

On My Way In II: Countering Gender Stereotypes in Letters of Reference and Shifting Academic Valorization While We Are at It

It is that time of year again. After months (October-December) of producing one letter of reference after another, it is now the season (January-April) to collect those written by colleagues. I am seeking inspiration for my next season of writing: How does this colleague manage to make me think that the next Marie Curie/Albert Einstein is applying? What lengths do they go to? What words do they use? And how does this other colleague make me immediately think 'reject', even though they do not use a single explicitly negative word? There is an art to the signalling that happens through this genre of scholarly writing.

Unsurprisingly though, this art is deeply shaped by the society in which it is performed. If one were to closely go over hundreds of reference letters, one thing would quickly become apparent. As if required by a grammatical rule, certain adjectives seem to attach to women, and other adjectives to men. Guess which of these examples describe male applicants and which female:

A is a hard-working, diligent, motivated, responsible, reliable and respectful student, and a very kind and pleasant person, with an impressive ability to organize workload and meet deadlines.

During the last few years, we have had students of similar intellectual capacities as B, but most of them lacked [his/her] well-developed social and communicative skills. B is a very pleasant and reliable person to work with.

C has an exceptional ability to absorb new theoretical and empirical information and to formulate [his/her] own distinctive views with intellectual rigour.

D brilliantly passed the written exam and I believe that, on the strength of [his/her] background and [his/her] intellectual abilities,

E is a dedicated and hardworking student, with a passion for justice and accountability.

Sadly, the answers are too predictable to merit a prize. A, B and E are women and C and D are men. In many of the letters I read, women are hard-working, diligent, respectful, kind, pleasant, communicative and passionate. The men have exceptional abilities and are associated with intellect, ingenuity, originality, brilliance and distinctiveness.

I do not want to question that the women have the positive characteristics attributed to them, or that the men have theirs. But the pattern does raise two significant questions. First, could the adjectives also be a reflection of what the letter writers, both men and women, have been socialized to see and highlight? Do the descriptions follow social prescriptions? What are the chances of a woman being labelled 'an intellectual powerhouse', and of a man being described as a 'caring member of the scholarly community'? Secondly, even if the adjectives used are the most accurate to describe the personalities involved, how do they 'pay off'? Which characteristics are considered valuable by academic selection and promotion panels and which are not valued or are

undervalued? So, if my exemplary man was indeed a 'caring member of the scholarly community', would that description work in his favour?

My examples are merely a selected few based on letters I recently read – and I have also come across letters that refreshingly deviate from the apparent norm. However, studies conducted in other fields do confirm my first impression: gender biases play out in the writing of reference letters and differences in adjectives are among the indicators. A 2003 study of over 300 letters of reference for medical faculty positions found that letters for men contained more repetition of standout adjectives such as 'remarkable', 'unparalleled', 'unique', 'superb' and 'outstanding' than those for women. Letters for women, by contrast, comprised more grindstone adjectives than those written for men: 'hard-working', 'diligent', 'conscientious'.¹ The authors of the pioneering study, Frances Trix and Carolyn Psenka, observe on this point: 'There is an insidious gender schema that associates effort with women, and ability with men in professional areas.'²

Apart from the effort/ability divide, letters demonstrate a perceived difference in agency versus community orientation. Analysing over 600 references for applicants to an academic psychology department, Juan Madera, Michelle Hebl and Randi Martin have shown how female applicants were more likely to be described in communal terms (sympathetic, affectionate, community building, nurturing, warm, kind) and with words indicating a communal orientation (referring to other people) than their male colleagues. Male applicants were more likely to be described in agentic terms (independent, assertive, self-confident, ambitious, outspoken, forceful, daring, intellectual, resourceful, creative) and with words showing an agentic orientation (think, earn, accomplish, innovate, create, achieve) than their female colleagues.³ Potential differences in productivity factors – such as the number of publications, postdoctoral years, honours, and teaching experience – were controlled for in the study.

So what? Who cares about some adjectives? People on hiring panels do: adjectives have consequences. A follow-up study by Madera, Hebl and Martin explored the correlation between descriptors and hiring rates. Though it did not establish a positive correlation between agentic descriptors and hireability – publication records were more indicative – it did find that communal characteristics were negatively related to hireability.⁴ Academia does not seem to valorize community orientation.

¹ Trix and Psenka, 'Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty', 14 *Discourse & Society* (2003) 191, at 207-208, available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0957926503014002277>. For science faculty positions, see also Schamder, Whitehead and Syzocki, 'A Linguistic Comparison of Letters of Recommendation for Male and Female Chemistry and Biochemistry Job Applicants', 57 *Sex Roles* (2007) 509, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2572075/>.

² Trix and Psenka, *supra* note 1, at 207.

³ Madera, Hebl and Martin, 'Gender and Letters of Recommendation for Academia: Agentic and Communal Differences', 94 *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2009) 1591, at 1594, available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19916666/>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, at 1596-1597.

The different categories of adjectives do not merely reflect gender differences among the applicants, but also those of the writers: the studies have shown that male reference writers use more agentic orientation terms for female applicants than female writers.⁵ Women may thus be inadvertently double-glazing the ceiling by using fewer agentic words. Perhaps they fear that, due to social norms, agentic words could actually backfire against the female applicant: Would an 'ambitious woman' be associated with elbows as sharp as stiletto heels? Might 'an assertive woman' sound like trouble? Alternatively, perhaps female letter writers use more adjectives that describe the communitarian characteristics because they actually value those characteristics, even if agency-oriented academia apparently values them far less. The context may help explain this: gender biases are more likely to be reinforced in hierarchical organizations and also in organizations where women constitute a minority group.⁶ Academic organizations have opened up to women, but traditional patriarchal hierarchies have not yet disappeared.⁷

So what is to be done? Reflexivity by reference letter writers on their potentially unreflective compliance with social norms (in this case, gender stereotypes) seems a relatively easy first step. I'll begin with a post-it above my desk with key words for references. When I write my next one in a few hours' time, I will check each and every word that I use, not only to ensure that they match the candidate, but also to see whether the candidate merits some other words, words often associated with the opposite sex.

Perhaps I need a poster, rather than a post-it.⁸ For one should not only pay attention to adjectives, but also to 'doubt raisers': comments that hedge ('Although I always disagree with her, she has some good points'), contain backhanded compliments ('she seems immune to criticism'), or express negativity ('It's true that she does not have many publications yet'). Such doubt raisers appear more in letters of reference for women than those for men, according to the study of references for an assistant professorship in psychology (which controlled for the applicants' academic productivity).⁹ Letters for men have also been found to be longer than those for women - length often being seen as an indicator of support - and to contain more research descriptors (research

⁵ Madera, Hebl and Martin, *supra* note 4, at 1594.

⁶ Trix and Psenka, *supra* note 1, at 215, drawing on S. T. Fiske, Trial Testimony 3/28/85, Tr. 534–633, in the Joint Appendix of the Briefs to the Supreme Court for Appellee in Price Waterhouse V. Ann B. Hopkins, Docket No. 87- 1167, October Term, 1987, 21–82, at 43 and and V. Valian, *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women* (1998), at 141.

⁷ de Búrca, Hailbronner and Prieto Rudolph, 'Editorial: Gender in Academic Publishing', 31(2) *European Journal of International Law* (2020) 387, available at <https://academic.oup.com/ejil/article/31/2/387/5909418>.

⁸ The University of Arizona Commission on the Status of Women (UACSW), *Avoiding gender bias in reference writing* (2016), available at https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf.

⁹ Madera *et al.*, 'Raising Doubt in Letters of Recommendation for Academia: Gender Differences and Their Impact', 34 *Journal of Business and Psychology* (2019) 287 available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10869-018-9541-1>.

agendas, research skills, publication records) and in doing so present the men more in terms relevant to the job.¹⁰ Finally, we should try to avoid gender terms, which tend to be used more in letters for women than for men.¹¹ Why would he be a ‘*scholar* of remarkable intellect’ and she a ‘*lady* with extraordinary talents’? Is the combination of lady and talents so extraordinary that the gender bears emphasizing?

Contrary to some of the official advice,¹² I am *not* going to rule out communal words. In that respect, it is not the letters that need adjustment, but the perception of what is valuable in academia. Too much attention during selection processes has gone to the question of whether the applicant might be a genius. But while flashes of brilliance are welcome, academic work depends much more on collaboration than is usually recognized: scholars always build on other scholars’ work (acknowledged or not); colleagues are crucial and so is community service (see EJIL’s praise for peer reviewers).¹³ So, let’s discuss academic citizenship prominently in our letters – and, when it is absent, draw adverse inferences.

Discussing both the agentic and community-orientation characteristics of *all* candidates, male and female, will not only benefit our institutions (which need bright and thoughtful intellectuals who collaborate within and beyond their communities) but eventually also all candidates, not just women. More and more panels seem to begin by asking questions such as ‘what does the candidate contribute to the community?’ and ‘what are they like as a colleague?’ ‘Give, not take’, was the key criterion of the director leading an academic search that I recently participated in.

The binary I have presented – men versus women – does not do justice to other burning questions. How about people who don’t fit either characterization? Do adjectives in letters of reference reflect colour? Which other stereotypes do we find? I look forward to studies exploring intersectionality in reference letters - and to the ensuing post-its above my desk.

Finally, all of this should be a concern not only for those who write or read letters of reference. Let’s have a look at acknowledgement sections. Have you ever spotted the co-supervised PhD candidate thanking the male supervisor for the inspiration and grand ideas and the female supervisor for the support and the meticulous line-by-line comments in the margins? Those who are finishing off their PhDs: beware the trap!

¹⁰ Trix and Psenka, *supra* note 1, at 198 and 209.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, at 201-202.

¹² UACSW, *supra* note 9.

¹³ Nouwen, ‘Celebrating Peer Review: EJIL’s Roll of Honour and Announcement of the first EJIL Peer Review Prize’, 20 April 2020, available at

<https://www.ejiltalk.org/celebrating-peer-review-ejils-roll-of-honour-and-announcement-of-the-first-ejil-peer-review-prize/>.