Examples of Bias in Letters of Recommendation to Watch Out For

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

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

Research Study Details

The following sections describe examples of the types of bias listed above, which were found in "Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty" [1]. The article discusses the results of a study that analyzed 312 letters of recommendation written from 1992 to 1995 for applicants of 103 faculty positions at an American medical school. The level of positions included assistant, adjunct, associate, and full professor. **The letters analyzed in this study were for applicants who were hired**, with approximately three letters written per applicant. Of the analyzed letters, 71% were for men and 29% were for women. Further, 85% of letters were written by men and only 12% by women. Results of the analysis include findings regarding how often each type of bias was detected in male and female letters of recommendation. 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 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.
  - On a personal level Sarah is, in my opinion, the quintessence of the contemporary lady physician who very ably combines dedication, intelligence, idealism, compassion, and responsibility without compromise.
  - I believe Dr. Smith to be a man of great personal integrity.
  - He is entirely dedicated to patient care, personable, a gentleman in every sense of the word.

- *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.
  - His substantial record of publication in reputable journals, during those developing years, certainly attests to his overall research capabilities and **accomplishments**.
  - 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 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

[1] Trix, F. & Psenka, C. (2003). Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. Discourse & Society, 14(2), 191-220.

[2] Barker, L. (2010). Avoiding Unintended Gender Bias in Letters of Recommendation. National Center for Women & Information Technology, Case Study 1