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Gender-based differences in letters of recommendation written for ophthalmology residency applicants

Fei Lin¹, Soo Kyung Oh¹, Lynn K. Gordon², Stacy L. Pineles¹, Jamie B. Rosenberg² and Irena Tsui^{1*}

Abstract

Background: To determine whether gender-based differences may be present in letters of recommendation written for ophthalmology residency applicants.

Methods: All applications submitted through SF Match to the UCLA Stein Eye Institute Residency Training Program from the 2017–2018 application cycle were analyzed using validated text analysis software (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (Austin, TX)). The main outcome measures were differences in language use in letters of recommendation by gender of applicant.

Results: Of 440 applicants, 254 (58%) were male and 186 (42%) were female. The two gender groups had similar United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE) Step 1 scores, undergraduate grade point averages (uGPA's), proportions of underrepresented minority (URM) applicants and Gold Humanism Honor Society members, numbers of academic and service activities listed, and gender distributions of their letter writers (all *P* values > 0.05). However, letters written for male applicants were determined to use more "authentic" words than those written for female applicants (mean difference, 0.800; 95% CI, 0.001–1.590; *P* = 0.047). Letters written for male applicants also contained more "leisure" words (mean difference, 0.056; 95% CI, 0.008–0.104; *P* = 0.023) and fewer "feel" words (mean difference, 0.033; 95% CI, 0.001–0.065; *P* = 0.041) and "biological processes" words (mean difference, 0.157; 95% CI, 0.017–0.297; *P* = 0.028).

Conclusions: There were gender differences detected in recommendation letters in ophthalmology consistent with prior studies from other fields. Awareness of these differences may improve residency selection processes.

Keywords: Ophthalmology, Residency, Gender, Application, Bias

Background

In the past few years, ophthalmology residency selection has become a highly competitive process. The Ophthalmology Residency Match Summary Report 2017 revealed a mean United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) Step 1 score of 243 (interquartile range, 236–252) for applicants who successfully matched into residency programs, compared to the United States and Canada mean (SD) of 229 (20). In 2017, 22% of ophthalmology residency applicants did not match into any program.

Competitive residency programs, including ophthalmology programs, rely heavily on cognitive measures in their selection processes to recruit top-tier medical school graduates [1]. However, cognitive metrics, including USMLE Step 1 scores, have been poor predictors of success in residency. In 2002, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education identified six Core Competencies that residents must master in their training. Imbedded in those competencies are many non-cognitive factors, such as interpersonal and communication skills, which can be evaluated through letters of recommendation.

Thought to provide insight into applicants' non-cognitive traits, letters of recommendation written on behalf of applicants can grasp the attention of selection

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