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**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Towards a performative understanding of deservingness: Merit, gender and the BBC pay dispute

Ruth Simpson<sup>1</sup>  | Savita Kumra<sup>2</sup> | Patricia Lewis<sup>3</sup> | Nick Rumens<sup>4</sup><sup>1</sup>Brunel Business School, Brunel University<sup>2</sup>School of Business Administration, American University of Sharjah<sup>3</sup>Kent Business School, University of Kent<sup>4</sup>Oxford Brookes Business School, Oxford Brookes University**Correspondence**Ruth Simpson, Brunel Business School, Brunel University, Uxbridge, UB83RS, UK.  
Email: r.simpson@brunel.ac.uk

Drawing largely on a high-profile case of unequal pay at the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) as an illustrative example, this conceptual article considers differences and interrelationships between merit and deservingness, where the latter captures how, through appropriate performances, merit is given recognition and value. We propose a performative understanding of deservingness that highlights its gendered and embodied dimensions. Informed by Judith Butler's account of gender performativity, we show that, while merit is conventionally conceptualized as a relatively fixed set of attributes (qualifications, skill) 'attached' to the individual, deservingness captures how, in gendered terms, value and recognition are both claimed and conferred. As we argue, a gendered, deserving subject does not pre-exist but is performatively constituted through embodied practices and performances of what is seen as worthy in a particular time and place.

**KEYWORDS**

BBC, deservingness, gender, merit, pay gap, performativity

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This conceptual article develops a critical understanding of deservingness to help explain why merit-based reward systems in organizations often fail to deliver the equality they seek to ensure. Drawing largely on a recent, high-profile case of the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) pay scandal as illustrative example, where female

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journalists were found to earn up to 50 per cent less than their male counterparts, we examine how deservingness 'plays out' in an organizational context, building a conceptual distinction between deservingness and merit. We propose a performative understanding of deservingness by suggesting, in gendered terms, how merit must be given recognition and value to be seen as deserved and how discourses and embodied performances help construct a subjectivity based on perceptions of who 'counts' as deserving. In so doing, rather than conflating deservingness with merit as in many accounts (Pojman & McLeod, 1999; Sommerlad, 2015), we provide conceptual clarity and distinction whilst highlighting potential interrelationships between the two, extending our understanding of why, despite well-intentioned merit-based intervention strategies and reward systems, gender-based inequalities persist in organizations.

We rely here on media coverage of the incidents involved in the BBC pay dispute as an illustrative example, incorporating direct comments from the journalists concerned (many of whom wrote extensively on the topic). While these accounts do not enable a direct study of practice, they make reference to particular behaviours which, supplemented by a re-reading of literature on gender, embodiment and work, we draw on to support our propositions. Our illustrative example is not used to assert the interaction proposed between deservingness and merit as an incontrovertible empirical reality, that is, as data upon which our arguments solely rely. Rather, it is used to illustrate some of our claims, to provoke reflection and to offer suggestions as to why the promise of merit has not materialized.

Often overlooked in accounts of work and organization, deservingness is mainly viewed from a social justice and/or ethical perspective where it is seen as core to beliefs about 'rightful claims' in terms of the distribution of reward (Miller, 1999). These rewards are linked to outcomes from personal effort or commitment which are evaluated positively (Feather, 1999). Deservingness accordingly relies on subjective evaluations based, in part, on personal values and normative expectations. Drawing on these, individuals may need to convince themselves, by the *claiming* of deservingness, that they are deserving of reward. More importantly, they are also required to persuade others who are in a position to judge whereby value and worth are *conferred*. As Feather (1999) notes, these values and expectations may well have a gendered dimension, potentially underpinning beliefs about entitlement and the legitimacy of individuals or groups to expect rewards. Such understandings stand in distinction from merit which is typically presented as an objective, gender-neutral measure of individual ability and achievement, based upon qualifications and the capacity of the individual to apply them to job-related tasks (Castilla, 2008, 2012, 2016; Castilla & Benard, 2010). This is founded on a presumed objectivity and stability, for instance, that ability can be quantified, separated from social context and assigned to the individual irrespective of gender or other categories of difference (Kumra, 2014; Simpson & Kumra, 2016).

This conventional approach to merit is predicated upon a liberal feminist view of gender as a unitary category 'brought into' organizations by women comprising, through missing opportunity structures, a potential source of inequality (Calas & Smircich, 1996) which a merit-based system can potentially 'solve', ensuring organizations are just and fair. We extend current critiques of merit which problematize its assumed objectivity and gender neutrality (e.g., Kumra, 2014; Roithmayr, 1997; Sommerlad, 2012, 2015) to incorporate the interrelated dynamics of deservingness — largely overlooked in current accounts. In particular, we show in gendered terms how merit must be evaluated positively to be seen as deserved and given reward. We do this from a post-structuralist approach that conceptualizes gender as 'discursive practice and performance' (Calas & Smircich, 1996, p. 231). This approach enables us to examine how, through gendered, embodied performances, merit may (or may not) be afforded worth and recognition as deserved and, relatedly, how a gendered, deserving subject is performatively constituted.

Our article is guided by two concerns: how can we distinguish between merit and deservingness? What are the potential relations between the two? Drawing on Austin's (1962) claim regarding the 'doing' of words and Butler's (1990, 1993, 1997, 2004) approach to gender performativity, we contribute to the critical literature on merit and gender equality in organizations in the following ways. Firstly, we draw a conceptual distinction between merit and deservingness where the former is conventionally conceptualized as an objective measure based on the possession of attributes and skills while the latter is founded on particular acts and behaviours that are valued positively.

Secondly, we develop a performative understanding of deservingness which highlights the interrelationships between the two. This shows how merit comes to be performatively constituted as deserved through embodied performances of gender that rely on traditionally masculine enactments and displays. In particular, we demonstrate how iterative, embodied performances and speech acts cite pre-existing gender norms around accomplishment and achievement, bringing a gendered subjectivity based on the meritorious – as *deserving* of recognition and reward – into being. We accordingly focus on the dynamics of deservingness in terms of how merit may be given value and recognition and how a deserving subject is performatively constituted in gendered terms. While critiques of merit have problematized the semblance of objectivity and stability, and have highlighted merit's subjective base, we suggest that we can only fully appreciate this contingent element through the inclusion of deservingness – distinctive through this performative and evaluative dimension.

## 2 | PERFORMATIVITY AND GENDER

As Gond, Cabantous, Harding, and Learmonth (2016) have noted, the concept of performativity has been conceptualized and applied differently within organization studies. For example, Spicer, Alvesson, and Kärreman (2009) define the notion of 'critical performativity' as a means by which researchers can cultivate 'openness and curiosity about the social world' (p. 549). Riach, Rumens, and Tyler (2016) galvanize Butler's (1990, 1993) concept of performativity to explore how subjects can 'undo' the constraints imposed by the compulsion to perform seemingly coherent narratives of self within organizational settings. In engaging with Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) notion of performativity, we are concerned here with how the 'performative dimension of construction', as Butler (1993, p. 64) puts it, enables us to interrogate the citation of norms by which the (gendered) subject is performatively constituted as deserving. We accordingly draw on Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) 'radical' version of social constructionism, which goes beyond the idea that gender is a mere social construct, disavowing the idea that there is a set basis or essence to gender, to examine the conditions under which the deserving subject is enabled and performatively constituted.

Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) concept of performativity draws attention to how a set of discourses does not just describe particular attributes but brings what appears to be an objective and external reality into being. In other words, it focuses on the processes whereby 'presentations, language and bodies of knowledge co-constitute the realities they describe' (Gond et al., 2016, p. 442). Performativity from this perspective draws on both Austin (1962) and Butler (1990, 1993, 1997, 2004) to highlight, in terms of the former, what language and words do – how words and speech are not only descriptive in a constantative sense but, performatively, can bring about what they say (Cabantous, Gond, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016). In this sense, performativity is not performed by subjects but 'is what enables a subject' (Butler, 1993, p. 95). Thus, Kornberger and Clegg (2011) show how the language of strategizing creates legitimacy for particular representations of reality and alters, through giving voice and silencing, levels of power and influence of individuals concerned. However, for Butler (1990, 1993), these speech acts are not just used by pre-existing subjects in forms of expression, as Austin would suggest, but help to construct the (gendered, embodied) subject so that the 'subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that he or she speaks' (Butler, 1997, p. 28).

Butler mobilizes the concept of interpellation in a theoretical sense, as a constitutive process by which individuals recognize themselves (and are recognized by others) as subjects. In other words, the process of becoming a subject is, in a power-laden sense, based on the conferring of recognition according to particular normative schemes available. As she argues:

... to persist in one's own being is only possible on the condition that we are engaged in receiving and offering recognition. If we are not recognizable, if there are no norms of recognition by which we are recognizable, then it is not possible to persist in one's own being, and we are not possible beings, we have been foreclosed from that possibility. (Butler, 2004, p. 31)

Linking performativity to gender, Butler (1990, 1993) encourages us to understand how gendered subjects are performatively constituted through iterability and citation, such as through the repetition of 'coded' utterances that conform to a 'model' by citing earlier normative examples. In other words, the individual becomes recognized (as 'man', as 'woman') within a certain set of norms grounded in 'the heterosexual matrix', a term coined by Butler to describe how 'intelligible' genders and sexualities are constituted. Gender, like sexuality, becomes ritualized so as to appear 'natural' (Ozturk & Rumens, 2014). On this basis, gender is seen as performative through the repeated

stylization of the body, a myriad of acts undertaken within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (Butler, 1990, p. 330)

Butler (1990) exposes how there is no gender prior to this citation — rather the citation and its associated material practices bring a recognizable gender into being, so that gender can be seen as an expectation that produces what it anticipates.

Here, Butler (1990, 1993) infuses Derrida's analysis of the significance of discourse with materiality through her focus on practice and 'bodies that matter'. Gendered bodies and the gendered subject are accordingly constituted through the repetition of acts (movement, style, comportment, gesture, language) that cite pre-existing norms and values. More than this, the appearance of the body in the process of subject constitution is both enabled and constrained by these norms. Butler (1993) states, 'bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas' (p. xi). For our purposes, Butler provides a valuable performative and material account of bodies as gendered that is linked to how the body and subject are attributed value within the social sphere, allowing insight into the processes of subject formation. In particular, we can trace how a gendered, deserving subject is performatively constituted.

### 3 | MERIT AND GENDER INEQUALITY

The processes outlined above concern, in our context, the ways in which a meritorious subject is created and becomes recognized as deserving. Rarely contested in mainstream accounts, meritocracy can be understood as a form of social order in which individuals are ranked on the basis of their individual merit or worth. Jobs are seen to require different abilities, traits and skills and people to differ in the constellation of abilities and traits that they possess with rewards distributed on the basis of individual performance or talent (Scully, 1997). This assumes that ability, credentials and skill can be quantified, separated from social context and assigned to the individual, leading to the identification of characteristics that are seen as merit-worthy (Castilla, 2016; Jackson, 2007; Sommerlad, 2012, 2015). As Sommerlad (2015) notes, merit represents an 'unassailable moral order' based on characteristics of universality, 'disinterestedness' and the promotion of excellence through ability and achievement where those unable to compete are held responsible for their failure. Individuals make 'rational' choices in respect of the best use of their talent, background and skills while employers make 'rational' decisions, free from cognitive biases, based on 'the best person for the job'. From this perspective, the outcome for individuals would be positive as it would 'responsibilize' them, linking self-improvement to continued career and economic success (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). Thus, in a meritocratic society, opportunities to succeed are provided and 'success is determined by individual merit' (McNamee & Miller, 2009, p. 4) — seen as an indicator of modernity and essential to the ideological claim that markets represent 'level playing fields'.

Recent critiques, often with a post-structuralist slant, raise questions about how dominant discourses of merit are disseminated and lead to 'taken-for-granted' assumptions about equality, who defines merit and how some interests are privileged over others (e.g., Castilla, 2016; Krefting, 2003; Thornton, 2007). Thus, discourses and practices based on a meritocratic system in organizations can be used to help to justify the slow pace of change in

respect of diversity, equality and inclusion. As Castilla (2016) found, belief on the part of managers that their organizations are meritorious can lead to less vigilance about individual action, giving space to biased decisions. Others have cast doubt on the claim within liberal individualism that merit represents objectivity and rationality, pointing to the socially constructed nature of merit. Thornton (2007), looking at the judiciary, shows how merit standards in practice are determined in a context of prevailing power relations and reflect socially acceptable preferences developed by members of social groups in power at a relevant time and place. With a focus on gender, Van den Brink and Benschop (2012) similarly argue that merit is constructed and endorsed by power elites who stand to gain most from maintaining the gendered *status quo*. Here, they show how merit often translates into socially constructed and gendered notions of 'excellence' – based largely on a masculine model of an uninterrupted career and which reproduces hegemonic structures of inequality. Examining the professional services, Kumra and Vinnicombe (2008) have exposed the masculinized, highly individualistic and 'self-managed' nature of career development in the promotion-to-partner process which privileged men and undervalued the collaborative approach of women, more used to advocating on behalf of others than operating from a traditionally masculinist individually self-interested position. By presenting the processes which enable men in particular to reach positions of seniority and power as precise, objective and unequivocal, these processes are rendered beyond reproach and the responsibility for those who do not succeed within the prevailing system is laid squarely on her own shoulders (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012).

While these studies cast doubt on the conventional view of merit as an objective measure of ability and talent, foregrounding its gendered, subjective nature, we suggest they overlook the fundamental significance of deservingness – and that it is deservingness rather than merit that 'holds' this subjective dimension. We extend these critical accounts by exploring how particular, deserving subjects are performatively constituted, highlighting the processes by which merit is given value as deserved. It is through these processes, namely, the inclusion of the dynamics of deservingness, that we can gain a deeper understanding of merit's subjective element and how the gender order at work is reproduced. We develop our understanding of these dynamics below.

## 4 | DESERVINGNESS, MERIT AND THE BBC PAY SCANDAL

To deserve is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson & Weiner, 1989 cited in Feather, 1999) as the ability to

acquire or earn a rightful claim by virtue of action or qualities ... to become entitled to or worthy of reward or punishment, esteem or disesteem, position, designation or any specified treatment ....  
(p. 516)

As noted above, critical discussions of merit within the sociology of work and organization studies literature rarely address deservingness as a distinct and separate issue, preferring to treat deservingness, where it is given mention, as an 'alternative meaning' (Sommerlad, 2015) to merit, almost interchangeable with merit's conceptualization and usage. One exception is Pojman and McCleod (1999) who note that while talent, skills and ability are the qualities that comprise merit, deservingness comprises effort, commitment and goodwill, highlighting the latter's reliance on appropriate performances and displays. This account notwithstanding, understandings of deservingness are often implicitly insinuated into evaluations of the outcomes of merit-based systems with scant attention paid to its particular role in creating and perpetuating work-based inequalities. This is to fail to fully understand not only the distinction between them but also the nature of their interrelationship. Thus, as we seek to show, while merit is generally thought to be founded on a stable set of attributes possessed by the individual, its contingent and subjective character is in fact rooted in the performative dynamics of deservingness, with implications for work-based reward.

In order to help build an understanding of deservingness in the context of work, we draw on a recent illustrative example from the UK where merit ostensibly (and catastrophically) failed to deliver the promised gender equality in rewards despite apparent comparability between the men and women concerned in qualifications, experience and skill. This concerns a pay dispute that emerged in 2018 at the BBC – the national broadcaster in the UK context. We draw on commentaries of the dispute, highlighting in particular the circumstances around and the intense media coverage of the resignation of a senior editor, Carrie Gracie, who was central to the dispute and who gave up her post in protest at what she saw as her unfair treatment over pay.

Under new legislation that came into force in April 2017, companies in the UK employing more than 250 staff (9000 in total) have been required by law to publish their gender pay gap in order to make transparent any gender-based disparities. This means public, private and voluntary sector organizations must disclose the average pay for men and women, including bonuses. Firms cannot be punished for the size of their gender pay gap but they may be penalized for failure to publish their data or if they provide inaccurate information.

Within the context of this new legal requirement, the BBC was found to have a 9.3 per cent median pay gap (close to the average of 9.1 per cent for full-time workers across the UK). Far larger disparities however were revealed when the salaries of senior managers and well-known presenters earning more than £150,000 were published. This information demonstrated that there were no women in the BBC's top ten earners and only two women in the top 20 earners at that time (Sweney, 2018). In fact, female journalists were astounded to discover that male counterparts were routinely being paid 50 per cent more for the same job – a situation which led to 200 women lodging grievances against the corporation.

The pay gap that emerged prompted senior female editor and China correspondent Carrie Gracie to publicly resign her position. As she stated in her open resignation letter, *'It is not men earning more because they do more of the jobs that pay better. It is men earning more in the same jobs'* (Wyatt, 2018). Fluent in Mandarin and with an impressive and successful track record at the BBC dating from 1987, Gracie's unique ability and credentials to undertake the China editorial role appears incontrovertible. The parliamentary select committee set up to investigate the BBC pay dispute heard how Gracie *'wasn't just the best qualified person for the job. She was the only qualified person for the job'* (Crace, 2018), with many references made to her talent, her experience and commitment and with one colleague referring to her as an *'outstanding and principled journalist'* (Crace, 2018). Adopting a critical stance, the select committee referred to *'... a culture of invidious, opaque, decision-making'* on pay within the corporation, concluding that the lack of central oversight over pay levels allowed significant managerial discretion over salaries, with decisions being made on *'an ad-hoc basis'* (Sweney, 2018).

Viewed through the lens of deservingness as briefly outlined above, commentaries on the issue drew extensively on meanings around fairness, value and worth. Gracie herself stated in her open letter that through the publication of pay rates, women *'saw hard evidence ... that they are not being valued equally'*, commenting that her managers *'yet again judged that women's work was worth much less than men's'* (Wyatt, 2018). Sarah Montague (2018), a seasoned and high-profile journalist and presenter (and who discovered she was earning only one quarter of top earning male counterparts) was in her commentary *'incandescent with rage'*, referring to pay as *'the most powerful measure of what your employer thinks of you relative to your peers'*. Among headlines suggesting the BBC was undervaluing and *'belittling'* women (Moore, 2018) and needed to redress *'structural injustices'* (*The Observer*, 2018), Gracie at first chose to resign her position rather than accept the £45,000 p.a. offered pay rise, together with back pay, on-the-grounds that it would still leave her earning less than her male counterparts. Drawing further on evaluations of worth and insisting that all international editors be paid the same amount, she stated *'I wanted acknowledgment that my work was as good as my male colleagues.'* Commenting on the issue, and drawing directly on meanings around deservingness, Jane Merrick of *The Telegraph* queried how the female European affairs editor Katya Adler (the only international editor to earn less than £150,000) could be paid less than the men: *'doesn't Adler, fluent in four languages besides English, deserve some parity with (male Middle East editor) given Brexit makes hers one of the busiest seats in journalism at the moment?'* (Merrick, 2018). In sympathy, former BBC news presenter Robin Lustig (2018) expressed

disapproval towards some of his top-earning male peers in a *Guardian* article, referring to '*grotesquely inflated salaries for which there is no justification*' and asking whether some highly paid male journalists '*deserved*' their pay (p. 45).

Discourses of fairness and attempts at justification permeated reports of the BBC response, even though Gracie was reportedly given assurance on her appointment to China editor in 2013 that she was being paid on a level with male foreign editors. The BBC claimed that pay rates were 'fair' and that Gracie '*deserved*' lower pay than male colleagues because she worked as China editor part-time and because she was still '*in development*' in the role. These '*laughable excuses*' (Montague, 2018) were strongly refuted by Gracie in the media and at the parliamentary select committee.

As a high-profile example of the failure of merit to deliver gender equality (and which led, uniquely, to some highly paid male journalists accepting cuts in pay), this demonstrates how discourses of merit become '*fused*' with notions of deservingness, muddying the waters in terms of how disparities can be explained. Further, the example highlights how outcomes depend in part on appropriate evaluations and judgements of worth. In other words, merit must be judged positively to be seen as deserved, suggesting a need to understand potential interrelationships and to draw conceptual distinction between the two.

## 5 | THE CLAIMING AND CONFERRING OF DESERVINGNESS

Much of the scholarly literature that addresses issues of deservingness comes from a social justice/ethical perspective and echoes some of the meanings around women's '*rightful claim*' to fair rewards given expression through reports on the BBC pay scandal above. As Feather (1999) contends, analysis of deservingness is inextricably interwoven with everyday judgements about the value attached to outcomes and behaviour for which, through personal effort, individuals are seen to be responsible. Deservingness accordingly is linked to action and performances whereby individuals demonstrate responsibility for outputs based on their own hard work and effort (Pojman & McLeod, 1999). Thus, Montague (2018) sought to justify her deservingness to receive higher rewards on the grounds of her high workload, indicative of effort and of her worth and esteem: '*If I am really so much worse than others, why am I so busy? My diary cannot accommodate the work I am offered from across the organization.*'

Implicit in these accounts is the impetus to persuade both self and others of value and worth. In other words, while others (e.g., line managers) might suggest to an employee that he/she applies for promotion or a pay reward, deservingness may, in many cases, need to be '*claimed*' initially by the individual concerned. More importantly, deservingness needs also to be '*conferred*' by those with decision-making power. In support, Oh (2018) found, in her recent study of North Korean mothers returning to work, that women had to prove to themselves, as well as to grandparents as potential caregivers, that they deserved childcare support. Looking at the BBC, Carrie Gracie first and foremost claimed in her open letter that she herself was deserving of equal pay which she then conveyed to those in decision-making power: she described the Chinese editorial role as a demanding one, based on a '*punishing*' schedule and hence worthy of recognition and reward. It was on this basis that she saw herself as deserving of pay parity with male colleagues. As she wrote: '*I accepted these challenges whilst stressing to my bosses that I must be paid equally with my male peers*' (Wyatt, 2018).

These self-assessments, as Lerner (1987) has suggested, can potentially translate into feelings of personal entitlement. This can be seen as a '*sense of requiredness*' (Lerner, 1987, p. 107) and/or imperative that underpins and strengthens self-evaluations of deservingness and which are partly predicated upon normative prescriptions and role-based expectations associated with particular social identities, such as those based on gender. In support of the latter, Barron (2003) has highlighted, in a study of differences between men and women in attitudes towards pay, how men had a stronger sense of entitlement and saw themselves as more '*deserving*' of financial reward. This resonates with Knights and Tullberg (2011) who refer to how economic self-interest underpins men's '*almost obligatory*' pursuit of ever-increasing levels of remuneration as important visible and symbolic elements of the social construction of masculinity based on hierarchical claims to superior status and wealth.



This tendency to associate entitlement with masculine rather than with feminine norms and practices was also captured and illustrated in a bizarre twist in the BBC pay dispute. In a singular event, the highest paid journalist John Humphrys, earning between £600,000 and £649,000 and who had just agreed to accept a £120,000 pay cut, was caught out in an off-air conversation with the US international editor Jon Sopal, making light of the gender pay gap and of Gracie's plight. Reported by the BBC online news (January 2018) 'John Humphrys Defends "Jokey" Pay Gap Remarks about Carrie Gracie' and with the sub-heading: 'Backslapping Entitled Males', he was recorded as saying, ill-advisedly: '*I've handed over already more than you fucking earn but I'm still left with more than anybody else and that seems to me to be entirely just ...*' prompting Jane Garvey, the presenter of *Woman's Hour* (a daily radio programme), to accuse him of misogyny (Moir, 2018). While Humphrys dismissed this as '*silly banter between friends*', his flippant approach to inequality within the BBC was widely interpreted as symptomatic of a sense of personal entitlement, as highlighted in the BBC online news sub-heading above ('Backslapping Entitled Males'), based on a gendered privilege and imperative towards a 'rightful claim' to higher rewards.

As highlighted in the pay scandal above, Gracie must also persuade others (key personnel within the BBC) that she is deserving of equal pay. In Butlerian terms, deservingness is not only based, in part, on self-evaluations through the claiming of worth but must also be *conferred* so the subject is recognized as a deserving subject (Butler, 1990, 1993). Focusing on external, rather than internal, evaluations of worth, Feather (1999) suggests that personal values and normative prescriptions concerning the legitimacy of an individual or group are likely to influence judgements of worth from those in positions to make such assessments. Social positioning such as socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity and race have emerged as key factors which influence evaluations of an individual's worth and their deservingness of reward and support in relation to work. Further, such social positioning impacts on the perceived validity of claims and requests that an individual might make — the higher the value attached to an individual's position and the work they do, the more deserving they are perceived to be (Oh, 2018). Thus, evaluations of deservingness are likely to be influenced by the relationship between the person who is judging and the person being judged with positive evaluations largely predicated upon a shared social identity in terms of, for example, citizenship or gender. In terms of the latter, academic research (e.g., Thornton, 2007) has suggested that those in senior roles tend to see merit in those most like themselves so that male managers are likely to reward other men. Taking up this stance, media commentaries on the BBC pay divide referred in commonsensical terms to how employers (often male) '*judge women and men differently with female job applicants regarded as ... deserving of lower pay*' (*The Observer*, 2018). This same-gender advantage may not however apply to women in that, as Balcar and Hedija (2018) found, female managers do not necessarily give preference to women in their remunerations but instead follow the example of their male counterparts by prioritizing men.

Taken together, this suggests that deservingness is predicated upon: (i) particular actions or outcomes for which a person is assumed to be responsible, for example, through personal effort and achievement; and (ii) on evaluations of their worth where deservingness is claimed by the individual and conferred by those with decision-making power. Given the importance attached to inter-subjective relations and personal values as above and given that men occupy key positions in organizations, gender is likely to not only influence how individuals self-assess (with women judging themselves as less deserving), but also how deservingness in others is evaluated and how managers are persuaded of value and worth. As we explore in the next section, it is this persuasive element and the *conferring* of deservingness which underpin its performative qualities whereby, through discourse and action, a deserving meritorious subject is given recognition by others through, as example, appropriate enactments and displays of effort and achievement.

## 6 | DESERVINGNESS AND PERFORMATIVITY

Carrie Gracie's position on her equal pay dispute proved controversial and attracted some critique. Under the headline, 'Oh Carrie. You Win the Money but then Stamp on the Fight for Equal Pay', Camilla Long (2018) from the *Sunday Times* queried Gracie's credentials, claiming that they did not rival those of male colleagues in terms of

significant screen time. Most people, Long said, 'couldn't pick her out of a police line-up' and, further, Gracie had 'never ... got a single memorable scoop'. More significantly, Long (2018) described the 'terrible stab of rage' she felt on reading the latest developments in the gender pay gap row. Several weeks after the crisis erupted, Gracie announced she was, after all, going to accept an undisclosed sum in back pay and donate it to the leading gender equality campaigning charity, the Fawcett Society, to set up a fund for women who need legal advice on equal pay claims. As she stated, altruistically, 'I want my back pay to help other women at work.'

For Long, the donation was an outrageous gesture which completely invalidated Gracie's claim to equal pay:

Surely the whole point of equal pay is that women need to be proud of their worth, not ashamed of the money they demand. If you earn it, you get it and keep it and enjoy it.... It isn't dirty or embarrassing or vulgar or beneath you....

By refusing to take and spend the money, Gracie sent a message that women should be constrainedly 'principled' about accepting high salaries. Justifying her stance, Gracie stated in a broadcast on the issue (and expressing some embarrassment at her privileged position) that she was already highly paid and 'would not wish to be remembered forever as the woman who complained about money' (Wyatt, 2018). However, for women who do not have the luxury of refusing a pay rise because they need more money to pay for basic living costs, Gracie's 'donation' was interpreted by Long as an act of unmitigated self-indulgence. Further, Long felt that Gracie had behaved 'like a child' as she dealt with the pressures of the case. On her own admission, Gracie had wept at the select committee as she recounted the difficulties she had faced with the BBC during the pay dispute and, after receiving an inaccurate report of the grievance she had filed, had gone to bed for two days in distress — demonstrating a lack of self-belief by ceding in defeatist terms 'I can't do this, this is too big.' In the face of what could be seen as weak, unprofessional (and gendered) behaviour, Long questioned whether Gracie *deserved* the same pay as other reporters.

Two key issues in this aspect of the BBC pay dispute stand out. The first relates to an evaluation of worth (based on screen time, scoops, memorability and fame) and which Long judges to be less than that of her male counterparts. The second concerns Gracie's behaviour (crying at the select committee, taking to her bed, giving away her back pay, defeatism) which Long sees as inappropriate and as 'undeserving'. In our terms, this behaviour is viewed as problematic because it does not conform, performatively, to a normative (masculine) model of professionalism and of career success. We draw on this latest aspect of the BBC pay story, as well as on particular literature on gender, embodiment and work, to illustrate some of the performative dimensions of deservingness. This is to foreground the significance of normative expectations and personal values as well as social identity characteristics such as gender in terms of the relationship between the judge and the person being judged (Feather, 1999; Miller, 1999; Oh, 2018). Here, the latter is likely to reflect both the gendered nature of the structures and processes of hierarchal positioning in organizations (Acker, 1990) and the dominance of men in positions of decision-making power.

To develop our conceptualization of the performativity of deservingness, we examine the significance of enactments of worth through embodied performances (e.g., behaviours, comportment, speech acts) and the role of recognition in how a deserving, meritorious subject is performatively constituted and maintained. Building on our previous argument that merit must be displayed and performed appropriately to be judged positively and seen as deserving, we now highlight the significance of gendered, embodied performances that cite pre-existing, contextually specific norms of acceptability, achievement and success. In this way, in a performative sense a gendered, deserving, meritorious subject is brought into being.

## 6.1 | Deservingness and embodied performances of merit

As Hodgson (2005) claims, drawing also on Butler's (1990, 1993) writing, perceptions of professionalism involve not only professional knowledge and expertise, but also their processual enactment. Claims to professional competence must accordingly be underpinned by what is seen as 'suitable' conduct for their recognition in the eyes of others. In

our terms and as we propose, through gendered, embodied performances, deservingness may (or may not) be conferred. This aligns with Butler's (1990, 1993) view that a (gendered, professional) subject is constituted performatively through the repetition of acts and behaviours that cite pre-existing norms within a contextually specific regulatory scheme.

With a focus on gender, a considerable body of work has shown how management and leadership often prioritize masculine discourses around measurement, rationality and accountability (e.g., Kerfoot & Knights, 1993, 1998; Simpson, 2005) – attributes that are more associated with masculinity than with femininity and feminine practices, reproducing a masculine model of achievement and success. Knights and Tullberg (2011) show how performative displays of authoritative expertise, the taking of risks and the securing of ever-increasing levels of pay comprise bodily and personality characteristics that produce and sustain masculinity in organizations, helping to produce the 'right kind of man' according to prevalent scripts. Referring to the gendered nature of 'fitness to practice' in law and accountancy firms, Haynes (2012) describes how success is predicated upon a masculine body and how women must distance themselves from negatively constructed aspects of their femininity (e.g., dress, voice and self-presentation) if they wish to be taken seriously. This resonates with Long's (2018) critique of Carrie Gracie's behaviour in the BBC pay dispute. Through her *'spoilt, fey gesture'* of donating her back pay, Gracie was seen to be enacting an 'inappropriate' femininity (modesty, self-sacrifice) in the context of a highly competitive career that did not conform to a masculine, normative model of professional worth. As Long stated in her article (John Humphrys notwithstanding), *'I can't think of a single man who works in any senior role at the BBC or anywhere who would waive maybe £100,000 simply in order to look good.'* Enactments and displays of feminine weakness (crying at the select committee, retreating to her bed, demonstrating lack of self-belief) further compounded negative assessments of Gracie's deservingness. As Long queried sarcastically: *'Who wouldn't offer £200,000 or so a year to someone who took to her bed and/or burst into tears at the first sign of trouble?'* concluding, *'now it's all over, I'm not sure Gracie deserved the same pay'*.

Evaluations of merit as deserving are accordingly contingent upon a particular embodied performance that cite pre-existing norms around gender and professional worth. As Waring and Waring (2009) argue, the body has potential to symbolize occupational status with female bodies often positioned according to male-dominated professional expectations. With a focus on dress and appearance, Kumra and Simpson (2018) show how some forms of embodied feminine displays (e.g., in terms of sexual attractiveness, posture and attire) can undermine claims to a meritorious self. Similarly, looking at entrepreneurship, Lewis (2014) demonstrates how excessive displays and embodied enactments of femininity can disrupt accepted notions of professional careerism, undermining women's claims to being a 'serious' entrepreneur. Gendered discourses of professionalism therefore interact with the physical representation of the body with implications for occupational status and success (Waring & Waring, 2009).

However, enactments of masculinity by women can also mean that merit goes unrecognized and, drawing on Butler's terminology, is also 'undone' – whereby, as Riach et al. (2016) highlight in the context of organizations, a viable, intelligible subject is denied. As example, one participant in Haynes's (2012) study above recalled a situation where, despite having relevant credentials, a female candidate for employment in a legal firm was discounted because the communication and display of merit was seen, in implicitly gendered terms, as unbecoming: she was described as having an 'authoritative manner' which was interpreted negatively as 'forceful'. The hiring partner 'couldn't get past that and listen to what she was saying' (Haynes, 2012, p. 495) even though, as Haynes points out in the context of the legal profession, powerful advocacy and assertive behaviour are required for effective performance of the job. Merit was not seen as deserving of recognition or reward: it did not conform to normative expectations that confer value and hence deservingness and was reinterpreted as inappropriate ('forceful') in highly gendered and devalued ways.

This highlights potentially the importance of speech acts and modes of articulation as instances of embodied enactments and performances that impinge on notions of professional worth. In other words, how individuals talk about and present themselves help create understandings of the deservedly meritorious. As some authors suggest (e.g., Belenky, Clinchey, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Simpson & Lewis, 2005), speech patterns and

speech acts have a strong gendered dimension. While men describe themselves through adjectives of achievement and separation (e.g., ambitious, independent, confident, self-reliant), women often define themselves in the context of relationships and judge themselves (and are judged) by standards of likeability, ethics and care. Thus, Humphrys voiced an informal, competitive and privileged male camaraderie and entitlement: '*I've handed over already more than you fucking earn but I'm still left with more than anybody else*'; Gracie publicly proclaimed her vulnerability: '*I can't do this*'; and Sarah Montague, like Gracie, referred to the '*moral high ground*' she had taken prior to the disclosure of the pay gap where she exercised pay restraint on the grounds that she was working for a public sector organization and felt a sense of moral responsibility towards those paying the licence fee – an ethical stance that was not apparently shared by her male colleagues (Montague, 2018).

Further, as Haynes' example of the 'forceful' female candidate shows, women often encounter difficulties in speaking and being heard (Belenky et al., 1986; West & Zimmerman, 2002) particularly in relation to their own achievements. In this respect, Kumra and Vinnicombe (2010) refer to how men may be 'culturally conditioned' to take credit for their achievements to a greater extent than women and such credit may be more easily conferred on men. Women must present their ambition carefully (Benschop, van den Brink, Doorewaard, & Leenders, 2013) so as not to violate gender norms dictating that they focus on others rather than on self-interested and self-motivated 'open' careerism – a stance that finds sympathy with Gracie's altruistic behaviour in donating her pay. Men therefore have greater linguistic alignment with qualities associated with leadership and management (ambitious, rational, logical, decisive) and have more success than women in getting and holding the notice of others for their opinions and/or articulations of personal success. In other words, men's speech acts convey more authority and their merit in the form of qualifications and skills may accordingly be evaluated more positively, with implications for how they progress in organizations. This gives credence to Austin's (1962) account of 'doing things with words' and his claim concerning the performative power of speech acts in helping to create the reality they describe as well as to Butler's contention that a (e.g., gendered, deserving, meritorious) subject is performatively constituted by the language he/she speaks.

These studies as well as the BBC pay dispute cast doubt on claims that rewards are attached unproblematically to merit, where merit is conventionally seen as a set of skills and attributes that an individual possesses, as a form of physical capital anchored to a gender-neutral body. However, unlike research that draws attention to merit as a social construction, our engagement with Butler's notion of performativity foregrounds the significance of embodied performances which have profound, gendered implications for how merit is evaluated and deservingness conferred. In other words, the evaluation of merit as deserving is contingent upon day-to-day activities and practices involving speech acts, comportment, dress as well as self-presentations and impression management, so that others can be persuaded of value and worth. As highlighted in Long's (2018) critique of Gracie's 'inappropriate' behaviour around the pay dispute, 'appropriate' citational performances and enactments, based on specific norms in context, are integral to understandings of deservingness, translating potentially into occupational returns in the form, for example, of promotion and pay. It is through these gendered, performances that deservingness is conferred whereby merit is given recognition and hence rewarded. In other words, deservingness is performative wherein the constitution of the meritorious subject relies on traditionally masculine performances and displays.

## 6.2 | Recognition and the creation of a deserving, meritorious subject

Integral to these accounts is an emphasis on the role of recognition. Butler (2004) argues that recognition is partly but not exclusively verbal in that 'subjects are transformed by virtue of the communicative practices in which they are engaged' (p. 132). As we have seen, norms and their enactment have far-reaching consequences for how we understand deservingness, with individuals seeking recognition within particular, normative frames. This holds parallels with McKinlay's (2010) account, namely, that to be performative a speech act must categorize and allow others to see the difference signified and conveyed. In this respect, as we have seen and as part of an ongoing process, merit-based deservingness has to be communicated and 'talked into existence' through communicative

events based on recognition of what counts as deservingly meritorious at a particular time and place. We can therefore see how discourses (e.g., a language of personal achievement and success) reflect and reinforce existing relations of power in specific contexts, generating what is named and producing 'effects through reiteration' (Butler, 1993, p. 20). Hence, potentially, a recognizable, deserving and meritorious subject is brought into being.

As Butler (2004) notes, recognition is a reciprocal process in that we are engaged in its offering and receiving. As Haynes' study and as Gracie's behaviour critiqued by Long show, doing femininity (through dress, speech, behaviours) may mean that deservingness is 'undone'. Equally, performative displays of merit (e.g., a confident, authoritative demeanour) that do not align with perceptions of the embodied dispositions of femininity may go unrecognized as the 'schemes of recognition available to us ... "undo" the person' through its withholding (Butler, 2004, p. 2). The person can be 'undone' and 'foreclosed from possibility' (p. 31) – in these cases, from being seen as deserving of recognition within a professional or leadership role. Recognition, which we suggest helps to confer deservingness and, in a performative sense, constitutes a deserving, meritorious subject, becomes a site of power 'by which the human is differentially produced' (p. 4), with, in our context, some people seen as more deserving than others. Starkly illustrated through the BBC pay dispute, the constitution of a deserving, meritorious subject as a recognizable category is accordingly a site of struggle over who qualifies as deserving. As we propose, it is through these dynamics of recognition that the appearance of merit is brought into being and the deserving and meritorious subject is in a performative sense given substance.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

In this article we have sought to extend critiques of meritocracy as a neoliberal inspired system adopted in organizations to distribute rewards in a supposedly fair and equal way by drawing on and developing the concept of deservingness. As such, we propose through our example of the BBC pay scandal as well as through a re-reading of key literatures, that while merit is conventionally conceptualized as a relatively fixed set of attributes (qualification, skill) anchored onto a gender-neutral body, deservingness captures in a dynamic, contestable sense key performative dimensions based on recognition of what 'matters' in evaluations of worth. This is to foreground not only how deservingness is predicated upon behaviours and performances that are given value in context (e.g., based on effort, commitment, achievement), but also, highlighting the interrelationships between the two, how a gendered, deserving meritorious subject is constituted through performative, embodied displays. Deservingness is evaluative and performative and we suggest that these gendered, interrelating and distinctive elements help explain gender differences in reward. We accordingly both extend and give more detailed substance to current understandings of the subjective and socially constructed nature of merit through a delineation of an often neglected and hitherto 'nebulous' concept in organization research. In so doing, we hope to provide greater clarity in terms of its potential explanatory power in addressing differentials in work-based reward.

This delineation of deservingness highlights firstly the importance of self-evaluations in judgements of worth through which individuals may seek to convince themselves that they are deserving of reward. This process of claiming worth can translate, often in gendered terms, into feelings of entitlement (Barron, 2003) as a prerogative or 'sense of requiredness' (Lerner, 1987) that demands a return. A second aspect indicates that deservingness is also conferred. In other words, those in a position to make assessments of others must be persuaded of merit's worth, foregrounding the potential significance of the relationship between the judge and those being judged (Feather, 1999). As we suggest, it is this process of conferment that underpins the performative dimensions of deservingness in that it is through appropriate embodied performances and speech acts that merit is given recognition and others are persuaded of value and worth.

Drawing on Austin's account of the 'doing' of words and Butler's (1990, 1993) approach to gender performativity, we have sought to promote a performative understanding of the gendered nature of deservingness that draws on the significance of recognition and of communicative and embodied displays. In this way, we have drawn attention

to the enactment of merit through iterative performances of norms, constituting the subject as recognizably meritorious, as deserving to be ascribed merit and therefore value. As we propose, while the allocation of rewards according to merit is emblematic of the so-called 'success' of equal opportunities, the recognition of merit and worth as deserving relies on traditionally masculine embodied performances and displays. In other words, rather than conflating deservingness with merit as in many accounts (Sommerlad, 2015), we argue that merit must be enacted and communicated appropriately so that it is acknowledged and recognized, that is, so it is seen as deserved.

For Butler (2004), it is through this experience of recognition that we become constituted as social beings and here our analysis highlights some of the gendered power relations that operate through communicative and embodied displays – the 'myriad of acts' (Butler, 1990, p. 330) and 'moment to moment iterations' (Harding, Ford, & Lee, 2017, p. 1213) through which the deservingly meritorious is constituted. Within our own context of the academy, embodied performances and 'face work' based on value judgements and beliefs about 'what matters' (Bell & Clarke, 2013) can help create a convincing (masculinized) image of the proficient academic worthy of reward. This may include performative displays of authoritative expertise, 'showmanship', the claiming of achievement and a single-minded focus on research – masculine performances which may help to 'undo' women as 'deserving' academics in that they are often relegated to a smaller, 'domestic' sphere (e.g., as listeners, programme conveners, pastoral caregivers).

The process of becoming a deserving, meritorious subject as, in Butler's terms, a 'possible being' is accordingly based on the conferring and the withholding of recognition according to normative (gendered, occupational) schemes available and through which the subject is rendered 'intelligible' – highlighted specifically through our example of the pay scandal at the BBC. As we have seen, doing femininity may mean that merit is 'undone' while performative displays of merit that do not align with perceptions of the embodied dispositions of femininity may go unrecognized, rendering a deserving subject 'impossible'. Further, as Haynes' (2012) study shows, and as Hodgson (2005) notes in the context of the professions, while the repetition of identifiable performances enacts the 'professional' into being, the performance may go awry. Here Butler (2004) highlights the potential for divergence or resistance within citational acts, so that (in the context of gender) femininity or masculinity may be 'undone' (Butler, 2004) through 'slippage' in appropriate performances or through enactments of alternative agency. Recognition, which we suggest helps to transform merit into deservingness and, in a performative sense, create a deserving, meritorious subject, accordingly becomes a site of struggle through which individuals (e.g., as more or less deserving) are produced. Taken together, this highlights the power of performativity to analyse the power-laden processes whereby self-presentations, language and bodies of knowledge about what constitutes gender, merit and the deservingly meritorious, co-constitute and enact the realities they refer to and describe. These processes offer different insights into the persistence of gender inequalities in organizations. Thus, as we suggest, merit can only be understood through the performative and evaluative processes of deservingness whereby merit is recognized and given value. While current critical accounts point to the subjective nature of merit, we suggest it is deservingness that should, in this respect, be the critical focus of inquiry and that interventions need to focus on deservingness rather than on merit *per se* in addressing inequality at work. We accordingly need an understanding of the evaluative and performative processes of deservingness which we suggest are fundamental to understanding the factors that lie behind gender-based disadvantage at work.

## 8 | FUTURE RESEARCH

We have proposed a performative approach to deservingness, drawing in part on the example of the BBC pay dispute, seeking to expose its dynamics in terms of the allocation of rewards. We use this example, supported by a selective reading of literature on gender, embodiment and work, not as data *per se* but to illustrate the propositions we make. Further empirical work is needed to help give weight and substance to these suggestions. This could explore from a critical perspective the micro-processes through which men and women are ascribed with value and

worth as well as how these processes might lead to recognition being denied. In other words, research is needed to further understand the significance of deservingness in the allocation of rewards in organizations, its manifestations and how – with a focus on gender as well as other categories of difference – this is differentially produced. How is a recognizably deserving and meritorious subject performatively constituted, for example, through speech acts and other forms of communicative displays in a range of organizational settings? What are the gendered processes involved and what are the implications for race, class, sexuality or age? How is the withdrawal or withholding of recognition encountered and experienced? An embodied account of these struggles for recognition would create a better understanding of how a gendered, deserving body is constructed with value.

An awareness of these dynamics may be a first and important step towards challenging the privileging of certain groups whilst recognition afforded to other groups is denied. As Riach et al. (2016) contend, drawing on Butler's work, men and women as managers and/or employees, can reflexively 'undo' the constraining effects of organizational normativity, opening to question the terms of recognition upon which, in our context, a deserving, meritorious subject depends. This alerts us to the need to be critically aware of how, through gendered embodied communicative events and performances, merit is brought to life and seen as deserved, thereby helping actors to challenge the gendered *status quo*. It is, we suggest, the gendered dynamics in different contexts which transforms merit into deservingness and, in a performative sense, into a deserving, meritorious subject which should be the focus of critical inquiry in terms of understanding inequality at work.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

We have no conflict of interests to declare.

## ORCID

Ruth Simpson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9917-163X>

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Ruth Simpson** is Professor of Management at Brunel Business School. Her research interests include gender and organizations; inequality and 'dirty work' and gender and careers. She has authored, co-authored and co-edited several books including *Gendering Emotions in Organizations* (2007); *Men in Caring Occupations: Doing Gender Differently* (2009); *Emotions and Transmigration* (2011); *Dirty Work: Concepts and Identities* (2012); and *Gender, Class and Occupation* (2016). She has had several editorial roles and has published in leading journals including *Human Relations*, *Organization*, *Work, Employment and Society*, *The Academy of Management (Learning and Education)*, *Management Learning* and *Gender Work and Organization*.

**Savita Kumra** is an Associate Professor at the American University of Sharjah. Her research interests include the gendered nature of the promotion process, professional services firms, meritocracy and career management. She has published in *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *British Journal of Management*, *Gender, Work and Organization* and *Journal of Business Ethics*. Savita has also co-authored two books, *The Oxford Handbook of Gender in Organizations* with Professor Ruth Simpson and Ron Burke and *Managing Equality and Diversity: Theory and Practice* with Simonetta Manfredi.

**Patricia Lewis** is Professor in Management at the Kent Business School, University of Kent. Her research on gendered entrepreneurial identity includes investigations of the masculine norm, authenticity and postfeminist entrepreneurial femininities. She has recently edited (with Yvonne Benschop and Ruth Simpson) *Postfeminism and Organization* (Routledge, 2018) and has published in journals such as *Organization Studies*, *Human Relations*, *Work, Employment and Society*, *British Journal of Management* and *Journal of Business Ethics*. She is currently Joint Editor-in-Chief of *Gender, Work and Organization*.

**Nick Rumens** is Professor in Business and Management at Oxford Brookes University, UK. His main research interests are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) sexualities and genders in organizations, workplace friendships and queer theory. He has published on these topics in journals including *Human Relations*, *Organization Studies*, *British Journal of Management*, *Organization*, *International Small Business Journal*, *Sociological Review* and *Gender, Work and Organization*. He has also (co)authored and (co)edited books including *Contemporary Perspectives on Ecofeminism* (Routledge, 2016); *Sexual Orientation at Work: International Issues and Perspectives* (Routledge, 2014); and *Queer Company: Friendship in the Work Lives of Gay Men* (Ashgate, 2011). His latest single authored book is *Queer Business: Queering Organisation Sexualities* (Routledge, 2018).

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