have also seen reductions in racial and gender inequality, a presidential campaign by Hillary Clinton, and the election of Barack Obama. Events like these may convince Americans that the U.S. is becoming more meritocratic.

Studies that examine beliefs in meritocracy, however, are relatively rare. The most recent peer reviewed studies of meritocracy in the U.S. rely on data that are more than twenty years old (see Barnes, 2002; Shepelak, 1989). Consequently, it is not clear if Americans see the U.S. as a largely meritocratic country or how unified they are in their beliefs. It is also not clear if or how American's beliefs have changed over time.

We provide a long overdue update using data from the 1987 and 2010 General Social Surveys (GSS). We examine the importance Americans attribute to both meritocratic and non-meritocratic elements and their overall assessment of how meritocratic the United States is. We examine changes in Americans' beliefs regarding what people need to get ahead in the United States. We also examine how Americans layer beliefs about meritocratic and non-meritocratic elements on top of each other. Finally, we examine how beliefs about meritocracy vary by race, gender, class, and age.

2. Literature review

The connotation of the word meritocracy has become strikingly more positive since its creation in 1958. Michael Young coined the term in his book, *Rise of the Meritocracy*, and defined it as a society in which

merit = IQ + effort. He argued that attempts to create a meritocracy could lead to undesirable outcomes; most notably, a demoralized underclass whose relative disadvantage would be seen as deserved (1958). To Young, meritocracy was something we should fear. Today, however, much to Young's chagrin (2001), the pursuit of meritocratic ideals is typically seen as unambiguously good, fair, and desirable (Allen, 2011; Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001), especially in the United States (Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007).

Given the enthusiasm for meritocratic ideals, it is not surprising that researchers have looked for objective criteria to assess how meritocratic different societies actually are. As part of this effort, they have examined mobility rates and the status attainment process (for reviews see: Ganzeboom, Treiman, & Ultee, 1991; Treiman & Ganzeboom, 2000). They have also examined the extent to which rewards in a society are allocated according to ability, effort, and education rather than factors such as race, gender, family of origin, or social ties, but they have sometimes disagreed about how to interpret the evidence (e.g., Breen & Goldthorpe, 1999; Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001; Saunders, 1997; Swift, 2004).

Researchers have also examined the potential importance of people's *beliefs* about the stratification system (Hunt & Wilson, 2011). There is much research, for instance, that examines how much gender and racial inequality people think there is (Davis & Robinson, 1991; Hunt, 2007; Kane, 2000). There is also a substantial body of research examining why people believe existing inequality is fair (Osberg & Smeeding, 2006). The dominant ideology thesis (Huber & Form, 1973) has guided much of this research about fairness (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). The argument is that inequality is legitimated because people tend to believe everyone has the opportunity to get ahead and that a person's position in the stratification system is a function of *individual* factors (e.g., effort and abilities) rather than *structural* factors (e.g., a lack of good schools). Together, these two beliefs are said to convince people that the distribution of rewards is fair and legitimate. Researchers have also examined how transitions from communism to capitalism influence people's beliefs about inequality (Kluegel, Mason, & Wegener, 1995) and the extent to which people think rewards should be distributed according to merit (Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007; Smith & Mateju, 2012).

There have been an especially large number of studies examining Americans' explanations of wealth and poverty (Feagin, 1975; Hunt, 2002; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Merolla, Hunt, & Serpe, 2011; Robinson, 2009), and although they are related to our work, they focus

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7410114>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7410114>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)