Meritocracy and diversity: tensions and contradictions

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Abstract

We empirically examine tensions in narratives of meritocracy and diversity through twenty semi-structured interviews with high-skilled foreign workers (primarily based in the United States and the United Kingdom, and predominantly of colour). Existing studies have established that meritocracy is a complex and multi-faceted construct, riddled with tensions and contradictions. However, organisations continue the diffusion of meritocratic sentiments through processes, which ironically reproduce inequalities. Minority groups are most negatively affected, with disparities being further heightened by multiple intersections of difference such as gender, race, and foreignness. Foreign workers of colour find themselves precariously placed, where legal requirements exacerbate their marginalisation, which is further heightened for women. While diversity initiatives are proposed to address inequalities arising from meritocratic sentiments, they have come under criticism as token gestures. Our findings reveal participants simultaneously believing in and questioning meritocracy, showing tensions in their positioning stories, demonstrating the complexity of meritocracy.

Keywords

Meritocracy, diversity, foreign workers, gender, intersectionality

Introduction

"Every selection of one is a rejection of the many." (Young 1958,12)

These words, taken from Michael Young's *THE RISE OF MERITOCRACY* illustrates meritocratic systems as inevitably generate exclusion despite claiming to be fair. At the present moment, a growing body of literature suggests that organisations continue to perpetuate the ideals of meritocracy despite evidence identifying tensions (Banerjee, Zhang, and Amarshi 2025; Castilla and Benard 2010; Castilla and Ranganathan 2020; Śliwa and Johansson 2014; van Dijk et al. 2020). However, the tensions highlight further complexities, especially when it comes to considering intersecting dimensions of foreignness, race, and gender (Cruz et al. 2020; Johansson and Śliwa 2014).

Against this backdrop, we empirically examine the intricate relationship between meritocracy and diversity by exploring narratives of foreign workers. Given the paradoxical tensions within notions of meritocracy and diversity initiatives (such as positive discrimination) (Banerjee, Zhang, and Amarshi 2025; Noon 2010; Noon and Ogbonna 2021), as well as the particularly precarious position foreign workers find themselves in (Banerjee, Zhang, and Amarshi 2025; Cruz et al. 2020; Grigoleit-Richter 2017; Johansson and Śliwa 2014), this paper addresses the following research question: what do foreign workers' narratives tell us about the relationship between meritocracy and diversity?

As Littler (2018) points out, meritocracy is the idea that one can rise to the top through the combination of opportunity offered by society and talent. Meritocracy is the notion that we can all be anything we want through effort and ambition (Reay 2018), based on underlying assumptions about processes being fair and positive (Sliwa and Johansson 2014). However, Littler (2018) articulates five problems of meritocracy. We provide an overview of these problems, which forms a useful foundation, before reviewing the related empirical evidence on

meritocracy within Management and Organisation Studies (MOS). The first problem is its endorsement of a "competitive, linear, hierarchical system" (Littler 2018, 3), resulting in some people being left behind. The second problem is the assumption that talent and intelligence are innate, and individuals are inherently different from one another. The third problem relates to a metaphor of a ladder, that is often used to refer to meritocracy, where climbing the ladder is much harder for some than others. The fourth problem of meritocracy is the idea of placing some professions at the top, uncritically. For instance, entrepreneurs and CEOs may be seen as professions to aspire to, as opposed to professions such as being a nurse or a VET. This is in part perpetuated by popular culture. The fifth problem is meritocracy functioning as an ideological myth, which extends social inequalities by overvaluing effort and veiling the unevenness of the social playing field (Littler 2018). Littler's (2018) critique of meritocracy highlights the tensions that echo the experiences of foreign workers in our study. For instance, visa restrictions mean that the assumption of equal starting points perpetuated by the ideology of meritocracy is problematic and does not apply to foreign workers as it creates unequal conditions for them. Therefore, although the ideology of meritocracy is adopted universally, it is important to consider the tensions within it.

Relatedly, several studies in the MOS literature have identified these tensions. For instance, although organisations claim to represent meritocratic ideologies, studies reduce meritocracy to a myth (Acker 2006; Amis, Mair, and Munir 2020; Castilla and Benard 2010; Castilla and Ranganathan 2020; Śliwa and Johansson 2014; van Dijk et al. 2020). Moreover, organisational structures directly and indirectly contribute to the reproduction of inequality within organisations (Acker 1990; Amis, Mair, and Munir 2020; Ray 2019). This implies a contradiction between beliefs perpetuated by institutions: the assumption that one can achieve success irrespective of their background; and converse to that assumption, the reality of lived experiences of minority individuals. What is particularly noteworthy is the existing

contradiction in notions of meritocracy and diversity, giving rise to a diversity-meritocracy paradox (Konrad, Richard, and Yang 2021). This paradox refers to the duality between the interconnectedness between the supposedly opposing concepts of diversity and meritocracy.

Such a paradox between meritocracy and pro-diversity initiatives (such as advantaging minority groups) has also been highlighted by Ponce de Leon and Kay (2021) who note the irony of egalitarians supporting pro-diversity initiatives, which benefits minority groups, paradoxically corresponding to antiegalitarian beliefs. However, Noon (2010) argues that meritocratic principles can be misapplied to mask prejudice about certain groups being unsuitable to perform certain types of work. Such positive discrimination operates on the premise that disadvantaged groups who require enhanced support, exist in society and workplaces (Noon 2010); whilst meritocracy operates on the basis that hard work creates a level playing field, thus denying the existence of disadvantage. While pro-diversity initiatives and meritocratic sentiments appear on opposite ends of the spectrum, we argue that they are in fact interrelated, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach in examining interrelationships between such ideas.

We focus on the lived experiences of foreign workers, whose marginalisation is heightened due to several factors. In this study, we specifically focus on the factors of foreignness, gender, and race. Subsets of foreign workers find themselves in precarious positions, where inequality is heightened due to gender (Grigoleit-Richter 2017; Rodriguez and Scurry 2019; Śliwa and Johansson 2014), race (Cruz et al., 2020; Nkomo and Al-Ariss, 2014; Van Laer and Janssens, 2017), and polarising ideas on migration in Western democracies (Özkazanç-Pan, 2019). Such experiences of marginalisation can be interpreted through the interplay of intersecting dimensions (Amis et al., 2018; Köllen, 2014; Köllen, 2021; Prasad et al., 2007), of foreignness, gender, and race. Such inequalities are heightened for foreign workers of colour (Cruz et al., 2020). Interestingly, what constitutes foreignness is complex,

with substantive literature on the myriad understandings (see Ahmed 2004; Cruz et al. 2020; Honig 1998). By “foreign”, we mean racial, marginalised factors alongside issues of culture, immigration rules, religion, and other personal factors that generate feelings of “foreignness”. Our presentation of “foreignness” denotes personalised sentiment, where Ahmed (2004) post-colonially describes the White population as the normative ordinary mainstream, where imagined others become a threat to the ordinary. So too, in this paper, when we indicate a country’s mainstream, we imply its majority, “ordinary” population. As our participants were primarily concentrated in the West, by mainstream we generally mean original citizens of the host country, who in our participants’ views are mainstream. There are thus different interpretations of foreignness. The most commonly understood technical definition of a foreign worker is that foreign workers are those who work in a country that they are not a citizen of (Uslegal 2025). However, understandings of foreignness are varied, showing that its meaning is more intricate than it initially appears. For instance, Honig’s (1998) understanding of foreignness does not strictly refer to the legal status of individuals. Symbolically, Honig’s definition of foreigners in the context of discussing an immigrant America may also include citizens, as they can be positioned as foreign in narratives that sustain democracy. Foreignness is not limited to a demographic label but can include citizens whose difference (such as ethnicity) helps tell a political narrative, such as that of an immigrant America (Honig, 1998). Therefore, feelings of foreignness may transcend nationality, which consequently warrants further examination of individual narratives of foreignness.

Konrad, Richard, and Yang (2021) call for empirical studies that examine the impact of intersectionality on meritocracy and diversity, which our study addresses by looking at the impact of both gender and foreignness on narratives of meritocracy and diversity. While Banerjee, Zhang, and Amarshi (2025) have investigated the diversity-meritocracy paradox empirically, by examining both the employers’ and skilled-immigrants’ perspectives and

revealing differences between the way in which meritocracy was constructed, we argue that there is a gap in understanding the nuances and tensions of meritocracy that are present within foreign workers' narratives. Our study addresses this gap by teasing out the nuances within the narratives of foreign workers through their own personal narratives. Notably, given the importance of considering intersectional dimensions, and the gendered conceptions of the ideal worker (Acker 2006, 1990), our study also highlights the gendering of foreignness.

We therefore examine high-skilled men and women foreign workers' narratives about their experiences in the workplace through twenty semi-structured interviews. Our findings indicate a simultaneous questioning of and belief in meritocracy by participants. The intersectional dimensions highlight the othering of foreign workers through visa restrictions, and the simultaneous gendering and de-gendering of work. We find that cynicism of diversity initiatives is prevalent even amongst those who had been disadvantaged by organisational and legal requirements.

Our paper contributes to the MOS literature on meritocracy, which is complex and multi-faceted, and riddled with tensions and contradictions (Banerjee, Zhang, and Amarshi 2025; Castilla and Ranganathan 2020; Konrad, Richard, and Yang 2021; Śliwa and Johansson 2014). We demonstrate empirically how meritocracy has varied, and sometimes opposing, understandings. Our findings reveal tensions within narratives of meritocracy and diversity, emphasising that foreign workers are not a monolith and have various positioning stories that show conflicting understandings of meritocracy questioning the credibility of individualistic accounts.

Background Literature

Meritocracy is a multi-faceted and complex construct (Castilla and Ranganathan, 2020; Noon, 2010; Scully, 2002). This can be demonstrated through Michael Young's work of satirical fiction, *THE RISE OF MERITOCRACY,* in which cases for and against meritocracy are presented (Young 1994). Young uses the facetious label, "meritocracy," for a dystopian society in which individuals are exclusively evaluated by IQ and effort; however, systems continue to discriminate through choice definitions of "merit" (Amis, Mair, and Munir 2020, 18). Young's futuristic work examines meritocracy in a world where the most talented and capable are rulers (Garforth 2018). His argument is against a system that stifles creativity and promotes a kind of meritocracy, which he believes to be harmful to those less privileged (Morrin, 2017). Young's scepticism of meritocracy is reflected in MOS; for instance, Amis et al. (2020) argue that despite the institutionalisation of merit-based practices, organisations across the world remain nonmeritocratic in multiple ways, thus highlighting meritocracy's complexity. Other scholars corroborate this (for e.g. Banerjee, Zhang, and Amarshi 2025; Konrad, Richard, and Yang 2021; Śliwa and Johansson 2014; Castilla and Benard 2010; Castilla and Ranganathan 2020).

There are several issues with the perpetuation of meritocratic ideology in organisations. The first issue is the notion that workplaces are conduits for equality, which has been challenged (Tolbert and Castilla 2017; Zanoni et al. 2010). Structures and processes conceal inequality through the legitimisation of processes (Amis, Mair, and Munir 2020; Ray 2019; Scully 2002; van Dijk et al. 2020). Studies have shown that individuals from disadvantaged groups face obstacles that influence their performance (van Dijk et al. 2020), which in turn leads to diminished opportunities and rewards (Acker 2006; van Dijk et al. 2020; Zanoni et al. 2010). Moreover, research contends that overcoming these obstacles may come at a huge personal cost for ethnic minority professionals (Van Laer and Janssens, 2017).

The second issue involves a paradox of meritocracy, which cautions us against accepting merit as a widely accepted principle in organisational contexts. Banerjee, Zhang, and Amarshi (2025) tested the diversity meritocracy paradox empirically, by focusing on skilled immigrants versus employers' perspective, and found that whilst Canadian Employers claimed to endorse principles of meritocracy, preferential treatment was given to Canadian applicants through an identity-blind approach under the euphemism of workplace fit. New immigrants were expected to assimilate to Canadian norms. Immigrants were expected to shed their foreignness, and foreignness was seen as interfering with merit, as it was marked as inferior. Castilla and Benard (2010) highlight this paradox by showing gender and racial disparities existing, despite the alleged generic shift towards pay for performance in organisations. Additionally, Castilla (2008) finds that gender, race, and nationality differences affect salary growth. Despite equal scores on performance evaluations, women and minorities receive lower compensation. Additionally, providing a managerial perspective on performance evaluations, Castilla and Ranganathan (2020), through an in-depth qualitative study demonstrate managers' decision-making as influenced by their own experiences of receiving performance evaluations. Upon assuming managerial roles, managers reproduce their own positive outcomes or attempt to rectify their experiences of negative outcomes. Significant to our study, there is evidence that women and racial minorities experience performance appraisals in organisations differently (Cox and Nkomo 1986; Wilson 2010). Hence it must be recognised that merit is not consistently comprehended as a distributive principle.

The third issue interrelates with individual beliefs. Strikingly, meritocratic attitudes in organisations can extend to individual beliefs. Individuals believe in merit through a rationalised narrative of their career trajectory (Pérez and and Sabelis 2020), despite the previously discussed evidence. Knowles and and Lowery (2012) reveal that members of the mainstream (such as White people) who endorse meritocracy, maintain a self-view by denying

their privilege as well as the existence of racial inequity. Faith in meritocracy therefore remains at the heart of how inequality is reproduced (Scully 2002). The belief in, and application of, meritocratic principles unfortunately has the opposite effect, because by denying issues of diversity that do not fit within the myth of meritocracy, organisations may produce further inequalities (Sliwa and Johansson, 2014). Such individual beliefs further inequalities, highlighting the complexities and contradictions of meritocracy.

The final issue is the framing of individuals as disembodied subjects (Acker 1990, 2006; Śliwa and Johansson 2014) which effects the absence of considering the gendered (and racialised) processes of the creation of organisational hierarchies and jobs. Acker (1990) argues that organisations and organisational structures are gendered; characterised by workers being disembodied, which means that there is an assumption through organisational thinking that workers who are so universalised and disembodied, are implicitly male. Acker (1990) argues that as organisations are not gender neutral, the notion of this abstract worker, who is posited as disembodied and universal in fact has images of masculinity subsumed within it, which in turn marginalises women and contributes to a gender hierarchy within organisations.

Here, it is crucial to consider intersectionality as the lack of considering multiple bases of inequality becomes an obstacle in achieving social justice aims. Crenshaw (1989) introduced the term "intersectionality" as focusing on the combined effects of the multiple intersecting identities creating "interlocking forms of oppression" (Collins 1990, 225). Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 1990) provides an essential analytic lens for this study, because foreign workers' experiences are not shaped by a single axis of identity but by the interlocking effects of foreignness, race, gender. Scholars recognise the importance of intersectionality, yet it continues to be in the margins of MOS (Dennissen, Benschop and Van Den Brink, 2020; Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher and Nkomo, 2016). Intersectionality and meritocracy have an intricate relationship, as intersectionality considers multiple bases of inequality while

meritocracy perpetuates the idea that gender, race, and class are irrelevant for the societal structure. Sliwa and Johansson (2014) and Konrad et al. (2021) suggest that further theorising is needed to explore intersectional dimensions in relation to views on meritocracy and diversity. Furthermore, discrimination towards foreign workers is heightened through intersecting dimensions of race and gender (Cruz et al. 2020; Grigoleit-Richter 2017; Köllen 2014; Rodriguez and Scurry 2019). For instance, Grigoleit-Richter (2017) found that highly skilled women immigrants experienced othering and had to constantly prove themselves in the male-dominated STEM fields in Germany. Processes in relation to hiring decisions of immigrants preserve racial and cultural hierarchies within organisations (Özkazanç-Pan, 2019). Moreover, notions of foreignness are complex where as stated, Honig (1998) describes the myth of an immigrant America, where foreigners are supplementary to the nation, effectively outside the mainstream. The "capitalist foreigner" (Honig 1998, 4) is materialistic in her acquisition of the country's resources. Honig's conceptualisation of foreigners gives them a supplemental status, where it is not race alone, but not being native-born that excludes them from the mainstream.

Diversity initiatives have been offered as solutions to some of the above issues that affect foreign workers. Noon (2010) and van Dijk et al. (2020) recommend that opportunities be awarded to disadvantaged groups, described as positive discrimination. Interestingly, as aforementioned, Ponce de Leon and Kay (2021) address the contradictions around what they call "ironic egalitarianism", where pro-diversity goals encourage egalitarians to mobilise beliefs and hierarchy-enhancing myths (otherwise associated with antiegalitarians). For instance, ironic egalitarianism could involve using essentialist categories of difference in organisational decision-making when these decisions benefit members of minority groups. Here, egalitarians would support categories of difference to positively discriminate against minority groups, which ironically corresponds with typically antiegalitarian beliefs. This elucidates the complex relationship between meritocracy and pro-diversity initiatives such as

positive discrimination and/or affirmative action in the US context. To this end, (Noon 2010, 734) writes:

> Opponents argue that it [positive discrimination] infringes merit by giving preferential treatment based on social group characteristics (sex, race, etc.) while supporters argue that only by taking these characteristics into consideration can a truly meritocratic process be ensured. Overturning the notion of meritocracy produces an uncomfortable alternative proposition for the advantaged group: that meritocracy is not the prevalent norm and so, logically, some people in the advantaged group do not deserve to be in their jobs.

Therefore, we posit that meritocracy and diversity initiatives, despite occupying opposing ends of the spectrum, appear intricately intertwined. This is largely because understandings of meritocracy vary, and one such understanding relates to considering demographic characteristics in decision making processes; while other understandings, which oppose diversity initiatives would not deem such an understanding as meritocratic.

National and institutional contexts are similarly important whilst examining diversity initiatives. Different legal frameworks across diverse countries influence how specific dimensions of diversity management programmes are emphasised or neglected (Köllen, 2021). In the US, positive discrimination (or Affirmative Action [AA]), is legal. AA programmes were introduced to address the inequalities faced by African Americans. Despite such initiatives, White persons have held a higher status, and from this have benefitted from higher levels of confidence (Jarvis Thomson, 2013; Köllen, 2021).

Contrastingly, in the UK, positive discrimination is unlawful. Generally, an employer recruiting an individual due to a protected characteristic would be discriminating under the Equality Act 2010. Some examples that would constitute unlawful discrimination under the

Equality Act 2010 include recruiting or promoting an individual solely due to a relevant protected characteristic or setting quotas to recruit or promote a particular number of people with protected characteristics (Gov.uk 2023). Positive action however is lawful and involves encouraging people who share a protected characteristic to overcome disadvantage (Webber, 2021). Positive action is a generic term denoting policies and practices aimed at supporting underrepresented groups; yet the disadvantages experienced by such groups are not specifically considered when formal decisions are made. There are limited circumstances under which, the provisions apply for positive action, which include the 'tie-breaker' provision allowing employers to give priority to an individual from a disadvantaged group only when considering two candidates of equal merit. There should be no blanket policy favouring one group (Gov.uk 2023). However, with positive discrimination, protected characteristics such as sex, race/ethnicity, or disability become legitimate criteria for formal decision-making processes (Noon, 2010). Nevertheless, there have been debates around this in the UK: Home Office figures show that 92.7% of police officers in England and Wales are White as of end of March, 2020 (Gov.uk 2025), calling for positive discrimination to promote representation of ethnic minorities (Webber 2021); similarly in Wales, a Union leader called for positive discrimination in favour of Black and ethnic minority women applying for jobs (Faragher 2019). However, this could be argued given the existence of the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) provision in the UK, which is a duty for public sector authorities in the UK to consider the impact of their policies and decisions on people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, but it is important to clarify that this is not the same as positive discrimination, and exists to ensure that public sector authorities consider unlawful discrimination and the needs of individuals who experience inequalities, by treating some groups favourably. Therefore, it is important to understand the nuances in debates, such as the Union leader's call for greater representation in the police force, which often conflates these distinct legal concepts.

To summarise, the review of the existing literature has revealed several issues with the perpetuation of a meritocratic ideology within organisations, which include: first the concealment of inequalities through structures and processes; secondly, evidence of the paradox of meritocracy (Banerjee, Zhang, and Amarshi 2025; Castilla and Ranganathan 2020; Konrad, Richard, and Yang 2021); thirdly, individual beliefs in the existence of meritocratic society, despite evidence suggesting the contrary; and finally the framing of individuals as disembodied subjects, where intersecting dimensions of race, gender and foreignness, with varying definitions of foreignness, along with the varying legal/institutional contexts, further complicates this aspect (Cruz et al. 2020; Sliwa and Johansson 2014). Consequently, we uncover the complexities of meritocracy, diversity, and intersectionality as they affect foreign workers through their narratives.

Methodology

Research approach and method

We sought to understand how foreign workers formulated their own experiences at the workplace within the socio-cultural-legal context they inhabit. We view the world as socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1967) and recognise that participants construct their own realities in numerous ways. We take the position of constructionism, according to which, social actors continually create social phenomena and their meanings (Clark et al. 2021). Consistent with this paradigm, a qualitative approach was best suited because we were interested in the meanings participants gave to their lived experiences, as opposed to a measure of things (Howard and Bruce 2017). We wanted to capture the nuances and the tensions within participant narratives, which a qualitative approach would allow. We opted for semi-structured

interviews as the method, given the specific focus of our research and to ensure that the questions asked are meaningful to our research topic, whilst simultaneously allowing for flexibility (Clark et al. 2021). This method allowed us to capture participants' stories, which are important as they can shape orientations to action (Greene 2017; Griesbach 2025), and help frame the situation in a particular way, highlighting certain portions and masking others (Goffman 1974). Griesbach (2025) refers to positioning stories as narratives about structural features of work. These are constantly shifting narratives that individuals use to make sense of the structural features of their work. While Griesbach (2025) in her study refers to precarious work, she demonstrates how conflicting narratives, told via positioning stories, undermines individualistic, meritocratic and entrepreneurial ideologies. While we do not focus on precarious work, continually shifting narratives helps us understand the complexities of foreignness more deeply. Table 2 consists of illustrative questions and the aspects examined in the study. While we did not specifically ask questions about race, they emerged in relation to participant's descriptions of foreignness.

Participants

We conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with ten men and ten women foreign workers. While foreign workers are those who work in a country, they are not a citizen of, we also included participants who were naturalised citizens with prior experience of having been a foreign worker. Among these, are also participants who were born in the UK, but did not have British passports at the time. As previously explained, we were interested in feelings of foreignness, which transcend nationality (Honig, 1998). While most of our participants were of colour (and Indian origin), two individuals were of UK/European origin, and one was East Asian. We interviewed both men and women, enabling a richer understanding of how multiple

categories of difference influence lived experiences of foreign workers in organisations, and in turn, how they shape their views on meritocracy and diversity (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participants

Number	*Pseudonym*	*Gender*	*Occupation*	*Nationality*	*Country of birth*	*Race*	*Country of occupation*
1	Aliya	Woman	Awaiting the start of a high-skilled position in the service industry	Taiwanese	Taiwan	Asian	UK
2	Eleni	Woman	Account analyst	Greek	UK	White	UK
3	Lakshmi	Woman	Lawyer	British	India	Asian	UK
4	Mary	Woman	Pharmacist	Indian	India	Asian	UK
5	Meera	Woman	Consultant in the philanthropy sector	British	India	Asian	UK
6	Nayanika	Woman	Academic	Indian	India	Asian	UK
7	Neena	Woman	Academic	Indian	India	Asian	UK
8	Poonam	Woman	Media consultant	British	India	Asian	UK

9	Rekha	Woman	Electrical engineer	Indian	India	Asian	USA
10	Sheena	Woman	Orthodontist	German	India	Asian	Germany
11	Arjun	Man	IT consultant	Indian	India	Asian	Belgium
12	Atman	Man	Engineer	Indian	USA	Asian	USA
13	Billy	Man	Financial analyst	Indian	India	Asian	UK
14	Karan	Man	Financial analyst	Indian	UK	Asian	UK
15	Kevin	Man	E-commerce	Indian	India	Asian	UK
16	Leonard	Man	IT consultant	Indian	India	Asian	USA
17	Martin	Man	Financial analyst	Indian	India	Asian	UK
18	Rohan	Man	Finance investment manager	Indian	India	Asian	USA
19	Thomas	Man	IT consultant	Indian	India	Asian	USA
20	Max	Man	Researcher	British	UK	White	USA

To obtain a richer understanding of participants' narratives, it is useful to provide contextual information surrounding visa and immigration rules at the time of data collection (2016-2017) in the participants' countries of occupation. In the UK, foreign workers required employer sponsorship under the Tier 2 (General) skilled worker visa. Major changes happened around April 2016, which involved introducing a £35,000 salary threshold for those on the Tier 2 visa for settlement, which is known as Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) (UK Home Office 2016). In the US, H1-B visas for specialty occupations were most dominant when it came to employment-based migration, but this was subject to a cap of $65,000 plus $20,000 for US

Master's holders (USCIS 2015). Belgium, at the time had the type B work permit for foreign workers, the salary threshold for which also increased in January 2016 to €39,824 for highly skilled personnel and €66,442 for personnel in a management position. Both Belgium and Germany at the time of data collection offered the EU Blue Card for high-skilled non-EU nationals (BAL 2016).

Our main sampling criterion was that of recruiting high skilled individuals (those with master's degree and/or professional occupations) with foreign work experience. All interviewees fall within the category of high-skilled foreign workers with specialist qualifications. We used purposive sampling to recruit participants that best fit the requirements of the study (Clark et al. 2021), which included having foreign work experience, and being highly skilled. We also wanted to ensure that we interviewed men and women foreign workers to explore gender differences in shaping participant experiences. In addition to using purposive sampling, we used convenience sampling by using our networks to recruit participants. All but two participants were based in the UK and the US with differences in institutional and legal discourses (highlighted in the background literature) surrounding diversity management between the two countries. The visa rules in both UK and the US have been constantly evolving.

The remaining two were based in Belgium and Germany. We view these differences as a strength to enable us to examine how the institutional and social context shapes participant experiences. Most of our participants were of Indian origin. Although this was not a criterion for sampling, it is essential to acknowledge that this shapes the data obtained; for instance, it enabled us to understand the racialisation of foreignness for those of Indian origin as compared to the experiences of individuals of European origin. We use a subset of the data from our own larger study about foreign workers, where given the vastness of data, we realised that meritocracy and diversity warranted a deeper examination given their rich theorising.

Therefore, the formulation of the research question for this study was an iterative process. We present this exploration herein. All participant names are pseudonymised to protect anonymity. Ethics approval was obtained from author one's institution at the time from the committee SOM-REC framework reference (P1415-956).

Table 2 Illustrative interview questions

Aspect investigated	*Interview questions*
Introductory/background information to understand participants' understanding of foreignness	Introductory questions about job How do you understand foreignness?
Lived experience of being a foreign worker due to gender	What examples can you give, if any, of prejudice that you may have experienced (overt and covert) due to your gender?
Experiences with visa/immigration issues	What examples can you give, if any, about visa or immigration related issues while applying to this job?
Policies and practices in the organisation	What are your thoughts on the policies and practices in your organisation? (Such as selection, rewards, provision of leave, career opportunities)
Perceived fairness of organisational practices/policies	To what extent are policies and practices fair?

The interview data that we examine emerged out of questions in the table. Given that the interview style was semi-structured, there were slight variations in phrasing, and further questions were asked based on responses.

Reflexivity

In line with Berger's (2015) argument that the positions of researchers affect the research, we highlight how our experiences and identities link to this research process. As authors we are cognisant that our experiences as women foreign workers informed this study. Our identities and experiences were therefore intertwined in the research process. We have experienced and continue to experience the dilemmas of meritocracy ourselves with its complexities entrenched in our daily working lives. Illustratively, during data analysis, Researcher A was actively involved in EDI activities in her organisation, simultaneously advocating for and resisting the performative aspects of such activities. She believed that while the greater social justice aims of such programmes should be fulfilled in principle, there is a danger in such activities becoming mere tick-box exercises to enhance organisational image – subsequently veiling issues of inequality. Researcher B has meanwhile found herself in work situations where she was asked to train those less experienced than her but on a higher pay scale based on their birth as White men. Researcher A was in a hierarchically more privileged position compared to Researcher B. Both researchers used their personal networks to recruit participants and had familiarity with some of the participants.

Data preparation and analysis process

Once the interviews were conducted, the researchers themselves transcribed them. During the transcription process, notes were taken on any interesting and emerging findings.

Both of us, as authors, read the transcripts actively to look for meaning behind narratives (Thompson 2022) and made written notes on word documents. Data was thematically analysed and then consolidated into codes adopting an abductive approach (Charmaz, 2020). Abduction allowed us to find a middle ground between inductive and deductive approach as we engage with the extant theoretical understanding pertaining to meritocracy and foreign workers' experiences, as well as our empirical data (see Thompson 2022). In iterative process, we both re-coded transcripts to ensure minimisation of bias. Some codes were categorised under meritocracy at first, then re-coded to gain a more granular understanding of the data, then categorised into themes. As Rouse et al. (2025) point out, the potential theoretical contribution of the study evolved as the analysis progressed, and the analysis and theorising of data occurred iteratively. A table illustrating the description of each theme is provided below.

Table 3 presents the themes and their descriptions.

Table 3 Themes and descriptions

Themes	*Description of the theme*
Notions of foreignness	This theme represents participants' understandings of foreignness.
Overvaluing effort	This theme corresponds to one of the problems of meritocracy and consists of excerpts that signify the importance of putting effort, taking control of one's own career, and rejecting discrimination by emphasising effort.

The marginalisation of foreign workers due to visa restrictions	This theme describes participants' narratives of visa requirements, leading to their differing experiences.
De-gendering, gendering, and gender differences	This theme encompasses the dissociation/association of gender and jobs, as well as highlights the gender differences in relation to views on meritocracy.
Questioning Meritocracy	This theme refers to participants' questioning the systems and process as being fair.
Diversity initiatives	This theme encompasses participants' views on diversity initiatives, such as affirmative actions, as well as organisational level policies.

Findings

We review and present our findings, below. We begin by outlining participants' understandings of foreignness, which collectively corresponded to otherness, highlighting the complexity of foreignness, given the wide-ranging understandings presented by participants. This provides useful context to the intricate relationship between meritocracy and diversity reflected in participant narratives. We then discuss the six sub-themes, which relate to the tensions between meritocracy and diversity.

Foreignness as otherness

Participants had varied understandings of foreignness based on their lived experiences. This theme shows how racialised and cultural aspects, as well as feelings of belonging and not belonging, create conditions under which meritocracy and diversity may be interpreted.

Kevin, an Indian national living in the UK, repeatedly associates foreignness with race and physical appearance:

> For me, over here [foreignness means] being brown.
>
> I feel foreign, like there's an underlying resistance…an underlying notion that if you're brown, you're automatically assumed to be a taxi driver or waiter.

Here, foreignness is racialised: thrusting foreigners of colour to particular occupations, where racialised assumptions imply that they are unlikely to be in high-skilled occupations. For Kevin racism is born of physicality – he notes fellow foreign workers with physical features being closer to those of the dominant group, as experiencing less racism and exclusion:

> I think it's more about being brown because I don't think Indians who have fair skin have to go through that.

The racialisation of Kevin is deep-rooted in colourism, indicating that race is not experienced as a single consistent identity, whereby light-skinned foreigners are better treated due to being viewed as Anglicised. Therefore, there are perceptions of better treatment. Kevin protests assumptions made on race, even while living and working in a multicultural city:

> So, it comes out more prominently in the office place when I'm talking to ten White people and I'm the only non-European, I'm the only non-British person…I have that kind of feeling that I'm the outsider.

Concurrently, other participants reiterate their differential features as a marker of foreignness, where Billy describes circumstances of foreignness, stemming from that he "look[s] different".

Poonam, similarly, despite having spent her formative years in a foreign country, reiterates that her "primary culture" is from the country of her birth, not the country of her teenage years:

> I feel foreign in the sense that because I wasn't born in the UK, my primary culture comes from India. The way I see, and also my interests would be Indian. While at the same time if I was to go back to India, because my teenage years were spent growing up in the UK, I don't quite feel I fit in there, so I'm a bit of a foreigner there as well.

Poonam views foreignness as otherness, stating:

> I'm always treated as the additional, not the primary.

Though naturalised, Poonam retains a dual identity, unable to identify completely with either of the cultures that form her identity. Poonam's crisis of self, as being of the dominant culture's nationality and yet remaining outside in terms of her heritage, is illustrated in the numerous processes that form her identity. She remains simultaneously insider and outsider of the cultures that constitute her origins and her formative years, resulting in a cognitive dissonance characterised by an inconsistent and almost inexistent sense of belonging. Interestingly, despite her naturalisation, Poonam feels a sense of otherness, which emphasises the racialisation of foreign workers, but is also characterised by being the "additional". Poonam's dual identity

and the liminal space she finds herself in – between belonging and not belonging – seems embedded in differences, where one struggles between shedding a previous identity and adopting a new one.

Similarly, Nayanika, an Indian national working in the UK, similarly elaborates on how while she "fits in", she still feels excluded. Her status as a foreign worker affects her identity, but her way of thinking fits in with the host country placing her in a similarly liminal space, where she feels both a sense of belonging and of exclusion.

> I feel like in many ways I fit in in the UK quite well, despite having roots in another country. My way of thinking, and just being, is very similar to the culture here, so it was never difficult for me to live here or adapt. It's the media and the anti-immigrant rhetoric that makes me feel like an outsider sometimes.

The effects of the rise in negative attitudes towards immigration and hostility towards the foreign workforce is felt by Nayanika, contributing to her experience of liminality – between belonging and not belonging. Nayanika's views highlight the complexity of foreignness, where it is not solely about being from another country, but the castigation of the foreigner's very presence in the host country, manifested through both direct and subtle practises, constituting the otherness that these subjects experience.

The understandings of foreignness then provide a useful context for us to understand participants' conflicting narratives of meritocracy as presented in the themes below.

Overvaluing one's effort

> I was very happy as a foreign worker; I was treated fairly. Having said that, I did my bit, I didn't shirk my work. Whatever I did, I did sincerely so I think it works both ways.

> If you are a good employee, good at your job, and do not give any cause to complain, they also treat you fairly. I have strong faith that if you are good at your job, and if you are sincere and honest, you will be successful wherever you are, whether it's in India or whether it is in [the] UK and [the] UK is quite fair. I feel they are quite fair and if they need you, they will take your help; if they don't need you, why would they? (Lakshmi, UK)

There are several observations that can be made here. Lakshmi displays a staunch belief in meritocracy depicted through her belief in just-rewards for work. In this, she refers to the "strong faith" she has in being successful if one is good at one's job, which is perhaps a primary feature of meritocracy, in relation to overvaluing effort. She also refers to the national/legal context of the UK, with its strict immigration rules, as well as the organisational setting in which she found herself. Lakshmi places emphasis on doing her job, not shirking her work, helping, and in return being treated fairly. By overvaluing her own individual effort, Lakshmi feels the need to justify her usefulness to the state and to the organisation.

Lakshmi's firm belief in meritocracy appears to have evolved as a coping mechanism. A sense of obligation to the employer is observed, where she emphasises the need for foreign workers to be "good at [their] job."

Another interviewee, Nayanika, mindful of her "reputation" meanwhile states:

> I think the systems in place definitely work for some people. I totally believe that without hard work, it is impossible to get anywhere, but things like reputation, and perceptions play a big role. Do you come across as a serious worker for instance? (Nayanika, UK)

There is again an emphasis on effort, as "hard work" seems to be a key determinant of success according to Nayanika. However, tensions can be observed in Nayanika's own narrative where

she acknowledges differing experiences between people. The crafted image of a "serious worker" seemingly benefits "some people" (the mainstream) more than foreign workers, where Nayanika describes the prevailing systems working for them.

Nayanika highlights how other's perceptions aid in constructing reputations, indicating that merit, or one's ability might be presented in diverse ways; and that as such, one might not believe that their work ethic and performance is accurately captured. The racialised and gendered foreign worker could be excluded from advantageous perceptions, leading to further opportunities where she would have to exert herself more than her mainstream counterparts. The racialised and gendered foreign worker[1] thus stands to be excepted from advantageous perceptions, only leading to further opportunities if she exerts herself more than her mainstream counterparts. The emphasis lies on additional "hard work", and in maintaining an image of a "serious worker", which is seen as necessary in attaining further success, highlighting the importance of one's agency as well as effort in achieving goals.

Correspondingly, men foreign workers believe in taking initiative to build one's career. Karan, based in the UK, argues "I think you just have to take initiative to build your own career." Similarly, Martin adds:

> I found it a bit, how should I say this, a bit tough, but eventually if you just put in a bit of effort, you get it. It's not a big deal…you must take control of your career yourself…You have to create your own opportunity, that's what I've learnt…I think you have to be smart at your work, you've got to be smart with talking, and you got to be smart with doing your work. (Martin, UK)

Both participants believe in taking initiative to build their career. The onus is placed on the self to put in the effort. The narrative they construct reinforces the notion of hard work

[1] Nayanika had recounted experiences of covert racism.

leading to success, where the initiative is primarily placed on the subjects, by emphasising the importance of being "smart".

Equally, Arjun rationalises the state of those unemployed, and is cynical of attributing it to one's nationality.

> Some of my friends here, whenever something happens, they say it's because 'I am Indian'. Some people think everything is related to your nationality. If someone gets a bad rating, they think it's because of their Nationality. I argue with them, and I say maybe you aren't qualified. (Arjun, Belgium)

Arjun emphasises taking initiative by suggesting that his friends lack qualification, subsequently leading to a bad rating, indicating a strong belief in meritocracy. Arjun is critical of individuals' attribution of negative outcomes to one's nationality and constructs a narrative that justifies negative ratings.

It can be seen that whilst acknowledging discrimination, participants create positioning stories, embedded in the meritocratic ideology that overvalues effort.

The marginalisation of foreign workers due to visa restrictions

> You must prove you have special skills that they [the host country] don't have. If I didn't have the [post-study work/PSW] visa it would have been difficult, because I have had individuals at junior levels who were turned down that tried to apply because the companies were refusing to sponsor them. I have been told they wouldn't have been successful. (Meera, UK)

Meera recognises that the legal context impacts foreign workers. Foreign workers have to prove their worth by requiring a post-study work visa (at the time of interview). This legal

context also leads to companies refusing to sponsor foreign workers. Meera refers to the complexities of meritocracy in state legislation, where the structures, processes, and rules legitimise the othering of foreign workers. Foreign workers must prove their worth and provide yeoman's service to satisfy the powers of government, justifying that they are useful to the host country, subsequently leading to their commodification. As in the case of Lakshmi, Meera focuses on the institutional and legal context of the PSW/Graduate visa which is a restriction imposed on foreign workers. Foreign workers must "prove" their special skills, failing which, organisations may refuse to sponsor them.

Moreover, the sense of gratitude amongst foreign workers, and a feeling of owing the dominant group for giving them employment opportunities, that one has to be "good" for them to "take you", is also exemplified by another participant, Mary, who wonders if job sponsorship involves a need for forced loyalty, a sense of obligation to the employer, despite career-growth or promotions. Mary, a pharmacist, states, "I feel like just because my boss has sponsored me, so I have to work there only, so there is no chance for me to get out of this pharmacy". Mary's employer is her visa sponsor; she is unable to leave her job. A contradiction therefore can be observed between the power of agency, and the sense of obligation to the employer. Mary expresses an absence of agency.

Billy, similarly, referred to the difficulties with visa sponsorship, where moving jobs is difficult, and alluded to employers taking advantage of this:

> So, what I mean to say is there might be someone at the company who thinks that it's not that easy for you to move to another firm (due to visa restrictions) so they can make you work, for example, longer hours or in a way that you're not supposed to or ask you to do favours that are really difficult…I was asked to work after hours, which would be after my contracted hours, when everybody

> else does not have to; and I feel, again, I'm not saying that in any way is related to my gender, or race, or the place where I come from, but I do believe that is a prejudice. (Billy, UK).

The immigration rules/legal context of the UK leads to feelings of prejudice, as Billy was regularly asked to work beyond his contractual hours indicating his feelings around such systemic prejudice. However, Billy's insistence that this is not related to his gender, race, or where he is from indicates a perplexing tension in his narrative. Billy's rejection of the prejudice being linked to his gender, race, or the place he comes from, shows tensions in his narrative where he seems to construct a positioning story that rejects any attribution of prejudice to gender, race, or country of origin, whilst simultaneously expressing that foreign workers may get asked to work longer hours.

Further compounding this sense of otherness, all participants mentioned immigration laws, where work visas as Atman (based in the US) describes, are "very difficult because it is almost akin to bonded labour…It is almost like bonded labour." Atman's repetition of "bonded labour" highlights a distressing situation of forced company loyalty, invoking a historical terminology. While Atman's present-day "labour" is paid, and in theory offers opportunities for upward and inter-company mobility, the reality is restrictive. Visa regulations render foreign workers unable to change jobs, restricting career mobility. Stringent immigration laws mean that despite being qualified, foreign workers are denied access to opportunities, and often devoid of choice, are reduced to the job functions they carry out. Several participants describe a system of exploitation, where establishments employ high-skilled workers in vulnerable positions. Mary similarly protests: "I have to work there…it's like one bond to one employer."

However, foreign workers simultaneously feel gratitude towards an employer who might sponsor a visa – Mary expresses an obligation to her employer. Such situations

drastically impact the self-worth and personal empowerment of migrant workers, often fostering feelings of self-deprecation as compared with what their mainstream counterparts might experience. Atman also alludes to these skewed power relations: “I find my employment options limited, and also the need to regularly ask for more vacation to go stamp my visa every vacation, instead of traveling some place new.” Atman describes the covert discrimination facing him as a foreign worker, which creates additional barriers in employment opportunities. By law, he must get his visa stamped every time he leaves the country, creating additional stresses and barriers. Foreign workers are controlled and bound by such regulations where distorted power dynamics leave them immobilised in a vicious cycle. The “additional” and outside status – “strangerness” – of foreign workers carries expectations of several bureaucratic processes that foreign workers must undergo. Constantly under surveillance and the glaring eye of governments, foreign workers are acutely aware of their marginalisation.

De-gendering, gendering, and gender differences

Notably, there was both a de-gendering and gendering of jobs observed in men participants’ narratives. Billy insists on equality where: “…it does not matter if it’s a man or a woman who is requesting holidays. I think the first thing they need to justify is why they are off”. Martin corroborates: “…I cannot work from home; I have to take a day off. So especially in my kind of role it’s like trade support, so people need us, traders need us at that point in time, so that’s the only thing I see…it’s not gender biased, its role biased”.

The difficulties and reduced flexibility offered at work is attributed to the type of work and not gender. Martin suggests that the “only thing” he sees is the role requirements, which cause reduced flexibility, emphasising that this is not about gender. Martin’s de-gendering is “disembodied meritoriousness” (Śliwa and Johansson 2014, 825) where gender and the job role requirements are separated, and the worker is framed as disembodied subject. Moreover,

Martin justifies the varying gender ratios in various departments: “It depends, the work and gender varies by role and department, so if you were to go to finance and HR, there’s always girls; and like the other way round, you’ll hardly find any guys”. The gendering of professions is accepted as the norm and contradicts Martin’s earlier statement that dissociated profession and gender, highlighting tensions within Martin’s narrative.

However, women participants were generally more doubting of their own ability, often questioning the justification of their reception of greater rewards or justifying the lack of receiving such rewards due to their own imagined inefficiencies. Nayanika, on a sabbatical, justifies her lack of a promotion saying, “I can definitely say that I feel that I’m lagging behind…I am lagging behind a little bit”. She later reflects:

> If there’s an opportunity, let’s say a manager says ‘oh, so I’ve got this role open for coordinator for this particular project. I’m looking for people,’ I think, women sort of evaluate themselves and think ‘do I have enough experience for the role, do I fit the role’ and a man will just go and grab it. I guess there’s a gender difference in how they look at opportunities. (Nayanika, UK)

From Nayanika’s perspective, women evaluate themselves more harshly against a particular role which might subsequently influence the distribution of opportunities, also highlighting an imposter syndrome.

While an alternative perspective would be recognising that evaluating oneself more thoroughly against the role criteria might lead to a more successful outcome of getting the role, Nayanika’s reflection emphasises subtle disparities between men and women. This appears to be heightened because of one’s foreign status, which places additional demands on foreign workers.

Further indicating a gender divide in approaches to meritocracy, women participants tend to prioritise other aspects of what might be described as sentimental or personal satisfaction over meritocratic promotion or economic distribution. Aliya describes her place of work where, "there are young people and different nationalities, and people from different backgrounds, and I'm really excited to be working in this kind of environment. Whether or not I will get promoted or not, I will really enjoy this environment". It can be determined that the diverse organisational environment with different nationalities leads to Aliya's self-efficacy. Aliya's positions her narrative as hopeful through her emphasis on seeking satisfaction

Questioning Meritocracy

Nayanika's sense of marginalisation casts doubt on the legitimacy of the meritocratic sentiment. Nayanika notes of her organisation's promotions system, "…another individual was made to jump through hoops to get a promotion which was well-deserved, and interestingly, this particular person is a foreign worker". It can be discerned that the promotion process was more difficult for a foreign worker. Nayanika's narrative alludes to the othering of foreign workers due to organisational processes and structures related to promotions. In doing so, her narrative questions the existence of meritocracy in such processes.

We observe how Nayanika's perception of "jumping through hoops" contributes to the othering of the foreign worker. Lakshmi echoes this:

> There is that covert discrimination. If they need you, they will take you, but not if they have a choice. You have to really prove yourself. You may not get the promotion you want; you have to work much harder than the local person.

For Lakshmi, foreign workers must work harder than locals to get the promotion they desire. Despite the expression of support for meritocracy earlier, tensions within Lakshmi's narrative can be observed as she also indicates that processes are not equal.

Questions of meritocracy are further exemplified in the views of Rohan, of Indian origin working in the US:

> I think that the current system is not fair. Not because they are discriminating against me, but more along the lines of [if] you do extra work or you do extra, you contribute to a certain project that improves the efficiency of the operation and reduce costs, you do not have a system that captures it; so because of that, you know, it is hard to quantify how much you have saved so you don't get paid for those projects. (Rohan, US)

Rohan highlights the existence of organisational systems that do not sufficiently capture contributions. Organisational citizenship behaviours such as that of going beyond one's role is thought of as not being appropriately recognised or remunerated. Rohan believes that the systems in place might not acknowledge his work. This underlines the inherent problem in the belief that sincerity and commitment exhibited by workers always get rewarded. Organisations use foreign workers to maximise capital gains.

The rejection of discrimination by Rohan is seen, where organisations implicitly instil the belief in foreign workers that processes are not discriminatory. This highlights the power of organisations in managing difference whilst fully leveraging employee contributions. This issue lies at meritocracy's core, and underlines the importance of recognising employee contributions. Interestingly, Rohan's narrative indicates him wanting recognition for his work; and therefore also questions the meritocracy of organisational systems, which points to tensions and contradictions in views of meritocracy.

Similarly, Billy describes the inequality of the rewards system at his workplace. When referring to the fairness of reward processes, Billy asserts:

> No, absolutely not. And this is not just what I feel…I mean, I understand that people will never be happy and that they will always desire more, but at some level there is such a huge difference at rewards that are offered to some people, and some other people are basically left with nothing.

Martin similarly recognises problems with his workplace's performance appraisal process:

> I would not say it is fair because it's the same thing. In my organisation, we have performance feedback that happens either quarterly, half-yearly or yearly, I would not believe in that system at all. This is my opinion. I'd rather believe in real-time feedback.

The perceived unfair rewards system appears to also effect Billy's unhappiness. The performance appraisal system causes Martin dissatisfaction, which indicates an absence of an efficient and meritocratic process. Martin doubts the efficiency of this process and offers a different alternative (real-time feedback) to the feedback process. A contradiction can be observed in simultaneously believing in taking initiative and in doubting the system. While Martin believes the onus is on the worker to take initiative to build their own career, he also notices issues with the performance appraisal system and expresses a lack of trust in it.

Ambivalence towards diversity initiatives

Men foreign workers often recounted experiences where they were disadvantaged due to gender. By identifying with the more mainstream power-group in society (resultant of gender and other orientations), some felt themselves excluded from certain hiring processes in organisational structures:

> I was told that there was no real point in me applying for certain positions as I was a White…male…I believe that such so-called positive discrimination is completely legal in USA anyway. (Max, USA)

Max, a White male British foreign worker in the US, indicates his difficulty in the attainment of an academic position due to his identification as a White, cis-gender, heterosexual man in the US legal context. While our findings reveal that women foreign workers, and some men foreign workers of colour generally find themselves disadvantaged, a paradox emerges where mainstream group membership begins to be constructed as a disadvantage due to the positive discrimination faced by the dominant group.

Similarly, Rohan, working in finance, believes he was not hired for a particular job because he was male.

> They made it clear early on that if they did sign up as a client, I am not going to be working on that because I am male. So, I never thought it would happen, that's the only time that happened. Normally we don't make any decisions based on gender and nationality. They started including stuff, about how the firm has many women, and the team has many women, so the team that works for the client should only have women, which is very bizarre. (Rohan, USA)

We can discern that client wanted a woman-only team, and that the clients could achieve this purpose through their position of power. The client meeting was the setting where the decision to not hire Rohan was made because he was male. Rohan appeared resentful, assuming a minority view, where he felt discriminated against in the hiring process.

Concurrently, Atman highlights the lack of career advancement opportunities for both Indian and White men in the American technology sector. It is perhaps worth noting that

Indians tend to be well-represented in technological fields, thus accounting for Atman's identification of Indian men as mainstream.

> One way being an Indian male you can feel discriminated against is that there is a group for career advancement for every single ethnic/gender group you can think of except for White and Indian males. Now, there is a women's career advancement group, there is a Latino career advancement group, African American group, Muslim, LGBTQ, Latino LGBTQ group, but if you are Indian or a White male you are just left with not many people to turn to. You sometimes end up feeling a little alone. (Atman, USA)

The existence of such career advancement groups, which he views as exclusionary causes feelings of loneliness for Atman. Atman describes career advancement groups as only available to certain ethnic/gender groups because of social action, which he believes puts certain dominant groups (in this case Indian or White males), at a disadvantage. Atman believes that consequently, he does not have a peer group where might address his grievances and thus feels alone and uncared for. He continues:

> Sometimes they take diversity hiring to an extreme because they hire a less qualified candidate for the job. One of the most talented software developers was a White American but they actually could not hire him because he didn't fit the quota and also because he did not have a degree; but I heard my manager say that he would not need a degree if he was a Black woman. (Atman, USA)

The US legal context causes cynicism among dominant groups about hiring decisions. In agreement with his manager, Atman's view exemplifies the instilling of meritocracy belief by organisations, resulting in masking the marginalisation of racialised and gendered subjects. Even though the White American candidate referred to did not have a degree, the cynicism of

diversity hiring represents a denial of White and/or male privilege, with exclusionary views being presented as "meritocratic".

Atman and his manager seek egalitarianism, which involves not considering demographic characteristics in decision-making. Atman and his manager's construction of meritocracy separate characteristics such as gender and race from the requirements of the role to benefit the dominant group. Ironically, in doing so, they conceal the marginalisation of Black women. Thus, meritocracy and positive discrimination are intricately intertwined.

Meera, a woman, whilst also cynical, had a different take.

> I think my company from what I remember is quite big on equality and diversity, equal opportunity. Sometimes, it is a token gesture because they have got to look good. On the other hand, they have consciously employed people with disabilities and minorities. They are quite keen on representing people who otherwise would not be represented. I got a sense that they are quite conscious about it. I do not know if that's discrimination.

Meera seems critical of the push for diversity in her organisation through what she hypothesises to be positive discrimination. She terms these initiatives as a "token gesture", lacking genuine sentiment, and an image-building exercise to "look good." While affording jobs to minority groups, this also allows the company to exercise control over minority employees, making them aware that the reasons for their employment are born of factors other than merit. Meera also noted two instances where ethnic minorities were subjected to racism, but which were never addressed by the organisation, reaffirming her cynicism that the organisation's equality and diversity policies may be token gestures. However, different to Atman, Max, and Rohan's views, Meera's reason for cynicism was formed by the

organisation's empty gesture as a public image enhancing exercise. Meera was not critical of disadvantaged groups receiving special treatment, unlike Atman.

Discussion

We have empirically examined the intricate relationship between meritocracy and diversity initiatives by exploring narratives of foreign workers, and have demonstrated the paradoxical tensions existing within participant narratives contributing to the rich literature on meritocracy (Banerjee, Zhang, and Amarshi 2025; Castilla and Ranganathan 2020; Śliwa and Johansson 2014; Konrad, Richard, and Yang 2021)

The implications of our findings are thus threefold. Firstly, our study shows that there are tensions within participant narratives of meritocracy, given the evidence of simultaneous questioning of, and belief in meritocracy by participants. Secondly, the intersectional dimensions foreignness, race and gender highlight the othering of foreign workers, through visa restrictions and simultaneous gendering and de-gendering of work. Thirdly, cynicism of diversity initiatives was prevalent even amongst those who had been disadvantaged by organisational and legal requirements. These implications are elaborated in the following paragraphs.

While rationalised narratives about progression (Perez and Sabelis, 2020), a prevailing faith in meritocracy (Śliwa and Johansson 2014; Littler 2018; Scully 2002), and faith in one's own agency (Van Laer and Janssens, 2017; Zanoni et al.,2010), were found amongst participants; there was still a simultaneous questioning of processes indicating the paradoxical nature of meritocracy inherent within foreign workers' narratives. While Banerjee, Zhang, and Amarshi (2025) demonstrated the contradictory tensions between meritocracy and diversity, their empirical study showed the differences between the employers' and immigrant

employees' views. Complimenting this, our study contributes to the literature by indicating the nuances and intricacies within participant narratives, showing how foreign workers themselves believe in the principles of meritocracy. Several men and women foreign workers (Lakshmi, Nayanika, Martin, Billy, Arjun) expressed a staunch belief in meritocracy whilst also highlighting the perils of being a foreign worker. Narratives of organisational processes, including performance appraisals, promotions, and career progression, as well as issues with visa requirements corresponded to the notion of meritocracy as myth (Amis et al., 2020). Incongruously, even participants who were cynical of meritocracy held on to a belief in meritocracy (cf. Scully, 2002; Sliwa and Johansson, 2014). Our findings reveal the use of positioning stories (Griesbach 2025) in displaying the belief in meritocracy. Such contradictions in participant narratives empirically stress the complex nature of meritocracy, where opposing understandings of meritocracy are observed. Rejecting others' feelings of marginalisation when they attribute negative work outcomes to their nationality complicates the discourse of meritocracy, and reinforces the fact that foreign workers may construct different stories to cope and these narratives are not monolithic. Moreover, our findings also question the credibility of such individualised accounts.

The examination of intersectional dimensions between gender, race and foreignness highlighted two key issues. The first issue is the othering of foreign workers through strict visa requirements, which affect their agency and influence their constructions of merit, indicating the importance of institutional and legal contexts. This finding is consistent with Cruz et al.'s (2020) study of foreign workers in the United States. The second issue relates to gender, highlighting both gendering and de-gendering of work, by men participants. De-gendering includes the separation of gender from role requirements corresponding to "disembodied meritoriousness" (Sliwa and Johansson, 2014, 825). Contrarily, the gendering of jobs comprised justifying the wide-ranging gender ratios across professional departments, by the

same participant (Martin) who presented a disembodied view of the job. Moreover, gendered differences were found in which women evaluated themselves more harshly in assessing their suitability for a job, as in Nayanika's narrative, confirming the importance of considering intersecting dimensions (Grigoleit-Richter 2017; Śliwa and Johansson 2014).

Men foreign workers also felt discriminated against, evident in narratives corresponding to diversity initiatives, by Max, Rohan, and Atman. Rohan and Atman, both non-White men, were subjected to discrimination through organisational processes, as well as through exclusion from positive discrimination due to the lack of support groups. Additionally, Meera seemed cynical of the token gestures of diversity initiatives. This cynicism, evident in our findings, differ from de Leon and Kay's (2021) study on ironic egalitarianism. We found that in addition to questioning the existence of meritocracy, participants remain sceptical about diversity initiatives. While Meera acknowledges the importance of hiring minorities, she also questions whether the token gesture was "discrimination", which indicates that despite being discriminated against on the grounds of being foreign, hints of egalitarianism remain. Differences were additionally observed in dominant groups' narratives, where men expressed cynicism over diversity initiatives that excluded them. Such cynicism, more pronounced among men, is consistent with Knowles and Lowery (2012), who argue that dominant groups which endorse meritocracy maintain a self-view which includes a denial of their privilege of being White and/or male. Therefore, Atman's narrative, presenting a desire to separate gender/race characteristics from decision-making, as well as the cynicism for diversity initiatives, paints a complicated picture, where it is used to conceal the historic marginalisation of Black women, despite the White candidate they were advocating for not having a degree (cf. Noon, 2010). While men were overall bigger proponents of meritocracy, they simultaneously questioned organisational and immigration processes, which indicates an intricate but contradictory relationship between belief in meritocracy and pro-diversity policies.

While our study empirically demonstrates the diversity-meritocracy paradox consistent with Banerjee, Zhang, and Amarshi (2025) and aligns with Konrad, Richard, and Yang (2021), it extends this literature by illustrating the tensions embedded in participants' narratives. These narratives reveal how foreign workers draw on meritocratic and individualistic ideologies in their positioning stories (see Griesbach 2025), even when their lived experiences include marginalisation. This interplay creates a complex picture in which deeply held beliefs in meritocracy coexist with intersectional disadvantages, highlighting tensions between structural elements, such as visa requirements and individual accounts that both recognise and challenge these constraints.

Concluding remarks

Our analysis of foreign worker narratives has contributed to the debates on meritocracy and diversity. Our findings challenge simplistic understandings of meritocracy by uncovering paradoxes and tensions.

Looking forward, we hope that practitioners and policy makers may find this research useful in taking a more nuanced approach to addressing diversity issues especially in relation to foreign workers. Clearer communication around these issues might reduce the cynicism experienced by the mainstream (non-foreign workers). While our sample consisted of primarily non-White individuals, all participants had a specialist or a master's degree, which is indicative of their relative privilege in society. Further research on high-skilled foreign workers could investigate social class, which may bring deeper issues to light. We also encourage further discussion of LGBT foreign workers, where increased intersections of difference might further complicate discourse around meritocracy and diversity. We acknowledge that our sample consisted predominantly of individuals belonging to Indian origin. Future research could include large scale studies examining experiences of individuals belong to multiple nationalities and based across difference countries with varied institutional and social contexts,

to get a deeper understanding of foreign workers narratives of meritocracy. It is important to recognise the tensions within participants' narratives and the ways individuals positioned themselves despite experiences of marginalisation, revealing inherent contradictions. Future large-scale research should therefore examine both structural elements such as visa regimes and foreign workers' lived experiences, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how policy and organisational practices might be improved.

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