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Document Version
Final published version

Published in:
Social Forces

DOI:
[10.1093/sf/soad131](https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soad131)

Publication date:
2024

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Citation for published version (APA):
Friedman, S., Ellersgaard, C., Reeves, A., & Grau Larsen, A. (2024). The Meaning of Merit: Talent Versus Hard Work Legitimacy. *Social Forces*, 102(3), 861-879. Article soad131. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soad131>

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Download date: 19. Apr. 2024



The Meaning of Merit: Talent versus Hard Work Legitimacy

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Elites often use merit to explain, justify, and make sense of their advantaged positions. But what exactly do they mean by this? In this paper, we draw on 71 interviews with elites in Denmark and the UK to compare self-justifications of meritocratic legitimacy. Our results indicate that while elites in both countries are united by a common concern to frame their merits as spontaneously recognized by others (rather than strategically promoted by themselves), the package of attributes they foreground vary significantly. In the UK, elites tend to be “talent meritocrats” who foreground their unique capacity for ideational creativity or risk taking, innately good judgment, and “natural” aptitude, intelligence, or academic ability. In contrast, in Denmark, elites are more likely to be “hard work meritocrats” who emphasize their unusual work ethic, extensive experience (as a signal of accumulated hard work), and contributions outside of work, particularly in civil society. We tentatively argue that one explanation for this cross-national variation is the role that different channels of elite recruitment play in amplifying legitimate notions of merit. In the UK, for example, elite private schools act to nurture ideas of exceptionalism and natural talent, whereas in Denmark elite employers socialize the connection between hard work and success. These findings suggest that nationally specific understandings of merit can have quite different implications for the legitimization of inequality.

The authors would like to thank participants at the inequality workshop at OsloMet in July 2022, the *Social Forces* Editor and four anonymous reviewers for their useful comments on earlier drafts of this article

Received: October 20, 2022. **Revised:** May 10, 2023. **Accepted:** July 13, 2023

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Introduction

In recent years, a new and highly critical literature on meritocracy has flourished across the social sciences. This work has attacked the meritocratic ideal from multiple angles—empirical (Woodson 2015), philosophical (Sandel 2020; Frank 2016; Markovitz 2010), and normative (Littler 2018). Yet despite the preponderance of scholarly critiques meritocracy remains incredibly popular—both as a political ideology but also as a lens through which lay people make sense of, and justify, their own (and other people’s) life outcomes (Mijs 2019; Mijs and Savage 2020). Nowhere is this more clear than among elites. Scholars have long described how powerful societal groups legitimate their advantages through *self-justification*. As Bourdieu (1996, 265) argues: “No power can be satisfied with existing just as power, that is, as brute force, entirely devoid of justification – in a word, arbitrary – it must thus justify its existence”. Such justification is often, in turn, about articulating one’s deservingness and therefore legitimacy. As Weber (in Gerth and Mills 1991, 271) famously observed as early as 1915:

The fortunate man is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this, he needs to know that he has a right to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced that he ‘deserves’ it, and above all, that he deserves it in comparison with others ... good fortune thus wants to be legitimate fortune.

More than a hundred years later, this elite yearning for “legitimate fortune” has arguably only intensified. A range of recent studies, for example, has demonstrated elites’ insistence that their advantaged position is attributable to talent and hard work (Kantola and Kuusela 2019; Kantola 2020; Hecht 2021).

Yet one limitation of this work is that it largely fails to distinguish the relative salience of talent versus hard work in meritocratic self-beliefs. This is important, we argue here, because each point to different forms of elite self-justification, different relationships between elites and wider publics, and different notions of meritocratic legitimacy. Claims to natural or innate talent, for example, speak to notions of individual genius and imply a sense of merit-scarcity that can be used to justify an almost infinite degree of inequality (Mijs 2021). Hard work is arguably more ambiguous. It does not essentialize inequality in the same way as talent, and necessarily there is a more restricted scale for justifying inequalities premised on human labor. Yet at the same time appeals to hard work often involve aggressive boundary drawing with those less fortunate, who are seen to *choose* to work less (see Littler 2018).

In this paper, we explore these different meanings of meritocratic legitimacy by employing a comparative research design of elites in Denmark and the UK. Specifically, we draw on 71 interviews with political, business, and bureaucratic elites to ask—how do elites understand their success in Denmark and the UK, what is the relative salience of hard work and talent in their narratives, and what might explain variations in the meaning of meritocratic legitimacy across the two countries?

Elites and Meritocratic Legitimacy

A vibrant sociological literature has emerged in recent years exploring the ways in which contemporary elites use meritocracy to explain and justify their privileged position (Khan 2011; Kantola and Kuusela 2019; Hecht 2021). This work demonstrates that, across a range of occupational fields, elite fractions, and national contexts, elites tend to understand their own success as flowing from their own individual “merits” (Sherman 2017, Friedman et al. 2021). And, while many may acknowledge structural inequality at an abstract societal level, such elites largely fail to concede the impact of ascribed characteristics such as class, gender, or race on their *own* career trajectories (Brook et al. 2019; Sherman 2017, Neely 2022).

The rise of such meritocratic self-beliefs is important, according to many, because it has a range of pernicious implications for the reproduction of inequality. For example, it variously contributes to the stigmatization of working-class jobs (Littler 2018), the cultivation of “meritocratic hubris” among the successful (Sandel 2020), the mis(recognition) of arbitrary attributes as meritorious (Friedman and Laurison 2019), and, more overarchingly, a belief that inequalities of outcome are fair (Mijs 2019).

Yet one limitation in this literature is the conceptualization of the term merit¹. The conventional lay idea is that merit is the sum of talent *and* hard work, or ability *and* effort, or even as Michael Young dryly (1958) satirized in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* “intelligence + effort = merit”². Yet curiously research on meritocratic beliefs largely fails to tease apart the role of talent and hard work (Sardoč 2022, for an exception see Paugam et al. 2018). In some studies, for example, the emphasis is entirely on the role of hard work (Mijs 2019; Mijs and Savage 2020), while in others the focus is solely talent (Mijs 2021). And in the majority of work in this area, talent and hard work are conflated analytically, and presented together as evidence of generic meritocratic reasoning (Friedman and Laurison 2019).

In some ways, such confluations of talent and hard work are understandable. After all, people’s perceived talents are often only realized through the very process of hard work. Equally, as Sandel (2020) notes, “those who lack the talents society rewards may find it hard to summon the motivation to strive”. Indeed, one of the key insights in the recent burgeoning critical literature on meritocracy is that such striving tends to be easier for those with advantaged starting points (Mijs 2021). For example, the ability to develop a reputation as a “risk-taker” is often contingent on having a certain degree of financial insulation from the “bank of mum and dad” (Moor and Friedman 2021) or benefiting from gender-essentialist stereotypes that men are less risk-averse (Neely 2022).

Yet we would maintain that, when it comes to understanding elites’ *subjective* understandings of their own success, distinguishing the relative power of talent versus hard work remains important. We are fully aware that, as Khan and Jerolmack (2013) caution, people often “say meritocracy and do privilege”. But our interest here is precisely on what elites say. And in this regard, distinguishing hard work and talent is potentially important because each signal different forms of self-justification.

On the one hand claims to talent, and specifically raw or innate rather than learned forms, speaks to notions of spontaneous genius or individual exceptionalism, and arguably points to a more elitist understanding of meritocracy (Mijs and Savage 2020)³. Here, for example, inequalities of outcome can be positioned as unavoidable—the inevitable result of normal distributions of innate ability. As Former UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, claimed in a speech in 2013, it is “futile” to end inequality because a “violent economic centrifuge is operating on human beings who are already very far from equal in raw ability, if not spiritual worth”. Moreover, discursive appeals to “talent” are often implicated not just in justifying existing inequalities of outcome but also their *intensification*. As Brown et al. (2016, 195) write, for example:

The rhetoric of the ‘war for talent’ is therefore symptomatic of positional conflict within the upper-echelons of British society. Those in positions of market power are seeking to legitimate larger salaries at the expense of other employees by asserting that credentials and the claims to income and status that they have traditionally granted are now subject to re-negotiation in an economy that depends on the outstanding performance of a ‘talented’ elite.

On the other hand, foregrounding hard work is more ambiguous. In some senses, it arguably represents a more “democratic” rendering of meritocracy (Mijs and Savage 2020). After all, the popular lay perception is that everybody has the ability to work hard (Sandel 2020) and therefore it is a matter of individual agency as to whether one *chooses* to do so. Of course, though, appeals to hard work can also act to legitimize inequalities of outcome, especially when they involve a value judgment that some in society simply can and *should* work harder (see Littler 2018)⁴. Yet references

to hard work arguably do not essentialize inequality in the same way as talent. In theory, hard work meritocracy is a roadmap to equality of outcome as much as inequality of outcome.

In this paper, we interrogate these issues via a comparison of how elites understand their success in Denmark and the UK. We should be clear, though. Our aim here is not to address the biological or philosophical validity of concepts such as talent and hard work. Instead, we are interested in lay meanings of merit, and in particular the way it informs the self-beliefs of elites in two very different national settings. A comparison of these countries is particularly fruitful with regard to what Lamont (1992) terms national repertoires of evaluation, i.e. the culturally specific classification systems people draw on to make sense of their own and other people's lives. In particular, following Naudet and George (2018), we are interested in the particular place that merit plays in such nationally specific repertoires of evaluation, and how notions of meritocratic legitimacy vary cross-culturally.

In the UK, for example, class division has a long and culturally significant history. Here, elites traditionally saw themselves as having an ascribed birthright to power (Scott 1991), or later an inherent superiority based on highbrow cultural consumption (Friedman and Reeves 2020). Although this culture of ascription was slowly replaced by one of achievement (Savage 2021), notions of hermetic intelligence and eugenical thinking continued to animate political elites for much of the twentieth century (Barry 2005). One profoundly important instantiation of these ideas was in the design of the education system, whereby the secondary school system separated children into different schools on the basis of academic ability at the age of just 11. This rigid institutional division has largely been removed, but the ideology that talent is innate and measurable has persisted, as evidenced by the continuation of a set of highly exclusive and selective grammar schools, private schools, and elite universities (Reeves et al. 2017). This ideology has also had a profound influence on the remaking of Britain's economy and welfare state over this same period. Britain has pursued an industrial strategy rooted in an aspirational individualism typified both by a dominant service sector (and finance in particular) and by cuts to social security that attempted to activate the labor market. These economic shifts have generated high levels of inequality, particularly at the top end of the distribution. However, even as they pull away economically, a number of recent studies have underlined how UK elites now attempt to ward off suspicions of snobbishness and superiority by signaling their ordinariness (Friedman and Reeves 2020), downplaying advantaged class backgrounds (Friedman et al. 2021), and appearing tolerant and non-judgmental in public settings (Jarness and Friedman 2017).

In contrast, the historical political economy and elite formation of Denmark is quite different. It is a comparatively egalitarian country with a history characterized by a century long elite settlement between the dominant nobility and merchant class, and representatives from popular movements—initially by farmers and later organized labor (Pedersen 1976). As in other Scandinavian societies, this has meant that elites need to forge cross-class alliances to successfully represent all sections of society (Swenson 1991). Indeed, as Martin and Chevalier (2022) note in their study of nineteenth-century welfare state development in Denmark and the UK, while Danish elites have long seen social investment in the working classes as key to economic development, British elites historically saw the lower classes as a challenge to these goals. This is perhaps a contributing factor to the “conspicuous unobtrusiveness” of Danish and other Scandinavian elites (Daloz 2012; Ljunggren 2015), where egalitarian sentiments tend to be highly prevalent in expressions of self and interactional styles, and support for the welfare state is widespread. This is exemplified by a more generalized code of conduct known as “The Law of Jante” rooted in the novel *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks* by the Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose. Generally, the Law of Jante refers to negative depictions of individual success and achievement, or a mentality emphasizing the collective while discouraging those who stand out as achievers. Indeed, some scholars even argue that strong moral values encouraging refrain from judgment make Scandinavian elites exceptional cases when it comes to drawing symbolic boundaries.

Yet again, though, this conventional rendering of Denmark can also be problematized. Recent work (Andersen et al. 2021), for example, emphasizes that lay people in Denmark are actually quite sophisticated analysts of inequality, often precisely *because* of the social mix they have experienced in the education system. This often furnishes them with a critical understanding of the gap between Danish commitments to egalitarianism and the empirical reality of enduring class reproduction. Others have also noted that Denmark, along with other Scandinavian societies, actually has one of the highest rates of wealth inequality in the world (Pfeffer & Waitjus 2021) and that elites often draw very aggressive boundaries with less advantaged groups, who they see as culturally insular and lacking an expansive cosmopolitan outlook (Skjøtt-Larsen 2012).

Thus, elites in these two countries make for a potentially intriguing comparison precisely because they spring from quite different cultural and economic formations and yet, despite these differences (especially historically), appear to share common concerns to demonstrate meritocratic legitimacy and perform ordinariness. Flowing from this we ask—how are claims for meritocratic legitimacy made by elites in UK and Denmark? And, more specifically, what is the relative salience of raw talent and hard work in elite narratives in each country?

Methodology

While the recent revival of elite studies has been dominated by economic definitions of elites, here we draw on a wider conception of elites that combines positional and reputational definitions (Mills 1999; Mosca 1939). Specifically, we analyze 71 interviews from two complementary research projects about pathways to top *occupational* positions in the UK and Denmark.

The UK interviewees are drawn from a wider sample of 217 interviews conducted with entrants of *Who's Who*, the leading biographical dictionary of “noteworthy and influential” people in Britain (Reeves et al. 2017). *Who's Who* makes selections based on a mix of positional and reputational grounds. Around 50% of entrants are included automatically upon reaching a prominent occupational position and the other 50% are selected each year by a board of long-standing advisors, who make reputational assessments based on a person's perceived impact on society.

Danish interviewees are recruited from a wider sample of 37 interviews conducted with individuals within the 423 who occupy positions at the core of the Danish Elite network, a cross-sectoral power elite of interlocked corporate executives, business association directors, union leaders, senior civil servants, politicians, and academics (Ellersgaard et al. 2021, 2023).

To ensure we compare similar elite groups, we focus both interview samples to concentrate on 71 individuals—36 from Britain and 35 from Denmark—working at the top echelons of politics, business, and the civil service in both countries. This includes politicians, academics working in key political advisory roles, leaders of large private businesses, and senior civil servants. We focus on this sub-group for two reasons. First, this ensures that we compare elite groups who hold similarly significant positions in the same sectors. For example, all interviewees are included in either the Danish (*Kraks Blå Bog*) or UK version of *Who's Who*. Second, these individuals arguably represent the most powerful—and in the Danish case certainly the most cohesive—sub-sample within our data sets—what Bourdieu (1996) termed the “dominant” fraction of the “dominant class”.

UK interviewees were recruited in two stages. From December 2021 to February 2022, 17 interviewees were purposively sampled via email (using publicly available contact details) from *Who's Who* in order to target prominent figures in the political, business, and civil service fields. The other 19 were selected via a survey that went out to all *Who's Who* entrants ($N = 3480$) in February 2022. In total, 1678 respondents to the survey indicated that they were happy to be interviewed for the project, and an interview sample was drawn from this group that, together with those sampled in the first stage, broadly captured the demographic range of entrants to *Who's Who* from the political, business, and civil service fields in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and class origin. Interviews were conducted between January and August 2022.

Danish interviewees were selected to ensure maximum variation within Ellersgaard et al.'s (2023) mapping of the Danish Power Elite, in terms of sector, career trajectory, and social characteristics. Furthermore, the most sociometric central actors in the core of the elite network were strategically selected as they held unique positions of brokerage. Interviewees were approached via email (using publicly available contact details). Twenty-seven potential interviewees declined to participate of the original sample in Denmark and were substituted by elite individuals holding similar positions according to the aforementioned criteria. Danish interviews were carried out in 2018 and 2019.

Online Appendix Table 1 provides demographic information on all interviewees, including gender, ethnicity, age, job title, interview location, schooling, and parental occupation.

As Appendix Table 1 shows, our interview sample is strongly gendered in both national contexts (56 men 16 women), overwhelmingly white (67 white, 4 white (other) or black and minority ethnic), and strongly class-privileged (48 with parents doing professional/managerial work). The vast majority of the sample are in their 50s, 60s, and 70s, and are fairly equally distributed across the three elite fractions in both countries—although there are more business and union leaders in the Danish sample and more senior civil servants and political advisors in the British sample. While these skews are broadly representative of the demographic makeup of these elite groups, it is worth noting that the logic of our selection strategy was not to attempt a random sample. Instead, we “sampled for range” (Weiss 1995), attempting to at least partially capture the experiences of minority sub-groups, such as women, those who were non-white, younger elites, and those from working-class backgrounds, who may have otherwise been absent from the sample.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 1 and 3 hours. Although the interview schedules in both countries differed in some areas, both contained three key sets of questions that we draw on here. First, there were a set of questions that probed interviewees' early lives. This included questions about both parents' occupation, their schooling, and how they perceived their class background. Second, interviewees were asked about career trajectory, allowing them to narrate key moments and critical junctures. Third, there were a series of more attitudinal questions, including what they think had been the most important factors in their own success.

Although the data used in this article were initially coded separately by the UK and Danish teams as part of the respective projects, the specific sub-sample used here was then re-coded again by both teams together to facilitate comparative analysis and to enhance intercoder reliability⁵. Here, analysis involved a two-step process of coding. Initial coding revolved around reading each transcript in its entirety while also listening to the audio recording, noting speech patterns and non-verbal expressions (e.g., sighs, laughter, crying). Initial coding was then followed by a second step of more focused line-by-line coding. This involved finding the most significant or frequently occurring initial codes in order to identify the most salient categories in the data. It was here where salient between-country thematic differences emerged and where some themes that were not as clearly patterned by country were eliminated from the analysis⁶.

An important difference between the British and Danish interviews were that all UK interviews were conducted anonymously while 29 of the Danish interviews were non-anonymous. Later, parts of these interviews were used in 30 one-hour radio programs on public broadcaster Radio24syv. The public nature of Danish interviews may have had implications for discussions of merit. In particular, such interviewees may have felt more pressure to perform (what they perceived as) the most publicly acceptable form of meritocratic legitimacy, whereas the British interviewees knew their comments would be anonymized. However, UK interviewees still had to negotiate a highly located interlocutor—a critical elite researcher based at an elite university—and therefore may have similarly attempted to resist stereotypes of elite superiority they may have felt we wanted to impose (Mellor et al. 2014). Moreover, it is important to note that the themes we present from the Danish data—particularly narratives of hard work and modesty, and the relative absence of reference to innate talent, were equally present in anonymous and non-anonymous interviews.

It is important to recognize that our own positionality—as white male academics from comparatively privileged backgrounds—may have restricted the stories our interviewees felt able to tell. Yet in other ways this positionality may have helped provoke narrations particularly relevant to our research questions here. Specifically, our profile as academics with a reputation for doing critical studies on meritocracy and elite recruitment may have elicited a particular desire to justify the meritocratic nature of one's success.

Results

An unsurprising but nonetheless notable feature of elite career narratives in the UK and Denmark is that they are largely conceived as meritocratically achieved. This is not to say that accounts did not touch on other factors, such as the power of an advantaged upbringing, luck (although see below), networks, or white male privilege. However, in line with many other contemporary studies of elites (Sherman 2017), we were struck by most interviewees' insistence that, ultimately, the decisive factor in understanding their own personal achievements was merit. Yet the meaning of merit, the package of attributes it signified, varied strongly across both countries—particularly in terms of the relative value attributed to talent versus hard work.

Talent Meritocrats in the UK

In the UK, while elites usually acknowledged hard work somewhere in their career narrative, this was often mentioned only fleetingly, as a taken-for-granted prerequisite rather than a decisive factor. Instead, what was striking was a tendency to foreground one's own unique and innate (rather than learned) talents. This was common across each of three elite sectors. Talent tended to be expressed in three ways: (1) unique personality traits—particularly for ideational creativity or risk taking, (2) the possession of innately “good judgment”, and (3) “natural” aptitude, intelligence, or academic ability.

Almost all interviewees mentioned possessing unique personality traits. Here, many underlined their abilities as original and creative thinkers who had acted as disruptive ideational entrepreneurs in their field:

I think in policy terms I probably would be seen as towards the entrepreneurial end of the spectrum⁷ ... the way I was probably able to differentiate myself was when things went bad and we had crises because that's when the window of opportunity opens up to reconfigure things ... I quite like leaning in to that uncertainty and seeing it as a big opportunity to rethink (Aidan, academic/political advisory)

I think I carved out for myself a role as someone who would be prepared to do difficult and sometimes extremely counterintuitive things and that meant you needed to be prepared to have a fight (Adam, politician)

When I was invited into Number 10 [Downing St] I wasn't actually very good at the day-by-day part of the job, and when I stepped out I had this leaving interview with Tony Blair and I said I didn't think I'd done very well and he said, “No, you were a Rolls Royce in a Land Rover job.” Which is a nice thing to say ... Because I was bad at the politics, I was briefed against, I wasn't firm enough with the Prime Minister, and I could often see the other side of the argument ... So I think in the end ultimately probably my ideas were more influential or my thinking was more influential than my actual direct involvement in Number 10 (James, academic/political advisory)

Connected to this, others emphasized their personalities as “risk-takers” (Jim, CEO), individuals unafraid to “think outside the box” (Duncan, academic/political advisory) or “put [themselves] in harms way” (Michaela, CEO) in the pursuit of challenging established orthodoxies:

I'm a warrior... nothing frightens me, nothing fazes me, and I will stand up to anybody, irrespective of who they are (Nancy, Business Exec)

I think somebody who doesn't rebel hard at some point in their life is extremely unlikely to emerge as an original thinker. So when I went into fund management... obviously you were doing analysis on companies and figuring out what's going to happen to the macroeconomics. But you're also trying to work out what other people think and if they're all wrong. There's a big premium on being original... and I was often a Cassandra figure... awkward squad (Sam, Business Exec)

A second way talent manifested was via the idea that one's career success had revolved around the possession of “good judgment”. Here, many described how knowledge in their area is often tacit and hard to codify. This poses a particular problem for transferability, as expertise is hard to verbalize and/or explicitly teach. Under these conditions of heightened knowledge ambiguity, many stressed that their abilities were best characterized in terms of an instinctive sense or acumen:

It is essentially judgement. You have to have a sound factual basis for anything you say... but the judgement is whether it is so legally weak that it is improper to go ahead... and I think what I was good at was telling [Government] Ministers “This is the boundary of what you can do”... So I certainly had much more than some of my colleagues... a political sense (Paddy, Senior Civil Servant)

I think in terms of sensibilities I just think, you know I just think I've probably got quite good taste... It's a bit like if you're an art expert, you can spot a real Rembrandt from a fake Rembrandt (Patrick, CEO)

I mean people discuss journalism in terms of objectivity and balance and neutrality and I can understand why they do but they often omit to say all writing involves a judgement. Everything one writes is a judgement. It's a selection... And I'm aware that people generally think I have good judgement (George, Editor/Political Advisory)

The final manifestation of talent in elite narratives came through the more blunt idea of natural intelligence. Sometimes this was indirect and referenced via exceptional academic attainment—of demonstrating “unusual ability” (Milo, academic/political advisory) or “natural aptitude” (Jon, CEO). In other instances, references to intelligence were more explicit:

I'm different. I'm clever in a different way... I just have a totally different brain. So, I'm very very logical... Yeah I'm a really good problem solver. If you give me a really complex problem, I will solve it (Nancy, Business Exec)

Mind you there are two kinds of intelligence. There are some very intelligent people who complicate things enormously [laughs]. And then there's simplifying intelligence which tries to produce what the point is in as simple and straightforward a way as possible. People have said

that I'm good at that, and obviously I think I partly got that genetically from the lawyers on my mother's side of the family (Jim, Business Exec)

Interviewee: I've got a rather unusual cocktail of skills and people therefore find me quite interesting. I listen to them. [Laughter] I don't talk at them. *I've discovered a bit too late in life I'm extremely good at talking to anybody, at the emotional intelligence* Interviewer: Yes. For you is that something that you learned fairly early in life? Interviewee: *It was natural rather than I learned it.* (Jon, CEO)

What is striking in these narratives about intelligence, as well as in the discussions of good judgment and unique personalities, is that such traits are not presented as accumulated via experience or self-fashioning. Instead, such talents are seen as unique or innate to the individual—"natural rather than learned" (Jon) or inherited "genetically" (Jim).

Hard Work Meritocrats in Denmark

Unlike the UK, expressions of natural talent were largely muted in Danish elite narratives. Where they did appear they were carefully articulated so as not to contravene egalitarian norms. Thus, some mentioned in passing that to become part of elite one has to be "creative", "bring something to the conversation", or be "sharp". In the most extreme example, CEO Niels Jacobsen noted the big difference between the top 20 business leaders and the rest is "personal quality, that is intellect, broadness, vision, the ability to understand extremely complex issues". However, it is noteworthy that these attributes were always, as in the case above, ascribed to elite peers rather than themselves directly (although they were of course implicated). And, notably, when most interviewees described the qualities needed to rise to the top, they used the generalized pronoun "man [one]" rather than to the personal "I".

In contrast, when asked about their *own* way to the top, interviewees—again across all three sectors—tended to emphasize their distinct capacity to work hard. This was largely expressed in three forms: (1) an unusual work ethic, capacity, or commitment; (2) extensive experience (as a signal of accumulated hard work); and (3) contributions outside of work, particularly in civil society.

First, many foregrounded their own hard work directly and bluntly, describing how their achievements had been premised on a particular "work capacity", "laboriousness", "hard work", "energy", "industriousness", "stamina", "diligence", or ability to "rise early and go to sleep late":

It is weird how success breeds success. However, in my opinion success is only achieved through hard work. Of course you can be very talented, be successful without labouring, but for most people success is tied to showing diligence, working hard and through that gaining positions, offers and roles that makes others notice and crawl up the hierarchy (Sten Scheibye, former CEO Coloplast)

This emphasis on work was often expressed almost as a moral obligation or duty. As union leader, Thorkild E. Jensen, explained: "One really has to put in a shift no matter if it is night or day, Saturday or Sunday. When there is work to be done, it has to be done". Similarly, former CEO of insurance company Tryg, Stine Bosse, explained that she is so preoccupied with working hard she has repeatedly forgot "to negotiate my own salary".

The second way hard work was expressed was more indirectly via an emphasis on how one's efforts had allowed them to accumulate experience and develop certain competencies. It is only through "reasonable board experience", for example, that one anonymous banking CEO has been able to give "relevant inputs", while another anonymous CEO attributes his board positions to "a combination of competencies and stamina".

Finally, hard work was also referenced in terms of a willingness to take on labor outside of one's job, especially in collective-interest civil society projects. For instance, Director of the Danish Centre for Social Science Research, Jørgen Søndergaard, recounts:

Since my late childhood, I have always taken part in associational life and been active in organizational work. It is a part of my DNA, I think.

Others recounted almost superhuman efforts, such as completing a PhD while working full time and adopting a child at the same time (Executive at the Confederation of Danish Industry, Lars Goldschmidt), or simply “not tiring at 5:30, but always being able and willing to complete a task” (CEO of The Danish Chamber of Commerce, Jens Klarskov). Notably, this capacity to work hard was rarely constructed as an innate quality. Instead, it was rather seen as something learned, either through—or in opposition to—the family:

I decided, I had to earn some money. I wanted to get away from my family and earn my own money. I would have rather studied anthropology or history, but I chose economy. It was boring at times.

Interviewer: It sounds like you have worked hard quite early in your life?

I was certainly the best strawberry picker on the island of Funen. I can tell you that. I earned a lot of money, I earned a lot more than the adults even as a child. And I worked year round with everything, there is not a vegetable or fruit I have not picked or chopped' (Nina Smith, Economist and board chair)

What is significant here is both Nina Smith's agentic expression of her work ethic as a “decision” rather than a natural capacity but also her relational suggestion that she has worked harder than others. Thus, for Danish elites, success is premised less on innate exceptionalism and more on a learned and strongly agentic work ethic. It is this distinctive capacity to labor, often enhanced by engagement in associational life from an early age, that they suggest has allowed them to develop the skills, competencies, and experience to merit reaching elite positions.

Institutional Amplifiers of Merit

How might we explain these different framings of merit in Denmark and the UK? Clearly, this is a complex question and one in which a definitive account is beyond the scope of the inductive data we draw upon in this article. Yet our data do tentatively point toward one potential explanatory mechanism: nationally specific institutional channels of elite recruitment that promote, nurture, and amplify different ideas about merit. Here, in particular, we identify the relative importance of schools and employers.

In the UK, for example, it is well established that the educational trajectories of elites have long been dominated by elite private schooling. For example, [Reeves et al. \(2017\)](#) show that historically approximately 60% of entrants to *Who's Who* have been privately educated—compared to just 7% of the UK population. In contrast, there is very little stratification of secondary schooling in Denmark, with no elite schools at secondary or university level which are selective at the point of entry ([Ellersgaard et al. 2019](#); [Birkelund et al. 2021](#)). Such a divide is strongly reflected in our interview sample. While there is no connection between the primary and secondary schools attended by Danish interviewees, 72% of the UK interviewees were privately educated, and 36% of these at one of the nine most exclusive and prestigious Clarendon Schools.

Our analysis suggests that private schools may play a key role as amplifiers of natural talent narratives. This is partly about the role of academic selection into such schools, which

in turn breeds a sense of intellectual exceptionalism among pupils. Similarly, such schools also stream internally based on academic ability. At the Clarendon Schools, for example, a small number of boys receive “scholarships” based on ability and are then separated into a “scholars” house, replete with separate dormitories, traditions, and customs. Many interviewees described how the experience of being a “scholar” had further entrenched a sense of their intellectual exceptionalism. As Adam, a business executive and “scholar” at Eton, reflected:

I think *the emphasis was on the brain rather than on feelings* or anything like that. We [scholars] expected to run the world. Or anyhow run the UK . . . I think it was *just an assumption. That’s what we would be doing.*

Another key way that elite schooling appears connected to notions of natural talent is through the cultivation of highly individualized child development. As interviewees explained, such schools employed a fairly heterogenous idea of achievement or success. Indeed, many described how they were afforded a distinct freedom to explore their own interests, and that once identified, were often very explicitly encouraged to develop and nurture such abilities:

I have always believed actually that Cheltenham as I knew it was a classic example of comprehensive education. Now what do I mean by that? *I mean actually that whatever you were good at was celebrated.* You could pursue whatever it was, and it didn’t matter whether it was woodwork or the classics (Katie, CEO)

It was a great sense of sort of freedom and civilisation actually . . . you were at liberty to go and do what you wanted and that was encouraged (Perry, senior civil servant).

In many ways, such accounts echo previous work on elite schools that emphasize their role in cultivating a sense of “ease” and familiarity with a broad range of cultural forms and types of knowledge (Khan 2011). Yet what is also evident here is how such schools actively nurture and scaffold a belief in one’s own *unique* capabilities. Very often this concerted cultivation appeared to center around cultivating a particular intellectual orientation—of fostering original, daring, or creative thought:

They did encourage and champion free thinking . . . they liked people who I guess were different or, not different, but kind of thought differently. They encouraged uniqueness in a way that, you know, I think was quite special for a school (Nadine, Academic/Policy advisory)

So what was distinctive about it was that *they really cared about how people thought*, about cultivating the mind (Sam, Business exec)

Finally, it is also possible to draw a link between the experience of elite schooling and the feeling that one possesses inherently “good judgment” (Mangset 2015). For some, this was about being aggressively encouraged to develop (and believe in the validity of) their own lines of argumentation. For others, it was more about a sense of assurance or certainty about their ability to have an impact in the world, about their “right to speak” (Bourdieu 1984: 411):

And I think [Eton] *did give me, yes, a sense of confidence in dealing with the outside world . . . so it both was an advantage in terms of reputation but also an advantage in terms of confidence and ability to talk, to articulate, have confidence in one’s own abilities*

INT: I’m interested in your sense of the future when you were there . . .

RES: A sense of entitlement?

INT: No not necessarily entitlement, more a sense of . . .

RES: Groomed to be a part of the elite? Yes is the answer, yes I did feel that. I did feel that I knew, *I thought I would do well in whatever I chose and I would get to the top. So I was not only ambitious but I also had the confidence to feel that I would fulfil those ambitions* (James, academic/political advisory)

The influence of elite schools is arguably brought more sharply into focus when we consider them alongside the educational narratives of UK elites who were not educated at elite schools, particularly those who were from similarly advantaged class backgrounds. This is an important comparison because a plausible alternative explanation for the talent narratives we see in the British data may be that it is driven more by primary socialization in upper-class families rather than experiences at school. This is of course hard to unpick in any definitive way, but it is notable that schooling was noticeably muted in the elite narratives of those from privileged class backgrounds educated in the state sector. In some cases, this was signaled by the conspicuous absence of schooling in narrations of early life, or in others was mentioned only in passing and in often fairly negative terms as “bog-standard” (Aidan, CEO), “failing” (Dan, politician), or “pretty shitty” (Arthur, politician).

One wider point is worth making here on the topic of class background and other demographic characteristics. Notably, among the small minority of UK interviewees who were women, non-White, and/or from working-class backgrounds, it was more often hard work (rather than talent) that was foregrounded as the decisive driver of their career success:

Res: You know I'd always come in the top few of my class but that wasn't natural. Oh my gosh I would sit down and it *wouldn't come naturally, that came through brute hard work. It was just brutal. It was, I just ground it through and nothing came to me easily.* Nothing's ever come to me easily, nothing, nothing. Just ground, just ground it out you know really like a meat grinder. And I still do in a way

INT: Interesting.

RES: Look, I don't have the right name, I don't have a title, I don't have form, I don't have old boys networks. *This focus on what I don't have, I don't come from Eton, I didn't go to Oxbridge . . . What do I have going for me? I work like a dog okay.* I know a lot of people do but I really work hard (Bruce, Business exec)

What is significant about these and other similar accounts is not just the emphasis on hard work but also the suggestion that working hard was the key means of overcoming gender or classed barriers. In the absence of an elite education, as Bruce notes here, what does he feel he has “going for” him—he works “like a dog”.

Like these UK interviewees, Danish elites did not place a strong emphasis on schooling. This was not necessarily because they hailed from less privileged origins—although Danish elites were somewhat less likely to come from families where their parents were doing professional or managerial work, more than half still have a background in the upper or upper middle class (see Appendix 1). What was more significant in their narratives was the role of particular elite organizations or firms. Again, this reflects wider trends in elite recruitment. For example, members of the Danish “power elite” are still recruited through a very narrow set of large employers, including establishment corporations such as Mærsk or Danske Bank, Government ministries such as the Ministry of Finance or the Ministry of Justice, and major political parties and interest organizations, which functions as what former minister of Finance Bjarne Corydon calls “career factories”. Thus, half of the 423 elite individuals in our sampling frame had worked in at least one of only 17 organizations (Ellersgaard et al. 2023).

In our interviews, Danish elites placed great emphasis on their experience working in these “hub” organizations. They also appeared to underpin hard work narratives, both cultivating and demanding a certain intensive work mentality. For example, several interviewees explained how

stints at certain organizations almost function as a *rite de passage* where you must demonstrate that you can handle intense hard work. The extreme case here is the Danish Ministry of Finance, the organization where most people in the core of the Danish elite network—33 of the 423—have held career positions:

The ministry of Finance. It is all about making a difference, right. Because it is ridiculously hard. Really, it is idiocy... when I was there in 1990s and 2000s... if you came in the middle of the afternoon with something and said 'By the way, we have this problem' then it was solved the same day... One learned to go into a gear one did not know one had (CEO of Danish Municipalities, Kristian Vendelbo)

One has learned to work. There is a clear work discipline and you work at night as well and on weekends. We constantly worked under tight deadlines. And the thing with deadlines is that you can make the most clever analysis in the world, but it will not matter, if it only arrives the day after the Minister has had a meeting on the subject. Then what you had been pondering about would not be worth anything. So timing is key. If you want influence, you have to get the task done (Anders Eldrup, former permanent secretary)

What is notable here is the intense socialization and acculturation these men describe going through upon entering the Ministry, and particularly the process of “learning” to work intensively. It is also significant how Anders Eldrup orders the talent versus hard work requirements of work in the Ministry. His colleagues may be capable of the most “clever analysis in the world”, but this will “not matter” if they do not have the work ethic and discipline to deliver it on time.

Recognition Meritocrats in the UK and Denmark

While elites in the UK and Denmark tended to diverge in the relative salience they attributed to hard work and talent, there were also important points of connection in their framing of meritocratic legitimacy. In particular, both were keen to stress that there was “no plan” behind their accelerated rise through the ranks. In this way, they largely presented themselves as unstrategic actors who had not instrumentally sought out power and influence. Instead, their success was framed as flowing from spontaneous external recognition rather than calculated intentionality:

The positions I've had have not been ones I've sought. None of them have been, you know... things like the presidency of the [name of organisation]. So, they phoned me about a year ago and they said, we're having a council meeting and we've just realised that we want you to be the next president... I had no idea I was going to be invited for that. *There are people who are always trying to find things, but I genuinely have not* (Milo, Academic/political advisory, UK)

I don't actively seek people out but they do seek me out... It's like I'm on a rail track and somebody else is driving the train and I'm a passenger and I'm not thinking very hard about what stations I'm calling at (Jon, CEO, UK)

Interviewer: I am just wondering, how purposeful have you been, have you had a strategy for power, to put it that way?

Martin Damm: Not at all!

Interviewer: No?

Martin Damm. Really. It is completely random. In total honesty. I just as well could have been doing something completely different today

(Martin Damm, Major of Kalundborg and Chair of Danish Municipalities, Denmark)

What is striking here is how these interviewees express being encouraged, almost pressured, to take up elite positions. Significantly, interviewees often also tied this external validation to their wider meritocratic narratives; others *rewarded* their hard work or *spotted* their talent. In the UK for example, in line with previous work, most were actually keen to stress their ordinariness when explicitly asked to evaluate their own abilities or played down talent when asked directly why they thought they had got to the top. Talent narratives, in contrast, tended to emerge more indirectly through discussions of particular career moments and through the eyes of others. Thus, in the accounts explored earlier, it is *other people* who “see” Aidan as “towards the entrepreneurial end of the spectrum”, while both James’s “good ideas” and George’s “good judgment” are ultimately ordained by their managers. Equally, for Sten Scheibye, it is through demonstrating “hard work” and “diligence” that one gets “noticed” and ultimately rewarded.

One other common narrative feature flanking these accounts was the idea of luck. Luck can of course be real and consequential (Sauder 2020), and was sometimes used to describe fairly random events that had benefited one’s career (although never as a fundamental determinant of success in the way Frank (2016) argues is often the case in elite careers). Yet in many cases, luck was deployed more as a refrain, a linguistic means to distance oneself from the suggestion of intentional or strategic behavior and instead frame external validation as serendipitous. For example, Former Danish Ministry of Finance, Bjarne Corydon, explained that he only knew he wanted to have a political career after he was “lucky” to be offered a temporary position filling in for another party bureaucrat on maternity leave. This is reminiscent of C. Wright Mills (1999, p. 139) who famously noted that luck can often be used in elite narratives to disguise “politic-ing” or the navigation of corporate hierarchies via the network of friends which people call “luck”. Of course, it was only because Corydon was plugged in to political networks, and indeed was actively involved in student politics at the time, that he was able to benefit from this piece of luck. In this way, it is possible to see luck as serving dual purposes—as a way of deflecting from both accusations of power-seeking *and* hubris. Meritocratic legitimacy in both contexts, then, is not just about your attributes and behavior but also the signal of modesty and humility that is communicated when one’s merits are spontaneously recognized by others (rather than strategically pursued by oneself).

Conclusion and Discussion

Contemporary elites often use merit to explain, justify, and make sense of their advantaged positions. In this paper, we deepen this literature to show that the idea of merit deployed in such self-justifications can vary in important ways cross-nationally. Specifically, we find that while elites in both the UK and Denmark are united by a common concern to frame their success as externally recognized rather than intentionally sought, the package of attributes they foreground as signals of merit vary significantly. In the UK, elites tend to portray themselves as “talent meritocrats” who foreground their capacity for ideational creativity, possession of “good judgment”, and “natural” aptitude. In contrast, in Denmark, elites are more likely to be “hard work meritocrats” who emphasize their unusual work ethic, extensive experience, and contributions outside of work, particularly in civil society. Our findings tentatively suggest that one explanation for this cross-national variation is the role that different institutional channels of elite recruitment play in amplifying legitimate notions of merit.⁸ More broadly, we think our findings have implications for several key debates in contemporary sociology.

First, our results contribute to a burgeoning literature connecting meritocracy to the reproduction of inequality (Castilla 2008; Littler 2018; Mijs 2019). Here, our results suggest that nationally specific understandings of merit may have quite different implications for inequality.

Hard work or effort-centric expressions of merit, such as we find in Denmark, may legitimate a certain agentic conception of inequality of outcome, whereby poor or working-class groups are stigmatized on the basis of presumed faulty agency; of being “lazy”, “work-shy”, or making “bad decisions” (see Hansen 2019 for examples of this in Danish political discourse).⁹ Here, so the narrative goes, everyone can work hard and be equally rewarded for doing so. Talent-centric expressions, by contrast, also act to reproduce inequality but do so by essentializing inequities of outcome as inevitable rather than having any basis in human agency. Of course, it is possible to use such beliefs about talent to argue for the injustice of inequality, as in the case of Rawlsian luck egalitarians. However, we see very little evidence of this kind of reasoning among our interviewees. Instead, talent is presented as a common-sensical justification for success—a means to articulate Weber’s notion of “legitimate fortune”.

Moreover, it is possible to argue that talent meritocracy has particularly pernicious implications for the legitimation of inequality. This is because appeals to “talent” do not simply justify existing inequalities but can also be used to legitimate their intensification. Indeed, the scarcity and almost infinite scale of natural talent—often framed as a “war for talent” in corporate discourse—are often central to justifications for spiraling CEO remuneration and general “superstar” capitalism (Brown et al. 2004). In contrast, while appeals to hard work may often explicitly pathologize the poor, the scale of inequality this justifies is necessarily restricted. After all, there is only so many hours one can work in the day.

Finally, it is not surprising that such appeals to talent are more readily articulated in the UK. The country has a long history of ascribed social position and widespread emulation of, and deference to, elites. Moreover, British elites have long held a belief in their collective national exceptionalism through an imperial framing of Britain’s underlying “greatness”. Indeed, as Flemmen and Savage (2017) show, such imperial nostalgia and nationalism lingers on among British elites.

Second, our results point to the role that particular institutional channels of elite recruitment play in amplifying dominant notions of merit and how these are embedded in wider cultural political economies (Castilla and Rangaathan 2020; Mangset 2015, 2017). Thus, while elite private schools in the UK nurture ideas of natural talent, one of the reasons they do so is because they arguably represent the apex of an educational system designed to foster aspirational individualism, which itself is emblematic of the country’s wider political economy and the ideas in which that political economy is embedded (Somers and Block 2005). In contrast, it is elite employers in Denmark that socialize the connection between hard work and success, but this too is consistent with and reinforced by the Danish growth model and its welfare state, which emphasizes exceptional hard work rather than exceptional innate ability. In other words, while elite schools or elite employers play an especially important role in amplifying ideas about merit in these settings, they are likely joined by a constellation of other institutions subject to the same conditions of political economy.

This argument also has implications for countries outside of Denmark and Britain. If notions of merit are grounded in specific institutions that legitimate a particular cultural political economy, then other channels of elite recruitment will be crucial for constructing distinct notions of merit in other national contexts. For example, drawing on the work of Bühlmann et al. (2012), it may be significant to see the role that the military socialization plays in Switzerland, religion in countries like Pakistan, or the role family served in pre-modern societies such as renaissance Florence (Padgett & Ansell 1993).

In critically engaging with these narratives, it is important to note that we are not arguing that our interviewees are somehow “incorrect”. These accounts clearly reflect their “lived experience” of being successful. Equally, the fact that, across both countries, women, ethnic minorities, and the upwardly mobile are more likely to stress hard work in their narratives likely reflects very tangible barriers and inequalities these interviewees have faced in their careers. We would reiterate, though, that our interest here is precisely the realm of *subjective self-understanding*, and what tells us about how contemporary elites see themselves and other groups in society.

These self-understandings matter not only because they are used to justify inequality but also because they often generate resentment among wider populations, with the discourse around meritocracy seen by many as a key driver of the recent populist backlash against elites (see [Mijis 2022](#); [Sandel 2020](#)). In this way, it is crucial for future work to both delineate these different elite articulations of merit, but also equally to explore how such justifications are received, contested, and mobilized against, by the many less obvious beneficiaries of meritocracy.

Endnotes

1. The idea that societies should be organized around notions of merit is not entirely new ([Littler, 2018](#)). [Sandel \(2020\)](#) argues that notions of merit are connected to ideas of deservingness, which are themselves rooted in religious ideas around the prosperity of the righteous and the suffering of the wicked. Similarly, ascription and patronage, the principles which organized social hierarchies in many pre-modern societies, also implied some (albeit pre-modern) notion of merit. For example, there was a widespread belief that being born into a landed, aristocratic family meant your life was fundamentally structured around what you were obligated to pass on. These obligations changed your outlook in ways that meant you were better suited to leadership ([Wooldridge, 2021](#)).
2. It is important to acknowledge that terms like talent and intelligence, or hard work and effort, are not necessarily interchangeable and may be measured in different ways. However, in the literature on meritocratic self-beliefs that we aim to dialogue with in this piece, the conventional operationalization of merit is via reference to talent and hard work.
3. An alternative view, however, might be that appeals to talent meritocracy are less elitist and more solidaristic than appeals to hard work meritocracy because they do not imply a value judgment of others. If one believes in natural talent, it follows that others have no control over the lottery over their innate gifts.
4. However, if one believes their success is based on their own hard work, it does not necessarily follow that they believe those less fortunate have worked less hard. This need not be a zero-sum relational assessment.
5. It is worth acknowledging that there remains limits to our intercoder reliability, as the respective teams were inevitably more familiar with the interview data they had generated.
6. For example, in the UK context, expressions of meritocratic legitimacy were often framed against a distinct imaginary of elites from Britain's past. Here, the prevailing narrative was that the elite institutions one had experienced—be those elite schools, universities, or employers—had once been closed and socially exclusive, but that things had changed and become more markedly more meritocratic over time. This type of theme was not present among Danish interviewees.
7. Throughout the analysis, we add emphasis in direct quotes where the interviewee testimony highlights key themes.
8. It is worth noting that we had expected to find differences in self-justification styles across the political, business, and bureaucratic elite fractions but, as our results show, found little variation by field. One possible explanation for this may be rooted in the institutional channels we highlight. For example, one notable feature of Britain's elite schools has been an enduring ability to deliver their "old boys" into various fractions of the British elite (see [Reeves et al., 2017](#)). Equally, the key employers highlighted in the Danish case exist in each of the three fields we examined (see [Ellersgaard et al. 2019](#)).
9. The Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen, for example, recently called for "a break with the idea that going to work should be enjoyable".

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Funding

The UK-based parts of this project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 849960 CHANGINGELITES).

Data Availability

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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