

Preventing Racial & Gender Bias in Evaluation of Trainees

Have you been asked to write a letter of recommendation or fill out an evaluation on a trainee? Gender and Racial Biases remain prevalent in evaluation commentary and reference letter writing, and these can have enormous impacts on a trainee's career path.

Remember to be **AWARE** of these biases and don't make these common mistakes!

Acknowledge that bias exists!

The first step is to recognize that we all have implicit biases. Recent studies show that language bias in letters of recommendation or evaluations occurs even in specialties that are predominantly comprised of women, such as Pediatrics. We need to be aware and work to make changes to further decrease the gap for women and trainees of color.

Word choice matters

Women trainees tend to be described with communal terms while men are more likely described using agentic terms. While communal terms are historically associated with the caregiver role, they tend to be viewed in a weaker light than agentic terms, which depict a leadership role. Men are also more likely to be described using superlatives (i.e., best, outstanding, superb, phenomenal, leader).

Adjectives to avoid:

Caring
Dependable
Compassionate
Warm
Helpful

Adjectives to include:

Successful
Accomplished
Independent
Intellectual
Knowledgeable

Active verbs get the job done

Women or trainees of color are more likely described using passive verbs (seemed, involved in, worked on), while men are more likely to be described by active verbs (researched, lead, published, taught). Utilizing active verbs frames a trainee within their current or prospective career and denotes their abilities and accomplishments.

Resist raising doubt

Women trainees and trainees of color are more likely to be described with **negative connotations** ("unexpectedly good," "delightful surprise," "pleasant to deal with"), **hedging** ("appears motivated," "seemed to have good clinical knowledge," "more reserved, but medical knowledge is sound") and/or **faint praise** ("frequently completes tasks," "better than average"). Don't add doubt unless it is absolutely necessary!

Emphasize accomplishments over effort

Letters for women are more likely to utilize grindstone adjectives (i.e., hardworking, dedicated, determined, solid) to describe their effort throughout training, but this does not convey any information about their ability. Rather, you should emphasize a trainee's objective accomplishments (i.e. she was awarded for her phenomenal teaching skills; rather than she was a dedicated teacher).

Other things to keep in mind when writing a letter of recommendation or evaluation:

Be specific!

Women trainees are more likely to be provided with vague and non-specific feedback, while men are often provided with specific, actionable feedback. This difference allows men to show progression in their skillsets and milestones while it worsens the leaky pipeline for women. When writing evaluation commentary or letters of recommendation, be specific about objective behaviors and skills you have seen. It also helps to comment on personal experiences working with a trainee.

It's okay to say no

Letters of recommendation can have a profound impact on a trainee's ability to get interviews and be ranked for a program. If you do not feel like you can provide a **strong** letter for their application, please decline!

References

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