

# Reflexivity of Meritocracy: The Theory of Education and Selection in the Late Modern Age

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The purpose of this article is to construct a basic theory of “education and selection” that is applicable to the analysis of contemporary social changes, and to provide a theoretical perspective that is useful for conducting empirical studies in this area. A key concept of the theory is “reflexivity of meritocracy.”

First, the thesis of “modernization and meritocracy,” wherein educational selection became a social issue as meritocracy is popular in the modern age, was one of the basic theories in the area of “education and selection” studies. However, this thesis cannot explain the situations in late modernity.

Second, the theories of late modernity, which include Giddens’ and Beck’s theoretical works, pointed out the importance of the concept of “reflexivity.” We also follow these theories when constructing our new theory of education and selection.

Third, Giddens’ high-modernity theory is explained in connection with the structuration theory, and it is found that the distinction among the three “reflexivity” concepts—reflexive monitoring of action, reflexivity of the self, and institutional reflexivity—is important.

Fourth, I discussed the theory of reflexive meritocracy in the late modern age, in which reflexivity is radicalized and where contemporary meritocracy continues to be monitored.

According to this theory, we can develop new education and selection studies by analyzing the mode of reflexive self-regulation.

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## 1 Introduction<sup>1)</sup>

When it is necessary to explain the theoretical significance of dealing with the theme “education and selection” in sociology, it must be explained on the foundation of the thesis of “modernization and meritocracy.” In other words, in modern society where a variety of values, such as freedom, equality, and rationality, are called for, selection, instead of heredity, has become inevitable by making a shift from the principles of

blood and property to the principle of ability (meritocracy). However, the level of modern knowledge and skills is put to test in the selection standards in an industrial society. As a result, therefore, more importance has been attached to the results of education and selection centered around school than ever before. Here, “education and selection” is positioned as the theme that needs to be elucidated in sociology, wherein people have discussed modern society as its main theme. This explanation has theoretically underpinned various empirical studies of the phenomenon of individual selection as a practical matter, as described earlier, and in this sense, we can say that it is the basic theory of “education and selection.” However, if we rely only on this “thesis of modernization and meritocracy” focused on the shift from pre-modern to modern, it is logically inevitable to not be able to obtain a basic perspective that can link the changes that occurred after modernization, for example, the postwar social changes, with educational selection. What was originally necessary for sociologists of education who deal with the phenomenon of education and selection should have been the theory of “modernization and meritocracy” as well as a theory that would allow us to understand various phenomena related to education and

selection in connection with the changes seen in contemporary society. In this paper, therefore, I would like to construct a new theoretical framework by temporarily setting up a middle-range theory that can be used to analyze the changes in educational selection seen in contemporary society after modernization and also aim to provide a theoretical foothold for empirical studies in this field to be conducted from a contemporary perspective. In concrete terms, I would like to introduce the concept called “reflexivity of meritocracy” and then discuss that meritocracy in the late modern age continues to monitor itself reflexively, i.e. contemporary society is the society of reflexive meritocracy in the late modern age hereinafter.

The notion of reflexivity has been discussed in various ways in sociology, but the reason I focus on this concept here is because the notion of reflexivity shared by Beck and Giddens (Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994), who have constructed a framework for extracting the features of contemporary society on the line that extends from modern age, can provide an important clue for discussion, in light of the objective of this article, which is to explore a framework that can capture contemporary society on the basis of the thesis of modernization and meritocracy.

However, what I refer to in relation to this in this chapter is mainly Giddens’ notion of reflexivity. The primary reason for this is that Giddens sees this reflexivity as the key concept in understanding agency as a micro feature and comprehending the circumstances of the time as a macro feature. Before Giddens began to fully develop his theory of late modernity, Beck presented the notion called “Reflexive Modernisierung (reflexive modernizing, in English)” in *Risikogesellschaft* (*Risk Society*, in English) (Beck 1986). What Beck calls reflexive modernizing is the second modernization, in which people reflexively deal with the risks created by modernization itself. From this aspect alone, the notion of institutional reflexivity in Giddens’ concept of high modernity is extremely similar to this argument by Beck. However, some have criticized that action theory is missing in Beck’s argument (Yamaguchi 2002). When creating a basic theory for education and selection, even if it is middle-range, it is necessary to have an action theory-based foundation, which allows us to fundamentally examine the actions of those who conduct selection and those who are being selected both. In this respect, the fact that Giddens placed emphasis on this

notion of reflexivity from the stage when he was developing the theory of structuration using the duality of structure as its basic concept is the point worth noting in this paper.

I would like to develop an argument in the following order. First, in Section 2, I will outline what kind of arguments have been made under the subject “modernization and meritocracy” and then introduce the notion called “reflexivity of meritocracy” as a theoretical standpoint unlike others in the past. In Section 3, to build a theoretical foundation for it, I will organize the notion of reflexivity into three concepts according to Giddens’ theory. Then, from the perspective of those three reflexivity concepts, I would like to show the validity of the notion of “reflexivity of meritocracy” by explaining the issue of meritocracy while referring to the phenomenon of educational selection seen in postwar Japan. Finally in section 5, I will briefly add a remark about the significance of the arguments of this paper.

## 2 Various arguments on modernization and meritocracy

The viewpoint of seeing that modernization and meritocracy are closely linked is regarded as the basic thesis in today’s educational sociology. For example, we can find the following description in one of the introductory books of today’s educational sociology.

*Meritocracy as a modern social issue is closely tied to the transformation of economies from agrarian to industrial, and of political orders from hereditary to democratic, particularly multiparty democracies...As employment shifted from agriculture to industries and services, and as industrial and service corporations became progressively more technically advanced, formal educational credentials have grown in importance. (Hoffer 2002, p.438)*

This sort of thinking can be basically traced back to the viewpoint of bureaucracy and the emphasis on educational credentials in modern society, which was stressed by Weber (Weber 1956). However, it is fair to say that it is a theory that was already being accepted later by the first half of the twentieth century. For example, as many have noted,

Mannheim made a distinction between the three principles as an essential form of elite selection, i.e. principles of blood, property and achievement. And he points out that as modern democracy gains momentum, the achievement principle increasingly tends to become the criterion of social success (Mannheim 1940). And almost at the same time as Mannheim, Linton also made a distinction between ascribed status and achieved status (Linton 193). Although he does not stress the directionality of the transformation through the times from ascribed to achieved here, with European and American societies in mind, people have pointed out that achieved status and broad competitions over it have been characteristically observed because in society where things change rapidly, the abilities of the members need to be utilized. Parsons et al. also came up with the pattern variable of ascription-achievement, in response to this argument by Linton, but it is recognized that the United States of America made a significant shift toward an achievement-oriented society when it comes to the issue of allocation (Parsons & Shils eds.1951). And considering that Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy* was published in 1958 (Young 1958), the backbone of the concept of modernization and meritocracy was already widely understood by mid-twentieth century.<sup>2)</sup>

There are generally two types of arguments for capturing today's situations surrounding meritocracy based on this thesis of "modernization and meritocracy." One is the argument that as modernization proceeds, pre-modern irrationality gets eliminated and meritocracy grows, while the other is the argument that as modernization proceeds, meritocracy seems to be growing on the surface, but in reality, meritocracy is merely a fantasy due to social bias. The former argument has been seen in various discussions centered on so-called functionalism; in addition to Parsons mentioned above, the industrialization theory by Lipset and Bendix (Lipset & Bendix 1959), Treiman (1970) and Clark's technological functionalism (Clark 1962) are examples of such argument. However, as Karabel and Halsey pointed out in their arguments quite a long time ago, while people began to realize that social inequality would not be narrowed even if access to education expanded, discussions centered on conflict theory, to be described later, emerged in the history of sociology if education (Karabel & Halsey ed. 1977). Today, there are only a few researchers who support the simple theory that meritocracy is growing. However, this

simple theory is easy to understand as a general argument and thus is logic often discussed even today. For example, knowledge economy, which we often hear recently, can be regarded as one type of the theory that meritocracy is growing in the sense that one believes education gains in importance as knowledge economy advances.

In contrast to this, the latter opinion that meritocracy is merely a fantasy is an argument originating from conflict theory, which points out that employment and educational opportunities are only available to particular segments in a biased fashion, as seen in social stratification. The arguments by Bowles and Gintis, who pointed out the class bias in meritocracy based on Marx's class theory (Bowles & Gintis 1976), Halsey, who analyzed the class bias in status achievement and pointed out that meritocracy is a fantasy (Halsey 1977), and Collins, who explained the reality that the gaps are not narrowed based on Weber's idea of status groups (Collins 1979), were representative examples that were presented as an antithesis to functionalism-based meritocracy mentioned above. So-called reproduction theories (for instance, Willis' Marxist reproduction theory (Willis 1977) and cultural reproduction theory by Bourdieu et al. (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990) also contain elements that lead to these arguments. Various arguments that emerged after conflict theory and reproduction theories like these had been established to a certain extent are also basically close to the theory that meritocracy is an illusion. The idea of parentocracy, which points out educational selection is based more on parents' wealth and wishes than on the abilities and efforts of pupils (Brown 1990, 1995), as well as the argument by Duru-Bellat, who pointed out that expansion of opportunities for higher education in France does not necessarily mean that meritocracy is growing because of social inequality (Duru-Bellat 2006), can be also classified into this category in a broad sense.

Like the above, the point of argument over whether meritocracy is growing or merely an illusion is a very controversial question. However, it is true that there is a phenomenon that cannot be explained by these arguments—diversity in the standards of meritocracy. If we assume the standards of meritocracy are diverse, then the meaning of questioning as a society whether meritocracy is growing or an illusion could be questioned. For example, when thinking about compensation differences based on educational background, we can see them as meritocracy as

compared to compensation differences based on class or ethnicity, whereas we can also think that they are distorting the true meritocracy, as seen in educational credentialism. In other words, we can *always* say that even if we are dealing with the same phenomenon, it can be meritocratic according to some standard and at the same time it can be non-meritocratic according to another standard. Toward the argument claiming that meritocracy is growing, we can always assert that it is an illusion if we use another standard of meritocracy, and vice versa. From this point as well, we can clearly see the simplicity of the argument over whether “meritocracy is growing or merely an illusion.”

What is instructive about the diversity in the standards of meritocracy is Rosenbaum’s idea of the social construction of ability. According to Rosenbaum, when one climbs the ladder, whether it is academic advancement or career advancement, the movement is not contest mobility, as suggested by Turner (1960), but it is rather tournament mobility, which means once the person loses, he or she cannot participate in the next race. What is important here is that the loser of the tournament is labeled as a “person who does not have the ability to participate in the next contest” and the upper limit of his or her ability is socially defined. In other words, he pointed out that ability does not exist in an objective sense based on non-system standards but it is constructed socially and *ex-post facto* by the tournament system (Rosenbaum 1986). Then, why do people need to construct ability *ex-post facto* to have meritocracy emerge? It is because the “thesis of modernization and meritocracy” is not merely a thesis on theoretical grounds but also a thesis and a norm that we vaguely feel in our daily lives. We are in need of meritocracy. That’s why we construct meritocracy *ex-post facto*, which does not necessarily correspond to the true meritocracy based on actual abilities as in the case of tournament mobility. In other words, meritocracy that actually exists in the society we live in is meritocracy socially constructed. From the standpoint that meritocracy is socially constructed, the objectivistic perception of whether the true meritocracy is achieved or not becomes just another perspective for capturing the phenomenon of meritocracy. The fact that Goldthorpe, who has conducted excellent studies from an objectivistic viewpoint, sees meritocracy as a “necessary myth” (Goldthorpe 1996) is very instructive to the discussions I am developing here.

The idea of “reflexivity of meritocracy,” adopted in this study, is a perspective similar to the third meritocracy theory outlined here in the sense that it is based on the assumption that the standards of meritocracy are diverse. Here, I will first provide its basic logic.

As I pointed out earlier, the actual standard of meritocracy is ambiguous. And depending on the definition of the standard, we can say that meritocracy is growing or it is just an illusion. We are in need of meritocracy but we are essentially inclined to not allow the question of whether it is really “growing or just an illusion.” The reason is that without the presumption that we are able to find out who really have ability, we cannot argue whether meritocracy is growing or it is merely an illusion, and as a practical matter we have no way of knowing that in a strict sense. What we can do is to infer that “this person probably has ability because he or she can (could) do this.” It won’t take long to go from this inference to concluding that “we will regard those who can (could) do this as people with ability.” That’s why the viewpoint that meritocracy is socially constructed in a variety of ways depending on context is realistic. Because of these reasons, meritocracy has an aspect as educational credentialism or exam-based society even though it is an ideal philosophy of modern society. If so, then socially constructed meritocracy cannot always succeed in justification nor continue to be accepted by people. It is rather natural to think that meritocracy intrinsically has a characteristic of being questioned in light of a variety of standards whenever people reflect upon it reflexively. And as modernization is pushed forward, simple educational credentials, test results, and qualifications alone won’t be enough as indices of ability as society makes a shift to the services industry, becomes complex and education becomes popularized. And opportunities for such reflection will increase even more. In this study, I call this nature of meritocracy whose validity is constantly questioned “reflexivity of meritocracy.” This reflexivity takes place on a level of self-identity as well on an institutional level. Society in which heightened reflexivity is observed on these two levels is a society that we live in today characterized by high modernity, i.e. “society of reflexive meritocracy.” In the next section, I will organize Giddens’ notion of reflexivity as a prerequisite for presenting this idea. And in addition to the general notion of reflexivity, I would like to provide a rationale for

discussing reflexivity separately on a level of the self and on an institutional level.

### 3 High modernity and structuration : Organizing the notion of “reflexivity”

As I pointed out earlier, “reflexivity” is a notion that is given an important position in the theory of structuration (Giddens 1976, 1979, 1984), which is said to have been completed in the 1980s, in Giddens’ social theory. There are various opinions even among theoretical sociologists in terms of the relation between the theory of structuration and the theory of high modernity, upon which this study is mainly based.<sup>3)</sup>

But speaking only of the issue of reflexivity, I believe that its theoretical position can be clearly defined by going through the theory of structuration. With this in mind, I would like to organize the notion of reflexivity hereinafter.

Giddens emphasizes discontinuities between the pre-modern and the modern as a prerequisite for seeing the present state as “radicalized modernity.” Giddens also refers to modernity’s extreme dynamism (“runaway world”) as one of the obvious characteristics of modernity that separates the present era from any other preceding period. And he points out the following three points as elements that cause this extreme dynamism; time-space separation, disembedding mechanisms, and institutional reflexivity (Giddens 1991). These three are closely linked with each other. In local communities where face-to-face situations were dominantly seen, which is typical in pre-modern societies, “when” made no sense if it was separated from “where.” However, due to dissemination of mechanical clocks and standardization of calendars, as typified by the western calendar, the same time is now displayed “wherever irrespective of where you are.” This is the separation of time and space. Disembedding mechanisms refer to “abstract systems” consisting of symbolic tokens (currency is a typical example) and expert systems. They are mechanisms that separate interactions from the particularities of locales by functioning under the circumstances of the era where time is separated from space. Currencies and scientific specialized knowledge are what we can rely on because of their abstract nature free of any particular time and space, when we have to live on while being separated from local communities. And the activities that we, who have been separated from particular time and

space by the disembedding mechanisms, engage in would exhibit thoroughgoing reflexivity. In other words, they carry “susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge” (Giddens 1991: 20). And this reflexivity of modernity “extends into the core of the self” (Giddens 1991: 32). Thus, self-identity becomes a reflexive project in modernity.

Then, why is institutional reflexivity heightened in modern society? We can get to the answer to it faster if we think about why institutional reflexivity is not heightened in pre-modern society. To summarize the answer in simple terms, it is because traditions and customs are suppressing reflexivity. That’s why Giddens sees modern society as a society which has “wholesale reflexivity” (Giddens 1990: 39), but at the same time he calls it “post-traditional society” (Giddens, Beck & Lash 1994). And its meaning becomes clearer by going through the ideas in the theory of structuration.

A core idea of structuration theory can be expressed by the notion called “duality of structure.” Duality of structure is the idea that he proposed in an attempt to argue that structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices, in contrast to the traditional social theories (dualism of action and structure, especially the theory of structural functionalism), where people tried to separate agency from structure to understand the relationship between them. Let me explain by using the example that Giddens often uses. When we utter an English sentence, we say it according to the structure of the English grammar through practical consciousness even though we are not clearly conscious of how we should verbalize it. And the practice of speaking English itself gets reproduced by going over the structure of the English grammar itself. In other words, structure does not bind the agent one-sidedly nor appear in a place totally separated from the agent as seen in structuralism. Structure is a virtual order that binds the practices of the agent and appears through the practices. What is important to the discussions of this paper is the fact that, as typically seen when looking at the functional relationship between agency and structure, the relationship between them is not dealt with atemporally and it is thought that duality is manifested within the framework of time (which is not structure but structuration!). This is also Giddens’ empathetic criticism toward the Weber

sociology whose theme is to understand the subjective meaning of social action. In other words, “it is mistaken to suppose that we ‘attach’ meaning to action that is being lived through, since we are immersed in the action itself. The ‘attaching’ of meaning to experiences, which implies a reflexive look at the act by the actor or by others, is something which can only be applied retrospectively, to elapsed acts” (Giddens 1976: 33-34). To take the example of English mentioned earlier, the reproduction of the structure of the English grammar is an unintentional result for the agent, and faced with this result, the agent gives meaning to his or her action later through reflexive monitoring. Therefore, reflexive monitoring of action occupies an important position in the theory of structuration. And reflexivity in this sense does form the foundation of modern society but is not something unique to the modern age. It shows the general feature of the processes that accompany all practices of human beings whether it is the modern or pre-modern age (Giddens 1990: 37).

If we understood the theory of structuration this way, we can answer the earlier question—why institutional reflexivity is not heightened in traditional society—as follows. Tradition is the “‘purest’ and most innocent mode of social reproduction” (Giddens 1979: 200) and it is enough for the agent to say that “it is a tradition” and he or she does not have to aggressively give meaning to his or her action through reflexive monitoring. The assertion of the theory of structuration is that reflexive monitoring inevitably accompanies actions according to the principles of human society. But the circumstances in pre-modern society allowed it to not take place that frequently. Even though the actor did not undertake the task of speaking of the meaning of his or her action, tradition did it for him or her to a significant extent. To borrow Giddens’ words, “in pre-modern civilizations reflexivity is still largely limited to the reinterpretation and clarification of tradition” (Giddens 1990: 37). However, in the modern age in which temporal and spatial dimensions have expanded and agents are ripped from the context of traditional society, the agents who are questioned the meanings of their actions are now exposed to ontological anxiety more than ever. Anxiety that has been suppressed by the traditional customs and values is now totally exposed in modernity. In modernity, therefore, it is an important issue for the self to deal with this ontological

anxiety. As a result, reflexive monitoring begins to work much more powerfully than before to give meaning to one’s own actions. During the process, the self continues to update his or her identity reflexively while absorbing specialized knowledge, including scientific knowledge. This is the reflexive project of the self. However, self-identity is not the only thing that gets corrected by the information such as specialized knowledge. Actions by individuals and groups also get corrected reflexively. Giddens calls the social function caused by this reflective absorption of knowledge and corrections of actions “reflexive ordering and reordering” (Giddens 1990: 17). This means that reflexivity contains factors that could cause social changes on an institutional level. For example, about economic concepts like capital, investment, markets, and industry, Giddens says, “Modern economic activity would not be as it is were it not for the fact that all members of the population have mastered these concepts and an indefinite variety of others” (Giddens 1990: 41). This is the same as saying that reflexivity creates basic aspects of capitalism. The expression “institutional reflexivity,” which Giddens began to clearly define in *Modernity and Self-Identity* is believed to be used to emphasize that it is a phenomenon that overlaps with the issue of self-reflexivity but is a different concept and thus reflexivity can lead to consequences on an institutional level.<sup>4)</sup>

From what I have outlined above, it is obvious that Giddens’ concept of reflexivity has three aspects. First, there is reflexivity that occurs universally in human society in general, which has been introduced in the theory of structuration (reflexive monitoring of action). And apart from this, it is necessary to clearly recognize reflexivity as a feature of modernity. This distinction is emphasized by Giddens himself (Giddens 1991, Giddens & Pierson 1998). But the former reflexivity in a general sense began to function powerfully under new conditions (time-space separation and the development of disembedding mechanisms), which I believe is reflexivity of modernity. Based on this understanding, it is effective to categorize reflexivity of modernity into self reflexivity and institutional reflexivity.

Therefore, if we can persuasively define reflexivity of meritocracy from these three aspects, then this will guarantee the validity of discussing meritocracy in relation to reflexivity. Hereinafter, therefore, I will try and explain

reflexivity of meritocracy from these three aspects.

#### 4 Late modern age and reflexivity of meritocracy

##### A Reflexivity as a universal phenomenon and meritocracy in the late modern age

In any age and in any society, human beings are placed somewhere within that society. According to the theory of structuration, the action of placing people or being placed is normally the target of reflexive monitoring as it is an action of human beings. However, as explained earlier, in pre-modern society, reflexivity is limited because of traditions and customs. From the perspective of social mobility, the action of heredity was implemented under the name of tradition in the pre-modern era. This meant that a traditional class society existed. Then, reflexive monitoring concerning social mobility which leads to meritocracy was not functioning too obviously. There, making an issue out of meritocracy itself was very rare. However, in modern society where people call for values such as freedom, equality, and efficiency, the influence of the traditional class system has been weakened significantly, and reflexive monitoring takes place generally toward personnel placement and the action of social mobility of individuals within a society. There, traditions and customs can no longer explain how one is going to be placed and in which direction he or she is going to move, and the relationship between the ability of the self and his or her placement becomes an issue. In other words, our society becomes a society where the validity of meritocracy is reflexively monitored by many people.

The important thing here is that we are unable to objectively find out in advance who really have ability and what standards are truly appropriate as the standards of meritocracy, as pointed out earlier. The primary reason is because the world we live in is a world in which information is imperfect, as described in the new institutional economics (Williamson 1975). The second reason is because the concept of "ability" itself is an ever-changing thing composed of social situations. As a result, when we try to implement meritocracy in modern society, it is temporarily exercised based on proxy indicators of general ability, such as educational credentials and qualifications. However, these proxy indicators are used only temporarily and thus can be replaced by more persuasive proxy indicators anytime. To put it another way, meritocracy (and its proxy indicators)

actually exercised in modern society has a tendency to be constantly questioned about the relationship with the "true ability," which may be abstract and unsubstantial in reality. Thus, modern society becomes a society where the validity of meritocracy *continues* to be monitored reflexively on a constant basis.<sup>5)</sup>

The issue here is that this reflexive monitoring works differently in the first half of period of modernization and in the late modern age. In the first half of period of modernization when the industrial structure centered around manufacturing industry was established and school education was growing, higher education, which was associated more closely with modern knowledge and technology necessary in this industrial structure, was still a privilege only available to a small number of people (Trow 1973). Compared to contemporary times, much fewer people thought it was anti-meritocratic that those small number of people who had knowledge and were university graduates occupied the elite positions. Educational credentials were still rare in the early modern age and this proxy indicator of meritocracy was stably structuralized. And we can say that this allowed reflexivity of meritocracy to take place only on a limited scale, just like traditions did but not to the same extent.<sup>6)</sup> However, if the industrial structure changes and a shift toward the services industry is pushed forward, many people begin to "assume" that ability different from the traditional standards of meritocracy will be required. This "assumption" is largely related to the massification of education and informatization. As access to education expands, a group of people that expect upward mobility through education becomes larger and meritocracy becomes a concern to many people. Thus, those people begin to monitor the validity of meritocracy as their own (or their children's) issue. At the same time, the social landscape that changes along with the development of media becomes more familiar to them and access to specialized information becomes much easier. If that happens, then "trust based purely on the assumption of technical competence is *revisable*" (Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994: 89) even with regard to the experts with high educational credentials and qualifications. People now have a much stronger interest and abundant knowledge and continue to intensively and reflexively monitor whether meritocracy that matches today's society has been achieved. We can call the late modern society where reflexivity of

meritocracy has been heightened compared to the past, as described above, “society of reflexive meritocracy.”

### B Self-reflexivity and anxiety about ability and ability identity

The late modern society where reflexivity of meritocracy is heightened (= society of reflexive meritocracy) is also a society where the level of ability is constantly examined. In traditional society, even if ability was examined, it would not basically go beyond the traditional class system. It is thus considered that reflexivity of meritocracy only had an extremely limited influence because of traditions. When the idea of meritocracy was pushed forward in modern society, the meritocratic ethic defined the acquisition of educational credentials as the solid proof of ability, just like the protestant ethic defined the accumulation of wealth as the solid proof of relief.<sup>7)</sup> In this sense, educational credentialism was a necessary “belief” for the time being to control anxiety over ability unique to modern society. Yet, the range of people who were involved in such belief was limited at this point. However, in late modern society where access to education expanded and people began to pursue higher educational credentials, reflexivity of meritocracy began to spread among the mass public. In society where education has been popularized, almost all people explore their own future direction through school education. As ability-based selection becomes generalized, anxiety about ability becomes popularized. Ability evaluation offered at school or in organizations can cause anxiety in people about their own ability or can bring relief. Giddens points out that self-identity gets updated reflexively while people try various ways to deal with ontological anxiety. If we apply this to the issue of ability, we can presume that many people who have anxiety about their ability today will continue to reconstruct their ability identity<sup>8)</sup> while monitoring their ability reflexively.

Under the circumstances surrounding educational selection in postwar Japan, the most appropriate and important phenomenon in this context is probably the phenomenon of deviation value (Hensachi, in Japanese)<sup>9)</sup>. The use of deviation values became widespread at a drastic speed after they were created in the 1960s when massification of education became explicit, but this timing was not coincidental. Statistics underlying the calculation of deviation values is knowledge through expert systems. Choosing a future path based on them is exactly the risk

profiling (“analysing what, in the current state of knowledge and in current conditions, is the distribution of risks in given milieux of action” (Giddens 1991: 119)), as discussed by Giddens. From the perspective of reflexivity of meritocracy, because anxiety about ability becomes popularized when selection is popularized, it can be considered that deviation values were introduced and became widespread as a tool for providing many students who have such anxiety information that could strongly support reflexive monitoring of their ability. However, the fact that ability identity based on deviation values is vulnerable is the same as the fact that self-identity based on the risk profiling is vulnerable. This is because ability identity can easily waver when the values change in the next practice text. And Giddens refers to “addiction” as the phenomenon that became prominent in relation to reflexive exploration of self-identity in the late modern age (Giddens 1992), whereas going to cram school and early education, which became prominent in postwar education, have addictive elements. In other words, for the self reflexively exploring ability identity, continuing to go to cram school and getting absorbed in *ojuken* (taking competitive entrance exams for famous elementary schools) has an effect of reducing parents’ anxiety about their child’s ability, in addition to the effect of learning.

From the above, we can regard the phenomenon closely linked with deviation values and personal choices of individuals, such as going to cram school, among the phenomena that are the key to understanding postwar education as something that is associated with the massification of anxiety about ability in the late modern age and reflexive questioning of ability identity as a way to cope with it.

### C Institutional reflexivity and educational selection

The way to cope with anxiety about ability, as described above, not only question self-identity but is believed to have an institutional effect through its process. For example, the phenomena of deviation value and going to cram school, which I explained earlier, are of course inextricably linked with the fact that the entrance exam industry and practice exams are established socially as an institution. In addition to these, we can extract a phenomenon of having a reflexive effect on the system of educational selection itself.

As discussed earlier, institutional reflexivity is considered to mean constant correction of activities through absorption



of knowledge from expert systems, etc. and its institutional consequences. However, like Beck, this phenomenon means that the second-phase modernization implies “coming to terms with some of its limits, tensions and difficulties” (Giddens & Pierson 1998: 198) in Giddens’ argument as well. It is therefore believed that in the late modern age, the system of educational selection itself is going to be intensely exposed to the influence of institutional reflexivity and there will be institutional corrections to come to terms with the limits, contradictions, and difficulties brought about by the system of educational selection itself.

Looking back postwar education in Japan from these perspectives, an easy-to-understand example in this context is the process in which enrollee selection based on the standardized written examinations to test academic abilities, which is excellently modern in terms of fairness and efficiency, was criticized and led to the introduction and expansion of selection using the recommendation system and school reports.

The fact is, there is a ability indicator that is considered to be involved in reflexive questioning of ability identity, in addition to the ability indicators of written examinations, such as deviation value. That is school record. People must have felt that they would want their usual ability manifested at school to be valued more than the ability measured on the day of the examination. I believe this feeling has existed from before in a contained way. However, in terms of enrollee selection, when there were only a limited number of applicants, such questioning led to concrete institutional changes only partially. It was placed under serious reflexive questioning when high school education became universal through the spread of education and higher education became popularized. Time and space expanded in educational selection as well as in modernization in general. Individuals who participate in the competition for entrance exams will undergo selection based on ability evaluations, which is separated from the localized context. Anxiety about ability is no longer the feeling that a portion of elite candidates have but is shared by most people. And the expansion of education created a situation where many people can easily picture how desperately they need to eliminate this anxiety about ability and establish ability-identity. In this context, I believe that specialized knowledge of educators and intellectuals criticizing degree-oriented society and competition for entrance exams, as

well as technical findings in the research of examinations, such as strong persuasiveness of the school reports toward educational records after admission led to the introduction of systems other than the traditional written academic examinations, i.e. policy-based official approval of the recommendation system in the selection of university enrollees in 1967 and a shift toward emphasizing school reports in the selection of high school enrollees in 1966. Both are systems that significantly expanded in contemporary times. Even after that, enrollee selection has always been the subject of discussion, which can be regarded as the heightened institutional reflexivity in the late modern age. But what’s important is the fact that in contemporary times, it has become an ordinary practice to reflexively question and correct the contradictions that were created by meritocracy of modern Japan. This is exactly the image of the society of reflexive meritocracy.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper, I demonstrated that 1) the perspective called reflexivity of meritocracy can be derived when we pay close attention to the diversity of the standards of meritocracy, which was not necessarily discussed fully in the traditional arguments of meritocracy, and its social construction nature, 2) we can extract three aspects of reflexivity by sorting out Giddens’ theory of high modernity based on the theory of structuration, and 3) with these in mind, we can explain the historical progress of postwar education and selection in Japan based on the three concepts of reflexivity in a consistent manner to a significant extent.

What is important in conducting this study is that by looking through the perspective of reflexive meritocracy, it will be easier to examine the changes in postwar education, for example the introduction and expansion of the recommendation system, which had been considered uncompetitive and unfair compared to academic tests, in relation to the changes in contemporary society, as explained in the problem setting in the preface. The historical fact that the phenomena considered a pathological obsession with entrance exams, such as deviation values and going to cram school, and the systems that were considered to have been introduced to mitigate such obsession with entrance examinations, such as the recommendation system and selection based on school

reports, did in fact expand and develop simultaneously and in parallel in the postwar history is a fact that has been ignored most of the times probably because it is difficult to explain. But being able to explain this in a consistent manner shows the effectiveness of the perspective of reflexivity of meritocracy.<sup>10)</sup>

As I said earlier, the notion of reflexivity of meritocracy does not basically employ the viewpoint that meritocracy grows or becomes sluggish as time proceeds. Meritocracy inherently has a nature to be updated reflexively in modernity, and therefore the completion of meritocracy as a philosophy of modern society, is impossible. This standpoint may seem rather extreme depending on how you look at it. On the other hand, however, when thinking about the selection phenomenon in reality, such as enrollee selection, recruitment selection, or career advancement, I imagine that there are an overwhelming number of people in contemporary society who are trying to convince themselves that things are more or less meritocratic but are feeling not very happy about it, rather than trying to find a path to the completion of meritocracy or accusing that meritocracy is merely a fantasy. I would like to add at the end of this chapter that the notion of reflexivity of meritocracy was developed to save such reality as it is in the best way possible.

### Notes

- 1) The former version of this paper is published in 2009 in Japanese (Nakamura 2009). This paper is a modified and translated version of that for English readers.
- 2) This sort of thinking was a basic understanding in sociology of education in Japan as well in the 1950s.
- 3) For example, Miyamoto, who has examined Giddens most comprehensively in Japan, sees the core concept that is consistent in Giddens' theory "power" (Miyamoto 1989. Nakanishi has identified continuity of Giddens' theory in the notion of "reflexivity" (Nakanishi 2007). Sudo also points out that "understanding the theory of structuration is an indispensable prerequisite for understanding the theory of modernity, which Giddens is currently developing" (Sudo 1997, p.219). On the other hand, however, Tsutsui argues that it is important to read while paying close attention not make a meaningless intellectual investment in an attempt to read consistency in inconsistent text (Tsutsui 2006, p.181). Similarly, Kainuma (1996) made an argument that emphasizes "discontinuities." Although Kainuma admits that Giddens has consistently made modern social changes a subject of discussion, he claims that the arguments that Giddens has made after *The Consequences of Modernity* are "arguments that went through a 'turning point' and we must take note of that" (p.248).
- 4) Giddens defines institutional reflexivity as "the regularised use of knowledge about circumstances of social life as a constitutive element in its organisation and transformation" (1991: 20). In the same section, he also says, "Such information or knowledge is not incidental to modern institutions, but constitutive of them (p.20). What Giddens points out as a feature of modernity is the heightened reflexivity seen everywhere, and he tends to discuss the entire phenomenon as institutional reflexivity. But considering that Giddens used the viewpoint of understanding the relationship between agency and structure as duality in his theory of structuration, it is safe to assume that the viewpoint that agency comprises society is included in the notion of institutional reflexivity. In this sense, Lash distinguishes "self" reflexivity, in which agency reflects on itself, from "structural" reflexivity, in which agency reflects on agency's social conditions of existence" (Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994: 115). I believe that such distinction is rational to a certain extent in understanding Giddens' theory of high modernity.
- 5) Am I the only one who thinks it is rather easier to discuss whether things were meritocratic by reflecting on them later on when thinking about meritocracy? For me, it seems too much to discuss in advance "ideal employees our company wants" or "ability required in our university." I feel it is easier to discuss "whether our company's recruitment process was alright" or "whether our university's enrollee selection was appropriate" after things happened. If so, then it may be because of the reflexive nature of meritocracy.
- 6) To take the case of Japan as an example, the existence of the prewar educational background-based system in business enterprises or the university-based starting salary system itself tells us that reflexivity of meritocracy was limited in the former part of the modern age.
- 7) This analogy is based on the idea by Arita (Nakamura, Fujita & Arita 2002). According to Max Weber, the Protestant ethic encouraged people to accumulate wealth as proof of their worthiness as Christians, which leads to the development of modern capitalism (Weber 1920).
- 8) "Ability identity" is a term that used to be used by Iwata (1981) in his discussion of credentialism. It did not take root as a technical term, but is a convenient term that deserves to be revived.
- 9) *Hensachi* is the application of Z score. This calculation was contrived by a junior high school teacher and has been used in Japan since the 1960s. Most mock examinations for high school and university entrance continue to use it today to calculate the probability of passing the examination. Most applicants for high school and university focus a great deal of attention on raising their *hensachi*. This climate of worrying only about *hensachi* has been criticized.
- 10) In addition to this, I was going to apply the depth of the notion of reflexivity in educational research. Reflexivity is not a phenomenon unique to contemporary society but it is rather a phenomenon observed in all ages. Looking only at reflexivity unique to modernity, it has different aspects in the first half period of modernization and in the late modern age. The practice of reflexive questioning is common to these two periods. Loose usage of this term (it seems such usage has increased indeed (Nakamura 2007)) can lead to a situation where anything can be explained by reflexivity. I classified reflexivity into three aspects in this article because I also want to avoid making the notion of reflexivity

almighty (= meaningless) and at the same time enhance its convenience by sorting out the notion of reflexivity to make it easy to use.

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