

Critically explore the social reproduction of inequality associated with Meritocracy and Social Mobility

Introduction

‘Greater inequality is associated with less mobility between generations. That means it's not just temporary; the effects last. It creates a vicious cycle’.

Barak Obama (2013)

This assignment will critically explore the social reproduction of inequality associated with meritocracy and social mobility. To engage with the issues of this assignment, we will examine the definitions of social reproduction, meritocracy, and social mobility and discuss how these terms are being interpreted. We will also explore the social reproduction of inequality through the lens of black ethnic minorities and discuss the impacts of meritocracy and the barriers to social mobility. Specifically, we will discuss employment, health outcomes, economic and social disadvantages, political and social exclusion, and low self-esteem associated with the low status of this ethnic group.

Social reproduction of inequality

Social reproduction of inequality refers to activities, policies, and procedures through which social, economic, and educational inequalities are reproduced through generations. (Willis, 1981). Society is not always equal, there are many factors affecting the life chances of groups and individuals, and these factors are reproduced through the generations. As argued by Krieger, et al (p.341, 1997), race, gender, wealth, social standing and status all play part in determining the prospects and outcomes in someone's life. Some individuals have automatic advantages at birth that although does not guarantee success, eliminates some of the barriers and limitations faced by those born into less advantageous circumstances. Conversely, individuals born into a less favourable environment and still achieve success and there are lots of examples of this in all sectors, in particular, sports where physical excellence and sporting prowess can elevate individuals economically and socially. (Bailey, 2005)

“Claims made on behalf of participation in sporting activities suggest that it has the potential to, at least, contribute to the process of inclusion by bringing individuals from a variety of social and economic backgrounds together” (Bailey, p.76, 2005)

However, is the fair to question whether this is the exception and not the rule? Several mechanisms perpetuate social reproduction, including education, economic policies and systems, cultural practices and political agendas and establishment politics, particularly Conservatism, ideology that supports maintaining the status quo. As outlined by Brown et al.

(2018), Conservatism is opposed to drastic change and supports those structures that maintain the establishment. It is, however, the responsibility of those in power to create a more equitable society that promotes social justice, tackling the systemic inequalities that prevent those less advantaged from climbing the social and economic ladder. Some organisations and conservatives, as suggested by Jetten et al. (2014), believe this can be done by building and promoting a meritocracy.

Meritocracy

Meritocracy refers to the process in which people are selected or elevated based on their abilities, qualifications, skills, and achievements rather than on their social status, ethnicity, family background or wealth. Meritocracy is predicated on being judged on performance and competence and rewarding those who surpass their rivals. (Young, 2011)

When referring to her vision for Britain in 2016, Prime minister Theresa May, said:

“I want Britain to be the world’s great meritocracy – a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow.” Theresa May (2016)

Nevertheless, even with this speech about making Britain a great meritocracy, Theresa May acknowledged the barriers that prevent social mobility for those who are deemed in the lower social class, stating:

“If we are going to make the change we need and build a great meritocracy in Britain, we need to broaden our perspective and do more for the hidden disadvantaged: children whose parents are on modest incomes, who do not qualify for such benefits but who are, nevertheless, still only just getting by.” Theresa May (2016)

Proponents of meritocracy believe in success belonging to those who are willing to work harder than anyone else, and in working hard, you can get on. With meritocracy, the playing field can be levelled, and anyone can achieve rewards for hard work and talent. However, this does not consider access to certain opportunities that those in disadvantaged and marginalised communities face. Meritocracy gives opportunity to the unprivileged but can similarly perpetuate the challenges of those disadvantaged if the structural and systemic barriers to social mobility are not also addressed. (Zhao, 2016)

Social mobility

Social mobility as discussed by Kraus et al. (p.82, 2013), refers to the ability of a group or an individual to move up, horizontally or down the social ladder within society. Social mobility is discussed in relation to upward social mobility when those deemed to be from a lower class can move up to a higher social class by certain factors such as education, career development or entrepreneurial skills.

Social mobility can be measured in various ways, for example, by looking at the numbers of a particular ethnic group that can move up or down the social ladder over a given time. This racial social mobility Gilbert et al (p174, 2022) refers to the extent that those from a different ethnic background who could face numerous barriers and challenges, can improve their economic and social status regardless of their race.

The UK Government's own assessment of social mobility in 2018 /19 found that those from higher social classes were almost 80 percent more likely to be in a professional job than those coming from working or lower class as a result, the income gap was also less, furthermore even when the classes occupy the same positions, those from a higher class still obtain a higher salary. Continuing to look at employment, the commission found that the group from working-class backgrounds had a higher level of unemployment. Privileged families were found to be more likely to own their own home, and those from less privileged backgrounds had a lower standard of living. Finally, the Social Mobility Commission found that those with additional social and economic disadvantages including ethnicity, disability, and gender are more likely to experience downward social mobility than their white, male and able equivalents. (Social Mobility Commission, 2019)

Many Governments politicians like Theresa May believe that meritocracy and social mobility can work. However, Souto-Otero (2010) suggests that when it comes to education individual's performance academically does not solely depend on effort; class, wealth and status play a significant role. It's not hard to imagine that an A* attained at Eton College would still be considered more significant than an A* achievement in a local comprehensive. Weale (2018) reported that the top eight schools in the UK got as many pupils into Oxford and Cambridge as three-quarters of all schools and colleges together. The report mentions Eton sending 60 to 100 students to Oxbridge every year, with a 'dedicated universities officer' available for interviews with these students or their parents. Nahai (p.683, 2013) points out that unmeritocratic admissions are inherently unfair and 'possibly vice versa'. Nahai (p.697, 2013) concludes that Oxford and other prestigious Universities need to do more to confront

inequality in the admission process including further trialling with data indicators that can result in greater diversity and academic excellence.

Young (2011) argues that not only do children of wealthy family benefit financially, but they also benefit from ‘the culture festooning their homes’ (Young, p104,2011). He points out that they also have the privilege of being sent to the best schools and colleges. This would also follow that their choice of University would also be advantageous. If we follow this argument through, there we could find evidence of favourable internships, including in the political hierarchy, where the opportunity to take on unpaid internships is not an issue to the wealthy. (Roth, 2019). When examining the statistics of those who are privately educated, its significant that those who have influence over our policies and laws are predominately privately educated; senior judges 65%. Civil service permanent secretaries 59%, The House of Lords 57% and the Foreign and Commonwealth office diplomats 52%. The ‘Elitism in Britain’ report (2019) also records the high number of privately educated people working in the media, who are in a position to influence the narrative that is broadcast to the country. The report comments on the financial barriers and accumulation of social and cultural capital that impacts some groups being under-represented. It’s important to note that the attempts by successive governments to address the lack of social mobility is not restricted to the Conservative Party. Under New Labour, Tony Blair pledged to ‘make the spread of greater social mobility between the classes the cornerstone of his third term (Wintour, 2004)

Bloodworth (p.19, 2016)argued that even under Tony Blair's government, there was no attempt to address the inequalities associated with private schools versus state schools and goes further in suggesting that New Labour politicians also had a vested interest in ‘ maintaining educational inequalities’ and kept a ‘hands off’ approach to the wealthiest at the time they were in office.

Perpetuation of inequality for black minorities

When considering the perpetuation of inequality for black minorities, the impacts can be significant. We have discussed the impacts in education from a wealth and social status perspective. However, black minorities face additional impacts not just in education but in employment, health outcome, economic and social disadvantages, political and social exclusion, and low self-esteem associated with low-status ethnic groups (Major et al., 2017).

When considering employment and the disparities for ethnic groups, meritocracy is sometimes used to cover these inequalities. Frank (2022) highlights how those hiring and promoting often say race and ethnicity do not matter; they want ‘the best person for the job.’ (Frank. p.97, 2022). However quite often the best person for the job as Frank suggests is the person for the job is not born, but made and in making that best person we are not applying equity. The people who are being nurtured, given access to important projects, information, and encouragement are not from ethnic minorities as they are not perceived as ‘the best person for the job’ even when they are undeniably the best person for the job. If meritocracy was being applied within all organisations, then the boards of FTSE 100 companies would be far more ethnically diverse than it is. To argue the contrary, you would have to believe that only white people have the talent and competence to be elevated to the C-suite. Murray (2015) argues for gender quotas in recruitment and suggests without quotas, recruitment is not meritocratic, also making the point that to suggest there is meritocracy within politics and boardrooms would suggest that ‘rich white men are naturally superior to everyone else’ (Murray, 2015)

Meritocracy does not consider the role of bias or the ‘golf course connections’. The author was once instructed by senior management to go in search for new talent on the golf course, where of course, we would find a whole range of diverse men and women! To achieve meritocracy, organisations need to remove any opportunity for bias within the recruitment or promotion process, this will enhance the prospect of a more diverse workforce, more talent rising up the employment rank, and therefore enabling social mobility. However, a few of these successes is not sufficient, and (Brown, p.768, 2000) cautions against minority groups endorsing political strategies that might only favour a few in achieving social mobility, ‘tokens’ that can lead to a less collective group approach and consequently group outcomes. McCoy & Major (2006) go even further in suggesting it is not only the successful who believe that they are deserving of their status due to merit, but also extends to those who are disadvantaged, believing their status is justified and blaming themselves for the lack of upward mobility. This belief structure prominent in the United States helps to maintain the hierarchy structures and status quo. (McCoy & Major 2006) Within the UK, the Institute for fiscal studies reported that despite minority ethnic groups performing well in education, in particular at the degree level, this has not translated into employment advantages, with people from ethnic minorities having a lower rate of employment than their white counterparts. (IFS 2021).

Racial health disparities and social mobility are closely linked as health outcomes can seriously impact their ability to achieve upward social mobility. Health disparities impact all the factors affecting social mobility like wealth, employment, and education.

Structural racism within the NHS has been widely reported. There are significant disparities and health outcomes for black and Asian people which was highlighted during the pandemic, where the rates of mortality from Covid-19 were higher than for those of the white population (Office for National Statistics, 2020). In addition; Black women are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth compared to white women. These disparities are partly due to the social reproduction of inequality through structural racism and cultural incompetence. (White, 2009). Meritocracy within the health service can be helpful when considering the workforce by promoting a level playing field; there is the possibility of a more diverse and inclusive workforce where ethnic minorities are given equal opportunity for development and promotions, with a clear, fair, and transparent professional development and progression strategy for all. This would also reduce the negative impacts on patients from the same ethnicity as cultural competence should increase. Even so, consideration still has to be given to the issues discussed earlier concerning bias in recruitment.

Education disparities are a key factor that also contribute to economic social reproduction for black minorities. Education also plays a pivotal role in shaping the ideas, values, behaviours and attitudes of young people that can if nurtured influence how society develops. Whilst access to education is available, for many black minorities' education was historically oppressive and lacked inclusivity. Black and mixed white and black Caribbean students have faced discrimination and racism in schools and have higher levels of isolation, suspensions and expulsions than other ethnic groups other than Romany Gypsy (appendix one). The impact of educational disparities affects the life chances, employment opportunities and economic prospects of these groups, eliminating any real possibility of upward social mobility. The lack of quality, equitable education, in a fair and unbiased environment undoubtedly perpetuate social inequality for black minorities.

Financial capital is a key factor when discussing social reproduction (Nevill et al., 2022), as wealth is often inherited and passed down the generations. This perpetuates inequalities and sustains the existing social hierarchy, particularly in the united kingdom, where the monarchy who, sit at the top of the social hierarchy are not always seen as part of the problem with the social reproduction of inequality.

Families from ethnic minorities have lower income levels than that of white families in the UK. Among all ethnic groups, black households were most likely to have a weekly income of less than £600. Families that do not have wealth inherited or otherwise face significant barriers to achieving upwards social mobility. They will in a lot of cases have a lack of resources to invest in education, which limits their life opportunities. In addition, 'time' which is not always seen as an issue, is when those on the lower end of the wealth spectrum are forced into second jobs to make ends meet (Reed, 2022) and therefore are unable to invest time in their own personal and professional development.

Families that inherit wealth are in a position to invest in their education and their children's education. This positive continuum of investment in education, health and opportunity maintains and increases their wealth and the wealth gap between rich and poor. The historical nature of the wealth acquired, sometimes from slavery and imperialism (Scruggs, 2021), is often overlooked. However, when considered next to the relative poverty of many black and Asians, it's hard not to see the dichotomy between the two.

Banks are a source of finance that could support ethnic minorities and help support the economic disparities are often seen by black entrepreneurs as part of the establishment and not on their side and also discriminating their efforts in business. There is a lack of trust, that means for many black business owners, they are not getting the same access to advice and mentoring that others may receive. (Clawson, 2022). Clawson (2022) highlights the issue of homeownership, a disparity that exists between those from historically wealthy backgrounds and minorities who overwhelmingly occupy social housing and private rented accommodation. 68% of white British households were homeowners, 40% of black Caribbean and 20% of black Africans were homeowners from data collected between 2016 to 2018. The lack of homeownership in black ethnic groups makes it harder to take out loans and expand their businesses. Sewell briefly comments on this in his widely criticised report (Begum et al., 2021) saying:

'It is a less encouraging story with wealth and property ownership, but one would expect wealth accumulation to take longer in generational time' (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. p.40,2021)

Overall, the relationship between wealth and social reproduction of inequalities highlights the need to address these economic factors to ensure that there is a level playing field when trying to access the resources and opportunities needed for success.

Conclusion

On the surface meritocracy is fair and equal, those who work hard and study hard should be rewarded. However, this view of meritocracy does not consider the systemic inequalities, bias, racial disparities or the historical impact that affects those who appear to benefit from a meritocracy. Those who promote and espouse the benefits of a ‘great meritocracy’ state, are, in the main, the ones who have most benefitted from it. The question has to be asked whether success has come purely from their abilities and endeavour or whether social connections, inherited wealth and in some cases, white privilege have also been factors.

The challenges facing black minorities in achieving upward social mobility are immense as discussed, the socio-economic disadvantages, the low rates of homeownership coupled with the educational disparities that lead to higher levels of unemployment and low-income levels. These structural and historical barriers must be addressed to enable greater social mobility for black minorities in the UK. The Executive Chairman of the Sutton Trust, Sir Peter Lampl, sums up the issue and challenges of social mobility, stating:

“Britain is an increasingly divided society. Divided by politics, by class, by geography. Social mobility, the potential for those to achieve success regardless of their background, remains low. The key to improving social mobility at the top is to tackle financial barriers, adopt contextual recruitment and admissions practices and tackle social segregation in schools.” Sir Peter Lampl (2019)

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