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## A Short Soliloquy on Merit

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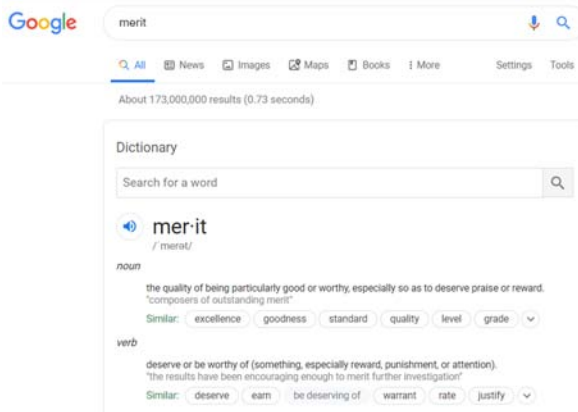
ABSTRACT Merit is often considered to be a neutral and therefore fair way to judge quality. Through soliloquy and graphics, this essay deconstructs and interrogates the definition of merit, revealing the ways that it is tied to standardization and dominant knowledge. KEYWORDS Merit; Soliloquy; Power; Deconstruction; Diversity

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Soliloquy is a dramatic device used when a character speaks to herself, “relating thoughts and feelings, thereby also sharing them with the audience, giving off the illusion of being a series of unspoken reflections.”<sup>1</sup>

When conversing with others, we are also conversing with ourselves. Soliloquy is therefore recursive and elliptical. What’s more, soliloquy transforms abbreviated self-talk into external conversation and “transforms our raw, bodily sensations into emotions.”<sup>2</sup>

The following is a short soliloquy inspired by the definition of merit and the question of “what = merit?”



The definition of “merit.” Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google LLC, used with permission<sup>3</sup>

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Through soliloquy, the interlocuter deconstructs and interrogates the idea that merit is neutral. Rather, the concept is both the consequence and cause of ongoing power relations that privilege dominant, standardized, and white knowledge.<sup>4</sup>



A graphic deconstruction of “merit.” The concept of merit may appear neutral, but is infused with notions of standardization, standing in sharp contrast to diversity and difference. Image created and provided by author.

I wrote the soliloquy in light of a crisis and awareness of racism in communication studies and the ways that diversity and merit have been framed as antithetical.

The italicized words in the soliloquy come directly from the Google definition. In the soliloquy, the interlocuter is both speaker and listener. Interrogator and discipliner. Betwixt and between. Liminal.

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Are you *meritorious*? Are you *excellent*? Are you *good*?

To be *meritorious* is to be *standard*. Are you *standard*? Do you avoid drawing outside the lines?

To be *meritorious* is to be *level*. Are you *level*? For goodness sake, be *level-headed*, polite, and civil.

If you are not *standard* and you are not *level*, you will certainly not make the *grade*. Better do some extra credit if you ever hope to be *worthy*.

And take time to *account* for your *virtue*. You do want to be *virtuous*, yes? And *praised*?

Learn the right forms of *virtue* and you too may someday be *deserving of distinction*, *worthy of credit*, and *entitled to eminence*.

Just make sure to *account* for it in *standard* ways that show your *quality*. You need to clearly show your *caliber* in order to receive the right kind of *attention*.

What? You say you have different values and *virtue* from the *level standard*?  
*Quality* for you looks different? You seek non-*standard* reward?

Hush my darling.

Shhhh . . . Best keep that to yourself. Or better yet, morph. Simply change thyself.

If not, you may attract the wrong *attention*, *worthy of punishment*.

Do you know the people who are arbiters of *merit*? They get to say whether you are *entitled* to *distinction*. Only they *have a right* to praise you as *qualified*.

Do you want to *earn* their approval? Keep *leveling*. Keep *standardizing*. Keep *accounting*.

Someday, maybe, your efforts will *warrant deservingness*. Someday, maybe, your work will achieve the mantle of *quality*.

Keep striving. Try just a wee bit harder.

Because the criteria for *excellence*, *distinction*, and *praise* are neutral: based purely on *merit*. ■

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SARAH J. TRACY is Professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. I thank Devika Chawla, Mohan J. Dutta, Amardo Rodriguez, and Elizabeth F. Desnoyers-Colas for their leadership of this special issue. Furthermore, I feel grateful to the many scholars who have been active on the Facebook group Communication Scholars for Transformation. I have been inspired and uplifted by your support, encouragement, and courageous examples of how to counter racism through writing. Correspondence to: Sarah J. Tracy, Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, PO Box 871205, Tempe, AZ 85287, USA. Email: Sarah.Tracy@asu.edu.

## NOTES

1. Wikipedia, s.v. “Soliloquy,” modified by Jackchango, 25 April 2019, 05:38, accessed 22 June 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Soliloquy&oldid=894034892>.

2. Lonnie Athens, “The Self as a Soliloquy,” *Sociological Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1994): 525.

3. Google, s.v. “merit,” accessed 22 June 2019, [https://www.google.com/search?q=merit&rlz=1C1GCEA\\_enUS772US772&coq=merit&aqs=chrome.o.69j59j69j60l2j69j61j0l3.2388joj7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=merit&rlz=1C1GCEA_enUS772US772&coq=merit&aqs=chrome.o.69j59j69j60l2j69j61j0l3.2388joj7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8).

4. Stuart Hall, “Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse,” in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 72–81.