

**The Belief in Prescriptive Meritocracy and Individuals' Acceptance of Ethnic versus  
Educational Inequalities**

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### **Abstract**

While prescriptive meritocracy serves as a widely endorsed justice principle, its effects on the acceptance of inequality remain ambiguous and encourage debate.

Therefore, we tested whether different types of inequalities may influence this relationship, namely ethnic versus educational inequalities. Participants (N = 258) from countries within the European Union (EU) were recruited to fill out an online survey and randomly allocated to either the ethnicity-condition or education-condition. Individuals were assigned to read a text about societal disparities appropriate to each condition and their scores on acceptance of social inequalities were reported. The survey assessed individuals' belief in prescriptive meritocracy. Both the relationship between prescriptive meritocracy and individuals' acceptance of social inequalities as well as the moderation effect were found to be insignificant. This reinforces previous research reflecting a significant discrepancy in interpretations of prescriptive meritocracy. The difference in participants' scores on acceptance level for ethnic versus educational inequalities, was only found significant in direct comparison. The moderation model did not show a significant result. However, this indicates that ethnicity-based inequalities were less accepted than education-based inequalities. The findings suggest that prescriptive meritocracy may not serve as a predictor in the acceptance of social inequalities but people make a distinction between different types of social inequalities.

*Keywords:* Prescriptive Meritocracy, Acceptance of Social inequalities, Meritocracy, ethnic inequalities, Educational inequalities

## **The Belief in Prescriptive Meritocracy and Individuals' Acceptance of Ethnic versus Educational Inequalities**

Inequalities in Europe are dramatically increasing (Hardy & Schraepen, 2024; Mijs, 2019). Countries like Germany and Italy, for example, have shown notable growth in economic inequality over the past decades (Mijs, 2019), and research indicates a self-reported discrimination rate of 38% in Belgium in 2019 which has risen since (Hardy & Schraepen, 2024). Paradoxically, although there has been an objective rise in societal inequity, concerns about these issues do not seem to be increasing among European Union (EU) citizens (Mijs, 2019). Despite far-reaching consequences for discriminated people ranging from employment and financial difficulties to mental health issues (Hardy & Schraepen, 2024), individuals living in more unequal societies tend to show even fewer concerns (Mijs, 2019). This prompts the question, do people simply accept those inequalities? Previous studies point to differences in people's attitudes towards different types of inequalities, leading to some disparities being acknowledged whilst others are overlooked (Kuppens et al., 2018; Sainz & Vázquez, 2023). To emphasize this issue, we will examine two types of inequalities that have been shown to elicit different levels of acceptance, namely ethnic and educational inequalities (Kuppens et al., 2018; Sainz & Vázquez, 2023).

An ideology commonly used to understand societal outcomes is meritocracy (Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013), which can be defined as a social framework that rewards individuals on the basis of their merits and talents rather than based on material assets and social origin (Kim & Choi, 2017). Originally, the term was first introduced by Alan Fox and Michael Young as a societal critique. They coined it to describe a system that maintains inequality under the pretense that status is inherently deserved, warning against a new hereditary elite based on

merit (Littler, 2018; Young, 1958). What started off as structural criticism, soon became an ideology when political figures like Margaret Thatcher started to promote a neoliberal meritocracy (Littler, 2018). Over the past decades, this ideology has been further established and remains influential in many European countries (Brezis & Crouzet, 1999; Heuer et al., 2020; Rohde, 2023). One example is Germany where grades in schools function as critical measures in an ongoing pursuit of improvement (Rohde, 2023) and citizens show a clear tendency toward labour glorification (Heuer et al., 2020). However, researchers have increasingly highlighted critical perspectives on meritocracy. Similarly to what Fox and Young hinted at (Littler, 2018), studies show that meritocracy as an ideology can be used to sustain the system by legitimizing hierarchical structures (Son Hing et al., 2011; Trevisan et al., 2021; Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013). Sandel (2021) argues that due to meritocracy masking structural disparities, less fortunate people are held responsible for their marginalized position, while more fortunate people's high status is seen as deserved through effort.

Two theories have been found to be particularly associated with this perspective, namely social dominance orientation (SDO) and system-justification theory (Son Hing et al., 2011). Individuals with a high SDO seek dominance by higher-status groups over lower-status groups (Pratto et al., 1994). Merit can serve as a justification for this orientation, where those who invest much effort are seen as deserving of high status (Son Hing et al., 2011). Furthermore, the system justification theory proposes that individuals have meaning-making and social needs that drive them to believe in their social system as fair (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Even if disadvantaged by a hierarchical system, many people use ideologies like meritocracy to legitimize the status quo and thus lessen ambiguity and avoid discomfort (Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013). Consequently, meritocracy can function as an ideology that precludes recognition of issues like discrimination

and conceals structural inequalities (Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013). This raises the question of whether Fox's and Young's warnings should have been met with greater urgency.

### **Distinction Between Prescriptive And Descriptive Meritocracy**

According to Son Hing et al (2011), the belief in meritocracy can reflect both, a legitimising ideology on the one hand, and a justice principle on the other. They propose to distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive meritocracy. Descriptive meritocracy defines the belief that the societal system is already meritocratic, meaning that rewards are allocated in an equal manner among citizens. Prescriptive meritocracy, on the other hand, describes one's belief that society should be meritocratic but is not perceived as having been achieved yet. While descriptive meritocracy has been found to be linked to legitimizing tendencies, such as SDO and system justification, prescriptive has not (Cargile et al., 2019; Son Hing et al., 2011). Hence, the effect of prescriptive meritocracy remains to be investigated, especially since research on this construct remains limited (Cargile et al., 2019). To help fill this gap, the present study aims to explore prescriptive meritocracy and its effect on people's acceptance of social inequalities overall, as well as of ethnic versus educational inequalities, specifically. The following section will provide research on the first relationship we aim to investigate.

### **Prescriptive Meritocracy and Acceptance of Social Inequalities**

As previously mentioned, research on prescriptive meritocracy is ambiguous and limited, particularly on its effect on the acceptance of social inequalities. Individuals' acceptance level refers to how fair individuals perceive disparities to be. Hence, the term perceived fairness will also be used to reflect people's acceptance of social inequalities. Firstly, as stated above studies have proposed prescriptive meritocracy to be a distinct construct to descriptive meritocracy (Major et al., 2007; Son Hing et al., 2011) where prescriptive meritocracy did not show

hierarchical-legitimizing tendencies as descriptive meritocracy (Son Hing et al., 2011). Furthermore, Cargile et al (2019) found that students high in prescriptive meritocracy showed more positive attitudes toward an university diversity course, than those high in descriptive meritocracy, indicating their receptivity. The researchers prompt the question of whether prescriptive and descriptive meritocratic beliefs may function in opposing manners on societal outcomes. Additionally, studies found that people who score high on prescriptive meritocracy exhibit lower levels of sexism (Davey et al., 1999) and support social justice policies that are in line with the merit principle (Son Hing et al., 2011). As we assume the support for such equity policies to imply rejection of social inequalities, this suggests the belief in prescriptive meritocracy to be linked to challenging the status quo. This leads us to the assumption of prescriptive meritocracy being a distinct belief system which may serve as a more inclusive and a rather critical perspective on societal structures.

However, Cargile et al (2019) also warns against overinterpreting prescriptive meritocracy as a harmless system-challenging belief. Empirical findings align with this nuanced take on prescriptive meritocracy demonstrating its complexity. For instance, in their research Knowles and Lowery (2011) point towards the relationship between prescriptive meritocracy and individuals' denial of white privilege. Although prescriptive meritocracy does not function as a system-justifying belief the way descriptive meritocracy does, the researchers claim that it can facilitate the denial of white privilege (Knowles & Lowery, 2011). Additionally, Sandel (2012) argues that the endorsement of a meritocratic society as an ideal can contribute to sustaining inequalities as well as furthering the divide. Results like these, question the assumption of prescriptive meritocracy to be a system-challenging construct compared to descriptive

meritocratic belief, and invites further examination of prescriptive meritocracy and its societal implications.

To test whether prescriptive is indeed a distinct, system-challenging construct and contribute to more consistency in results, this study investigates the relationship between the belief in prescriptive meritocracy and acceptance of social disparities. We adopt the former assumption that prescriptive meritocracy may function as a rather critical perspective on societal structure (Cargile et al., 2019; Major et al., 2007; Son Hin et al., 2011). Hence, as *Hypothesis 1* we state the following: Prescriptive meritocracy will be negatively associated with participants' acceptance of social disparities.

### **Different Types of Social Inequalities**

While all forms of disparities are caused by societal structures resulting in a disproportionate distribution of resources among individuals, inequality differs in its guises (Blackburn, 2008). Previous studies have shown that different types of inequalities also elicit diverse reactions in people (Almås et al., 2024; Benson et al., 2024; Hubert, 2022; Kuppens et al., 2018; Sainz & Vázquez, 2023). Depending on the origins of the inequality, individuals differentiate between just and unjust inequalities (Almås et al., 2024). Almås et al (2024) argue that this is especially linked to meritocracy. The researchers distinguish meritocracy as a distinct fairness view to egalitarian fairness perception and libertarian perception of justice. Accordingly, while egalitarian fairness views reject all types of inequality and libertarian fairness views accept all types of inequality following natural justice, meritocratic fairness perception has been found to differentiate between types of inequality (Almås et al., 2024). Inequalities associated with personal choices and performance are perceived as more just than inequalities related to one's fortune (Almås et al., 2024). This might be explained by the belief in *ascribed* versus *achieved*

statuses, developed by Ralph Linton (1936). According to the anthropologist, a person is allocated to their ascribed status at birth which does not represent their abilities. Achieved statuses, on the other hand, are defined as attained through effort and an individual's abilities (Linton, 1936). To demonstrate how people distinguish between inequalities based on ascribed versus achieved characteristics, this section discusses three types of inequalities, namely ethnicity-based, gender-based, and education-based inequalities.

For gender-based and ethnicity-based inequalities, two examples for inequalities based on ascribed characteristics, respondents' have shown similar trends in their attitudes towards them. Both types of inequality are generally rejected among a vast majority of individuals (Benson et al., 2024; Hubert, 2022; Kuppens et al., 2018). In a study carried out across countries within the EU, the European Commission found approximately 90 percent of people support gender equality driven by personal values and the benefit of society. Likewise, the same amount of people did not accept a pay gap between men and women (Hubert, 2022). These results indicate people's rejection of gender-based inequality. However, gender-based discrimination is not seen as equally prevalent as ethnicity-based discrimination (Benson et al., 2024; Saczuk & Brunarska, n.d.). People living in a country within the EU perceive ethnicity-based discrimination as one of the most common types (Saczuk & Brunarska, 2024). Furthermore, previous research has indicated that a vast majority of the population views ethnic-based disparities as unjust and advocates for national laws prohibiting ethnic discrimination (Benson et al., 2024; Kuppens et al., 2018). Additionally, over the past years, the European Commission has developed several programs to tackle this issue, with the *anti-racism action plan 2020-2025* being one example (Müller, 2021). This plan includes guidelines to develop national action plans which target ethnic-based discrimination (Müller, 2021). These findings indicate not only a recognition of



ethnic-based inequalities but show an overall trend of rejection and attempts to tackle this type of discrimination.

A stark contrast to this observation was found in people's attitudes towards education-based disparities. This type of inequality has drawn increasing interest in recent years as it was found to play a central role in shaping social divisions (Kuppens et al., 2018). Research shows that people hold stronger biases towards less educated social groups (Kuppens et al., 2018), perceive them as less human, and attribute fewer demographic rights to less educated individuals (Sainz & Vázquez, 2023). As discussed, disparities perceived to be linked to performance are seen as more just (Almås et al., 2023). Therefore, in a meritocratic society educational success, an ascribed characteristic, is seen as a consequence of one's effort, and the educational system is perceived as a legitimate source of status (Sainz & Vázquez, 2023). Consequently, educational inequalities are oftentimes overlooked which demonstrates a significant contrast to the general perception of previously mentioned types of inequalities (Kuppens et al., 2018). As ethnicity-based discrimination has been found to be perceived as one of the most prevalent types, we observe the greatest difference between people's attitudes toward ethnicity-based versus education-based disparities. Since fewer researchers have examined those types in direct comparison, this study focuses on investigating these two types of social inequalities, measuring participants' acceptance. For *Hypothesis 2*, we predict the following: Respondents will perceive ethnicity-based disparities as less fair than education-based disparities.

### **The Effect of Different Types of Social Inequalities on the Relationship Between Prescriptive Meritocracy and Social Inequalities**

As demonstrated, present literature explores people's perceived fairness of social inequalities, highlighting differences in perception and factors influencing their acceptance level (Almås et al., 2024; Benson et al., 2024; Hubert, 2022; Kuppens et al., 2018; Sainz & Vázquez, 2023). However, research on factors impacting inequality acceptance in people with prescriptive meritocracy beliefs is limited. Thus, this study aims to explore how participants' acceptance of social inequalities is shaped by the interaction between prescriptive meritocracy and evaluation of different types of inequalities. The present focus is in line with previous findings, indicating that individuals who score high on prescriptive meritocracy distinguish between different types of social justice policies, namely merit-violating policies and treatment that aligns with the merit principle (Davey et al., 1999; Son Hing et al., 2011). An example of merit-violating equity policies is employment selection based on minority group membership despite lower qualification (Davey et al., 1999) while recruiting the most qualified individual is considered merit-aligning (Son Hing et al., 2011).

In their studies, Davey et al (1999) and SonHing et al (2011) both demonstrate that among people who hold prescriptive meritocratic beliefs, merit-violating policies were opposed. Contrary to this, merit-aligning policies were associated with less opposition and more positive attitude (Davey et al., 1999). Son Hing et al (2011) highlights that this is irrespective of whether policies reinforce or oppose societal structures, suggesting violation versus restoring of the merit principle to play a central role. Bobocel's et al (2002) suggest that opposing attitudes toward those policies might be caused by an individual's primary concern about transgression of their justice principle.

This research suggests that prescriptive meritocracy does not predict individuals' social attitudes consistently but instead it appears to be context-specific (Davey et al., 1999; Son Hing

et al., 2011). For this study, research prompts the notion that this relationship depends on whether the inequality is perceived as violating or reinforcing the merit-principle. As discussed, distinguishing between different types of inequalities has been particularly found to be linked to meritocracy (Almås et al., 2024). More specifically, literature suggests that people show different attitudes towards ethnic versus educational disparities, as the first is seen as violating the merit principle while the latter one is perceived as in line with it (Almås et al., 2024; Benson et al., 2024; Kuppens et al., 2018; Sainz & Vázquez, 2023). Consequently, we expect the different types of social inequalities to influence the effect of prescriptive meritocracy on individuals' acceptance of social inequalities. Therefore, we propose the following as *Hypothesis 3*: Prescriptive meritocracy will be more positively associated with the acceptance of educational inequalities than with the acceptance of ethnic inequalities.

## Methods

### Participants

In total, 258 eligible participants took part in the survey. Out of the entire sample, more than half of the participants identified as females ( $n = 158$ , 61.2%) about a third identified as males ( $n = 92$ , 35.7%) and only a few participants identified as non-binary or other ( $n = 8$ , 3.1%). Moreover, the majority of participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 ( $n = 182$ , 70.5%) and considered themselves as members of the ethnic majority in their country ( $n = 182$ , 70.5%). Lastly, most participants have acquired an upper secondary diploma or equivalent ( $n = 114$ , 44.2%) or a Bachelor's degree or equivalent ( $n = 69$ , 26.7%). The complete participants demographics are displayed in table 1

**Table 1**

#### *Demographic Information*

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage
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Gender	Male	92	35.7
	Female	158	61.2
	Non-Binary / Third Gender	5	1.9
	Other	3	1.2
Age (in years)	18 - 25	182	70.5
	26 - 35	27	10.5
	36 - 45	11	4.3
	46 - 55	21	8.1
	56 - 65	14	5.4
	66 and above	3	1.2
Ethnicity	Majority Member	182	70.5
	Minority Member	65	25.2
Education Level	No Qualification	2	.80
	Less than Upper Secondary Diploma	6	2.3
	Upper Secondary Diploma	114	44.2
	Short - Cycle / Vocational Tertiary Education	4	1.6
	Bachelor Degree	69	26.7
	Master's Degree	48	18.6
	PhD	12	4.7
	Other	3	1.2

### Research Design and Procedure

The data collection was completed in April 2025. On the basis of a checklist developed by the EC-BSS at the University of Groningen, the study was exempt from full ethics and privacy review. The recruitment of participants was completed via snowball and convenience sampling, specifically on social media platforms, such as Instagram and WhatsApp, and the local network of the researchers. The study was advertised as *research about European citizens' and political beliefs particularly regarding social inequalities in Europe*. The participation was based on a voluntary basis. The eligibility criteria required participants to be 18 years or above and

citizens of a country in the European Union. Participants were required to give informed consent. All data collection was completed individually through a Qualtrics survey assessing social and political attitudes. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions consisting of a text on either education-based or ethnic-based disparities. Both texts highlight societal differences for each condition and can be found in Appendix A. The survey required participants to complete measures of prescriptive meritocracy and perceived fairness of inequalities. Additional variables were measured, which can be viewed in Appendix B. The survey was completed in English and had a duration of 7 to 12 minutes.

## **Measures**

### ***Demographic Information***

Demographic information was requested such as the participants' gender, their education level, and whether they categorize themselves into a majority ethnic group.

### ***Prescriptive Meritocracy***

On an adapted scale, participants were asked to indicate how they believe society should be and completed a six-item scale ( $\alpha = .8$ ) measuring prescriptive meritocracy (Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013) with a seven-point response scale ranging from 1 (*Disagree Strongly*) to 7 (*Agree Strongly*). Example items measuring prescriptive meritocracy were: (1) *People who work hard should achieve success* (2) *If people work hard they should get what they want*. The scale was found to be internally consistent.

### ***Manipulation Check***

Participants had to answer a text-comprehension question, created for this study, to assess whether they had understood the text based on the condition they were allocated to. In both conditions, participants were asked the following: *Which of the following statements best*

*summarizes the information you just read?* For the ethnicity-condition, one of the following responses could be selected: (1) *There are no differences in outcomes between EU-citizens from ethnic majorities and ethnic minorities.* (2) *EU-citizens from ethnic minorities have higher unemployment rates, lower median income, and have less political representation.* (3) *EU-citizens from ethnic majorities face more difficulties in employment and have lower political representation compared to ethnic minorities.* Responses for the education-condition were equivalent to the ones for the ethnicity-condition and can be found in Appendix A. Only participants who selected the second response passed the manipulation check.

### ***Acceptance of Social Inequalities***

A three-item likert scale for each condition (ethnicity condition :  $\alpha = .83$ , education condition  $\alpha = .89$ ), was adapted and used to assess the participants' perceived fairness of the condition they were allocated to (Russo & Mosso, 2018). In the ethnicity-condition, participants were asked to respond to the following question: *To what extent do you think that the differences in outcomes between EU-citizens from ethnic majority groups and from non-western immigration background are...* Participants in the education-condition answered the following: *To what extent do you think that the differences in social and economic outcomes between higher and less educated EU-citizens are...* In both conditions, the responses were again ranging from 1 to 7, with 1 being 'very unfair' for the first item 'very illegitimate' for the second and 'Very unjustified' for the third item and 7 being 'very fair' for the first, 'very legitimate' for the second, and 'very justified' for the third item. Internal consistency for both the ethnicity condition and the education condition scale were found (ethnicity condition: Cronbach's alpha  $\alpha = .83$ , education condition: Cronbach's alpha  $\alpha = .89$ ).

The study considered other variables and scales that are not in the interest of this research paper. All scales were measured on a seven-point scale unless otherwise specified and can be referred to in Appendix A.

## Results

### Preliminary Analysis

From the original sample size of 285 participants, 27 cases were removed due to failing the manipulation checks and 258 valid responses remained. The responses were then analysed to test the study's hypotheses, predicting a relationship between prescriptive meritocratic beliefs and perceived fairness influenced by different types of social inequalities. Model 1 from PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) on IBM SPSS Statistics (version 28) was used to analyse this moderation model.

Among the responses of 256 cases (listwise deletion, 2 cases excluded), participants scored significantly high on prescriptive meritocracy ( $M = 6.31$ ,  $SD = .76$ ), indicating a general belief in the justified distribution of rewards based on merit. The average score on acceptance of both social inequality types, showed an overall low tendency ( $M = 2.3$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ), demonstrating that participants were generally less accepting of social inequalities. However, the Pearson's correlation was not found significant between the two variables,  $r = -.02$ ,  $p = .71$ . For the two conditions, different central tendencies were found. Responses from participants in the ethnicity condition indicated a lower average score on perceived fairness ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) than the average score of participants in the education-condition ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ). This shows participants perceived ethnic inequalities as less acceptable than educational inequalities. An independent sample  $t$ -test showed this difference (mean difference = .86) to be significant  $t(252.61) = -5.57$ ,  $p < .001$ . The Pearson's correlations between prescriptive meritocracy and the

separate fairness perception of ethnic and educational disparities both did not indicate significant correlations. While a negative yet weak association was found between prescriptive meritocracy and ethnicity-based inequalities,  $r = -.13, p = .16$ . no relationship was shown for prescriptive meritocracy and educational inequalities,  $r = .017, p = .84$ . This outcome suggests that higher belief in prescriptive meritocracy did not predict participants' perceptions of different types of inequalities. All the descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlations can be found in Table 2.

Preliminary to the testing of our hypotheses, three assumptions were checked, namely linearity, homoscedasticity, and normality. Firstly, the residual plot used to test the linearity and homoscedasticity assumption showed no violation of the linearity assumption but mild heteroscedasticity. Figure B1 in Appendix B provides a visualization of this plot. However, due to our large sample size ( $N = 258$ ), this does not pose a significant violation affecting our PROCESS macro Model 1. For the normality assumption, the Shapiro-Wilk test was used and indicated the assumption to be violated,  $W(256) = .89, p < .001$ . Nevertheless, the use of PROCESS macro model 1 was not necessarily invalidated because of our large sample size and its use of bootstrapping resampling. This robustness makes the PROCESS macro model 1 especially beneficial which led us to make use of the model 1 and conduct the analysis as proposed.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics and Pearson's Correlation*

	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Prescriptive Meritocracy	6.31	.76	1	-.02	-.13	0.17
2	Perceived Fairness	2.34	1.33	-.02	1	1.00**	1.00**



3	Ethnicity Condition	1.87	1.07	- .13	1.00**	1	-
4	Education Condition	2.73	1.4	.02	1.00**	-	1

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*Note.* \*\* $p < .001$

### Main Analysis

To test our hypotheses, a moderation analysis was conducted using PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022). The model 1 was found to be statistically significant,  $F(3, 252) = 10.35, p < .001$  but points to a rather small explanatory power as it explains 10.97% of the variance in perceived fairness ( $R^2 = .11$ ). Hence, external factors might have influenced the outcomes and conclusions have to be drawn with caution.

As our first hypothesis, we stated that people scoring higher on prescriptive meritocratic beliefs would show lower tendencies to perceive social inequalities as fair. The model did not show a statistically significant effect of prescriptive meritocracy on perceived fairness, indicating prescriptive meritocracy to be insignificant as a predictor ( $b = -.37, SE = .32, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.00, .26], p = .25$ ). This insignificant main effect contradicts our first hypothesis. Our second hypothesis predicted ethnicity-based disparities to be perceived as less fair than education-based disparities. Although the prior conducted  $t$ -test was significant,  $t(253) = -5.57, p < .00$ , the PROCESS model 1 did not show a significant main effect for the difference between the two conditions ( $b = -.41, SE = 1.33, 95\% \text{ CI } [-3.03, 2.22], p = .76$ ). This discrepancy might result from the PROCESS model including covariates and interaction terms, while the independent sample  $t$ -test compares the two means directly. Consequently, lower statistical power may have obscured this difference in the moderation model. Lastly, our third hypothesis anticipated that participants scoring high on prescriptive meritocracy would perceive ethnicity-based inequalities

as less acceptable than educational inequalities. Similar to the aforementioned hypotheses PROCESS model 1 did not show a significant result for our hypothesized interaction effect ( $b = .2$ ,  $SE = .21$ , 95% CI  $[-.21, .62]$ ,  $p = .34$ ). All the findings from the PROCESS macro model 1 can be found in Table 3 and Table 4.

**Table 3**

*Model Summary for PROCESS Macro Model 1*

R	R-Sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.33	.11	1.6	10.359	3.00	252.00	.000

**Table 4**

*Moderation Analysis Summary for Effect of Prescriptive Meritocracy on Perceived Fairness of Ethnicity-Based and Educational-Based Inequalities*

	Coefficient	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	3.33	2.04	1.63	.10	- .69	7.34
Prescriptive Meritocracy	-.37	.32	- 1.15	.25	- 1.000	.26
Condition	-.40	1.33	-.30	.76	- 3.03	2.22
Interaction Effect	.20	.21	.96	.34	-.21	.62

## Discussion

This study investigated people's attitudes toward social inequalities and one of the two meritocratic beliefs that is still explicitly less researched and ambiguous in its results, prescriptive meritocracy. More specifically, we examined the effect of prescriptive meritocracy on participants' acceptance of social inequalities and investigated individuals' perception of two different types of inequality, namely ethnic and educational disparities. A following moderation

model was analyzed to explore a potential difference between these types of the relationship between prescriptive meritocracy and one's level of acceptance.

### **Findings and Implications**

Measuring respondents' prescriptive meritocratic beliefs and their acceptance of social inequalities in our study, did not present any significant correlation. Therefore, our first hypothesis was not supported and prescriptive meritocracy was not found to predict individuals' acceptance of social inequalities. This outcome opposes the research findings that prompt prescriptive meritocracy as a potentially system challenging belief which functions in an opposing manner to descriptive meritocracy (Cargile et al., 2019; Major et al 2007; Son Hing et al., 2011). Differences to prior studies may serve as potential explanations and are discussed.

Firstly, acceptance of social inequalities may not necessarily precede opposition of social justice policies and may have to be considered as distinct dimensions. This could account for differences between the present study and previous research findings by Son Hing et al (2019). Furthermore, the absence of hierarchy-legitimising beliefs that have been found associated with descriptive meritocracy (Son Hing et al., 2011) may not have indicated prescriptive meritocracy to predict opposing characteristics, as presumed. Although, Cargile et al (2019) argued for opposing directions related to the two belief systems, this study's results suggest moving back from the view of prescriptive meritocracy being a single system-challenging construct (Son Hing et al., 2011) and rather promotes to evaluate prescriptive meritocracy in its relation to descriptive meritocracy. In previous research, this has not only led to significant findings (Cargile et al., 2019; Son Hing et al., 2011) but also to stronger relationships compared to measuring the two belief systems as independent constructs (Cargile et al., 2019). Lastly, an aspect that warrants consideration is an evident ceiling effect (  $M = 6.31$ ,  $SD = .07$ ) that has been found in the

participants' scores on prescriptive meritocracy, limiting statistical power in our analysis to identify nuanced effects. This is addressed in the limitation section below.

Although our insignificant finding does not support our hypothesis, it is in line with the addressed research ambiguity on prescriptive meritocracy. That is, it corresponds with the non-predictive quality that is demonstrated by a significant discrepancy in interpretations of prescriptive meritocracy (Cargile et al., 2019; Knowles & Lowery, 2011, Major et al., 2007; Sandel, 2012; Son Hing et al., 2011;). Further, the results suggest that prescriptive meritocracy as a single construct may rather be neutral but influenced by external cues. Therefore research may focus on examining either the relation between prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy (Cargile et al., 2019) or characteristics, such as SDO or system justification, that were generally found related to meritocracy (Son Hing et al., 2011).

For our second hypothesis, we assessed individuals' attitudes towards two different types of social inequalities, ethnicity-based and education-based disparities. We anticipated that participants would show less acceptance for ethnicity-based disparities than for education-based disparities. Although our interaction model did not yield a significant effect in individuals between the two conditions, the independent sample *t*-test indicated a significant difference, supporting what has been hypothesized. This discrepancy may be traced back to methodological limitations, more specifically to the difference between the models' statistical power and model complexity. While the *t* test assesses the direct difference between the two means, the PROCESS model investigates the moderation model, requiring more statistical power. Consequently, the PROCESS model is more likely to not detect the statistical difference that has been found in the *t*-test.

However, the significant finding shown in the  $t$ -test aligns with previous research, as it demonstrates that participants perceived ethical disparities as less acceptable than educational disparities. This supports the notion of people distinguishing between social inequalities, potentially based on ascribed versus achieved characteristics (Almås et al., 2024). It shows that less educated individuals are subject to greater bias and more held responsible for their status (Kuppens et al., 2018; Sainz & Vázquez, 2023) while ethnic inequalities seem to be generally recognized and perceived as unfair (Benson et al., 2024; Kuppens et al., 2018; Müller, 2021, Sączuk & Brunarska, 2024.). The distinction may be particularly important for researchers and campaigns raising awareness of social inequalities. When trying to tackle social inequalities in society, one might want to make use of this knowledge and frame information accordingly. Lastly, more redistributive policies and awareness raising initiatives may focus on educational disparity, to work against the dismissal of this type of inequality and biases held against less educated individuals.

As our third hypothesis, we predicted prescriptive meritocracy to be more positively associated with the acceptance of education-based disparities than with ethnicity-based disparities. Previous research has shown that people's level of acceptance varies depending on the type of social inequality, with merit-aligning inequalities being more accepted than merit-violating inequalities (Almås et al., 2024; Benson et al., 2024; Kuppens et al., 2018; Sainz & Vázquez, 2023). We expected this differentiation to be especially prominent among individuals who strongly endorse the merit principle. However, no significant interaction effect was found, indicating that the type of inequality did not moderate the effect of prescriptive meritocracy on individuals' acceptance of social inequalities. Although the independent sample  $t$  test revealed that participants rated ethnic inequalities as less acceptable than educational

inequalities, the moderation model suggests that this may not interact with prescription meritocratic beliefs. This contradicts the prior formulated assumption. Similar to *hypothesis 1*, dissimilarity between affirmative actions and the acceptance of social inequalities may have led to different results than previous research has shown (Davey et al., 1999; Son Hing et al., 2011). Moreover, differences might be more detectable if social inequalities are specifically linked to equity policies, as they may activate greater concern about violation of one's merit principle, a central concern (Bobocel et al., 2002). Another aspect to take into consideration, is the framing of the two conditions. The condition-specific text may have served too little context and might have not stimulated meritocratic related beliefs, as seen in prior studies (Davey et al., 1999; Son Hing et al., 2011). Consistent with findings for *Hypothesis 1*, the found ceiling effect may also have accounted for the insignificant result and caused undetectable effects due to restricted variability. Finally, again investigating the discrepancy score or characteristics related to meritocracy, such as SDO or system-justification, may have provided more insight into the interaction between people's acceptance of different inequality types and their merit-related beliefs.

### **Limitations and Future Research Direction**

This study entails certain limitations that should be taken into account. A core limitation of the study was the observed ceiling effect ( $M = 6.31$ ,  $SD = .76$ ) in responses on prescriptive meritocracy which led to restricted variability and unobservable differences between individuals (*Hypothesis 1*) and conditions (*Hypothesis 3*). If the variability is restricted, the sample does not present great precision which in turn limits the model's statistical power to detect significant results (Cohen, 2013). Besides the limited number of items for each construct, the response options were framed in an abstract way which may have accounted for uniformity in responses.

On the other hand, as discussed, prescriptive meritocracy might also simply present a belief that is more neutral than predicted and highly influenced by external factors. Future research should take this into consideration and measure the discrepancy score between prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy instead. As advocated by Cargile et al (2019), this can lead to more evident results.

Another aspect potentially impacting participants' responses, is the social desirability effect. Although anonymity was assured, participants may have reflected social desirability in their responses, rather than their actual belief. This may also have reduced variation in responses accounting for insignificant results. Paulhus (2002) found social desirable responding as a prevalent issue in self-reporting, and thus stresses the need for *departure from reality* measures (Paulhus, 2002; p.49). One example could be a performance measure, which may serve as an alternative for our study measures, as well. Using this method, participants' genuine reactions may be more observable, leading to more variation in.

Another significant limitation was the notable homogeneous characteristics of our sample. We found a significant homogeneity in gender, age, ethnic identity and education level in our convenience sample. A significant majority of our sample was female, between the ages of 18 to 25 years, considered themselves as ethnic majority members of their country and had achieved an upper secondary diploma. Recruiting participants through stratified random sampling may have led to enhanced representation of diverse demographic backgrounds in our sample. However, the sample of this study shows low generalizability which lowers the study's external validity. Another aspect related to the research's external validity, is our expectation of all responses to be comparable. All participants were citizens from an EU-country. However, the present study did not account for differences between the countries, and how they shape their

citizens perceptions of social inequalities. People from different countries may show different fairness perceptions shaped by their cultural background. This may have led to differences in response that were not taken into consideration. By controlling for this variation, future research may allow for enhanced comparability which might lead to greater external validity.

Despite its limitations, this study has presented valuable insights and identified possible directions for future research. Previous research has stressed the need for investigation of prescriptive meritocracy as a single construct, as most studies focus on descriptive meritocracy (Cargile et al., 2019). Hence, this study provides a valuable contribution to this research gap and proposes several notions that future research may take into consideration. Our results question whether prescriptive meritocracy should be viewed as a single construct and suggest to put more emphasis on measuring the discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy. It indicates prescriptive meritocracy as a malleable belief system that seems to be more neutral than anticipated. Future research may shift its focus on developing a more nuanced way to measure prescriptive meritocratic beliefs or aim to examine more individual characteristics related to it. In addition, this research shed light on the need for raising awareness of educational disparities, both in academia and in the broader society. More research is required to understand and acknowledge the individual and societal implications of this type of inequality. Societal debates may be encouraged and help victims find acknowledgment of this type of inequality. The present study has also presented some insight into the formation of acceptance of certain social inequalities. Future research may further investigate theoretical backgrounds of different types of social inequalities which might help to target them more efficiently.

### **Conclusion**



This study has provided a meaningful contribution to the topic at hand. The insignificant result of prescriptive meritocracy on social inequalities, suggests that prescriptive meritocracy may not serve as a predictor. However, the finding aligns with previous research ambiguity on prescriptive meritocracy and its societal implications. The results suggest moving back from viewing prescriptive meritocracy as a single construct and to shift the focus onto the relationship between prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy or related ideologies, instead. For the moderation effect, we did not find a significant relationship between prescriptive meritocracy and acceptance of social inequality, influenced by ethnic versus educational disparities. The insignificant results may be traced back to the same limitations, such as limited range in responses or restrictions due to sampling, for example. Although the difference between ethnicity-based and education-based inequalities was found insignificant in the moderation model, it was detected as significant in direct comparison. This demonstrates that people show different levels of acceptance depending on the type of inequality. Future research and societal campaigns may aim to raise awareness for types of inequalities that seem commonly overlooked. In addition, research could further examine the role of performance-related characteristics that seem to shape a great level of acceptance of inequalities, such as educational disparities. Considering factors specific to different types of social inequalities, may lead to more efficiency in targeting social inequalities. This may mitigate the drastic increase occurring in the EU and raise concerns among citizens.

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## Appendix A

### Online Survey

#### **Prescriptive Meritocracy [Prescriptive.Merit]**

The following statements are about how you think society should be and not about how you think it is currently. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with these statements.

*[(1)Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neutral, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7)Agree strongly]*

1. People who work hard *should* achieve success. **[Prescriptive.Merit\_1]**
2. If people work hard they *should* get what they want. **[Prescriptive.Merit\_2]**
3. With hard work, minorities should be able to climb the ladder of success just as much as the majority. **[Prescriptive.Merit\_3]**
4. Discrimination *should* not prevent minority groups from getting ahead if they work hard. **[Prescriptive.Merit\_4]**
5. European societies *should* be open societies where all individuals can achieve higher status through hard work. **[Prescriptive.Merit\_5]**
6. Advancement in European societies *should* be equally possible for all individuals. **[Prescriptive.Merit\_6]**

#### **Descriptive Meritocracy [Descriptive.Merit]**

The following statements describe how society is currently. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of them.

*[(1)Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neutral, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7)Agree strongly]*

1. People who work hard *do* achieve success. **[Descriptive.Merit\_1]**
2. If people work hard they *do* get what they want. **[Descriptive.Merit\_2]**
3. With hard work, minorities *are* able to climb the ladder of success just as much as the majority. **[Descriptive.Merit\_3]**
4. Discrimination *does not* prevent minority groups from getting ahead if they work hard. **[Descriptive.Merit\_4]**
5. European societies *are* open societies where all individuals *do* achieve higher status through hard work. **[Descriptive.Merit\_5]**
6. Advancement in European societies *is* equally possible for all individuals. **[Descriptive.Merit\_6]**

### **Ethnicity Condition**

**Please read the following texts carefully, we will ask you questions that relate to it.**

In some European countries, there are large differences in outcomes between EU-citizens from ethnic majority groups and EU-citizens from ethnic minority groups (especially those from non-western ethnic groups). Citizens from ethnic minority groups have higher unemployment rates compared to citizens from ethnic majority. Additionally, citizens from ethnic minority groups have lower median incomes, and they are significantly underrepresented in political institutions (e.g., parliament) compared to their share of the population.

### **Education Condition.**

**Please read the following texts carefully, we will ask you questions that relate to it.**

In some European countries, there are large differences in social and economic outcomes between higher educated (having a higher education degree) and less-educated EU-citizens (not having a higher education degree). Less-educated Citizens have higher unemployment rates compared to higher-educated citizens. Additionally, the less-educated have lower median incomes, and they are significantly underrepresented in political institutions (e.g., parliament) compared to their share of the population.

**Manipulation/comprehension check**

***Ethnicity condition* [Eth\_check]**

Which of the following statements best summarizes the information you just read?

- (1) There are no differences in outcomes between EU-citizens from ethnic majorities and ethnic minorities.
- (2) EU-citizens from ethnic minorities have higher unemployment rates, lower median income, and have less political representation.
- (3) EU-citizens from ethnic majorities face more difficulties in employment and have lower political representation compared to ethnic minorities.

***Education condition* [Edu\_check]**

Which of the following statements best summarizes the information you just read? There is only one correct answer.

- (1) There are no differences in outcomes between EU-citizens with and without higher education degrees.



(2) EU- citizens without higher education degrees face more difficulties in employment, income, and political representation.

(3) EU-citizens with higher education degrees have fewer opportunities in employment and political representation than those without.

### **Support for Inequality Scale**

#### ***Ethnicity condition* [Eth\_inequality]**

*[(1)Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7)Agree strongly]*

1. The negative consequences of inequality between ethnic minorities and majorities have been largely exaggerated. **[Eth\_inequality\_1]**
2. Inequality between ethnic minorities and majorities is causing many of the problems in European countries. (R) **[Eth\_inequality\_2]**
3. I am very disturbed by the amount of inequality between ethnic minorities and majorities in Europe today. (R) **[Eth\_inequality\_3]**
4. Inequality between ethnic minorities and majorities is not a problem. **[Eth\_inequality\_4]**
5. We need to do everything possible to reduce inequality between ethnic minorities and majorities in European countries today. (R) **[Eth\_inequality\_5]**

#### ***Education condition* [Edu\_inequality]**

*[(1)Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7)Agree strongly]*

1. The negative consequences of inequality between the higher and less educated have been largely exaggerated. [Edu\_inequality\_1]
2. Inequality between the higher and less educated is causing many of the problems in European countries. (R) [Edu\_inequality\_2]
3. I am very disturbed by the amount of inequality between higher and less educated people in Europe today. (R) [Edu\_inequality\_3]
4. Inequality between higher and less educated people is not a problem. [Edu\_inequality\_4]
5. We need to do everything possible to reduce inequality between higher and less educated people in European countries today. (R) [Edu\_inequality\_5]

### **Perceived fairness of inequalities**

#### ***Ethnicity condition*** [Eth\_Fairness]

To what extent do you think that the differences in outcomes between EU-citizens from ethnic majority groups and from non-western immigration background are...

1. Fair [(1) Very unfair (7) Very fair] [Eth\_Fairness\_1]
2. Legitimate [(1) Very illegitimate, (7) Very legitimate] [Eth\_Fairness\_2]
3. Justified [(1) Very unjustified, (7) Very justified] [Eth\_Fairness\_3]

#### ***Education condition***

To what extent do you think that the differences in social and economic outcomes between higher and less educated EU-citizens are...

1. Fair [(1) Very unfair (7) Very fair] [Edu\_Fairness\_1]

2. Legitimate [(1) *Very illegitimate*, (7) *Very legitimate*] [Edu\_Fairness\_2]

3. Justified [(1) *Very unjustified*, (7) *Very justified*] [Edu\_Fairness\_3]

### **Support for redistributive policies**

#### ***Ethnicity condition*** [Eth\_Policy]

*[(1)Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7)Agree strongly]*

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with these two statements

1- The government should reduce inequalities between citizens from ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority. [Eth\_Policy\_1]

2- The government should implement policies to improve outcomes for citizens from ethnic minorities, even if it requires raising taxes. [Eth\_Policy\_2]

#### ***Education condition*** [Edu\_policy]

*[(1)Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7)Agree strongly]*

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with these two statements

1- The government should reduce inequalities between less educated and higher educated citizens. [Edu\_policy\_1]

2- The government should implement policies to improve outcomes for less-educated citizens, even if it requires raising taxes. [Edu\_policy\_1]

### **Attribution of responsibility for disadvantaged position**

#### ***Ethnicity condition* [Eth\_Responsibility]**

*[(1) Not at all, (7) Entirely]*

1. To what extent are people responsible for being of a certain ethnicity?

**[Eth\_Responsibility\_1]**

2. To what extent are people in control of being of a certain ethnicity?

**[Eth\_Responsibility\_2]**

#### ***Education condition* [Edu\_Responsibility]**

*[(1) Not at all, (7) Entirely]*

1. To what extent are people responsible for being less or higher educated?

**[Edu\_Responsibility\_1]**

2. To what extent are people in control of their level of education? **[Edu\_Responsibility\_2]**

### **Common question for both conditions**

#### ***Exposure to systemic inequalities* [Exposure\_1]**

Due to discrimination, some people face challenges in finding jobs, accessing good education, healthcare, housing, and being represented in political and leadership positions. Think about your own social network (friends, family, colleagues, or community members) when answering the following question

*[1 = Never; 2 = Very rarely; 3 = Rarely; 4 = Sometimes; 5 = Often; 6 = Very often; 7 =*

*(Almost) always]*

#### ***Religiosity* [Religiosity]**

[(1)Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7)Agree strongly]

1. In my life, I experience the presence of the Divine (i.e., God). **[Religiosity\_1]**
2. My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life. **[Religiosity\_2]**
3. I try hard to carry my religion over into all other dealings in life. **[Religiosity\_3]**

***Political Orientation* [Pol\_orientation]**

In political matters, people talk of left and right. How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking

- 1- How would you describe your political orientation in general? **[Pol\_orientation\_1]**

*Very left wing (1), Center (4), Very right wing (7)*

- 2- How would you describe your political orientation on social issues? **[Pol\_orientation\_2]**

*Very left wing (1), Center (4), Very right wing (7)*

- 3- How would you describe your political orientation on economic issues? **[Pol\_orientation\_3]**

*Very left wing (1), Center (4), Very right wing (7)*

***Belief in need justice principle* [Need]**

[(1)Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7)Agree strongly]

There are many different views as to what makes a society fair or unfair. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the three statements.

- 1) A society is fair if it takes care of those who are poor and needy. **[Need\_1]**
- 2) Society is fair if people taking care of their children or their dependent relatives receive special support and benefits. **[Need\_2]**
- 3) A society is fair if all people have sufficient nutrition, shelter, clothing as well as access to education and medical care. **[Need\_3]**

***Support for General Government policies on affirmative action and redistributive policies***  
**[Gov\_policies]**

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following policies

*[(1)Disagree strongly, (2), Moderately disagree, (3) Slightly disagree (4) Neither agree nor disagree, (5) Slightly agree, (6) Moderately agree (7)Agree strongly]*

1. Reserving university admission positions for students from a financially or socioeconomically disadvantaged background. **[Gov\_policies\_1]**
2. Reserving some employment positions in workplaces for the financially or socioeconomically disadvantaged. **[Gov\_policies\_2]**
3. Wage subsidies, whereby the government pays employers to *hire* people from disadvantaged groups, to increase their number of jobs. **[Gov\_policies\_3]**
4. Wage subsidies, whereby the government pays employers to *train* people from disadvantaged groups, to increase their potential earnings. **[Gov\_policies\_4]**

**Demographics**

***Age* [Age]**

Less than 18 (1)

18-25 years (2)

26-35 (3)

36-45 (4)

46-55 (5)

56-65 (6)

66 and above (7)

***EU Citizenship* [Nationality]**

Are you a citizen of a country in the European Union?

Yes (1)

No (2)

***Gender* [Gender]**

Are you...

Female (5)

Male (6)

Non-binary / third gender (7)

Other, please specify (9)

***Ethnicity* [Ethnicity]**

Are you a member of the ethnic majority in your country in Europe?

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

Prefer not to say (4)

***Level of Education* [Level of Education]**

1. No qualification. (1)
2. Less than an upper secondary diploma. (2)
3. Upper secondary diploma or equivalent (general or vocational; e.g., A-level, BTEC, Abitur/ Fachhochschulreife, HAVO, VWO, MBO 2-3-4, matricular examination). (3)
4. Short-cycle or vocational tertiary education (e.g., MBO-4 specialist, HBO Associate degree, Ausbildung, Berufsoberschule, Abendgymnasium, specialist Vocational). (4)
5. Bachelor's degree or equivalent (University, Applied Sciences, Polytechnics, Fachhochschule (FH), WO, HBO). (5)
6. Master's degree, or equivalent. (6)
7. Ph.D. or equivalent. (7)
8. Other, please specify. (8)



## Appendix B

### Assumption Checks

**Figure B1**

*Assumption Checks of Linearity and Homoscedasticity using Residual Plot*

