Avoid Implicit Gender Bias in Recommendation Letters

These guidelines are based on the analysis of 1,224 letters of recommendation* as well as the larger body of research on bias in recommendation letters, which suggests that men usually receive stronger letters of recommendation compared to women. Typically both male and female letter-writers exhibit similar biases. Here are some things to keep in mind when writing a recommendation letter.

Identify Skills
Before writing a letter look at the job description and identify the necessary skills. Examples could include "creativity", "problem-solving skills", "analytical skills". This will help avoid reliance on gendered language.

Mention Accomplishments
Take care to mention accomplishments – studies suggest that women are less likely to highlight their own accomplishments compared to men.

Language Matters
Women's personalities are often described as "caring", "reliable", and "team player". Try to counteract this by mentioning other traits, e.g., "confident", "motivated", "passionate", "dynamic".

"Hardworking" and "Intelligent": To Use or Not to Use?
Some studies suggest that words like "hardworking" and "intelligent" (labeled "grindstone" adjectives) might be deterrents. However, the overwhelming majority of letters that we examined described candidates (male and female) as hardworking and intelligent. The key difference? Some letters went significantly above and beyond that to describe the candidate in outstanding terms; others did not. So the key questions are not whether to use words like hardworking and intelligent, but more importantly: i) What is the best thing you have said about the candidate and does it reflect their skills? and ii) Are you using similar language when describing men and women?

Important!
The goal is not to simply start writing stronger letters for everyone; rather, it is to ensure that similarly qualified men and women are described in similar language, thereby avoiding unconscious bias.

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Pay Attention to Wording
"Excellent academic ability" reads better than "very good student", and "motivated and driven" reads better than "good work ethic". Also, men are more likely to be described in terms of their potential, and women in terms of their actual accomplishments.

Avoid Qualifiers and Reference to Stereotypes
Avoid comments such as, "For an Asian, her English is very good," when you can just say, "Her English is very good." Or instead of, "For someone who has two young children she is a very productive scientist," you can just say, "She is a very productive scientist."

Be Mindful of How You Give Credit
Research has shown that men are more likely to be credited with the big picture (e.g., vision, drive) in science, whereas women are more likely to be credited with supporting roles.

John or Jennifer?
Numerous studies have documented that men are evaluated more favorably than women with similar or identical qualifications. This includes CVs, recommendation letters, teaching evaluations, grant proposal funding, investment pitches and entrepreneurial funding, symphony orchestra auditions, and various others.

Don't Rush It
Evaluate materials without rushing, as we are more likely to make snap judgments when in a hurry or during moments of stress, causing us to rely more heavily on stereotypes and unconscious biases.

Some Resources:

- *Dutt K, Pfaff DL, Bernstein AF, Dillard JS, Block CJ. *Gender differences in recommendation letters for postdoctoral fellowships in geoscience*. Nature Geoscience, 9(11) 805-808. (2016)
- Moss-Racusin, CA, et al. *Science faculty's subtle gender biases favor male students*. PNAS, USA, 109(41):16474-*9* (2012)
- Trix, F. & Psenka, C. *Exploring the color of glass: letters of Recommendation for female and male medical faculty*. Discourse Soc. 14, 191220 (2003)

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