Best Practices for Writing Letters – Nominator / Referee

Multiple studies have revealed notable differences in the language used by referees in letters of recommendation depending on the subject’s gender. For example, several research groups that compared letters written for male and female applicants found that those written for females were shorter and included ‘communal’ and ‘grindstone’ terminologies describing character (e.g. selfless, helpful, warm) and effort (e.g. tireless, diligent, committed), respectively.

Conversely, letters written for males were generally longer, emphasized achievements and included ‘standout’ and ‘agentic’ descriptors associated with leadership and power (e.g. outstanding, excellent, independent, daring, intelligent). Similarly, albeit less studied, several groups have reported that the subject’s race can influence the choice of words and tone used by referees when drafting letters, with fewer agentic terminologies used when describing individuals belonging to minority groups, despite similar credentials with non-minority applicants. Collectively, these studies attributed the differences observed to implicit biases that can positively and negatively affect an individual’s perceptions, behaviours and decisions in an unconscious manner.

Implicit bias is the unconscious association of attributes and stereotypes to people based on characteristics such as race, age, education, ability/disability, religion, socioeconomic status, and appearance. These biases are developed over time through exposure to social norms and expectations. As previously reported, the effects of unconscious bias can negatively impact an applicant’s overall success in obtaining research funding and reinforce further inequities in academia. It is, therefore, imperative to recognize when opportunities for bias occur and be vigilant in minimizing them.

Below, we offer best practices and resources from various sources for nominators and referees to carefully consider when drafting their letters:

- Focus comments on the candidate’s research skills and academic achievements rather than their interpersonal attributes. Address the points requested and exclude personal information not relevant to the nomination.
- Carefully consider the choice of words, tone and length of the letter and whether they would differ depending on the subject’s demographics. Consider whether the same descriptors would be used for another candidate with equivalent credentials, but of a different demographic background.
- Refer to the candidate’s formal title and surname rather than their first name.
- Avoid using language that could unintentionally raise doubt (e.g. hedges, ambiguous comments, faint praises, potentially negative language, and irrelevancies). Provide concrete examples, when applicable.

Additional resources:
- CIHR Unconscious Bias Training: https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/lms/e/bias/
- Harvard Implicit Association Test: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html
- Gender bias calculator: http://slowe.github.io/genderbias/

References: