

“The Ball Is in His Court. It’s up to Him”: Parental Communication About Meritocracy

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Meritocracy—the belief that society rewards individual ability, motivation, and hard work—is foundational to many Western nations but the processes by which meritocratic beliefs are communicated to youth is not well understood. The present study used a master narrative (i.e., dominant cultural stories) framework to explore parents’ communication of meritocratic messages. Data came from a larger qualitative study of family social class socialization; the interview protocol was designed to elicit information about parents’ perspectives on how their families’ current social class standing affects their family life, including how they communicate about social class with their children. The sample comprises parents from the United Kingdom ($n = 21$) and United States ($n = 13$) with at least one child between the ages of 5 and 17 ($N = 34$; $M_{\text{age}} = 44.1$ years; 50% women; 26% Asian; 26% Black; 9% Latinx; 38% white; 44% working class; 6% lower middle class; 38% middle class; 12% upper middle class). Results indicate that all parents incorporated aspects of meritocracy, adhering to individualist views of economic success. Many also resisted dominant narratives such as materialism. Far less frequent was endorsement of a counter narrative to meritocracy (i.e., structural dimensions of social class).

Public Significance Statement

As beliefs about meritocracy are prevalent in Western countries and have been linked to youth outcomes, this study explored how parents convey messages about meritocracy to their children. We interviewed parents from diverse socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds in the United States and United Kingdom. Results indicate that all parents emphasized messages aligned with meritocracy, adhering to individualist views of economic success. Many also pushed back certain themes related to meritocracy, such as materialism.

Keywords: meritocracy, parental socialization, social class, master narratives

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Meritocracy is the belief that society or social and economic systems reward individual ability, motivation, and hard work such that success indicates personal deservingness (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). In many Western nations, including the United Kingdom (U.K.) and United States (U.S.), meritocracy serves as a master narrative or “culturally shared stor[y] that guide[s] thoughts, beliefs, values and behaviors” (Syed & McLean, 2023, p. 1). Meritocracy is foundational to British and American culture and to the countries’

respective economic systems, which promote individualistic values and emphasize individual merit while simultaneously systematically privileging certain groups over others (Kasser et al., 2007; Littler, 2017; Taylor-Gooby & Leruth, 2018; Uhlmann & Sanchez-Burks, 2014). This meritocratic narrative is thought to be communicated through the media, in schools and curricula, and in the stories told by families to explain their current economic situation and instill values (e.g., the importance of hard work; Jones et al., 2018; Littler, 2017),

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but it often ignores or minimizes institutional and structural barriers to economic success faced by many in the U.K. and U.S. Moreover, survey data indicates that adults across the U.K. and U.S. endorse meritocratic views to a similarly high degree, and endorsement of meritocracy has increased amongst adults in both countries over the past three decades (Mijs, 2021). At present, however, little research has investigated how young people learn about meritocracy, including how parents communicate meritocratic messages to their children; the present study aims to address this gap.

Youth's Beliefs About Meritocracy

Better understanding of how meritocratic beliefs are communicated to children and youth is particularly important in part because beliefs aligned with meritocracy have been shown to have both psychological benefits and hindrances (Destin, 2020; Dickinson et al., 2023). For example, meritocratic beliefs perpetuate racial stereotypes (Katz & Hass, 1988) and denial of discrimination (McCoy & Major, 2007). They have also been shown to affect youths' psychological wellbeing. For example, in a recent study with a sample of racially diverse (i.e., youth of color and white¹ youth) students from families who were low-income, Godfrey et al. (2019) observed that meritocratic beliefs, while related to short-term increases in self-esteem and decreases in delinquent behavior, predicted worse trajectories across a 2-year period. The influence of meritocratic beliefs has also been shown to differ across high and low status groups with privileged individuals benefitting more than marginalized individuals (Rankin et al., 2009; Weinberg et al., 2021).

Yet the social relational influences that contribute to the emergence and development of meritocratic beliefs throughout childhood and adolescence are not yet well understood (Ruck et al., 2019). While developmental research has extensively documented socioeconomic status-related differences in children's and adolescents' academic, behavioral, and socioemotional outcomes, less well investigated is how children and youth reason about their social class or economic issues more broadly defined, or the processes leading to these beliefs (including meritocracy; Ruck et al., 2019). Existing psychological frameworks (e.g., status-based identity, Destin et al., 2017; social class as culture, Kraus et al., 2011; social class worldview model, Liu et al., 2004) can aid the examination of children's and youths' developing beliefs in this area (e.g., Ghavami & Mistry, 2019). These frameworks emphasize the material (i.e., possessions, purchasing power) and psychological (e.g., perceptions, values, group identity) aspects of social class that influence an individuals' beliefs about their social class, that of others, and society at large. Relevant to the present study is evidence that shows that children become aware of and reason about economic issues at an early age (Dickinson et al., 2023; Fehr et al., 2008; Mistry et al., 2022). By late childhood/early adolescence, children identify material possessions as important social status markers, define their own and other's socioeconomic status by such markers, and are aware of stereotypes of the rich and poor (Dickinson et al., 2023; Mistry, Elenbaas, McGuire, & Patton, 2025). During adolescence, some youth develop more complex understandings of economic inequality and incorporate structural attributions for wealth and poverty (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2014); however, individualistic attributions (which align with a meritocratic master narrative) remain common (Dickinson et al., 2023; Mistry, Elenbaas, McGuire, & Patton, 2025).

Socialization of Youth's Beliefs About Meritocracy

Despite evidence that children and youth reason about economic issues, including meritocracy, and that their economic beliefs have implications for psychological wellbeing, little research has examined factors that influence the development of these beliefs (Dickinson et al., 2023; Mistry, Elenbaas, McGuire, & Patton, 2025). A small body of literature highlights that parental socialization plays a critical role in this process. In particular, factors such as family values (e.g., social responsibility, self-reliance) and parental discussions of current events have been shown to be associated with youth's beliefs (Flanagan & Kornbluh, 2019; Flanagan et al., 2014). For example, Flanagan et al. (2014) found that youth whose families engaged more frequently in discussions of current events were more likely to use structural attributions for wealth or poverty than youth whose families did not engage in such discussions. However, little research has focused explicitly on parental communication about meritocratic beliefs (as the present study does).

Furthermore, it may be that child and family sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., child developmental status, parent social class identity) and more distal contexts (e.g., national context) influence how and what parents communicate with their children about economic issues, including meritocracy. There is some evidence that parental communication about economic issues is infrequent at home (Mistry, Elenbaas, McGuire, & Patton, 2025) with a recent study with parents of younger children finding that parents cited developmental concerns (e.g., worries that their child is too young) as a barrier to engaging in such discussions (Griffin et al., 2024). To what extent these findings extend to discussions of meritocracy is unclear. Similarly, the extent to which parents' social class identity influences their communication about meritocracy with their children is less well understood. Finally, although much of the research on meritocratic beliefs conducted with U.K. and U.S. adults has found similar rates of endorsement of meritocratic beliefs (Mijs, 2021), it may be that parental communication about meritocracy varies based on distinct historical (i.e., historical class-based society in U.K.) and cultural (i.e., prevalence of "the American Dream") contexts. That is, although endorsement of meritocratic beliefs may be similar, it may be that the process through which such beliefs develop, or the specific narratives that uphold them, differ across the U.K. and U.S. To address these outstanding questions, the present study explored how parental communication about meritocracy varied by developmental status (i.e., childhood vs. adolescence), parent social class identity (e.g., working class, middle class), and national context (i.e., U.K. vs. U.S.).

Master Narrative Framework

To better understand parents' communication of meritocratic messages, the present study was guided by the master narrative (i.e., culturally dominant stories) framework because it allows for an

¹ A note on capitalization: In accordance with the Society for Research in Child Development (2024), we choose not to capitalize white throughout this article. This choice aims to recognize the inherent politics of capitalization, resist alignment with white supremacist hate groups who capitalize "white," and acknowledge that whiteness serves solely as a mechanism of power-hoarding and oppression (as opposed to a collective identity of resistance and community amongst racially/ethnically minoritized groups).

investigation of how individual meaning making is influenced by societal structures and, in turn, how individuals perpetuate societal inequalities (McLean & Syed, 2016). In their framework, McLean & Syed outline three types of narratives: (a) master narratives, (b) alternative narratives, and (c) personal narratives. Master narratives are stories shared across and within cultures that shape thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors, thus influencing how individuals develop their own personal narratives (i.e., the stories that inform one's personal identity). Furthermore, master narratives uphold societal inequality by "provid[ing] guidance for how to be a 'good' member of a culture," thus reinforcing hegemonic norms and justifying oppressive systems (McLean & Syed, 2016, p. 320). Alternative narratives push back against master narratives to incorporate voices and perspectives that have been historically excluded and may also influence personal narratives. In so doing, alternative narratives open up the possibility for constructing personal narratives that push back against the structural oppression the master narrative upholds. Alternative narratives exist along a continuum from narratives that *differ* from the master narrative (e.g., acknowledging influence of economic forces on opportunity for upward mobility) to those that *are explicitly antagonist* to the master narrative (i.e., counter narratives, e.g., acknowledging social class as deterministic influence on opportunities for upward mobility; see Miller et al., 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002 for lineage of counter narrative research). Master narrative research has two primary lines of inquiry: (a) content and (b) process. Content research aims to understand the definition, details, and conceptualization of master and alternative narratives (Syed & McLean, 2023). While process research illuminates how individuals negotiate master and alternative narratives to form their personal narratives. The framework outlines two primary interactions that individuals undertake in the master narrative process: (a) internalization of the master narrative and incorporation into one's personal narrative and (b) construction of alternative narratives that "at minimum differ[s] from, and at maximum resist[s], a master narrative" (McLean & Syed, 2016, p. 325).

The present study is also informed by the framework of resistance and accommodation from Rogers and Way (2021), which centers socialization as a key element to developing resistance to dominant ideologies (e.g., master narratives) in children and adolescents. The authors theorize that fostering genuine relationships, intentional socialization about social issues, and naming systems of inequity are key socializing practices for fostering youth's awareness of and ability to resist to master narratives. To this end, recent research has, for example, utilized the master narrative framework to understand the impact of white supremacist narratives on the development of racial beliefs amongst white children (Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2022). Aligning with this work, the present study applies the master narrative framework to the socialization of meritocratic beliefs via parental communication. In particular, this study aims to understand which aspects of the meritocratic master narrative (i.e., content) are evident in parents' accounts of their communications about social class, money, and values with their children. Furthermore, the study examines how parents incorporate these aspects of the meritocratic master narrative when sharing their personal narratives (e.g., about their own economic mobility or stability) and the extent to which they construct and communicate alternative narratives to meritocracy (i.e., process).

The Present Study

Previous research has illustrated that master narratives influence individual meaning making. Furthermore, there is evidence that meritocratic beliefs are prevalent amongst adults and youth in the U.K. and the U.S., and these beliefs have both positive and negative psychological consequences. However, little is known about how meritocratic beliefs are communicated to youth by their parents, or how this communication may vary based on the family's social identities or experiences (e.g., social class identity, child developmental status, national context). To examine this, the present study draws upon data from a larger investigation of a socioeconomically and racially diverse sample of adults' perceptions of social class and social class identity in the U.K. and U.S., (see Elenbaas et al., 2025). Specific research questions are as follows:

Research Question 1: What aspects of the meritocratic master narrative do parents incorporate into their communication?

Research Question 2: To what extent do parents exhibit evidence of alternative narratives to meritocracy (in their communication with their children)?

Research Question 3: What experiences and social identities (i.e., national context, social class identity, child developmental status) inform parents' negotiation and communication of meritocracy?

Method

Data Source

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger study about social class identity in the U.K. and U.S. (see Elenbaas et al., 2025). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Rochester (Study ID STUDY00006606) and the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter (Application ID: 492697). Data were collected between Fall 2021 and Spring 2022. A diverse sample of adults ($N = 1,052$; U.S.: $n = 595$; U.K.: $n = 457$) were recruited via <https://www.Prolific.com> to complete an online survey of their social class identity, beliefs, and perceptions. Upon completion of the survey, participants who met eligibility criteria (i.e., self-reported parent of a child between the ages of 5 and 17) were invited to participate in a follow-up interview about how social class affects their family life and socialization. Eligible participants were stratified by national context (i.e., U.K., U.S.), social class identity, racial-ethnic identity, and gender. Recruitment for the interview study began immediately following survey completion in December 2021; interviews were completed via Zoom between February and April 2022. Participants were compensated at a rate of £3.65/\$5.00 for survey completion and £13.50/\$20 for their participation in the interviews.

Participants

Present study participants were 34 U.K. ($n = 21$) and U.S. ($n = 13$) parents ($M_{\text{age}} = 44.1$, $SD = 8.7$, age range = 35–58 years) who participated in both the survey and the interview (see Table 1 for full sample demographics. See Supplemental Materials for participant profiles). Among those who met the eligibility criteria specified above ($n = 438$), recruitment for the present study prioritized

Table 1*United Kingdom and United States Sample Demographics*

Demographic	United Kingdom		United States	
	% or <i>M</i>	<i>n</i> or <i>SD</i>	% or <i>M</i>	<i>n</i> or <i>SD</i>
Age of oldest child				
Under 6 years	10%	2	15%	2
6–11 years	33%	7	39%	5
12–18 years	57%	12	46%	6
Parent age ^a	43.3	6.2	46.6	8.7
Parent gender				
Female	43%	9	62%	8
Male	57%	12	38%	5
Parent race or ethnicity ^b				
Asian	24%	5	31%	4
Black	33%	7	15%	2
Latinx	0%	0	31%	3
White	43%	9	23%	4
Parent generation status ^c				
First	38%	8	31%	4
Second	24%	5	31%	4
Third or higher	38%	8	38%	5
Parent social class ^d				
Working	43%	9	46%	6
Lower middle	10%	2	0%	0
Middle	43%	9	31%	4
Upper middle	5%	1	23%	3
Parent education				
No qualifications/no formal qualifications	0%	0		
1–4 GCSEs or equivalent	5%	1		
Five or more GCSEs or equivalent	5%	1		
Two or more A-levels or equivalent	10%	2		
First degree or equivalent	57%	12		
Other qualifications/vocational qualifications	0%	0		
Master's degree or equivalent	14%	3		
Doctorate degree or equivalent	10%	2		
Some high school			0%	0
High school degree or equivalent			0%	0
Some college			0%	0
Technical or vocational degree			0%	0
Two-year college or associate degree			15%	2
Four-year college or bachelor's degree			62%	8
Master's degree			15%	2
Doctorate degree			8%	1
Parent income				
Less than £15,000	14%	3		
£15,001–£25,000	5%	1		
£25,001–£50,000	33%	7		
£50,001–£75,000	29%	6		
£75,001–£100,000	5%	1		
£100,001–£150,000	10%	2		
£150,000	0%	0		
Not provided	5%	1		
Less than \$15,000			0%	0
\$15,001–\$25,000			8%	1
\$25,001–\$50,000			8%	1
\$50,001–\$75,000			15%	2
\$75,001–\$100,000			8%	1
\$100,001–\$150,000			23%	3
>\$150,000			38%	5
Not provided			0%	0

Note. GCSEs = General Certificate(s) of Secondary Education.

^a Ages ranged from 34 to 58 years. Two participants did not provide their age. ^b Participants chose their race/ethnicity from 17 options for U.K. participants and 15 options for U.S. participants with an open-ended response option. Participant responses were aggregated into these five groups. ^c Participants responded to the following questions: (a) Were you born in the U.S./U.K.? (b) Were both of your parents born in the U.S./U.K.? Participants who responded no to both questions were categorized as first generation, those who responded yes to the first question and no to the second were categorized as second generation, and those who responded yes to both questions were categorized as third or higher. ^d Participants were asked to list up to 10 social class groups and asked, "Of all the social class groups that you just listed, which one do you identify with the most?" Their responses were aggregated into these four groups.

diversity across nationality, social class identity, racial–ethnic identity, and child developmental status (see Supplemental Materials for full recruitment details). The final study sample was racially diverse and included approximately equal numbers of male and female participants. Participants self-identified as being either working ($n = 14$), lower middle ($n = 2$), middle ($n = 13$), or upper middle ($n = 4$) class. There was greater diversity across participants in terms of household income as compared with parental education (which was high across both U.K. and U.S. participants). Participants' children ranged from 1 to 18 years of age ($M_{\text{age}} = 9.4$, $SD = 4.8$), and just over half of the sample had at least one adolescent child ($n = 18$).

Procedure

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was designed to elicit information about parents' perspectives on how their families' current social class standing affects their family life, including how they communicate about social class with their children. Informed by the Ecocultural Family Interview Model, which focuses on how daily routines and practices create a family's culture and ecology (Weisner, 1997), the 45-min semistructured interview protocol covered a variety of topics. These included family routines and practices related to social class, children's awareness of social class, parents' socialization approaches and practices, reflections on their child's social mobility, and beliefs about financial security.

Development of the interview protocol was informed by a review of existing research on social class and family life (e.g., Lareau, 2011; Quint et al., 2018) and input from research team members who drew on their lived experiences (see Researcher Positionality section for details). Protocol development spanned several months, including time for building community and trust among team members (e.g., sharing childhood experiences of social class), gaining familiarity with the existing literature, identifying interview topics, and writing interview prompts. Prior to data collection, the interview protocol was piloted with parents in the U.K. and U.S. for flow and content and to provide opportunities for interviewers to practice and gain familiarity with the protocol. The research team met to debrief these pilot interviews and make any final adjustments to the protocol. In accordance with a semistructured interview framework, participants were asked all of the questions included in the protocol to ensure credibility; however, interviewers often incorporated additional follow-up probes based on each participants' answers in order to build rapport, and elicit a deep description of each participants' experiences and meaning-making (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

Conducting Interviews

All interviews were conducted in English, on Zoom, and audio-recorded. Interviews were conducted by the graduate and undergraduate students who helped to develop the interview protocol. The key investigators and interviewers met regularly as a team during the data collection process to share and reflect upon their experiences and insights as well as to discuss any concerns or questions that arose. To facilitate these conversations, interviewers were asked to memo their thoughts, reflections, and perceptions immediately following the interview.

Data Coding and Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and checked by the interviewers. Thematic data analysis was conducted according to the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process utilizes a flexible, iterative approach to coding that is both guided by extant literature (i.e., deductive) and allows for the emergence of new ideas, codes, and themes (i.e., inductive). For the present study, analysis of the data (i.e., full interview transcripts) was conducted at two levels and in two waves. Initially, the first author conducted both levels of analysis of data from the U.S. parents under the guidance of the second author. U.S. data were coded first (due to availability), and the process is described below. Coauthors then applied the final codebook to the U.K. data using a consensus coding approach and adjustments were made accordingly (e.g., two additional codes were observed in reviews of the U.K. transcripts). As a final step, the first author returned to the U.S. data for application of the new codes.

Level one analysis involved several rounds of open coding the data using both deductive (e.g., personal responsibility, American Dream) and inductive categories (e.g., teaching values, college is important). As this process continued, a higher order reorganization of the codes was conducted wherein codes were collapsed, expanded, and deleted to form the final codebook (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2021). Decisions about the inclusion of codes ($N = 9$) in the final codebook were informed by the prevalence of the code across transcripts (i.e., education, values), relevance to the research questions (i.e., intergenerational transmission of meritocracy, mobility, social class membership, structural), and prior research on meritocratic beliefs (i.e., individual decision making, uncontrollable, work). The final codebook was applied to all transcripts and codes were not exclusive.

The second level of analysis was guided by the master narrative framework (Syed & McLean, 2023). The first author read excerpts from each code and wrote analytic memos describing what aspects of the master narrative of meritocracy were present in the parents' interview data, and how each participant negotiated them (i.e., incorporated the master narrative or exhibited evidence of an alternative narrative). Following processes outlined by Hazelbaker and Mistry (2022) and with input from the second author, the first author determined that the U.S. parents' narratives included the following themes related to meritocracy: (a) individualism, (b) pathways to economic mobility and stability, and (c) materialism. With these aspects identified, the first author returned to the data to determine the presence or absence of the themes in each parents' transcript and the extent to which the parent's communication incorporated (i.e., offered explicit or implicit support) the master narrative or evidenced an alternative narrative to the theme. Evidence of an alternative narrative varied from participants pushing back or speaking in a nuanced way about a theme (e.g., acknowledging influence of economic markets on the possibility of upward mobility) to strongly rejecting the theme and including perspectives that have been historically excluded (e.g., social class as an organizing structure). As such, we identified two categories of alternative narratives: (a) resistance and (b) counter narratives (see Results section for how these terms were defined and applied). A similar process was followed by the first author with support from the second and third authors for the second level of analysis of the U.K. data.

Further analyses were conducted by the first author (under the guidance of the second author) to examine what experiences and social identities inform parents' communication about meritocracy. Cross-group comparisons were assessed along four dimensions: national context (i.e., U.K. and U.S.), social class identity (i.e., working and lower middle as compared to middle and upper middle), child developmental status (i.e., parents of children as compared to parents of adolescents) and parent's generational status (i.e., first-generation—born outside of and having immigrated to the U.K. or U.S. during childhood or adulthood—as compared to second-plus generation—born in the U.K. or U.S.). Of these four dimensions, three were determined a priori (i.e., national context, social class, child developmental status) by the research team, and one was determined inductively (i.e., generational status) during data analysis. We compared the frequency of codes, both content and process, to determine if themes were discussed at different rates or if the negotiation of dominant narratives differed across groups (see Results section for explanation of how this was determined).

Researcher Positionality

The research team for the larger study consisted of three principal investigators (second–fourth authors), six psychology and education graduate students (including the first author), and two psychology undergraduate students. Team members were from diverse social class, racial and ethnic, and immigrant backgrounds. All had familiarity with and experience living in either or both the U.K. or U.S., including as immigrants. The first author identifies as a white cisgender woman of lower middle class background from the U.S. The second author identifies as an Asian American cisgender woman of South Asian heritage of working-class background who resides in the U.S. but spent much of her childhood in the U.K.; she is also a parent. The third author is a white cisgender man of middle class background from the U.K., and the fourth author is a white cisgender woman of middle class background from the U.S. Throughout the coding and analysis process, the authors met biweekly to discuss their interpretation of the data and the influence of their own identities and experiences, particularly those concerning social class, nationality, race/ethnicity, and generational status, on this process.

The authors' unique insider knowledge of the U.K. and U.S. was especially important during data analysis. For example, biweekly discussions included questions, reflections and sharing about each nation's structures and systems (e.g., education system differences, public housing and gated communities, health care access), relevant cultural and social phenomena (e.g., vacations, holiday traditions), and certain language and colloquiums (e.g., posh, chavs, council estates). This engagement in reflexivity enriched the authors' understanding of the data and fostered multiple interpretations of participant data that ultimately strengthened the credibility of the coding and analytic process, and resulting conclusions (Armstrong et al., 1997; Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

Transparency and Openness

We do not have permission to share the data from this study, but we provide extensive details about the sample and complete methods (above). The study design and analysis plan were not preregistered. The interview protocol is available on Open Science

Framework: <https://osf.io/yk8hj> (Mistry, Elenbaas, McGuire, Ackerman, et al., 2025).

Results

In the following section, the aspects of meritocracy that parents *incorporated* in their communication with their youth are discussed first. Next, evidence of parents' communication of alternative narratives to meritocratic beliefs is described. Finally, results from cross-group comparisons are outlined. Table 2 provides an overview of parents' negotiation (i.e., process) of dominant narratives (i.e., themes), codes, examples of coded excerpts, and the frequency of codes across the sample of 34 parents. For ease of interpretation, we use the following descriptors to refer to the prevalence of specific themes: "few" refers to less than 20% of parents, "some" refers to between 20% and 50% of parents, and "many" refers to more than 50% of parents (Mistry et al., 2022).

Research Question 1: Incorporation of Meritocracy

The first research question focused on understanding which aspects of the meritocratic master narrative parents incorporated when talking with their children. Two themes that align with meritocracy were identified: (a) individualism and (b) societal pathways to economic mobility and stability.

Incorporation of Individualism

For the most part, parents adhered to the tenet of individualism, a belief system that views the self as self-directed, autonomous, and separate from others (Santos et al., 2017). Individualism aligns with meritocracy as it overemphasizes the role of the self and deemphasizes external factors (e.g., economic system, structural barriers). Individualism arose in the lessons that many parents hoped to teach their children about work and financial decision making. Importantly, lessons about work and financial decision making were often rooted in parents' personal narratives, which they leveraged as evidence that adhering to meritocracy will lead to economic success for their children.

Many parents spoke about the importance of teaching their children that labor (ranging from household chores to formal employment) should be exchanged to earn money or items (e.g., sports equipment, video game consoles). For example, Neil, a U.K. middle class father of one child (age 12 years), requires his son to do chores such as mowing the lawn or cleaning the house in exchange for pocket money. On the other hand, Maita, a U.S. working-class mother of one child (age 16 years), shared that she sends her son pocket money so that he can learn to budget, but she also supplements this practice with conversations about her job, "just to keep him grounded like, okay, I might be sending you this money, but I have to work this much." By emphasizing the exchange of an individual's work for money, these parents are teaching their children that their individual efforts will be rewarded with financial gain. This lesson presumes that society is structured to support a just exchange of labor and money, a central tenet of meritocracy (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Afiya, a U.K. working-class mother of three children (ages 9, 9, and 7 years), illustrated this belief, saying "I think the world is just like, there is natural justice built in. The ones who will save and budget, and on top of all that, work hard, working

Table 2
Master Narrative Process and Theme, Code, Coded Excerpt, Number and Percentage of Participants

Process	Theme	Code	Coded excerpt	n	%
Incorporation	Individualism	Work Financial decision making	"It was all because of my mom and dad's hard work which paid off"	24	71
			"We have great opportunities to do things, and if we don't do them it's our own fault really"	30	88
Alternative narrative: Resistance	Pathways to mobility and stability	Role of education Role of family of origin	"I definitely expect them both to go to college"	29	85
			"I want to be the force that prevents you from sliding back"	19	56
Alternative narrative: Counter narrative	Individualism	Structural influences and barriers	"In the U.K., there are opportunities that are not equal for everybody for different reasons"	6	18
			"Yet some of the richest people out there are some of the most unhappy and miserable people"	25	74
	Pathways to mobility and stability	Role of education Role of social class	"I don't believe any longer that getting a 4-year college degree is like everything"	6	18
			"There's middle classes, there's upper class, and this is what they do, and this is how they work and they don't like to mix"	4	12
	Social class as organizing structure		"Because typically people who succeed needed certain things to happen. ... A lot of rich people started out rich"	1	3

Note. Results are reported for the full sample because percentages were similar across U.K. and U.S. subgroups.

hard will get that." Finally, parents also emphasized the exchange of an individual's work for money through the personal narratives they shared about individual efforts and financial gain. For example, Ekene, a U.K. middle class father of two children (ages 7 and 5 years), said that he hopes his children understand that "[their] parents have achieved this level of social class because of maybe some level of prudence and hard work. So it helps them to formulate that attitude to work to dedication."

Relatedly, some parents expressed views about work that aligned with aspects of the Protestant work ethic ideology, the idea that "people have a moral responsibility to work hard and avoid leisure activities; hard work is a virtue and is its own reward" (Jost & Hunyady, 2003, p. 261). Dina, a U.S. middle class mother of one child (age 14 years), shared a personal narrative steeped in the Protestant work ethic ideology. She referred to her parents as "simple folks" who had "low salary, [and were] just honest; lots of integrity" and passed down values such as the importance of maintaining integrity, not complaining or being envious, and working hard. Consequently, she emphasizes these values in conversations with her son about career choices, saying:

You have to go after work. You have to be part of the system that might not have integrity. I tell them how he could do anything he wants. I could tell him to be a plumber. That's something you could do with 100% integrity.

In this quote, Dina outlines a clear script for her son that upholds the Protestant work ethic ideology by prioritizing moral purity over the material outcomes of work (i.e., income earned; Uhlmann & Sanchez-Burks, 2014). This aspect of the Protestant work ethic ideology upholds individualism by centering the individual's choices as the primary determinant of morality. Furthermore, adherence to Protestant work values has been consistently correlated with adherence to meritocratic beliefs in empirical research (Uhlmann & Sanchez-Burks, 2014).

Most parents incorporated individualism when they discussed financial decision making, implying a belief that an individual's financial decisions are the most important element to financial security. This upholds meritocracy by overemphasizing an individual's choices, efforts, and abilities in determining their socioeconomic status (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Parents' personal narratives about their own lives and the lessons they explicitly share with their children aligned with this narrative. For example, Afiya's personal narrative directly connected financial skills and decisions with gaining upward mobility. When describing her own life, she shared a narrative of "get[ting] up to a point and fall[ing] right back" because she did not receive "foundational lessons" about financial decision making as a child. She compares herself to people she perceives as more financially successful and attributes their success to financial skills and decisions, saying, "they've been very responsible with money. And it was taught to them at home when they were very young. ... I just realized that if I had been doing the same, we probably would have been at par maybe there'd [sic] be better." She goes on to share that she prioritizes financial lessons with her children because "if you teach the children the hard things very early on, they don't have to pay that price later in life." In so doing, Afiya endorses a clear cultural script for how to achieve upward mobility that is centered within the individual family unit.

Furthermore, parents utilized various socialization practices to teach their children how to make smart financial decisions. These

included giving their children an allowance, opening savings accounts for the children, and engaging in ongoing conversations about the financial impact of decision making and weighing the pros and cons of spending versus saving. For example, Mariana, a U.S. upper middle class mother of two children (ages 8 and 7 years), took her young children to the bank to open savings accounts. Her stated goal for this practice is “to teach them how to save money, because every single thing that they get they want to spend it, but they’re little.” She continued on to say that she wants them to understand that savings can lead to the ability to make larger purchases in the future.

Incorporation of Societal Pathways to Economic Mobility and Stability

Parents’ discussion of societal pathways to economic mobility and stability incorporated dominant narratives related to meritocracy. Specifically, parents strongly espoused the belief that education and the family of origin are critical elements to attaining economic mobility and stability (Webster, 2022). Additionally, parents compared their own personal narratives (e.g., their educational and mobility experiences) to that of dominant narratives about education and family of origin and outlined their efforts to ensure that their children’s experiences more closely aligned with these dominant narratives.

Most parents discussed their child’s education during the interview, and many of the expressed views incorporated the dominant narrative that higher education leads to financial benefits and financial security (Webster, 2022). Many parents expressed positive views of education (both K-12 and postsecondary) and some explicitly expressed a desire or expectation that their children attend university. This upholds a biographical master narrative (i.e., a cultural script for how a life should unfold; McLean & Syed, 2016) that identifies higher education as a normative achievement for all. Some parents spoke about education in terms of its financial benefits and burdens. Dina, who holds a bachelor’s degree, shared that she and her husband pay for private school, which is a strain on their budget but one they are happy to take on “because that’s what we feel we have to do.” Kai, a U.S. working class father of one child (age 7 years) holds a doctorate degree and shared that, while his family currently lives in a good school district, he and his wife hope to get better paying jobs and move so their son can attend a different school.

Many parents discussed the connection between education, economic mobility, and career opportunities. Zoya, a U.K. lower middle class mother of one adolescent (age 16) and three grown children (ages 21, 22, and 23 years) holds a doctorate degree and explicitly endorsed the dominant narrative that education will be financially beneficial for her children, saying, “I think, because my two daughters they’re doing medicine. And my son he’s doing dentistry. I think because of this type of study, I can see they will move their social class.” Eduardo, a U.S. middle class father of two children (ages 16 and 10 years) holds a bachelor’s degree and expressed a similar sentiment when asked about his son’s college applications. He said that he encourages his children to find a profession (e.g., engineer) that interests them and “try to do like the highest level, hardest thing that you can, because it gives you [the] option” to work in that position even if you change paths later. Each of these examples upholds the dominant narrative that education,

and higher education in particular, leads to upward mobility and economic stability. However, higher education outcomes in the U.S. and the U.K. are increasingly inequitable across family income groups, and earnings after degree completion vary significantly across industry sectors (Cahalan & Perna, 2015; Kirby, 2015; Ma et al., 2019).

In addition to discussing education, some parents shared their perspectives about the role that one’s family of origin can play in preventing downward mobility or supporting upward mobility through hard work and smart decision making. For example, Bo, a U.S. middle class father of two children (ages 5 and 3 years), shared that his experience growing up in a lower social class than his own children informs his beliefs about the role of the family of origin, saying:

I don’t want [them] to have the same exact struggles that I would have had, because you know that that’s [my] definition of a generational success where you always want the future generation to live better than you did because resources have been more widespread.

He further explained that he aims to prevent downward mobility for his children, saying “The threat of sliding back is one, I want you [speaking about his child] to always look ahead. But . . . , I want to be the force that prevents you from sliding back.” He continued on to share that he aims to teach his children “a decision-making methodology” that will allow them to navigate difficulties, saying “you hope to train their mindset that they figure out what’s best for them in each individual scenario.” Through these quotes, Bo outlines a narrative of avoiding downward mobility that places the responsibility within the family unit. More specifically, the family unit is responsible for instilling a certain mindset and skills to navigate economic systems and difficulties.

Relatedly, parents shared specific and various ways they support their children’s mobility such as purchasing cars for them, allowing them to “live with me for as long as possible . . . to save on room and board or rent” (Alma, a U.S. working class mother of three children; ages 9, 4, and 1 years), and funding their higher education. Others discussed the financial skills they hoped to instill; Dorcas, a U.K. middle class mother of two children (ages 11 and 12 years), said:

Yeah because we want them to grow up understanding, you don’t want to struggle. If they don’t understand how important it is for the value of money now, then it will affect them when they get older. And then it’s your responsibility [to] show them or explain to them how important it is. For the kids it is important to have that conversation with your parents.

Similar to Bo, Dorcas ultimately placed the responsibility for economic mobility or stability on the individual and family unit, upholding meritocracy by centering individual effort and ability to mobility and stability.

Overall, parents incorporated individualistic views of work and financial decision making, and dominant narratives about societal pathways to economic mobility and stability into their own personal narratives and the lessons they communicated to their children. Parents emphasized hard work, smart decision making, the pursuit of higher education, and support from the family of origins as critical levers for economic stability and mobility, thus overemphasizing an individual’s control over their socioeconomic status and upholding meritocracy.

Research Question 2: Alternative Narratives to Meritocracy

The second research question aimed to understand the extent to which parents communicate alternative narratives to meritocracy to their children. Two primary categories of alternative narratives were identified in parents' data: (a) narratives of resistance, which were far more frequent and (2) counter narratives, of which only one was identified. Furthermore, three themes arose in parents' narratives of resistance to meritocracy: (a) individualism, (b) societal pathways to economic mobility and stability, and (c) materialism. One participant incorporated a counter narrative to meritocracy: That the social class into which one is born is a critical influence on economic opportunities.

Resistance to Individualism

Only a few parents resisted individualism by acknowledging structural influences on the individual's economic status, opportunities, and decision making. For example, Alma noted that, "I think like the whole value of a dollar thing is a little antiquated in a sense. I mean I've been reading lately like so it's such an antiquated idea, because there's inflation and there's interest, and there's investments." This illustrates that Alma was considering structural influences on finances and pushing back against a simplistic view of money. In so doing, she complicated individualism's singular focus on personal responsibility and allowed for a more nuanced consideration of the complex factors influencing one's economic prospects.

Relatedly, when asked about financial stability, Isaac, a U.S. working class father of one child (age 15 years), said that a stable decent income and lifestyle choices are the two key elements to financial stability. He spoke about how wealth is maintained through budgeting and not living "an extravagant lifestyle"; however, he quickly added a caveat, saying: "as long as you make over \$46,000 a year." This shows that, while Isaac emphasized meritocratic ideals of the wealthy, he also recognized that a certain level of income is necessary to survive. Later, Isaac shared that his family is currently struggling to finance his elderly mother's care, which has led him to understand that, "the system is not set up for you to 'win,' so you have to make sure you take care of that yourself." This assertion directly contradicts meritocracy, which proclaims that the system rewards and punishes individuals according to their effort and ability. This statement illuminates Isaac's motivation for emphasizing individual choices (i.e., career, lifestyle); he aims to teach his child to be resilient in the face of real challenges they will face in the U.S. economic system. This becomes even clearer in Isaac's response to a question about why conversations with his child about social class are important to him:

Well, the first thing, well I guess my first reason was to not allow their expectations to get out of hand. So as to not set him up for disappointment, You know to set a reasonable understanding of what could happen, what couldn't happen. Now I see too many people shooting for the stars, and knowing they don't have enough, you know, resources to make that really happen, and they end up being upset and disappointed, bad feelings behind that.

Here Isaac further resisted meritocracy by emphasizing the limits to economic opportunities. He is wrestling with the desire to empower

his child, reassure him of his potential and prevent emotional pain and the reality that he is living in an economically unjust society, thus resisting and incorporating an individualistic view of economic success that is central to meritocracy.

While Isaac's negotiation of meritocracy led him to temper his child's expectations, a few parents took a different approach, aiming to teach their children how to make strategic decisions about careers to reach financial stability. For example, Alfred, a U.K. middle class father of two children (ages 7 and 4 years), spoke about his own experience with "the rat race" that employees run in their attempts at upward mobility, saying:

Well I want my children to be better off and I want them to be business oriented because there's no way your employer will pay you what he or she is earning so if you're working for people ... you can never be rich. You cannot belong to that class except [if] you have your own business and the earlier the better and that is really affecting us now as parents, and now, because our words we have taught them was just go to school and earn your money but I realised that there is more to life than just going to school and getting a job and then start ... it's just a rat race. Nobody will pay you money that will make you rich!

Here Alfred acknowledges limits to hard work and shares his belief that his children need to aim to own their own business in order to be part of a "financial class" that has some control over their own wages. Thus, Alfred is acknowledging that financial stability requires more than simple hard work, but that one must strategize and understand how to circumvent barriers to achieve a certain level of financial freedom and stability. Similarly, Ekene, a U.K. middle class father of two children (ages 7 and 5 years), shared he has to go above and beyond to teach his children certain skills because they are not growing up in an elite social class:

And those things are not easily gotten from the social class where you are. So, a lot has to be done in terms of upbringing, to prepare a child for a social class that is different from you. So to achieve that you really need to push beyond what you are capable of And look for ways in which your child can get what you can't give. If you get what I'm saying that could be in terms of hiring people to teach certain values certain skills and certain abilities to the child.

Each of these parents ultimately place the responsibility on the individual and the family of origin but they also problematize a purely meritocratic view of the economic system by noting that there are barriers within the economic system that must be overcome to achieve upward mobility.

Relatedly, Bo both resisted and incorporated individualism when discussing the nuances of financial decision making and the importance of socioeconomic status to developing financial literacy, saying:

You gotta be a little bit smarter about things so you know, because now, only when money is finite, it's this finite resource for everybody. But it's more finite for some people than others, and you know growing up in a lower rung of society. You always have to say you know what you kind of have to pick your battles. You have to make your choices. Maybe we will go shopping this week, and we won't do anything next week.

Bo expanded upon this by saying that he wants to teach his children "a sense of how society really works" and instill critical thinking skills that he learned from navigating financial hardships in his youth. These excerpts illustrate that the process of negotiating master narratives is complex. On the one hand, Bo recognized that

financial hardship instills critical thinking and budgeting skills, which resists negative stereotypes of people in low and working classes (Durante et al., 2017). However, in so doing, he implicitly centered the individual's choices, which aligns with meritocracy. Furthermore, Bo's own upward economic mobility (he currently identifies as middle class with a reported income of \$100–150,000), combined with this emphasis on his own financial literacy aligns with the dominant narrative that effort and ability will lead to economic success (Jost & Hunyady, 2005).

As these quotes show, parents negotiate meritocracy, specifically individualism, in their personal narratives and their conversations with their children. Importantly, each of these parent's beliefs and the lessons they aimed to instill in their children were rooted in their own personal narratives; their understanding of the economic opportunities and structural challenges their children are likely to face were narrated through the lens of their own experiences navigating the U.S. economic system. Excerpts from Isaac, Alfred, Ekene and Bo illustrate that incorporation of and resistance to master narratives are often intermingled. All of these parents perpetuated individualism through their focus on hard work, persistence, and financial decision making; however, they, along with Alma, also acknowledged structural constraints to economic success and in so doing resisted the master narrative of meritocracy.

Resistance to Societal Pathways to Economic Mobility and Stability

A few parents resisted meritocracy when discussing societal pathways to economic mobility and stability. They resisted dominant narratives about the role of education and social class. Specifically, a few parents resisted the dominant narrative that a 4-year degree is needed for financial success and endorsed trade school as a beneficial alternative. When asked about education and her child's future, Alma said:

I think education as a means to a higher salary. But then again, what good does that higher salary do if they're going to be burdened with student loan debt? So perhaps, and also you have to look at the individual child, like my 16 year old, probably is interested in going to college. But he could also do a trade, and maybe do just as well, and not have that debt.

Joanne, a U.S. working class mother of three children (ages 10, 8, and 7 years), also endorsed trade school as a viable option for her children. Both Joanne and Alma are working class moms but with different levels of education; Joanne holds an associate degree (i.e., 2-year undergraduate degree) while Alma holds a bachelor's degree. As such, their reservations about the necessity of completing a college degree may be grounded in the real challenges their children may face as working class students and, in the case of Joanne's children, first-generation college students. Recent research has found that U.S. students from lower income households and first-generation college students are significantly less likely to complete their degree than students from high income households (Ma et al., 2019). Additionally, their endorsement of trade school mirrors a substantial rise in enrollment in U.S. trade schools over the past decades, specifically amongst students from low-income families (Holland & DeLuca, 2016). Similarly, many of the U.K. parents that endorsed trade school as a viable option had personal experience with this trajectory. For example, Ali, a U.K. working class father of

three children (ages 10, 7, and 1 years) who holds 5+ General Certificate(s) of Secondary Education, shared, "my younger brother, he's doing an apprenticeship. ... Along with the work you gain qualifications, and you earn. It's a career path in itself." Evidence from the U.K. suggests that apprenticeships are often a financially beneficial path, and in some cases, are more financially beneficial than attending university (Kirby, 2015).

Other parents resisted meritocracy by acknowledging social class group membership and status as a source of influence of one's economic opportunities. Ekene said:

Also, yes, social class, if you're of a higher social class, there is a particular treatment that you get from different institutions and then from different organisations and then from different groups of people. The way they treat you and the way they attend to you is a big difference so that also counts, it counts for a lot.

Kristen, a U.S. working class grandmother of one grandchild (age 17 years), went a step further and discussed her experience with class-based social norms by sharing her experience growing up in poverty and attending school with children from higher social classes. When describing this experience, she said:

I just kind of hung with my crowd, and it's just- it's just a lifestyle, I know it, and I understand it. And now I kind of feel like. ... I would be unworthy, and I wouldn't know how to fit into a group of folks like that [higher classes].

Later in the interview she shared that she still adheres to this mentality and spends little social time with people outside of her own social class group. Throughout her interview, Kristen resisted the meritocratic assumption that social class and socioeconomic status are equivalent, but rather, she acknowledged social class as comprised of distinct groups with particular social norms (Destin et al., 2017). In so doing, she acknowledged that access to economic resources and opportunities is not equal or solely dependent on effort or financial abilities but is influenced by one's capacity to navigate the social norms of the upper classes (Destin et al., 2017). Unfortunately, in Kristen's case, these social dynamics have caused her to stay in her own social class group, thus reinforcing class hierarchy through the continued separation from economic resources and opportunities.

Each of these parents resisted dominant narratives about pathways to mobility and stability. Some resistance focused on alternative educational pathways while other resistance illuminated the role social class plays in mobility opportunities. Critically, parents grounded their resistance in their own or their loved ones' personal experiences, highlighting the power of visible examples of alternative pathways in promoting resistance to dominant narratives (McLean & Syed, 2016).

Resistance to Materialism

Although parents largely spoke in ways that aligned with individualism and adherence to established societal pathways to success, when asked about the values that they hope to instill in their children, many parents rejected materialism in particular. Materialism is defined as a set of beliefs that places value on the pursuit of material possessions in order to reach a desired state (Richins, 2017). Materialism upholds the meritocratic master narrative as meritocratic societies often view material possessions

as a sign of economic success. Two themes arose in how parents resisted materialism: (a) they hoped that their children would not come to associate status and prestige with material possessions and money and (b) they sought to instill gratitude and a desire to help others.

Of the parents who rejected materialism, many spoke about discomfort with their children's desire for possessions or status markers (e.g., money, jobs) or pride that their children do not seem concerned with this. For example, Dina shared that her son "doesn't envy other people's possessions, and you know he likes to have experiences, but [is] not into fancy stuff." Lin, a U.S. upper middle class father of two children (ages 4 and 1 years), shared that he is uncomfortable with his wife's family purchasing expensive, name-brand items for his child because it feels "like I'm training him to be like a consumer almost." Carrie, a U.S. middle class mother of two children (ages 10 and 7 years), expressed her frustration when her children requested expensive gifts (i.e., \$500 drone) and shared that she frequently admonishes them by saying "don't be ridiculous." She wants to instill "reasonable expectations" about their possessions and the skill of delayed gratification. Ali, shared a similar goal of emphasizing happiness over material possessions, sharing that he and his wife have adopted a practice of providing their children with regular doses of "vitamin N, which is a funny way of saying vitamin NO." This stems from a belief that "there's a lot of emphasis on materialism and owning a lot of things, but people are maybe spiritually and emotionally bankrupt. And this is [sic] so much cases of depression, suicide, anxiety things like that so prevalent in society." Each of these parents expressed strong resistance to their children's interest in material goods and money and implied that they believe materialism is ultimately detrimental to their children. This resists the meritocratic and capitalistic pursuit of economic success as a means of happiness and status (Richins, 2017).

Other parents' resistance to materialism was woven into their own personal narratives. Specifically, these parents spoke about their socioeconomic experiences. Eunice, a U.K. middle class mother of three children (ages 8, 6, and 4 years), shared her personal narrative, which outlined a clear script for a life that resists materialism by "focusing on what [one] can afford." She said that she grew up "lower class" and learned from her father and older brother to: "always have the mind set that you're, like you need to remember where you are from. Live life on what you can afford at that point in time." She continued on to share that focusing on what she can afford "makes [her] the most happy." Similarly, Eduardo shared that he wants his children to understand that it is okay to want money and material possessions but they "don't provide happiness necessarily." Kristen shared that she focuses on quality of life when her grandson remarks on their lack of money or food, saying "I try to put more focus on quality of life instead of you know, because that's, that's how we are rich, that's the best hope we're gonna have I think." Later she remarks that her grandson has low self-esteem, and that "I don't think money's gonna fix that, I don't think that's going to make a difference." Eunice, a U.K. middle class mother of three children (ages 8, 6, and 4 years), also connected her resistance to materialism to social class by teaching her children to:

Live life on what you can afford at that point in time. If you start thinking how can I afford this, what do I have to do to get something like this, you know, that's a bad message to have. I believe like that really helped me.

These parents communicate the adage "money doesn't buy happiness" to their children, but they do so for different reasons. Eduardo speaks from a position of relative financial security while Kristen and Eunice utilize this belief to reassure their children as they experience financial struggles.

Other parents shared slightly different aversions to materialism, emphasizing the pursuit of purpose. For example, Maita wants to teach her son to focus less on money, jobs, and social status, and focus more on, what she calls, "finding his gift" because:

Once you learn your gift, then the opportunities are endless for you, because you only, only you have your gift, and when you have a gift people always come for you like people always seek for you, you might lose your job, but they can never take a gift. You have more opportunities because of your gift.

Here Maita is adhering to a belief that by focusing less on the pursuit of material possessions or money, one will ultimately accomplish this goal. This is in direct contrast to her own personal narrative that emphasizes the effort and time she expends managing her money, investing, and seeking upward mobility. Conversely, Mariana deemphasizes money and material possessions by saying she does not feel comfortable talking about it: "I actually don't feel like good talking about this. I know that there's people that like to brag about money but I'm just not one of those people." She goes on to add that "I feel, like bad because I think I could do [donate money] more, but I don't do it." Throughout her interview, she shares that she does not discuss social class with her children; however, she also prioritizes economic opportunities when making decisions about her family's lives (i.e., moving to a better school district, saving for their college education). These two parents provide examples of the simultaneous incorporation and resistance to materialism that arises in parents' communication about money with their children.

Many parents also expressed a desire to instill gratitude and a desire to help others in their children. These values counter materialism and capitalism as they reject the need for more and better possessions and deemphasize acting in one's own best interest (Kasser et al., 2007; Richins, 2017). Some parents shared a practice or conversation they have with their children about being grateful for what they have, and most made comparisons to others' financial situation when doing so. For example, Eduardo shared his own experiences of growing up with less than what his children have, and Mwaita, a U.K. middle class mother of two children (both age 14 years), tells her children that they may "want to be the richest person, but I think you also need to learn to be content with what you have." Similarly, Paul, a U.K. upper middle class father of three children (ages 17, 15, and 13 years), shared that after his children were upset that they did not go on an expensive trip to Dubai (like their peers), he and his wife tell them, "you know they've [children's peers] got this that and the other, that they haven't got all these things that we've got, you know we'll talk about that sort of thing how lucky, they are and try and sort of put things in perspective." Other parents encouraged their children to help others through donating to charity or volunteering. Each of these parents spoke about the positive impact gained when helping others, implying that charitable work benefits both society and the individual. For example, Dorcas takes her children to volunteer at the food bank to "make sure that they understand that people are going through different challenges" while Kristen shared that she donates to others even when struggling to make ends meet. Altogether, these parents rejected materialism and

sought to encourage their children to be grateful and think of others. This resists an individualistic worldview that promotes self-interest and competition, and in so doing resists the meritocratic master narrative (Kasser et al., 2007).

Counter Narrative to Meritocracy

Only one parent in our data, Alma, went beyond resistance to endorse a counter narrative to meritocracy and incorporated this counter narrative into her own personal narrative. Alma espoused the belief that one's economic opportunities are strongly influenced by the social class into which one is born (Mitnik & Grusky, 2017). This is an important counter narrative to meritocracy because it is an explicit rejection of the view that individual effort and ability are the most important factors to experiencing economic security or upward mobility (Kingston, 2006). It also rejects a view of the U.S. as a classless, meritocratic society (Wolak & Peterson, 2020).

When asked about her goals for financial conversations with her children she shared that she hopes they will learn "that there are systems in place in the world" that influence their and others' opportunities. This lesson was rooted in Alma's experiences combatting meritocratic expectations for her own socioeconomic status. She shared an instance in which she faced criticism from a family member who accused her of not being "successful" and being a "nobody." Alma disagreed with this assessment but also added "there's [sic] really good reasons why people don't succeed in life to the extent that you would hope they would, because typically people who succeed needed certain things to happen." She then articulated a counter narrative to meritocracy that explicitly named social class, saying:

A lot of rich people started out rich but there's always a very small group of people who succeed, no matter what I don't want to take that away from them. But for most people, it takes watering of the flower for them to succeed, and so I want my kids to understand that because they compare.

Alma explained that she uses a flower metaphor to help her children understand the necessary elements of financial stability. She tells her children that similar to a flower needing water, sun, dirt, and nutrients to grow, so do people need certain things to be financially successful. She thinks this is important for her children to understand their own starting point, how it differs from her experience as a child, and how it will impact their future opportunities, but she also wants them to use this metaphor to understand others' experiences. She said:

I think it's important, sociologically speaking too, because then you can also start talking to them about subjects like if you pass by someone that's homeless, are you having discussions with them? Well, remember we talked about needing a lot of water and fertilizer for that plant to grow, and this person did not get the water and fertilizer he needed and so, you know, you know we don't have a place for him to go, and he should have one.

Here Alma shared a counter narrative to meritocracy and to negative stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness. She centered systemic or structural factors that may prevent upward mobility or stability rather than focusing on individual factors (i.e., effort, ability) in a developmentally appropriate way without ignoring the

complex reality of economic inequality. In so doing, she seeks to communicate a counter narrative to meritocracy in her children.

At the same time, Alma was also one of only a few parents whose transcript included incorporation of all identified meritocratic narratives (i.e., individualistic notions of work and decision making, education and family of origin as pathways to economic mobility and stability). Thus, Alma further exemplifies how incorporation is often entangled with resistance and counter narratives. Alma is a Latina working class woman who has moved into a more affluent socioeconomic position (her reported income is \$100,001–\$150,000). Thus, it may be that although she aims to teach her children about the limits to American meritocracy, she also wants them to have the skills (e.g., work ethic, decision making) that she believes will lead to their upward mobility.

Altogether, alternative narratives were present but infrequent in parents' communication with their children and interwoven into their own personal narratives. Most of these narratives were resistant to meritocracy but still incorporated meritocratic elements, and only one counter narrative was identified. With few exceptions (e.g., trade school as an alternative to a 4-year degree), alternative narratives rarely included specific narrative expectations that outline an alternative path for children to follow. This is critical as visible deviations are necessary for making master narratives visible and limiting their influence (McLean & Syed, 2016).

Research Question 3: Identity and Experiences That Inform Negotiation of Meritocracy

Our final research question sought to understand sources of variability in parents' negotiation of meritocracy and their communication with their children, specifically with regard to differences across national context, parents' social class identity and generational status, and child developmental status.² The frequencies of content (i.e., themes) and process (i.e., incorporation, resistance, counter narratives) codes within and between groups were compared to determine (a) if themes differed across groups (e.g., pathways to economic mobility or stability) or (b) if the negotiation of dominant narratives differed across groups. If the proportions between groups were more than 1 step apart (e.g., few U.K. parents vs. many U.S. parents), the data were further analyzed, and findings are reported here. The findings indicated that, overall, parents' communication of meritocracy was more similar than different across the three areas of interest (see Supplemental Materials for proportions of master narrative negotiation). The content of dominant narratives related to meritocracy were discussed at similar rates and no differences arose in incorporation, resistance, or counter narratives across these groups.

However, one subtheme related to societal pathways to economic mobility and stability was evident only among the first-generation parents' interviews.³ First generation parents incorporated dominant narratives about mobility, stability, and social class in the U.K and U.S. contexts (in contrast to their home countries). To varying

² Due to the variability in race and ethnicity across our sample, we exclude a cross-race comparison. We did, however, review the descriptives for each of the results and confirmed that overall findings are evident in both parents of color and white parents in the sample.

³ We compared the frequency of master narrative content across white and people of color first-generation parents and found similar results. It is important to note, however, that of the 14 first-generation parents, only three are white.

degrees, first-generation parents' personal narratives and their communication with their children upheld a view of the U.K. and the U.S. as meritocracies in which their children would experience greater opportunities for upward mobility and were more likely to be successful and safe from downward mobility or poverty. A few first-generation parents directly connected their financial stability and upward mobility (or that of their children) to the U.K. or the U.S. context. For example, Afiya an immigrant to the U.K. from Uganda, said:

So, I came here as an immigrant. When I was back home, it was different I believe, I was in another social class but the opportunities again are not the same as what I have here, I find that in the U.K. I can dream. I find that I will go very far. Unless I don't try, of course. So, and I feel that it will cost me a lot, but I will shift that situation will change because the opportunities exist, so in the U.K. I've become better because when I came I think I was totally at the bottom. I started up in care work even though I was a qualified lawyer. And now I'm not in care work and I'm able to sit down and set up a business. And I project that it can only go higher.

Afiya strongly endorses a view of the U.K. as a meritocracy in which upward mobility is available to all "unless [they] don't try." Maita, an immigrant to the U.S. from Zimbabwe, was similarly optimistic about economic mobility in her son's future, saying:

When I see [my son's future], I see endless opportunities, and I can see a bright, brighter future than, what I had, and I see- I think a lot of help ... when I look at his future, I feel like the ball is in his court. It's up to him. The resources, I feel like the resources are endless. It's just your attitude at the end of the day.

Maita emphasized the social support and resources her son has available to him and ends the excerpt by underscoring that this support places ultimate responsibility for his success or failure in his hands. Relatedly, Mariana, an immigrant to the U.S. from Colombia, stated that she is not worried about mobility for their children while Maita shared that she expects her son to experience upward mobility. When asked if she had any worries or concerns about her children's future, Mariana said:

Oh, no, no I don't ... if they at some point in their lives change to another social class, if it's higher or lower, I don't think they would have any issues, I mean, obviously, if they have to struggle and don't have any food to eat, then yes, but ... we never talk about social class in in my house so I don't think they understand the difference other than there's poverty and there's kids that don't have any food. But the level [in the U.S.] is so different from what we see in Colombia that poverty for them is what they see in Colombia, not what we have in the United States.

Here Mariana shared her view of the U.S. as a safe place for her children to experience economic mobility with little fear of experiencing poverty. Each of these quotes adheres to dominant narratives about the U.S. as a meritocracy—a land of "endless opportunities" where individuals live without fear of poverty (Wolak & Peterson, 2020).

Not all first-generation parents adhered fully to a meritocratic view of their nation. Two U.K. parents acknowledged the role of race and racism affecting their own and their children's lives. When discussing his child's awareness of social class differences in the U.K., Ekene, an immigrant from Nigeria, shared that his children "do talk about skin color. The skin color, but that. ... I don't think

that has to do with social class. That is more of your race. And I see that plays out a lot." He went on to deemphasize the role of social class in the U.K., saying,

Because of the the country, we find ourselves in, a lot of things have been done to make it to make it almost like a level playing field. there's a there's this leveling that is done by the government, which really helps. Back home in the country where I come from it's not as clear as this, the leveling is not done. You may have a school where you have the extremely rich going to and then some not so rich going to so you were you have a really wide social class but here we have a similar social class at least basic amenities been provided. So it doesn't really show too much in the schools in the schools, the social distinction is less.

Thus, while Ekene endorses a view of the U.K. that deemphasizes the role of social class, he acknowledges that he and his children navigate race and racism in the U.K. Similarly, Nené, a U.K. middle class mother of three children (ages 5, 3, and 3 years) who immigrated from Nigeria, shared, "In the U.K., there are opportunities that are not equal for everybody for different reasons, visually or intellectually, so like we're inviting the idea that they need to work three times more than their counterparts." In both of these quotes, Ekene and Nené recognized that race impacts their experience in the U.K. Though they deemphasize social class and ultimately place the responsibility for their children's success within the individual, their experiences of racism are central to the lessons they teach their children, thus disrupting the purely meritocratic views of the U.K.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how U.K. and U.S. parents negotiate the master narrative of meritocracy and how this may influence their communication with their children and youth. Results indicate that all parents incorporated and perpetuated some aspects of meritocracy. This both aligns with previous research illustrating the strength of other master narratives (e.g., about gender, race/ethnicity) in shaping personal narratives (Syed & McLean, 2023) and extends this work to illustrate how the master narrative of meritocracy may be transmitted within families. It is also aligned with research that shows the dominance of meritocratic ideology amongst adults and adolescents in the U.K. and U.S. (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2014; Mijs, 2021). Thus, the present study provides new evidence about the processes through which meritocratic ideology continues to be dominant in the U.K. and the U.S.: through integration into individuals' personal narratives and into their communication with their children.

Regarding specific meritocratic beliefs, parents in this study emphasized individualism through simple lessons about work and financial decision making (e.g., if you work hard, you will earn fair wages), emphasizing individual decision making without acknowledging structural influences on financial security. This upholds meritocracy and may contribute to their children developing an outsized sense of individual control over their financial wellbeing. Furthermore, this focus on individualism in parental communication likely contributes to the prevalence of individualistic attributions for wealth and poverty observed amongst children and youth in the U.K. and the U.S. (Dickinson et al., 2023; Mistry, Elenbaas, McGuire, & Patton, 2025). Although important to helping youth develop mindsets and skills necessary to obtain and retain employment (e.g., work ethic)

that ensures their social mobility, prolonged meritocratic beliefs are associated with diminished mental wellbeing (Godfrey et al., 2019) and contribute to a lower level of awareness of societal inequality among youth. According to the master narrative framework, parents' lack of acknowledgment of the systemic roots of inequality is a direct consequence of the ubiquitous, invisible, and compulsory nature of master narratives (McLean & Syed, 2016). As such, parents likely overemphasize individual attributions for inequality because meritocracy outlines the specific "right way" to interpret such a phenomena (i.e., due to differences in individual effort and ability rather than structural forces). Additionally, one possible mechanism through which meritocracy is upheld as a master narrative is through individuals' limited awareness of economic inequality and structural barriers. Empirical evidence shows that Britons' and Americans' views of economic inequality, mobility, and stability are often inaccurate and demonstrate a limited awareness of structural barriers (Kraus & Tan, 2015; Mijts, 2021; Norton & Ariely, 2011). However, it is important that as youth are becoming more aware of the skills necessary to succeed in society, they are also learning about the structural conditions that enable some to succeed but challenge others from getting ahead.

To this end, most parents in our study did show evidence of resisting some meritocratic beliefs in their communication with youth. This aligns with research that shows that shifting between incorporation of and resistance to dominant ideologies is not only common but is necessary when living in oppressive systems (Rogers & Way, 2021) and begins to demonstrate how these processes may play out between parents and children. This integration of incorporation and resistance is necessary for parental communication about meritocracy as sustained meritocratic beliefs have negative mental health implications, but youth would be ill-served by parental communication that focused *solely* on the barriers to economic mobility and stability.

Many parents also rejected materialism specifically and sought to diminish this in their children. However, their children are growing up in capitalist societies in which high-paying jobs, luxurious lifestyles, and high-priced items are viewed as conveying status and signaling personal success. Yet, equal access to these markers is not the reality (Rözer et al., 2022). Parents communicated their aversion to materialism alongside a strong emphasis on personal financial responsibility (e.g., via work, smart decision making, education), which may reinforce an individualistic and materialistic perspective of success as children likely come to associate financial success with individual accomplishment, further confounding the reality of structural hindrances to economic mobility and stability and valorizing the wealthy. Thus, there is a tension between the skills and mindset that the parents hope to instill to ensure their children are financially successful and able to lead comfortable lives and their hope that they will not internalize the consumptive, materialistic values that capitalism promotes (Richins, 2017).

Nonetheless, there is some evidence in the present study's findings of endorsement of an alternative narratives to meritocracy. Specifically, a few parents resisted meritocracy by acknowledging social class-based groups that influence economic opportunities via established social norms. If there are specific social norms within social class groups, it must then be inherently more difficult for people from lower social classes to be accepted into higher social class groups and thus their access to the economic resources and opportunities are limited (Destin et al., 2017). Moreover, one

participant expanded on this resistance by endorsing the counter narrative that the social class group into which one is born strongly influences one's economic opportunities. While this is similar to the alternative narratives present in other parents' data, this parent continually returned to social class as an organizing construct in the U.S. that influences both economic and social phenomena, setting her apart from other parents and aligning with McLean and Syed's (2016) use of counter narrative to define alternative narratives that are antagonistic to the master narrative. Together this resistance and inclusion of a counter narrative is evidence that internalization of the master narrative of meritocracy is not inevitable and parental communication about meritocracy varies from strongly perpetuating the narrative to strongly disrupting it.

Finally, we investigated potential sources of variability in parents' negotiation of meritocracy and found a striking degree of consistency across social class identity (working class and middle class), national context (U.K. and U.S.), and child developmental status (children and adolescents). Indeed, the results revealed few differences across parents in their discussion of themes related to meritocracy. One important exception was comparisons between first-generation and second-plus generation parents. Evidence indicates that (to varying degrees) first-generation parents in the U.K. and the U.S. believed dominant narratives about each country as meritocratic societies in which their youth will experience greater opportunities for success and upward mobility (as compared to other nations). This aligns with previous studies that show that meritocratic beliefs are more common amongst first-generation (vs. second generation) immigrants to the U.S. (Waters, 2001; Wiley et al., 2012). Scholars have offered various explanations for this phenomenon, including both external sources (e.g., remote acculturation to dominant beliefs, less exposure to inequality in the country to which they immigrate) and internal sources (e.g., motivation to seek increased economic opportunities by voluntarily migrating; Ferguson et al., 2016; Sladkova, 2007; Wiley et al., 2012). Yet, as with incorporation of other themes related to meritocracy, a purely positive view of the U.K. and U.S. likely obscures the systemic barriers the children of first-generation immigrants will face in each country.

Somewhat surprisingly, we did not find evidence of systematic differences in parents' communication about meritocracy by social class. One possibility is that meritocracy and meritocratic beliefs may serve distinct but equally important purposes for individuals from upper versus lower social class groups (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). For those from lower social class backgrounds, for example, it may be protective to believe that upward mobility is achievable through working hard (i.e., retaining control over one's outcomes) while meritocratic beliefs may reassure members of higher social class groups that they achieved their status through hard work and are thus deserving of their wealth.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

While this study provides important, novel evidence about the influence of the meritocratic master narrative, it is not without its limitations. Namely, since the data are solely based on parent report, the extent to which parents' reported communication aligns (or does not) with children's awareness and negotiation of meritocracy is not known. Furthermore, parent report data does not account for the bidirectional nature of socialization (Hughes et al., 2006); future

research should incorporate parent-youth dyads and observational methods to better understand how meritocracy is communicated between parents and youth.

Additionally, while we were able to investigate the influence of several identities and experiences (e.g., race/ethnicity, social class, national context, generational status) on parents' negotiation of meritocracy, there may be other important identities and experiences that remain unexplored. Namely, the variability in race/ethnic identities across the sample limited our ability to conduct a rich investigation of the role of race and ethnicity, or the intersection of race and ethnicity with other experiences (e.g., generational status). Yet, we recognize that there likely are racialized differences in parents' negotiation of the master narrative of meritocracy, as suggested in our data (e.g., some immigrant parents of color in our sample discussed their experiences with systemic racism), and by the alignment of our findings with those from the racial-ethnic socialization literature. In particular, some of the findings from our study align with findings from the racial-ethnic socialization literature that have emphasized how parents from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds support egalitarianism (i.e., valuing individual qualities over racial group membership; Hughes et al., 2006). While meritocracy and egalitarianism both emphasize individual qualities (e.g., work ethic, responsibility) over group membership (e.g., social class, race), socialization of meritocratic beliefs extends beyond egalitarianism to draw an explicit connection between individual qualities and economic consequences. Relatedly, our sample is highly educated, and it is possible that education level influences the negotiation of and conversations about meritocracy. For example, a recent qualitative study with a similarly highly educated sample of U.S. parents found that family conversations about societal inequality were infrequent (Griffin et al., 2024). Our data supports this finding as parents in our study overwhelmingly endorsed individual attributions for socioeconomic status and mobility. Nonetheless, questions remain about the role of education, so future research should explore the negotiation of meritocracy amongst samples of parents with various education levels. Finally, we endorse recent calls from many developmental scholars (e.g., Godfrey & Burson, 2018; Rogers, 2019) for future research to take an intersectional approach to explore how experiencing marginalization or privilege across multiple identities (e.g., race, social class, generational status, education level) may inform communication about societal inequality, and in the case of the present study, meritocracy.

Nonetheless, this study has several strengths. By utilizing the master narrative framework, our study integrates a systemic perspective that is often lacking in developmental science research, and study findings contribute to the growing understanding of how economic beliefs are socialized through parental communication (Dickinson et al., 2023; Syed et al., 2018). In addition, the study sample was purposely recruited to be diverse in terms of race, gender, social class, and immigrant experience in both the U.K. and the U.S., thus ensuring a greater representation and inclusion of the lived experiences of those historically underrepresented in developmental science research (Henrich et al., 2010). Finally, by utilizing in-depth semistructured interviews, study data illustrate the interwoven nature of resistance and incorporation to meritocracy as participants often vacillate between the two within the span of the interview (Rogers et al., 2022). This is an important contribution to a field that heavily privileges quantitative data that strictly categorizes participants' negotiation of dominant ideologies, which keeps the

focus on the individual rather than on the ideologies that perpetuate oppression (Rogers & Way, 2021).

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand how the meritocratic master narrative influences parents' communication with their children and youth. Overall, findings are consistent with prior research that indicates that meritocracy is a dominant narrative in the U.K. and the U.S. (Mijs, 2021; Wolak & Peterson, 2020) and provides novel evidence that parental communication with youth is informed by meritocracy and incorporates and resists this master narrative to varying degrees. The study findings emphasize the need for research that takes a systemic perspective to understand how individual meaning-making and communication within families are implicated in the maintenance or disruption of oppressive systems (Syed & McLean, 2023).

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