

Gender and Letters of Reference in Education

By Thomas C. Peters & Rosemary Bedoya

Introduction

In the field of education, the reference letter has been—and continues to be—a valued resource in the teacher recruitment process. Often given more importance and attention than other information in the professional file (Mortalini, 1974), a candidate's letters of reference are considered by many school district recruiters to be the essential information link between the potential employer and those who are most familiar with the candidate's training and qualifications for the position (Nash, 1986; Natter & Kuder, 1983).

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Interest in the content of reference letters tends to remain high, because there are three categories of professional educators who are affected by the information in the letters. School district recruiters are concerned most basically with the accuracy and credibility of the letters, with a concomitant concern for gaining reliable information about the candidates who have applied for teaching positions. The recommenders have similar concerns, in that these authors assume a degree of responsibility for the quality of the newcomers entering the teaching profession. Here again, the issues of accuracy and credibility are

foremost, but there tends to be a greater sense of empathy and fairness toward the newly-trained candidate. And of course, the teacher candidates themselves have a very great interest in the letters of reference, since what is written therein can be essential to a successful beginning to the career for which they have so diligently planned and trained.

Consequently, the questions surrounding who is writing what about whom seem to generate a perennial interest from many quarters. There are, of course, many aspects and approaches to this most generic question, and one of the most interesting is the area of gender: male versus female. What is being written about male as compared to female teacher candidates? What is being written by male as compared to female authors? Are there significant patterns in these comparisons? If so, what do the patterns suggest with regard to the gender of authors and candidates? And finally, what are the implications of these patterns for professional educators and the teacher recruitment process? These are the principal questions which are addressed in our present study of gender and letters of reference in education.

Review of the Literature

There exists a body of literature concerned with letters of reference in education, focusing on the various issues of importance to the authors, readers, and subjects of the letters. Although the specific reasons for interest in the research on letters of reference surely vary among these three distinct professional groups, there is a common thread in the need to understand better the role and impact of such references in the processes of job search and recruitment.

To this end, the researchers have examined such issues as the relative merits of confidential versus non-confidential letters (Ceci & Peters, 1984; Davis, Sherman & Bryant, 1987; Knouse, 1987; Shaffer, Mays & Etheridge, 1976), the reliability factor (Leichner, Eusebio-Torres & Harper, 1981; Rim, 1976; Stanton, Burnstein, Kobos & Loucks, 1979), the relative impact of letters in the job marketplace (Guillemin, 1979; Kryger & Shikiar, 1978; Morteloni, 1974; Nash, 1986), "how to write" articles (Jones, 1990; Moore & Smith, 1986; Nilson, 1990), as well as advice which includes the legal ramifications of writing defamatory statements (Bell, 1984; Clear, 1987; Creim, 1979; Tidwell, 1986, 1987; Tidwell & Abrams, 1989).

The issues of gender as related to letters of reference have also been explored. Here the researchers have studied such matters as stereotypical language with regard to gender (Hirsh, 1989; La Croix, 1989; Lunnenborg & Lillie, 1973; Seipel, 1988), differences in letters written about male versus female applicants (Cowan & Kasen, 1979), employer attitudes regarding letters authored by men versus women recommenders (Kryger & Shikiar, 1978), and the difference in the way men and women were evaluated for university faculty positions (Guillemin, 1979).

Our present study of gender and letters of reference in education focuses on the

presence of statements which are potentially damaging to a candidate's chances of being employed in a teaching position. A substantial number of studies have focused on the favorable/unfavorable, or positive/negative/neutral tone of reference letters, (*e.g.*, Bredeson, 1982; Knouse, 1983; Kryger & Shikiar, 1978; Rim, 1976), but these researchers have generally chosen to discuss overall content rather than specific statements in the letters.

Evaluations of specific content of letters of reference were relatively few. Knouse (1983) assessed the importance of the informational content and showed that specific, favorable information increased the positive perception of the recommendee. La Croix's (1989) study examined gender-related language in letters of recommendation, and Guillemin (1979) used content analysis to investigate the differences in letters written about men and women. This latter study found significant differences among the types of statements made about male versus female candidates for a university faculty position.

Probably one of the most comprehensive qualitative and quantitative studies on letters of recommendation was the Cowan and Kasen (1979) study of candidates seeking university faculty positions in sociology and psychology. Their research examined over 50 variables—including negative statements—to determine the existence and extent of prejudicial language about the female candidates. The results of this research revealed no sex bias, contradicting the Guillemin (1979) study, which asserted that letters of recommendation play a key role in excluding women from faculty positions in sociology. Furthermore, Cowan and Kasen's study showed extremely few negatively-phrased statements in the letters about the female candidates and no difference in evaluator treatment of one gender as compared with the other.

In all, the review of the literature reveals an area of research which remains very much open to more study and interpretation. With regard to gender issues and letters of recommendation, the extant results are tentative and sometimes contradictory. This situation is to be expected in the early stages of examining a given field of data. With regard to specific comparisons of content in letters of reference as affected by gender of author and subject, the field is largely unexplored. The present study is intended as a seminal contribution in this important area.

Research Method

The present study was an examination of letters of reference written about candidates for public and private school teaching positions. A content analysis of the sampled letters focused on statements which were potentially damaging to the candidates' efforts to gain employment. Data from the content analysis were then cross-tabulated by gender of author and gender of candidate, allowing us to analyze the relationships between gender and content of the letters of reference.

Gender and Letters

The Sample

A random sample of 800 letters of reference was drawn from a body of approximately 30,000 letters in the placement files of teacher education candidates from the professional education program at the University of California, Riverside. The 800-letter sample represents the body of letters of reference which were mailed to the personnel offices of public and private school districts statewide and nationwide. Among the 129 identified school districts receiving the letters, 71 were located in the adjacent Riverside and San Bernardino Counties region, 33 were located in other parts of California, and 25 were located in other states.

The sample of 800 letters were written by school administrators, university student-teaching supervisors, and classroom cooperating teachers, all of whom possessed first-hand knowledge of the teacher candidates' performance in student-teaching and internship situations. Of the 800 sampled letters, approximately 52 per cent were submitted by female authors and 48 per cent by male authors. Female teacher candidates were the subject of approximately 57 per cent of the letters and male candidates 43 per cent, as shown in Table 1.

| Gender of Teacher Candidate | Gender of Author | | Row totals |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|
| | <u>Male</u> | <u>Female</u> | |
| Male | 161* (20.13)** | 186 (23.25) | 347 (43.38) |
| Female | 225 (28.12) | 228 (28.50) | 453 (56.62) |
| Column Totals | 386 (48.25) | 414 (51.75) | N=800 Letters (100.00%) |
| | * Raw Count | | |
| | ** Per Cent Total | | |

The percentages reported in the cells of Table 1 reveal a relatively even distribution of letters among the various permutations of male versus female authors and male versus female teacher candidates.

The Variables

The major independent variables for this study were the gender of the persons who wrote the letters of reference for the candidates' files—here called Gender of Author—and the gender of the teacher candidates about whom the letters were written—here called Gender of Teacher Candidate. These nominal variables were relatively simple to code, as it was extremely rare for the gender not to be obvious

from names, pronouns, and other contextual clues found in the letters themselves.

The dependent variable consisted of any comments deemed to be potentially damaging to the teacher candidates in their attempts to find employment. This dependent variable was somewhat more difficult to operationalize, because it involved a degree of judgment on the researchers' part. The variable "Potentially Damaging Comments" was operationally defined as the frequency of statements in the letters which could be reasonably construed as negative, a warning to the employer, or otherwise potentially damaging to the candidates' chances of being hired. In our sample, we found that most of these comments were quite clear and relatively easy to identify, but a few did require discussion by the researchers.

As a check on researcher coding reliability for this variable, a subsample of 50 cases were drawn randomly from the sample and were coded independently by a male and a female researcher. A comparison of the results yielded a 95.8 per cent correspondence in coding results—one discrepancy in the 50 letters. In all, the definition and coding of "potentially damaging comments" was not as ephemeral and difficult as one might imagine.

The Research Instrument

The method of data collection from the sample was a content analysis of the statements written about teacher candidates in open-ended letters of reference. References which responded to checklists, categories, or outlines were not included, because the suggested items would predispose the writers to emphasize certain characteristics of the candidates. Open-ended letters of reference were considered a superior source of data, because the authors would likely express more freely their evaluations of the teacher candidates.

The recording unit for the content analysis was "theme" as defined by Holsti (1969) to be "a single assertion about a subject" (p. 116), in our case operationalized as any phrase ascribing a potentially damaging characteristic to the subject teacher candidate. The enumeration system was simply the raw frequency (Holsti, 1969, p. 122) of such phrases, as tallied on a coding form for each sampled letter, including the independent variable information as well.

The raw frequencies of Potentially Damaging Comments were tabulated with respect to Gender of Author and Gender of Teacher Candidate, enabling simple cross tabulations and measures of association to be applied.

Results

The data from the content analysis indicated some interesting relationships among the variables Gender of Author and Gender of Teacher Candidates, shown in Table 2. Looking first at the raw count of potentially damaging comments found in the letters of reference, the total frequency of such comments was 136.

Even more useful, of course, are the comparisons among the calculated means

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per letter—that is, the data showing the frequency of potentially damaging remarks divided by the number of letters in which they were found. By comparing these means, we found at the onset that the female authors were much more likely to make negative references than were the male authors. Female authors made three times as many potentially damaging comments in their letters of reference.

| | | Gender of Author | | |
|--|---------------|--|---------------|-------------------|
| | | <u>Male</u> | <u>Female</u> | <u>Row Totals</u> |
| <u>Gender of Teacher Candidate</u> | Male | 19* (.118)** | 40 (.215) | 59 (.333) |
| | Female | 13 (.058) | 64 (.218) | 77 (.339) |
| | Column Totals | 32 (.176) | 104 (.496) | N=136 (.672) |
| | | *Raw Count | | |
| | | ** Mean Per Letter | | |
| | | Significance: Raw Chi Square=4.37 at 1 d.f. Significant at .05 level. | | |

Further comparing the mean scores for the male and female authors, we found a pattern of authors including more negative references in letters about candidates of the author's own gender. While the authors in general spread their criticism fairly evenly across the male and female candidates categories, the cross-gender cells in Table 2 revealed a noticeable pattern of higher frequencies of potentially damaging comments in the male-male and female-female combinations. These data proved to be statistically significant at the .05 probability level.

The possibility has been raised that these gender patterns found in Table 2 might be an artifact of the well-known fact that female teachers tend toward the elementary grades and male teachers toward the secondary grades. The theoretical question here concerns whether this higher level of same-gender criticisms is simply due to a preponderance of males in secondary teaching and administrative positions, and of females in elementary level positions. However, our Table 2 comparisons of "means per letter" render the total frequencies of male-male and female-female letters irrelevant. Even considering these demographic configurations in the profession, the average same-gender recommendation contains more potentially damaging comments than the average cross-gender letter.

This fact was illustrated even more clearly in Table 3, where we again crosstabulated the raw data, this time controlling for grade level of the teacher candidates. Although the resulting data were spread too thinly to yield very

Table 3
Grade-Level Comparisons of Potentially Damaging Comments in Letters

| | | Gender of Author | | <u>Row Totals</u> | |
|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| | | <u>Male</u> | <u>Female</u> | | |
| Gender of Teacher Candidate | Elementary Grades (K-6) | | | | |
| | Male | 13* (12.1)** | 32 (29.9) | 45 (42.0) | |
| | Female | 11 (10.3) | 51 (47.7) | 62 (58.0) | |
| | Column Totals | 24 (22.4) | 83 (77.6) | N=107 (100.00%) | |
| | Secondary Grades (7-12) | | | | |
| | Male | 6 (20.7) | 8 (27.6) | 14 (48.3) | |
| | Female | 2 (6.9) | 13 (44.8) | 15 (51.7) | |
| | Column Totals | 8 (27.6) | 21 (72.4) | N=29 (100.00%) | |
| | | | | | Grand Total N=136 |
| | *Raw Count | | | | |
| **Percent of Grade-Level Totals | | | | | |
| Significance: | | | | | |
| Elementary—Raw Chi Square=1.8 at 1 d.f. Significant at .20 level | | | | | |
| Secondary—Raw Chi Square=3.8 at 1 d.f. Significant at .10 level | | | | | |

impressive significance levels, one can see nevertheless that the original pattern from Table 2 holds true for both elementary and secondary grade levels. Thus, it is probably safe to conclude that we are not looking in Table 2 at phenomena caused by grade-level demographics and dynamics.

Discussion

The most general result from our data in letters of reference in teacher education was the discovery that female recommenders were significantly more apt to include potentially damaging comments in the letters which they authored. These findings correspond in a general sense with Peterson's (1988) research, which found that female evaluators rated teacher performance considerably lower than did male evaluators, and Frederic's (1977) study, which reported that women were significantly harsher than men in their evaluations. On the other hand, Cowan and Kasen (1979) found no difference between the references of male and female evaluators.

There are several plausible explanations for female authors displaying a greater tendency to make damaging comments in letters of reference. One relatively common explanation finds at least conceptual support in a body of research indicating a greater degree of commitment among female administrators in education. Although the recommenders in our sample consisted not only of school administrators but of cooperating teachers and university supervisors as well, all three of these roles involve a basically administrative and supervisory orientation toward the student teacher. Thus, the extant research and theory on school administrators is probably germane to our findings.

With regard to the commitment levels of female educators in education, Gross & Trask (1976) and Shakeshaft (1987) found that teaching is usually a first choice for women educators, but for men it is often a second or alternative choice. The researchers also indicate that women in education spend considerably more years than men in teaching before they go into administration (Gross & Trask, 1976). These researchers did not control for ethnicity nor for socio-economic status. As administrators women continue to focus their efforts on instruction and the students, whereas men tend to center their responsibilities around the management of school and adults (Ortiz, 1982; Shakeshaft, 1987). Finally, Gross & Trask (1976) found that female administrators do place more importance on the technical skills of teachers than do male administrators. If these findings do indeed mean that women are more committed to the profession than are men, then it is reasonable to expect that women would be more critical in their appraisals of future teachers.

Turning our attention now to the gender crosstabulations, we confront the more formidable task of explaining why the female authors are more critical of female candidates, and why the male authors are more critical of male candidates.

One explanation may lie in the realm of same-gender familiarity and comfort, combined with a reticence to be perceived as discriminatory against the opposite gender. Thus, for example, male recommenders may be more comfortable with being specifically critical of male candidates, while avoiding the appearance of being too hard on female candidates. A complicating factor in this case would be the traditional, cultural proscription against males attacking females. Likewise, the female authors may attempt to be objective by not giving preferential treatment to candidates of their own sex, as suggested by L'Heureux-Barrett and Barnes-Farrell (1991).

Several studies have shown that women diminish women's accomplishments. For instance, even in fields that are traditionally female-occupied, women evaluators have rated men's accomplishments higher (Goldberg, 1968). Other research (*e.g.*, Tomkiewicz & Brenner, 1982) showed that males tend to be unaccepting of women in roles untraditional to their gender. These male-held views have been attributed to why women often do not advance into administrative positions. Oliver & Taylor (1978) found men to exhibit a high level of aggression toward assertive female competitors. These findings may suggest more of a relative reticence on the

part of female recommenders to criticize males than an active propensity to discriminate against females.

On the other hand, there is a body of research and literature which suggests that females in positions of authority do, indeed, often discriminate against their own gender. (*e.g.*, Staines, Tavis, & Jayaratne, 1974). A study conducted by Schmuck and Schubert (1986) surveyed female school principals to find out if they were "equity advocates." Not only did most of the principals not pay much attention to gender issues in educational practices, but they also expressed views which held, "traditional and negative stereotypes about women as a group and women as teachers" (p. 12). A related study by Haggerty (1982) reported that members of both sexes are more prejudiced against their own gender.

It is interesting to notice that there has been a surprising lack of research specifically on male biases and prejudices in recommendations and evaluations. But even with regard to female recommenders, the studies have been relatively few and the findings contradictory. Oswald and Van Matre's (1990) study of arbitration in business found female arbitrators to be more favorably disposed toward female grievants. Similarly, Haemmerlie and Montgomery (1991) revisited Goldberg's (1968) study, and reported a tendency among engineering students to favor the female writers of substantive articles.

There is certainly no consensus in the research concerning why or even whether gender biases and prejudices are a significant factor in letters of recommendation. Our data indicate that there are important gender-based patterns, but it would certainly be premature to attempt to judge which among the many possible explanations is the most valid reflection of the actual dynamics of educational recruitment.

There has been an unfortunate tendency in the literature of genders to be rather facile in applying the labels "bias" and "prejudice" as an explanation for any discrepancies found in the data. In many cases these labels merely obfuscate the matter by begging the question of cause. A more useful approach would be to continue to do careful research into the facts and the motives behind the facts in our data for valid explanations of the phenomena we see.

In other words, the data from our present study do not prove any simple statement such as, "males are prejudiced against males, and females are prejudiced against females." To support such a conclusion would require a knowledge of the beliefs, opinions, and motives of the authors, and this knowledge is beyond the scope of our data. We know simply that there is a pattern in the data, and we can only speculate as to why it is there.

But the practical implications of the patterns in the recruitment process are operant and important for all concerned. The discerning recruiter will be tempted to weigh the contents of letters of reference in view of these gender patterns, regardless of their underlying cause. The conscientious recommender will ask himself or herself if these data reflect a personal pattern and why. The teacher

candidate will wonder if he or she can gain an advantage by selecting recommenders, keeping these gender patterns in mind.

Meanwhile it would benefit not only researchers but professional educators in general to continue to explore these issues of gender and the extant patterns of behavior between the sexes. In an age of strong and growing concern for fair and equal treatment in the job marketplace, the need for accurate and relevant information is greater than ever. If we are ever to come to grips with these fascinating and elusive questions surrounding the similarities and differences of men and women in the educational professions, our progress will be the result of the continuing dialogue between the scientist and the professional in the field.

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