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Maintaining the meritocracy myth: a critical discourse analytic study of leaders' talk about merit and gender in academia

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	<p>hegemonic discourse retains its potency in day-to-day talk in organizations. We argue that leaders, given their active discursive roles and opportunities to establish and control discourses, play an important but underexamined role in the reproduction and legitimization of this seemingly progressive yet ultimately destructive discourse. We conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) drawing on qualitative interviews with leaders in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK focusing on their talk about women’s recruitment and progression in academic roles. We identify three discursive interventions through which leaders routinely maintain and reinforce and on occasion challenge the existing system of meritocracy: invisibilizing gender inequality through gender-neutrality; denying constraints through individualization; and problematising meritocracy to uphold or challenge the status quo. We argue that by uncovering the means through which meritocracy discourse retains its resilience, our paper offers the opportunity to scrutinize and challenge these discursive underpinnings that uphold the ‘meritocracy myth’. We suggest it is possible to re-imagine what might be considered ‘merit worthy’ in universities recognising and centring structural gender and other social inequalities to create more equal institutions.</p>



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3 **Maintaining the meritocracy myth: A critical discourse analytic study of leaders' talk**
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5 **about merit and gender in academia**
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Abstract

The belief in meritocracy – that advancement is based solely on individual capabilities and hard work – remains ingrained in organizations despite evidence it is a flawed concept that perpetuates gender and other social inequalities. Critical streams of research have highlighted the ideological character of meritocracy discourse, its entrenched nature and acceptance as ‘common-sense’. Less is known about how this ‘meritocracy myth’ is maintained, that is, how this hegemonic discourse retains its potency in day-to-day talk in organizations. We argue that leaders, given their active discursive roles and opportunities to establish and control discourses, play an important but underexamined role in the reproduction and legitimization of this seemingly progressive yet ultimately destructive discourse. We conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) drawing on qualitative interviews with leaders in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK focusing on their talk about women’s recruitment and progression in academic roles. We identify three discursive interventions through which leaders routinely maintain and reinforce and on occasion challenge the existing system of meritocracy: *invisibilizing gender inequality through gender-neutrality; denying constraints through individualization; and problematising meritocracy to uphold or challenge the status quo*. We argue that by uncovering the means through which meritocracy discourse retains its resilience, our paper offers the opportunity to scrutinize and challenge these discursive underpinnings that uphold the ‘meritocracy myth’. We suggest it is possible to re-imagine what might be considered ‘merit worthy’ in universities recognising and centring structural gender and other social inequalities to create more equal institutions.

Keywords

meritocracy, discourse, gender (in)equality, women’s representation, academia

Introduction

Within organizations there remains a reliance on meritocracy as a system to inform decision making in relation to recruitment, reward, and promotion (Castilla & Ranganathan, 2020), built on the assumption that ‘if we try hard enough, we can make it: that race or class or gender are not, on a fundamental level, significant barriers to success’, rather ‘talent’ combines with ‘effort’ leading to a ‘rise to the top’ (Littler, 2017, p. 2). The system promises fairness, justice, and social mobility. When outcomes of systems based on such principles are mapped, however, ‘patterns of disadvantage and exclusion’ emerge (Morley & Lugg, 2009, p. 46). Rather than reducing gender and other social inequalities, research has shown that reward systems that treat gender and other markers of disadvantage as irrelevant to success are in fact a central means through which inequality is maintained (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b; Castilla & Benard, 2010). As we illustrate in this paper, the existing system, which we label ‘the meritocracy’ to distinguish it from other potential ways of defining or understanding what is ‘merit worthy’, is a key means through which contemporary neoliberalist agendas are enacted, where the language of equal opportunity and fairness is used to uphold a ‘socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest which both legitimates inequality and damages community by requiring people to be in constant competition with each other’ (Littler, 2017, p.3).

The resilience of the ‘meritocracy myth’ has resulted in researchers identifying it as a hegemonic discourse: a ubiquitous, uncontested, seemingly natural, or ‘common-sense’ account that is resilient to countervailing evidence (Krefting, 2003; Śliwa & Johansson, 2014). We know much less about how it functions to reproduce gender inequalities in day-to-day talk within organizations and how and why it remains so resilient (Hardy & Thomas, 2014). More specifically, we lack understanding about how those in positions of power, i.e. those in subject

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3 positions that afford them more opportunity to influence, control, and (re)produce texts (Phillips,
4 Sewell, & Jaynes, 2008) use, enact, and legitimize discourses of meritocracy. We focus
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6 specifically on the talk of leaders in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) in relation to
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8 women academics' recruitment and progression. There remains an enduring belief that
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10 universities are 'true meritocracies' (Scully, 1997). However, what constitutes 'academic
11
12 excellence' has been shown to be deeply gendered, conferred in ways that disadvantage women
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14 academics where the 'the arbiters of excellence' are largely men (Brink & Benschop, 2012a;
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16 Husu & Koskinen, 2010). Within universities women are largely found in the more junior and
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18 insecure academic positions with the proportion of women professors hovering around 28% in
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20 the UK (HESA, 2021). In the most elite universities this gender disparity is even more
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22 pronounced (Fotaki, 2013). Contrary to the narrative of universities as great equalisers, they are
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24 centres where neoliberal ideals are propagated and longstanding gender, racial, and class-based
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26 inequalities are perpetuated and reinforced (Guinier, 2015).
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33 We examine how, in the face of evidence demonstrating that women do not progress in
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35 academic careers with the same degree of success as white men, leaders maintain the
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37 'meritocracy myth'. More specifically, we examine the ways in which the denial or obscuring of
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39 gender (dis)advantage through talk of meritocracy occurs. We conduct 53 qualitative interviews
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41 with leaders in HEIs, treating the interviews as co-produced interactional discursive events
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43 (Alvesson, 2003) and employ a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Fairclough, 1992) to examine
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45 leaders' discursive strategies that 'naturalize the social order, and especially relations of [gender]
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47 inequality' (van Dijk, 1993, p.254). We identify three discursive means through which men and
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49 women leaders routinely maintain, reinforce or on occasion challenge the meritocracy:
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53 *invisibilizing gender inequality through gender-neutrality; denying constraints through*
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3 *individualization; problematising meritocracy to uphold or challenge the status quo.* Our
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5 findings show how leaders render invisible gender inequality by presenting the recruitment and
6
7 promotion processes in academia as gender neutral thereby reproducing systems of gender
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9 inequity in more hidden and covert ways. Lack of representation of women at senior levels in
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11 universities was not presented as a failure of the meritocracy, rather leaders used discourses of
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13 individualization to explain gender imbalance, discounting wider structural constraints. While
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15 leaders consistently ‘naturalised’ (van Leeuwen, 2007) the meritocracy as the best (only) system,
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17 some leaders highlighted the flaws inherent in the existing system. Rather than act as a
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19 counterchallenge, leaders’ problematising of the meritocracy largely focused on how they ‘fixed’
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21 the system, referring to instances where they acted in an informal capacity to restore fairness,
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23 displacing the need for a more systemic change. There was, however, a very small minority of
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25 leaders that problematized the meritocracy in a bid to challenge the existing system and pursue
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27 more systemic change. There was, however, a very small minority of
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29 leaders that problematized the meritocracy in a bid to challenge the existing system and pursue
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31 more systemic change.

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33 Through revealing three discursive interventions we show how leader’s talk obscures and
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35 denies gender inequality, presenting women as solely accountable for their own under-
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37 representation in more senior roles and rendering changes to the existing system unnecessary.
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39 We highlight how leaders themselves are positioned within and conditioned by the neoliberal
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41 meritocracy and seek to maintain their ‘earned status’ which is based upon the continuing growth
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43 of their institutions’ competitive advantage and revenue. By uncovering the means through
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45 which meritocracy discourse retains its resilience, our paper offers the opportunity to scrutinize
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47 and more effectively challenge the talk that underpins the upholding of the ‘meritocracy myth’.
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49 While in the existing meritocracy what is considered meritorious is embedded in ideas of
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51 individualism, self-interest, and competition (Littler, 2017), we suggest it is possible to re-
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3 imagine how merit might be defined in universities. Meritocracy is at its most fundamental a
4 social system that rewards individuals based on merit, but merit is not an 'objective' or 'neutral'
5 term but rather a socially constructed and malleable concept. What is considered 'merit worthy'
6 can change over time depending on what a society or institution values (Guinier, 2015).
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11 Although existing conceptualisations and measures of what constitutes merit reflect the deeply
12 gendered relations within which they exist, standards of merit could be transformed to be more
13 inclusive and reflect different and diverse values. This would involve recognising that gender
14 and other categories of disadvantage are not irrelevant to merit, on the contrary, in order to create
15 fairer systems, it is critical to recognise and foreground systematic and structural inequalities. In
16 doing so we can better understand how to change the reward systems of our institutions, moving
17 away from competitive and financial incentives and toward the creation of faculties and
18 departments that represent more fully the diverse society that universities purport to serve.
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33 **Theoretical Background**

34 *Gender and the meritocracy myth*

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37 Within the meritocracy, it is assumed that individuals of equivalent talent and motivation will
38 advance at similar rates and where inequalities emerge, they can be accounted for by deficiencies
39 in human capital, such as a lack of experience, or motivational deficiencies, such as confidence
40 or preferences for family over work (Foley & Williamson, 2019). This system is widely accepted
41 as the most equitable approach to 'sorting people into positions and distributing rewards' (Scully,
42 1997, p. 413). However, research has extensively illustrated the innate gender biases that
43 accompany decision-making within the existing system of meritocracy. In an experimental study
44 Uhlmann and Cohen (2005) show how individuals define criteria for success in job roles based
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3 on the credentials that a candidate of the desired (stereotypical) gender happens to have, so for a
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5 ‘male’ role such as police chief, participants defined their criteria of merit to align with the
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7 credentials of individual male applicants. Such gender-based ascription biases work to
8
9 disadvantage women seeking managerial and leadership roles since such positions have been
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11 traditionally dominated by men and are associated with ‘masculine’ characteristics (Reskin &
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13 McBriar, 2000). Even when efforts are made to hide gender related information in applications,
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15 bias still occurs as managers search for implicit cues to infer applicants’ gender (Foley &
16
17 Williamson, 2019). Where organizations try to actively promote a meritocratic culture, gender
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19 bias may be even greater – this ‘paradox of meritocracy’ occurs as employees believe that
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21 because their organization identifies as meritocratic, they themselves are non-prejudiced, making
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23 them less likely to scrutinise their behaviour and potential bias (Castilla & Benard, 2010).

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28 Those who are systematically disadvantaged by this system can be just as likely to
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30 believe in the meritocracy and reject the idea of discrimination (Baker & Kelan, 2019). McCoy
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32 and Major (2007) show that women primed with meritocratic beliefs are more likely to blame
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34 themselves and other women in ways that justify their low status. Reinforcing this, initiatives to
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36 address gender inequalities within organizations are often based around attempts to ‘fix women’
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38 for example women’s mentorship or confidence and skills-based training programs. As Acker
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40 (1990, p.142) notes ‘since men in organizations take their behavior and perspectives to represent
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42 the human, organizational structures and processes are theorized as gender neutral,’ this obscures
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44 unequal gender relations and instead women are identified as ‘missing something (skills,
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46 confidence, commitment, networks, vision) and should work harder at acquiring it...when these
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48 efforts do not deliver...women are not “stepping up”’ (Wittenberg-Cox, 2013, p. 107).
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3 When women don't 'step up' (i.e. do not progress in their career) or 'opt out' (Williams,
4 Manvell, & Bornstein, 2006) it is assumed that they are unwilling to prioritise work and careers
5 while raising a family (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). This 'work family narrative' dominates debates
6 about women's careers and acts as a justification and legitimation of women's lack of
7 progression within organizations (Padavic, Ely, & Reid, 2020). Efforts to mitigate this by
8 offering flexible working arrangements may result in the further disadvantaging of women as
9 they become victims of the 'flexibility stigma' where they are perceived as less productive and
10 committed than men (Williams, Blair-Low, & Berdahl, 2013). Efforts and initiatives that seek to
11 enable individual women to achieve greater success can hinder women's collective progression
12 as a social group by leaving 'women with the problem and men with the advantage' (Eveline,
13 1998, p.92), reproducing masculine models of merit, valorising hegemonic masculine traits and
14 behaviours, and embodying and reproducing patterns of male power and domination (Galea &
15 Chappell, 2022).

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33 Critical streams of research have sought to problematize the entrenched nature of the
34 meritocracy and acceptance as 'common-sense', interrogating the enduring belief that such
35 systems are fair despite extensive countervailing evidence (Sandel, 2020). Littler (2017) unpicks
36 the 'immutable' and 'factual' status of this 'ideologically charged' discourse, by illustrating
37 meritocracy's 'short etymological history – under 60 years' where the meaning of the term has
38 moved 'from a negative disparaging criticism...of problematic new hierarchies...to a positive
39 celebratory term, one connecting competitive individualism and talent' (p. 43). In Young's
40 (1958) satire 'The Rise of Meritocracy 1870-2033' it is a pejorative term, a dystopian future
41 where elites gleaned their social position based on a formulation of merit as 'IQ + effort'. With
42 the advent of neoliberalism, the term was progressively rehabilitated, alongside the promotion of
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3 competitive market-based self-interest where success and failure were individualized. As
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5 opposed to older systems of privilege, e.g., born into wealth or aristocracy, where ‘built-in’
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7 privilege was overtly acknowledged, in the meritocracy privilege is hidden. In the context of
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9 gender, meritocracy discourse persuades women they do not ‘merit’ the successes that are denied
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11 to them by working to obfuscate structural and organizational factors that disproportionately
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13 impact women, such as ‘overwork culture, the inflexibility of institutionalized labor,
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15 inadequately funded and socialized childcare’ (Littler, 2017, p. 201; Lewis, 2018).
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19 The ‘meritocracy myth’, a seemingly progressive yet ultimately destructive discourse,
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21 acts as a smokescreen for continued gender inequality by disregarding entrenched discriminatory
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23 practices and deep-rooted gender-based biases and assumptions. It is one of the most ‘prevalent
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25 social and cultural tropes of our time’ (Littler, 2017, p.9), yet we know much less about how this
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27 discourse is used in everyday talk in organizations and how it remains so resilient (Hardy &
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29 Thomas, 2014). While there has been some research on how women submit to and subscribe to
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31 meritocracy discourse (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014), what remains particularly underexplored is
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33 how those in power use talk of meritocracy to maintain the status quo. Leaders’ subject
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35 positions, i.e. their ‘location in social space from which [they] produce texts’ (Phillips et al.,
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37 2008, p. 772) results in them having a strong ‘discourse access profile’ (van Dijk, 1993). Leaders
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39 are more likely to be able shape, control, legitimize and potentially transform organizational
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41 discourses (van Dijk, 1993). We focus specifically on the discursive activities of leaders in HEIs
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43 in relation to women academics’ recruitment and progression. As we outline below, commitment
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45 to the meritocracy is central to the academe’s mission and the belief that merit can be judged
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47 objectively is a core principle of university practice despite extensive research problematizing
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49 these assumptions (Treviño, Balkin, & Gomez-Mejia, 2017; van den Brink et al., 2010). We thus
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3 argue that HEIs are an ideal context for our study.
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8 *Meritocracy, Discourse and Gender in Higher Education Institutions*
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10 Universities typically consider themselves to be meritocracies and even faculty who ‘study the
11 ways that politics, family wealth, and social biases compromise the meritocratic operation of
12 other domains...uphold the university as the true meritocracy’ (Scully, 1997, p. 399). Existing
13 privileges and advantages are discounted as irrelevant and rarely acknowledged as contributing
14 factors in terms of success (Guinier, 2015). In terms of gender, universities do not offer better
15 career outcomes for women: as in other organizational contexts women disproportionately
16 occupy junior academic roles, with men greatly outnumbering women in professorial roles which
17 are normally a pre-requisite for more senior leadership roles (Bagilhole & White, 2011; Jarboe,
18 2018). As neoliberal governance models have crept into HEIs, and academia has become
19 increasingly corporatized, marketized, and audited, research has become a competitive game of
20 recognition, prestige, and power, ‘a ‘manstory’ relying on a hero myth that glorifies individual
21 achievements and success’ (Ylijoki, 2013, p. 249). Performance is evaluated according to
22 quantifiable standards of productivity using the purported ‘objective’ metric of ‘academic
23 excellence’ (Guinier, 2015; Scully, 2002). These trends are at their most extreme in many of the
24 most elite universities where the underrepresentation of women in senior academic research
25 positions is most pronounced (Fotaki, 2013).
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46 Research has increasingly debunked the assertion that the ‘evasive social construct’ of
47 ‘academic excellence’ represents a gender-neutral standard of merit (van den Brink et al., 2010).
48 van den Brink and Benschop (2012a) unpack how gender inequality is veiled in professorial
49 appointments by conferring ‘academic excellence’ in ways that disadvantage women including
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3 basing it on a linear career trajectory with a lengthy publication record, the presence of strong
4 international network connections, and visiting fellowships often at overseas institutions. Husu
5 and Koskinen (2010) demonstrate ‘the arbiters of excellence’ are largely men, e.g. the editors of
6 top journal and decision-makers of the most significant prizes and awards. While universities
7 point to their raft of gender equity policies such as parental leave and flexible working
8 arrangements, such policies ‘are routinely undermined by the audit culture that works on a merit
9 system that is conceptualized as gender-neutral but is essentially masculinist’ (Huppatz, Sang, &
10 Napier, 2019, p. 785). If women take advantage of these policies, they ultimately reduce their
11 quantifiable outputs (publications) which has a knock-on impact on opportunities to obtain
12 grants, permanent academic positions, and promotion. Academic systems are built on masculine
13 norms, where individuals must have complete commitment to their career largely unencumbered
14 by domestic and care demands since presumably others (women) will manage the household
15 responsibilities and care work). Women academics often end up channelled away from elite
16 masculinised research routes and towards less prestigious feminized teaching, administrative,
17 and pastoral roles (Ashencaen Crabtree & Schiel, 2019).

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38 Yet despite this underrepresentation of women in more prestigious and senior roles and
39 evidence that unpicks ‘the objectivity and measurement of excellence’ (van den Brink &
40 Benschop, 2012a, p. 508) there remains an enduring belief that HEIs are ‘the last remaining
41 realms of merit’ (Lewis, 2018, p. xi). Meritocracy discourse remains so pervasive in the academe
42 that ‘efforts to revise merit-based evaluation processes meet considerable resistance, even from
43 those who might benefit from change’ (Krefting, 2003, p.261). As Fotaki (2013) illustrates,
44 rather than leading to a rejection of the universal masculine order of academia, the ongoing
45 exclusion and devaluation of women results in women academics adopting masculine subject
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3 positions, colluding in their own marginalization, and leaving uncontested the power structures
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5 in place. Śliwa and Johansson (2014) illustrate how foreign women academics reproduce the
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7 mainstream discourse of meritocracy, often accounting for their progression (or lack thereof)
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9 based on individualist responsibility. In this study we build on this discursive interrogation of the
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11 meritocracy and gender inequality, using a CDA approach (Fairclough, 1992) to examine the talk
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13 of HEI leaders about women's recruitment and progression within academia.
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19 **Methodology**

20 *Participants*

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22 The study is based on 53 qualitative interviews, consisting of 32 women and 21 men, holding
23
24 senior leadership roles in Russell Group universities. The Russell Group is a collection of 24 UK
25
26 universities with a shared focus on research and a reputation for academic achievement (The
27
28 Russell Group of Universities, 2022). While the group highlights a commitment to equality and
29
30 social mobility, they have also been identified as sites of enduring inequity and lack of diversity
31
32 (Boliver, 2013). Gender imbalances in senior roles are widespread within these universities, with
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34 women making up just over a third of senior lecturers and 22.7% of professors, in comparison to
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36 28% for HEIs more generally in the UK (HESA, 2021).
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42 We used a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2001) supplemented by snowball
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44 sampling (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019) to identify university leaders with a strong 'discourse
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46 access profile' (van Dijk, 1993). As van Dijk (1993, p. 256) notes, organizational leaders have
47
48 'special access to discourse' controlling and influencing 'discourse genres, context, participants,
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50 audience, scope and text characteristics'. University leaders have access to board meetings,
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52 control agendas and topics, chair meetings (where they control turn-taking and opportunities to
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3 speak), write university mission statements, including gender and equality strategy, and therefore
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5 have ample discursive opportunities to shape, embed or challenge inequalities. We aimed to have
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7 a sample that represented leadership at different levels within universities. We initially directed
8
9 interview requests to Vice Chancellors and Deputy-Vice Chancellors at the 24 Russell Group
10
11 Universities. We also sought to interview those who had roles on the executive management
12
13 team, including the University Secretary, Chief Financial Officer, and Director of Human
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15 Resources (labelled ‘executive team’ in Table 1). To get insight at school or faculty level we
16
17 invited several Deans/Deputy Deans to be interviewed. We also asked individuals with
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19 leadership roles related to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) to participate. Where these
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21 roles were held by academics, we label them under their primary role title (Professor) and when
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23 their role focused exclusively on EDI we labelled them ‘EDI Strategy’ (Table 1). Four senior
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25 corporate-sector leaders (one CEO and three partners in FTSE top 100 firms, labelled ‘corporate
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27 leader’) were also included as members of the university governing body. Ninety-one requests
28
29 for participation were sent (41 women and 50 men). All those who agreed to participate (53)
30
31 were interviewed. Our final sample had more women than men (32 women, 21 men). Although
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33 those who said they could not participate reported this as due to scheduling conflicts, women are
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35 more likely to be interested in the impact of gender at work and to do EDI roles (Jarboe, 2018),
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37 and perhaps therefore more likely to respond positively to a request for interview.
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49 *Qualitative interviews*

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51 The interviews were carried out by the one of the authors and ranged from 32 minutes to 2.5
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53 hours with an average length of 64.5 minutes. The interviews took place in a location convenient
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3 to participants, either a personal office or campus meeting space. Consent to participate and
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5 record was obtained prior to each interview. We approached the interview as a co-produced
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7 interactional exchange where meaning is ‘actively and communicatively assembled...by both the
8
9 interviewee and interviewer’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 4). Our approach can be viewed as
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11 in contrast with ‘neo-positive’ perspectives on the interview, where a ‘neutral’ researcher elicits
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13 information from ‘primarily competent and moral truth tellers...serving up data that will reveal
14
15 their ‘interiors’ or the realities of their social institutions’ (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012, p. 245).
16
17 We are not focused on accessing a participant’s inner mental universe, rather we treat responses
18
19 as accounts by focusing on the social outcomes that participants seek to achieve with their
20
21 language (Alvesson, 2003). The emphasis is on the regularity that exists in the discursive
22
23 elements used by speakers to maintain, rationalise, and naturalise the current status quo (Potter &
24
25 Wetherell, 1987).
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30
31 We take a loosely semi-structured approach in terms of interview questions. Given their
32
33 position as organizational elites the participants held significant power in terms of length and
34
35 direction of the interview (Conti & O’Neill, 2007). The interviewer started by requesting the
36
37 interviewee explain their current role and career history. In a conversational and organic manner,
38
39 the interviewer then solicited discourse about personal experiences of gender at work, and wider
40
41 issues of gender imbalances in academia and how this might be addressed. The discussions
42
43 relating to merit and meritocracy typically emerged from the participants themselves, reflecting
44
45 the ubiquity of this concept in recruitment and progression. While the interviewer did not
46
47 elaborate her own views, participants were aware that the researcher was interested in gender and
48
49 equality in HEIs. We acknowledge the discursive context within which the responses were
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51 produced, working on the assumption that responses ‘would be both occasioned (produced for
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3 the particular context of the interview) and yet also revealing of the collectively shared
4
5 discursive constructions of gender and equality' (Edley, 2001, p. 442). All interviews were
6
7 transcribed verbatim using a modified version of the Jefferson (1984) system routinely used in
8
9 discourse-oriented studies where interactionally relevant details are transcribed (Appendix A),
10
11 producing transcripts that 'look to the eye how it sounds to the ear' (Schenkein, 1978, p. xi).
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17 *Analytical Procedure – Critical Discourse Analysis*

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19 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focuses on the role of discourse in the production and
20
21 reproduction of power and inequality, advocating that unequal power relations, bias, and
22
23 privilege are (re)produced and maintained through discursive activity (Fairclough, 1992; van
24
25 Dijk, 1993). CDA advocates more attention should be directed to 'top-down relations of
26
27 dominance' rather than 'bottom-up relations of resistance, compliance and acceptance' (van
28
29 Dijk, 1993, p. 250; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). While the focus of CDA is on the discourse of
30
31 those with more power, it does not assume that inequality is simply imposed on others, but rather
32
33 that subjugated groups can come to see their position as natural or legitimate through the
34
35 discursive production of hegemonic masculinities, regulations, norms, and cultures that reinforce
36
37 unequal relations (van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 1997). CDA proposes that understanding how those
38
39 in more powerful positions use discourses to enact, condone, and legitimate social inequality is
40
41 key to understanding how these discourses may be challenged and potentially transformed.
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47 Methodologically, CDA aims to link 'the micro scale of everyday language use and the
48
49 macro scale of social structure, [treating] language use as a form of social practice – discourse is
50
51 shaped and constrained by social structures, where discursive practice will simultaneously shape
52
53 the social structures that constrain it' (Phillips et al., 2008, p. 2). CDA focuses on different levels
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3 in its analysis of discourse: the description of the text (micro-linguistic analysis), the analysis of
4
5 discursive practice (intermediate analytical level) and explaining social structures (macro-
6
7 analytical level; Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 1997). The three levels are interdependent, and their
8
9 relationship is symbiotic so while the analysis of each level is described separately below, the
10
11 analysis process was highly iterative, with each stage informing the next, and a constant back
12
13 and forth to produce the 'final' product. Table 2 organises and summarizes our analytical process
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15 which we discuss in depth below.
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20 INSERT TABLE 2 AROUND HERE
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24 To develop more familiarity with the data and identify areas that could be important for
25
26 further analysis we started with initial coding by identifying words or phrases to thematically
27
28 organize portions of text. Having already done a thorough review of the work in this area we
29
30 approached the data with existing literature in mind, coding with both in vivo codes from
31
32 participants' discourse and concepts from the academic literature, e.g. women opt-out, work-
33
34 family narratives, equality interventions. We also paid attention to idiosyncrasies,
35
36 commonalities, and differences across the texts (Strauss, 1987).
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38

39
40 We then moved to the CDA analysis. We initially conducted a close textual analysis to
41
42 describe the properties of the discourse focusing on aspects such as lexicalization (e.g. the
43
44 selection/choice of wording; use of metaphor; use of active/passive voice; deletion of agent; who
45
46 is quoted directly and indirectly; and nominalization (turning a process into a reified thing or
47
48 event) (adapted from Janks, 1997; see Table 2). The next iterative stage involved an analysis of
49
50 the discursive practices in the data which included a consideration of the roles that individuals
51
52 adopted during their construction of a discourse and the conditions within which it was
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1
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3 produced. The objective was to understand and interpret the relationship between the discourse
4 and its producers by identifying ‘subject positions’, ‘social identities’, ‘social relationships’
5 (Fairclough, 1992). We took note of what assumptions were taken for granted as commonly held;
6 what relationships were set up and enacted; and how and why participants orientated themselves
7 in particular ways (Drew & Heritage, 1992). The final stage was positioning the discourse within
8 the larger societal context with a focus on the hegemonic functions of discourse and how
9 ideological constructions contribute to the production, reproduction, and transformation of
10 unequal power relations (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). We examined what power relations at the
11 situational, institutional, and societal level shaped the discourse, whether the discourse evoked
12 certain ideologies; what assumptions about social relationships, social identities, and power
13 relations permeated the discourse (see Table 3 for a worked example of our analysis process).
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36 INSERT TABLE 3 AROUND HERE
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39 Through our iterative analysis we identified three core means through which the
40 discourse of meritocracy was enacted and legitimised by leaders of HEIs. We did not find
41 consistent patterns of gendered differences with women just as likely as men to enact discourses
42 of meritocracy. The data extracts are presented followed by participant’ pseudonyms, gender (W
43 for woman or M for man) and role in the university.
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50 **Findings**

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53 *Invisibilizing gender inequality through gender-neutrality*
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Throughout their accounts, participants presented the existing system of meritocracy in a ‘matter of fact’ way as a ‘natural’ part of the social order where the best individuals are recruited or promoted. A core means through which participants naturalised merit (van Leeuwen, 2007) was through presenting decision-making as gender-neutral, discursively working to render gender irrelevant, concealing gender inequality (Acker, 2006; Kelan, 2009). Both men and women evoked the gender neutral ‘*best person*’ logic while women often drew on personal experience accounts to discount the significance of gender in their own progression.

- 1 *Interviewer* *When you're appointing (.) and these decisions are being made about who to employ, how are those decisions made?*
- 21 Louise, W, Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) that's a very big question (.) but again I think the point is to try to look at the balance of your skillset and the balance of your gender and I think it's important you get quite a good mix of backgrounds and subjects and so diversity isn't just a gender thing. It's a much more general thing than that (.) And I think that the issue is, it is a meritocracy in a way, you are trying to get the best person. We hopefully have a diverse shortlist as well and then may the best person win (.) Whoever they may be.

In the above extract, the interviewer asks about recruitment decisions, the participant initially hedges her response ‘that’s a very big question’, then deemphasizes the centrality of gender noting, ‘diversity isn’t just a gender thing’, once the list of candidates is diverse, the meritocracy will naturally prevail, and the ‘best person’ will ‘win’. In extract 2, in a series of stalling, stop-start sentences, the participant outlines that because he believes ‘completely in meritocracy’ he ‘struggles’ to ‘see’ the ‘issue’ before more firmly drawing on the ‘*best person*’ logic.

- 2 Henry, M, Dean I find it difficult (.) because I believe completely in meritocracy (.) if I think you are better than the bloke it wouldn’t cross my mind not to recruit someone who’s a woman so I suppose I struggle a bit to see it because I don't see the (.) I don't see the issue (.) I would want the best person alongside me irrespective of race, gender, ethnicity because I know that the stronger the people I put around me the better I will be

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3 There is no interrogation in these extracts of the assumptions underlying who is thought of as the
4
5 ‘best person’ or in extract 2 what ‘stronger’ (a highly masculinised term in itself) or ‘better’
6
7 means and as a result the privilege that is being upheld here goes unquestioned. Leaders’
8
9 accounts were littered with claims that the ‘best person wins’, which is a cornerstone of the
10
11 neoliberal meritocracy since resulting inequalities can be justified on the basis that participants
12
13 had equal opportunity to prove themselves (Sandel, 2020). In the context of increasingly
14
15 corporate universities, where every activity, output and impact is assessed, these leaders are
16
17 pressured to ensure accountability and ‘value for money’, thus the gender neutral ‘best person’
18
19 ideal leads to the recruitment of the most ‘productive’ individuals in terms of quantifiable
20
21 outputs (high status papers, research grants, etc.) who are more likely to be men. Women leaders
22
23 also presented gender as irrelevant to their personal progression:
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- 28
29 3 Interviewer *You’ve done quite well. What do you think you can kind of attribute that*
30 *to?*
31 Barbara, W, Dean I don’t know really (.) I mean I (.) never been bothered about being the
32 only woman I just cracked on (.) I worked in a really male environment,
33 so I’ve always just (.) you know (.) it’s a meritocracy (.) I just work
34 really hard...
35

36
37 In extract 3, we see that Barbara constructs an account where her success is due to her ‘cracking
38
39 on’ and ‘working hard’. This is what Littler (2017) refers to as a ‘parable of progress’, narratives
40
41 about those who have ‘made it’ despite being members of disadvantaged social groups. These
42
43 narratives work to showcase what can happen when you ‘rise up’ whilst detracting from others
44
45 who fail to do the same. They are central to how the meritocracy maintains its power, feeding
46
47 into the belief that through hard work anyone can ‘make it’ up the metaphorical ‘ladder of
48
49 opportunity’. When women leaders did give accounts of difficult experiences or encounters at
50
51 work, they presented these incidences as unconnected to gender:
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4 Claire, W, Vice ...maybe (.) nobody believes it but there's very few occasions in my
5 Chancellor (VC) career where I think (.2) being a woman has held me back and I actually
6 have to think re::ally hard to think about real examples (.) I've had
7 episodes where people have bullied me and everything else like a lo::t
8 of people have when they get to a life in academia (.) but I don't re::ally
9 think that any of them were because I was a woman.
10

11 In extract 4, Claire starts with the caveat that 'maybe nobody believes' that her gender has not
12 'held [her] back', with the underlying assertion that there is a widely accepted (incorrect)
13 'held [her] back', with the underlying assertion that there is a widely accepted (incorrect)
14 assumption that gender impedes women at work. She acknowledges that she's experienced
15 episodes of bullying but immediately follows up with 'like a lot of *people* when they *get to a life*
16 *in academia*' making the experience of bullying in academia gender neutral. What this talk
17 conceals is that bullying is not neutral - there is always a power imbalance between the parties
18 and given women are more often less senior, untenured, part-time etc. they are more likely to
19 experience bullying than men (Johnson-Bailey, 2015). Similarly, when women leaders felt they
20 'don't fit in' or were excluded they were unlikely to attribute this to gender:
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- 32 5 Interviewer Do you feel the effects of that (.) as::a woman in a male dominated
33 field?
34 Barbara, W, So I:: don't know whether people see me as doing things because I'm a
35 Dean woman or doing things because I'm from a different background (.) I
36 feel I don't fit in (.) So I don't feel as excluded as much because I'm
37 female (.3) I feel excluded as a result of my > educational background
38 and class <
39
40

41 Barbara questions whether others attribute her way of 'doing things' to being a woman or
42 because she's from a 'different background', but largely identifies educational background and
43 class rather than gender as her marker for exclusion. However, focusing on 'one category almost
44 inevitably obscures and oversimplifies other interpenetrating realities' (Acker, 2006 p. 442) and
45 as scholars of intersectionality show, it is hard to separate out characteristics when it comes to
46 (dis)advantage or bias. Despite's Barbara's earlier assertion that success comes through 'hard
47 work' (extract 3), her account here is inconsistent with her previous defense of the university as
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meritocratic. Whilst she argues her exclusion is not gender based but rather based on another social category (class), she is conceding that in the existing meritocracy, people are disadvantaged (and advantaged) by their membership of certain social groups. In extract 6, Fatimah uses her experience as a Black woman to reinforce the meritocracy as the best system (as opposed to positive discrimination), since without it her individual deservedness (and that of other Black men and women) would be questioned:

- 6 Fatimah W, we have to make a conscious effort (.) without going into quotas and
 Exec Team positive discrimination because (.5) for people of colour (.6) that's a
 double whammy < they say oh you're here as a non-white women >
 Interviewer *People have said that to you?*
 Fatimah I've had this from strangers (.) I was at an event one dude comes up to
 me and says 'oh you already have a board position' I'm thinking ya (.)
 [eyebrow raise] and then he said 'I'll never get that. You see I'm male
 pale and stale' (.) and before I could even respond he said well I'm
 [name] in PR and if you see something interesting please call me (.6)
 I'm thinking f**k you too (.) it's not the first time since then it has
 happened a lot of time with men who when I check they haven't even
 got a single degree (.) I have two degrees I'm far more qualified I'm far
 more skilled (.) but what do they see? the skin the gender and the race

Whilst this participant initially outlines the importance of making 'a conscious effort' for more equal outcomes, she doesn't specify what kinds of conscious efforts should be made beyond that these efforts *should not* involve quotas or positive discrimination. She presents such initiatives unhelpful and creating a 'double whammy' for those in traditionally marginalised groups. She argues such initiatives denigrate individual deservedness as others would assume those who are successful from disadvantaged groups have achieved not on 'merit' but due to 'the skin, the gender and the race'. The counter to this is that those in privileged social categories are already disproportionately achieving because of their skin, gender, and race yet their individual merit goes unquestioned.

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3 *Denying constraints through individualization*
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5 In participant's accounts the challenges that universities face in terms of promotion of women
6 academics at senior levels were often acknowledged by leaders, but this was not presented as a
7 failure of the meritocracy. Through a process of individualization leaders challenged the
8 perspective that women's underrepresentation is symbolic of inequality, denying or discursively
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7 Jim, M, Exec Team We lost so many people because (.) they decided they were going to be -
look after kids or whatever, of those who stay the course (.) are they
underrepresented would be my first question?

In extract 7, the participant acknowledges that they 'lost so many *people*' because they 'decided' i.e., voluntarily chose, to 'look after kids or whatever'. He identifies this 'lost' group using the non-gendered 'people' rather than 'women' and then questions whether 'they' [women] are really underrepresented if we focus solely on those 'who stay the course'. In the meritocracy it is assumed that everyone starts off with an equal chance to 'make it' and inequalities in outcomes are to be expected because not everyone will have the same perseverance and talent. Jim's account silences the fact that those who are 'lost' to family obligations, unable to cope with the increasing pressure and workloads of academia whilst taking on the main caring role in the family are more often women whilst those who have 'stayed the course' are more often men (Padavic et al., 2020). There is also no consideration of why these 'lost' academics had to give up their careers to 'look after kids' or why having children cannot be compatible with having a successful academic career. In extract 8, the interviewer presents a challenge to the interviewee to consider that men also make the choice to have a family:

8 Interviewer Talking about maternity and returning then (.) it's only women that make that choice, to have children?
Alex, M, DVC I suppose I would say you're making choices in your life all the time (.) and if you're making the choice about having kids then there's going to be

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3 consequences to that choice (.) that would be presumably something you'd
4 discuss with your other half before you go (.) well you'd hope before you
5 go into it and acknowledging that there's going to be certain changes and
6 how do we (.) as a family accommodate those changes, who's best I mean,
7 most of the sort of super women talk about 'oh it was always gonna be me
8 (.) I was the breadwinner so husband's gonna stay at home' and I suppose
9 it's no different than the men saying 'well I'm the breadwinner so my wife
10 is gonna stay' ...I suspect there are very few situations where the person
11 who's earning more...or significantly more - stays at home following the
12 birth of children...it really depends if you're earning 60 he's earning 50
13 you know but if you're earning 600 and he's earning 50 (.) don't think
14 there's going to be a discussion ... how many mothers who are no longer
15 working are thinking oh (.) 'I was done out of the opportunity (.) by my
16 husband or by his six figures' ...I think part of it at the same time is it's
17 very difficult to have it all.
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21 Despite referring to women breadwinners as 'super women' thereby denoting them as part of an
22 extraordinary group, he presents the decision about 'who is best' to stay home after children as
23 unrelated to gender rather it's a simple, objective 'choice' based on finances. As his argument
24 progresses, he uses an extreme example, women with husbands earning six figure salaries,
25 suggesting it is unlikely they feel 'done out of the opportunity'. There is no consideration of
26 what 'best' means in the context of taking care of children or questioning why there should be a
27 sole breadwinner rather than responsibilities shared between partners, with organizational
28 support. The account silences the potential additional barriers or societal expectations that
29 women confront when seeking to return to work. He completes the argument by reciting an
30 adage used typically in relation to women and their careers 'it's very difficult to have it all' - 'all'
31 meaning it's difficult for women [but not men] to have both a successful career and children. In
32 extract 9, Russell tries to reduce the culpability of academic institutions in the lack of
33 representations of women in more senior roles by drawing on expert authority to aid in the
34 presentation of his account as factual rather than opinion (van Leeuwen, 2007).
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54 9 Russell, M, I read some stuff by both McKinsey and in the Harvard Business
55 DVC Review a few years ago that actually (.) perhaps the most difficult
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3 thing to adjust for are the choices and expectations of women
4 themselves (.) and my worry is that quite often women may try to
5 adopt what may be seen as male behaviours not natural to them in
6 order to try and progress and (.) of course if that's the case you can't
7 really be an authentic leader and > you can't persuade other people to
8 do things <
9

10
11 He suggests for institutions it is difficult to have policies that improve representation because it
12 is challenging to factor in the individual 'choices and expectations' of women, he then quickly
13 moves to draw on an essentialized conception of the behaviour of men and women attributing
14 women's lack of visibility and success in leadership roles to their adoption of 'male behaviours
15 not natural to them', meaning they are not perceived as 'authentic leader[s]'. This participant
16 doesn't question why women academics feel they need to adopt masculinized behaviours to 'try
17 and progress' but what he is illustrating is that there is a dominant way of doing leadership and
18 that classic leadership styles are not gender neutral. In corporate university contexts, 'leadership'
19 remains associated with stereotypically masculine traits and dispositions with leaders often being
20 selected from the male dominated, more prestigious, 'hard' sciences. Leaders also used
21 meritocracy discourse to reject affirmative action or positive discrimination initiatives as a
22 legitimate means to recruit and/or promote women.
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- 39 10 Interviewer *so do you think (.) the initiatives that have been started (.) Athena Swan,*
40 *targets (.) do you think those things are helping?*
41 Brian, M, The::y're helping for sure (.5) I'm nervous about quotas because I'm
42 Exec Team HUGELY meritocratic (.) if you go back in time the profession was
43 entirely unmeritocratic (.) I hated that system and I fought through my life
44 to change it completely so we were completely enough meritocratic (.) you
45 were paid according to your value (.) so I would hate to have a system that
46 forces us into a position where we recruit people who are not as good as
47 the people we could receive because there's a quota (.7) Anything that
48 helps towards building confidence building the capability < helping them
49 (.) them that sounds awful doesn't it (.) women (.) helping women (.)
50 somehow acquire the skills to go into managerial positions I would support
51 whole heartedly
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3 In extract 10, the participant agrees that voluntary initiatives like Athena Swan (a gender equality
4 accreditation system in UK HEIs), are helping (without specifying how they help), then quickly
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6 contrasts such voluntary measures to mandatory quotas which he is ‘nervous’ about because they
7
8 would force the recruitment ‘of people who are not as good’. The (gendered) assumptions in
9
10 terms of what is considered ‘good’ are not explored nor does he elaborate how he decides an
11
12 individual’s ‘value’. Quotas are positioned in opposition to meritocracy, threatening to return us
13
14 to an unspecified period in the past that was ‘entirely unmeritocratic’. This participant notes he
15
16 ‘fought’ against the prior system and although he doesn’t elaborate what exactly the system was,
17
18 presumably, he is suggesting that recruitment/promotion was not solely based on individual
19
20 talent and hard work. Comparing meritocracy positively against past ‘unmeritocratic’ systems of
21
22 privilege (e.g. hereditary privileges, nepotism) is another means through which the meritocracy
23
24 is reproduced and maintained (Littler, 2017). However, the meritocracy does not appear to offer
25
26 much better outcomes for those in disadvantaged groups, rather privileges are preserved and
27
28 reproduced whilst being largely concealed. Leaders also presented issues of gender
29
30 discrimination and harassment in university contexts as individualized, localised episodes:
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- 39 11 Interviewer *Are there not (.) do you find there’s things women (.) I suppose have to*
40 *deal with at work that men don’t*
41 Luke, M, *sexual harassment wise (.) I’d be almost entirely conditioned by my*
42 Deputy Dean *wife (.) who’d say just knee him in the so and so or just you know (.3)*
43 *she would have the sort of (.) you know > just react to it and deal with*
44 *it > and I suppose part of that is then sort of becomes my (.) you know*
45 *thinking about that’s what women should be doing.*
46
47

48 Luke draws on the ‘voice’ of his wife to ascribe women the agency to confront such issues on a
49
50 personal basis, trivializing the issue of sexual harassment. Despite universities claiming to be
51
52 occupational centres of equality, incidents of sexual harassment against women are common,
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54 however, the implication in extract 11 is that individual women rather than institutions are
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3 responsible for finding solutions. Acknowledging sexual harassment or other gender-based
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5 disadvantage as systemic, can impact the marketability of a HEI, therefore it must be ‘swept
6
7 under the carpet...airbrushed out of the picture, to ensure the security of income streams: from
8
9 research, from student recruitment or both’ (Phipps, 2020, p. 231). The common feature across
10
11 these discursive accounts is the emphasis on the ‘individual subject’ and a lack of engagement
12
13 with the structural issues in which gender inequality is rooted.
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19 *Problematizing meritocracy to uphold or challenge the status quo*
20

21 While leaders often denied there were systemic gender-based disadvantages in university
22
23 recruitment and promotion procedures (e.g. extracts 1-4 above), within their accounts some also
24
25 identified scope for potential bias in the system. These responses ranged in the extent to which
26
27 the leaders problematized the meritocracy but sought to uphold it. A very small minority of
28
29 leaders who problematized the meritocracy did so in a bid to challenge the existing system and
30
31 pursue more systemic change. When problematizing the meritocracy the vast majority of leaders
32
33 signalled the complexity of merit as a concept but didn’t question the meritocracy as a system,
34
35 rather minor modifications were sufficient to restore fairness. They highlighted how they
36
37 intervened to ‘catch biases’ through discretionary and often concealed interventions that operated
38
39 at the margins of policy. The small minority of leaders who sought more system wide change
40
41 were women who were active in the EDI space, either with a formal role in EDI or as someone
42
43 with research expertise in the field.
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49 For example, in relation to the first group of leaders who problematized but upheld the
50
51 meritocracy, Michael in extract 12 questions the objectivity of promotion criteria and suggests
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53 the need to understand where ‘hidden biases might be operating’:
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- 12 *Interviewer* *In the promotion process (.) where are those cha::llenges*
Michael, M, VC when you say it'::s based on quantity and quality of publications (.)
completed PhD supervisions, winning money and influence of your peers
(.) they seem reasonably objective but of course as we said if you've ha::d
a succession of maternity leaves (.) or the funders that you're applying to
have hidden bias then it (.) may not be easy (.) You could adjust the
criteria to be fair to everybody (.5) [We must] understand where the
hidden biases might be operating

Whilst this VC suggests they 'could' adjust the criteria to be fairer there is no agreed upon way
to 'adjust' for a 'succession of maternity leaves'. The fact that maternity leave impacts women's
academic careers is, to some extent, acknowledged, yet universities lack formal policies in
relation to how to calculate this impact. University recruitment and promotion boards and
research funding agencies offer vague assurances they will 'take into account' maternity leaves
(see extract 13 below) but as Klocker and Drozdowski (2012) provocatively ask 'how many
papers is a baby worth?' They point out the difficulties in trying to adjust for the multi-faceted
effects that childbearing has on women's academic careers and that there is no 'magic' baby-to-
paper ratio. The problem with this 'adjustment' approach when tied up in the discourse of
meritocracy can be seen in the next extract:

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- 13 *Interviewer* *can you describe a bit of the promotion process here (.) How do the*
diversity goals you mentioned play a role in decision making?
Stephen, M, Pro yea in terms of promo::tions (.) does diversity come into account (.)
Vice Chancellor we do take (.) into account (.) uh differ:ences of contractual status of
(PVC) individuals (.) so if you know we take into account the fact that
people are on point eight contracts or full time or part time we take
into account individuals having periods of sickness or maternity
leave or whatever changes in their contractual status (.) in the same
ways that we would look at someone who has a disability or long
term sickness and try to gauge what the appropriate benchmark
would be for them (.) and we take that quite seriously (.6) I think it's
(.) it's rea::lly difficult space because the risk you have is the (.3) I
think if you're promoting on merit you should be promoting on
merit

The participant in extract 13 begins a series of uncertain start-stop sentences before he settles on
equating diversity to 'differences of contractual statuses of individuals'. He outlines that they

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3 ‘take into account’ periods of absence when making promotion decisions but offers no concrete
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5 insight into how they ‘gauge...the appropriate benchmark’ beyond assuring the interviewer they
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7 take it ‘seriously’. He later acknowledges ‘it’s a really difficult space’ returning to the discourse
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9 of meritocracy saying, ‘if you’re promoting on merit, you should be promoting on merit’. No
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11 consideration is given to the gendered notions of merit in university contexts, where those who
12
13 ‘merit’ promotion, are likely those who have been able to commit fully to their careers. Even if
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15 periods of maternity leave are ‘taken into account’, when women return to work their careers
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17 continue to be impacted since the amount of time that they can dedicate to their careers is
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19 reduced given the bulk of the care and domestic work often falls on them. Here the leader has
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21 problematized aspects of the promotion system, but ultimately upheld the meritocracy.
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26 Some leaders signalled small individual adjustments or ‘tweaks’ that they made to the
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28 system to restore ‘fairness’ but were resistant to formalising policies to ensure certain levels of
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30 representation:
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33 14 *Interviewer* *Do you think that (.) interventions (.) will cause some change of*
34 *the status quo*
35 Brian, M, you would hope that as we move on as a society that the whole
36 Exec Team male white thing will be less of an issue than it has been (.5) here
37 we (.) they have 3 elected [members] (.) who sit on the board and
38 at the moment 2 of those 3 are women (.) fabulous (.) and very
39 good at what they do (.5) I used to cheat a bit because I used to
40 make sure (.) well most of the time and where I could (.) for the
41 meritocracy point (.) that my finance director and HR director
42 were women
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46 In an earlier part of this interview Brian maintained that he ‘would hate to think we are making
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48 decisions on something other than merit’ but in extract 14 he outlines a situation where he
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50 himself ‘cheated a bit’ by making decisions based on gender rather than solely on ‘merit’. The
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52 interviewer asks about ‘interventions’ referring to gender quotas for women’s representation. He
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54 opposes the use of quotas, suggesting society will ‘move on’ from ‘the whole white male thing’
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without any specific systemic or formal changes needed. Yet, he then foregrounds examples of where he made some ad hoc adjustments to the recruitment process only selecting women for certain roles. Brian is acknowledging that he needs to ‘cheat’ to ensure women’s representation yet is simultaneously adamant that the existing system should remain unchanged. The VC in extract 15 presents an unofficial strategy he uses to ensure his fellow recruitment panel members aren’t swayed by personal biases:

- 15 Rupert, M, VC you must make sure that you don't influence selection processes (.) and that's, for me that's the critical piece is (.5) when you say that (.) you need to be scrupulously clear that you're not bringing personal bias into the situation (.) so the only way that I think you can do that is for someone to say you must have group x more than x1 represented in your shortlist. and you must then argue why the marginalised group that you've identified (.) candidate or candidates (.) are not as good as the one you are choosing.
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- 26 *Interviewer* *So, this is (.) part of the (.) formal process that you implement?*
- 27 Rupert [head shake] No no (.) I’m much more of the (.4) work in the background and provide incentives for change rather than no you must change
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He asserts that the ‘only way’ to avoid bias, involves having a shortlist with members of marginalised groups and if a non-marginalised candidate is chosen, the recruitment committee should argue through the reasons why a marginalized candidate is not ‘as good’ as the chosen candidate. He doesn’t acknowledge that what is seen as ‘good’ will likely also be gendered. He simultaneously notes that he doesn’t formalise this as part of the recruitment processes, rather he is working in the ‘background’ providing unspecified ‘incentives’ for change. The unanswered question here is why he is resistant to formalising this process or forcing change especially considering he believes it is the ‘only way’ to avoid bias.

In relation to the second group of leaders a very small minority called for more systemic change. For example, Joanna, a professor with an EDI role, challenges the dominant discourse on

meritocracy, stating that without systemic change the privileges that white men enjoy will continue:

16 Joanna, W, professor (EDI role) It's me and (.) a few others (.) who handle recruitment together and there's one man on the team (.3) has all these ideas for supporting women...his idea is > 'well we have to make sure that we have clear criteria and minimum qualification standards for every position and we need to make sure we hire the best qualified person based on those standards for every interview that we do' < (.) and I said (.3) 'we::ll (.) that's in the::ory really good > but DO YOU REA::LISE THAT WHEN WE DO THAT WE'RE FAR MORE LIKELY TO BE REPRODUCING THE WHITE MALE INDIVIDUAL > who has had more opportunity and privilege to gain those qualifications' (.) If we look at the more holistic picture as opposed to just the criteria (.) and not picking the best but as long as they meet the minimum standards of what we're looking for (.4) well we need to be a little bit more creative with that

As Joanna signals, her male colleague believes he is acting as an ally and has 'all these ideas for supporting women' yet his proposals are fully embedded in the 'best person' logic and will reproduce the 'white male individual'. This is one of the few examples where a participant actively rejected meritocracy discourse and advocated for 'not picking the best' or rethinking what being the 'best candidate' means illustrating the important role individuals with EDI expertise can play in university recruitment and promotion boards. However, several women leaders also highlighted how visibly challenging the existing system could create difficulties for their own legitimacy and careers and they had to balance 'wanting to challenge things' whilst 'maintaining credibility' as in extract 17:

17 Interviewer Janet, W, Dean *So because you're a woman (.3) people assume or expect you to be on the equality committee, to be part of the feminist agenda as you put it? I think you have to be rea::lly careful (.) I've learned over the years about what battles to fight and what aren't worth raising an issue (.) so there are some things it's worth challenging people and sometimes it's not because you're not going to get anywhere (.) and I think once you get labelled as a mad feminist then you'll never achieve anything (.) for me it's about maintaining credibility (.3) if you still want to challenge and do things (.) and if you attack every instance you see of potential*

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3 discrimination you won't get anywhere (.2) you have to have a really
4 careful balance between acceptance and fighting.
5 *Interviewer* *how do you do that (.) find that balance?*
6 Janet (.3) try to do it in a humorous way (.) so intervene in a humorous way (.)
7 obviously not use the word sexist.
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10 In extract 17 this leader sought to evade the disparaging label of 'mad feminist' because once
11 labelled in this way her authority as leader would be undermined and her ability to make changes
12 diminished. The discursive trope of 'mad' feminist enacts and reinforces patterns of male
13 dominance by delegitimising feminist concerns even before the argument begins by making its
14 costs personal. Janet instead used humour to soften her interventions and didn't directly call out
15 'sexist' behaviours. As individuals move up through organizational hierarchies where they begin
16 to have greater potential to effect change, they also experience greater pressures to express the
17 organizational culture and values, rather than challenge them. Janet might be described as a
18 'tempered radical', individuals that seek to 'rock the boat and stay in the boat' (Meyerson, 2001).
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33 **Discussion**

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35 In this paper we problematize the meritocracy's 'spontaneous quality, its transparency, its
36 'naturalness', its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance
37 to change or to correction' (Hall, 1979, p. 325-326). While previous studies have established
38 meritocracy as a politically charged hegemonic discourse (Littler, 2017; Krefting, 2003), in this
39 study we sought to provide insight into how this discourse is used by leaders to justify gender
40 inequalities and deny or obscure male privilege. We examine how leaders in HEIs discursively
41 maintain the 'meritocracy myth' in the face of extensive counterevidence that demonstrates that
42 women academics do not progress with the same degree of success as men. Using text from
43 qualitative in-depth interviews, we applied Fairclough's (1992) CDA framework to 'illuminate
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3 ways in which the dominant forces in a society construct versions of reality that favour the
4 interests of those same forces' (McGregor, 2003, p. 2). We identified three discursive means
5 through which leaders maintain and reinforce and on occasion challenge the meritocracy:
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7 *invisibilizing gender inequality through gender-neutrality; denying constraints through*
8 *individualization; and problematizing meritocracy to uphold or challenge the status quo.* The
9 staying power of dominant discourses rests on their ability to go unrecognized and appear
10 'factual' or 'common-sense'. By highlighting the internal contradictions in how meritocracy talk
11 is used by leaders, unravelling the 'naturalness' of this discourse, and surfacing the discursive
12 interventions that uphold and normalise gender inequalities, our paper challenges and scrutinizes
13 the neoliberal meritocracy, opening a discursive space for a counter-perspective.
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17 The first discursive means used by leaders is *invisibilizing gender inequality through*
18 *gender-neutrality* whereby efforts to challenge the meritocracy are presented as unnecessary,
19 irrelevant, and even damaging. Previous research has shown that representations of the 'best
20 person' and 'ideal academic' are not gender-neutral and disadvantage women. Our paper
21 contributes by unpacking the ways in which this 'best person' trope permeated with hegemonic
22 masculine ideals alongside 'parables of [women's] progress' (Littler, 2017) where unconstrained
23 women succeed if they work 'hard enough' (i.e. behave and act in (masculine) ways which
24 demonstrate commitment to career progression) is used by leaders to render gender peripheral to
25 discussions. This invisibilizing allows the differences in outcomes for men and women to be
26 treated as irrelevant and enables gender inequalities to reproduce through covert and hidden
27 ways. This builds on Acker's (1990) work that emphasised how the notion of an abstract
28 disembodied worker enables masculine behaviours, practices, and processes to become gender
29 neutral. Acker's work has largely focused on how organizations' structures and processes work
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3 to invisibilize gender. She hints at the importance of exploring the role of leaders noting
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5 ‘managers’ decisions often initiate gender divisions... and organizational practices maintain
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7 them’ (Acker, 1990, p. 146). One contribution of our paper is precisely that - unravelling and
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9 problematising, on a discursive level, how gender neutrality in leader’s talk works to invisibilize,
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11 maintain and normalise gender inequalities. Our analysis also points to the enduring and
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13 pervasive analytical treatment of women and how this differs from men. Women’s (lack of)
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15 progress is so often intimately connected to the work family narrative, their maternal and other
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17 ‘bodily attributes’ (Acker, 1990), rendering them more at risk of disrupting organisational logics
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19 of value and merit, requiring additional support and help for them to successfully navigate their
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21 careers. We also see the use of exceptional women as a benchmark for evaluating other women's
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23 ‘lesser’ progress and commitment, which can be divisive and harmful for women collectively.
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25 This treatment stands in sharp contrast to the positioning of men as progressing their career
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27 organically and remaining disembodied and unencumbered from concerns regarding
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29 reproduction capacities and care (Acker, 1990).
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35 We identified a second discursive intervention used by leaders to uphold the meritocracy;
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37 *denying constraints through individualization*, where leaders largely rejected the existence of
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39 systematic or structural gender inequality within HEIs recruitment and promotion processes.
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41 While leaders acknowledged evidence of gender inequality as still present, this was not regarded
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43 as a failure of the meritocracy rather they drew on a web of pervasive narratives about women at
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45 work, including the ‘work-family narrative’ (Padavic et al., 2020), ‘women opting out’ (Williams
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47 et al., 2006), and ‘women as lacking’ (Wittenberg-Cox, 2013) to individualise and normalise the
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49 underrepresentation of women in more senior positions. While these narratives have been
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51 previously identified, our paper contributes by illustrating how these overlapping narratives
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3 operate as a self-perpetuating frame of reference, working to strengthen the credibility of an
4 argument that denies the structural inequalities faced by women thereby protecting and
5 legitimising existing privileges. In addition, our work contributes by showing how
6 individualization steers us to interpret conditions of marginalisation or disadvantage in isolation,
7 as atypical, rather than as connected and constituting an institutionalised system reinforcing
8 privilege and inequality. Individualization rationalises instances of gender discrimination as
9 localised, unconnected events with the emphasis placed on women to be agentic overcoming
10 barriers, structural constraints and inappropriate behaviours at work while maintaining
11 authenticity. Leaders suggest women academics are underrepresented in senior roles because
12 they *choose* not to progress. Yet simultaneously and paradoxically women academics were also
13 portrayed as in need of reshaping *in order to* progress by aligning with masculine standards of
14 leadership while somehow also retaining an 'authentic' (gender appropriate) style and approach.
15 Our paper therefore contributes by surfacing the inconsistencies within individualization
16 discourse that leave women academics constrained by irresolvable contradictions.
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35 The final discursive means was *problematizing meritocracy to uphold or challenge the*
36 *status quo*, used within the accounts of some leaders where they problematized the meritocracy
37 but sought to uphold it and a very small number seeking to challenge and potentially change the
38 existing system. Leaders who problematized the meritocracy accepted the potential for inequality
39 or bias but most sought to discursively resolve this tension by signalling individual tweaks and
40 adjustments they made to restore 'fairness' dismissing the need for systemic change. Acting
41 individually to make informal concessions to the underprivileged group without making systemic
42 changes that visibilize and acknowledge inequalities allows the discourse of meritocracy to
43 remain unchallenged. Our paper uncovers the internal contradictions in the talk of leaders where
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3 they both venerated the meritocracy's objective 'best person' ideal whilst simultaneously
4 contravening it, discursively presenting these 'breaches' as restoring meritocracy rather than
5 violating it. Our paper also contributes by the revealing the discursive tactics through which
6 alternative systems such as positive discrimination are rejected. Critiqued through the prism of
7 the meritocracy, leaders discourse makes such alternatives appear oxymoronic, i.e. universities
8 will be forced to recruit people who are not 'as good', reinforcing the meritocracy as the only
9 viable option. Our paper also illustrates albeit to a much lesser extent how discourses of
10 meritocracy are questioned, challenged, and resisted. For example, we show how those in EDI
11 roles can present a discursive challenge to the meritocracy by surfacing and illustrating
12 paradoxes and questioning and countering assumptions before decisions are made. We illustrate
13 how some women leaders walk a tightrope between conformity and rebellion, challenging the
14 status quo through small and incremental changes, these 'tempered radicals' can create
15 opportunities for more radical change through being committed and productive organizational
16 members whilst also sources of resistance, alternative ideas and transformation (Meyerson,
17 2001).

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19 These three discursive interventions do not work in isolation but rather together to
20 maintain and obscure gender and other social inequalities that support the ongoing competitive
21 functioning of neo liberalised academic institutions. In the marketplace of higher education,
22 leaders are encouraged, like academics, to see themselves as 'responsible, striving, competitive,
23 enterprising subjects' (Ball, 2015, p. 258; Fotaki & Prasad, 2015). A leader's success is largely
24 measured on ensuring the increasing prestige of their university and they are incentivised to
25 ensure their institution rises to the top of the continuously proliferating academic leagues tables.
26 Part of this is ensuring that they recruit the most 'productive' individuals (high status papers,
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3 research grants, etc.) more likely to be men. Yet, universities must be perceived as actively
4 trying to address inequities or risk impacts on research funding, external marketability,
5 recruitment etc. Leaders therefore talk about the importance of gender equality and declare their
6 commitment the creation and adoption of gender equality policies in their institutions. However,
7 as we show from the three identified discursive interventions by denying structurally ingrained
8 inequality, and focusing on individual emancipation, equality discourse is essentially ‘hijacked’,
9 to performatively create an aura of gender equality without changing the existing system (Smidt,
10 Pétursdóttir, & Einarsdóttir, 2021). This ‘hijacking of the discourse’ works to both manage
11 impressions whilst simultaneously discursively downplaying gender inequality, by suggesting it
12 has already been dealt with, actions have been taken and appropriate solutions put in place.
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26 While we have extensively problematized the contemporary ideals promulgated by ‘the
27 meritocracy’, in terms of implications of our work we also suggest it is possible to re-imagine
28 what might be considered ‘meritorious’ in universities. Meritocracy is at its most fundamental a
29 social system that rewards individuals based on merit, yet merit is not an ‘objective’ or ‘neutral’
30 term but rather socially constructed and malleable and what is considered ‘merit worthy’ can
31 change over time depending on what a society or institution values (Guinier, 2015). Although
32 existing conceptualisations and measures of what constitutes merit are weighted heavily in
33 favour of the privileged, standards of merit could be transformed to be more inclusive and reflect
34 different and diverse values. Universities missions often have a very public quality outlining
35 their ambition to use research and education to create change and build more progressive
36 societies, and we follow Guinier (2015) in suggesting a fundamental part of this process of
37 transformation is developing wider and more inclusive definitions of what is considered
38 ‘meritorious’ within universities. In relation to the recruitment and promotion of academics this
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3 would involve recognising (rather than denying) inequalities and acknowledging that ‘merit’ is
4 not gender (or race) blind. We should place individual academics and their achievements firmly
5 within wider structural systems of dis(advantage) and moving away ‘the best’ being equated
6 solely with publication outputs, research funding etc.
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12 There have been some initiatives that move in this direction, for example, the DORA
13 (Declaration of Research Assessment) which advocates for a different, qualitative assessment of
14 research quality instead of relying on quantitative and gendered metrics (Benschop & van den
15 Brink, 2023). The suggestion is not that we ignore existing markers of quality, but rather there
16 should be critical engagement with what constitutes merit, alongside a more inclusive and
17 diverse understanding of contribution where different types of profiles with diverse trajectories
18 are encouraged and embraced alongside more traditional academic routes. Recruitment and
19 promotion procedures should be continuously reassessed for the degree to which they support the
20 institutions in creating a more inclusive understanding of merit. This would also involve
21 changing what is considered meritorious in how leaders run our academic institutions moving
22 away from ‘incentive systems’ that predominantly prioritise financial outcomes and towards
23 systems of leadership involves shaping and designing formal organizational initiatives that lead
24 to widespread systemic change, creating faculties and institutions that reflect the diverse society
25 that universities claim to serve and support (Guinier, 2015).
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47 **Conclusion**

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49 In the paper we show how the ideal of the meritocracy has immense resilience and continues to
50 be mobilised and defended by HEI leaders as an appropriate guiding principle for recruitment
51 and promotion in academia, with the result being that structural gender (and other) inequalities
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3 are insufficiently challenged and inadequately remedied. We illustrate how meritocracy
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5 discourse is used by leaders as a means of discursively legitimating the underrepresentation of
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7 women in senior positions and naturalizing gender disparities as the deserved outcomes of a fair
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9 process. We argue that belief in ‘the meritocracy’ as it stands will further entrench inequality and
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11 privilege. Yet, in terms of moving beyond critique, we also highlight that what constitutes merit
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13 can change over time and is context dependent, flexible in terms of what any given institution or
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15 organization or society values. If we re-define and re-evaluate what is ‘merit worthy’ it could
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17 also potentially unseat established privilege, visibilize inequalities and aid the creation of more
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19 inclusive and egalitarian organizations. This would involve the open acknowledgment that
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21 existing understandings of merit have not worked and could only hope to work in a society or
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23 system unlike our own which started with an already high degree of (gender) equality. Academic
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25 institutions could choose to value other characteristics as ‘meritorious’ beyond the traditional
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27 markers of academic excellence which disadvantage women and incentivize self-interest and
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29 individual accomplishment and competition. We suggest that processes of recruitment and
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31 promotion should position the achievements of academics in the wider context of gender (and
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33 other forms of) structural advantage and disadvantage and universities should prioritize the
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35 creation of schools and faculties that are more reflective of the diverse societies within which
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37 they exist.
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3 *Jean Clarke* is Professor of Entrepreneurship and Organization at Emlyon Business School.
4 Her research explores how language and other modes of meaning-making are used in
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29 Resource Management Journal; and Human Relations. Jennifer was an editor of Work,
30 Employment and Society 2010–2013 and associate editor of Gender, Work and Organization
31 2013-2019.
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Table 1: Composition of sample: Leadership role and gender

	Women	Men	Total
	32	21	53
Position			
Vice chancellor	4	9	13
Deputy/Pro Vice Chancellor	4	3	7
Executive Team	4	3	7
Dean	3	2	5
Deputy Dean	3	1	4
Professor	6	2	8
EDI Strategy	5	0	5
Corporate Leader	3	1	4

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Table 2: Iterative stages of CDA analysis

Phase	Analytical goal	Analytical considerations included:
Initial Coding	Open coding of all transcripts to develop familiarity	commonalities; idiosyncrasies; opposing and similar views within and across transcripts; comparisons across position and gender
Textual	<i>Describing</i> the linguistic properties of the discourse	lexicalization; metaphors; types of verbs used; active vs passive voice; nominalization; quoted speech (direct/indirect); turn-taking (who controls topic; interruptions; silence); tense used (past, present); pronouns (we, you; choice of first, second, third person)
Discursive practice	<i>Analyzing</i> the situational and intertextual context of the discourse with a focus on interactional activity and personal orientations	what is assumed to be known or accepted; who is talked about in the text what are their subject positions; what is left unsaid or implied; the social identities, relationships and positions that are referenced/enacted in the discourse and for what purpose.
Social Analysis	<i>Explaining</i> the discourse within economic, political, and environmental conditions	What power relations at the situational, institutional and societal level shape this discourse; what assumptions about culture, social relationships and existing power relations are evident; what hegemonic discourses and ideologies that are drawn on to support arguments.

Table 3: Example of Analytical process

<i>Interviewer</i>	Where does the problem sit then (.) for universities?
<i>Female, deputy vice chancellor</i>	I think in universities < the reason we're not more representative > (.) people have this view (.5) that it's the best way (.) it's a meritocracy (.) and the best will come forward and I don't think that's always the case

Early Codes	Text	Discourse practice	Social Analysis
Representation in universities; The merit ideal; Merit imprecise; One best candidate;	Use of both "I" "we" pronouns; hedging; slowed speech; careful selection of words 'I don't think', 'not always'	Alludes to generally accepted assumption that merit should be the goal, although it's "not always the case". Assumption that people view universities as meritocracies; it is self-evident Initially uses "I" statement, but then "people" when talking about the "view" that "the best come forward"; "we're" is used when referring to collective "universities"	Linkages to hegemonic/ideological ideals of merit The idea of "one best candidate" is gently challenged, the "best" may be the person with most societal advantage The idea of universities as realms of unquestionable equality is challenged

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4 **Appendix 1: Transcription Notation adapted from Jefferson**
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(.)	Short interval
(.2)	Longer interval measured in seconds
[...]	Material omitted
[text]	Clarificatory information
<u>Text</u>	Underline indicates emphasis
Te:::xt	Multiple colons indicate elongated speech
CAPITALS	Increase in volume
<text>	Slowed speaking rate
>text<	Increased speaking rate

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