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Support (and rejection) of meritocracy as a self-enhancement identity strategy: A qualitative study of university students' perceptions about meritocracy in higher education

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Abstract

Access to Higher Education (HE) is based on the idea that all students should have the same opportunities, and that merit and hard work, regardless of students' backgrounds, will lead to success. However, inequalities remain despite efforts to provide equal access to HE, raising questions about the validity of such a meritocratic approach. Using qualitative analysis, we interviewed UK university students to understand students' perceptions of meritocracy in HE, and if and how students associated these perceptions with their gender and subjective socioeconomic status identity experiences. Students' perceptions could be described in two main ideas: (a) the perceived commitment of their universities to meritocracy, and (b) their endorsement and rejection of meritocracy as an identity enhancement strategy. Hence, both support *and* lack of support for meritocracy are strategies used by disadvantaged groups to navigate and cope with the lack of opportunities and socioeconomic disadvantages in HE.

KEYWORDS
gender, individual mobility, meritocracy, social identities, socioeconomic status

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, massification of higher education has been a goal for British governments (Scott, 2010). Contrastingly, research has shown that actually people who attended Higher Education (HE) are more likely to believe that opportunities to access education are not fairly distributed in Britain (Duffy et al., 2021). Moreover, as HE expands, class-related inequalities are more likely to increase (Reay, 2021). This contradiction—that HE has been portrayed as a key meritocratic institution, yet not perceived as such by some—illustrates the key aims of this article: (a) to understand how meritocracy is seen by students in HE; and (b) if and how students perceive these views as related to their own identity experiences, specifically in terms of their gender and their subjective socioeconomic status.

First, we will provide an overview of (a) the role of meritocratic discourses in UK HE, (b) social psychological research related to meritocracy, (c) social psychological research related to HE students' perceptions of meritocracy, and (d) the role of social identity in understanding meritocracy. Subsequently, we respond to the diversity of findings from psychological theories about social groups' endorsement of meritocracy, by drawing on an intersectional social identity approach. We present the main results of the interviews conducted, which provide information about the different ways in which UK students perceive meritocracy in HE. We show a variety of positions towards meritocracy, from perceptions of universities as meritocratic institutions to disbelief of universities as meritocratic, with a focus on students' experiences in their universities. These perceptions were explained by students in light of their perceptions of universities as

meritocratic settings and their identity experiences as a source of potential challenges and barriers to navigating HE. Finally, implications for theory and practice are discussed.

1.1 | Universities' commitment to meritocracy

Over the past decades, education has been promoted as being key to an equal society, providing much-needed social mobility for members of socially disadvantaged groups. However, in the United Kingdom, while HE seeks to increase social equality, at the same time, it continues to be a source of disparities among students (Kuppens et al., 2018). To help address these disparities, universities implement support strategies to help students. However, the current educational model continues to promote the idea that economic and social success is determined by factors that are internal to the students, such as personal motivation or 'inherent' abilities (Jackson & Nyström, 2015). Indeed, interventions to support underrepresented groups in HE tend to focus on increasing the number of students who have access to HE, offering support in terms of mentoring, and assisting them with the application processes (Younger et al., 2019).

Thus, amidst efforts to promote greater equality, universities may be conveying a message that emphasises the role of the individual in overcoming challenges. The centrality of the individual is maintained when individual academic performance is judged, as is the individual achievement, rather than the group or the system (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014). Indeed, meritocratic ideals suggest that people get what they deserve because of the hard work they put in to reach their goals (Madeira et al., 2019). Hence, meritocracy explains inequalities in individuals' outcomes in terms of a 'fair' yet unequal distribution of rewards, depending on individuals' effort and hard work, presenting itself as an objective system that facilitates social mobility. The discourse of meritocracy has led to a higher endorsement of beliefs that social mobility is achievable, and, in turn, to an increase in students' enrolment (Cunningham & Samson, 2021).

University discourses convey ideas about individual responsibility of students from their own success within a meritocratic system (Coyle et al., 2021). This is despite the fact that research has shown that meritocracy beliefs are associated with inequality and that, indeed, meritocracy is an elitist system that does not consider social structural forces that are out of the individual's control (Mijs & Savage, 2020). For example, research has shown that students from lower social class backgrounds are less likely to apply to elite universities (e.g., Russell Group), compared to students from higher social class backgrounds (Boliver, 2013). In contrast, it could be argued that this is a fair and meritocratic system, as students who do not reach the expected admission requirements should not be accepted. However, this belief rests on the idea of (a) opportunities to achieve the requirements requested by universities being equal, and (b) the role of HE settings, as research has shown that students from lower social class backgrounds are actually less likely to apply to elite universities because they perceive they will not fit into those particular settings (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2019).

Meritocratic explanations about success fail to take into account the existence of systematic inequalities within HE contexts, such as (a) unequal access to quality education at primary and secondary levels, which is important for building the skills necessary to access university and to expose children to norms about pursuing HE (Tranter, 2012); (b) the dependence on the capacity of a student's family to pay for access to prestigious academic institutions (Markovits, 2019); and (c) the unequal access to employment opportunities, with a greater number of members of higher socioeconomic status groups in the most prestigious sectors, such as medicine and law (van Dijk et al., 2020). The persistence of these systematic inequalities makes it important to expand our knowledge of how students perceive meritocracy in a culture where merit is promoted as the key to success, despite the evidence of the role of social inequalities in individuals' outcomes.

1.2 | The psychology of meritocracy

Following the complexity in the understanding as to why individuals endorse meritocratic beliefs which might be considered as problematic, notions of meritocracy form a key part of a number of social psychological theories that examine how the status quo is maintained. Indeed, system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) outlines how individuals justify social systems—to reduce cognitive dissonance and rationalise social inequalities—even when such systems disadvantage them personally (Batruch et al., 2019; Wiederkehr et al., 2015). Meritocratic beliefs are a key part of this justification, as a function of maintaining well-being, helping individuals to cope with uncertainty (Jost et al., 2019), and driving perceptions of control for future success (McCoy et al., 2013).

Relatedly, research has shown that people want to believe in a just world to feel positive and perceive the world as predictable (see Lerner, 1980). In this way, meritocratic beliefs work to legitimise inequalities and reinforce social hierarchies (Major & Kaiser, 2017). Inequalities in socioeconomic status can also be maintained through a social dominance orientation (Sidanius et al., 2004), whereby individuals endorse beliefs (and engage in actions) that support existing social hierarchies and forms of inequality between groups. Here, meritocratic beliefs would be supported by people who are higher on social dominance orientation, promoting intergroup hierarchies (Pratto et al., 1994).

While individuals from different social groups can endorse meritocratic beliefs, they have important, yet distinct, implications for the self, affecting individuals differently, depending on their previous experiences and group memberships. For example, there is evidence that individuals with high socioeconomic status are more likely to endorse meritocratic beliefs. This may take the form of 'downplaying' their privileged socioeconomic status, for example, by telling 'meritocratically legitimate' stories about their success, or by not recognising their own advantages (Friedman et al., 2021).

Although it could be expected that members of higher status groups endorse meritocratic beliefs more highly, such as men and individuals from higher socioeconomic groups (e.g., Duru-Bellat & Tenret, 2012), this is not always the case. For example, women who endorse

meritocracy tend to deny gender inequality and sexism, and self-stereotype themselves with more traditional gender stereotypes (McCoy & Major, 2007). Thus, while high-status members may endorse meritocracy as a way to support the status quo where they are benefited, for members of low status groups, endorsing meritocracy may be reinforced by the need to cope with a system of inequality, even if this inadvertently supports it.

The endorsement of meritocracy may also represent a strategy for individuals to align themselves with higher-status groups. For instance, women have been shown to endorse meritocracy to see themselves as competent and deserving 'working professionals' (Olson & Hafer, 2001). Experiences with success have also been shown to increase women's endorsement of meritocracy as a way of explaining inequality particularly when they have reached top positions in male-dominated Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM) fields (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010). While such strategies may help women reinforce their membership in higher-status groups, they may also be promoted by organisational cultures that overlook gender inequality, and reproduce the status quo rather than calling for a social change.

1.3 | Students' perceptions of meritocracy in HE settings

Considering the extant research on meritocracy and continued inequalities in HE (Woodward, 2019), it is critical to expand our understanding of how students perceive meritocracy and their endorsement of it. Research in HE contexts has demonstrated a similar pattern of research in other contexts about individuals' perception of meritocracy: in general, students from high-status groups (e.g., men, white individuals, individuals from high socioeconomic status backgrounds) tend to perceive their universities as meritocratic (Cargile et al., 2019). Furthermore, these students are more likely to support meritocratic ideals. For example, white students in elite institutions perceive their universities as meritocratic, with the admission process and grades being a proof of merit and hard work (Warikoo, 2018). Indeed, students from high socioeconomic groups also tend to deny their privileges and explain their success as a product of their merit and hard work (Chen & Berman, 2022; Phillips & Lowery, 2020).

However, students from less privileged backgrounds also perceive their universities as meritocratic and support meritocratic beliefs, especially when they participate in high-status settings (e.g., elite universities, prestigious disciplines). For example, high-achieving working-class students in elite institutions validate grades as a meritocratic system (Canaan, 2004; Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014), and reproduce meritocratic discourses, taking distance from their working-class identities (Jin & Ball, 2020). However, low status students outside these higher education settings also support meritocratic beliefs, even if these beliefs might be detrimental to them. For example, Chinese students from Vocational Education and Training (VET, a considered low status discipline in Chinese education) internalise meritocratic discourses and reproduce negative stereotypes about themselves as students of VET (Wang, 2022). Like high-status students, students from low status backgrounds also validated the HE system as meritocratic: when university students with low subjective social status are reminded of the selection process at university, they are more likely to endorse beliefs in meritocracy in these educational settings (Wiederkehr et al., 2015). In other words, research shows that students are prone to endorse meritocracy across the board: whether it is students from high status groups, students from lower status groups in elite institutions, or students from lower-status groups in non-elite institutions (e.g., vocational schools). This is despite the fact that rejecting meritocracy has been associated with higher self-esteem when students from lower status groups face perceived discrimination against themselves (Foster & Tsarfati, 2005) or their group (Major et al., 2007).

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that female students participating in high-status STEM disciplines with high selection criteria tend to endorse meritocracy as a way to validate their achievements and facilitate others' recognition of their capability and their belonging to the group (Seron et al., 2018). Hence, this indicates that students from a range of social groups may endorse meritocratic beliefs—even among students who, collectively, may not benefit from this type of ideology (e.g., women, and students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds; insofar as the ideology suppresses more systematic, group-wide progression toward equality). As such, it is important to develop a more nuanced understanding of how students perceive meritocracy, and why they may endorse it (even with its potential expense to their own social group[s]).

Together, these findings suggest that it is still unclear how students, from their own perspectives, perceive meritocracy at their universities, especially from a qualitative perspective, emphasising an in-depth analysis of how students perceive meritocracy in a situated context, in this case their universities. Furthermore, previous research has explored potential demographics differences in how students perceive meritocracy (e.g., looking at gender or social class). However, from our knowledge, less is known in terms of if and how students themselves perceive these perspectives as related to their identity experiences (e.g., gender and socioeconomic status), and further, to intersectional identity experiences.

1.4 | Social identity theory and intersectional identities

To better comprehend how students perceive meritocracy, it is critical to acknowledge that meritocratic beliefs are not just organisational/societal beliefs that students passively internalise. Rather, students are active individuals that build their beliefs and perceptions about social structure and groups where they belong. For example, regarding meritocracy, students might evaluate their place in social groups and social structure and, considering the role of (a) social context, this is, the setting where interactions with members of the same and other groups take place (Given, 2008), that is, a particular programme or module; (b) the perceived characteristics of the social context (i.e., how permeable groups are, how legitimate groups interaction are perceived, how hierarchy operates); and (c) how students

define themselves in this context. Therefore, extending previous work on meritocracy and HE (see Jin & Ball, 2020; Seron et al., 2018), we take a social identity approach to understand how social context and identity have a role in an individual's understanding of meritocracy.

A social identity approach offers a theoretical framework where individuals' perceptions of meritocracy can be understood as an active process whereby they analyse their place in the social context relative to others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as well as the perceived characteristics of this context (Scheifele et al., 2021). For example, the social identity approach suggests that an individual's perception of meritocracy as real, is likely to be associated with the extent to which they perceive they can be part of groups with higher status (also known as permeability beliefs), and how legitimate they perceive the group hierarchy to be (Ellemers, 1993). In this way, meritocracy has been shown to be associated with the social identity strategy of individual mobility (Wright & Boese, 2015). This is where an individual identifies with and moves into, a higher-status group, abandoning their previous group membership if they perceive that group boundaries are permeable.

Meritocratic beliefs also have an impact on how individuals perceive themselves as members of particular groups. The nature of group memberships can explain why individuals who belong to particular groups may or may not endorse meritocratic beliefs and the role of these beliefs in their group identity. For example, individuals who belong to higher-status groups are likely to support meritocracy when they see their identity status threatened (Madeira et al., 2019), as high-status groups tend to emphasise meritocracy to justify their higher status position even if this legitimises social inequality (Phillips & Lowery, 2020). Furthermore, certain social class identities become contextually relevant when individuals are aware of their differences with others through social comparison processes (Thomas & Azmitia, 2014).

At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge that the experiences of individuals are both individual and intersectional (Gaither, 2018). Social identities are multiple, and the intersection between gender and socioeconomic status can lead to unique experiences. For example, disadvantaged socioeconomic status women are likely to face (a) cultural and social separation from their backgrounds to access university; (b) stigmatisation of their behaviours, that is, being seen as less feminine for coming from working class contexts; and (c) a lack of support when applying to elite universities (Evans, 2009). Following this, meritocratic beliefs have potential psychological and social costs for women with lower class identities, including lower self-esteem and lower motivation for social action (Kozan et al., 2020). Therefore, social identity categories (e.g., gender) need to be understood in terms of their relationship with other categories (e.g., socioeconomic status) (Shields, 2008). An intersectional perspective in psychology is critical to understanding that (a) participants are multidimensional and these dimensions need to be acknowledged rather than erasing groups (for example, using 'women' to refer 'white women'); (b) group memberships are dynamic rather than stable and fixed; (c) power is part of group relationships; and (d) participants see themselves and their context from positions of advantage and disadvantage according to the groups they belong (McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019).

Indeed, both the social identity (Doosje et al., 2002) and intersectional approach (Hurtado, 2017) recognise that social groups are hierarchically organised; they also recognise the importance of hierarchy for understanding how individuals are perceived and treated within their social environments. However, the social identity approach has traditionally focused on broad, singular, social identities (e.g., an individual's gender) with less attention to the idea that intersectional identities (e.g., an individuals' gender and their social class) come together in a way that yields a more specific position within that social hierarchy (e.g., where an individual perceptibly locates within that hierarchy may be shaped by their gender, but simultaneously by their social class). At the same time, while theorising around intersectionality has offered a more nuanced lens for considering individuals' positions within social hierarchies, it has not offered the same level of detail in understanding how individuals might navigate that social hierarchy. A social identity approach offers a depiction of such strategies, including the potential for individuals to attempt to 'move up' the hierarchy by psychologically emphasising their affiliation with higher status social groups.

Ultimately, this is why, when trying to understand how individuals approach meritocracy in HE, it is important to adjoin insights from both social identity and intersectional perspectives. Together they provide a basis for understanding whether seeing meritocracy as valid may be perceived by students as an identity management strategy (drawing on insights from a social identity approach), and who within HE may regard it as a useful strategy (drawing on insights from intersectionality).

1.5 | The current research

Taken together, previous research regarding HE students' endorsement—or not—of meritocracy within the field of psychology has shown (a) complex results concerning the role of meritocracy in individuals' academic and social experiences; (b) that meritocratic beliefs play a role in legitimising inequalities; and (c) how students perceive themselves in university, particularly in terms of gender and socioeconomic status identities, might help to understand why and how students perceive meritocracy in HE—albeit with a continuing lack of psychological research taking into account students' perceptions about meritocracy. Thus, the question about how students perceive—from a qualitative approach—meritocracy in HE and whether they associate their intersectional identities to these perceptions—instead of looking at demographic difference—is still open. Previous research in HE settings has focused on identities from a psychological perspective, highlighting the persistence of inequalities on the basis of gender (David, 2015) and social class (Rubin et al., 2019). To our knowledge, the intersection of gender and subjective socioeconomic status in HE has received less attention concerning of how it is related to inequalities in HE, with research focusing either on gender or social class, or the intersection of these separate categories with race/ethnicity (see Block & Corona, 2014; Sparks et al., 2021). Our study aims to provide further knowledge about how these intersectional identities might play a role in how students approach meritocracy, taking

into account students' own perceptions about their intersectional identities.

Hence, our study aims to contribute to the psychological literature, focusing on individuals' perceptions of meritocracy and how they relate (or not) these perceptions with their social identities, highlighting the relevance of intersectional identities. In other words, we aim to understand how students, from their own perspective, (a) perceive meritocracy in HE; and (b) if, and how, they perceive that their intersectional identities (this is gender and socioeconomic status) are related to their perceptions of meritocracy. We follow a social identity approach as it can provide a new angle to understand the motivations underlying students' support or rejection of meritocracy, as well as how meritocracy can be perceived as a social identity strategy to navigate the university context. Additionally, an intersectional approach to social identity contributes to understanding university context as a social structure organised by social hierarchies, where social status (either socioeconomic or in terms of gender) plays an important role.

We specify the concept of subjective socioeconomic status (SSS) as an individual's perception about their status compared to others in social hierarchy, grounded in indicators of financial and material resources, as well as perceived prestige (Singh-Manoux et al., 2003). Therefore, rather than focusing on students' reports of their exact family income, parental education or economic and cultural capital (for 'absolute value' terms; see Marks & O'Connell, 2021), we consider it in relative terms: to acknowledge that it is the *context* wherein these measures are perceived by students (and relative to their peers) that is more important, as perceptions of socioeconomic status are not static but context-dependent.

To this end, we conducted online interviews with UK undergraduate students using an exploratory qualitative approach. This methodology is appropriate as it allows us to consider participants' perspectives and the diversity of meanings, nuances, and positions they have towards meritocracy and their identities.

2 | METHOD

We conducted our study following an interview method developed by Opara et al. (2021), using real-time, semi-structured online written interviews via a document sharing website (Microsoft Outlook). Online written interviews have the advantage of high engagement, as young adults utilise text messaging as their principal mode of communication (Markowitz et al., 2014). They also enable us to access students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and locations within the United Kingdom. As we did not have to commute to different locations, this method gave us flexibility regarding time slots to conduct interviews, which was important considering that students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds might have different schedules and be based in different locations. This method also facilitated real-time, verbatim transcription of interviews, and enhanced sense of privacy during the interview, which may allow for more open and candid responses from participants. We also acknowledge the limitations in terms of obtaining direct emotional and non-verbal information during the interview (Opara et al., 2021) and therefore we did not focus our analysis on emotional and non-verbal behaviour from participants.

Interviews were semi-structured and formed part of a more extensive study about students' university experiences. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee from the first author's institution (approval for eCLESPsy001713.pdf; participant consent obtained electronically).

2.1 | Participants

We interviewed 36 undergraduate students enrolled in UK universities (Table 1). The sample included 19 women and 17 men. Following study objectives: (a) to describe the ways in which students perceive meritocracy in HE; and (b) to analyse if, and how, students relate these perceptions to their gender and socioeconomic status identity experiences; participants were selected through quota theoretical sampling (Robinson, 2014). Following this sampling strategy, we set mutually exclusive categories according to participants' gender and SSS (e.g., women and low SSS), to ensure a representation of students from different groups while having the flexibility of not setting the final number of participants by groups a priori. We selected participants with a brief Qualtrics screening demographic questionnaire through the online participant recruitment site Prolific, Facebook student groups, and university contacts from Widening Participation programmes. We intentionally used multiple recruitment platforms to capture a greater breadth of students. As online written interviews allowed us to recruit participants from different areas and universities, we could select a diverse group of participants based on their characteristics rather than just for convenience purposes.

On the basis of the screening questionnaire, we invited students to participate in the interviews in a way that ensured equal representation of (a) women and men and (b) students from different SSS in the United Kingdom. The sampling process started aiming to interview between 5 and 6 participants by gender. After this, we contacted participants aiming to maintain an equal number of students for each group. We measured SSS with the MacArthur Social Class Ladder (adapted from Adler et al., 2000), where students identified their place relative to people in the United Kingdom. The sample size was not determined a priori (see Braun & Clarke, 2019), and we stopped recruiting participants as the topics mentioned in the interviews started to repeat, no further new information regarding our research questions was detected, and we reached a roughly equal number of participants in each gender and SSS group (for the final distribution of participants by groups see Supporting Information).

Participants' mean age was 21.97 (SD = 3.44), and on average they were enrolled on their 2nd year of study (M = 2.5; SD = 0.74). We grouped students' SSS into 3 groups: 12 students in the lower SSS group (values of 1–4), 10 students in the mean group (values of 5–6), and 14 students in the higher SSS group (values of 7–10). Students were enrolled in a variety of disciplines, and were from a range of UK universities.

TABLE 1 Demographic data of participants

Pseudonymous	Age	Gender	Year	Subjective social status
P1	21	Woman	3	Low
P2	21	Woman	3	Low
P3	21	Man	3	High
P4	20	Woman	2	Mean
P5	19	Woman	2	Low
P6	32	Woman	2	Mean
P7	21	Woman	2	Mean
P8	22	Man	4	Mean
P9	19	Woman	2	Low
P10	22	Woman	4	Mean
P11	20	Woman	2	High
P12	20	Woman	2	Low
P13	21	Man	3	High
P14	22	Man	3	Low
P15	28	Woman	4	High
P16	20	Woman	3	Low
P17	19	Woman	3	High
P18	27	Woman	2	Mean
P19	20	Woman	2	High
P20	31	Man	2	Low
P21	21	Man	2	High
P22	19	Man	2	Mean
P23	19	Man	2	High
P24	28	Man	3	Low
P25	20	Woman	3	High
P26	20	Woman	2	High
P27	21	Man	3	High
P28	23	Man	3	High
P29	19	Man	2	Low
P30	20	Man	3	High
P31	26	Man	3	Mean
P32	21	Man	3	Low
P33	21	Man	2	Low
P34	22	Woman	1	Mean
P35	19	Man	1	High
P36	26	Woman	3	Mean

2.2 | Process

Based on the screening questionnaire, we contacted students via Prolific and invited them to the online interview, sharing with them the participant information form. Following this, the unique link to access the document was shared via private message one day before the arranged interview time, with a reminder message about the interview. When participants were recruited via social media, we contacted them via email and followed the same procedure.

The online written interviews were semi-structured and consisted of a thematic script that included: (a) their motivations in relation to their chosen career and expectations about university, specifically academic staff and peers; (b) challenges perceived as university students and, if so, the role of gender, socioeconomic status, and their universities in these challenges; (c) perceptions of meritocratic values in their university; and (d) their perception about supporting meritocracy and reasons of their support, or lack of (for interview script, see Supporting information). We did not include overt questions about the role of gender and SSS in students' meritocracy perceptions, but rather kept this in the background with the purpose of exploring if students spontaneously highlighted these experiences as important in their perceptions of meritocracy.

The first author typed the questions live into an online document that was unique to each participant. Participants typed their responses. As the interviews were synchronous, we were able to ask follow-up questions for a better understanding of the participants' initial responses, replying to their answers on the same shared document during the interview (see Opara et al., 2021). After each interview, the first author read the transcript in detail to identify relevant data, and discussed it verbally with the second author. We then anonymised the transcription, using random codes to refer to names, institutions, places, and third parties. Each interview lasted approximately 2 hours[1] and could be conducted in one session or two separate sessions (in the latter case, within the same week). As the interviews were conducted via an online document, they were transcribed verbatim in real-time. After the interviews, students were debriefed via email and received payment for their participation. This payment was conducted by the main researcher either via Prolific Academic system, via bank or Amazon voucher (according to how participants were recruited and their preferences). The payment was approximately £15 per participant.

2.3 | Analytical procedure

We followed a reflexive thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We approached the data from a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), acknowledging how students' perceptions of meritocracy are situated in a particular context—in this case the university setting—where individuals might take different positions towards meritocracy depending on how they see themselves within the university context, through students' multiple and intersecting identities (Hurtado, 2017; Shields, 2008). Thus, we read and interpreted the interviews identifying (a) students' perceptions about meritocracy in HE, particularly in their university; (b) whether students signalled their gender, SSS identity-based, or intersectional identities as related to their perceptions of meritocracy; and (c) previously documented

[1] The interviews were part of an extensive research project about students' experiences in HE and other topics were discussed but not included in this study.

TABLE 2 'Students' perceptions of university commitment to meritocracy': Subthemes, codes and quotes

Quote	Codes	Subtheme	Theme
'Honestly, as the entry requirements were quite high and the admission process quite selective. I expected very talented students, hardworking, incredibly smart' (P4).	Access is fair	Perceptions of university as a permeable structure	**Students' perceptions of university commitment to meritocracy**
'Sure. Every college at my university is assigned a geographical region in the UK where the admissions staff work with students from state-comprehensive and grammar school students who have the academic potential to study at the university. For me personally, it was a really valuable experience because without it I don't think I would have even applied to the university' (P13).	Widening Access policies		
'I believe people have equal opportunities on my course and at my uni. (…) I am really happy the University is committed to giving everyone opportunities' (P17).	Participation opportunities		
'My university is pretty inclusive and tries to support less privileged individuals' (P34).	Access: university is inclusive		
'There's so much pressure to complete work in uni, I think for this module I'm on now there's a graph they've sent us showing the grades we can expect depending on how many hours we do. (…) I personally don't think so. But I think it's a good way to show that the harder you work the more it pays off' (P29).	University expectations	University as a fair system: 'Gender and social class don't matter'	
'Not the university in specific but many of my lectures have said this to us as a class and to me personally. If you do not put in the effort now to focus on your studies properly then when you graduate it will be harder to find a job and understand what you have to do in that job' (P26).	Lectures expectations		
'I think it is designed like that. With grades being the obvious example, a lot of people have to work and study very hard to get a good grade' (P2).	Grades as proof of working hard		
'Honestly, for now I have never experienced any kind of gender inequality nor any kind of social class issues. I think everyone is very respectful and open minded, and that's one of the impressive things I have seen there' (P4).	Gender and social class don't affect experiences		
'Yes, lower class people may not have the opportunities like other people and may not be confident enough to aspire to go to university and experience new places in the world since they are going through other things at home' (P22).	Gender and social class affect others		

social identity processes analysed in social identity theory literature (e.g., individual mobility in Tajfel & Turner, 1979; permeability beliefs in Ellemers, 1993) and their relation with students' perceptions about meritocracy in their universities.

To analyse the data, we followed the process proposed by Trainor and Bundon (2020). The final coding scheme (see Supporting information) was developed through a collaborative process (Braun & Clarke, 2019) in which (a) a first list of codes developed by the first author was shared with a research assistant, who coded a sample of extracts and provided ideas about the material (e.g., potential relations among quotes, new codes ideas); and (b) the first author developed a refined list of codes and the themes they sustained, which was then shared and discussed with the second author.

After this discussion, the first author again reviewed individually the codes, subthemes, and themes in light of the research questions and objectives, and we stopped analysis[2] when we could not identify new codes, and when we identified that the way we grouped the codes and subthemes answered the research question (for the development of the codes, subthemes and themes, see Supporting Information. For the final codes and subthemes by each theme, see Tables 2, 3 and 4). As all the coding process was made using the software NVivo (v.12.7) we could automate the data processing.

2.4 | Findings

We created three themes following students' perceptions of meritocracy in HE: (a) students' perceptions of university commitment to

[2] The list of codes, subthemes and themes was reviewed again following the Editor's and reviewers' comments on the manuscript.

TABLE 3 'Endorsing meritocracy and individual mobility to overcome disadvantages': Subthemes, codes and quotes

Quote	Codes	Subthemes	Theme
'I think career wise and in my position, just getting a graduate job is an example of having something to show for the hard work. It could be a physical thing such as writing a paper or maybe publishing something for example. Or even just an award or certificate, for example just getting a degree is an achievement in itself I think' (P30).	Being a student as proof of working hard	Being a university student as a signal of having work ethic	**Endorsing meritocracy and identity mobility to overcome disadvantages**
'Since enrolling at university, I think I have changed quite a lot. I have become more disciplined and focused on what I want to achieve as previously I was unsure of what I wanted to do' (P21).	Identity transformation and work ethic		
'From experiences with family, I know you can get a good career and be successful by working hard in the industry and not having a degree. However, I guess they've still had education to show them how to work in that sector' (P18).	Family role/expectations		
'I think education is the key for me personally, but for other people you can have jobs/success that don't require education. For me, I think it's because I want careers in the scientific field, where you need experience, that you can only gain from university. Apprenticeships for example wouldn't give me the qualifications and experience I need (…) I know that if I wasn't "smart" enough in what I wanted to do, I could always become a contractor or something' (P9).	Working hard and status disciplines/careers		
'If I work hard now, study a lot, put in the hours, I will get good grades in my assessments. This will mean I will graduate with a good/very good degree classification which will make it more easy to get into good jobs after Uni. Which essentially is a good outcome. If I wouldn't put in the hard work, I wouldn't get good grades and essentially not find a good job or maybe not even graduate with a passing grade at all' (P12).	Work hard as a student and employability		
'Being a woman I kinda feel like I do have to prove myself to be successful and to achieve things more than if I were a male maybe, just to prove that I'm just as good and independent and capable than anyone else' (P5).	Gender and work harder	Work ethic and endorsement of meritocracy as a source of self-worth	
'I think this has had a huge influence on my expectations of success. I guess it is often said that class doesn't exist now but I think it definitely does. In my university it's very clear that many, if not most, of the students are of a wealthier background. I can only think of a handful (maybe 3–4) students on my course from the same or similar background to me. I've always wanted to break out of the "class" I was in and do better, which has definitely pushed me to work harder' (P2).	Social class, work and dress smart		
'I think that's a misconception students have. That you'll only be successful if you get a first class degree. I think it's more about the experience and skill you build at university and if you can demonstrate that from work you did with university you implemented it into a real life situation with in a placement or work experience' (P35).	'You make your own future'		

meritocracy, (b) endorsing meritocracy and identity enhancement, and (c) universities' lack of meritocracy and socioeconomic (and gender) disadvantages (see Tables 2, 3 and 4). We propose that the support and lack of support to meritocracy could be understood (a) as related to students perceptions of the university system and (b) as an identity enhancement strategy that helps students to understand and approach gender and socioeconomic disadvantages at university, in terms of either (i) denying/acknowledging these disadvantages valuing their hard work, or (ii) acknowledging these disadvantages by recognising that hard work sometimes is not enough, which becomes more explicit when multiple and intersectional disadvantaged identities are recognised.

TABLE 4 'Universities' lack of meritocracy and socioeconomic (and gender) disadvantages': Subthemes, codes and quotes

Quote	Codes	Subthemes	Theme
'This is the absolute dream for myself, I am so so passionate about wanting to do real scientific research and get published within my lifetime—but the fees for further study are extortionate and unattainable for someone in my position so I may not reach the success I strive for—so perhaps my expectations need to be lowered?' (P1).	Financial capital	Importance of socioeconomic (and gender) identities to success	**Universities' lack of meritocracy and socioeconomic (and gender) disadvantages**
'However, I do know of friends with e.g. parents working in particular industries, that make it easier for them to find jobs over summer/Easter breaks' (P28).	Social capital		
'Going to such an elitist University I am expected to achieve more than if I went to a different University and my expectation of success does involve getting higher-paying jobs because I go to a more exclusive University' (P5).	University status		
'I've also noticed due to the nature of my degree it feels like these same students are often busy with lots of internships through connections or even by starting their own businesses. When you come from a regular public state school and you get student finance etc. This is quite impossible to do' (P2).	University internships opportunities		
'If you are a white man from a richer background, possibly privately educated and you have connections with people from your desired job industry you're much more likely to have a better outcome than a black girl from a state school or who is from a care home' (P1).	Intersectional identities as barriers to succeed		
'I read today that my university have won an award for their support to students. It feels like "support" for students is done for PR and marketing a lot of the time, to be honest. If they can say they have X facility in place, it looks good —even if it doesn't really help people all that much. But perhaps I am too much of a pessimist; others may have good experiences' (P14).	Inclusion efforts as university marketing	Meritocracy is a lie: University's lack of commitment to meritocracy	
'I am made to feel very inferior to everyone around me whilst I am studying here which naturally would be reflected within my own self-belief going on from my graduation. The University has certainly made me feel as though my dreams are not achievable, even if I have all the drive in the world, but I will watch some of my peers, very unmotivated and in my opinion undeserving thrive' (P1).	Work ethic and lack of motivation		
'And thinking about the university courses, it's all focused on exams which in my opinion isn't a promotion of working hard, but just studying for an exam and that's it. So not necessarily testing a range of skills or knowledge, or promoting people to work harder' (P30).	Grades are not proof of working hard		

2.5 | Students' perceptions of university commitment to meritocracy

An understanding of how the context of HE was perceived by students is essential for an understanding of students' perceptions of meritocracy. Indeed, a group of students defined meritocracy to be a part of their university practices and discourses. They described university as a fair and permeable organisation, where gender and socioeconomic status were not mentioned as playing a role in potential failures nor successes, and where effort and hard work would lead them to academic success and better future job opportunities.

2.5.1 | Perceptions of university as a permeable structure

From some students' perspectives, meritocracy within their university was identified in organisational practices such as access schemes: *'I believe people have equal opportunities on my course and at my uni. (…) I am really happy the University is committed to giving everyone opportunities'* (P17, woman, high SSS). This perception was based on individual experiences, such as interpretations of values promoted by the university and the observation of students who were 'different' from them—mostly in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnic background.

Indeed, students' perceptions of diversity and meritocratic opportunities were shaped by the presence of students from 'minority' or 'less privileged' backgrounds: *'(…) those who are in the minority or not from the same background as most people are still included and can fit in, despite their differences and they don't seem left out'* (P23, man, high SSS), which can be interpreted as a sign that university is a permeable social structure: '*(…) now thanks to government funding, everyone or most people can get a university education regardless of where they come from'* (P5, woman, low SSS) .

However, most of the students interviewed were not aware of the existence of Widening Participation programmes: although there was some recognition of the concept of Widening Access, both concepts were seen as synonymous. Indeed, students from low SSS highlighted their SSS experiences as important to the understanding of this scheme. Knowledge about such programme was demonstrated only by lower SSS students who had participated in this scheme, and who evaluated it positively because it shaped their own access experience, overcoming their SSS disadvantages: *'I was on the foundation that invites students from areas where not a lot of people go to university, and through them I actually visited the uni and that's how I found them and decided where I wanted to go'* (P9, woman, low SSS). For these students, their gender and socioeconomic status identities were not a barrier for access to university and, thus, university was seen as a meritocratic institution.

2.5.2 | University as a fair system: 'Gender and social class don't matter'

In this way, meritocratic beliefs were important for students to the extent that they provided proof of the hard work asked by their universities: *'Despite everyone being from different backgrounds, there was mutual respect for the fact that everyone there was there on merit (…) I think a big part of that is that regardless of where you're from, everyone has to go through the same rigorous admissions process'* (P13, man, high SSS). Furthermore, most of the students recognised the grade system as fair, and evidence of students' hard work: *'(…) I always feel I deserve the grade I got—I never feel any need to complain about it or that I got "lucky" on an assessment'* (P14, man, low SSS). Thus, meritocratic beliefs were shared beliefs reproduced in everyday classroom activities.

Hence, students who supported meritocratic ideals also expressed that their gender or/and SSS were not factors in their opportunities to succeed. On the one hand, students directly denied potential disadvantages or inequalities: '*I wouldn't say I've had many challenges due to my gender or background*' (P15, woman, high SSS). On the other hand, students also expressed a disbelief of gender and socioeconomic status inequalities: *'I don't think that there are challenges like that at my uni (…) I feel like I am treated just like anybody else'* (P33, man, low SSS); or denied experiencing it personally: *'Yes, in certain subjects' areas gender could be barrier. However, I haven't experienced it'* (P17, woman, high SSS).

In some cases, students also expressed that gender did not matter, but recognised the role of SSS as an obstacle to achieve success: '*Gender-related I don't think I have experienced any [challenge] but definitely for economic status*' (P5, woman, low SSS). Hence, students' perceptions of university as fair and meritocratic were shaped by their identity experiences in university settings, as their recognition of gender and socioeconomic inequalities was based on their experiences (or lack of them) of challenges faced due to these identities: '*I have never thought that my gender or social class was problem when I attend [my university].* ' (P33, man, low SSS)

The view of university as a fair system—where working hard pays—led students to think that being from an advantaged or disadvantaged group should not matter to reach success. Particularly students from low status groups emphasise the importance of prioritising meritocracy, as it would show the fairness of their university system, especially in terms of how students from their own groups (e.g., low SSS, women) are evaluated '*(…) I shouldn't receive a lower graded offer for a university because I am from a low income household and first generation university*' (P14, man, low SSS). This idea was also mentioned in terms of STEM programmes' efforts to increase gender equality, mentioned by both male and female students: *'I know what I was pushed to go into stem [sic] because of the whole "there aren't enough girls in stem" idea [sic]'* (P16, woman, low SSS). Thus, despite recognising their belonging to certain groups that might be considered disadvantaged, students supported the idea of university as meritocratic and the fact that belonging to particular groups should not mean they require extra help to achieve success.

2.6 | Endorsing meritocracy and individual mobility to overcome disadvantages

Particularly for low SSS students, being a student implied having the work ethic necessary to pass all the access requirements, especially when they believed that university was a meritocratic organisation where working hard leads to success both academically and workwise. This promoted a positive sense of self-worth as they recognised that a work ethic (a) was rewarded in university (e.g., with good grades) and (b) it would lead them to success after graduation.

2.6.1 | Being a university student as a signal of having work ethic

Overall, students' perceptions of meritocracy demonstrated a clear link between being a 'university student' and having a strong work ethic. Students indicated that their enrolment as students in the university was proof that they had worked hard, and that this work ethic was shared with other students: *'As the entry requirements were quite high and the admission process quite selective, I expected very talented students, hardworking, incredibly smart'* (P4, woman, median SSS). At the same time, they felt that society more broadly would also recognise this relationship between being at university and working hard: *'I think that when people tell me they have a degree I'm quite impressed by them, it's a sign of good character. And society rewards people with higher education'* (P28, man, high SSS).

Hence, a university student identity was seen to be associated with working hard and social status for a number of reasons, including the fact that (a) being a student impresses other people, such as their family; (b) students met stringent entry requirements; (c) students recognised that education is helpful for some careers (e.g., medicine); and (d) having a degree would help increase individual mobility through greater employability options. Hence, students' support for meritocracy promoted a positive sense of self-worth in students, such that working hard is seen as a desired feature that shows they earned their success, and that it will lead them to future success:

> If I work hard now, study a lot, put in the hours, I will get good grades in my assessments. This will mean I will graduate with a good/very good degree classification which will make it more easy [sic] to get into good jobs after Uni. Which essentially is a good outcome. If I wouldn't put in the hard work, I wouldn't get good grades and essentially not find a good job or maybe not even graduate with a passing grade at all. (P12, woman, low SSS)

2.6.2 | Work ethic and endorsement of meritocracy as a source of self-worth

For those supporting the importance of working hard, there was also a recognition of the challenges they may face due to their gender and socioeconomic status. However, to overcome these challenges with hard work was seen as an opportunity for growth and to prove to others that they can become successful, enhancing a positive sense of self-worth. Following this, endorsing meritocratic beliefs can be seen as a strategy used by students who recognise the existence of social inequalities to (a) maintain a positive sense of self and enhance their academic social identity; and (b) maintain motivation towards their goals, believing that this hard work, despite the challenges that they might face, will lead them to success in the future.

In the case of gender inequalities, these beliefs were supported by female students, who expressed an understanding that they had to 'work harder than men', to overcome inequalities and become successful: *'I think gender has only influenced me to work harder, I've heard a lot about women who have succeeded and in a way this is even more motivating'* (P2, woman, low SSS). Female students also saw unfair experiences as a motivation to challenge themselves and as a source of positive identity (e.g., a form of social creativity, Tajfel & Turner, 1979): *'I think I am much more unwilling to take any negativity or unfairness from anyone now, I think I have become a very strong-willed and independent young woman'* (P1, woman, low SSS).

Similar ideas were expressed by those facing disadvantages on the basis of socioeconomic status, such as a lack of financial and social capital: '*My best course mate's father is very successful, and she got a graduate job very easily through her family networks, and as I wanted to find a grad job in a good company, I felt even more pressured to get the same as that's what I wanted, but I had to work harder*' (P32, man, low SSS). Again, these disadvantages became a source of motivation and positive identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). To some extent, these disadvantages had the potential to facilitate a positive sense of self-worth, as achievements are seen as more rewarding because they were not given: '*maybe for someone who wants to succeed and really focuses on this and works hard it is more rewarding than someone who has lived in an "upper class" lifestyle their whole lives and just wants to be successful to sustain this*' (P2, woman, low SSS). Socioeconomic status identity was perceived by students as transformable and potentially concealable. One particular strategy to overcome socioeconomic status disadvantages was changing their appearance: '*Dress smart, be hygienic and presentable, I feel this could mask a social class if it was an issue*' (P24, man, low SSS). Indeed, shifting one's social class identity is about psychologically aligning with a different set of behaviours and attitudes.

2.7 | Universities' lack of meritocracy and socioeconomic (and gender) disadvantages

Students had varied views on meritocracy—while some perceived meritocracy as a valid and fair system in HE, others rejected meritocracy. In particular, rejection of meritocracy was more likely to occur when (a) the university setting was perceived by students as less trustworthy in terms of meritocracy, and (b) students perceived themselves to be in a disadvantaged position compared to other students within their universities. Here, social comparison with students with more resources led students to acknowledge their disadvantages in terms of socioeconomic status, and view meritocracy as not being enough to ensure academic and job success. Thus, students highlighted the contextual circumstances and inequalities associated with success. For students, the failure of meritocracy was related to a critical perspective of unfair practices within the universities, and the relevance of economic resources to be successful. To some extent, these disadvantages were also recognised in terms of intersectional identity experiences; belonging to different advantageous groups (men, white, high socioeconomic status) and disadvantaged groups (women, black, low socioeconomic status) would have different outcomes for individuals, due to their privileges (or lack of) rather than due to their work. Hence, a critical approach towards university and meritocracy can be also understood as a 'survival strategy', as students share a recognition of contextual factors in their academic outcomes in university.

2.7.1 | Importance of socioeconomic status (and gender) to success

A group of students mentioned social practices, not related to meritocracy, that benefited success, particularly of students from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Students recognised the role of money, financial resources and intangible status resources, especially for employment opportunities. These opportunities were often linked to family connections, attending a high-social class university, or students' overall background—also known as social and cultural capital

(Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979): '*I do think it makes me expect less in terms of my career path as I know that some others who have upper middle class family have connections within their family (…)*' (P16, woman, low SSS). Indeed, socioeconomic differences made students more aware of the implications of meritocracy. Students pointed out the advantages and privileges of socioeconomic status as a reason for their mistrust of meritocracy.

Furthermore, acknowledgement of class inequalities was associated with students' lack of a sense of fit with the university and its values, such as meritocracy, as they recognised that success was facilitated by other resources beyond working hard:

> Gender—not that I have noticed myself [challenges] (…) Socioeconomic status and my social class—100%, without a single doubt, yes. I find that not having as much money to spend on resources or clothes to fit in with your peers or coffees and social activities than your peers massively disadvantages you in many aspects including academically in terms of textbooks and paying for tutors … etc. (P1, woman, low SSS)

The recognition of a lack of meritocracy from university was also exemplified in terms of intersectional identities. Indeed, for one student, not only belonging to a particular group, such as women or low SSS, provided them with fewer opportunities, but these barriers—or benefits—were amplified when they belonged to an intersectional group in terms of disadvantages (being a low socioeconomic status woman) and advantages (being a high socioeconomic status man). Furthermore, ethnicity was also mentioned as a source of advantages or disadvantages:

> If you are a white man from a richer background, possibly privately educated and you have connections with people from your desired job industry you're much more likely to have a better outcome than a black girl from a state school or who is from a care home. And that is the most tragic thing in the world because those students may have much more drive than their rich peers but the world will usually favour them due to circumstance. (P1, women, low SSS)

Hence, intersectional identity-based experiences were acknowledged as sources of advantage or disadvantage. Furthermore, intersectional identity-based experiences were mentioned to illustrate how university is not a meritocratic system.

2.7.2 | Meritocracy is a lie: Universities' lack of commitment to meritocracy

Students recognised how, for some groups, working hard might not be enough and therefore, perceived meritocracy as a lie: they highlighted the role of universities in this lack of equal opportunity for all students, regardless their backgrounds. Thus, contrasting with the group of students who perceived university as a fair system, these students took a critical position towards university practices that showed a lack a commitment to meritocracy, such as seeing university inclusion and access policies as a marketing strategy, or to reproduce social inequalities, favouring students with more resources: *'So, no universities are exploited—and this university particularly I would say, leading to certain students getting better outcomes than others and it doesn't necessarily relate to working harder'* (P1, women, low SSS).

Students' perceptions about social inequalities, especially in terms of socioeconomic disadvantages, played a relevant role in the development of a more critical perspective on meritocracy: *'I think the concept of meritocracy is a lie and if you look about who the more successful people in society are, none of them got there just by working hard, and they always had the financial ability prior, except a very few cases'* (P5, woman, low SSS).

In this way, the university also became a mistrusted organisation for some. Indeed, for specific students, meritocracy messages can be associated with lower motivation and success expectations, and overall feelings of inferiority (Seron et al., 2018). But, as the quote ends, even in these situations, students wanted to believe that meritocracy is an option, if only in *'very few cases'*.

3 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this study, we explored UK university students' perceptions of meritocracy, and if and how students perceived their gender and SSS identity experiences as related to their meritocracy perceptions. For this, we used a social identity framework considering social identities as intersectional.

Our study shows that how individuals understand and approach meritocracy can be understood, at least in part, in terms of the extent to which individuals perceive HE settings as fair places providing equal opportunities. In this manner, for some students, to perceive university as a permeable structure (Ellemers, 1993) was an important factor to explain why they supported meritocracy. When students perceived university as a fair and equal environment, they did not perceive gender and socioeconomic status identities as an obstacle to success. On the opposite, they perceived universities as a place where all can succeed, despite their background. These findings support previous research showing how perceived permeability beliefs promoted the endorsement of individual strategies to overcome inequalities, such as meritocracy (McCoy et al., 2013).

However, the adoption of meritocracy also happened in cases where students recognised social inequalities in HE. In these cases, students perceived meritocracy as an individual strategy to overcome inequalities and disadvantage social positions, in the line with individual mobility (Tafjel & Turner, 1979). Students related their perceptions of meritocracy with their socioeconomic or gender identities, referring disadvantages associated with their identities, and meritocracy as a way to overcome them. Hence, despite perceiving social inequalities, students still perceived meritocracy as a valid system. A strong work ethic, and the associated meritocratic beliefs were not only seen as

a strategy to achieve success through individual mobility, but also an identity resource to enhancement their identity and boost their sense of self to overcome barriers and disadvantages in HE.

When universities were not perceived as meritocratic and fair environments, there was also the case of some students recognising that working hard is not enough, and that financial resources and networking were even more critical. Students found positive self-worth as they identified university socioeconomic inequalities, acknowledging that their outcomes were not shaped just by their work ethic, but also by social inequalities. Furthermore, the lack of support to meritocracy was related to the recognition of others' intersectional identities (gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity) as sources of advantages or disadvantages when navigating HE.

Our findings support previous research discussing how individuals' adoption of meritocratic beliefs is an individual strategy to align with higher status groups values (Jin & Ball, 2020; Seron et al., 2018), and boost a sense of positive self, for example being seen as competent (Canaan, 2004; Olson & Hafer, 2001). Moreover, our findings also expand on previous research showing that, when individuals from low-status groups perceive discrimination, they reject meritocracy to protect their self-esteem (Major et al., 2007). Thus, our findings show that it is also possible that to reject meritocracy can be a resource of self-worth and a self-enhancement identity strategy, legitimising one's disadvantage position as associated with social structure inequalities, rather than with individuals' lack of effort/hard work. Hence, to adopt meritocratic beliefs and to reject meritocratic beliefs can be seen as a resource for self-worth to navigate social inequalities in HE settings. Both adopting and rejecting meritocracy can be 'survival' strategies that students from disadvantaged backgrounds put in place when they perceive the context as unfair. Therefore, to support meritocracy does not necessarily mean to dismiss or deny social inequalities (Seron et al., 2018). Rather, its support shows that individuals indeed recognise inequalities and also that they need to navigate this context with their own resources, such as working hard. To reject meritocracy also works as a 'survival' strategy, as it helps students to understand social hierarchies, and the role of socioeconomic disadvantaged in their academic and professional outcomes. Thus, not only does support for meritocracy provide individuals with a sense of control about their future (Jost et al., 2018; McCoy et al., 2013), but also its rejection can provide a sense of control about their future possibilities, as individuals can feel that they know what to expect considering the social inequalities where they navigate.

3.1 | Theoretical and practical implications

Our study contributes to an understanding of students' perceptions of meritocracy and suggests that context—such as organisational culture and social identity-based experiences—needs to be included in these analyses. This then provides a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of how students perceive meritocracy in HE, and how they link these perceptions to their gender and SSS experiences. Significantly, our analyses contribute to a critical understanding of who does supports meritocratic beliefs (and who does not) and the reasons underlying this support, or lack thereof. Our findings support previous research showing that meritocracy—either their support or rejection—might be an identity enhancement strategy to understand personal and others disadvantages, helping students to embolden their own sense of value and self-worth (Major et al., 2007; Seron et al., 2018; Wang, 2022). Moreover, we propose that support and rejection of meritocracy can also be understood as coping strategies that students from disadvantaged backgrounds utilise when they perceive social inequalities at university. Hence, supporting meritocracy is more than simply justifying social inequality and the status quo to reduce ideological dissonance (Jost & Banaji, 1994), or as a general tendency to develop and maintain group hierarchies (Sidanius et al., 2004). Rather, it is a strategy to navigate these inequalities, recognising them rather than dismissing or denying them.

Endorsement of meritocracy has often been thought of, from a Social Justification Theory perspective, as a means of coping with (if not 'accepting') one's disadvantaged position in society. Moreover, endorsement of meritocracy has been shown to have a palliative effect by giving individuals a sense of control (McCoy et al., 2013), and potentially reducing a sense of dissonance: the idea that one actually deserves more (Wiederkehr et al., 2015), muting that idea, and supplanting it with the idea that one has in fact got what one deserves. We suggest that endorsing meritocracy, at least in some cases, such as among HE students from disadvantaged social backgrounds, may not be a coping strategy that seemingly justifies one's disadvantage (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010; Major & Kaiser, 2017). Instead, the social identity approach offers a new angle to understand endorsement of meritocracy, as an active method of navigating social hierarchy as a means of boosting one's sense of self-worth. Thus, support for meritocratic beliefs cannot simply be considered as support for social inequality (e.g., Jost, 2019) or as a lack of understanding. Rather, it can be conceptualised as a 'survival' strategy that forms part of a fight for better opportunities: the maintenance of motivation within a context that can be seen as unfair, but can be overcome with hard work. Furthermore, we propose that the rejection of meritocracy can also have a palliative effect and be understood as a 'survival' strategy, as it helps students to understand their lack of opportunities and socioeconomic disadvantages in HE.

We proposed that while supporting meritocracy not only boosts students' sense of self-worth, giving them a positive sense of identity (see Goode et al., 2014), rejecting meritocracy can also boost students' identity, as they recognise the systemic barriers in HE and take a critical position where they are able to expose universities lack of meritocracy.

Finally, our study contributes to this understanding by the nature of its exploratory approach where, instead of priming participants to give particular answers, our study shows how some identities, such as gender and especially SSS, are highlighted by students as important in how they perceive meritocracy. As intersectional identities were mentioned primarily when meritocracy was dismissed in university settings, our findings support the critical role of disadvantage in determining individuals' attitudes and beliefs. Hence, the role of social identities is not only related to understanding intergroup processes (e.g., social

comparison), social identities are also imbedded in power relationships, where individuals recognise their position within the social structure and within systems of inequality (McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019; Peña & Toledo, 2017). Taken together, our study contributes to an understanding of how university students approach these systematic inequalities in HE, and how the recognition of their (and others) multiple and intersecting identities promotes different interpretations of these inequalities.

These analyses also have practical implications. Whether deliberate or not, universities facilitate the idea of a meritocratic, fair, and neutral organisation, without necessarily having an in-depth acknowledgment of their role in social inequality reproduction (Triventi, 2013). Universities would benefit from recognising that meritocratic discourses and practices will shape students' experiences and outcomes in different ways, and that diversity and inclusion practices are enacted within power relationships within organisations (Reay, 2021).

Certainly, expansion of HE is not enough (Reay, 2021) and access policies should be implemented in conjunction with differential social, economic, and academic support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., see The Paired Peers project by Bradley et al., 2013). Meritocracy ideals and widening access strategies may conflict with everyday social and academic practices, as these ideals do not acknowledge the role of inequalities and circumstances beyond the individual level, and may have unintended consequences, especially for those students who need them the most.

3.1.1 | Limitations and future research

Our study has limitations that must be acknowledged. First, due to our exploratory approach, we did not directly ask students about their perceptions of gender and socioeconomic status identity experiences and how they perceived meritocracy. This choice allowed us insight into which identities are spontaneously raised by students when they talk about meritocracy. However, this indirect approach may be not have captured the full extent of intersectional identity experiences. Future qualitative research could focus on a more direct approach to the role of intersectional identities in individuals' experiences.

Our analysis is focused on gender and socioeconomic status as identities that might be related to students' perceptions of meritocracy. We observed, based on participants' qualitative data, coupled with self-reported demographic information, that it was mostly low socioeconomic status female students who took a critical and generally unsupportive position towards meritocratic beliefs. However, participants' own qualitative responses did not necessarily illustrate or explicitly mention this intersection of identities as the basis for taking a critical and unsupportive view (more often socioeconomic status, rather than gender, was explicitly noted in their responses). So, while our own observation about how perceptions of meritocracy correspond to individuals' (self-reported) social identities, it is important to recognise that this observed pattern does not provide the same type or degree of empirical insight that comes from examining these patterns with strict quantitative data. Our study was not designed (in method or sample size) to provide a robust, quantitative test of comparisons across groups. Therefore, future research should expand on this initial observation using quantitative methods that can further assess whether belonging to a disadvantaged group, if not also more specifically being at the intersection of multiple disadvantaged groups (e.g., based on one's gender and socioeconomic status), is associated with the tendency to reject meritocracy in HE. Going forward, using both quantitative and qualitative methods and building from the current study's initial insight, it will also be important to examine why this tendency exists. Hence, further research should examine the hypothesis (from a both a qualitative and quantitative perspective) that to belong to a disadvantaged group, particularly in the intersection of gender and SSS (especially low socioeconomic female students), seemed to be associated with the rejection of meritocracy in HE, and explore potential reasons to understand why.

Future studies would benefit from including more contextual variables, such as university level measures of status and inclusion. For example, students recognised access criteria as evidence of fairness and work ethic, and explained their perceptions about meritocracy by highlighting their experiences as students with examples from their universities. Hence, experiences within universities with differing access criteria, especially in a society where HE is still deeply segregated, such as in the United Kingdom, may promote different beliefs about meritocracy.

4 | CONCLUSION

The current research indicates that while universities often espouse a meritocratic ideology, in practice they may continue to harbour if not actively perpetuate social inequality. Moreover, as the current research suggests, even some students from disadvantaged backgrounds who recognise this ongoing inequality may find themselves adopting meritocratic beliefs in efforts to navigate the HE environment as best they can—even if such beliefs may make it more difficult to identify and address those ongoing inequalities in a systematic and collectively beneficial way. Ultimately, this is why it is imperative that universities devote considerable resources to creating an environment that is truly equal and replete with opportunity—with a keen and constantly vigilant eye towards the myriad forms of inequality that may linger or newly emerge on campus, whether overt or subtle in form. Rather than a focus on 'talking the talk' or simply signalling their values and virtues (to the public, prospective students, or their own student body), universities need to truly 'walk the walk'.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author [DPF].

ETHICS STATEMENT

The manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct as well as authors' national ethics guidelines.

TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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