Too Nice to Land a Job

Submitted by Scott Jaschik on November 10, 2010 - 3:00am

You are reading a letter of recommendation that praises a candidate for a faculty job as being "caring," "sensitive," "compassionate," or a "supportive colleague." Whom do you picture?

New research suggests that to faculty search committees, such words probably conjure up a woman -- and probably a candidate who doesn't get the job. The scholars who conducted the research believe they may have pinpointed one reason for the "leaky pipeline" that frustrates so many academics, who see that the percentage of women in senior faculty jobs continues to lag the percentage of those in junior positions and that the share in junior positions continues to lag those earning doctorates.

The research is based on a content analysis of 624 letters of recommendation submitted on behalf of 194 applicants for eight junior faculty positions at an unidentified research university. The study found patterns in which different kinds of words were more likely to be used to describe women, while other words were more often used to describe men.

In theory, both sets of words were positive. There's nothing wrong, one might hope, with being a supportive colleague. But the researchers then took the letters, removed identifying information, and controlled for such factors as number of papers published, number of honors received, and various other objective criteria. When search committee members were asked to compare candidates of comparable objective criteria, those whose letters praised them for "communal" or "emotive" qualities (those associated with women) were ranked lower than others.

The research found no difference between men and women as letter writers -- both are more likely to describe women with communal words than they are to describe men that way. And the bias appears to act against male candidates who are praised for traits people associate with women. But a much higher proportion of female candidates -- regardless of their overall qualifications -- are praised with these words that appear to hurt their chances of being hired for faculty jobs.

"When you use communal terminology, it is linking people to a feminine type, and they are not seen as credible and they don't get hired," said Michelle Hebl, a professor of psychology at Rice University and one of the authors of the study, along with Randi Martin, also a psychology professor at Rice, and Juan Madera, assistant professor at the University of Houston. "It's not just men doing this to women, and it's not just women being hurt, but it hurts women more."
The research was supported by the National Science Foundation and published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. The National Institutes of Health is now supporting a follow-up study looking at letters of recommendation for medical faculty positions.

In the scholars' analysis of the words that appeared in the letters of recommendation, they found clear patterns of word use for women's and men's letters. Women were more likely to be described with words such as those cited above, as well as "nurturing," "kind," "agreeable" and "warm." Men, in contrast, were much more likely to be described in words classified as "agentive" -- words such as "assertive," "confident," "aggressive," "ambitious," "independent" and "daring."

What the analysis showed is that letter writers didn't need to use words like "feminine" to create female stereotypes -- and that they did so, time and again, with women who had the same intellectual achievements as their male counterparts.

Hebl said that women in academe face a dilemma. Hiring committees appear to devalue women who are identified as people who would be nice or supportive colleagues. But women who aren't seen as nice and supportive "get called bitches," she said. So the solution for women is "to have both sets of qualities" -- the communal and the agentive. But when it comes to getting letters of recommendation, she said, women need to be sure their letter writers focus on the agentive qualities.

"Communal might be nice, but agentive is what's really important," she said. Women perceived as too communal "are seen as being pushovers, not somebody to run a program."

Asked if she believes she would find similar results in faculty searches at liberal arts colleges or community colleges -- institutions that tend to value teaching more than research and that place an emphasis on close ties to students -- Hebl said she guessed there would be only a slight variation. She said that even in stereotypically female fields like nursing, research has shown that many place more of a value on qualities associated with men than those associated with women (even if they also want the latter qualities).

Hebl said that the implications of the research for those writing letters of recommendation are clear: stay away from communal words, whether writing on behalf of men or women.

Given how subtle the issue may seem, and that letter writers may not be conscious of what they are doing, Hebl urged those seeking letters of recommendation to not be afraid of talking about the issue with their letter writers. "Given them a copy of the research," she said.