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## Avoiding hidden messages: Strategies to reduce implicit bias in recommendation and reference letters

<u>Purpose</u>: to provide evaluators the most useful and accurate possible letter for applicants/candidates.

Word clouds from recommendation letters for two groups of applicants:



After: https://awis.site-ym.com/?Awards Recs; Schmader et al. 2007

<u>Language used in recommendation letters for job applicants differs between men and women in</u> several ways:

- Length: Letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women (Trix & Psenka 2003)
- Standout terms "superb", "outstanding", "remarkable", "exceptional" male more than female (Schmader *et al.* 2007). Used even less frequently for racialized people (Boatright *et al.*, 2017).
- Grindstone terms (v. stand-out terms): hard-working focus on effort, but not ability.
- **Tentative words** "she might", "it is possible that she" female more than male (Isaac *et al.*, 2011)
- **Agentic terms** (influence, initiative, assertiveness-focused) **vs Communal terms** (relationship & welfare-focused) (Madera *et al.*, 2009)
- Doubt Raisers phrases or words that question an applicant's aptness for the job
  - Negativity "X doesn't do much committee work"
  - Faint praise "needs only minimum help"
  - o Hedging "who might not be the best teacher"
  - Irrelevant information "is an avid cross-country skier"

## To avoid bias in your recommendation letters:

- ✓ Have established criteria for particular types of letters & address only the criteria.
  - o In particular, for professional activities, be consistent with attention to scholarship and professional productivity for all individuals for whom you write.
- ✓ Keep things evidence-based and share only direct observations (when possible).
  - Focus on research accomplishments and professional productivity, teaching, service and sympathy with the mission.
- ✓ Identify and evaluate accomplishments over effort (grindstone adjectives).
- ✓ Interpersonal skills are important, but keep them balanced with other characteristics.
- ✓ When describing stereotypically female traits, consider if the characteristics are relevant and if
  other applicable characteristics/achievements have been overlooked.
- ✓ Use titles and surnames consistently for all candidates/applicants.
- ✓ Avoid invoking a stereotype ("she is not too emotional" or "his English is very good"). Likewise, avoid referring to age, sex, disability, race, nationality or religion. Each of these, while most likely well-meaning can evoke bias in the reader.
- ✓ Avoid personal information.
- ✓ For a given type of letter, write letters of equal length for each applicant/candidate.
- ✓ Try the **Gender Bias Calculator**: https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/

Paste your letter in the window and it will list words more often associated with women and words more often associated with men.

Several suggestions come from: the University of Arizona's Commission on the Status of Women: www.csw.arisona.edu/LORbias

## References:

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