Examples of Bias in Letters of Recommendation to Watch Out For

The following are types of bias to watch out for in letters.

1. Length of Letters and Level of Assurance
2. Use of Gender in the Letter
3. Doubt Raisers
4. Stereotypical Language
5. Grindstone Language

Examples and findings for each bias category are given below.

1. Length of Letters and Level of Assurance

- Recommendation letters for women are often shorter than those for men.
- Shorter letters are often associated with minimum assurance.
- To achieve full or maximum assurance, a letter of recommendation will include:
  - Commitment and relationship of recommender with the applicant.
  - Specificity of focus and record of applicant.
  - Evaluation or comparison of traits and accomplishments.
  - *Anything less is considered minimal assurance.

- Sample letter:

Dear Dr. Alfred Koop:

I have known Sarah as a resident and as staff at The Metropolitan Hospital. She is knowledgeable, pleasant, and easy to get along with. I have no hesitation in recommending her for a faculty position at Centvingcinq. I will be happy to answer any further questions in this regard.

Charles Lewis, MD, Chairman, Department of Psychiatry

- This letter shows commitment and relationship to applicant but that's all, making it a letter of minimal assurance.

*FINDINGS:* This type of bias was found in 15% for women's and 6% for men's letters.
2. Use of Gender in the Letter

- The following are examples of the use of gender in letters:
  - Dr. Simpson is a thorough, hardworking, extremely intelligent and insightful woman.
  - Dr. Smith is a man of great personal integrity.
  - She is an extremely conscientious and meticulous researcher who devotes her time to laboratory work and the training of graduate students in laboratory technique.

- FINDINGS: This type of bias was found in 10% for women’s and 5% for men’s letters.

3. Doubt Raisers

- The following are examples of the use of doubt raisers:
  - Negative Language
    - While Sarah has not done a lot of this type of research...
    - Although his publications are not numerous...
  - Hedges
    - It appears her health and personal life is stable.
    - He appears to be a highly motivated colleague.
  - Potential Negative
    - An independent worker, she requires only a minimum of supervision.
    - Bright, enthusiastic, he responds well to feedback.

- FINDINGS: At least one example of this type of bias was found in 24% of women’s and 12% of men’s letters.

4. Stereotypical Language

- The following are examples of stereotypical language:
  - Dr. (William) Smith has been very successful in obtaining grants from both the NIH (National Institute of Health) and industry and has developed an excellent clinical trials group for the study and treatment of AIDS.
  - Dr. (Sarah) Simpson is a caring, compassionate physician who has excellent interpersonal relationships with patients and their families as well as nursing and medical staff.

- FINDINGS: At least one example of this type of bias was found in 16% of women’s and 4% of men’s letters.

5. Grindstone Language

- Grindstone language includes adjectives that describe applicants as hard-working, and are more often used to imply effort for women and ability for men [2].

- The following are examples of grindstone language:
  - She is an extremely conscientious and meticulous researcher who devotes her time to laboratory work and the training of graduate students in laboratory technique.
  - She is a superb experimentalist – very well organized, thorough and careful in her approach to research.
  - I have found William to be hard-working, thorough, and conscientious in providing all aspects of patient care.

- FINDINGS: This type of bias was found in 34% of women’s and 23% of men’s letters.

References