

A Theory of Reflexive Meritocracy:

Toward a Critique of the “New Abilities” Discourse

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This paper introduces an overview of the “Theory of Reflexive Meritocracy” presented in the Japanese publication “Runaway Meritocracy” in 2018. As a precursor to this paper, a theoretical examination of the concept of “the reflexivity of meritocracy” was published in Japanese in 2009. An English-language paper covering the same content has also been published in 2023. This paper expands upon considerations that could not be fully developed in the 2023 paper due to space constraints. Specifically, it presents a “theory of reflexive meritocracy” structured around five propositions. It also outlines how social change appears when applying this theory, dividing it into three stages—pre-modern, early modern, and late modern—and provides a table sketching their characteristics. Furthermore, it critically examines some discourses about ability—specifically the OECD’s “key competencies” and “non-cognitive abilities (skills)” —which are also gaining attention in the global arena of discourse. This aims to illustrate that the theory of reflexive meritocracy is broadly applicable to societies beyond Japan.

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1 Introduction

This paper introduces an overview of the “Theory of Reflexive Meritocracy” presented in the Japanese publication “Runaway Meritocracy” (Nakamura, 2018). It also reconstructs and republishes in English the concluding section (Chapter 6), which employs this theory to conduct further analysis.

As a precursor to this paper, a theoretical examination of the concept of “the reflexivity of meritocracy” was pub-

lished in Japanese in 2009. An English-language paper covering the same content has also been published (Nakamura, 2023). This concept applies Giddens’ high modernity theory (Giddens, 1990, 1991) to the discussion of meritocracy. Interested readers are encouraged to consult that work. This paper expands upon considerations that could not be fully developed in the 2023 paper due to space constraints. Specifically, it presents a “theory of reflexive meritocracy” structured around five propositions. It also outlines how social change appears when applying this theory, dividing it into three stages—pre-modern, early modern, and late modern—and provides a table sketching their characteristics. Furthermore, it critically examines some discourses about ability—specifically the OECD’s “key competencies” and “non-cognitive skills”—which are also gaining attention in the global arena of discourse. This aims to illustrate that the theory of reflexive meritocracy is broadly applicable to societies beyond Japan.

2 Five Propositions

In contemporary society, there is vigorous debate surrounding abilities. Examples include the OECD’s “key competencies” (Rychen & Salganik eds., 2001) and “non-cognitive abilities” as represented by economist Heckman (Heckman, 2013), which are discussed later in this paper. Or consider concepts like GRIT (Duckworth, 2016). These can be termed the discourse on “new abilities” deemed necessary

in the modern era. However, this article holds a skeptical view toward the notion that these represent abilities newly required by contemporary society. This is because, as the author has already argued (Nakamura, 2018), the abilities highlighted in the “new abilities” discourse are largely not recent discoveries. They were necessary in the past and have consistently been regarded as essential, even now.

So why does the discourse on “new capabilities” generate such fervent discussion, advocacy, and even influence policy? My conclusion can be succinctly expressed in the following sentence:

What people crave now is the very argument that “we must pursue new abilities.”

And behind the creation of such craving lies the reflexivity of meritocracy. There are five propositions that logically connect this craving with the reflexivity of meritocracy. Collectively, we shall refer to this set of propositions here as the “Theory of Reflexive Meritocracy.” Below, we will briefly explain each of these five propositions.

Proposition 1: No abstract ability can be precisely measured.

Proposition 1 is deeply connected to the high level of abstraction inherent in the concept of ability. Since the modern era, we have adopted ability as the only acceptable principle for allocating status and have devoted considerable effort to figuring out how to implement it. However, ability is not something concrete that exists tangibly before our eyes. It is an invisible quality inherent within the individual.

For concrete abilities, such as “the ability to run 100 meters in under 10 seconds,” we can definitively determine whether that ability exists by actually running 100 meters and seeing if it can be achieved in under 10 seconds. In other words, we can only judge the presence or absence of an ability quite clearly when the definition of that ability includes a concrete method for measuring it.

However, what we consider problematic in social life are not such specific, concrete abilities. This is because such overly specific abilities have too narrow an application range, limiting their social usefulness. Therefore, when discussing abilities widely demanded by society, we focus on abilities of a much higher level of abstraction. These include such

attributes as intelligence, athletic ability, academic ability, communication skills, or competency. When dealing with such abstract abilities, accurately measuring the ability itself is nearly impossible, forcing us to compromise by measuring proxy indicators. No matter how sophisticated the statistical or scientific tools employed, directly measuring these abstract abilities remains extremely difficult.

Proposition 2: Ability, which is becoming an issue in status attainment and educational selection, is socially constructed.

Proposition 2 is an application of the argument known in sociology as the “social construction of ability” (Rosenbaum, 1986). As shown in Proposition 1, abstract ability cannot be measured directly as it is. Even so, our society must somehow make judgments about whether someone “has ability” or not. This is because modern society cannot abandon the normative facade that it should be meritocratic. To achieve this, we must somehow define “ability” in a simplified manner and reduce it to a measurable form. In other words, we are, to some extent, running society using provisional, temporary ability standards. That is, how we determine the presence or absence of abstract ability is socially determined. Because the criteria for judging ability are socially constructed, there is considerable room for arbitrary judgment. Consequently, the abilities we tend to emphasize in discussions about ability can be said to be socially constructed. This adds further fluctuation and instability to ability assessments.

Proposition 3: Meritocracy, from the outset, has been inherently subject to reflexive questioning and criticism. (reflexivity of meritocracy)

Proposition 1 and Proposition 2 are akin to axioms. They are principles that generally hold true regardless of context. And if one accepts these two propositions, Proposition 3 follows logically. If we take as a premise from Proposition 1 that the precise measurement of ability is difficult, then the ideals and standards of meritocracy that appear to be functioning in reality cannot be definitive; rather, they can only exist as provisional. And precisely because they are provisional, a decision must be made somewhere about how to reconcile the ideal with reality. Since this decision cannot be determined by the logic inherent within meritocracy itself, it must be made by the environment outside meritocra-

cy—that is, the social context. In other words, society must, for the time being, determine the criteria for judging ability. This is the socially constructed nature of ability referred to in Proposition 2.

If a meritocratic society can only be operated in this context-dependent and provisional manner, it inherently contains the latent possibility that it could have been otherwise. Taken together, accepting both Proposition 1 and Proposition 2 implies that meritocracy inherently possesses a nature that is constantly subject to reflexive questioning and criticism. This essential characteristic of meritocracy is termed its reflexivity.

Proposition 4: In the late modern era, the reflexivity of meritocracy increased more than ever before.

Proposition 4 holds as a special case of Proposition 3, meaning it applies when certain conditions are added to Proposition 3. These conditions refer to the historical context of late modern society. The reflexivity of meritocracy is always active, but its degree varies according to the circumstances of the era. Meritocracy did not entirely absent itself in pre-modern societies. This becomes clear when recalling China's imperial examination system. However, pre-modern societies generally featured stable traditional classes and statuses, where the attainment of position carried a strong hereditary character, making the reflexivity of meritocracy difficult to activate. In early modern societies, alongside the spread of education, academic credentials came to be used in many societies as a provisional indicator of meritocracy. Consequently, in early modernity, where academic credentials and qualifications held high credibility, meritocracy based on these was stable. While the reflexivity of meritocracy functioned, it did so to a lesser extent than in late modernity. However, in late modern society, where education expanded and higher academic attainment became more prevalent, the credibility of academic credentials and qualifications as indicators of ability itself became shaken. As a consequence, reflexive scrutiny came to be directed more intensely than ever before. This implies that, in late modernity, the reflexivity of meritocracy intensified more than ever before.

Proposition 5: The debate around “new abilities” in contemporary society is a phenomenon that demonstrates the increase in the reflexivity of meritocracy.

And if we accept Proposition 4, Proposition 5 can be readily derived as an interpretation of contemporary society. That is, as the reliability of academic credentials—the ability metric persuasively established until now—begins to waver, people are driven by anxiety surrounding ability (ability anxiety) to intensify discussions about “new abilities”. Thus, these discourses on “new abilities” themselves become phenomena demonstrating the heightened reflexivity of meritocracy. Underlying this is people's anxiety about their abilities, and the discussions they engage in about “new abilities” to compensate for this anxiety are a kind of addiction.

3 The Theory of Reflexive Meritocracy and Social Change

The “Theory of Reflexive Meritocracy” outlined above provides a framework capable of describing medium- to long-term social changes over time. Here, we will briefly explain the specific nature of these changes and their driving forces, particularly the transition from early modernity to late modernity.

A Framework for Grasping the Era Based on the Theory of Reflexive Meritocracy

My own research interests were in clarifying the relationship between social change in postwar Japan and the transformation of selection systems. As such, while I was spending time searching for frameworks that could fulfill these research interests, the theory of reflexive meritocracy emerged. Accordingly, this framework is constructed in a way that allows me to use the central concept of the reflexivity of meritocracy to describe educational and social changes in postwar Japan in a relatively consistent way. However, I believe this theory is applicable to societies outside Japan as well. Table 1 presents a conceptual framework of social change based on this theory.

While this table delineates the premodern, early modern, and late modern periods, in actuality the boundaries between the periods are not definite. Consider it as a general, rough sketch. However, I intended to organize things so that the directionality of the passage of time

Table 1 Framework for Grasping the Era Based on the Theory of Reflexive Meritocracy

	Premodern	Early modern	Late modern
Operation of the reflexivity of meritocracy	Very Weak	Moderate	Strong
Primary factors suppressing reflexivity	Tradition	Educational background	None
Corresponding systems and phenomena	Class system Lack of intergenerational mobility Hereditary inheritance	Credential society Academic meritocracy Designated school system Written examinations Trust in schools	Criticism of the focus on academic background Criticism of admission methods Rise of the theory of new abilities Ability anxiety School/University evaluation
Spread of the educational system	Limited	Partially open	Open
Examples of educational systems	informal schools established by feudal lords or the church	Establishment of compulsory education Spread of secondary education Elite higher education	Secondary education becomes universal Mass or universal higher education
Progress of informationization	Local	National	Global
Examples of typical means of communication and telecommunication	Letters/word of mouth	Newspapers/landline telephones/television/radio	Computers/cellular phones/e-mail/internet/satellite communication

would be consistent from a theoretical perspective.

It is hypothesized that the operation of the reflexivity of meritocracy has strengthened as we progressed from the premodern period, through the early modern period, and to the late modern period. As has already been argued, this reflects the weakening and changing of factors suppressing reflexivity. While tradition was a strong suppressor of reflexivity in the premodern period, academic background took on some of this in the early modern period. However, the increasing popularization of higher education cast a reflexive gaze on academic background itself and, in the late modern period, we increasingly advanced toward a society in which the reflexivity of meritocracy operates completely. Although the table shows “none” in the row “primary factors suppressing reflexivity,” this does not mean that reflexivity is completely unsuppressed. There are simply no primary factors; naturally, mechanisms and systems that impede reflexivity exist in different contexts in the present as well. However, in comparison to tradition in the premodern period and academic background in the early modern period, these mechanisms and systems are scattered inconsistently, making deterrence quite weak, relatively speaking. That is the view being expressed here.

This table uses examples to describe the various systems and phenomena related to meritocracy at each stage, but to simplify things further, the premodern period was an era of no schools, the early modern period an era of schools, and

the late modern period an era of criticizing schools. Additionally, the “school/university evaluation” mentioned below likely produces a certain kind of mistrust toward the school-based education system. This is slightly overreaching for this discussion, which focuses on individual ability, but it is believed that ever since the school-based education system began in the early modern period, schools and universities themselves have tried to make reforms reflecting on past practices. However, in the late modern era, there is a tendency to apply this drive indiscriminately. In other words, putting aside whether this is the correct direction in which to go, the act of reflecting and repeatedly evaluating oneself is becoming a part of daily life and a part of institutions. This is another phenomenon that is symbolic of school criticism.

B Drivers of Reflexivity: Educational expansion and Informationization

In broad terms, two kinds of social change modify the operation of the reflexivity of meritocracy: educational expansion, and informationization. These correspondence relationships are listed at the bottom of the table, but the education system has continued to develop and become more universal as we progressed from the premodern period, through the early modern period, and to the late modern period. Opening up the education system and filling society with well-educated people causes criticism of academic background and schools, by the

well educated, to operate reflexively. Meanwhile, in the case of informationization, the distribution of information in pre-modern society was essentially local and, even if information did spread throughout the country, it took a great deal of time. However, as modernization progressed, and means for communicating information such as newspapers, radio, television, and telephones (landlines) were established one after another, information was smoothly transmitted at the national level. Amid such development, there were many instances in which places were forced to amend local values and systems. Today, in the late modern period, the reach of information communication is expanding, becoming more and more global. Here, all kinds of values, customs, and systems that had become national concerns are becoming exposed to the reflexive gaze. This is also true of the school-based education system and the focus on academic background.

Incidentally, the educational expansion and informationization do share one characteristic: spatial expansion. While this is easy to picture right away when it comes to informationization, educational expansion also operates in concert with spatial expansion. It becomes easier to picture when you imagine the geographic range of students expanding as they advance through elementary school, middle school, high school, and university. Put more succinctly, advancement to higher levels of schooling is associated with the expansion of an individual's range of spatial movement. This essentially occurs because of the simple reality that there is a smaller number of schools at higher levels, increasing the number of people who have to travel farther distances to attend them. This relates to the reflexivity of meritocracy because, no matter the circumstances, one function of the popularization of higher education is to disembed individuals from locally grounded social contexts, which makes locally established systems and sets of values an easier target for questioning because they become linked to such spatial mobility. From this perspective, the popularization of higher education can be understood as one mechanism that tends to generate reflexivity. Increasing reflexivity of meritocracy is also a factor underlying such process of spatial transformations.

At first glance, such an interpretation may make the difference between the late modern and "postmodern" less clear. Indeed, to reference the story of "The End of Grand Narratives," which emphasized Lyotard's theory of postmodernism (1984), it seems that it would not be

impossible to understand the present day as a state in which the "grand narratives" of school and meritocracy have collapsed. However, the decisive difference is that, in Lyotard's "The End of Grand Narratives," there is little emphasis on continuity as a guiding theoretical concern. Because late modern theory depicts this not as an "end" but as a process of reflexive exposure that was present from the beginning, present circumstances are understood in the context of an extension of the modern period. Actually, it could be said that the present (or, to use Giddens' term, high modernity) is even more modern than the early modern period.

Meritocracy does indeed appear to be a grand narrative, and its fluctuations may look like an "end" in some respects. However, although we do criticize the meritocracy that exists, we are not completely discarding it. That is to say, we cannot discard it. That is because we do not have an alternative plan on hand to replace the system of schools and academic records. In that sense, the grand narrative of meritocracy is not losing its meaning. That is why we cannot use the word "post." Therefore, from the perspective of the theory of reflexive meritocracy, the phenomenon of "new abilities" discourses, which we now come across so frequently, is not at its core the first sign of new selection principles. Despite the fact that no one has come up with any better ideas, we contemporary people criticize the existing meritocracy and cannot help bandying about clichéd theories of ability that we heard in one place or another as if they were splendid alternatives. The phenomenon itself should be understood as a chronic pathology of contemporary society --- the increase in the reflexivity of meritocracy. Based on the theoretical understanding described above, I made the following claim at the beginning as the fundamental position of this article:

What people crave now is the very argument that "we must pursue new abilities."

Readers who have been so kind as to read this far should easily understand that "the actual argument that people 'must pursue new abilities'" is referring to the phenomenon of the reflexivity of meritocracy.

4 A Critical Examination of ‘New Ability’ Discourses in the World

Given this understanding of meritocracy, how can we interpret the ‘new ability’ theories being discussed on a global scale? Here, let us examine key competencies and non-cognitive abilities.

A Key Competencies: A Mysterious Theory of Ability Taking the World by Storm

Some readers will likely be familiar with the phrase key competencies. At the very least, there should be a certain number of people who have heard the word competency. In Japanese, it is often used to mean the same thing as the word “ability.” The term was originally extremely nuanced, and it refers to behavioral traits shared by people who achieve results. I say that this concept is nuanced because it differs slightly from the usual view that sees traits as inherent to individuals, and instead can mean that the context in which a person achieves results is important. In many ways, this overlaps with the view emphasized in Proposition 2: that ability is socially constructed.

The attempt to reveal key traits from among such abilities began at the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) in the late 1990s in the form of the DeSeCo project. DeSeCo is an abbreviation of Definition and Selection of Competencies. Specifically, it was a research project that attempted to define competencies and select the abilities key to them. The key competencies defined and selected in this project are broadly organized into three categories, and three subcategories are further assigned to each of the abilities. Nine abilities were conveniently selected as “key competencies”. These have been incorporated into the concepts of the OECD’s high-profile PISA test (Programme for International Student Assessment) and are reflected in the exam questions. We can think of this as the ideology behind the PISA, a major project now receiving attention from education policymakers around the world. After reading this, you can likely imagine the global influence of these ideas. For an easy example, recall what happened in Japan: Japan’s PISA ranking fell in 2003, throwing the country’s curriculum reduction policy (the so-called Yutori education) into turmoil. Globally, the PISA continues to influence the educational policy of a variety of countries,

and its destructive (?) power is great.

However, I believe that many readers who have come along with me this far may feel that something is not right here. They may wonder, if competencies summarize the behavioral traits of people who have achieved results in set conditions, how valuable can they be when people attempt to abstract them and summarize their common points without context? If the country, culture, workplace, or education level is different, then the competencies should be different as well. However, abilities that were made abstract by disregarding such context are precisely the abstract abilities that Proposition 1 has referred to, and they are not only trite but also difficult to measure. Consider the key competencies diagram(OECD, 2005). For instance, the second category “interact in heterogeneous groups” has the subcategories “the ability to relate well to others,” “the ability to cooperate,” and “the ability to manage and resolve conflicts.” Can we really call these advanced abilities that are leading the twenty-first century? Anyone who asserts this should realize that there have to be some limits to authoritarianism. If this were not a project of an authoritative international organization like the OECD and did not have an ostentatious name like key competencies, I doubt that we would set much store by it. Just what is so original about getting along well with others, cooperating in a team, or resolving conflicts? If these abilities are truly enough to get us through the twenty-first century, that would actually give pessimists such as myself a great deal of hope.

Of course, that is not to say that these values are meaningless. In a world where conflict and discrimination never stop, these values are extremely important. The point I am trying to make is that, just because these abilities can be universally valuable by being overly abstract, that does not mean we have discovered new abilities for a new era. Putting aside their skill, strengths, or weaknesses, these universal values themselves are already thoroughly integrated into the curriculums of many educational systems. Education in Japan has long been criticized as collectivist, but it may, in fact, have long incorporated elements that would now be regarded as “advanced” within the framework of key competencies.

Once we have understood this series of events, we should be able to get started on tasks that investigate competencies based on individual context with as little abstraction as possible, while keeping an eye on the abstractness of key

competencies and the vagueness they cause. This likely means that a critical gaze will be cast upon plans that attempt to carry out major reforms revolving around key competencies as new abilities that suit the twenty-first century.

B Non-cognitive Abilities: An Old Theory of Ability Rediscovered by Economists

Those who often read writings related to education have likely noticed that “non-cognitive abilities (skills)” is an industry buzzword, just like key competencies. One major trigger for this was the research of the American Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman. Anyone can see an outline of that research in *Giving Kids a Fair Chance* (Heckman, 2013). If I simplify it to just the important points, the research claims that: 1. A child’s future potential to succeed is influenced not only by cognitive abilities, of which academic ability is a typical example, but also by non-cognitive abilities such as physical and mental health, perseverance, attentiveness, drive, and confidence; and 2. Policy intervention in early childhood education is effective because the environment in early childhood is important and intervention there can achieve major economic returns.

These findings from Heckman have been introduced by many economists in the world (and also in Japan) and they are quite well known in the field of education. His findings seem to be the underpinning of the campaign pledge hammered out by Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party just recently to make early childhood education free. The conference, which is debating this free educational policy, was held for the second time in the October of 2017, and discussion of Heckman and non-cognitive abilities appeared in the materials for the conference. It must be said that this is hugely influential.

During that debate about making early childhood education free, experts in early childhood education did not seem to have a particularly high opinion of the plan. However, I would like to call attention to the fact that some economists thought to agree with Heckman’s arguments also raised objections in this debate. During the debate on free early childhood education, Hideo Akabayashi, well known for his research on the economics of education, referred to the fact that Heckman was repeatedly used as the basis for arguments in Japan as “an absurd argument that ignores the differences in the social context of the US and Japan.” According to Akabayashi, Heckman’s claims

are based on the results of measuring the effects when high-quality education was provided to preschool children in America 50 years ago who were not well cared for and had few educational opportunities, meaning that the conditions were far too different from those currently existing in Japan, where nearly everyone receives early childhood education (including daycare) (Akabayashi, 2017).

I am among those who found Akabayashi’s argument convincing. Because Heckman argued not only for investment in early childhood education but also for the importance of non-cognitive abilities, I believe that the latter should be critically investigated as well. That is because, to me, the emphasis on non-cognitive abilities itself looks like a phenomenon of the reflexivity of meritocracy.

A variety of studies are being done both in and outside Japan on the influence that non-cognitive abilities have on a person’s future and, as I believe that this is an extremely important area of research, I would like to take advantage of it in my future research as well. However, this is a discussion for the academic world. If these ideas become a guiding principle in daily life and a policy goal, then they need to be subject to more careful debate. That is because they are nothing but the abstract abilities discussed in Proposition 1 of this article. Not to be repetitive, but the abstract abilities discussed today have a tendency to turn into the hackneyed theories of ability that have been recognized for a long time, and even assuming that they do not, many of these abilities are not necessarily easy to measure in reality.

I will risk inviting misunderstandings to make things easier to understand. Without Heckman’s research, would we really be completely unaware of the idea that people’s futures are influenced by qualities seen as non-cognitive abilities, such as health, perseverance, attentiveness, drive, and confidence? Would not most people feel like they were aware of this without being told? Every single one of these traits would be considered better to have in life than not to have. Opinions have probably always been divided over whether it is a good idea to decide that certain non-cognitive abilities are intrinsically present in certain people because an individual can change depending on the situation. For example, a person may be persistent when working on something they like and unable to persist when working on something they do not like; confident when they are doing something they are good at and not confident at other times; or attentive when they are interested and

distracted when they are not.

In that sense, they also have the same issue as key competencies. In other words, it is possible that non-cognitive ability is not a new theory of ability for a new era, but only a reconfirmation of incredibly common abilities that have long been considered important in real life. Additionally, such non-cognitive abilities are rarely ignored in education policy, no matter the country; they have already been integrated into curricula to varying degrees. In Japan, school curricula are frequently divided into subject-based education, moral education, and extracurricular activities, the latter two of which are exactly what non-cognitive abilities are referring to (non-cognitive skills should have been even more strongly emphasized in early childhood education in the world). In particular, Japanese schools are said to place special emphasis on extracurricular activities compared to other nations, and it is easy to imagine the major contributions that club-based activities or school events like student council activities, sports days, and school festivals have made to the development of children's non-cognitive abilities. With that being the case, how much additional impact can policies make? Non-cognitive abilities are a type of universal ability rather than new abilities and, if non-cognitive abilities are to be emphasized in education policy, then we must break down what new things need to be added after giving adequate consideration to what can be handled by existing curricula.

5 Conclusion

This paper presents five propositions and one table as a theory of reflexive meritocracy. This theory draws inspiration from the realities of postwar Japanese education and society. However, by connecting the discussion to Giddens' late modern theory, it can also be proposed as a theory applicable to many societies that have experienced educational expansion and informatization. As an example, this paper demonstrates that the OECD's key competencies and the non-cognitive abilities (skills) emphasized by Heckman can be critically interpreted as phenomena of reflexivity of meritocracy.

The increasing reflexivity of meritocracy in late modernity is beginning to influence various policies, starting with education, in many societies. If we possess a framework that interprets these new theories of ability not as something

that will improve the future of our world, but merely as reflexive phenomena stemming from ability anxiety, we can confront the compulsive discourse spreading worldwide—that we “must acquire new abilities”—with a restrained perspective. In this sense, the theory of reflexive meritocracy serves as a practical theory offering valuable support for contemporary individuals struggling not with a “Runaway World” (Giddens, 1999) but with a “Runaway Meritocracy,” enabling them to survive late modernity.

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