

# Gender and Racial Bias in Radiology Residency Letters of Recommendation

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## Abstract

**Objective:** Perceptions of agency and communality vary by race and gender, which may be contributing to the persistent gender and racial inequality in radiology. The objective of this study was to determine if there are differences in the use of agentic and communal language in letters of recommendation for radiology residency programs based on the demographics of the applicant and letter writer.

**Methods:** We retrospectively reviewed letters of recommendation for 736 diagnostic radiology residency applicants to Duke University from the 2015 to 2016 interview season. We then used computerized text analysis software to calculate the frequency of agentic and communal terms and multilevel negative binomial regression to compare differences in count by applicant and letter writer demographics.

**Results:** We analyzed 2,624 letters of recommendation, comprising 976,489 words. The majority of applicants were male (75%, 549 of 736) and white or Asian (77%, 565 of 736). Letter writers, who were mostly male (75%, 1,979 of 2,624) and of senior rank (50%, 1,313 of 2,624), described female applicants as more agentic than men (incidence rate ratio [IRR] = 1.08,  $P < .05$ ) and described blacks and Latinx applicants as less agentic than whites and Asians (IRR = 0.932,  $P < .05$ ). Secondary analysis showed that female letters writers described applicants as more agentic (IRR = 1.09,  $P < .05$ ) and more communal (IRR = 1.12,  $P < .01$ ) than did male writers, and senior rank faculty used agentic (IRR = 0.95,  $P < .05$ ) and communal (IRR = 0.88,  $P < .01$ ) language less often than did junior faculty.

**Conclusion:** The extent to which agentic and communal language is used in letters of recommendation for diagnostic radiology residency programs differs by applicant and letter writer demographics.

**Key Words:** Bias, gender, letters of recommendation, race

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a fixed and long-standing racial and gender imbalance in diagnostic radiology, the causes of which are incompletely understood [1-3]. However, lessons may be drawn from the organizational literature that has consistently demonstrated that women and racial

minorities are disadvantaged relative to men and whites, respectively [4,5]. Agency and communality are a psychological framework that describes the traditional masculine and feminine domains in Western society [6]. Communality is the female stereotype of being relationship oriented with a focus on being kind, helpful, concerned, and sympathetic, and agency refers to the male stereotype of being achievement oriented with a focus on being competent, aggressive, independent, decisive, and forceful [6-8]. A major source of disadvantage for women and racial minorities is the perceived incongruity between agentic traits and stereotypes ascribed to their subordinated groups. The communal stereotypes ascribed to women and the incompetent stereotypes (eg, inept, lazy) attributed to racial minorities are frequently perceived as incompatible with agentic characteristics that tend to define

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professional roles and are deemed valuable in radiology [9-11]. Given that the field of radiology is dominated by whites and men, it is conceivable to reason that differing racial and gendered perceptions may play a role when applicants seek positions as radiologists.

Letters of recommendation are important residency selection criteria, but their subjective content lend easily to bias [12,13]. Nonradiology medical investigations have demonstrated conflicting relationships between agentic and communal language and applicant gender on residency letters of recommendation [14-17]. Ample nonmedical evidence supports the notion that women will be perceived in less agentic and more communal terms than men [11,18,19], but perceptions of women's competence, a primary dimension of agency, have increased over time [20]. Racial influences on agency and communality are even more nuanced than gender considerations. Incompetence—the antithesis of agency—is a persistent stereotype attributed to blacks and Latinx [21-24], and Asians are stereotyped as smart and hardworking, two primary dimensions of agency [25-27]. Similarly, Latinx are perceived as family-oriented (communal), yet macho (agentic); Asians are stereotyped as submissive (communal) but socially aloof (agentic); and blacks are viewed as simultaneously protective (communal) but individualistic (agentic) [23,28]. Agentic and communal perceptions are clearly influenced by gender and race, but the extent to which these perceptions vary across letters of recommendation is not fully understood. Furthermore, rater gender has been shown to influence the evaluation content [29]; hence, we also investigate its influence on the language used in recommendation letters.

We hypothesize that agentic and communal language in letters of recommendation will conform with traditional gender and racial stereotypes of applicants. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to quantify the frequency of agentic and communal language in letters of recommendation for diagnostic radiology residency applications and understand the influence of applicant and letter writer demographics.

## METHODS

The Institutional Review Board from Duke University determined that this study was exempt from formal review.

### Sample Population

All 736 diagnostic radiology residency applications submitted to Duke University through the Electronic

Residency Application Service in the 2015 to 2016 application year were made available for analysis [30].

In line with the central purpose of the study, we first recorded the applicant's gender, applicant's self-identified race, and the letter writer gender. If the letter writer gender was not apparent from the letter of recommendation, then a clarifying Internet search was conducted. Applicant race was categorized as white or Asian or underrepresented minority (URM) or other. This was done for three reasons: (1) previous work demonstrating similarities in the evaluation of white and Asian diagnostic radiology applicants [31], (2) comparable negative perceptions of black and Latinx individuals [32], and (3) although no individual pairwise race comparisons on the use of agentic and communal terms initially emerged in our preliminary analysis, this analysis demonstrated mean similarities between white and Asian applicants and between black, Latinx, and other applicants.

Next, we included the following control variables in our analysis: (1) medical school rank categorized as top 25 by *U.S. News and World Report* 2016 rankings or not ranked in the top 25 [33-35]; (2) United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE) Step 1 Score; (3) an overall research productivity metric calculated by summing the number of peer-reviewed publications, poster presentations, oral presentations, and book chapters; (4) academic rank categorized as senior rank if associate or full professor and junior rank or other if medical or clinical instructor, assistant professor, or those without an academic rank, such as private practitioners; and (5) word count per letter.

### Letter of Recommendation Analysis

The text of each letter of recommendation was analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) software (version 1.4.0; Pennebaker Conglomerates, Inc; Austin, Texas). LIWC is a word-count-based, text analysis program that quantifies language metrics. It has been used to analyze documents in the social, physical, and medical sciences [15,29,36-38]. For this study, the entire content of the letter of recommendation was processed, excluding the greeting (eg, "Dear Committee") and closing (eg, "Sincerely, Dr Smith").

We developed a library of agentic and communal terms based on prior work establishing a library of terms [39]. In brief, the library was built based on an analysis of eight studies encompassing 3,461 data points over a 40-year period that were then included into a means-

Table 1. Description of applicants, letter writers, and letters of recommendation

| Variable   | All Applicants | Female Applicants | Male Applicants |
|--|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Applicants, % (n)  | 100 (736)      | 25 (187)          | 75 (549)        |
| Applicant race or ethnicity, % (n)                                     |                |                   |                 |
| White or Asian   | 77 (565)       | 18 (136)          | 58 (429)        |
| URM or other   | 23 (171)       | 7 (51)            | 16 (120)        |
| Applicant age (y), mean (SD)   | 27.5 (3.5)     | 27.6 (1.9)        | 27.4 (3.3)      |
| Applicant United States Medical Licensing Exam Step 1 Score, mean (SD) | 239.4 (15.6)   | 234.7 (16.9)      | 241.1 (14.8)    |
| Applicant total research, mean (SD)                                    | 6.2 (9.2)      | 6.3 (8.8)         | 6.2 (9.3)       |
| Peer-reviewed manuscripts  | 2.5 (5.1)      | 2.5 (4.6)         | 2.6 (5.3)       |
| Posters  | 2.3 (3.3)      | 2.5 (3.0)         | 2.3 (3.4)       |
| Oral presentations   | 1.2 (2.7)      | 1.2 (2.9)         | 1.2 (2.6)       |
| Book chapters  | 0.1 (0.5)      | 0.2 (0.6)         | 0.1 (0.5)       |
| Applicant medical school rank, % (n)                                   |                |                   |                 |
| Top 25 school  | 16 (118)       | 4 (30)            | 12 (88)         |
| Not in top 25  | 84 (618)       | 21 (157)          | 63 (461)        |
| Letter writers, % (n)  | 100 (2,624)    | 26 (674)          | 74 (1,950)      |
| Letter writer gender, % (n)  |                |                   |                 |
| Female   | 25 (645)       | 7 (171)           | 18 (474)        |
| Male   | 75 (1,979)     | 19 (503)          | 56 (1,476)      |
| Letter writer academic rank, % (n)                                     |                |                   |                 |
| Junior   | 50 (1,311)     | 12 (305)          | 38 (1,006)      |
| Senior   | 50 (1,313)     | 14 (369)          | 36 (944)        |
| Letters of recommendation, mean (SD)                                   | 2,624          | 2.3 (1.1)         | 2.3 (1.1)       |
| Word count per letter of recommendation, mean (SD)                     | 364.4 (187.8)  | 368.7 (184.6)     | 362.9 (189.1)   |

URM = underrepresented minority.

influence-ability multifactor model followed by exploratory and then confirmatory factor analysis. From a master text file of every letter of recommendation (976,489 words), the frequency of each term was calculated. LIWC requires exact matching so modifications to the terms were required. For example, the term “ambitious” was changed to “ambitio\*” to ensure both “ambition” and “ambitious” were counted. The context for each term was reviewed and removed or modified if not used in the intended manner of interest. For example, the term “dominance” was utilized in the context of “autosomal dominance,” rather than describing a dominant personality, so the term was excluded from the analysis. Additional terms were added based on the context in which other agentic or communal terms were found. For example, the term “industrious” was added as an agentic descriptor because it was frequently utilized among other agentic descriptors. Edits to the library were performed in a blinded fashion by one study author (L.G.), and all additions, subtractions, or modifications were discussed by the study team before final changes were incorporated. The full library of agentic and communal terms is included in [Appendix 1](#). Agentic

(mean: 3.50 words per letter, SD: 2.72, with average 0.97% across letters) and communal (mean: 1.42 words per letter, SD: 1.56, with average 0.39% across letters) terms that were utilized at least 200 times were included in our analysis.

### Statistical Analysis

Agentic and communal letter content was compared across applicant and writer characteristics using Kruskal-Wallis tests and Dunn’s post hoc pairwise comparisons with a Bonferroni correction for multiple groups. Next, multilevel negative binomial regression (NBR) (Stata command menbreg) was used for modeling the counts of agentic and communal terms. Multilevel NBR was used because there were multiple observations per applicant, the outcomes were counts, and overdispersion (variance > mean) characterizes each outcome’s distribution. NBR includes a parameter (alpha) along with an error term to account for extra dispersion. Random effects were modeled at the subject level, with fixed effects estimated for the independent variables and controls. Two models are reported for each outcome. First, we model the outcomes conditioned on control

Table 2. Agentic and communal terms by applicant and letter writer characteristics, unadjusted for covariates

| Characteristic                   | No. of Letters | Agency          |                       | Communality     |                       |
|----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
|                                  |                | Mean Count (SD) | Mean % of Letter (SD) | Mean Count (SD) | Mean % of Letter (SD) |
| Overall                          | 2,624          | 3.50 (2.72)     | 0.97 (0.67)           | 1.42 (1.56)     | 0.39 (0.42)           |
| Applicant gender                 |                |                 |                       |                 |                       |
| Female                           | 674            | 3.70 (2.87)     | 0.99 (0.66)           | 1.52 (1.72)     | 0.40 (0.45)           |
| Male                             | 1,950          | 3.44 (2.66)     | 0.96 (0.68)           | 1.38 (1.50)     | 0.38 (0.40)           |
| Applicant race or ethnicity      |                |                 |                       |                 |                       |
| White or Asian                   | 2,011          | 3.59 (2.74)     | 0.98 (0.67)           | 1.42 (1.52)     | 0.38 (0.40)           |
| URM or other                     | 613            | 3.24 (2.62)     | 0.93 (0.67)           | 1.42 (1.69)     | 0.41 (0.46)           |
| Letter writer gender             |                |                 |                       |                 |                       |
| Female                           | 645            | 3.65 (2.74)     | 1.00 (0.71)           | 1.59 (1.71)     | 0.42 (0.44)           |
| Male                             | 1,979          | 3.46 (2.71)     | 0.95 (0.66)           | 1.36 (1.50)     | 0.37 (0.41)           |
| Letter writer rank               |                |                 |                       |                 |                       |
| Junior                           | 1,311          | 3.37 (2.55)     | 1.01 (0.70)           | 1.42 (1.53)     | 0.41 (0.43)           |
| Senior                           | 1,313          | 3.64 (2.86)     | 0.93 (0.63)           | 1.41 (1.59)     | 0.34 (0.40)           |
| Female writer × female applicant | 171            | 3.54 (2.49)     | 0.99 (0.66)           | 1.74 (1.89)     | 0.47 (0.51)           |
| Female writer × male applicant   | 474            | 3.69 (2.83)     | 1.00 (0.72)           | 1.54 (1.64)     | 0.41 (0.41)           |
| Male writer × female applicant   | 503            | 3.76 (2.99)     | 1.00 (0.65)           | 1.45 (1.65)     | 0.38 (0.43)           |
| Male writer × male applicant     | 1,476          | 3.36 (2.60)     | .94 (0.66)            | 1.33 (1.45)     | 0.37 (0.40)           |

Mean count (standard deviation) and mean percent of agentic and communal terms per letter. Unadjusted for covariates and subject-level clustering. URM = underrepresented minority.

variables. Second, we model the main effects of applicant gender, race, and writer gender with controls, along with an interaction term between applicant and writer gender.

Tests for outliers involved inspecting cases with extreme values on the outcomes (eg, counts greater than 12 for agency and 9 for communality) and conducting iterative regression models removing these values to test sensitivity of results. Because the results were unchanged by excluding these values, we used the full data for our analysis. Incidence rate ratios (IRRs), which provide the effect size, were reported. All statistical analyses were conducted using Stata/SE by RR (version 15; StataCorp LLC; College Station, Texas).

## RESULTS

We analyzed 2,624 letters of recommendation for 736 applicants, comprising 976,489 words. Table 1 describes the applicants, letter writers, and letters of recommendation. In brief, applicants were mostly male (75%, 549 of 736), white or Asian (77%, 565 of 736), and not graduating from a top 25 medical school (84%, 618 of 736). The applicant mean age was 27.5 ± 3.5 years, USMLE Step 1 score was 239.4, and research metric was 6.2 (sum of peer-reviewed publications, posters, oral presentations, and book chapters).

The only demographic difference between male and female applicants was a higher USMLE Step 1 score for male applicants (241.1 versus 234.5,  $P < .001$ ). Letter writers were most commonly male (75%, 1,979 of 2,624) and senior rank (50%, 1,313 of 2,624). As a result, letters of recommendation were most commonly written by male letter writers for male applicants (56%, 1,476 of 2,624).

The mean counts and mean percent of agentic and communal terms by applicant and letter writer demographics, as well as for applicant and letter writer gender pairings, are shown in Table 2. The results from the multilevel NBR model for agentic and communal language with main effects and the applicant × writer gender interaction are shown in Table 3 and Figure 1. Letter writers used more agentic terms when describing female applicants as opposed to male applicants (IRR = 1.08, Model 2 in Table 3,  $P < .05$ ). Exploratory analysis demonstrates that this finding was primarily driven by differences in the use of three specific agentic terms (mean count differences ≥ 0.03 per letter for skill, lead, and dedication), indicating the influence of specific types of agentic perceptions (Table 4). Additionally, letter writers used fewer agentic terms when describing URMs or other applicants as compared with white or Asian applicants (IRR = 0.93,  $P < .05$ ). Exploratory analysis showed that six agentic terms

**Table 3.** Regression results: multilevel negative binomial regression of agentic and communal terms in letters of recommendation by applicant and letter writer characteristics

| Variable  | Outcome: Agency Terms                     |                             | Outcome: Community Terms    |                             |
|---|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
|   | Model 1                                   | Model 2                     | Model 3                     | Model 4                     |
|   | Applicant female<br>(Ref: applicant male) |                             | 1.08*<br>(0.04)             |                             |
| Applicant URM or other<br>(Ref: applicant white or Asian) |   | 0.93*<br>(0.03)             |                             | 1.03<br>(0.05)              |
| Writer female<br>(Ref: writer male)                       |   | 1.09*<br>(.04)              |                             | 1.12*<br>(0.06)             |
| Applicant gender × writer gender                          |   | 0.90<br>(0.06)              |                             | 1.07<br>(0.11)              |
| Writer senior rank<br>(Ref: writer junior or other rank)  | 0.95*<br>(0.03)                           | 0.95*<br>(0.03)             | 0.87 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.04) | 0.88 <sup>‡</sup><br>(0.04) |
| Top 25 medical school<br>(Ref: below top 25)              | 0.94<br>(0.04)                            | 0.94<br>(0.04)              | 1.06<br>(0.06)              | 1.04<br>(0.06)              |
| Step 1 score  | 0.98<br>(0.01)                            | 0.98<br>(0.01)              | 0.96*<br>(0.02)             | 0.97<br>(0.02)              |
| Total research  | 1.00<br>(0.00)                            | 1.00<br>(0.00)              | 0.99 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.00) | 0.99 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.00) |
| Word count  | 1.00 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.00)               | 1.00 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.00) | 1.00 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.00) | 1.00 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.00) |
| Intercept   | 1.76 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.06)               | 1.74 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.06) | 0.72 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.03) | 0.69 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.04) |
| Random effects: applicant level                           | 1.02 <sup>‡</sup><br>(0.01)               | 1.02 <sup>‡</sup><br>(0.01) | 1.02<br>(0.02)              | 1.02<br>(0.02)              |
| Likelihood ratio test                                     | 9.54 <sup>‡</sup>                         | 8.62 <sup>‡</sup>           | 1.31 <sup>§</sup>           | 1.06                        |
| AIC   | 11,165                                    | 11,161                      | 8,137                       | 8,135                       |

In all, there were 2,624 letters for 736 applicants. Multilevel negative binomial regression with subject level clustering. Incidence rate ratio (IRR) and standard error (SE) reported. IRR > 1.00 indicates increasing rate of terms used; IRR < 1.00 indicates decreasing rate of terms used. AIC = Akaike information criterion, URM = under-represented minority.

\* $P < .05$ .

<sup>†</sup> $P < .001$ .

<sup>‡</sup> $P < .01$ .

<sup>§</sup> $P < .10$ .

(mean count differences  $\geq 0.03$  per letter for skill, strong, lead, confidence, active, and work ethic) mostly influenced this difference, indicating a more generalized difference in perception when compared with the noted gender differences (Table 4). For communality, no

differences were noted based on the gender and race of the applicant (Model 4 in Table 3).

Our analysis of the influence of the demographics of the letter writer showed that women used agentic terms more frequently (IRR = 1.09,  $P < .05$ ) and communal terms more frequently (IRR = 1.12,  $P < .05$ ) than did their male counterparts when describing applicants. Furthermore, senior-rank letter writers used agentic terms less frequently (IRR = 0.95,  $P < .05$ ) and communal terms less frequently (IRR = 0.88,  $P < .01$ ) than did their junior ranked counterparts. Of note, the mean letter length was 407 words for senior rank letter writers and 344 words for junior rank letter writers, which compensates for the slightly higher mean counts for senior rank letter writers as shown in Table 2. Neither letter writer gender nor letter writer rank qualified the differences in the use of agentic content noted between female and male applicants and between whites or Asians and URMs or other applicants. Although there were trends in the use of agentic and communal language based on the applicant gender × writer gender, they were not statistically significant (Table 3).

## DISCUSSION

Our results show that letter writers used agentic language more frequently to describe female applicants than male applicants. At first glance, this result may seem surprising because perceptions of agency seem in conflict with traditional feminine stereotypes [11,40]. However, these findings are consistent with recent research demonstrating that women are sometimes perceived as possessing more rather than less agency when specific types of agency (ie, competence) are under consideration [11,41]. For example, top women leaders have been shown to be evaluated as more agentic than male leaders, and these findings were explained by differing perceptions in double standards of competence [6]. Also, women leaders were evaluated more favorably when enacting self-reliance rather than dominance [41]. Our results are consistent with these findings because our exploratory post hoc analysis showed that differences in terms like “skill” and “dedication,” rather than terms like “dominance” and “tough,” accounted for higher descriptors of agency for women when compared with men. Hence, the extent to which women were described more favorably than men is contingent on the type of agency under consideration. Although beyond the scope of this project, the

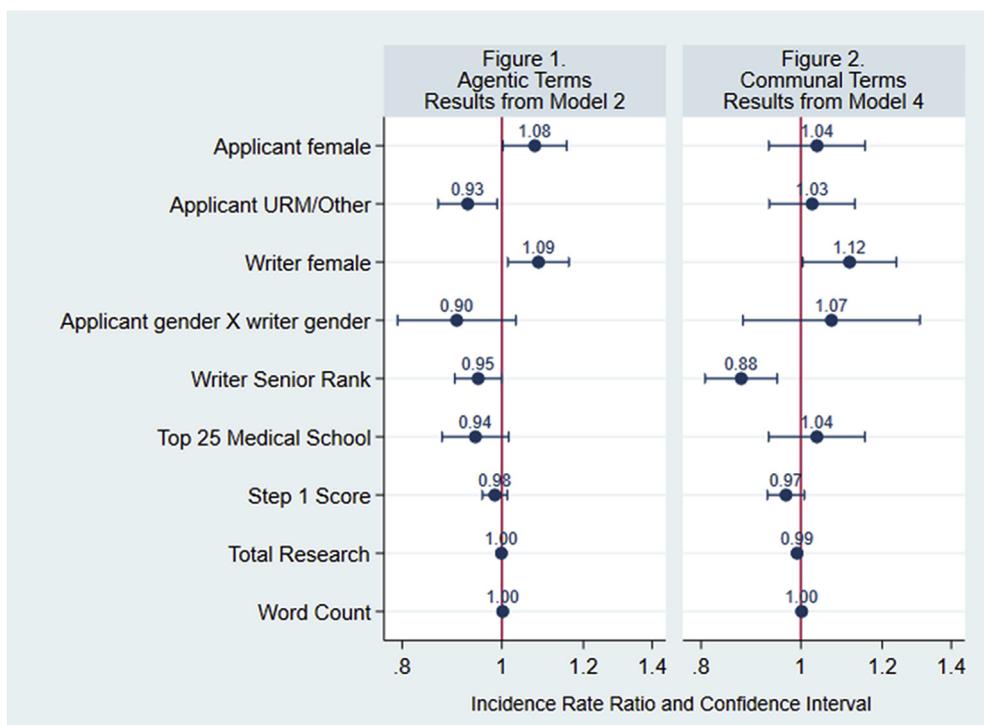


Fig 1. Forest plots of predictor variables for agentic (Figure 1) and communal (Figure 2) terms based on Models 2 and 4 as shown in Table 3. Incidence rate ratios and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

utilization of agentic and communal language for men and women may be influenced by the specialty of medicine, with certain personality characteristics deemed more or less favorable in different fields.

When considering race, letter writers were more inclined to use agency when describing white and Asian applicants rather than black and Latinx applicants. Furthermore, when compared with the gender differences, letter writers used a more inclusive set of agentic descriptors, like work ethic, confidence, and leader potential, to distinguish whites and Asians from URMs. This suggests URMs may be perceived to differ from whites and Asians on more types of agency than women are perceived to differ from men. Although racial differences in the field of radiology have not been well studied, these findings are in line with generally favorable biases toward whites and negative perceptions that have been shown to persist toward racial minorities in social science research [21-24] and in the limited research that has considered race in medical school admissions [42,43]. For example, when utilizing the implicit association test, medical doctors—including medical school admissions committee members—have been shown to have a pro-white bias [42,43]. However, it is important to note that racial minorities are less inclined to exhibit pro-white biases

on the Implicit Association Test [44], and we were not able to attain the race of the letter writers for this study.

Although not the primary focus of our analysis, we also found that the frequency of agentic and communal language differed by two demographic characteristics of the letter writer: gender and rank. Specifically, women writers used agentic and communal language more frequently than men writers. This is slightly at odds with an analysis of standardized dean's letters by Isaac et al, which did not find differences in language based on letter writer gender but rather based on the letter writer–applicant gender combination [29]. Future research should attempt to explore and reconcile the distinctions between these studies. When considering faculty rank, junior faculty used communal and agentic descriptors at a greater rate than did senior faculty (ie, slightly lower mean counts but shorter letters for junior faculty). This finding may reflect differences in experience because senior faculty who have a larger pool of applicants for comparison may be less effusive in their descriptions or rely on more templated language copied from prior letters. Regardless, these results indicate that the demographics of the letter writer do have an influence on the language used and programs may need to initiate training programs for letter writers.

Table 4. Agentic and communal terms used at least 200 times by applicant characteristic

| Variable              | Overall     | Male Applicant<br>(n = 549) | Female Applicant<br>(n = 187) | White or Asian<br>Applicant (n = 565) | URM or Other<br>applicant (n = 171) |
|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| No. of letters        | 2,624       | 1,950                       | 674                           | 2,011                                 | 613                                 |
| Agency (overall)      | 3.50 (2.72) | 3.44 (2.66)                 | 3.7 (2.87)                    | 3.59 (2.74)                           | 3.24 (2.62)                         |
| Skill                 | 0.83 (1.16) | 0.82 (1.15)                 | .88 (1.17)                    | 0.86 (1.18)                           | 0.74 (1.08)                         |
| Strong                | 0.50 (0.81) | 0.50 (0.80)                 | 0.51 (0.85)                   | 0.51 (0.81)                           | 0.47 (0.83)                         |
| Lead                  | 0.36 (0.86) | 0.33 (0.82)                 | 0.43 (0.98)                   | 0.38 (0.88)                           | 0.30 (0.80)                         |
| Dedication            | 0.31 (0.64) | 0.30 (0.62)                 | 0.34 (0.71)                   | 0.31 (0.63)                           | 0.32 (0.66)                         |
| Confidence            | 0.31 (0.59) | 0.31 (0.57)                 | 0.33 (0.62)                   | 0.32 (0.59)                           | 0.28 (0.58)                         |
| Active                | 0.26 (0.57) | 0.26 (0.58)                 | 0.26 (0.55)                   | 0.27 (0.58)                           | 0.23 (0.51)                         |
| Intelligent           | 0.16 (0.39) | 0.16 (0.39)                 | 0.18 (0.40)                   | 0.16 (0.39)                           | 0.17 (0.40)                         |
| Work ethic            | 0.25 (0.51) | 0.25 (0.51)                 | 0.24 (0.49)                   | 0.26 (0.51)                           | 0.23 (0.49)                         |
| Hard working          | 0.16 (0.41) | 0.15 (0.40)                 | 0.16 (0.41)                   | 0.16 (0.41)                           | 0.14 (0.38)                         |
| Desire                | 0.11 (0.38) | 0.11 (0.38)                 | 0.11 (0.38)                   | 0.11 (0.38)                           | 0.11 (0.37)                         |
| Independent           | 0.12 (0.39) | 0.12 (0.39)                 | 0.13 (0.39)                   | 0.13 (0.40)                           | 0.12 (0.37)                         |
| Achieve               | 0.12 (0.39) | 0.12 (0.39)                 | 0.12 (0.38)                   | 0.12 (0.38)                           | 0.14 (0.39)                         |
| Communality (overall) | 1.42 (1.56) | 1.38 (1.50)                 | 1.52 (1.72)                   | 1.42 (1.52)                           | 1.42 (1.69)                         |
| Help                  | 0.47 (0.84) | 0.46 (0.81)                 | 0.52 (0.91)                   | 0.47 (0.82)                           | 0.48 (0.91)                         |
| Eager                 | 0.21 (0.49) | 0.21 (0.50)                 | 0.21 (0.48)                   | 0.21 (0.49)                           | 0.22 (0.50)                         |
| Compassion            | 0.20 (0.49) | 0.20 (0.49)                 | 0.21 (0.48)                   | 0.20 (0.50)                           | 0.20 (0.44)                         |
| Happy                 | 0.13 (0.39) | 0.13 (0.38)                 | 0.14 (0.39)                   | 0.14 (0.39)                           | 0.12 (0.37)                         |
| Kind                  | 0.13 (0.38) | 0.12 (0.38)                 | 0.14 (0.39)                   | 0.13 (0.39)                           | 0.11 (0.36)                         |
| Caring                | 0.10 (0.33) | 0.09 (0.32)                 | 0.12 (0.38)                   | 0.10 (0.32)                           | 0.11 (0.37)                         |
| Friend                | 0.09 (0.31) | 0.08 (0.30)                 | 0.09 (0.34)                   | 0.08 (0.31)                           | 0.09 (0.34)                         |

Results are mean count (SD) of agentic and communal terms per letter.

There are some limitations to this study. First, we included all applicants who applied to Duke University, but this represents only a portion (54%, 736 of 1,360) of all diagnostic radiology applicants [45]. Second, we only had sparse information on the letter writer (gender, academic rank). Writers likely vary a great deal based on skill, experience, and training, for which we could not control. Third, other factors that influence application success were not included on the application, such as physical appearance, for which we could not control [31]. Future research should address these limitations in follow-up studies.

In conclusion, we demonstrated that agentic language was more frequently used to describe female applicants and less frequently used to describe URM or other applicants. Secondary analysis demonstrated that female and junior rank letter writers use both agentic and communal language at a greater rate compared with their male and senior rank counterparts. Further work is justified to understand the implications of agentic and communal language on applicant match success and to develop better practice guidelines or educational interventions for letter writers.

## TAKE-HOME POINTS

- In diagnostic radiology residency letters of recommendation, agentic language was used more frequently to describe female applicants (IRR = 1.08,  $P < .05$ ) and less frequently to describe black and Latinx applicants (IRR = 0.93,  $P < .05$ ).
- Female letter writers use agentic (IRR = 1.09,  $P < .05$ ) and communal (IRR = 1.12,  $P < .01$ ) language at a greater rate than male writers.
- Senior rank faculty letter writers use agentic (IRR = 0.95,  $P < .05$ ) and communal (IRR = 0.88,  $P < .01$ ) language at a lower rate than junior rank faculty.
- Medical schools may wish to implement training programs for faculty who serve as medical student mentors who will be asked to write letters of recommendation.
- Residency selection committees should be mindful of the differences in language on letters of recommendation when making decisions regarding interview invitations and residency rank list positioning.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Additional resources can be found online at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacr.2019.08.008>.

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