



Universiteit Utrecht

Favouring the Competition After You Have Lost?

A Study of Support for Meritocratic Values in Various Societies among Different Individuals

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Abstract: Current understandings of the impact of social status on the propensity to support meritocratic values was extended by considering the social mobility and employment-status of individuals. Furthermore, the interaction between factors at both the micro and macro-level were taken into account. Specifically, the society-wide popularity of meritocratic perceptions was expected to enlarge both status-effects. Moreover, rational choice notions were supplemented with structuralist insights. Data from the ISSP Social Inequality survey of 2009 (ISSP Research Group, 2012c) were used. Popular meritocratic perceptions were shown to moderate the effect of being unemployed for an individual's support for meritocratic values. As expected, the unemployed were less likely to support meritocratic values. However, contrary to what was expected, popular meritocratic perceptions appeared to decrease this negative effect of being unemployed for support for meritocratic values. Furthermore, no relations were found for social mobility. Lastly, some theoretical innovations were suggested. Certainly, new questions arose from this study.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“People who dismiss the unemployed and dependent as ‘parasites’ fail to understand economics and parasitism. A successful parasite is one that is not recognised by its host, one that can make its host work for it without appearing as a burden. Such is the ruling class in a capitalist society.”

(Jason Read, 2012, www.prosebeforehos.com)

There is an often heard statement that actually refers to a distributive justice system called ‘meritocracy’ by sociologists: “If you work hard enough and express your talents, you can make it to millionaire”. The philosopher Jason Read from the quote above, however, seems skeptical of this being the case. In current capitalism, he said, becoming a millionaire does not require you being a hard worker. Either way, the issue of meritocracy has recently received much attention in public debate, partly due to rising unemployment rates among highly educated young people and changes in national educational policies. Whereas a meritocracy is extolled by some as creating equal opportunities to achieve success, others rather tend to conceive such a system as a potential source of social problems (Marshall et al., 1999; Young, 2001; Meeuws, 2002; Jost et al., 2003; De Botton, 2005; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007; Pels, 2007; RMO, 2011; Vlasbom, 2011; Somers, 2012). In fact, those who are in favour of a meritocracy can be said to support *meritocratic values*, which are particular opinions about what is to be conceived as a just distributive system. Supporters of such values advocate that talent and effort ought to be the central criteria for distribution of income and occupations. Likewise, they favour abandoning traditional ascribed characteristics, such as class-background and race, as distributive criteria (Young, 1958; Marshall et al., 1999; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007; Pels, 2007; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). In other words, individuals should receive ‘equal chances’ to achieve desired occupations and incomes, given their talent and effort. Meanwhile, the meritocracy has been heavily criticised by some segments of the political spectrum and academics. These critics particularly warn that a far-established meritocracy could create an immense ‘class separation’ grounded on intellectual abilities (Young, 1958; Tonkens & Swierstra, 2008). In fact, for the Netherlands, the National Council for Social Development (RMO) reported an increasing ideological gap between the higher and lower educated, and even spoke of meritocracy as generating a ‘new class society’ (RMO, 2011).

This distinction between the higher and lower educated, more general, between the higher and lower strata of society, has been a common issue in studies that seek to explain support for meritocratic values. In fact, an individual’s social status is considered a key determinant for his likelihood to support meritocratic values (Hochschild, 1982; Jost et al., 2003; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007). Overall, the results suggest that the higher an individual’s social status the more likely he is to support meritocratic values. These meritocratic values may be more attractive to high status people rather than to lower status people, for they may serve as a justification of the current distribution of income and occupations. In other words: the ‘winners’ are most likely to favour a meritocratic ‘competition’ (Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). However, this line of reasoning in the literature is over-simplistic and critical supplements should be made. In fact, a

crucial element in the relationship between social status and support for meritocratic values, is neglected. In order to adequately understand the relationship between social status and support for meritocratic values, one must take into account the *popular perceptions* about the extent to which a society currently approximates a meritocracy. In other words: the crucial element which was absent in this reasoning is the popularity of meritocratic *perceptions*. To be clear, when meritocratic perceptions are said to be popular, it is meant that, on average, people in a society believe the current distribution of income and occupations to be fairly meritocratic. More specifically, they believe that the current distribution of income and occupations mainly result from an allocation according to talent and effort, and in which traditional ascribed characteristics are neglected. This study will focus on the question to which extent popular meritocratic perceptions in a society strengthen the differences in support meritocratic values gain from various social strata.

The possible impact of the popularity of meritocratic perceptions on the relationship between social status and support for meritocratic values is a fundamental issue. This becomes clear when considering what may happen in societies that are generally perceived to be far from meritocratic by its members. Such perceptions cause more cautiousness in labelling high status people 'winners' and low status people 'losers'. As a result, differences between high and low status members may be less pronounced regarding their support for meritocratic values. By contrast, in societies where meritocratic perceptions are popular, high status people are more strongly considered as 'winners' and those low in status as 'loser'. Consequently, the 'winners' may embrace meritocratic values, while the 'losers' may reject those values. Whereas many scholars of the subject have implicitly assumed a high degree of popular meritocratic perceptions as a present constant condition, Marshall et al. (1999) revealed that this condition varies considerably between countries. For example, while Eastern European respondents were generally sceptical about describing their society as meritocratic, Americans broadly believed their society to be a meritocracy. This is important to consider, for these varying levels of meritocratic perceptions held in society may cause greater or smaller gaps between social strata in their support for meritocratic values (Merton, 1939; Young, 1958; Jost et al., 2003; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). Those individuals low in status will experience more frustration when the popular perceptions in a society suggest the presence of sufficient opportunities for all citizens, and which explains disappointing social destinies in terms of lack of talent or laziness (Merton, 1939; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). As a result, these individuals are more likely to reject the corresponding *values* to this *perceived* meritocracy than either their counterparts in societies perceived to be less meritocratic, or fellow-countrymen in the higher social strata. Altogether, both theoretical considerations and empirical evidence point to the possible benefits of considering meritocratic perceptions.

In addition to theoretical and empirical motives for considering meritocratic perceptions, from a social viewpoint there is much to be gained as well. The earlier mentioned RMO-report warned about an increasing polarisation between social strata in a rising meritocracy. Moreover, the sociologist and social-democrat Michael Young

(2001) expressed strong worries about society becoming more polarised fostered by widely held meritocratic perceptions. Concern about polarisation has become a central issue in much policy thinking, particularly considering declining political participation among lower status people (Bovens, 2008). The expectation in this present thesis is that these perceptions, when popularly held in society, foster large differences between social strata with respect to their support for a meritocracy. By fostering these large differences between social strata, popular meritocratic perceptions may have consequences for the social order, political alienation, and political polarisation (Merton, 1939; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). In other words, widely held beliefs stating that people reach their low social destinies because of talentless and laziness may drive groups apart in society. In fact, some riots in Europe may be illustrating this point. In an article on the 'London riots', Zygmunt Bauman (2011) pointed to increasing differences in values held between the 'rich' and 'poor'. Similarly, Pels (2007) argued that increased polarisation between social strata had fostered the French riots in 2005. In addition, he argued that these riots were fed by a discrepancy between the social mobility individuals had hoped for and their actual situation (Pels, 2007). In short, examining how social strata differ in their support for meritocratic values, as well as what conditions make that social strata differ considerably, is urgent from a social viewpoint.

In recent decennia, much research attention has been directed at investigating whether support for meritocratic values is influenced by social status, as well as at country-level determinants of support for meritocratic values. Overall, individuals with higher educational levels and incomes tend to be more supportive of meritocratic values (Hochschild, 1982; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007). Kunovich and Slomczynski (2007) were the first to include both the individual and societal level in explaining support for meritocratic values, but unfortunately they did not address the possible interaction between (perceived) meritocracy in a society and the effect of social status on support for meritocratic values. In fact, Kunovich & Slomczynski's (2007) results left some questions unanswered which need clarification. Specifically, they showed that higher status people are more likely to support meritocratic values, but that the strength of this relationship varied substantially between countries. Their work left the readers wondering why the differences between social strata in their support for meritocratic values are considerably larger in some countries than in others. A plausible explanation point to the actual degree of meritocracy as a societal condition which influences the extent to which social groups differ in their values, as Kunovich and Slomczynski (2007) speculated. However, the degree in which a society is *perceived to be* a meritocracy may in fact be a stronger determinant, for a particular society may be less meritocratic than it is perceived to be by its citizens (Merton, 1939). In order to examine whether popular meritocratic perceptions in a society strengthens the difference between social strata in their values, comparing societies is necessary. In fact, a cross-national comparison was done by Marshall et al. (1999), who found considerably more scepticism toward meritocratic perceptions in Eastern Europe (Marshall et al., 1999). Unfortunately, Marshall et al. (1999) did not consider the individual-level relationship between social status and support for meritocratic values. Therefore, their study does not provide an

answer to the central question here: whether social strata differ more from each other in their support for meritocratic values in societies with popular meritocratic perceptions. In short, the absence of meritocratic perceptions is a major shortcoming of the current literature.

A second shortcoming of the current literature concerns the measure of social status. At first, social mobility has not yet been considered as determinant of the degree of support for meritocratic values. Instead, studies have primarily focused on static measures of social status, such as present income. However, considering a dynamic measure of social status is necessary, since a meritocracy is particularly concerned with social mobility. Consequently, it is reasonable to expect social mobility to have a more pronounced effect than present social status on support for meritocratic values. In addition, social mobility constitutes a social attribute of individuals according to which they may be evaluated in a meritocracy (Neve, 2000; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). A second aspect that has been fairly neglected in its potential role in predicting support for meritocratic values contains employment-status. This is remarkable, since the availability of a fair amount of theoretical work on the issue. Goffman (1963), McFadyen (1995) and Swierstra & Tonkens (2008) pointed to the potential stigma popular meritocratic perceptions inflict on the unemployed. In turn, frustration caused by these perceptions may elicit more rejection of meritocratic values among the unemployed, similar to what is expected for low-status individuals in general.

The focus here was at understanding the determinants of the degree of support for meritocratic values. Specifically, the interest was in further understanding the relationship between social status and support for meritocratic values, and to investigate whether this relationship is stronger in societies where meritocratic perceptions are relatively popularly held. Regarding social status, the focus was on two aspects: intergenerational social mobility and employment-status. The question is raised *whether supporters of meritocratic values differ from dissenters in terms of their social mobility and employment-status*. If so, of particular interest is the question *whether popular meritocratic perceptions in societies do strengthen these differences between social strata in their support for meritocratic values*. In the following section, the conceptualisation is set out in more detail. On the basis of these insights the attention is then turned to the theoretical framework and the hypotheses. A rational-choice framework was supplemented with structuralist insights. The general idea was that individuals support those values which are in accordance to their interests, but do so in a certain structural context. The structural context considered here is the popularity of meritocratic perceptions in a society. A classical theory was recaptured which has been applied particularly in the field of deviant behaviour: Merton's strain framework (Merton, 1939). In order to test the outlined hypotheses the ISSP Social Inequality survey of 2009 was used. The expected relationships were tested for each aspect of social status separately, in subsequent maximum likelihood multiple linear regressions.

2. UNDERSTANDING MERITOCRATIC VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS

In order to study meritocratic values and perceptions accurately, it is necessary to investigate their meanings in more detail, particularly considering the relatively young age of the broad sociological attention to the subjective side of meritocracy and the problems encountered in its conceptualisation. Meritocratic values and perceptions with respect to *meritocracy as a distributive principle* were studied here, as has been done in earlier studies. Therefore, meritocracy was conceptualised here as a system of distributive justice, using Cohen's (1987) elements of such a system. In this section, some encountered problems with the conceptualisation in the literature are discussed. Finally, elements from earlier conceptualisation were adopted in this study, while others were dropped for substantial reasons.

Meritocracy emerged as a modernising ideal against traditional distributive principles of income and occupations. For example, in feudal societies, a limited range of economic and occupational achievements were considered available for the 'common people' (Young, 1958; Boudon, 1981; Hochschild, 1982; Pels, 2007; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). By contrast, in modernised societies the opportunities have become more open to people from all social origins, although social origin still continues to play a role in determining individuals' social destinations (Ultee Arts & Flap, 2003; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008; Tolsma & Wolbers, 2010). What, then, is meant with the meritocratic values and perceptions? To start with clarifying a first central distinction, *values* deal with normative opinions about what *should* be the case in a society; whereas *perceptions* deal with beliefs about *the current state of affairs* (Marshall et al., 1999). After having clarified this, the subject of these values and perceptions, the meritocratic distributive system itself, has to be defined more clearly.

Cohen (1987) distinguished the following elements of a distributive justice system: receipts, entitled receivers, several distributional criteria, and procedural rules. With respect to a meritocratic system of distributive justice, the elements are the following. The (1) *receipts* are material resources which are to be distributed, here income and occupational status. Secondly, the meritocratic competition always takes place within a demarcated area of 'insiders', i.e. the (2) *entitled recipients*. The demarcation of the boundaries between the entitled competitors and those who may not participate in the 'game', is most often that of either being a citizen of the nation-state (Cohen, 1987) or, at least, a 'legal' resident (Soysal, 1994). As a result, theoretically it is possible that a nationalistic and meritocratic opinion are not mutually exclusive: the nationalist may define the boundaries according to the criterion 'having domestic ancestry' and strongly propose a meritocratic competition among those who fit this criterion. This element will not be studied here. Third, there are clear (3) *distributive principles* according to which a meritocratic distribution of resources and occupational status takes place. In distributing the receipts, only talent and effort count and the principle of proportionality is central here. This will be elaborated on more later on. Finally, there are (4) *procedural rules* according to which this meritocratic competition has to be 'played': it has to be

decided how to establish merit and talent and it has to be 'guaranteed' in some degree that people are being provided the same opportunities at the start of the competition for resources and occupational status, according to the established distributional principles. In Mertonian terms, legitimate institutionalised means are constructed by which individuals can achieve their goals (Merton, 1939).

How are meritocratic values and perceptions conceptualised and, subsequently, operationalised in the empirical literature? In most of the empirical literature, meritocratic values and perceptions are considered as moral opinions and cognitive assumptions about the way resources, especially income and occupations, are (to be) distributed. Part (3) of Cohen's (1987) definition often returned in an item similar to: 'How important do you think effort is in deciding one's pay check?' Besides distribution through talent and effort, another fundamental meritocratic distributional principle arises from the elaborations of Marshall et al. (1999) and Sen (2000): the principle of proportionality. This principle demands that contribution and reward must be equivalent. So one person who is contributing more than another must, regardless of the absolute degree of the differences in reward, earn *relatively* more than this other person. Continuing toward part (4), it can be noted that opinions about and perceptions of procedural rules have barely been studied, except from studying respondents' perception of the presence of corruption and nepotism (Marshall et al., 1999). In this study, the different elements were not be clearly separated, but rather combined to develop a complete definition of meritocratic values and perceptions. Table 1 presents the conceptual distinctions.

Leaving this elaboration on meritocratic values to rest, some clarifications have to be made on meritocratic *perceptions* as well. Again, under perceptions is understood: the beliefs about the actual extent to which talent and effort determine income and occupational achievement in society (Evans, 1997; Marshall et al., 1999; McCoy & Major, 2007). Contrasting, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, to a meritocratic perception is the use of social-structural accounts for income and occupational outcomes of people (Evans, 1997). This view is not necessarily excluding the possibility of having meritocratic perceptions as well, since people may use different explanations simultaneously (Evans, 1997).

2.1 Encountered Problems Regarding Conceptualisation

A journey through the literature on meritocratic values and perceptions reveals the relatively young age of this field of study. The interest in studying the subjective side of meritocracy and social justice ideologies in general grew remarkably in during the 1980's and 1990's (Marshall et al., 1999). Nonetheless, still much uncertainty prevails with respect to the conceptualisation of central constructs such as 'meritocratic values'. At first, talent and effort as distributive criteria have often been supposed to imply a necessity of having inequality for provoking the desired incentive of exerting effort (i.e. 'the incentive-approach') (Miller, 1991; Marshall et al., 1999). Talent and effort have often been confined to those abilities and performances that are relevant in labour-market terms (Young, 1958; Marshall et al., 1999; Sen, 2000; Swierstra & Tonkens,

2008). This ambivalence appears in an item such as ‘People with higher abilities should earn higher salaries’ as an indicator for endorsing an incentive approach. Furthermore, it is subject to much debate whether the incentive-approach is a necessary part of a meritocratic ideology or not (Sen, 2000; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007). It can be argued, as will be done here, that meritocracy is not concerned with creating the right incentives. Rather, a meritocracy is occupied with the imperative of distributing according to talent and effort, and with ensuring proportionality between reward and contribution, because this is considered inherently ‘just’, apart from utilitarian concerns (Miller, 1991; Marshall et al., 1999; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007).

However, not all theorists agreed with this viewpoint. Sen (2000) considered the incentive-approach as one of the inspirational forces behind the idea of a meritocracy, although he recognises that in current notions of meritocracy this aspect has faded on behalf of rewarding intrinsic virtues. Rewards are not so much allocated to *actions*, as well as *granted to persons* who possess certain meritorious properties. Additionally, other scholars endorsed a mixed point of view. Kunovich & Slomczynski (2007) argued that meritocracy is both an efficient incentive-provoking as well as an inherently just as a mode of distribution by its supporters. In this study, in the end, the incentive-element was omitted for several reasons. Firstly, the presumed threshold from which on diminishing income differences takes out the incentive to work hard is hard, if not impossible, to determine through asking respondents. Furthermore, a meritocracy is probably more concerned with rewarding *persons* and is motivated by many deontological rather than only instrumental reasons.

A related problem encountered in the literature is the wrongly presumed contradiction between meritocracy and redistribution (Pels, 2007; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). When considering the proportionality principle as central part of a meritocratic distribution (Marshall et al., 1999), redistributive policies may violate this principle of proportionality *only if these cause the income distribution to be perfectly equal*. By contrast, when income differences have been retained in such an extent that income still correlates with talent and effort, then income redistribution will be in accordance with the proportionality principle. Furthermore, Sen (2000) pointed to the logical possibility of meritocracies enhancing social welfare functions that contain a certain moral rejection of inequality. Intergenerational mobility, as a central focus of meritocrats, complicates the issue even further. Considering the number of dependent household members someone has to support as a distributive criterion is presented as antithetical to meritocratic values (Marshall et al., 1999; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). But the recognition of family size as an additional distributive criteria can in fact be interpreted meritocratic in that it fosters a standard of living enabling children to achieve their full potentials. Indeed, it actually cancels out the negative, structural effects of class on life-chances and therefore is meritocratic (Pels, 2007). This critique is supported by Kunovich & Slomczynski’s (2007) own finding that respondents who supported meritocratic statements such as that a worker’s exerted effort should strongly determine his salary, simultaneously tended to answer ‘inconsistently’ at items concerning the importance of family needs in determining a worker’s salary.

Table 1 Illustration of The Utilised Distinctions

Element	Meritocratic Values	Meritocratic Perceptions
First Element	' <u>Income</u> and <u>occupations</u> <i>ought to be</i> distributed through talent and effort'	' <u>Income</u> and <u>occupations</u> <i>are</i> distributed through talent and effort in our society'
Second Element	'Income and occupations <i>ought to be</i> distributed through talent and effort <u>among entitled competitors</u> (this element was not included here)	'Income and occupations <i>are</i> distributed through talent and effort in our society <u>among entitled competitors</u> (this element was not included here)
Third Element	'Income and occupations <i>ought to be</i> distributed <u>through talent and effort</u> '	'Income and occupations <i>are</i> distributed <u>through talent and effort</u> in our society'
Fourth Element	'Everybody <i>should have</i> an <u>equal chance to enter university</u> , regardless of their gender, income, etc.'	'Everybody in our society <i>has</i> an <u>equal chance to enter university</u> , regardless of their gender, income, etc.'

Besides this, the aspect of proportionality itself has caused problems in the existing conceptualisation. The internal order of superiority of several contributions (i.e. which occupations are considered more contributing) is unclear (Sen, 2000). Several work has pointed to vast attributes of *occupations* such as the degree of indispensability of the occupation and the required educational level, as to attributes of the *employees* occupying the positions (highly educated) (Miller, 1991; Marshall et al., 1999; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007). It is clear that 'contribution' applies to the labour market and not to contributions made in the other spheres. Finally, in this study the usual definition of contribution was used: talent and effort, with considering attributes of both occupations and of (potential) employees (Young, 1958; Marshall et al., 1999; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007).

2.2 Adopted Conceptualisation

The following definition of meritocratic *values* was used in this thesis:

Income and occupational status are distributed proportionally according to talent and effort ('contribution'). Indicators of these are exerted effort, commitment, a high degree of responsibility, an educational degree, former job experience, and all other person-related attributes relevant to the labour market. Occupations are considered more contributively in the extent to which they require more skills, innate abilities or responsibility.

The following definition was adopted with respect to meritocratic *perceptions*:

The perceived importance of meritocratic criteria (talent and effort) in distributing income and occupations compared to non-meritocratic criteria (e.g. being a man, knowing the right people). It is about using explanations for status outcomes that point to talent and effort, instead of the existence of social-structural factors and of alternative distributive principles.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

In this section the rational choice framework is presented to understand how earlier scholars have related individual determinants, such as income level, to support for meritocratic values. However, macro-social conditions were believed here to have consequences as well on which values are in people's interest. As Boudon (1981) argued, the rationality of individuals is to be considered in a social context. Therefore, after outlining the rational choice framework, structuralist complements are presented. Here it was theorised that the extent to which deprived people will feel frustrated is a function of the extent to which their unfortunate outcomes are generally *perceived* to result from a meritocratic competition (Merton, 1939; Boudon, 1981; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008,). In other words, it is assumed here that the *degree to which a society is perceived to be a meritocracy influences the link between status outcomes of individuals and their support for meritocratic values*. Interestingly, Kunovich and Slomczynski (2007) found some substantial variation between countries in the strength of the positive relationship between social status and support for meritocratic values. Unfortunately, they offered no explanation for this variation. Probably, variations in popularity of meritocratic perceptions among countries are the cause of these unexplained differences.

3.1 Rational Choice

Individual's social mobility and employment-status may be important predictors of the degree of support for meritocratic values. Kunovich and Slomczynski (2007) employed a *rational-actor framework* and expected people to support those values which are serving their interests. Meritocratic values are concerned with distribution of income and occupations according to effort and talent and glorify upward social mobility according to these two criteria. Therefore, those individuals who have moved upwardly or who retained higher positions are more likely to be meritocrats. This conjecture was confirmed in Kunovich and Slomczynski (2007) study with respect to static measures of status. In this study similar expectations were employed with respect to intergenerational social mobility and employment-status. Throughout the whole paper, 'desirable status outcomes' refer to *upward social mobility, social immobility in the middle or higher strata, and to employment*. In addition, 'undesirable status outcome' refer to *downward social mobility, immobility in the lower strata, and to unemployment*. Some indicative support exists for the rational-actor framework with respect to value

preferences: low-status individuals in the United States are more likely to support redistributive policies (Hochschild, 1982), and are less likely to endorse meritocratic values (Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007).

3.2 A Structuralist Complement to Rational Choice

This rational-actor framework, however, has an important limitation when it is applied without any complements. Rational individuals live and interact in a social context which defines the conditions and sets the expectations within which individuals make decisions (Boudon, 1981). One aspect of the social context supposed to exert an influence on the link between individual social mobility and value preferences is the *popularity of meritocratic perceptions*. When a society generally is perceived to be a meritocracy, individuals will often become exposed to this view, be it through conventional media or by being surrounded by others who perceive society as meritocratic. This continuous, pervasive exposure to dominant meritocratic accounts of distributive processes exerts stress upon the individual, irrespective of his own possible scepticism. He always will have to defend himself for 'not having made it' due to circumstances other than lack in talent and effort. Psychologists indeed have shown a stimulating effect (also for sceptical participants) of being exposed to subtle meritocratic messages for the degree in which meritocratic explanations are used by people for social outcomes (McCoy & Major, 2007). Similarly, Ruiters & Van Tubergen (2009) showed the impact of popular worldviews, measured in terms of aggregate level of education, over and above the educational level of individuals, on individual's attitudinal behaviours. More structuralist theoretical works have recognised this role of popular perceptions and form a fruitful complement to rational-actor theories (Merton, 1939; Boudon, 1981; McCoy & Major, 2007; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008).

3.3 Merton: Strain

In his *strain* framework, Merton (1939) theorised on the impact of popular modes of thought concerning status attainment on the behaviour of people finding themselves at the bottom of the status hierarchy. The framework considers individuals as being highly sensitive to popular discourses. Similarly, Swierstra & Tonkens (2008) and Alesina et al. (2004) theorised on a possible impact of popular perceptions on the value preferences of different status groups. Moreover, McFadyen (1995) discussed some theories and empirical work that referred to the possible contribution of certain perceptions to stigmatisation of the unemployed, which causes more frustration among unemployed individuals. Specifically, these works indicated that the expected relationships outlined in the rational-actor framework probably do occur only *when meritocratic perceptions are popular in society*. More clearly, the relationship between individual status outcomes and the level of support for meritocratic values depends on what perceptions are popular in a country concerning existing operating distributive criteria. Perceptions of a meritocratic distribution of income and occupations may influence the way individuals evaluate themselves having a certain status outcome. For example, when income and

occupations are perceived to be distributed according to talent and effort, individuals who had moved downwardly are likely to be relatively frustrated (Boudon, 1981). By contrast, societies containing a relatively low level of meritocratic perceptions are expected to contain a less frustrated group of downward mobiles. The same goes for employment-status: the extent to which the unemployed and employed differ in their support for meritocratic values, depends by the society-wide popularity of meritocratic perceptions.

Popular meritocratic perceptions contain the belief that social origin hardly has any effect on one's social destination (Marshall et al., 1999; Evans, 1997). Instead, economic success is perceived to be attainable for people from all social strata. Consequently, the range of outcomes *perceived* attainable for the 'common people' is substantially higher in societies with popular meritocratic perceptions. Boudon (1981) and Merton (1939) wrote about this situation of perceived immense opportunities and pointed to the paradoxical situation that times of rising opportunities bring forth more frustrated individuals. Individuals in that case perceive their odds to be higher. Nonetheless, some individuals eventually will fail to achieve the desired ends. Since no existing society has been able yet to rule out all social-structural determinants of income and occupational status (Hochschild, 1982; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008; Tolsma & Wolbers, 2010), societies with popular perceptions inevitably will contain a group of frustrated people (Merton, 1939; Boudon, 1981; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). Furthermore, even if a society will have become a 'perfect' meritocracy, there will always remain a group of less gifted individuals who will suffer from unrealised aspirations (Young, 1958; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). In short, Boudon (1981) expected that popular meritocratic perceptions can strengthen the link between an undesirable status outcome and frustration. Both the frustration experienced by people with undesirable status outcomes (Merton, 1939; Boudon, 1981) and the satisfaction experienced by people with desirable status outcomes (Boudon, 1981) were expected to be *more pronounced in societies with popular meritocratic perceptions*. Consequently, the differences between those groups in their level of support¹ for meritocratic values is expected to be *larger in societies perceived to be more meritocratic*. This expectation is grounded on the structuralist assertion that these perceptions involve an appeal to all citizens to compare themselves with everyone else, across a maximum variety of status outcomes, and this may induce a more pronounced concern about distributional issues and on the importance of status (Merton, 1939; Boudon, 1981; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). The frustration invoked by meritocratic perceptions may bring forth more pronounced rejections of the accompanying values. By contrast, for people in desirable status outcome, by enlarging their pride about their status outcome, popular meritocratic perceptions may foster support for meritocratic values.

Indicative support for these expectations arises from present studies, despite the fact that countries have not been compared yet in a sufficiently comprehensive model. The relationship between social status and support for meritocratic values appeared in the

¹ Merton theorised on multiple strategies of dealing with this frustration, so one is urged to speak in terms of *likelihood*.

expected direction in Kunovich and Slomczynski's (2007) study, which took place in a country characterised by widely held meritocratic perceptions: the United States (Marshall et al., 1999). By contrast, meritocratic perceptions were considerably less popular in Eastern Europe (Marshall et al., 1999). This may explain why Kunovich and Slomczynski (2007) found variability between countries in *the degree of* internal disagreement among status groups with respect to the desirability of meritocratic principles. For example, in Russia, where meritocratic perceptions are scarcely held by its population (Marshall et al., 1999), the positive relationship between social status and support for meritocratic values is relatively weak (Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007). This makes the possible influence of meritocratic perceptions on the relationship between social mobility and support for meritocratic values more likely.

3.4 Hypotheses

Combining the rational-actor framework with the structuralist framework, the following hypotheses can be outlined. If a society is perceived to be meritocratic, people with undesirable status outcomes are likely to reject meritocratic values (table 2, H1). By contrast, people facing desirable status outcomes are likely to support the principles of this distributional justice, since it legitimises their comfortable social position (table 2, H2). In addition, individuals who face undesirable status outcomes will be *less likely to reject* meritocratic values when they live in a society which is perceived to be *un-meritocratic* (table 2, H3). These individuals may indeed be more likely to support meritocratic values, because they are generally perceived to be hampered by social-structural constraints in achieving success. In this line of thought, meritocracy would open opportunities to some of them. Conversely, people who occupy desirable social positions in these societies are *less likely to support* meritocratic perceptions (table 2, H4). When status outcomes are conceived as results from social-structural and ascribed criteria, a meritocracy could potentially pose a threat for the privileged members of society. Bourdieu (1984) showed that members of the higher social strata had used strategies, during the time society was becoming more open, in order to keep their offspring at a comparative advantage in gaining success. At last, note that the between-groups differences were hypothesised to be lower for countries with a low degree of meritocratic perceptions. Identical patterns were expected for both types of status outcomes: social mobility and employment-status.

Table 2 Hypotheses Schematised

	Popular Meritocratic Perceptions	Popular Skepticism towards Perceiving Society to be Meritocratic
Individuals with Undesirable Status Outcomes	Large probability to reject meritocratic values (H1)	Slight probability to support meritocratic values (H3)
Individuals with Desirable Status Outcomes	Large probability to support meritocratic values (H2)	Slight probability to reject meritocratic values (H4)

4. DATA AND METHODS

4.1 Data

In order to test the outlined hypotheses the ISSP (International Social Survey Project) 2009 Social Inequality survey data set (ISSP Research Group, 2012c) was used. The standardised questionnaires underlying these data focus on opinions about inequality, just distributions, perceptions of current distributional practices and social conflicts, as well as the respondent's own social position (ISSP Research Group, 2012a). This data set was chosen for its well-suited items and for its large number of participating countries. The data set enables to consider both European and non-European Western countries. The ISSP is a continued collaboration between research departments from different countries. It coordinates the combining of several research projects and surveys and thereby enables the generation of cross-national data on several important social topics (ISSP Research Group, 2012a). The survey is taken once in a few years (1987, 1992, 1999 and 2009) (ISSP Research Group, 2012a). In all countries, the survey was directed at the population of 18 years and older (Gendall, 2011; ISSP Research Group, 2012b). In almost all cases, a probability-stratified sampling procedure was applied. Furthermore, for the majority of countries the data collection took longer than 3 months and took place in 2009 or early in 2010 (Gendall, 2011). Detailed information about the procedures followed by the ISSP in conducting their research projects can be found at the ISSP-website (ISSP, 2010) and in Gendall's (2011) evaluation report of the data collection process.

In total, the data file includes 40 (Western, South-American and Asian) countries (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). An overall weight factor was used that contains all country-specific weights to attain a combined data set consisting of representative

national samples (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). Eventually, 26 countries² were selected for this study. This case selection was directed by three desires: (1) including countries sufficiently different with respect to popularity of meritocratic perceptions, (2) retaining reliability, and (3) excluding countries with any missing crucial variables. Additionally, South Africa, Australia, the Scandinavian countries and Eastern European were consciously included, for these countries contributed to sufficient cross-national variation in the popularity of meritocratic perceptions. This variation is essential for assessing the possible impact of popular meritocratic perceptions on the relationship between status outcomes and support for meritocratic values. Due to missing crucial variables, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Portugal were not selected in the end.

The overall response rate for the ISSP survey is 48%³. Although most countries had similar response rates, there were some outliers in response rate in both directions (South-Africa: 94% and Italy, 18%) (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). In most countries weights were used for their samples, mostly directed at correcting the representation of the sexes, age categories, educational levels, regions and type of residences. Often the weights are post-stratification weights and corrected for non-response. List-wise deletion was used for the analyses here to deal with missing values at the crucial variables (substantial and control variables)⁴. This deletion was conducted separately for two distinctive analyses: one set of analyses considers social mobility as independent variable, whereas the other set contains unemployment. As a result, two slightly different samples emerged. In the analyses this is taken into account (e.g. by centring the variables separately for each sample). For the first set of analyses, barely 23,790 respondents out of 35,376 potential respondents remained available. This was only two third of the total number of respondents in the selected countries. This relatively high decline appeared to be caused by a considerable amount of missing data for the social mobility variable. The items on occupational status, out of which the social mobility variable was computed, suffered a relatively high proportion of missing data (18% for the item about the respondent's occupational status and 20% for the father's). In most individual countries, 70% of the original sample was retained. However, in two countries a remarkably share of the sample was lost. Note that the unemployed were also asked about their occupational status in the ISSP-questionnaire (about their last job), so a high unemployment rate cannot account for this large loss of respondents.

When the social mobility score was substituted by the unemployment-dummy for the second set of analyses, a considerably smaller loss of respondents occurred. Of the original sample, 94% retained available for the second set of analyses: 33,234

² These countries are: Austria, Australia, Flanders, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany (only the former West part), Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Russia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, South-Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the US.

³ This mean response rate was calculated based on the country-specific response rates for all selected countries for this paper. However, for Hungary information was missing in the study report; therefore the mean is based on the specific response rates for all selected countries, except Hungary.

⁴ These variables are (for the analyses on social mobility): meritocratic perceptions (at the macro-level), social mobility score, age, sex, educational level and meritocratic values. For the analyses on unemployment, the set of crucial variables is the same, with the exception that the variable representing social mobility score was substituted for an unemployment-dummy.

respondents. Besides this, the country differences with respect to missings were less pronounced. Overall, most countries approached the overall retained percentage of 94%. Indeed, in some countries as much as 97 to 99% was retained. Because the second set of analyses generated a considerably larger workable sample, it was checked whether the descriptive statistics based on the remaining sample for the first set of analyses was still valid. It turned out that the figures are virtually identical.

4.2 Dependent Variable

Support for meritocratic values was operationalised as a mean-scale containing four items. This scale was derived from the literature (Marshall et al., 1999; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007) and improved and examined after a reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha = .65 for the analyses on social mobility; .66 for the analyses on employment-status)⁵. Fortunately, no countries generated alpha-levels lower than .5, which was taken as a thumbnail to retain countries in the final analyses. Factor analysis revealed only one clear factor. The adopted scale consisted of the following 5-point scale items asking respondents to rank several payment considerations from 'essential' (1) to 'not important at all' (5), and a 'can't choose option'. Respondents who selected this last answer are coded as missing. This was kept this way for here. All four items started with the question phrase: 'In deciding how much people ought to earn, how important should each of these things be, in your opinion...'. The first item contains the consideration of responsibility: 'how much responsibility goes with the job – how important do you think that ought to be in deciding pay?'; the second deals with education: 'the number of years spent in education and training?'; the third is about actual performance: 'how well he or she does the job – how important should that be in deciding pay?'; and the last is concerned with effort: 'how hard he or she works at the job?' (ISSP Research Group, 2012c). All items were reverse coded (6 – item) such that higher scores on this mean-scale represent more support for meritocratic values. In other words: a meritocrat assigns a high importance to the responsibility required by the job, and the educational level, actual performance and the effort exerted by the employee in determining payment. Finally, in the mean-scale it was decided to exclude respondents that have answered less than 3 out of the 4 items (a threshold of two-third is maintained for all mean-scales in this paper).

⁵ As noted in the literature of Kunovich & Slomczynski (2007), the items on family need considerations in determining income loaded 'inconsistently' in the present analysis as well. The items attenuated reliability of the unimproved scale. As pointed out in the conceptualisation section, this makes sense theoretically. Meritocrats may propose an income that takes the family into account, for it could be argued children should grow up in proper circumstances in order to speak of 'equal opportunities'. The two omitted 'family-items' contain: 'In deciding how much people ought to earn, how important should each of these things be, in your opinion...' (a) 'what is needed to support a family' and (b) 'whether the person has children to support – how important should that be in deciding pay?'. The answer categories here (5-point scale) range from 'essential' to 'not important at all', with a 'can't choose' option included. Essential was originally coded as 1.

Support for meritocratic values is highly normally distributed around an overall mean of 3.94 at a 1 to 5 range, which is rather high. The distributions and means of different countries are very similar to this overall pattern. Countries that showed to have a relatively high mean support for meritocratic values are Bulgaria, South-Africa, Hungary, and Ukraine. By contrast, Denmark and Estonia showed a relatively 'low' mean support for meritocratic values. However, the deviations of individual countries from the overall mean support for meritocratic countries turned out to be not that dramatic, especially regarding the bottom of the distribution. The descriptive statistics for this scale are provided in tables 5 and 6.

4.3 Independent Variables: Micro-Level

To construct *intergenerational social mobility*, a few steps were taken. Because of its international comparability (Ganzeboom & Treiman, 1996) and the possibilities provided by the ISSP-data, the ISCO88 status scale is used as the initial status scale from which the social mobility measure were eventually extracted. Specifically, the ISCO88 scale of the respondent his father and of the respondent himself were used. The ISCO scale ranges from 1,000 to 9,333 in the ISSP data set (ISSP Research Group, 2012b), and each first digit represents another broad occupational category (Ganzeboom & Treiman, 1996). At first, respondents are asked about their father's ISCO88 in an open question: 'When you were 15 years old, what kind of work did your father do; what was his main occupation? Describe fully, using two words or more (do not use initials or abbreviations). If your father did not have a paid job at the time, please give information about his last job before that time.' (ISSP Research Group, 2012c). Next, the respondent is asked about his own status: 'And in your current job, what is your main occupation? If you are not working now, please tell us about your last job. Describe fully, using two words or more (do not use initials or abbreviations). If your father did not have a paid job at the time, please give information about his last job before that time.' (ISSP Research Group, 2012c). However, the exact wording of the two questions differs slightly between countries. Still, comparability is largely retained, since eventually the answers are uniformly coded according to the ISCO88 standard (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). For here, it was decided to omit soldiers (coded as 110) from the scale. This was done because of possible presence of military service obligations in countries.

In order to generate results that are more sociologically meaningful, the original ISCO88 scores are converted into scores at an EGP status scale (10 categories) (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Ganzeboom & Treiman, 1996). This EGP scale is presented in table 3. The scale has the advantage that it takes two additional substantial aspects of occupational status into account: being either employed or self-employed, and the presence of any supervision responsibilities. Another advantage of the EGP is the widespread use of this scale in cross-country studies (Ganzeboom & Treiman, 1996), which fosters the international comparability of results. Furthermore, EGP-scores are easy to calculate with, for the scale actually constitutes a ladder with discrete treads representing distinct social classes. The conversion conducted here was guided by Ganzeboom & Treiman's (1996) instructions, as well as some updated syntaxes found

online, produced by Ganzeboom (2001). This procedure contains two steps. Finally, an EGP-scale ranging from tread 1 (highest) to 10 (lowest) resulted (see table 3).

The two consecutive steps are taken as follows. First, occupations from the ISCO88, ranked primarily at the basis of the skills they require, are assigned to one of the EGP treads. However, the ISCO88 does not distinguish between being either employed or self-employed, nor does it consider the presence of supervision responsibilities in a job. Therefore, in the second step⁶, information is extracted from other items about these two work aspects. Using this information, respondents can be re-allocated more adequately among the EGP-scale. Three items in the ISSP data set provided the required information. Their literal wording varies slightly between the countries, but fortunately, the coding is done uniformly (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). In the first item used, respondents are asked about their supervision responsibilities in a simple yes/no question: 'Do/did you supervise other employees?' with the additional comment: 'If you work for more than one employer, or if you are both employed and self-employed, please refer to your main job. If you are retired or not currently working, please refer to your last main job.' The answers are coded in the data set as follows: (1) yes, (2) no, and (missing) are 'refused', 'don't know', 'no answer', and those who reported they never have had a job or were not in labour force (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). The information about self-employment is asked in the following question: 'If you are (or were) self-employed, please tell us how many staff you employ (or did employ)'. The question is routed only towards self-employed respondents. The coding in the data set is done as follows: first a continual numerical range from 1 to 4,000, followed by code 9995 for zero employees, and several types of responses coded as missing (never had a job, not/ never self-employed, refused, don't know and no answer) (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). For the present analyses, the item was recoded into three categories: (1) zero employees; (2) 1 to 10 employees; (3) more than 10 employees. Finally, for assessing whether the father was self-employed, the following item was used: 'When you were 15 years old, for whom did your father work?'. The answers are coded as (1) employee of a private company or business; (2) government (national, state or local government; state-owned enterprise); (3) self-employed; cooperative; collective farming; (4) other (open sub-question); and missings (not applicable, can't choose, no answer) (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). For the present analyses, this item was recoded into a dummy assigning a 1 to those whose father was self-employed (category 3) and a zero to the rest of the valid answers. In the end, it was randomly checked for respondents whether the re-allocation in both steps was done correctly.

After the two occupational statuses were adequately expressed in EGP-scales, a social mobility variable was constructed. Since the respective treads of the EGP each represent

⁶ Due to the fact that the available information differs somewhat from the information used by Ganzeboom & Treiman (1996), it was necessary to deviate slightly in the re-assignments during the second step. For example, information about whether the father supervised any employees was absent. Here it was assumed that in case he was self-employed and if his status equals that of his self-employed respondent, he would be in the same self-employment tread as the respondent (4 or 5). This is a somewhat information-constraining decision, but it was preferred because it is a safe one.

a substantially distinctive social class, it was decided that a deviation of 1 tread between father's and respondent's EGP-score reflects social mobility. The respondent's own EGP-score was subtracted from his father's EGP, such that positive values at this variable represent upward mobility and vice versa. In addition, a score of zero reflects immobility. However, this continual social mobility scale is not suitable for the final analyses, since the hypotheses demand to make a distinction between immobility types in different strata. Specifically, immobiles in the lower strata and higher strata were expected to react differently to popular meritocratic perceptions. Therefore, dummy categories were extracted from the continual social mobility variable. Additionally, a category 'immobiles in the middle strata' was distinguished. This was done because of the range of the EGP-scales and substantial reasons. The boundaries that defined the treads that were going to correspond to either 'lower', 'middle' or 'higher', were located after considering the relative size of the different treads and the desire for a substantial division. Finally, it was decided to label the highest three treads as 'higher strata' and tread 8 till 10 as 'lower strata'. In the end, five dummies were constructed: upward mobiles, downward mobiles, immobiles in the lower strata, immobiles in the middle strata, and immobiles in the higher strata. Of this sample 22.6% had experienced downward social mobility, whereas as much as 60.6% had experienced upward mobility, and 16.8% social immobility. Of these immobiles, 34.7% was situated in the lower strata, while 23.7% was in the middle strata, and 41.6% in the higher strata. For most countries the proportions appeared to be quite similar.

Next to social mobility, *employment-status* was considered as an alternative independent variable at the micro level. A dummy variable was constructed from a broader variable in the data set. In some countries, information on employment status was extracted from a question about the respondent's regular weekly activities. In other countries this information was generated through a more direct question: 'What is your current employment status?' (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). The coding, though, was uniform. Category 5 represented the 'unemployed', which was used for constructing a dummy variable for unemployment. Respondents in this particular category got a 1 and other valid scores got a zero. Important to note is that the original coding contained two other categories of people not in paid employment: housewives and the retired. Because these categories are clearly distinct from the unemployed, in that the unemployed usually seek employment, those other two categories were not assigned a 1. Instead of coding them as 'missing', they were assigned a zero. This was done because they constitute so called 'alternative positive identities' (McFadyen, 1995) and in this respect do not differ from the employed for the theoretical focus here. As a result, only the 'genuine' unemployed were distinguished, who did categorise themselves as unemployed and may feel the pressure of stigma and to perform at the market. Furthermore, a possibly large selective respondent loss among female and aged respondents is avoided by doing this. So strictly speaking, when speaking of the 'employed', one must remind that this category contains also housewives and retired individuals. The overall unemployment in the sample is 8.7%. The unemployed constitute a small minority, but from a substantial point of view this share is relatively

Table 3 The Adopted EGP Scale

Final Rank Order	Original Rank Order	Substantial Class Label
1	I	Higher Service (professionals, large enterprise employers and higher managers)
2	II	Lower Service (associate professionals, lower managers, higher sales personnel)
3	III	Routine Clerical/ Sales Personnel
4	IVa	Small Employers
5	IVb	Independent (own account workers, no employees)
6	V	Manual Foremen (manual workers with supervision responsibilities)
7	VI	Skilled Manual (craft workers, skilled service workers)
8	VIIa	Semi-Unskilled Manual (machine operators, elementary workers, sales and services)
9	VIIb	Farm Workers (employed farm workers, regardless their skill level)
10	IVc	Farmers/ Farm Managers (self-employed and supervisory farm workers, regardless their skill level)

Original Rank Order Labels are derived from Erikson & Goldthorpe (1992, pp. 29-39); the substantial class labels from Ganzeboom & Treiman (1996), p. 214.

appreciable: overall, close to 1 at 10 people is unemployed. Besides this, the unemployment rate varies between countries. Low unemployment rates (less than 3.5%) were found for Australia and Scandinavia; high unemployment was found in South-Africa (35%) and Spain (19.3%).

4.4 Independent Variables: Macro-Level

Similar to the construction of the scale for meritocratic values, the perception-scale is highly based on the literature of Marshall et al. (1999) and Kunovich & Slomczynski (2007). The respondent was asked to indicate how important he thinks several factors currently are in determining success in his society, and to express his (dis)agreement with several beliefs concerning how society works. All items constitute 5-point scales. The first set of items start with the phrase: 'To begin we have some questions about opportunities for getting ahead. Please tick one box for each of these to show how important you think it is for getting ahead in life...' after which some possible determinants for success follow which are ranked by the respondent between 'essential' (coded as 1) through 'not important at all' (coded as 5) (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). Respondents that answered 'can't choose', are coded as missing. The items selected for 'meritocratic perceptions' are the following: 'how important is coming from a wealthy family?'; 'having a good education yourself?'; 'how important is having ambition?'; 'how important is hard work?'; 'how important is knowing the right people?'; 'how important is having political connections?'; 'how important is giving bribes?'; 'how important is a person's race?' (ethnicity, depending on the country); 'how important is a person's religion?'; 'how important is being born a man or a woman?' After this, the respondents was asked: 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?', after which these three statements are included here: 'to get all the way to the top in <country> today, you have to be corrupt'; 'in <country>, only the rich can afford the costs of attending university'; 'in <country> people have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background'. Here, the respondent could select answers ranging from 'strongly agree' (coded as 1) to 'strongly disagree' (coded as 5), or 'can't choose' (coded as missing) (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). Some items were reverse coded such that higher scores on the scale represent stronger meritocratic perceptions: 'having a good education', 'having ambition', 'hard work', and 'in <country> people have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background'. Finally, as a threshold, it was decided that respondents had to have answered at least 9 out of 13 items to be included in the analyses.

At first, meritocratic perceptions were expressed in a mean-scale consisting of several items. The mean-scale was preferred above a factor-weighted scale because it generates fewer missing data and its results are more easy to interpret. Moreover, reliability analysis suggested that omitting some items from the scale would improve the present alpha-level (.703 for the first set of analyses and .704 for the second). But omitting these items would inevitably mean neglecting theoretically central issues (e.g. the perceived importance of a high educational degree), whereas the alpha-level would only barely improve. Therefore, it was decided to retain all 13 items in the scale. In addition, by retaining all items a better connection is kept with operationalisations in the pre-existing literature. Thus, because of the high costs and the low reliability-

benefits of retaining fewer items, all initial items were kept. Fortunately, again no countries had alpha-levels below .5, for both sets of analyses.

Subsequently, the median meritocratic perception for a country was calculated, from all individual scores at the mean-scale in a country. In this way, meritocratic perceptions were aggregated towards the macro-level (Hox, 2002). Subsequently, this country-specific median was assigned to each respondent in this country. By this use of meritocratic perceptions as a contextual variable (Hox, 2002), it became possible to assess its impact from the macro-level on the micro-level relationship between social mobility/ employment-status and support for meritocratic values. The overall median meritocratic perception was 3.62 at a range from 1.42 to 5, with an interquartile range of .67 for the first set of analyses and .69 for the second. So overall, the level of meritocratic perceptions is modestly high. Meritocratic perceptions are particularly popular in Australia and the Scandinavian countries. By contrast, meritocratic perceptions are only modestly upheld in Ukraine, South-Africa and Russia. Overall, countries do not appear to differ dramatically in the extent to which meritocratic perceptions are popularly held. In fact, radically low levels (below .27) appeared to be absent.

Summarising, at first, a mean-scale consisting of several items was constructed to measure *meritocratic perceptions* held by individuals. The following step contained the calculation of a country-specific median out of the scores of its respondents. This country-specific median was chosen rather than its mean meritocratic perception, because of the tendency of the distribution in some countries to be somewhat skewed to the left. In such a case, the median provides a better overall snapshot of the average perception in a country (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2009). Subsequently, out of all these country-specific medians, an overall median was calculated. Finally, with this overall mean a centred median-score on 'meritocratic perceptions' was calculated for each country. These centration-scores were used as the final macro-level variable of meritocratic perceptions⁷. All respondents were then assigned the value corresponding to their country.

However, it should be noted that factor analysis for evaluating the mean-scale revealed some issues that need to be noted. Factor analysis (principal axis factoring, promax rotated) yielded three to four factors for meritocratic perceptions (measured at the individual level), of which two were inspected more closely. One factor contained items that assess respondent's perceived importance of education, ambition and effort in determining success. This could be considered a positively, 'core' definition of meritocratic perceptions. Another factor consisted of those items that assess the perceived role of race, gender and religion in achieving success. This factor can be considered as a negatively defined operationalisation of meritocratic perceptions. For example, an individual who endorses the rhetoric that people generally get ahead by

⁷ Because of different sample sizes in the two distinct sets of analyses (social mobility and employment-status respectively), this macro variable was computed separately for each set of analyses. Although the figures for both sets are virtually identical both for the distinct countries as well as overall, a separate calculation was preferred because of discretion.

showing ambition, is likely to have a high score at the positively defined operationalisation. Moreover, an individual who perceives chances to depend on a person's race, likely scores high at the negatively defined operationalisation. Although some items were reverse coded such that high scores on individual items represented stronger meritocratic perceptions, the 'positive' factor was negatively correlated with all other factors. In order to understand this pattern, some preliminary regression analyses were conducted with country-level meritocratic perceptions calculated from the alternative mean-scales. For this calculation the same procedure was followed as used for the final analyses. Interestingly, the regression containing the positively defined operationalisation of meritocratic perceptions revealed no significant interaction effect for unemployment, whereas the regression on the other operationalisation in fact did. Furthermore, whereas positively defined meritocratic perceptions were positively associated with support for meritocratic values, the opposite turned out to apply for the other operationalisation. Furthermore, cross-country patterns varied considerably among the different operationalisations. South-Africa and many Eastern European countries scored low on the negatively defined operationalisation. Conversely, these countries scored remarkably high at the positively defined operationalisation. These are rather puzzling results, which give rise to new preliminary theoretical expectations. These will be further addressed in the discussion section.

4.5 Control Variables

Informed by the literature, some control variables were included in the analyses. However, the questions for assessing the control variables were asked in a slightly different wording in the various countries (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). Fortunately, the coding was done uniformly. The most representative formulation of the several questions are displayed in this section. Table 4 and 5 summarise the descriptive statistics for the control variables. All control variables appeared to have normal distributions. It was checked whether country-specific figures resemble this overall figure. This was found to be the case, with the exception of the age distribution of two countries.

Firstly, *sex* was included as a control variable. Kunovich & Slomczynski (2007) found a mixed, but significant positive effect of being a woman for the degree of supporting meritocratic values. As a relatively disadvantaged group in society, women can expect to gain from a meritocratic distribution of income and occupations, since it aims to combat the attributed significance to sex in the distribution of these two receipts. Respondents are either asked about their sex, or in other cases, the respondent's sex is derived by the interviewer (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). Here a dummy-variable was constructed in which a 1 was assigned to male respondents and a zero to females. Refusers were coded as missing.

Besides *sex*, Kunovich & Slomczynski (2007) included *age* in their analysis and found significant effects in some countries. They expected the younger generation to be more likely to support meritocratic values. Indeed, Young (1958) suggested that older people would be likely to oppose meritocratic values in favour of a system of promotions based

on seniority. Respondents were asked about their birth year, which resulted in a continuous variable representing the respondent's age at the time of the survey (ISSP Research Group, 2012a). Again, refusers were coded as missing values. The data set contains an arbitrarily cut off point at age 98, reflecting '98 or older'.

Moreover, since earlier studies showed that *educational level* correlates with both occupational status (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2001) and meritocratic values (Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007; Marshall et al., 1999; Jost, et al., 2003), this variable needs to be taken into account as well. Educational level was stated in terms of years of followed education in order to successfully attain a degree. Respondents were asked: 'All up, how many years of education have you completed?' with the additional comment 'Please include all primary and secondary schooling, and studies you've undertaken after high school. If your study was part-time, give the number of years of equivalent full-time study.' (ISSP Research Group, 2012b). The answers were coded numerically from 1 to 81, with value (95) for respondents still at school, (96) for respondents still at college or university, and code 97-99 for different types of missings ('no formal schooling', 'don't know', and 'no answer') (ISSP Research Group, 2012a). In order to be able to make sensible calculations with this variable, it was decided to assign 15 years to people still at school and 17 years to people still at college or university. Furthermore, some people answered they had been in education for (often considerably) more years than 23, which is quite strange from a substantial viewpoint. Therefore, it was decided to limit all those values to 23 years.

Finally, a macro-level control variable was added to the model: *social welfare expenditures* by the national government. Kunovich & Slomczynski (2007) pointed to the potential role of a welfare state in eliciting support for meritocratic values. To assess social welfare expenditures, statistics were derived from the web site of the World Bank (2013a). These statistics in turn are derived from publicised information by governments about their expenditures, checked by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The World Bank then calculates the proportion of the GDP in a country spent on government facilitations for the provision of public goods and services, civil servants' salaries, subsidies, social benefits, rent and dividends in 2009 (World Bank, 2013a). To evaluate reliability, the statistics of the World Bank were compared with similar statistics provided by the web site of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2013). The figures were indeed similar. For the analyses here, the level of social welfare expenditures, as assessed by the World Bank, was assigned to all respondents of the respective country⁸. Note that the variable on social welfare expenditures was mean-centred in this study, as was done with all continuous variables. Not being centred, the mean proportion of GDP spent on public goods and social benefits for the 26 countries under study, is more than one-third: 36.3%.

⁸ On both web sites, information about Switzerland's expenditures in 2009 was missing. Instead, for Switzerland the proportion of expenditures of the former year was used for the analyses here. This is convenient, for it appears that the numbers did not change dramatically in most countries between 2008 and 2009.

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics of Dependent, Independent and Control Variables for the Analysis on Social Mobility

Variable	Percentage	Range	Mean (SD)
Meritocratic Values ₁	n/a	1 to 5	3.94 (.56)
Social Mobility ₁	n/a	-9 to 9	2.09 (3.61)
- Upward	60.6%	0/1	n/a
- Downward	22.6%	0/1	n/a
- Immobile in High Strata	41.6%	0/1	n/a
- Immobile in Middle Strata	23.7%	0/1	n/a
- Immobile in Low Strata	34.7%	0/1	n/a
Sex ₁			
- Men	48.2%	0/1	n/a
Education ₁	n/a	1 to 23	12.78 (3.55)
Age ₁	n/a	15 to 98	47.37 (16.09)
Meritocratic Perceptions ₂	n/a	3.23 to 4.00	3.62 ⁹ (.67)
Social Welfare Expenditures ₂ ^a (centred)	n/a	-19.97 to 11.93	.37 (7.43)

*N*₁ = 23,790; *N*₂ = 26
^aThe statistics for this variable were derived from the World Bank (2013a). *N* = 23,790

Table 5 Descriptive Statistics of Dependent, Independent and Control Variables for the Analysis on Employment-Status

Variable	Percentage	Range	Mean (SD)
Meritocratic Values ₁	n/a	1 to 5	3.94 (.57)
Employment Status ₁			
- Unemployed	8.7%	0/1	n/a
Sex ₁			
- Men	47.2%	0/1	n/a
Education ₁	n/a	1 to 23	12.68 (3.61)
Age ₁	n/a	15 to 98	45.69 (17.43)
Meritocratic Perceptions ₂	n/a	3.18 to 4.00	3.62 ¹⁰ (.69)
Social Welfare Expenditures ₂ ^a (centred)	n/a	-19.97 to 11.93	.12 (7.07)

*N*₁ = 33,234; *N*₂ = 26
^aThe statistics for this variable were derived from the World Bank (2013a).

⁹ This is a median instead of a mean, and its corresponding variance-measure is the inter-quartile range instead of a standard deviation.

¹⁰ This is a median instead of a mean, and its corresponding variance-measure is the inter-quartile range instead of a standard deviation.

4.6 Methods

Maximum likelihood multiple linear regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. Subsequently, multi-level analyses were conducted to evaluate the robustness of the findings (see Appendices A and B). This was done because this type of analysis corresponds best with the multi-level nature of the theoretical problem. In fact, the aim is to assess the impact of a macro-level variable on the relationship between two variables at the micro-level (i.e. a cross-level interaction). A multi-level regression takes the dependence of individual observations into account. This dependency stems from the presence of national boundaries: individuals living in the same country may have more resembling scores at the micro-level variables than individuals from different countries do (Hox, 2002). As a result, the risk of inappropriately small standard errors, which is associated with applying regular multiple regressions on multi-level problems, is avoided by adopting a multi-level analysis (Hox, 2002; Immerzeel & Van Tubergen, 2011). Consequently, the likelihood for effects to be significant is larger in regular multiple regressions than in multi-level analyses (Hox, 2002). However, here the results turned out to be virtually identical for both types of regressions¹¹. Beforehand, collinearity values were inspected, and it was checked whether the homoscedasticity and normality assumptions were met. In both regression analyses all continuous variables were mean-centred. In order to rule out some confounding influences of external variables, some control variables were added to the analysis: sex, age, income, educational level, and social welfare expenditures.

5. RESULTS

Table 6 provides a summary of the linear multiple maximum likelihood regression results for social mobility with immobiles in the lower strata as the reference group. In addition, table 7 summarises the regression for employment-status with the employed¹² as a reference group. Below, the results will be described and evaluated. In each regression analysis, two models were estimated consecutively: the first model included only main effects (both at the micro- and macro-level), whereas the second model contained both the main effects and the interaction term(s).

5.1 Social Mobility

Contrary to the expectations, social mobility appeared to have no effect on the level of support for meritocratic values. In the regression, immobiles in the lower strata were held as the reference group. Afterwards, the reference category was shifted to downward mobiles, which revealed broadly the same picture. Therefore, only the results of the previous regression are depicted and discussed here. Only one social mobility category appeared to differ from immobiles in the lower strata with respect to their

¹¹ Note that the data were weighted in the regular multiple regression analyses, whereas the weight factor was turned off in the multi-level analyses.

¹² Remember that the 'employed'-category also includes housewives and retired.

support for meritocratic values: the upward mobiles ($p < .05$). However, this statistical difference turned out to be not robust after conducting the multi-level analysis for social mobility: the difference lost significance. As explained earlier, when a difference is statistically significant in regular multiple regressions, while it loses significance in a multi-level analysis, no firm statement about an existing difference can be made. Nevertheless, the mere absence of any main effect of social mobility does not necessarily imply that the hypotheses are to be abandoned. In the end, the hypotheses point to the crucial moderating role of meritocratic perceptions in the association between social mobility and support for meritocratic values. Therefore, first this moderator effect has to be examined before it is possible to derive any final conclusions about the hypotheses.

5.2 Unemployment

Being unemployed was expected to be associated with lower levels of support for meritocratic values. To examine the impact of employment-status a separate regression analysis was conducted. Because employment-status was constructed as a dummy variable in which the unemployed were assigned a 1, the figures reflect the 'effect' of being unemployed. As expected, unemployment appears to have a statistically significant negative influence on the amount of support for meritocratic values by individuals ($b = -.043$, $p < .01$). The fact that this effect is net of educational level makes this result additionally noticeable. However, from a substantial point of view, the effect is fairly small. On average, the unemployed differ only .04 points (.02 standard deviations) from the employed at a scale from 1 to 5 in their support for meritocratic values. Nevertheless the effect is shown to be closely as large as the (likewise significant) effect of education, on which earlier studies had focused (Hochschild, 1982; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007).

5.3 Interaction

So far, results were shown on the differences between the various status-defined groups in their support for meritocratic values. But the hypotheses mainly deal with the effect of popular meritocratic perceptions in a society on the magnitude of these group-differences. So it is crucial to analyse the possible strengthening role of popular meritocratic perceptions on the relationship between status outcomes and support for meritocratic values. With respect to social mobility, there is no such cross-level interaction effect with meritocratic perceptions. None of the interaction terms appeared to be significant. Hence, the results do not support any of the proposed hypotheses regarding social mobility.

Unlike what appeared to be the case for social mobility, the difference between the unemployed and their country-mates in their support for meritocratic values appeared to be influenced by popular meritocratic perceptions. However, this interaction does not operate in the expected direction; popular meritocratic perceptions generally appear to *weaken instead of strengthen* the differences in support for meritocratic values between

Table 6 Maximum Likelihood Multiple Linear Regression of Meritocratic Values on Social Mobility

	Social Mobility		Confirmed?
	b (SE)		
Intercept	-0.02	(.017)	
Micro-Level Variables			
Social Mobility			
- Immobile in the Lower Strata (ref.)	—	—	
- Upward Mobile	.036 *	(.017)	(+)
- Immobile in Higher Strata	.019	(.022)	(-)
- Immobile in Middle Strata	-.030	(.026)	(-)
- Downward Mobile	.016	(.018)	(-)
Age	<.001	(<.001)	
Sex			
- Female (ref.)	—	—	
- Male	-.057 ***	(.007)	
Education	.008 ***	(.001)	
Macro-Level Variables			
Meritocratic Perceptions	-.628 ***	(.067)	
Social Welfare Expenditures	-.009 ***	(<.001)	
Cross-level Interaction Variables			
Social Mobility ×			
Meritocratic Perceptions			
- Immobile in Lower Classes × Meritocratic Perceptions (ref.)	—	—	
- Upward Mobile × Meritocratic Perceptions	.099	(.070)	—
- Immobile in Higher Strata × Meritocratic Perceptions	.069	(.093)	—
- Immobile in Middle Strata × Meritocratic Perceptions	.081	(.107)	—
- Downward Mobile × Meritocratic Perceptions	.078	(.074)	—
R^2 Model (main effects)	.054		
R^2 Model 2 (interactions included)	.054		
$N_{micro-level\ variables}$	23,790		
$N_{macro-level\ variables}$	26		

^o $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. + hypothesis confirmed, - hypothesis not confirmed. All continuous variables were mean centred in the analysis.

Table 7 Maximum Likelihood Multiple Linear Regression of Meritocratic Values on Employment-Status

	Employment-Status			Confirmed?
	b (SE)			
Intercept	.022	***	(.004)	
Micro-Level Variables				
Employment-Status				
- Employed (ref.)	—		—	
- Unemployed	-.043	**	(.013)	(+)
Age	<.001		(<.001)	
Sex				
- Female (ref.)	—		—	
- Male	-.053	***	(.006)	
Education	.006	***	(.001)	
Macro-Level Variables				
Meritocratic Perceptions	-.477	***	(.014)	
Social Welfare Expenditures	-.008	***	(<.001)	
Cross-level Interaction Variables				
Employment-Status ×				
Meritocratic Perceptions				
- Employed × Meritocratic Perceptions (ref.)	—		—	
- Unemployed × Meritocratic Perceptions	.113	*	(.052)	—
R^2 Model (main effects)	.042			
R^2 Model (interaction included)	.042			
$N_{micro-level\ variables}$	33,234			
$N_{macro-level\ variables}$	26			

^o $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. + hypothesis confirmed, - hypothesis not confirmed. All continuous variables were mean centred in the analysis.

the unemployed and employed ($b = .113$, $p < .05$ ¹³). Hence, for employment-status as well, the data provide no evidence for any of the hypotheses. Instead of causing polarisation, popular meritocratic perceptions in society rather seem to foster agreement between the two groups with respect to the desirability of a meritocracy. On

¹³ In the multi-level regression, however, the interaction term turned out to be marginally statistically significant ($b = .099$, $p < .10$). See Appendix B.

average, at one standard deviation increase in the societal belief in meritocratic perceptions, the difference in support for meritocratic values between the unemployed and their country-mates decreased .015 standard deviations. However, from the fact that the countries under study did vary less than 2 standard deviations from each other in the level of meritocratic perceptions, it must be announced that this effect is not substantially large. In addition, despite the significant F-change resulting from adding the interaction term in the regression model, the R^2 does actually not increase. In other words: the interaction between an individual's employment-status and the popularity of meritocratic perceptions in his country, does not explain much variance between individuals in their support for meritocratic values. Still, however small, the model produced a statistically significant interaction effect. Specifically, one has to consider the average difference between the unemployed and employed with respect to their support for meritocratic values, which appeared to be .02 standard deviations. In that case, a decline of .01 standard deviations *in this difference* brought about by a 1 standard deviation increase in meritocratic perception may be quite appreciable.

Because of the relatively small overall variance between countries in the popularity of meritocratic perceptions, it is not the case that at a certain existing point in the data (i.e. at a certain degree of popular meritocratic perceptions), the unemployed do 'outperform' the employed in their level of support for meritocratic values. Thus, there occurred no paradoxical state of the unemployed 'conforming' to the status quo in such an extent that they start to 'differ' significantly from the rest of society in their support for meritocratic values. To have that happen, a higher level of popular meritocratic perception is required than was found in any of the countries under study. Furthermore, extrapolating conclusions from a limited range of scores generally is an unjustified generalisation to make. Although the data failed to contain countries with popular meritocratic perception sufficiently high to show a reversal in the association between employment-status and support for meritocratic values, Denmark appeared to be located at the 'turning point'. According to the regression function, at this level of meritocratic perceptions, the unemployed are on average equally strong supporters of meritocratic values as the other members of the society. Indeed, in Denmark the correlation between employment-status and support for meritocratic values was only marginally significant ($\Phi = .045$, $p < .10$)¹⁴, whereas in South Africa (where meritocratic perceptions appeared to be relatively uncommon) the correlation appeared to be much stronger ($\Phi = .154$, $p < .001$).

5.4 Additional Findings

A rather counterintuitive finding should be noted and further explored: the negative effect of popular meritocratic perceptions for support for meritocratic values. In all analyses popular meritocratic perceptions in a society were shown to reduce support for meritocratic values among its members. Indeed, meritocratic values appeared to be the

¹⁴ However, the unemployed contained only 2.6% of the N in Denmark, so relative group sizes differed remarkably. For Denmark N = 1,425; for South Africa N = 3,254.

strongest determinant of meritocratic values, among all other predictors involved ($b = -.628, p < .001$ for the regression on social mobility; $b = -.477, p < .001$ for the regression on employment-status). However, it should be noted that although the effect of meritocratic perceptions seems to be large in relative terms, in itself it is actually quite modest. To illustrate, individuals in the countries with the lowest and highest level of meritocratic perceptions, on average differ .39 points at a 1 to 5 scale in support for meritocratic values. Nevertheless, the effect is large compared to other predictors in the model and even larger than the effect of education. Because this finding raises questions, it was checked whether the surprising negative direction of the effect could be explained by the national wealth (GDP)¹⁵ of the countries. However, the negative relationship remained intact. Indeed, a remarkable share of the effect-size was retained (the b-coefficient diminished only with .021 points). Moreover, national wealth failed to have any statistical significant effect upon support for meritocratic values when meritocratic values was included in the models. As a second check, it was examined whether the negative association would still apply when considering meritocratic perceptions held by individuals instead of by society at large. This revealed the same picture with respect to the effect of meritocratic perceptions on support for meritocratic values, although the effect diminished to some extent ($b = -.100, p < .01$ for the analysis on social mobility; $b = -.028, p < .001$ for the analysis on employment-status).

Lastly, when considering the meritocratic perceptions held by individuals, net from the extent to which those perceptions are popular in society at large, social mobility did at a first sight appear to ‘matter’. However, the effect of social mobility was for most part insignificant or directed in the opposite direction as expected. Summarising, when considering meritocratic perceptions held by individuals, both with and without macro-level perceptions in the model, the results still fail to support any of the hypotheses regarding social mobility. In addition, the relationships were assessed at the micro-level for employment-status. It appeared that individual meritocratic perceptions do not change the impact of being unemployed for the level of support for meritocratic values. Instead, regarding the effect of unemployment, it are the society-wide held perceptions that matter.

6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this study the general view was upheld that people in different individual situations and societal contexts tend to adapt their preferences for certain social-political attitudes, such as meritocratic values. One of the aims in this thesis was to make an innovative contribution to the literature by considering a dynamic measure of social mobility, rather than a static one. Earlier studies found a positive effect of social status on support for meritocratic values (Hochschild, 1982; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007). However, since a meritocracy is rather concerned with social mobility, it was thought to have a greater impact on support for meritocratic values than an individual’s social status

¹⁵ Statistics on the country-specific GDP were extracted from the World Bank web site: (World Bank, 2013b).

regardless his point of departure. Furthermore, the effect of being unemployed had not been assessed before, whereas particularly unemployment could be popularly considered as an expression of 'failure' in a perceived meritocracy (Hochschild, 1982; McFadyen, 1995; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). Therefore, the possible effects of social mobility and unemployment on support for meritocratic values were examined. Several expectations were derived from a combination of rational choice and structuralist strain theoretical notions. These expectations focused at the effect of status outcomes for the tendency of individuals to support meritocratic values, and formulated separately for different degrees of society-wide popularity of meritocratic perceptions. This micro-macro level interaction constituted another innovation added to contemporary work. Moreover, important was the distinction between individuals in desirable and undesirable status outcomes. In addition, a distinction was used in type of status outcome: individuals possess desirable or undesirable (a) social mobility outcomes, as well as (b) employment-statuses. Individuals in desirable and undesirable status outcomes were hypothesised to mutually differ in their support for meritocratic values *to a stronger extent* in societies popularly perceived to be meritocratic. To test this expectation, the ISSP Social Inequality Survey data set of 2009 was used (ISSP Research Group, 2012c).

To start with to the main effects, the following can be concluded. Combined with what was found in earlier research (Hochschild, 1982; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007), the findings imply that it is only an individual's present social status that influences his level of support for meritocratic values, rather than social mobility. Specifically, having moved downward does not influence an individual's support for meritocratic values, what matters is his current social status and whether he is unemployed. In addition, for this last aspect of his socio-economic identity, it was found that this matters in a slightly smaller extent when meritocratic perceptions are more popular in society. Although the unemployed always remained less likely to support meritocratic values than their country-mates, their disagreement was lessened in societies dominated by meritocratic perceptions. In fact, in the country in which meritocratic perception were most popular (Denmark), the unemployed generally supported meritocratic values in a virtually equal extent as the other members of society.

Clearly, then, the results contradict the expectation that polarisation between the unemployed and those not unemployed would *rise* when meritocratic perceptions are more popular in a society. On the contrary, the differences between the two groups become *smaller* instead of larger. Specifically, the unemployed are becoming more like their country-mates when meritocratic perceptions are more popular in a society. Likewise, they are relatively more likely to support meritocratic values than their unemployed counterparts in other societies. Nevertheless, these figures do not necessarily contradict the utilised theoretical framework. In fact, the results could be due to underlying mechanisms that are in accordance with both rational choice and strain theory (Merton, 1939). Merton (1939) distinguished between different ways to deal with frustration exerted upon low-status individuals by popular meritocratic perceptions, of which one was the focus in this study: rejecting the values of the

perceived system. Using strain theory, it was suggested that people in undesirable status outcomes would be more frustrated when living in societies with popular meritocratic perceptions. As a result, they would become more likely to reject meritocratic values.

However, there are two possible accounts for the patterns found regarding the hypothesised interactions between status outcome and meritocratic perceptions. At first, it could be the case that (1) the unemployed do not experience additional, or do indeed experience less, frustration in societies popularly held to be meritocratic. In fact, Alesina et al. (2004) reasoned that it may be rather those in desirable status outcomes who experience anxiety when their society is popularly perceived to be meritocratic. Given that retaining a high status position in a meritocracy requires a continued good performance from the individual (Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008), meritocratic perceptions could introduce a constant threat of downward social mobility for those in desirable status outcomes (Alesina et al., 2004). A second contrary possibility is that, rather than experiencing less frustration, (2) the unemployed may actually be *more* frustrated in those societies. However, they could express it in ways other than by rejecting meritocratic values. In that case, the results ensured that this expression of frustration does *not* contain rejecting meritocratic values. Possibly, the unemployed are behaving as 'obedient conformists' in their response to the situation; they in fact accept the values of the perceived system (Merton, 1939). Indeed, Merton (1939) himself expected this to be the majority response among people who are affected by popular meritocratic perceptions. Moreover, from a rational choice framework, it could be argued that their context of being unemployed fosters an acceptance of the perceived system and even may make this response be more rational than rejecting meritocratic values (Marx, 1867; Merton, 1939; Jost, et al., 2003; Mathiesen, 2004). By adopting the values of the system as it is perceived to operate, people feel they conform to the values of dominant, conventional institutions of society and therefore make it easier for themselves to function well in society. Specifically, it may provide jobseekers the feeling that they enhance their chances in that they likely share opinions with potential employers at important matters.

Furthermore, McFadyen (1995) wrote about possible responses of the unemployed to their stigmatised social position. One of the responses contained the substitution of the 'unemployed'- identity for more positive identities. Moreover, in an earlier study, unemployed respondents seemed highly reluctant in associating themselves with 'the unemployed' as a social category (McFayden, 1995). They did not conceive themselves as a typical unemployed person. In their perception, contrary to this typical unemployed person, they themselves actually do exert much effort to find new employment. Back to the results, it is for three reasons that it this response-mechanism is the likely explanation for the patterns found. First of all, the unemployed may be more likely to have such (meritocratic) perceptions when meritocratic perceptions are popular in society at large. Secondly, the distinction made between the 'typical unemployed' and the individual himself, may be a manner to deal with the initial attack of popular meritocratic perceptions on their self-respect (Goffman, 1963). As a result of this, the need for another response (to reject meritocratic values) disappears. Thirdly, these

individuals will indeed support meritocratic values, because in their perception, it is this very system that will eventually reward their hard effort and ambition to find employment. However, in the end, more elaboration on explanations for the encountered differences in effects is needed, though, and possible knowledge benefits are to be gained from this.

Regarding the two different types of status outcomes, the findings showed that popular meritocratic perceptions do only change the effect of employment-status. By contrast, these patterns did not apply to social mobility. Apparently, it is only employment-status, rather than social mobility, that 'matters' for popular meritocratic perceptions to exert an influence upon individuals regarding their opinions about meritocracy. Various explanations are possible for this result. Firstly, the unemployed in societies with popular meritocratic perceptions may be more affected in terms of frustration by these perceptions, compared to, for example, employed downward mobile individuals. Probably, them being employed 'compensates' for their social mobility, if needed at all, and shows the environment that they exert effort and ambition, despite their perceived lack of talent. By contrast, being unemployed may be perceived as an expression of unwillingness to work hard. Alternatively, popular meritocratic perceptions may exert frustration upon all individuals in undesirable status outcomes. However, expressions of this frustration may vary between, for example, employed downward mobile individuals and the unemployed. Lastly, it could be the case that none of the groups experience any additional frustration. However, these are all preliminary speculations and require further study. These psychological mechanisms were not the primary focus of this study, which was rather aimed to assess the broad micro-macro interaction. But it is fruitful to examine the micro-level assumption made in this study in order to know whether Merton's (1939) described mechanism actually occurs.

With respect to the surprising negative association between meritocratic perceptions and meritocratic values, questions are raised for future research. This negative association is contrary to expectations expressed by earlier scholars (Boudon, 1981; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007). According to Boudon (1981), the higher people perceive their chance to achieve success, the more important individual achievement should be according to them. And however focused at a slightly different independent variable, Kunovich & Slomczynski (2007) found a positive relationship between the *actual* degree of meritocracy and support for meritocratic values. Some would be quick in assuming that the societal degree of meritocratic perceptions would be also highly associated with more support for meritocratic values. However, Marshall et al. (1999) showed a similar negative association between meritocratic perceptions and meritocratic values for Eastern European countries. Contrary, in their study, meritocratic perceptions correlated positively with meritocratic values in Western European and English speaking countries. However, the present study revealed a consistent negative effect which is not limited to Eastern Europe, but applies to virtually all countries. The United States, though, constituted an exception. At the moment, there is no substantial explanation available for this negative association. Probably, a certain distributive system may be more valued by its citizens when the present society is

perceived to be more at a distance from it. In addition to the speculations made by Alesina et al. (2004) about popular meritocratic perceptions feeding the anxiety of individuals in desired status outcomes, it could be argued that over time, this anxiety spreads out to almost all social strata. In other words, generally all working individuals come to realise that they are face a constant threat of downward social mobility. Indeed, this could account for the absence of any expected effected differences between individuals with different mobility histories. In fact, only the unemployed showed to be different. By definition, the unemployed do not need to fear downward social mobility, whereas employed people may in some extent face anxiety, regardless of their mobility history.

Clearly, much insights into the validity of the used theoretical framework are to be gained from investigating the presumed underlying frustration and anxiety behind the patterns found. Although the theoretical part of this study has elaborated on a possible frustration exerted upon individuals in undesirable status outcomes by popular meritocratic perceptions, which then would cause them to reject meritocratic values, this very mechanism was not further studied. Only the potential expression of the presumed underlying mechanism was in fact examined: the level of support for meritocratic values. As a result, it cannot be said with accuracy whether these patterns in support for meritocratic values are produced by the various levels of frustration experienced by the unemployed in different countries. This particular issue could be addressed through experimental, more psychologically oriented survey-research, or through qualitative research to the experiences of the different groups of people in different societies. Furthermore, a related limitation of this study concerns the cross-sectional nature of the data. As was said earlier, the theoretical part elaborated on a subsequence of events. Firstly, one finds himself in an (un)desirable status outcome in a society which is more or less perceived to be a meritocracy. As a result, the individual starts to feel frustrated or not, and finally adapt his level of support for meritocratic values accordingly. However, since the analyses in this study were limited to be only for one year, no certain statements can be made about the direction of the effects. Specifically, it is logically possible that the patterns of support for meritocratic values occurred first, which may have influenced individual's employment-status. The use of panel data would enable to assess the chronology of the events.

Regarding other limitations of this study, a few remarks are to be made. First, it should be noted that the educational stock in a country had not been taken into account in the present study. Specifically, some differences found in this study could be due to variable relative shares of educational levels in the respective countries. Taking this variable into account in future research would be an improvement, since an earlier study (Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007) showed that the educational stock in countries contribute to more support for meritocratic values. In addition, educational level appeared to be negatively associated with meritocratic perceptions in an American sample (Jost et al., 2003). Furthermore, regarding the data, some remarks are to be made. In most countries the ISSP-survey was part of a larger survey project. As a result, the literal wording of several questions and the mode of data collection differs to some

extent (Gendall, 2011). This could bring forth some differences in answering and response patterns for different countries. Fortunately, these differences in literal wording did not occur for the items used to construct the scales on meritocratic values and perceptions, which would have harmed their validity. Another limitation of the data is that due to limited availability of items to construct the scales, the operationalisation of meritocratic perceptions only concerned the way people perceive how economic occupational success is attained. Although this is fine and in accordance with operationalisations used in some literature (Marshall et al., 1999), it would be more comprehensive to consider the way people perceive economic and occupational failures as well (Evans, 1997; Jost et al., 2003). In fact, Evans (1997) demonstrated that individuals explain success outcomes in more meritocratic terms than they do for undesirable outcomes, especially when the success was achieved through upward mobility.

Another issue that requires additional attention is the possible presence of more dimensions of meritocratic perceptions. In this section a richer conceptualisation of meritocratic values and perceptions is proposed for future research. Clearly, the aforementioned elaborations exclusively have focused at meritocracy as a system of *distributing income and occupations*. Besides this, meritocracy deals with yet another fundamental issue: the overall salience of 'meritocratic' success in evaluating the dignity of individuals; the moral significance of being successful. Unfortunately, contemporary empirical work so far has failed to include this additional dimension of a meritocracy. While a fair amount of theoretical work has elaborated on this aspect of a meritocracy (Merton, 1939; Sen, 2000; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008), the empirical literature has primarily focused on the first component and neglected the latter. Chasing economic success and the succeeding itself may be meritocratic virtues as well, making people who conform to it morally 'better' citizens than people who 'had proven' to take those norms less seriously (Hochschild, 1982; Swierstra & Tonkens, 2008). In fact, definitions of distributional justice and moral actorship are inevitably interrelated (Cohen, 1987). Deciding what qualities deserve primary weight in designing a distributional order, necessarily involves selecting a certain view of the human nature, and later on allocating different moral weights to the qualities involved. Likewise, the rhetoric of a meritocracy tend to consider certain persons as more deserving, because they happened to be more contributing towards a desirable society, by possessing certain abilities work attitudes. (Sen, 2000). Specifically, the fact that a meritocracy as a distributive order involves a certain definition of a range of *actions* that do contribute to a desirable society, makes that a meritocracy inevitably assigns moral superiority toward some actions (and its accompanying persons) above others (Sen, 2000).

Besides enriching the definition of meritocratic values, meritocratic perceptions can be defined with respect to this second dimension. Meritocratic perceptions are then understood as the perceived societal moral stress on becoming successful. Including this second dimension in future research would enable a more close and richer test of theories: whether these are confirmed upon the first as well as the second dimension, in accordance with the expectations. These two elements are thus supposed to collide

when speaking of a high degree of support for meritocratic values. In doing this, recapturing Merton's (1939) classical work would be interesting as well. He in fact theorised on the consequences a differential relative importance assigned by society to each of these dimensions has for anomie. When the second dimension is disproportionately important in a society, whereas the procedural distributive requirements are relatively neglected, anomie can arise among the disadvantaged members of society. More specific, the relative social importance of each of these two dimension may predictor for the way individuals with undesirable status outcomes deal with their frustrating situation (Merton, 1939).

Leaving this discussion on the dimensions to rest, a final issue will be outlined. In the data section it was noted how alternative operational choices in defining meritocratic perceptions remarkably influence the results. To understand what processes may be underlying these puzzling patterns, first of all it is helpful to return to the theory. It is logically possible that one highly believes that in his country, the highest incomes and jobs generally go to the highest educated and ambitious. Simultaneously, one can believe that this generally only goes for whites. Here Cohen's (1987) second element comes in: that of who participates in the meritocratic competition and does not. However, the positively defined operationalisation did not contain the items that ask respondents about their perception about the role of race, et cetera. Conversely, both the negatively defined and finally adopted operationalisation in fact did. In other words: those who score high on meritocratic perceptions at the finally adopted operationalisation must believe both in (1) the salient role of education, effort and ambition and (2) that this meritocratic competition involves virtually all members in society. It could be that in countries where many believe their society to be meritocratic in the positive sense (talent and effort are crucial for success), but believe that certain groups are excluded from this 'equal' consideration, meritocratic perceptions in fact foster support for meritocratic values among the excluded members. For example, in South-Africa, the high support for meritocratic values may come from blacks, for whom this ideal could be liberating in some respects. Moreover, it is possible that popular meritocratic perceptions cause frustration only among the white unemployed. By contrast, in the finally adopted operationalisation, only countries with little perceived discrimination among its populace, are likely to have a high score. Further research could examine this preliminary elaborations.

Considering all these suggestions for further research, it becomes clear that this relatively young field contains still a considerable amount of future research possibilities. A remarkable wave of innovation is on the way, with the large body of theoretical elaborations which provide rich conceptualisations and more or less specific accounts for social processes concerning meritocratic values and perceptions. Furthermore, much is to be gained from interdisciplinary collaboration, as the need for closer explorations of the micro-mechanism and the fruitful insights from the philosophical literature revealed. Lastly, this and further research on the impact and presence of meritocratic perceptions and values could guide policy makers in their decision making.

7. NOTE

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APPENDIX A: Multi-level analysis on Social Mobility

Table 8 Maximum Likelihood Multiple Linear Regression of Meritocratic Values on Social Mobility

	Social Mobility		Confirmed?
	b (SE)		
Intercept	.020	(.026)	
Micro-Level Variables			
Social Mobility			
- Immobile in the Lower Strata (ref.)	—	—	
- Upward Mobile	.016 *	(.017)	(+)
- Immobile in Higher Strata	.009	(.021)	(-)
- Immobile in Middle Strata	-.048 °	(.025)	(-)
- Downward Mobile	.004	(.018)	(-)
Age	<.001	(<.001)	
Sex			
- Female (ref.)	—	—	
- Male	-.055 ***	(.007)	
Education	.008 ***	(.003)	
Macro-Level Variables			
Meritocratic Perceptions	-.616 ***	(.113)	
Social Welfare Expenditures	-.009 **	(.003)	
Cross-level Interaction Variables			
Social Mobility ×			
Meritocratic Perceptions			
- Immobile in Lower Classes × Meritocratic Perceptions (ref.)	—	—	
- Upward Mobile × Meritocratic Perceptions	.071	(.071)	—
- Immobile in Higher Strata × Meritocratic Perceptions	-.021	(.092)	—
- Immobile in Middle Strata × Meritocratic Perceptions	.051	(.107)	—
- Downward Mobile × Meritocratic Perceptions	.062	(.075)	—
$N_{micro-level\ variables}$	23,790		
$N_{macro-level\ variables}$	26		

° $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. + hypothesis confirmed, - hypothesis not confirmed. All continuous variables were mean centred in the analysis.

APPENDIX B: Multi-level analysis on Employment-Status

Table 9 Maximum Likelihood Multiple Linear Regression of Meritocratic Values on Employment-Status

	Employment-Status		Confirmed?
	b (SE)		
Intercept	.025	(.020)	
Micro-Level Variables			
Employment-Status			
- Employed (ref.)	—	—	
- Unemployed	-.030 *	(.014)	(+)
Age	<.001	(<.001)	
Sex			
- Female (ref.)	—	—	
- Male	-.052 ***	(.006)	
Education	.006 ***	(<.001)	
Macro-Level Variables			
Meritocratic Perceptions	-.518 ***	(.090)	
Social Welfare Expenditures	-.008 **	(.003)	
Cross-level Interaction Variables			
Employment-Status ×			
Meritocratic Perceptions			
- Employed × Meritocratic Perceptions (ref.)	—	—	
- Unemployed × Meritocratic Perceptions	.099 °	(.055)	—
$N_{micro-level\ variables}$	33,234		
$N_{macro-level\ variables}$	26		

° $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. + hypothesis confirmed, - hypothesis not confirmed. All continuous variables were mean centred in the analysis.