

# MERIT BEYOND THE MIRROR

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# Empirical research suggested a basic contradiction.

## There is strong evidence...

Institutions profess the importance of racial & gender diversity in...

- Undergraduate admissions & other types of selection<sup>1</sup>
- Mission statements & websites<sup>2</sup>

1 Grodsky, 2007; Lamont, 2009; Karabel, 2005; Stevens, 2008

2 Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Osei-Kofi, et al., 2013

3 Griffin & Muñiz, 2011

4 Garces, 2012; Attiyeh & Attiyeh, 1997

5 Milkman, et al., 2014

## At the same time....

- Recruitment work of graduate diversity officers is decoupled from admissions decisions of faculty.<sup>3</sup>
- 2 of the 3 best predictors of admission are high GRE scores and selective college attendance.<sup>4</sup>
- Unconscious bias in responses to emails from prospective students.<sup>5</sup>

# WHY?

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# GATEKEEPING AND INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM

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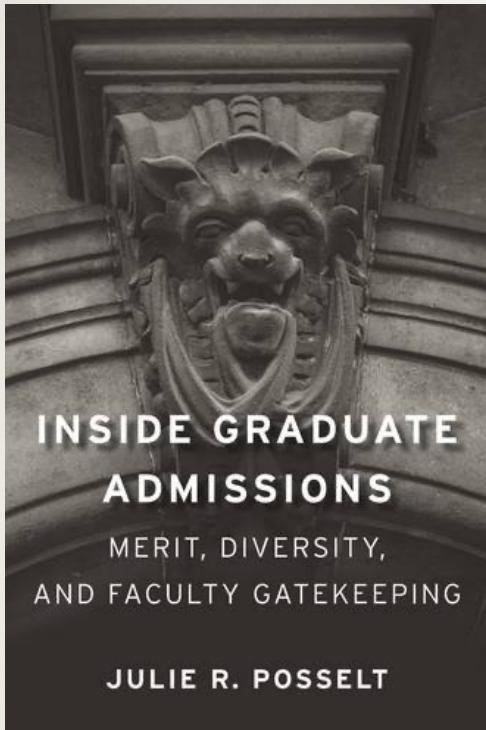
- Racial inequalities are “locked in” through ongoing use of facially neutral criteria and practices with a) disparate impact or b) racialized meanings.
- A “colorblind” approach to gatekeeping obscures consequences (ie, for racial equity & diversity) of how we operationalize merit.
- My team’s work draws out the common mental pathways with which professors legitimize the system, using these as starting points for redesign.
- **Inequalities are neither inevitable nor natural. Rather, they are the result of a process that was socially constructed and which we have inherited.**

Roithmayr, D. (2014). *Reproducing racism: How everyday choices lock in White advantage*. NYU Press.

Sturm, S. (2006). The architecture of inclusion: Advancing workplace equity in higher education. *Harv. JL & Gender*, 29, 247.

Thornton, P. H., Ocasio, W., & Lounsbury, M. (2015). *The institutional logics perspective*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc..

Tolbert, P. S., & Zucker, L. G. (1999). The institutionalization of institutional theory.



Harvard University Press, 2016

- **Research Questions:**
  - How do faculty individually judge & collectively select applicants to highly ranked Ph.D. programs?
  - What racialized assumptions about merit guide faculty judgment?
  - How do disciplinary norms shape faculty judgment?
- **Comparative ethnographic case study**
- **10 programs in 3 public & private universities**
  - 85 interviews with professors & a few graduate students
  - 22 hours of admissions meeting observations in six of the programs

	Humanities	Social Sciences	Natural Sciences
High Consensus	Philosophy (2 programs)	Economics	Physics
Moderate Consensus	Classics	Sociology	Astrophysics
Low Consensus	Linguistics	Political Science	Biology

## **Evaluative cultures explain apparent tensions between (definitions of) merit & (valuing) diversity.**

1. *Preference for specific criteria* was rooted in beliefs/scripts about what they signal. Those beliefs were tied up in their own identities as scholars in highly ranked programs.
2. *Preference for a process that is efficient and collegial.* They wanted to quantify quality & minimize conflict.
3. In high-consensus fields, defended decisions to themselves and one another using *disciplinary logics* (def: shared disciplinary norms about epistemology/methods, theories & metaphors, and practical priorities)
4. In low-consensus fields, a strong role of individual preferences included four clear patterns of *homophily* (pedigree, cool, social mobility, international).
5. *Ambivalence about organizational change*, especially reforms related to diversity and equity. Faculty ability to discuss race/racism, and their mindsets toward diversity, equity, and inclusion, must be addressed.

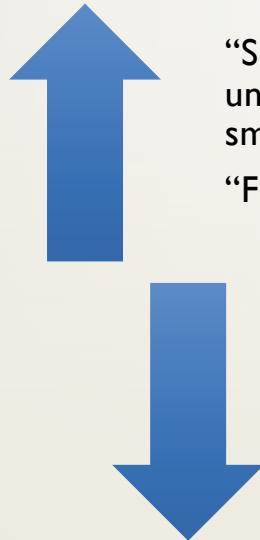
# SCRIPTS

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- Theories of cultural & evaluative scripts (Goffman, 1959; Lamont, 2009)  
*Definition:* Stories we tell ourselves to justify decisions, which operate as decision-making pathways
- GRE scores and Grades | Institutional prestige → Intelligence →
  - Belonging in an elite intellectual community
  - Risk profile

# GRE SCORES, INTELLIGENCE, RISK, & BELONGING

- In interviews, 50% of the sample volunteered some idea about intelligence when asked what GRE scores signal (e.g., “sheer intellectual horsepower”, “native intelligence”)
- In meetings, >50% of GRE mentions were what I classified as smart talk.



“Someone who does that well on the GRE is unlikely to be lame- brained. They are likely to be smart.” (philosophy)

“Freaking genius” (political science)

“I question she has what it takes.”

“[He was] from a different planet and we were confident that this person was not going to be one of us. He’s not going to be a full member of the scientific community.” (biology)

# RISK AVERSION & A COUNTERSCRIPT

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- Risk aversion as obligation & luxury
- Examples of challenging the risk aversion script
- Counterscripts

*Prof. Bob:* “Her GREs present a risk for her not succeeding” particularly because she “didn’t attend a top-rated university.”

*Prof. Lynn:* “She may have undershot...This is an area that can be gendered...We have to be very careful here.”

*Prof. Bob:* “All in all, it gives me doubt.”

*[Student ultimately waitlisted]*

*Prof. Denise:* “She might be a bet, but it could be a good bet... If we are going to increase diversity, these are the students we need to take seriously.”

*Prof. Jack: (Tentatively)* “What’s the diversity?”

*Dept. Chair Nancy:* “Family financial hardship.”

*[Committee agrees to move her forward, but discussion continues.]*

*Dept. Chair Nancy:* “It will be good for the whole faculty to take a look at her file. It seems pretty clear that she’s a risk, but if we’re going to increase diversity, we have to take risks.”

*Prof. Denise:* “And she seems like a good bet.”

*[Student ultimately rejected after being waitlisted and attending recruitment weekend]*

# MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT RISK

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- Informal assumptions about risk are rarely accurate.
  - Untested – subject to availability bias & other cognitive biases.
  - Difficult to reliably predict PhD completion for populations who rarely enroll (i.e., problem of small n's)
  - Validity of graduate entrance exams varies by test and graduate school outcome, but is consistently strongest for first year grad school GPA.<sup>1</sup>
- Student outcomes result from the educational experience we provide, not only from what they bring to the table.
  - Women who do not complete the PhD have higher mean GPA than men who don't complete, but leave programs in higher numbers.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kuncel & Hezlett, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Lovitts & Nelson, 2000

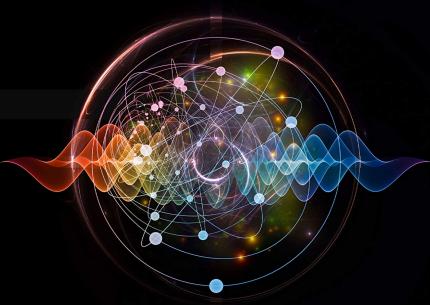
## PREVAILING SCRIPTS OF MERIT & RISK

- Are socially constructed stories rooted in false or narrowly framed assumptions about who can be successful.
- They have been passed down over time, and reinforce many academics' views of themselves.
- The scripts are racialized (i.e., they carry racial meanings).
- But these scripts
  - Are not true or complete stories.
  - Promote practices that misalign with commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- The scripts can be rewritten!

## COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF CHANGE EFFORTS

Discipline/Field	Focus of change effort	Level of Analysis
Applied Physics	Race & Gender	PhD Program
Chemistry	Gender	PhD Program
Civil Engineering	Gender	PhD Program
Psychology	Race	PhD Program
Astronomy	Race & Gender	Disciplinary society
Physics	Race	Disciplinary society
Geology	Gender	Field Course

# EQUITY IN SCIENCE



REPRESENTATION, CULTURE,  
AND THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE  
IN GRADUATE EDUCATION

JULIE R. POSSELT

## REDEFINING BOUNDARIES & PRACTICES IN APPLIED PHYSICS

1. Intellectual paradigm → curriculum
2. Script of the “ideal student” as “intellectually adventurous” → admissions & recruitment practices
3. Administrative staff as cultural translators → leadership practices
4. Family-like relationships in the program → climate, mentoring, & support practices

*“The great power of physics is that it can be used to solve problems, to develop new technologies, to understand complicated interactions.”*

-Former Director

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*“We brought in the best students we could find. Now these are not like the typical definition of the best student... We were after people who would be willing to take a big risk... We wanted to look for people who were intellectually adventurous.”*

*-Director*

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# RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS TO REDESIGN FACULTY PRACTICES

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Many STEM faculty want to do better, but need resources for individual & organizational development:

1. **Capacity building:** New language, data, and stories, via research translated into accessible formats
2. **Community** with other change agents to articulate, assert, & act on counterscripts
3. **Tools to facilitate coordinated change & assessment** of routines & policy in specific areas of racialized practice



## OPEN QUESTIONS

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- What leadership & change management practices enable anti-racist narratives about merit to become institutionalized in gatekeeping and incentive structures?
- How can institutional change efforts themselves decenter whiteness without placing undue burdens on people of color for service & leadership?
- Under what conditions do white leaders relinquish social and political capital to help facilitate change? What enables institutional courage?
- Do interventions destabilize engrained scripts about risk & merit? How may they reinforce these scripts?
- How can we leverage institutional isomorphism for racial equity? What limits does this strategy present?

# Thank you!

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