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Summary of Trix & Psenka Article

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Date: 5/4/2004 1:44 PM

Team,

I have attached the Trix & Psenka article to this email. Assuming that your time is limited for reading the full article, I pasted my summary below. The concern here is that this study of letters of recommendation for faculty positions shows a significant difference in the strength of the letters for men and women. The letter writers who were primarily male, appeared to have relied on gender schemas in writing the letters and that as a result men were more often associated with ability and women were more often associated with hard work. Here, at USU, where the primary decisions for promotions at the central level appears to be based on external letters this is a real concern.

Ronda

Summary of Trix & Psenka article:

This study examines over 300 letters of recommendation for successful applicants to medical faculty hired at a large American medical school in the mid 1990s using methods of corpus and discourse analysis and the theoretical perspective of gender schema from cognitive psychology. At the time women made up 20% of the faculty and their chances of receiving tenure were half that of men.

Gender schemas refers to the largely non-conscious assumptions about sex differences in men and women that affect expectations and interpretations of interactions (Valian, 1998).

Letters written for female applicants were found to differ systematically from those written for male applicants. Letters differed in length (more extremely long letters for males and more extremely short letters for females), more letters for females lacked basic features, included more doubt raisers and fewer mentions of status terms or titles. Further the use of possessives reinforced gender schemas that portray women as teachers and students and men as researchers and professionals (e.g. "her teaching" "his research").

A previous study (Eger, 1991) found that people would write better letters for people who were more like themselves in personality and gender. This "advocacy factor" has relevance when a field is dominated by men and the letter writers are often overwhelmingly male.

Greenberg et al. (1994) used 80 letter for residency applicants, had the letters ranked blindly and found that 1) the top 5 letters were twice as long as the bottom 5 2) top letters had 3 times the number of personal references as poorly ranks letters, 3) the worst letters contained no information or ambiguous information -- they lacked specificity 4) two of the worst letters were written for students whose other letters were in the highest group -- confirming the need for multiple letters.
This study had 89 letters for women and 222 letters for men (29% women). The recommenders were 85% male and 12% female and 3% unknown. Letters from Europe tended to be shorter. The gatekeepers -- those to whom the letters were addressed were 96% male.

The authors rank the letters as high, average and deficient. Then had physicians rate the letters and comment. Their rankings were in line with the authors.

The letters were analyzed for 1) length, 2) naming practices, 3) negative language and 4) sex-linked terms. The authors added 5) tabulations of differences in repetition of status terms, 6) letters lacking basic features and 7) possessives.

Basic features - an introductory section where commitment and relationship to the applicant is noted, a body where evaluations of academic traits and achievements are noted, and a closing section where the recommendation is made. The body may be expanded to note productivity in research, effectiveness in teaching and collegiality in service. The more specificity and detail the better.

Length -- average 246 words (females - 227 words ave., males 253 words ave.)
Mid range 11-20 lines or 111-202 words (45% women, 44% men). At the extremes were the primary differences. The high end 8% of the letters for men were over 50 lines long and only 2% of letters for women were this long. At the low end 10% of the letters for women were 10 lines or fewer, 6% of the letters for men were this short.

"Letters of minimal assurance" -- so short they were lacking in basic features.

Naming practices -- referring to applicant with full name, Dr+last name or first name only didn't vary by gender in this study. Use of gender terms did vary -- gender terms (e.g., lady physician) were more common in letters for women. 10% of letters for women included gender terms 5% for males. All but one of these writers were male. This has been interpreted in the past to indicate that the writer sees the applicant in terms of gender first and secondarily in terms of position. Using titles -- 3% of letters for female applicants used titles 12% of letters for male applicants used titles.

Doubt raisers -- Negative language is more memorable
The following were rated: Negative language, hedges, potentially negative statements, unexplained, faint praise and irrelevancies. 24% of letters for females had at least one doubt raiser and 12% of letters for males (significant)

Stereotypical adjectives and repetition -- For female applicants "grindstone adjectives" were more common -- hardworking, conscientious, dependable, meticulous, thorough, diligent, dedicated, and careful. 34% of female and 23% of male letters included grindstone adjectives. There is an insidious gender schema that associates effort with women and ability with men in professional areas.
Standout adjectives -- excellent superb, outstanding, unique, exceptional and unparalleled. Usage was similar for men and women, but repetition was different. These adjectives were used and average of 1.5 times per letter for women and 2.0 times for men.
When referring to research 35% of the letters for women mentioned "research" at least once, mentioned it multiple times. In contrast, 62% of the letters that mentioned research for men, mentioned it multiple times.
Possessives — The most common semantic categories of objects of possessive phrases for female applicants were: her training, her teaching, and her application (for the position). In contrast the most common semantic categories of objects of possessive phrases were: his research, his skills and abilities and his career.

Women's letters were on average 84% the length of men's but there were still far more references to her personal life, while male letters were more likely to refer to his publications, CV, patients, or colleagues.

Discussion
Letters for female candidates were lacking in basic features at a significantly greater rate, included doubt raisers at a statistically significant higher rate (double the rate for males). More references to research in letters for men than women. Possessives referred to her teaching, training and position application, whereas possessives are more likely to refer to males research, skills, abilities and career.

Do these findings accurately reflect the applicants? Are these female applicants hired because they do not threaten the largely male gatekeepers?

Or do these findings reflect more the assumptions and prejudices of the largely make recommenders who are not used to women in potentially comparable high status positions? Do the largely male recommenders have less invested in the female applicants and therefore fail to exert themselves to write more complete letters? Or as is consistent with research in social and cognitive psychology, have the recommenders merely fallen back on common societal gender schema in which women are not expected to have extensive accomplishments or even abilities in competitive professional work. That is recommenders may have unknowingly used stereotype in choosing what features to include in their profiles of the female applicants. Research in social psychology has found that such reliance on gender schema is more likely the more hierarchical the organization (Fiske, 1987). Such reliance on gender schema instead of individual description is also more likely, according to research, when a group is in the minority in the institution (Valian, 1998).