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Abstract: The neoliberal academy promotes a new managerial model based on the centrality of academic performance, conceived within the normative framework of meritocracy as the result of individual effort. The paper aims to investigate how merit and excellence are constructed, intertwined, and interpreted by Italian academics, and to understand the implications of the new logic in terms of (re) production of inequalities at individual and organizational levels. We conducted a content analysis on 176 semi-structured interviews with early and advanced-career scholars in the STEM and SSH Departments, members of selection boards, Departments' Directors and their deputies in four Italian Universities. Findings show how the rhetoric of measurable excellence represents, for many academics, the way to reward merit and, therefore, the guarantee of impartiality and the necessary step for leaving the old academic logic based on affiliation and loyalty. However, the assumption that the new meritocratic system, opposed to the old cooptative one, is always capable of rewarding scholars for their individual value risks naturalizing and individualizing the opportunities' structure. Moreover, the margins of discretion seem to be still wide and open the door to biased evaluations and decisions guided by other organizational logics, that are obscured by the centrality of meritocratic rhetoric.

Keywords: academia, excellence, meritocracy, cooptation, inequalities

Introduction

The ideal of merit has become the cultural norm for neoliberal academia, where individuals are classified and rewarded according to their abilities, commitment, and achievements (Scully, 1997). Excellence, on the other hand, has become the benchmark for evaluating, recruiting, and promoting academics (Van der Brink & Benschop, 2012). The rhetoric of merit and excellence has become prevalent also in Italian academia (Rostan & Vaira 2011), as a result of the implementation of reforms intended to make universities in Italy more efficient and performance-driven (Capano, Regini & Turri, 2017). This process is embedded in the global framework of universities' transformation characterized by the organisational model based on the logic of the New Public Management (Gunter et al., 2016), that promotes the competition between institutions for attracting funds and positioning in ranking (Ringel *et al.*, 2021), and - at individual level - the hyper-productivity, precariousness, intensification of work times (Colarusso & Giancola, 2020; Normand, 2016).

The paper investigates the discourses of male and female academic staff concerning the criteria that construct meritocracy and academic excellence and their implications in terms of the (re)production of inequalities, especially those linked to gender, which are the most visible and widespread.

This issue is particularly important in Italy, where the last general reform of the academic system (the so-called Gelmini Reform enacted in 2010) changed the recruitment process, the funding mechanisms, and research evaluation in order to favor a new meritocratic logic that has become pervasive at least at the rhetorical level. Indeed, the Italian university system has been known – also at international level – for being affected by a ‘baronial’ logic (Scacchi et al., 2017) whereby belonging to particular research or academic group or being loyal for a long time to a powerful professor mattered more than scientific ability and productivity for advancement in an academic career (Giglioli, 1979). Therefore, because the reform was supposed to introduce new meritocratic modes of functioning of academia, it is interesting to look at the representations of merit and excellence of academics, and the new opportunities or inequalities that they contribute to producing, comparing the representations they have of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ academia.

The article is organized as follows. The first section illustrates the theoretical background concerning excellence, merit, and inequalities in academia; the second describes the research questions and the methodology; the third one sets out the results of the analysis and is divided into two subsections devoted, respectively, to the definition of excellence and its relation with merit, and to the functioning of the new academia compared to the old one and its effects on inequalities. The last section contains the conclusions.

Theoretical background

The new managerial model of universities, mentioned in the Introduction, is based on the centrality of academic performance. This is conceived within the normative framework of meritocracy as the result of individual (but also institutional) effort measurable through formalized parameters considered neutral and objective. Indeed, on the one hand, “meritocracy is an ideal that suggests that the people hired and promoted into organizational positions are the individuals best suited to meet the requirements of the job” (Bird & Rhoton, 2021, p. 423), according to individual performance or talent (Scully, 1997) and regardless of other social categories such as gender, ‘race’ and class (Littler 2018). On the other hand, excellence is defined according to Western norms of meritocracy and refers to individual (but also departmental) performances and “should be reserved for scholars of the greatest merit” (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011, p. 509). Indeed, the benchmark of excellence corresponds to an academic model whose characteristics include hyper work, high and continuous scientific productivity – measured mainly in terms of the number of products published in high-impact journals or with prestigious publishers – high international mobility, and the ability to attract funding (Thornton, 2014). This model of academia is based on an increased competition between individuals and institutions where rankings play a central part (Brankovic et al., 2018), as they serve to create boundaries to define the scientific community and a global field of universities, following the notion of “academic excellence”. This often either supports existing hierarchies (and inequalities), that result in self-fulfilling prophecies, or introduces and stabilizes new ones (Ringel et al., 2021). Moreover, rankings have the power to shape how individuals and organizations make sense of their own identities and contexts, influencing their practices and strategies (*Ibidem*).

However, although the ideal of meritocracy aims to counter inequalities and privileges that may arise from individuals’ ascribed characteristics, several studies have drawn attention to the distortions that the ‘faith’ in meritocracy produces (O’Connor & O’Hagan, 2015; Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Deem, 2009; Scully, 2002; Thornton, 2014; Simpson et al. 2020). In particular, the emphasis on the individual dimension of results fails to consider the conditions underlying opportunities to achieve success (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010; Barone, 2012).

Moreover, the supposed objectivity of the parameters used to measure individual performance, and therefore excellence, neglects the subjective component of evaluators and those evaluated, and the distortions related to the presence of the biases, characteristics, and interests of the actors involved (Valian, 1999). In this regard, some research has shown that the Italian sys-

tem is still partly configured as a cooptative system, where the recruitment and promotion of academic staff are decided at the local level, rewarding the years of service and membership in the research group. It therefore favors candidates with an internal affiliation to the department, sometimes even at the expense of external candidates who present higher levels of performance (Abramo & D'Angelo, 2020; Abramo, D'Angelo & Rosati, 2015).

In terms of reproduction of inequalities, numerous studies have shown that women, for example, seem to experience more difficulties in adhering to the ideal academic model conceived with respect to the standard of excellence. The emphasis on the quantification and measurement of scientific productivity would disadvantage the careers of women due to various factors, such as women's higher burden of care (Fox, 2015), their lower involvement in large networks, less mobility (Britton et al., 2012), and their greater involvement in teaching (Minello & Russo, 2021), administrative activities and more time-consuming tasks (Guarino & Borden, 2016; Winslow, 2010).

In particular, the presence of mechanisms of inclusion in and exclusion from scientific networks is important for scientific productivity (Abramo, D'Angelo & Murgia, 2017), but also with respect to selection processes (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014) – even more so in Italy, where social and 'political' capital is a crucial factor in determining career recruitment and advancement (Pezzoni, Sterzi & Lissoni, 2012). This is particularly evident in low-feminized contexts, where the presence of 'old boys' networks' is more entrenched and where women with less social capital may have more difficulty in obtaining support, information, and resources to establish themselves academically (Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, & Uzzi, 2000). As a result, women seem to pay the highest price for the academic career uncertainty, both in advanced and in early stages. They have greater difficulties to reach the apical levels (Roberto et al., 2020) as well as to obtain a tenure track position (Bozzon, Murgia & Villa, 2017; Picardi, 2019).

On the other hand, the excellence model could also be an opportunity for women: the ability to attract prestigious funding could enable them to overcome those mechanisms that obstruct the academic careers of women, especially without internal support in the department (Gaiaschi, 2021). In this perspective, the attention centers on the conditions and the costs that women face in accessing these new opportunities, on recognition of their merits, as well as on the evaluation parameters applied to their work (Rositer, 1993; Foschi, 1996).

Although the literature on inequalities in academia is mainly concerned with gender asymmetries, some studies have focused on inequalities deriving from the social origins of researchers. For example, Helin et al. (2019) show how Finnish academics are strongly selected in terms of social background, not only in higher education but also in the transition to a lecture-

ship. Also in Germany, Blome, Möller & Böning (2019) observed a social closure among faculties, despite a social opening at the student level. The economic conditions, then, could represent an obstacle to face contractual interruptions during the academic career, especially in its precarious initial phases. Moreover, the literature has highlighted how researchers from low social backgrounds do not have the appropriate starting capital and career strategies, and how they experience isolation. Such researchers report discomfort in social situations like conferences, and their lack of social connections. They thus suffer from the inevitable shortage of the professional networks and social capital (Waterfield, Beagan & Mohamed, 2019) important to enter an academic career and advance in it (Pezzoni, Sterzi & Lissoni, 2012).

Research questions, research design and methods

Starting from the above considerations, this paper has two aims. The first is to investigate how the several dimensions of merit and excellence are constructed, intertwined, and interpreted by academics at different career levels and with different responsibilities working in SSH and STEM Departments characterized by different organizational cultures. The second is to understand the implications of excellence and merit in terms of the (re)production of inequalities at individual and organizational level.

In order to pursue these research aims, we conducted a content analysis of 176 semi-structured interviews with early career (EC) researchers (64) and advanced career (AC) associate professors (64), members of competition selection boards (Commissioner) (32), department directors and their deputies (Director/Deputy) (16), working in STEM and SSH Departments of 4 Italian universities. The interviews, balanced by gender in all categories, were part of the wider research project of relevant national interest (*Progetto di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale* – PRIN) “GeA – Gendering Academia”, which involved four Italian universities: two in North Italy and two in the South. Two of them were mega universities (more than 40,000 students), one was a big university (20,000 - 40,000 students), and one was a medium-size university (10,000-20,000 students). The project explored gender inequalities in academic careers and was carried out between 2020 and 2023; the semi-structured interviews were conducted online because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The outline used by the research group was built on the previous literature and included questions on professional history, current job, work-life balance, organizational cultures, policy perspectives, and individual socio-demographic characteristics.

The interviews lasted between 60’ and 90’, were audio recorded and fully transcribed, then coded with the Atlas.ti software (version 9.1.7). The members of the qualitative team of the Project used an intersubjective approach

to identify 13 families of codes and 76 codes, organized into two code books – one for the interviews with researchers/professors and one for the interviews with deputies/directors/commissioners – that substantially overlapped but differed in some parts. The analysis followed two steps: the interviews were coded a first time to test the grid of analysis and then re-coded with the definitive code book. For the research reported in this paper, we extracted some relevant codes by means of the Atlas.ti software, namely: ‘characteristics of excellence’; ‘fortune vs. merit’; ‘pre-post reform’; ‘criteria EC’; ‘criteria AC’; ‘unconditional worker model’. We decided to use a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; 2012) because it seemed particularly useful in this context due to its focus on the study of social relationships and the underlying power dynamics, as well as the importance of discourse in legitimizing certain practices that contribute to either reproducing or challenging power inequalities.

The logic of the ‘new’ academia: defining excellence to reward merit

Analysis of the interviews shows a strong emphasis on merit and excellence: hard work and a life completely dedicated to research are needed to achieve excellent results and advance in an academic career by virtue of merit.

In general I have to say that my department is a good one. My area, my department is fairly meritocratic. I think that people get ahead because they are good, because they are committed, because they do a good job, and the average level of the researchers and professors in my department is very high (Giacomo, M, 53, AC, STEM)¹.

Many interviewees saw the meritocratic model as an element that marks the transition from an academia based on privilege and loyalty to an academia where people who work hard and well can obtain success independently from an internal support, loyalty, membership etcetera. This view was expressed in particular by academics who had undergone the transition from the old to the new academia, regardless of their current position, early or advanced.

I’m quite positive. Until a few years ago that wasn’t the case. Until a few years ago my perception was that loyalty was more rewarded, right? [...] I think there is a better balance, a closer focus on meritocra-

¹ In the quotations we denote the interviewees by their fictional name, gender (M/W), age, their academic position (EC/AC) and their scientific field (SSH/STEM); for interviewees involved in governance roles, we distinguish directors, deputies, and commissioners, and we add the position as full professor (FP) or associate professor (AP).

cy, and a little bit is also due to the fact that...at the national level [...] some measures have been introduced that are more quantitative and, therefore, more aimed at objectively rewarding numbers (Raffaele, M, 45, EC, STEM).

Ten years ago, what basically mattered was seniority, to put it bluntly. Today there is greater appreciation, at least in the context where I work, much greater appreciation of merit (Leo, M, 42, AC, STEM).

Assuming merit as framework meant for many interviewees being confident in codified and measurable evaluation parameters. Merit quantification is a guarantee of objectivity, and it finds confirmation in the system of national scientific qualification (*Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale* - ASN), a process which people can access if they achieve a minimum number of publications and/or citations. This process takes place at national level; it is therefore independent from local power and localistic logics, and for this reason it is seen as an objective recognition of scientific value which attests that the academic career continuation is fair and well-deserved.

The ASN [...] somewhat mitigated what was, let's say, malpractice in local competition...so in my opinion it was a good idea, also because it helped to make the parameters a little bit more objective, i.e. there are benchmarks, etcetera, so it generalized the selection criteria (Laura, W, 42, AC, SSH).

So, my hiring and my career after the [local] competition for the researcher position – which anyway had at the basis the PhD, the specialization, a lot of publications, and that's precisely why I talk to you about merits – the other positions [i.e. as associate professor] resulted from competitions that I won at a national level, that is, I won two national qualifications [*abilitazioni nazionali* in Italian]. So, at that point, let's say, it was *per tabulas* a meritocratic choice (Cesare, M, 46, AC, SSH).

Meritocracy was described by interviewees in opposition to cooptation, and the criteria for rewarding merit meet the excellence ideal, since in a context where resources are inadequate the few vacant academic positions have to be occupied by the most deserving, that is, by those who are closer to meeting excellence standards. These standards, however, in our interviewees' words, comprise a variety of dimensions and indicators that make it difficult to give a single definition of merit and excellence, as well as to distinguish them from each other. In this sense, the two concepts can be respectively assimilated to those identified by Simpson and colleagues (2020) who distinguish between merit and deservingness. Indeed, while merit seems to be an 'absolute' principle, excellence resembles to the performative ideal of deservingness, as conceptualized by the authors, where the practices count

more than a fixed set of attributes and also have - as we will see in the following section - a gendered and embodied dimension. Therefore, even if some authors - such as Goldthorpe (1994) and Baez (2006) - theorize merit as an institutional construct that does not and cannot exist outside the institutions that use it, from our results it emerges that it is, instead, deservingness to assume contents and meanings that are localized and context-specific.

The excellence images, in fact, referred to several dimensions, often interchangeable, which we can summarize in the following:

- scientific, defined by number of publications and bibliometric indices, by the amount of funding obtained for competitive and international projects, by affiliation with international organizations or significant experience abroad, by quality of publications and their originality;
- teaching, defined by the number of students, graduates and PhD candidates, by good evaluations by students;
- managerial, defined by performing prestigious duties and positions, having leadership skills and managing large financial resources;
- relational, defined by networking activities, having numerous contacts, having political relationships within the department or specific personal traits characterized by cooperation skills.

The multidimensionality of excellence was well illustrated by a full professor, who was a commissioner in several recruitment and promotion procedures:

[The excellent candidate] is an outstanding person intellectually, with many ideas, balanced, with a lot of willingness and an ability that I would call [of] problem solving. [...] You know what is called the T-profile? [...] I'm also referring to a prominent ability in research, but then also to an ability to do very well in teaching, very well in institutional activities, very well in relations. In my opinion, this kind of profile is the excellent one (Commissioner 3, W, FP, SSH).

Although the interviewees provided a composite picture of excellence, the scientific aspects predominated and constituted the minimum requirement for defining an excellent profile in academia. This is coherent with the findings of the international literature on academic excellence (O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2016). Publications, internationalization, and ability to attract funding are the main aspects considered when evaluating the scientific quality of an academic, and they are also the main formal criteria for recruitment and promotion. The other dimensions of excellence/deservingness are instead more arbitrary (for example, relational qualities or academic abilities are not measurable) and because of this indefiniteness they leave room for a great deal of discretion, which reproduces old inequalities and produces new ones while cloaking them in objectivity (Anzivino, Cannito & Piga, 2023).

High scientific productivity, high bibliometric indexes, basically these are [the relevant criteria], the scientific part, because we are ***[discipline name] and so it's the scientific part; if you are a very good lecturer who teaches students very well, nobody gives a damn (Tania, W, 56, AC, STEM).

I think the notion of excellent scholar strongly relates to the criteria of scientific content, international dimension, prestige [...] [which] are quite easily measurable because they are people who belong to the study groups of the European Commission, they are editors at the international level, they are constantly invited, they go around the world, they publish with prestigious publishers in foreign languages (Elio, M, 47, AC, SSH).

The emphasis on the scientific dimension of excellence and, particularly, on measurable aspects was critically interpreted by some of the academics interviewed, especially the senior ones and those who had been in academia for a long time. Their criticisms mainly concerned three aspects:

1. the consequences for the quality of research in a system that rewards the hyper-productivity formally evaluated by bibliometric criteria, and the difficulty of finding shared criteria with which to evaluate research quality;
2. the dependency of excellence on practices and mechanisms that are less individual than what the neoliberal academia supposes;
3. the inequalities created by the 'merit ideology', which does not consider the social and economic conditions at the basis of opportunities that favor excellent results.

Those interviewees who highlighted the consequences of hyper-productivity on research quality critique the focus on quantitative criteria used to evaluate the excellence of scholars, but they recognized the difficulty of agreeing on other kinds of criteria. The merely quantitative logic to measure scientific excellence does not take into account the originality, the relevance, and the substance of scientific products; nor do practices like self-citation, which contribute to distorting the indicators.

These criteria are fair in theory. I mean, it is clear that scientific production is important, the number of thesis students is important, the ability to attract funds is important. The problem is that we are going more and more, as is now explicitly declared, towards a purely quantitative discourse, I mean, and quality is not considered [...]. Unfortunately, these damned indicators have completely ruined research, [...] so much junk research is produced and self-cited [...]. So, few people get ahead on merits, so many people get ahead because they have these numbers, because they do well in producing these numbers, but

that doesn't necessarily mean that there is quality underneath (Sandro, M, 52, AC, STEM).

Unfortunately, this is an aspect [the emphasis on the quantitative dimension] that, I believe, perhaps it is not yet apparent today, but in the long run, because of a flywheel effect, will be seen in competitions. It will favor those who perhaps have a larger production, as opposed to those who have a qualitatively better production. And, in the current state of the discipline, there is no competition announcement that can enhance this latter aspect, which instead is fundamental (Commissioner 3, M, FP, SSH).

Regarding the practices and mechanisms that influence excellence, some interviewees, especially in STEM disciplines, stressed that science is a collective activity. Hence scientific merit is rarely individual. Excellence is the result of several factors, including having the right affiliation – for those reputational mechanisms on which the construction of excellence depends – and being part of the right research group, possibly in the right department, i.e. those groups that already have a good reputation and those departments which have access to conspicuous funding.

Well, [excellence] is a term that I don't...I almost never use in research [...]. In my opinion, excellence can never be in a candidate, excellence is a team effort. So I don't believe in this story of the excellent candidate. There are good candidates, brighter candidates... (Commissioner 2, M, AP, STEM).

Finally, some interviewees pointed out the issue of the unequal opportunities to which scholars have access on the basis of their background and of pre-existing inequalities that are paradoxically reinforced by meritocracy, as we will see in the next section.

Is meritocracy really the opposite of cooptation? The 'new' academia and the (re)production of inequalities

As we saw in the previous section, merit is described as the new rule for judging the work of academics beyond the ascribed characteristics of individuals, and it is ideally based on the evaluation of achievements alone. From this perspective, merit is widely interpreted as a neutral construct, the only principle useful for ensuring a 'fair' academia, because it would ensure impartial, objective, even replicable evaluation (and thus selection). Merit, in Italian academia, is considered to be the new ruling system, in contrast to the old academia, which was governed by cooptative and discretionary practices exercised by a few powerful professors, mostly men, called '*baroni*'. In this

new scenario, excellence is supposed to be the principle that makes it possible to reward the merit of individuals in academia.

For example, according to many interviewees this system has enhanced the opportunities for women to access academic careers and to be recognized as distinguished scholars like their male colleagues: the evaluation and the possibility to demonstrate one's own talent is given to all individuals irrespectively of their gender.

The evaluations that we make in our research and study work are always and exclusively based on evidence, on scientific results [...]. In my opinion, already my generation – I'm talking about the generation of those who are now between 50 and 60 years old, let's say 60 years old – is a generation that [...] has absolutely never considered gender as a characteristic somehow relevant. On the contrary, I have noticed that the previous generation, that is, those who are now, let's say, 80-90 years old, the generation of our mentors, or better the mentors of our mentors, in my opinion, instead, had a... (brief hesitation) for them, in my opinion, a female scholar was still a woman in the first place and then a scientist (Commissioner 1, M, FP, SSH)

Welcoming the principles of meritocracy and excellence implies the acceptance and recognition of the legitimacy of processes of sorting individuals, since excellence in academia has been defined as the measure of the greatest merit (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011), and since the sense of meritocracy has switched from a form of governance to a structure of distribution (Liu, 2011). Indeed, especially in the quest for excellence in selection and promotion procedures, applicants are ranked, to reward merit, by sorting them from the most deserving candidate to the least. Thus, excellence/deservingness is not just a 'dichotomous variable', but a gradient that creates a new dimension of social stratification among aspiring 'academic citizens'. In this sense, in fact, ranking individuals is also a process of boundary-making to define insiders and outsiders of the academic community (Brankovic et al., 2018). Accordingly, as Fourcade noted when discussing ordinal citizenship, "the duty to realize one's full potential as an individual implies productive work engagement, skill upgrading, knowledge of laws and values, and civic participation. [However], people's movements up and down the ordinal scale may have little to do with their own actions, and everything to do with changing system rules. Ordinal stratifications are culturally powered and naturalized by ideologies of merit" (ivi, pp. 162-163). Transposing this process into academia means both individualizing the responsibility for failures and successes and disregarding some structural barriers still present in this allegedly new academia.

An academic career without the support of a good mentor is possible, yes, but it is more difficult. This does not mean [...] that the academ-

ic career is made for the recommended [*raccomandati* in Italian]. We use this expression too often (sigh). [...] The academic career is open to all and meritocracy matters, even if it doesn't look like it from the outside. Merit matters. My mentor taught me that the capable ones always succeed, even if you do not know when and how much time it might take. Maybe it will take a little bit longer than for those who have other kinds of help. In my case I could have become a professor or a researcher earlier, years earlier... (Sofia, W, 41, AC, SSH).

Indeed, as other authors have noted, in these accounts, merit but especially deservingness - which, as we have seen in the previous section is often named as 'excellence' and has a very changeable nature - have a performative nature also in academia: they are supposed to depend on individual agency and actions, resulting in an overlap between results and efforts (Pojman & McLeod, 1999). And yet, deservingness needs to be constantly claimed in order to persuade both oneself and others of value and worth because it also needs to be conferred to the subject (Simpson et al., 2020), in localized environments and social situations where the criteria and their combination to reward merit are mobilized in several unpredictable ways.

Therefore, the above quotation is interesting for two reasons. The first reason is that it assumes that merit is always able to reward scholars for their engagement and commitment to their work, but at the same time it recognizes and naturalizes the inequalities produced by, for example, affiliation with particularly powerful research groups and the influence of a mentor.

The second reason why the above quotation is interesting is that it highlights another crucial aspect: the fact that the difference between meritocracy and cooptation is a false dichotomy. Indeed, the purpose that meritocracy and the measurement of excellence serve is to make those in charge of conferring deservingness disappear. The dichotomy is false because merit is a principle while cooptation is a practice, and any system is meritocratic as long as it is consistent in the criteria that it uses to reward merit. What happens in this new scenario is that the alleged objective evaluation grants legitimacy both externally and internally to the selection/advancement procedures, so that the accountability of those in charge of these procedures disappears. In fact, in a cooptative system, deservingness and merit are connected to the responsibility of those who attribute excellence. Moreover, even if cooptation produces inequalities, we cannot affirm that in the past only unmeritorious people got into universities or that nobody whom we would call excellent today did so. The difference from the old academia is that, on the one hand, merit and excellence were measured according to paradoxically clearer and better-defined criteria, which sometimes also took ascribed inequalities into account, including also membership of and loyalty to a certain mentor or group.

In the past, I'm talking about 20 years ago, you used to wait for your turn and then your turn came (interviewee smiles). It might seem bad. A little bit more baronial management like "do what you have to do then you will be recognized" is certainly negative but it also has positive aspects, because you at least work and maybe get recognized (Sandy, W, 62, AC, STEM).

On the other hand, there was no shortage of resources to hire people who were not 'recommended' but simply conformed to established standards that included scientific but also membership/loyalty characteristics.

In the nineties I got a research post and back then things were much easier for everybody, both men /and women/ (laughing), than they are now. I mean, you could do a postdoc and get a research post. It was quite normal. There were even people who got in without a postdoc (Iole, W, 59, AC, STEM).

I have to tell you that I became a researcher in the second year of my doctoral program, I didn't even have the qualification! Back then, you could easily have a university career without having a PhD! (Commissioner 3, M, FP, SSH).

In our view, this alleged new meritocratic system produces new opportunities but for the same old logics and in a more complex and competitive scenario. The scarcity of public funding, for example, according to some scholars (Gaiaschi, 2021), has produced new opportunities for women who can compete for European funding programs and then be more attractive for Italian universities. However, apart from the fact that the possibility to access funding can be itself gendered (Finnborg et al., 2020), in promotions and recruitment in Italian academia the favor of the Department is often essential, so still linked to cooptative principles and practices, and the competition is extremely strong due to the scarcity of posts available.

What has changed a little is that funding has to be sought, [...] then you have to orient your research to those topics, to those things, that at the European or international level are at that moment the so-called 'hot topics'. Otherwise, the fundraising and so this international dimension certainly today affect [the academic career] [because] in order to become a full professor, you need [...] to reach a sufficient level of research to be considered eligible, but then you also have to be attractive to your department for it to call you and invest funds in you. [...] Departments now tend to invest funds in a few people, because these few people bring in something (Elio, M, 47, AC, SSH).

In this way, inequalities, far from being mitigated by meritocracy, are its inevitable consequence. And two paths can be followed to reduce them. One consists of affirmative actions, which seem to contradict the classification

according to supposedly objective criteria of individuals and which, in fact, were opposed by almost all of our respondents, both men and women. The other path is “to double down on the more clearly quantifiable aspects of merit, to push the frontier of commensuration outward further and further” (Fourcade, 2021, p. 161), analogously to what happened in society as a whole with the affirmation of the ‘credential society’ (Collins, 1979).

Competition has increased everywhere. It’s not just my Department’s problem. With a university system that has lost thousands of tenured posts in the last 10 years and is about to face an equally severe crisis, it’s clear that competition [increases]. The national scientific qualification mechanism has only created even more frustration because we have hundreds of persons qualified [*abilitati* in Italian] as both full and associate professors who will probably never have the chance to make the career transition. [...] So it’s, let’s say, a system that wants this. It is not a system error, but it’s the system’s specific political choice: to create dissatisfaction, competition, so that it can better govern the university (William, M, 52, AC, SSH).

This new system, in fact, has standardized and raised the minimum scientific standards (certainly quantitative but not necessarily qualitative, as we saw in the previous section) to be hired in academia. But, at the same time, it has established a way to justify and reproduce inequalities by portraying them as ‘natural’ and ‘objective’. In fact, merit does not reduce discretion because it creates rankings of excellence/deservingness which then translate into real inequalities in a context of scarce and unequally distributed resources and pre-existing structural and cultural obstacles.

Then [in the selection procedure] you produce a shortlist of four or five candidates that are very comparable, and at that point it’s very difficult to judge and make a ranking as the law requires us to do. Unfortunately, there is this idea that there can be an algorithm that determines the absolutely best person. Unfortunately, there is no such thing [...], so when you have four, five people who have solid track records, who have proven to do research at a high level, etcetera, it is difficult to say which of them is better than the others. So, as is done in other places in the world, you rightly also evaluate what the needs of the Department are [...]. People outside academia or research imagine that “there must be the best one”. This is not the case at all (Commissioner 1, M, FP, STEM).

There is thus a reversal of cause and effect: inequalities are the product of meritocracy and it is not true that it cancels them out by rewarding people regardless of other factors and ascribed variables. In fact, gender inequalities have been reduced but to a lesser extent than they should have been, considering the massive entry of women into university education. Recent quan-

titative analyses of women employed (Picardi, 2019) and recruited (Gaiaschi & Musumeci 2020) in Italian academia have shown that female access to assistant professorships has on the contrary worsened in coincidence with the so-called neo-liberal turn, and that women are under-represented among the 'new' assistant professor posts, especially among the tenure-track ones. In fact, this new system has set standards of excellence that are very often disadvantageous for women, often producing dropouts especially between the postdoc phase and achieving a tenured post. National and international mobility, for example, is one of the academic opportunities where women are penalized, especially in early phases (Bozzon, Murgia & Villa, 2017) and in some countries like Italy (European Commission, 2021) because of the gendered distribution of care duties in heterosexual couples. This reduces their opportunities to network and engage in international collaborations, which in turn negatively affects their productivity levels (Lee & Bozeman, 2005) and then fulfillment of the quantitative standards of merit.

I see it [spending a period abroad] as more likely for a father, as more feasible, [...] Especially if you are a woman and if you have a family, with young children, how can you be away for three months if you have children going to kindergarten or school? That is impossible (Laura, W, 38, EC, SSH).

Moreover, women are often penalized by stereotypes and non-recognition of their work also from a qualitative point of view: they are subjected to more rigorous evaluation, and since excellence also comprises intangible dimensions, there is room for discretionality and – with it – for gender bias and discrimination that, again, are described as fair and objective.

I don't think there are different expectations [towards men and women], I simply think that women's work is more easily dismissed. One tends to believe less that a woman can actually do it. The level to be reached in theory is the same, but what a woman has to do to prove that she is as competent as a man is probably much more (Marco, M, 37, EC, STEM).

In addition to gender inequalities, the old class inequalities have worsened because new age-related ones have emerged. In fact, since precariousness (i.e. the period before reaching a permanent position) in Italy can last more than ten years, inequalities – both gender and class ones – have diminished only in the early stages of the academic career, namely the postdoc phase, but they still persist later on because of the uncertainty of the future, low salaries, and frequent periods without a contract.

Indeed, social origins and economic conditions are important for facing the long precarity and achieving the excellence standards, for meriting to advance in academic career. Economic conditions, in fact, affect the possibil-

ity to achieve an uninterrupted academic path and productivity because of the very common need to integrate the salary with income from other work. Moreover, economic conditions are important for mobility in early phases, for participating in conferences, and for going abroad for visiting periods.

If someone is rich, let's put it this way, she can devote herself to her research, also by collaborating with the university, working her way up the ladder [*facendo la gavetta* in Italian] so that she can build her career, producing good publications that are ready at the time when competitions are held. Me, instead, I had to work in those periods when I did not have a contract at the university. Therefore, I did not have the time to publish so much in those years. So for sure the economic discriminant is crucial. So let's say, we fight for merit because that would already be a great thing, right?, a great achievement, but this is also profoundly unfair (Barbara, W, 46, EC, SSH).

Concluding remarks

The analysis reported in this paper revealed that the rhetoric of impartial and gender-neutral merit pervades all academic work, and that the criteria used to construct excellence do not differ substantially between STEM and SSH disciplines. For the youngest researchers, this rhetoric of merit represents the guarantee of impartiality, and it is necessary for leaving behind the old academic logic based on affiliation and loyalty. Academic excellence is the new parameter for selecting academics, and it is conceived mainly in (abstract) terms and in particular as: number of publications, internationalization, and ability to attract funding. For many interviewees, these characteristics define the ideal academic model and the trust on metrics seems to answer to the lack of legitimacy of the "weak elites" (Porter, 1995) in Italian academia, and a strategy used by academics for preventing the criticisms by outsiders and insiders about their own career. In this sense, the call for and the recognition of merit is not only a top-down process but also a bottom up process encouraged by the academics themselves (Fourcade 2019; Ringel et al., 2021).

The construction of rankings between individuals during selection procedures responds to the same logic: the evaluations do not only serve to distribute resources to comply with an allegedly meritocratic scope, but also encourage competition, which makes the selection process and the selecting committee accountable to an imagined audience/public (Brankovic et al., 2018).

However, in the quest for excellence to reward merit, excellence, far from being clearly codified, resembles more to the deservingness theorized by Simpson and colleagues (2020) which has only ephemeral, variable and con-

text-specific meanings, also influenced by ascribed, gendered and embodied dimensions (Littler 2018).

This has important implications because the meritocratic ideal “acts as a smokescreen for continued gender inequality by disregarding entrenched discriminatory practices and deep-rooted gender-based biases and assumptions” (Clarke, Hurst & Tomlinson, 2024: 639): it creates the illusion that only individual merit matters, obscuring the structure of opportunities underlying success, which is different for men and women, but also for people with different economic backgrounds. Moreover, despite the insistence on standardization in recruitment and promotion procedures, the margins of discretion are very wide, and they open the door to biased evaluations and to decisions guided by other organizational criteria that need to be explored further. Awareness of the collective dimension of merit emerged from few interviews, and gender asymmetries were mainly attributed to the care burden and horizontal segregation (in STEM disciplines), sometimes to women’s lack of motivation or aptitude skills, such as the characteristics embedded into the ideal academic (Cech & Loy, 2010; Thornton, 2013; Herschberg, Benschop & van den Brink, 2018).

The analysis has adopted a qualitative approach. For this reason, the results are not generalizable to the entire population of academics who work in Italian universities. However, the project collected a large number of in-depth interviews at different career levels. It balanced the sample by gender, discipline and geographical area, thus representing the sociological variety of academics. Moreover, the paper has analyzed the construct of excellence and merit from an original point of view, pointing out the variability in its definition and practical application that might be useful for future studies on this phenomenon and on the gendered practices connected to it. Finally, the paper has reflected on the differences and connections between meritocracy and excellence, trying to clarify these concepts. For these reasons, the research reported in this study has provided important insights into how to reduce inequalities in universities at different stages of the academic career, and it could be useful for reorienting policies and reforms of higher education institutions. In our view, therefore, instead of introducing ever more forcible measurements, it would be appropriate to transparently discuss the issue of cooptation – which, as we have said, is not necessarily the opposite of meritocracy – but thematizing the related necessary attribution of responsibility and acknowledging the structural and cultural barriers that existed before and continue to exist even in allegedly meritocratic systems.

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