

# A Critique of *The Tyranny of Merit* from a Psychological Perspective: Would Randomness to Success Reduce Distributive Injustice or Induce Psychological Existential Crisis for Adolescents?

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doi:10.56397/RAE.2023.10.03

## Abstract

This manuscript provides a critical analysis of Michael Sandel's proposal to introduce a "lottery of the qualified" system as a solution to the perceived distributive injustice within the current meritocratic education system. While acknowledging Sandel's perspective on the distributive deficiencies in the college admission process within contemporary meritocratic education, the author presents a counterargument to Sandel's proposal of implementing a lottery system, with a particular emphasis on its psychological implications. Drawing on Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, the critique argues that the proposed lottery system may hinder the crucial identity formation process during adolescence, leading to psychological existential crises. This assertion is supported by real-world examples from the Chinese education system, which already operates with a similar mechanism and has witnessed a rise in psychological issues among students. In conclusion, this manuscript advocates for alternative solutions to address distributive injustice within contemporary meritocratic education system, such as redefining the concept of merit and shifting the focus of rewards towards contributions to the broader community. The author underscores the significance of considering both social and psychological implications when formulating educational policies to foster a more equitable and just society.

**Keywords:** meritocracy, distributive injustice, college admission, psychosocial development, existential crisis

## 1. Introduction

This critique is based on the premise of the notion raised by Sandel (2020) that to produce a society that is just and equitable, the current meritocratic system needs to be reinvented. Though I agree with Michael Sandel's assertion that the contemporary meritocratic education system is far from perfect in freeing the entire education system from oppression, I disagree with Sandel's suggestion of incorporating a *lottery of the qualified* system into the college admission process as an ideal solution to the crisis in the current meritocratic education system.

According to Sandel (2020), despite the liberating ideology represented by meritocracy, inequality between the elites and the less privileged still perpetrates in modern society, only in a different format. Unlike in the past where students' success or failures were often considered as pure reflections of their family status, nowadays, the proposed principles of meritocracy create an illusory belief for both sides, that is, they deserve their place in the society because success is acknowledged through diligent work and talents. Elite families devote far more educational resources throughout the process, along with many other layers of privileges that secure their children's success. As a response, Sandel (2020) opined that adding an element of randomness to the college admission process could liberate the current crisis because the extra merits of elite children on their college application record that sets them apart from other children could be largely reduced through a lottery system.

I argue that this proposal is potentially problematic and hence needs reconsideration, with the Chinese education system, which already operates in this manner, as supporting evidence. I connote that adding elements of

randomness to the adolescents' identity development process can lead to adverse consequences such as psychological existential crisis, which occurs when a person struggles to find the meaning of life and motivation to live (Huang & Xu, 2019). Identity exploration and formation are crucial to prevent existential crisis. To do this, teenagers must explore various disciplines and believe that dedicated efforts in their areas of interest will be reliably rewarded (Erikson, 1968). Being treated as a passive recipient in a vast lottery pool will not empower teenagers or give them the sense of agency and confidence needed to effectively complete their identity formation stage as they develop psychologically.

Chronologically, this critique will first recap the concept of meritocracy and its subsequent criticism in the context of education; second, it will examine Sandel's (2020) proposal of *lottery of the qualified*, how it is supposed to address the flaws in the current meritocratic education system, and why it is potentially harmful from a psychological perspective. Then, referring to a real-world practise of such system, the consequences on young people's mental health will be highlighted. Eventually, the notion that there is a need for more discussions regarding alternative approaches to resolve the criticism to meritocracy will be illustrated.

## 2. Meritocracy and Its Criticisms

Meritocracy is a revolutionary concept developed by British sociologist Michael Young (1958) that transformed western society from a feudal system of class inheritance, nepotism, and patronage into a relatively more liberated system of governance, which allows social mobility and grants individuals the power to access more advanced resources based on their intellectual abilities and efforts (Liu, 2011). Theoretically, meritocracy aims to liberate society by replacing the aristocratic mechanism of job and education allocation, which was dominated by hereditary wealth and the privileged class. In a meritocratic structure, everyone, regardless of their social status or connections, has an equal opportunity to succeed if they demonstrate having sufficient intellectual ability and diligence in work (Wooldridge, 2021). To promote equality and equity, numerous western societies, such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Sweden, have adopted meritocracy as their primary operating political ideology (Mijs, 2018). This system is intended to benefit society by encouraging excellence through hard work and rewards based on talent. In China, meritocratic ideologies emerged as early as during Sui Dynasty (581-618). The old *recommendatory system* for government official selection was replaced by the *Imperial Examination System*. As a result, the monopoly of aristocratic families was challenged, and the system started to reward competence, regardless of family background and without the need for references or recommendations.

Critics contend that inequality still persists in meritocratic systems. Many scholars, including Michael Sandel, professor at Harvard University and London School of Economics, are concerned about the potential for meritocracy in education to produce distributive injustice, especially in the context of university admission (Sandel, 2020). Specifically, highly selective institutions in the west often take into account a set of 'merit' indicators that were designed to view students as a whole person who perform well in standardised tests, have a strong interest in a particular domain, and are thriving in other areas of life, as reflected in their personal statement, extracurricular achievements, artistic or athletic talent, and organisational interests (Killgore, 2009). While this is often viewed as a positive characteristic of candidate selection to ensure that all individuals are evaluated based on their ability and effort, it has been criticised for creating inequality because marginalised social groups find it difficult to support their children in achieving the same level of 'merit' as more affluent families who are better equipped to shape their children's backgrounds in ways that are favoured by university enrolment committees (Liu, 2011; Sandel, 2020). This leads to another factor that challenges the fairness of the meritocratic game, that is, social capital. It has replaced our initial understanding of capital, which was largely associated with financial prosperity, highlighting the rising significance of networks and human resources (Morley & Lugg, 2009). The unequal distribution of social capital further exacerbates the disparities in educational outcomes, perpetuating a cycle of inequality within meritocratic systems.

Sandel further elaborated that meritocracy, while seemingly fair and just, could actually lead to a new form of social hierarchy that perpetuates inequality and disadvantages among those who are not considered adequately 'meritorious'. With individuals who are deemed more intelligent and skilled rising to the top, those who have not succeeded in climbing the social ladder can be dismissed as lazy and unintelligent, even depicted as 'deserving' their position and fate. Moreover, while the meritocratic elites fail to acknowledge that their success may be a cumulative result of privilege, the rise of information technology and globalisation have led to the emergence of a new social class of technocratic elite who despise older generations of workers who have not caught up with the essential skills required to thrive in the 21st century. These new social groups are now forming a circle of leaders and policymakers who may have limited shared experiences with the broader populace, potentially leading to a society that prioritises values like productivity and efficiency, possibly at the expense of other vital principles such as compassion, empathy, and a sense of community.

## 3. Sandel's (2020) Proposal of Lottery of the Qualified: A Liberating Approach

Sandel (2020) proposed the ‘lottery of the qualified’ mechanism to liberate the current elite-dominated meritocratic education system by using a lottery system for qualified applicants seeking admission to elite universities and courses. Although this system would maintain academic qualifications as the primary factor for admission, it would also introduce an element of randomness. This implies that individuals who attain a specific level of academic qualifications would qualify for participation in the lottery. The chosen candidates would be randomly selected and granted admission to a university of their choice.

Sandel proposed a two-stage admissions process to execute this system. First, to be considered for the lottery, candidates must first meet specific academic requirements; this threshold could be determined based on the unique standards and requirements of each university. Candidates who fulfil the academic requirements will be included in the lottery; the university would conduct the lottery ensuring impartiality and openness that every qualified candidate would have an equitable opportunity of being chosen for both the university and specific courses. Dr Wooldridge (2021) explains the mechanism proposed by Sandel as follows: Rather than choosing to study a particular course with a particular set of professors, students will simply have to hit the right numbers to reach the threshold and then will see their names put into a giant sorting hat. Depending on the capacity of each university, this goal can be imagined to be achieved by using a random number generator or a comparable mechanism.

The lottery of the qualified is believed to be potentially effective at reducing the existing advantage of privileged individuals in the current education system. The implementation of a lottery system could promote fairness and inclusivity in the student body via the introduction of an element of randomness. Undeniably, Sandel’s suggestion of implementing a lottery system for qualified individuals is a creative approach to address the issues of inequality and elitism that exist within the present-day education system. Although it deviates significantly from the current admissions process, this approach has the potential to establish a more equitable and impartial society by fostering a feeling of shared experience and mutual goals among the privileged.

#### **4. The Problem with Lottery of the Qualified: The Possibility of Hindering the Psychosocial Development of Adolescents**

That being said, the problem with the lottery of the qualified system is that it exacerbates the uncertainties faced by young people during the crucial stage of identity formation. According to the theory of psychosocial development proposed by Neo-Freudian psychologist Erik Erikson in 1968, psychosocial development is a crucial aspect of human development that enables individuals to acquire attitudes and skills required to become active, contributing members of society. While the theory of psychosocial development includes eight stages, each characterised by a unique type of psychosocial crisis, the adolescence stage (13–21 years) has been deemed the most significant. According to Erik Erikson (1968), adolescents often encounter ‘Identity vs. Role’ confusion, a temporary period of distress in which it is essential for them to experiment and explore different aspects and alternative values that they may later decide to form a coherent set of identity with. After experimenting with various pursuits and confirming that their efforts dedicated to their passionate areas are valid, they will start to establish more static values and goals that are essential for their well-being and later life development. Teenagers who are unable to participate in this process are likely to become directionless and thus are unable to face the challenges of adulthood.

One of the shortcomings of the lottery of the qualified is that instead of depicting adolescents as active agents with participatory rights in constructing their identity and responsibility for determining the direction of their future academic and career development, it portrays them as passive recipients of a game of randomness having diminished likelihoods of achieving the life they seek to construct. Randomness increases anxiety and performance monitoring that involves continuing assessment to evaluate the quality of an activity (Tullett et al., 2015). Under such anxiety, adolescents may grapple with persistent self-doubt concerning whether their endeavours invested in their areas of interest will yield anticipated outcomes in college admission, potentially disrupting their identity formation process. This means further consideration of Sandel’s proposal is required because ensuring equal opportunities for candidates of all backgrounds, regardless of race, class, or gender, is important. However, when it comes to university admission, considering the psychological characteristics of this particular group of candidates is equally important. After all, around the controversy of social-political decision-making such as changing the admission policy of higher education, it is not necessarily a discussion of seeking the ultimate solution that leads to complete liberation, but rather a negotiation of what action can reduce inequality to the greatest extent while preserving the collective welfare of the general society.

To apply this theoretical discussion to real-world contexts, I refer to the scenario of the existing education systems that operate with a ‘lottery of the qualified’ mechanism and have been observed to contribute to collective mental health issues and psychological existential crises among generations of students who go through this process. Specifically, Chinese university admission policies place complete emphasis on the marks scored by students in their university entrance exam ‘Gaokao.’ Knowing the significance of this exam score,

students in China are known to spend their whole adolescence doing trial exams and attending shadow schools to prepare for this exam (Pires & Duarte, 2019). It is important to understand how the element of randomness in success prevails in this education system: during their adolescence, Chinese students are only given the opportunity to specify their academic interests between ‘humanities’ and ‘sciences’; they have little control over their future academic or career direction until the Gaokao score is released. Only when the score is released, they are able to enter the ‘lottery pool’, in which, although given the option to indicate their preferred course and university that matches with their ‘score tier’, they are often assigned with a course in the same tier to which they had little prior connection to, unless their exam scores are extremely high (Chen & Kesten, 2017; Pires & Duarte, 2019).

### 5. Psychological Well-Being of Students in a Lottery System

In November 2016, Kaiwen Xu, a psychology professor at Peking University, delivered a speech at the 9th ‘New Oriental Family Education Summit’, which was titled, ‘The contemporary hollowing heart phenomenon and the anxious economics.’ He spoke about a new phenomenon prevalent among youth groups in contemporary China. According to Xu, 30.4% of Peking University students regard life as meaningless and experience symptoms similar to depression, but treatment for depression has been found ineffective. Xu later termed this phenomenon *hollow disease* or *hollow heart syndrome*. They considered it a psychological disorder caused by value defects, and people who experience it find it difficult to find the meaning of life and the motivation to live, struggling to find their identity and living under a continual sense of misery (Huang & Xu, 2019).

Xu’s assertion of hollow heart syndrome has received massive resonance from the public and has been increasingly discussed among academics in China. Xiao et al. (2021) conducted a survey on 658 students from an art college in China and determined that 31% of them have symptoms of hollow heart disorder — a lack of clear sense of purpose and values in life, a profound feeling of emptiness, and unsureness regarding the meaning behind their existence. Many scholars have associated this condition to existential crisis, which is a psychological state characterised by feelings of directionless and emptiness, which are the primary consequences of being unable to resolve the ‘identity vs. role’ confusion stage in Erikson’s psychosocial development theory (Andrews, 2016; Ding et al., 2019; Xiao et al., 2021). Furthermore, Zhu et al. (2022) found that the feelings of existential crisis and isolation among Chinese college students were associated with higher tendency of suicidal thoughts. As suggested by evolutionary psychologists Oatley and Johnson-Laired (1987), when our self-preservation and sense of existence are threatened, our body generates the emotion of anxiety as a signal for us to stop attending vigilantly to an environment or seek ways to escape. Thus, suicide as a means to escape is an unfortunate yet not a surprising approach for these students.

Scholars have attempted to investigate the reasons behind this phenomenon from various perspectives. Some have put forth explanations that highlight the role of parents and teachers, including defective family education philosophies, the impact of family economic status, and inadequate guidance for students’ internet usage (Xiao et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2022). Some scholars have highlighted the importance of considering the political mechanisms through which the Chinese education system operates in this scenario (Lu et al., 2018; Pires & Duarte, 2019). The highly selective nature of university admissions in China, where only a small percentage of candidates are accepted, coupled with the significant boost in employability that a prestigious university degree can provide within the Chinese societal context, has led to a highly competitive academic environment that places considerable stress on students (Pires & Duarte, 2019). In addition to the pressure already experienced, the unpredictability of success can serve as another layer of pressure that suggests the possibility of their efforts yielding no returns. As mentioned previously, during the critical period of identity development, it is imperative for adolescents to gain experiences that instil a sense of confidence in their ability to construct a future aligned with their personal interests, even if they do not have complete control over the process. The experience of being treated as a passive recipient within a large lottery pool does not provide teenagers with a sense of agency or empowerment, marring their journey towards resolving their identity crisis.

This article does not propose that existential crisis in college students is solely caused by uncertainty to success in adolescence. Afterall, such phenomena are not restrained to the Chinese context. Professor Damon at Stanford University noted a comparable phenomenon among American adolescents, where many students misconstrue admission to a prestigious college as their ultimate purpose, despite it being more indicative of a status symbol than a genuine life purpose (Damon et al., 2019). This suggests misconception of purpose as another variable to this discussion. Nevertheless, in this article, I emphasize mainly on the potential risk of incorporating a lottery system in college admission as the solution to the distributive injustice that exists in contemporary meritocratic education.

### 6. The Need for More Alternative Proposals to Renovate Meritocracy

Based on the above discussion, other alternative solutions are needed to the current crisis of distributive injustice in meritocratic education. This article suggests that one possible direction is to encourage future researchers and

policy makers to create more diverse definitions of merit that is not dependent on social capital. Another possible approach is to alter the nature of rewards. In the current system, outstanding merit winners are usually rewarded with economic benefits like scholarships. Perhaps, in the future, universities and internationally recognisable organisations could take the lead to encourage merit winners to use their talents and abilities to give back to the broader community and contribute to the greater good. An example to demonstrate the use of both suggested approaches is as follows — The United Nations and the Millennium Campus Network initiated a fellowship programme that does not provide financial funds to the selected members, but provide them access to a network of world leaders having expertise in social impact (United Nations, 2023). The selection process does not require application fee, and young people only have to submit a proposal related to creating social impact that fulfils the Sustainable Development Goals and state their motivations behind the application. In this manner, the selection process not only becomes resistant to manipulation by applicants' parental social capital, but it also bestows upon the merit winners a mission to serve the broader public. To conclude, this article argues that stakeholders in education policy should consider both the social and psychological consequences of their decisions to create a more just and holistic educational system in the future.

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