

Differences in Trait Interpretation Between Black and White Professionals when Evaluating Letters of Recommendation

Devon Alfred Bryan
Avon Products, Inc.

The present study investigated whether professionals of different racial backgrounds form the same mental image of an applicant when only descriptive traits are used to describe the applicant in a letter of recommendation. A secondary aim of the study was designed to investigate the possible effect different traits used to describe people in reference letters would have on the people reading the letter. The sample consisted of 94 professionals (45 black, 49 white) who, currently or had previously, worked in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Each participant received a letter of recommendation, an excerpt from the Dictionary of Occupational Titles regarding an office manager, and a short questionnaire. The results indicated that black professionals were more inclined to rate applicants favorably than white professionals. The findings also suggest that not all positive traits are assessed equally regarding an employment situation.

Research on Letters of Recommendation

The use of the letter of recommendation has become an institutionalized formality for many educational and professional settings. In fact, it has been suggested that up to 99% of American companies use reference checks and/or recommendations to help evaluate potential employees (Muchinsky, 1979). However, the practical value of using this type of information as a selection tool seems to have little empirical support (Browning, 1968; Mosel & Goheen, 1959). This lack of support is probably due to the fact that actual physical characteristics of the letter, physi-

cal characteristics of the recommendee, writing styles of the recommenders, and individual differences of the people who read the letter can affect the evaluation of the recommendee.

Numerous characteristics such as the length of the letter, confidentiality of responses, amount of favorable and unfavorable information, and specificity of examples used in describing behavior can and will affect how an individual evaluates a letter of recommendation. These issues have been examined in several previous studies (e.g., Wiens, Jackson, Marnaugh, & Matarazzo, 1969; Mehrabian, 1965; Ceci & Peters, 1984; Shaffer & Tomarelli, 1981; Shaffer, Mays, & Etheridge, 1976; Miller & Rowe, 1967; Knouse, 1983).

Length of Letter

Two previous studies have demonstrated that the length of a reference letter can be affected by the letter writer's attitude towards the recommendee. Mehrabian (1965) conducted a study in which 69 college students were required to imagine that someone whom they liked or disliked very much came to them and requested that they write a letter of recommendation for him/her to the company for which they were applying for a job. The conditions required that the letter writers' personal preference towards the recommendee be unknown to the recommendee. The recommender was asked to write a positive letter and was given 12 minutes to complete this task.

Mehrabian's research indicated that when presented with a situation in which the communicator was unable to fully express his/her apprehension about someone, and in which the topic to be covered in the letter was only minimally specified, the written channel of communication reflected the communicator's underlying attitude towards the recommendee. This was demonstrated by the fact that longer positive letters of recommendation were written for people whom the referrer liked rather than disliked.

It has also been suggested that the written expression of a person's abilities may be confounded by the recommender's underlying mood towards the recommendee. An almost exact replication of Mehrabian's study was conducted by Wiens *et al.* (1969), which showed the number of words written by recommenders can be influenced by their feelings towards the recommendee. The findings of this study led the researchers to imply that an underlying positive attitude held by the recommender regarding the recommendee will result in more words being written in the

reference as compared to an underlying negative attitude (Wiens *et al.*, 1969).

Confidentiality

Since letters of recommendation can sometimes contain sensitive information and are important sources of knowledge for both hiring and college entrance decisions, many institutions request that recommendees waive their right to review the letter once in the possession of the institution. This seemingly harmless request grows in importance when one considers research reporting that nonconfidential letters were of a more positive nature than confidential letters (Ceci & Peters, 1984). This finding was based on the results generated from data obtained by students asking their faculty advisors to write letters of recommendation for them. The study required students to ask advisors to write both confidential and nonconfidential letters about them on different occasions. In the confidential condition the appropriate box was checked and faculty were instructed to complete the form and mail it directly to the university using the provided stamped addressed envelope. For the nonconfidential condition, the correct box was also checked. However, instead of having faculty mail the form, students asked their advisor when they would be able to come back and collect the completed form.

The results of the Shaffer and Tomarelli (1981) archival study regarding 253 applicants for graduate study suggested that potential employers might view confidential references as more accurate descriptions of the applicant's prospective capacity. In this study applicants' GRE scores, undergraduate grades, reference confidentiality, proposed program of study, and acceptance or rejection of applicant were recorded. It was discovered that applicants with confidential dossiers were more likely to be accepted for graduate study than ones with open files. This greater belief in accuracy is reflected by the fact that employers tend to prefer the people who had confidential files as supervisors, and picture them as more qualified than people with open files (Shaffer, Mays, & Etherridge, 1976).

Favorability

Another factor which can influence an employer's assessment of a letter of recommendation is the use of unfavorable versus favorable adjectives.

tives. Miller and Rowe (1967) demonstrated that when an individual was forced to evaluate another individual and was only provided with limited information, unfavorable comments carried more weight than favorable comments when the communication medium contained both favorable and unfavorable statements. In this study undergraduates were presented with written descriptions of possible roommates. Participants were asked to read a description which corresponded to one of the following conditions: three favorable adjectives and one unfavorable adjective (3F-1U), 3F-2U, 3F-3U, 2F-3U, or 1F-3U. Students then used a six-point rating scale to assess the extent to which they definitely would consider this person or definitely would not consider this person for their roommate. This research suggests that unfavorable adjectives were emphasized more than favorable adjectives resulting in a disproportionate influence on the assessment of the applicant.

Specificity

Research has pointed out that referrers who provided examples of specific behavior were perceived as being more credible. Knouse (1983) discovered that letters which provided specified performance examples increased employers' perceptions of the amount of information given, the quality of the recommendee's work, and elevated the general impression of the recommendee's letter. Knouse's findings are based on information obtained from surveys of 98 personnel directors. The study called for randomly selected personnel directors to evaluate a hypothetical letter of recommendation regarding a senior management major who was applying for a nonspecific job. The letter read by the participants either contained specific behavioral examples or no examples, specific numerical examples or no numerical information, no unfavorable statements or one unfavorable statement. Personnel directors were then asked to complete a 10-item survey concerning their perceptions of the letter. The survey discovered that the use of definite behavioral examples augmented the overall positive perceptions of the recommendee.

Physical Characteristics

Studies have also shown that physical characteristics such as sex (Arvey, 1979; Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wiback, 1975; Haefner, 1977; Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra, 1977; Heneman, 1977; Rosen & Jerdee, 1974)

and race (Arvey 1979; Wexley & Nemeroff, 1974; Triandis, 1963) can have a negative effect on how the recommendee is judged. However, it should be pointed out that not all research confirms the fact that race affects the interpretation of the recommendation (McDonald & Haskel, 1985; Haefner, 1977; Schmidt & Johnson, 1973).

Applicant Sex

Various studies have succeeded in displaying the effects of how a recommendee's sex can influence the judgment of the interviewer. Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wilback (1975) conducted a study in which 30 female and 30 male professional interviewers were required to evaluate potential employees for the position of furniture department head. Participants each received a somewhat ambiguous job description, a resume, and a nine-point scale which was used to measure the strength of the interviewer's recommendation about hiring the applicant. Each resume was manipulated on the basis of sex, physical attractiveness, and scholastic record. The overall findings of the study suggested that professional interviewers discriminated among applicants across all three manipulated conditions. Specifically, there was a strong bias against females when candidates were of equal scholastic standing.

In a related study, Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra (1977) confirmed the findings of the earlier study by again demonstrating that male applicants are preferred over female applicants. This study investigated the effects of the raters' sex and physical attractiveness along with the applicants' qualifications, sex, and physical attractiveness. Subjects were asked to read a job description pertaining to a trainee in sales management and to evaluate the qualifications of the applicant based on their resumes. Each resume contained information relating to extracurricular activities, statement of career goals, hobbies, and percentage of college expenses earned. Applicants' qualifications were controlled by varying grade point average and prior work experience.

After reviewing the resumes, participants assessed applicants using two different measures. First, they indicated their willingness to hire the applicant on a seven-point Likert scale. Secondly subjects were asked to state a starting salary ranging from \$8,000-\$8,999 to \$20,000-\$21,999, assuming they hired the applicant. Although there was a general bias on the willingness to hire female applicants, a clear discrimination pattern was shown against women in the ratings when subjects were required to

choose the one applicant they would hire.

Even though employers have indicated that an individual's competence is an extremely important factor in the hiring decision, research suggests that even highly competent women are discriminated against in employment situations. Rosen and Jerdee (1974) asked 235 male undergraduates to play the role of consultant to a clothing manufacturer. Except for the variable of sex, subjects used identical applications to evaluate individuals. Participants assessed applicants on the following scales: 1) overall rating, 2) potential for technical aspects of the job, 3) potential for long term service, 4) potential for fitting in well with the company. The results indicated that male applicants were preferred more frequently than equally qualified females, and were portrayed more favorably on general suitability, potential for long term service, and ability to fit in with the company.

Haefner (1977) also investigated the propensity of biased evaluations regarding competent females. Haefner's study was composed of 286 managers who were in the position to hire or recommend hiring of an individual. Managers were asked to evaluate individuals after reviewing a job description and a resume, which was defined as highly competent, barely competent, or disadvantaged. This study pointed to the fact that not only are competent women applying for managerial positions discriminated against but so are ones applying for semiskilled positions.

Applicant Race

Although there is conflicting evidence regarding the influence of race on an applicant's evaluation, some studies suggest that this variable could hinder the applicant when being assessed for a job. A study using personnel directors for some of its subjects (Triandis 1963), found that people place unnecessary emphasis on the variable of race in a job evaluation situation. His study required participants to review specified characteristics for each potential employee and then rate each person on a seven-point scale ranging from (I strongly oppose) to (I strongly recommend). Subjects were asked to complete the questionnaire for three different jobs: a section manager of the accounting department, manager of the district finance office, and company comptroller. The results suggested that these personnel directors paid unnecessary attention to the characteristic of race when judging applicants to fill the aforementioned

positions.

Other research has suggested that the variable of race might have a negative effect on the evaluation process of the applicant due to a lack of perceived similarity between the recommendee and interviewer (Wexley and Nemeroff, 1974). Their study asked 120 college students to judge applicants for the position of Mechanical-Engineer Technician. After reviewing job descriptions, applicant resumes, and conducting a short interview, subjects were asked to make hiring recommendations regarding the applicants. The findings of the study inclines one to believe that the apparent similarity of biographical information was an important factor in the interviewers' evaluation of the applicants.

Validity of Letters of Recommendation

Even though letters of recommendation are a widely used source of information and possess many inherent problems limiting their overall effectiveness, few studies have investigated if reference letters do in fact discriminate between good and bad employees. One of the few studies designed to evaluate the statements used in letters of recommendation by Peres and Garcia (1962), was structured to find out if reference letters could distinguish between effective and ineffective engineers and if the statements used in the letters fall into some factorable pattern.

Peres and Garcia used 625 reference letters obtained from an employment organization regarding engineering job applicants. After reviewing the letters, a list of 170 different adjectives was generated. These adjectives were then organized into a check-list. The check-list was distributed to 200 first-line supervisors, half of which were asked to use the check-list to describe their "best" engineer while the other half was supposed to describe their "poorest" engineer. This was accomplished by having the supervisors assign numerical values to each adjective. A rating of five was used to indicate an adjective which described the engineer very well, with a rating of one being given to adjectives which described engineers poorly.

After the checklists were returned, a factor analysis was conducted on the 170 adjectives. This analysis was done to discover if the adjectives could discriminate between the "best" and "poorest" groups. The analysis identified five main categories which were labeled as Cooperation-Consideration, Vigor, Mental Agility, Urbanity, and Dependability-Reliability. A sample of the adjectives that correspond to the identified categories is

given in Chapter Three.

A study by Whitcomb and Bryan (1988) took the findings of Peres and Garcia (1962) one step further by testing to see if the categories established in the previous study by the factor analyzed adjectives could be used to distinguish between good and bad employees. The study investigated the interrater reliability of rating letters of recommendation and the predictive validity of these ratings with reference to recommendee performance. The rating procedure involved classifying adjectives used to describe recommendees, into one of the five categories established by Peres and Garcia (1962).

The data used for the study were obtained from the files of 78 former graduate students. Information taken from the students' dossiers consisted of:

- 1) Letters of recommendation, written on behalf of the students for acceptance into graduate programs.
- 2) Students' first-semester grade point average.
- 3) Students' final grade point average.

Upon collecting the necessary data, raters were required first to highlight all adjectives in the letter that were used to describe the subject; second, to place each of the adjectives into one of the five predetermined categories; third, to sum the total number of adjectives in each category; and, finally, to compute a composite score for each recommendation.

After the average category and composite scores were computed for each student, the inter-rater reliabilities were calculated for each of the five average category scores. The results indicated that, with the exception of the Urbanity category the raters reasonably agreed on which recommendation had higher and lower average category scores. The predictive validity of the average category score was then examined with reference to first semester and overall graduate grade point averages. The results showed that the Mental Agility score significantly predicted the graduate students' overall grade point averages ($r = .32$). The overall findings of the study suggest that letters of recommendation can be used as reliable and valid predictors of recommendees' performance.

Other research which has investigated the possibility of improving the practical significance of letters of recommendation is that of Carroll and Nash (1972). Their study researched the idea of using forced choice reference checks which could be used to evaluate potential job applicants. This type of recommendation form would require recommenders to

choose between specified behavioral descriptions that best identified the person for which they were completing the reference form.

Items considered for the form were collected from questionnaire responses and interviews of eight clerical supervisors. Items which were adopted for the form were statistically analyzed to determine the degree each item distinguished between good and bad employees. Afterwards, items that were about equal with respect to frequency of use and "emotional tone" were paired together. The final reference form contained 24 pairs.

In order to validate the form, it was sent to former employers of all the clerical workers, at a major university, during a specific two year period. The findings suggested that the overall composite score obtained was able to discriminate between a good and bad employee. These results imply that if the method of forced choice is used reference checks can become an asset to the people reading them.

Although numerous studies have identified the characteristic problems of letters of recommendation, and other studies have proposed alternative methods of evaluating these letters, a characteristic which could affect the reference reader's evaluation of the letter of recommendation that has received limited attention is attitude similarity. This variable is suggested since attitude similarity has been shown to increase variables as interpersonal attraction (Rand & Wexley, 1975); starting salary and competency (Baskett, 1973), hiring decisions (Griffitt & Jackson, 1970), and the overall evaluation of an applicant (Golightly, Hoffman, & Byrne, 1972).

Because attitudes can have such an overwhelming effect on the way one evaluates an applicant, it seems important to investigate the possibility of an attitude bias being formed by just reading a non-behavioral specific letter of recommendation. The above mentioned contingency becomes very important when one considers the findings of Peres and Garcia (1962) who factor analyzed adjectives from 625 reference letters and discovered that typical letters did not describe applicants in terms of observable behavior. Instead the letters described applicants by adjectives or generalized traits.

The concept of traits and the role they play in directing human behavior has been known for over fifty years (Allport 1937). However, as indicated by Arvey (1979), there has been little research investigating the perceptions of the people reading the letters and their interpretations of different traits in letters of recommendations. In light of the fact that

Baxter, Brock, Hill, and Rozelle (1981) suggested that the descriptive contents of recommendations resulted more from the recommenders' own idiosyncrasies rather than the recommendees' qualities, and Muchinsky (1979) indicated that letters of recommendation are basically just judgments of behavior, the interpretation of the various traits becomes a significant component in the overall reliability of a letter of recommendation. Sleight and Bell (1954) also reported that a letter of recommendation not only is the product of the applicant's ability but also the ability of the writer in presenting his/her thoughts. They also suggested that reference letters should focus on intangible characteristics such as personality traits to allow the writer complete freedom in selecting the factors to discuss.

Other research has demonstrated that not only do individual traits influence readers' interpretations of letters, but also the use of trait patterns attributed to applicants can affect the readers' impressions (Cohen & Bunker, 1975). In the absence of any behavioral examples the person reading the letter of recommendation will use descriptive traits to form a picture of the recommendee and then compare that impression with their own attitudes (Griffitt & Jackson, 1970). As stated earlier, attitude similarity alone can result in an increased positive evaluation of a reference letter. Thus if certain traits represent different behavioral images, individual differences between recommendation readers might cause them to evaluate the same recommendation differently, if only descriptive cues are present.

Statement of Problem

The possibility of individual differences affecting the method used by recommendation readers to rate traits used in letters of recommendation creates a question that prior research has yet to answer: Do blacks and whites perceive the same traits within a reference letter as being important? Although there is no research regarding the use of traits in letters of recommendation and how these traits are perceived by different readers, previous research (Cowan & Kasen, 1984; Rowe, 1963) has addressed the idea of individual differences regarding readers of the letters of recommendation. However, neither study investigated the variable of race.

Cowan & Kasen (1984) indicated that sex did not affect the interpretation of reference forms and that males and females inferred the same

meanings from the forms. In the study conducted by Cowan and Kasen, 102 university faculty members (54 women and 48 men) were mailed a letter of recommendation written for candidates for positions in the psychology and sociology departments. Subjects also received a questionnaire which asked them to state what impression they thought the reference letter would form on the reader. The findings of this research indicated that males and females interpreted letters of recommendation in the same manner.

Regardless of the fact that the aforementioned study suggested that male and female recommendation readers derive the same meaning from reference letters, the findings of Rowe (1963) revealed that past learning did affect the interpretation of traits used in written descriptions of applicants. This study required 263 personnel selection officers to review a fictitious job applicant description and then rate the applicant using the Characteristic Rating Scale. After analyzing the results of the study it was proposed that certain individual characteristics of the selection officers produced differences in the selection decisions. The differences were attributed to possible variations in an individual's category width. The concept of category width is based on the principle that each personnel selection officer who reviewed applicants' descriptions has an idea in his/her own mind about what is an "acceptable applicant". These individualized definitions of the appropriate applicant are determined by prior experiences and the motivational state of the selection officers (Bruner, 1957).

Since it has been shown that past learning can affect trait evaluations, one is left to wonder if this influence is strong enough to cause perceptual differences between blacks and whites. Thus, if prior learning can affect how a person rates a letter of recommendation, the question still remains: What most influences the person in the hiring position, the cultural background or the professional position that the person holds?

When the concept of black vs. white is considered, one cannot overlook the research which suggests that, as pointed out in chapter one, attitude similarity can be a major determinant in the evaluation of a person. If black and white professionals, for some reason or another, interpreted the same traits differently this could have a dramatic effect on the evaluation process of a reference letter, depending on who wrote the letter, as well as who reads the letter.

An important reason to investigate possible differences between these two groups of professionals is because when the reader of a refer-

ence letter observes a trait in the letter, the trait causes the reader to form an inference in his/her mind about the trait and the behavior that the trait represents (Carlston, 1980). Thus if blacks and whites form different behavioral inferences from the similar traits, the same applicant could be assessed differently depending on who read their recommendation. This possible assessment differential could also be influenced by the findings of Burnstein and Schul (1982) who observed how traits that allow for elaboration (e.g., dishonest, impolite, ambitious, trusting) are seen to be more important for forming an impression and lead to more rapid and extreme impressions of a person compared to those that are not perceived as open to elaboration (e.g., boring, touchy, eager, patient).

The present investigation was designed to test the notion that (due to the possible influences of culture and upbringing) black and white professionals might perceive the same traits within a letter of recommendation differently. The implications of the results and how they may influence the outcome of face-to-face interviews are discussed later.

Participants in the study were mailed a packet which contained a job description for an office manager, a letter of recommendation (one of a possible six), and a short questionnaire. After reviewing the job description and letter of recommendation, subjects were asked to evaluate the hypothetical applicant using the questionnaire. The results were analyzed to determine if the reader's race and/or specific recommendation type affected the assessment of the applicant.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 94 professionals (45 black, 49 white) who, currently or had previously, worked in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Positions held by the participants ranged from directors of large government agencies to independent consultants. The professionals chosen for the current study were obtained from the mailing list of a consulting firm located in Washington, D.C..

Procedure

Participants were mailed a packet which contained information per-

taining to a fictitious job applicant. All packets contained a cover letter, a letter of recommendation, and a job description. The excerpt from the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (D.O.T.), which is located in Appendix A, provided participants with a description of the job for which the applicant was applying. The job was that of an office manager whose duties included activities such as coordinating activities of clerical personnel, organizing office operations, evaluating office procedures, and preparing employee ratings.

Each applicant received one of six letters containing ten different adjectives. The adjectives used to profile applicants in each of the six letters of recommendation were obtained from the previously discussed study by Peres and Garcia (1962). Participants received one of the following types of descriptive letters of recommendation: 1) Dependability-Reliability (D-R), 2) Urbanity, 3) Vigor, 4) Cooperation-Consideration (C-C), 5) Mental-Agility (M- A), 6) Neutral. Each letter contained ten descriptive adjectives, with the neutral letter containing two adjectives from each group. Copies of these letters can be found in Appendix B. Adjectives used in each letter of recommendation were as follows:

Dependability-Reliability: Hard-working, confident, businesslike, efficient, alert, responsible, critical, decisive, thorough, detail-minded

Urbanity: Spirited, poised, fastidious, polished, gregarious, open, expressive, assured, neat, sociable

Vigor: Enterprising, ambitious, industrious, quick, energetic, enthusiastic, independent, self-starting, productive, zealous

Cooperation-Consideration: Congenial, accommodating, sincere, respectable, friendly, pleasant, sacrificing, stable, earnest, calm

Mental Agility: Resourceful, insightful, judicious, skilled, inquisitive, thoughtful, adaptable, astute, discerning, ability to use good judgment

Neutral: Respectable, determined, enterprising, insightful, gregarious, pleasant, hard-working, knowledgeable, polished, industrious

After reading the D.O.T. excerpt and the letter of recommendation, participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire containing the 11 Likert scale statements shown in Appendix C. These statements were designed to obtain the reader's image of the person described in the letter of recommendation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Racial Differences

The results of a *t*-test comparing average ratings across the six letter types and 11 rating scale categories by race showed that black professionals were inclined to rate applicants higher ($M = 7.26$) than were white professionals, ($M = 6.42$), $t(1, 90) = 89.9$, $p < .0007$. The greatest disparity in ratings resulted when readers were asked to state how considerate they imagined the applicant to be. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, race had a significant effect on how considerate the readers thought the applicant was. Black professionals pictured the applicants as being more considerate than did white professionals.

Effects of Letter Type

The type of letter reviewed by participants resulted in several significant findings. The type of letter of recommendation had an important effect on how readers assessed the applicants performance of their previous job, $F(5, 85) = 2.75$, $p < .02$. As shown in Table 3, applicants whose recommendation contained adjectives from the Cooperation-Consideration category were perceived as being able to perform their previous job less well than applicants who were described by adjectives from the other categories. Also, when they were asked to consider how well they thought the applicant would perform at the job for which they were applying there was a tendency for the type of letter to affect the reader's image of the applicant. Applicants described by adjectives from the Vigor and Mental Agility categories were seen as more able to perform the job in question than applicants described using adjectives from the Cooperation-Consideration category.

Table 1**Effect of Letter Reader's Race on Judgment of Applicant**

Rating Scale	Race		Significance Test	
	Blacks	Whites	F	<i>p</i> <
previous job	6.46 (1.97)	5.67 (2.00)	3.69	.05
job applying	5.71 (1.96)	4.84 (2.40)	3.44	.06
call applicant	5.44 (2.49)	4.64 (2.74)	2.57	.11
hire applicant	4.63 (2.01)	4.05 (1.99)	2.27	.13
reliable	7.34 (1.45)	6.53 (1.83)	5.97	.01
dependable	7.43 (1.45)	6.65 (1.71)	6.40	.01
social skills	7.10 (1.63)	6.24 (1.77)	5.98	.01
considerate	7.50 (1.12)	6.42 (1.69)	13.26	.0005
cooperative	7.55 (1.21)	6.90 (1.68)	4.83	.03

vigorous	7.38 (1.45)	7.08 (1.80)	.92	.33
mental agility	6.51 (1.92)	5.34 (2.09)	7.84	.006
Overall	7.26	6.42		

Table 2

ANOVA Source Table

Variable/Source	df	SS	F	p
Previous job				
race	1	13.53	3.69	.05
recomm	5	50.51	2.75	.02
race*recomm	5	12.04	.66	.65
error	85	311.90		
Job applying				
race	1	16.20	3.44	.06
recomm	5	48.33	2.05	.08
race*recomm	5	16.79	.71	.61
error	82	386.53		
Call applicant				
race	1	17.24	2.57	.11
recomm	5	60.60	1.80	.12
race*recomm	5	27.40	.82	.54
error	86	577.73		
Hire applicant				
race	1	8.83	2.27	.13
recomm	5	17.04	.87	.50
race*recomm	5	30.33	1.56	.18
error	86	335.29		

Reliable				
race	1	16.55	5.97	.01
recomm	5	10.67	.77	.57
race*recomm	5	18.18	1.31	.26
error	86	284.17		
Dependable				
race	1	15.76	6.40	.01
recomm	5	6.29	.51	.76
race*recomm	5	27.06	2.20	.06
error	86	211.85		
Social skills				
race	1	17.09	5.98	.01
recomm	5	30.32	2.12	.07
race*recomm	5	5.33	.38	.86
error	84	292.50		
Consideration				
race	1	28.54	13.36	.0005
recomm	5	15.95	1.48	.20
race*recomm	5	4.84	.45	.81
error	84	180.81		
Cooperation				
race	1	11.18	4.84	.03
recomm	5	9.78	.84	.52
race*recomm	5	3.31	.29	.91
error	86	199.05		
Vigor				
race	1	1.80	.92	.33
recomm	5	79.03	8.06	.0001
race*recomm	5	13.81	1.41	.22
error	85	166.61		
Mental agility				
race	1	30.65	7.84	.006
recomm	5	48.28	2.47	.03
race*recomm	5	5.77	.30	.91
error	85	332.63		

Table 3

Effect of Letter Type on Mean Judgment of Applicant

Rating Scale	Letter Type						Significance	
	D-R	U	V	C-C	MA	N	F	p
previous job	6.36	6.04	6.39	4.57	6.83	6.20	2.75	.02
job applying	4.85	5.49	5.92	3.99	5.97	5.42	2.05	.08
call applicant	4.41	5.61	5.61	3.72	5.58	5.29	1.80	.12
hire applicant	3.90	4.67	4.36	3.83	4.83	4.46	.87	.50
reliable	7.21	7.00	7.25	6.39	6.83	7.00	.77	.57
dependable	7.11	7.00	7.22	6.73	6.83	7.34	.51	.76
social skills	5.96	7.28	5.92	6.90	6.92	7.10	2.12	.07
considerate	6.54	7.08	6.31	7.42	7.17	7.03	1.48	.20
cooperative	6.71	7.56	6.86	7.49	7.39	7.35	.84	.52
vigorous	7.66	7.49	8.14	5.51	6.86	7.71	8.06	.0001
mental agility	6.00	5.83	6.86	4.56	6.08	6.23	2.47	.03

Interaction Between Reader's Race and Letter Type

As shown in Table 4, the interaction between recommendation reader's race and type of letter being reviewed resulted in only one significant interaction. The race of the participant when paired with a recommendation letter which described the applicant using adjectives from the Dependability-Reliability category demonstrated a marginally significant interaction, $F(5, 86) = 2.20, p < .06$. Black professionals who reviewed a reference letter which described applicants in terms of dependability and reliability rated applicants higher in terms of consideration and cooperation than white professionals who reviewed the same letter.

Table 4**Mean Ratings by Race of Letter Reader and the Dependable-Reliable Applicant Description**

Type of Letter	Race of Letter Reader		
	Black	White	Total
Dependability-Reliability	7.13	7.10	7.11
Urbanity	7.56	6.44	7.00
Vigor	7.00	7.44	7.22
Cooperation-Consideration	8.13	5.33	6.73
Mental Agility	7.33	6.33	6.83
Neutral	7.43	7.25	7.34
Combined	7.43	6.65	

The primary aim of the present study was to determine whether professionals of different racial backgrounds assign the same value to descriptive traits when they are used in letters of recommendations and whether these trait interpretations are related to the overall evaluation of potential applicants. The study investigated the effect that different adjective traits used to describe applicants in letters of recommendation had on the people reading the reference letter.

The results provide evidence that the racial disparities of the letter readers can indeed result in the same applicants being rated differently. The racial distinction is evidenced by the average overall ratings for each applicant between the two groups. There were significant differences between the two groups on all but three of the rating scales used in the evaluation process. These data show that black professionals perceived the applicants described in the letters of recommendation as being more proficient at their previous jobs and being better able to perform the job for which they were applying. This overall increased ability level is probably due to the fact that black professionals imagined the applicants as

more reliable, dependable, considerate, cooperative, mentally agile, as well as possessing better social skills, than did white professionals.

Although there is a lack of specific previous research which would elucidate why black professionals would be more inclined to evaluate the applicants more favorably than white professionals, there is an intuitive explanation which could help to explain this finding. The dissimilarity of ratings could have resulted from different category widths (Bruner, 1957) between black and white professionals. These differences in category widths could be the result of various prior experiences which were the consequence of the letter reader's cultural background. This is to say that the experiences of the black professionals might have caused them to be more tolerant when they form an image of what they believe is a satisfactory applicant.

This increased leniency could also be related to the age of the black professionals. Since the average age of this group surveyed was in the upper forties, it is probably safe to speculate that these people might have been required to overcome some unnecessary organizational obstacles to reach their upper level managerial positions, due to the lack of minorities in these positions at the time. This possibility of having to withstand non-job related challenges may have caused this group of professionals to provide applicants with the benefit of the doubt when they were being evaluated.

The results also demonstrated that certain adjective clusters used to describe applicants in letters of recommendation are more effective in eliciting positive images in the perceptions of the letter readers, than are others. This use of traits to affect applicant assessments is confirmed by the fact that people who were described by adjectives which represented considerate and cooperative connotations were pictured as not being as competent at their previous job when compared to applicants described by the other adjective categories. Letter readers also had a tendency to believe that applicants from the Consideration- Cooperation category would not be able to fulfill the duties necessary for the job for which they were applying as effectively as members from the other adjective categories.

These findings were probably due to the fact that applicants described in terms of consideration and cooperation were seen as less mentally agile than members of the other categories. This overall negative image readers seemed to form when reading letters of recommendation which relied heavily on consideration and cooperation related traits is

probably due to the readers thinking that the reference writers really do not have any positive work related comments to make thus they try to build-up the applicant's image as a person, since they are not the best employees.

Another interesting finding regarding the adjective categories is related to the possible manipulation of adjectives by letter writers to portray applicants in a certain manner. The results suggest that this could be done by using certain adjective clusters. The data revealed that applicants who were described by adjectives from the Vigor category were in fact pictured as being substantially more vigorous workers than the other applicants. Also there was a tendency for letter readers to picture applicants who were described by adjectives from the Urbanity category as possessing more social skills than applicants from the other categories.

The final significant finding reflects the interaction between the racial differences of the readers and the different descriptive traits used in the letters of recommendation. Since racial differences resulted in a general across the board difference in applicant ratings and various trait clusters also resulted in differences in applicant ratings, one might surmise that the interaction of these two conditions would result in some curious findings. However the data suggest otherwise. An examination of the data revealed only one marginally significant interaction regarding racial differences and the descriptive trait categories. It was discovered that when black professionals evaluated applicants via a letter of recommendation which emphasized their dependability and reliability, they pictured the applicants as being more considerate and cooperative than white professionals.

Implications

Since the findings of this study suggest that one's cultural background may affect a professional's evaluation process and that not all positive comments written about employees in letters of recommendation carry the same importance, several tentative implications appear warranted

1. The general favorability of the black professional's ratings could also be reflected in their writing of a reference letter for someone. This is to say that, since black professionals were more inclined to rate applicants higher they also might be more likely to speak highly of applicants when they themselves are asked to write a recommendation letter for a person.

2. During an interview an expectancy confirmation process usually

takes place (Darley & Fazio, 1980). Thus the interpretation of the descriptive traits in the letter of recommendation may cause the interviewer to become entangled in a self-fulfilling prophecy which might cause the interviewer to misjudge the applicant's actions. Therefore if one's race could cause people to evaluate traits in a different manner, cultural background may also result in assessment differences of an applicant's actions. The point is that an applicant's response to the interviewer's actions may be very inexplicit, but the race of the interviewer may cause this person to evaluate the ambiguous response in a biased manner (Darley & Fazio, 1980).

3. From an applied and practical standpoint there were basically no information processing differences between black and white professionals. This is because there were no differences in applicant ratings between the two groups concerning the intent to call the applicant or to hire the applicant. Although the black professionals perceived the applicants to be better former and future employees, they were still no more inclined to bring the applicant in for an interview or hire the applicant given that the person provided a competent interview. This suggests that even though black professionals imagined the applicant in a more positive framework than white professionals, this perception is not strong enough to change their behavior.

4. Although the above point hypothesized that black professionals' general favorability of the applicant does not affect their actual behavior, this may not be true in a real life situation. A study by Dipboye (1982) found that the more favorably an interviewer judged an applicant's qualifications prior to the interview the more favorably the interviewer evaluates the applicant's qualifications after the interview and the more favorable the decision reached regarding the applicant. Thus, if black professionals are more prone to assess an applicant's letter of recommendation auspiciously, they may well be more likely than white professionals to evaluate the applicant's interview favorably. Research has also shown that the more favorably the interviewer views an applicant's letter of recommendation the more likely the interviewer will make internal attributions about the applicant's past success and fewer internal attributions about past failures (Tucker and Rowe, 1979).

5. Since in many cases the contents of letters of recommendation are a collection of the recommender's own self perceptions (Brock *et al.*, 1981), trait inconsistency might exist between the employee's actual behavior and the recommender's interpretation of the behavior. This

factor becomes important when the lack of parity of various positive trait descriptions is considered. The relevancy of trait interpretation inequality is pertinent because the gap between the referrer and the reviewer would become most pronounced during the time when the letter reader was required to make a decision regarding the trait description (e.g., the interview). This is because how a person interprets the adjectives used in the reference letter impacts the other information used to make judgments (Burnstein and Schul, 1982).

In sum, the results from the present study demonstrate that when professionals of different racial backgrounds use only descriptive traits to form an image of a job applicant, black professionals will generally evaluate the applicant more favorably than white professionals. The findings also indicate that not all positive traits used to describe applicants in reference letters are judged equally by the people who read these letters of recommendation.

REFERENCES

- Allport, G. W. (1937). *Personality: A psychological interpretation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Arvey, R. D. (1979). Unfair discrimination in the employment interview: Legal and psychological aspects. *Psychological Bulletin*, 86(4), 736-765.
- Baskett, G. D. (1973). Interview decisions as determined by competency and attitude similarity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 57(3), 342-345.
- Baxter, J. C., Brock, B., Hill, P. C., & Rozelle, R. M. (1981). Letters of recommendation: A question of value. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 66(3), 296-301.
- Browning, R. (1968). Validity of reference ratings from previous employers. *Personnel Psychology*, 21, 389-393.
- Bruner, J. S. (1957). On perceptual readiness. *Psychological Review*, 64, 123-152.
- Burnstein, E., & Schul, Y. (1982). The informational basis of social judgments: Operations in forming an impression of another person. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 18, 217-234.
- Carlston, D. E. (1971). The recall and use of traits and events in social inference processes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 16, 303-328.

- Carroll, S. J., & Nash, A. N. (1972). Effectiveness of a forced-choice reference check. *Personnel Administration*, 42-46.
- Ceci, S. J., & Peters, D. (1984). Letters of reference: A naturalistic study of the effects of confidentiality. *American Psychologist*, 39(1), 29-31.
- Cohen, S. L. & Bunker, K. A. (1975). Subtle effects of sex role stereotypes on recruiters' hiring decisions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 60(5), 566-572.
- Cowan, G., & Kasen, J. H. (1984). Form of reference: sex differences in letters of recommendation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46(3), 636-645.
- Darley, J. M., & Fazio, R. H. (1980). Expectancy confirmation process arising in the social interaction sequence. *American Psychologist*, 35(10), 867-881.
- Dipboye, R. L., Fromkin, H. L., & Wilback, K. (1975). Relative importance of applicant sex, attractiveness, and scholastic standing in evaluation of job applicant resumes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 60 (1), 39-43.
- Dipboye, R. L., Arvey, R. D., & Terpstra D. E. (1977). Sex and physical attractiveness of raters and applicants as determinants of resume evaluations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 62(3), 288-294.
- Dipboye, R. L. (1982). Self-fulfilling prophecies in the selection-recruitment interview. *Academy of Management Review*, 7(4), 579-586.
- Golightly, C., Hoffman, P. M., & Byrne, D. (1972). Liking and loaning. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 56(6), 521-523.
- Griffitt, W., & Jackson, T. (1970). Influence of information about ability and non-ability on personnel selection decisions. *Psychological Reports*, 27, 959-962.
- Haefner, J. E. (1977). Race, age, sex, and competence as factors in employer selection of the disadvantaged. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 62(2), 199-202.
- Heneman, H. G. (1977). Impact of test information and applicant sex on applicant evaluations in a selection simulation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 62(4), 524-526.
- Knouse, S. B. (1983). The letter of recommendation: Specificity and favorability of information. *Personnel Psychology*, 36, 331-341.
- McDonald, T., & Hakel, M. D. (1985). Effects of applicant race, sex suitability, and answers on interviewer's questioning strategy and ratings. *Personnel Psychology*, 38, 321-334.

- Mehrabian, A. (1965). Communication length as an index communicator attitude. *Psychological Reports, 17*, 519-522.
- Miller, J. W., & Rowe, P. M. (1967). Influence of favorable and unfavorable information upon assessment decisions. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 51*(5), 432-435.
- Mosel, J. N., & Goheen, H. W. (1959). The employment recommendation questionnaire: Validity of different types of references. *Personnel Psychology, 12*, 469-477.
- Muchinsky, P. M. (1979). The use of reference reports in personnel selection: A review and evaluation. *Journal of Occupational Psychology, 52*, 287-297.
- Peres, S. H., & Garcia, R. (1962). Validity and dimensions of descriptive adjectives used in reference letters for engineering applicants. *Personnel Psychology, 15*, 279-286.
- Rand, T. M., & Wexley, K. N. (1975). Demonstration of the effect "similar to me" in simulated employment interviews. *Psychological Reports, 36*, 535-544.
- Rosen, B., & Jerdee, T. H. (1974). Effects of applicant sex and difficulty of job on evaluations of candidates for managerial positions. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 59* (4), 511-512.
- Rowe, P. M. (1963). Individual differences in selection decisions. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 47*(5) 304-307.
- Schmidt, F. L., & Johnson, R. H. (1973). Effect of race on peer ratings in an industrial situation. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 57*, 237-241.
- Shaffer, R. D., Mays, V. P., & Etheridge, K. (1976). Who shall be hired: A biasing effect of the Buckley Amendment on employment practices. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 61*(5), 571-575.
- Shaffer, R. D., & Tomarelli M. (1981). Bias in the ivory tower: An unintentional consequence of the Buckley Amendment for graduate admissions? *Journal of Applied Psychology, 66*(1), 7-11.
- Slieght, R. B., Bell, G. D. (1954). Desirable content of letters of recommendation. *Personnel Journal, 32*(11), 421-422.
- Triandis, H. C. (1963). Factors affecting employee selection in two cultures. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 47*(2), 89-96.
- Tucker, D. H., & Rowe, P. M. (1979). Relationship between expectancy, causal attributions, and final hiring decisions in employment interview. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 64*(1), 27-34.

- Wexley, K. N., & Nemeroff, W. F. (1974). The effects of racial prejudice, race of applicant, and biographical similarity on interviewer evaluations of job applicants. *Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 20, 66-78.
- Wiens, A. N., Jackson, R. H., Manaugh, T. S., & Matarazzo, J. D. (1969). Communication length as an index of communicator attitude. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 53(4), 264-266.
- Whitcomb, A. J., & Bryan, D. A. (1988). Inter-rater reliability and validity in letters of recommendations. *Proceedings of the 9th annual Graduate Conference in Industrial/Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*.

Devon A. Bryan
Human Resource Administrative Supervisor
Avon Products, Inc.
6901 Golf Road
Morton Grove, IL 60053
(708) 470-5583

APPENDIX A: Job Description

169.167-034 MANAGER, OFFICE (any ind.) chief; manager, administrative services

Coordinates activities of clerical personnel in establishment or organization: Analyzes and organizes office operations and procedures, such as typing, bookkeeping, preparation of payroll, flow of correspondence, filing, requisition of supplies, and revises procedures, or devises new forms to improve efficiency of workflow. Establishes uniform correspondence procedures and style practices. Formulates procedures for systematic retention, protection, retrieval, transfer, and disposal of records. Plans office layouts and initiates cost reduction programs. Reviews clerical and personnel records to insure completeness, accuracy, and timeliness. Prepares activities reports for guidance of management. Prepares employee ratings and conducts employee benefit and insurance programs. Coordinates activities of various clerical departments or workers within department.

APPENDIX B: Copies of Recommendations

Dependability-Reliability

Mr. Smith requested that I write a letter of recommendation to support his record while working for us. I am honored to be able to write a reference letter for such a hard-working employee. This person was one of the most confident workers ever to work for our company. All of the work completed by Bill reflected his businesslike approach towards the job.

Beside doing efficient work, Bill has a very alert personality. His responsible attitude always enhanced the office area. I am confident that a person like Bill who possesses so many critical qualities will be a beneficial addition to your staff.

Once again I would just like to stress that Bill was a decisive employee whom I predict will do thorough work if given the chance to exhibit his capabilities. I am sure that Bill's detail-mindedness will allow him to succeed at any position he may encounter.

Urbanity

Mr. Smith requested that I write a letter of recommendation to support his record while working for us. I am honored to be able to write a reference letter for such a spirited employee. This person was one of the most poised workers ever to work for our company. All of the work completed by Bill reflected his fastidious approach towards the job.

Beside doing polished work, Bill has a very gregarious personality. His open attitude always enhanced the office area. I am confident that a person like Bill who possesses so many expressive qualities will be a beneficial addition to your staff.

Once again I would just like to stress that Bill was a assured employee whom I predict will do neat work if given the chance to exhibit his capabilities. I am sure that Bill's sociability will allow him to succeed at any position he may encounter.

Mr. Smith requested that I write a letter of recommendation to support his record while working for us. I am honored to be able to write a reference letter for such an enterprising employee. This person was one of the most ambitious workers ever to work for our company. All of the work completed by Bill reflected his industrious approach towards the job.

Beside doing quick work, Bill has a very energetic personality. His enthusiastic attitude always enhanced the office area. I am confident that a person like Bill who possesses so many independent qualities will be a beneficial addition to your staff.

Once again I would just like to stress that Bill was a self-starting employee whom I predict will do productive work if given the chance to exhibit his capabilities. I am sure that Bill's zealously will allow him to succeed at any position he may encounter.

Cooperation-Consideration

Mr. Smith requested that I write a letter of recommendation to support his record while working for us. I am honored to be able to write a reference letter for such a congenial employee. This person was one of the most accommodating workers ever to work for our company. All of the work completed by Bill reflected his sincere approach towards the job.

Beside doing respectable work, Bill has a very friendly personality. His pleasant attitude always enhanced the office area. I am confident that a person like Bill who possesses so many sacrificing qualities will be a beneficial addition to your staff.

Once again I would just like to stress that Bill was a stable employee whom I predict will do earnest work if given the chance to exhibit his capabilities. I am sure that Bill's calmness will allow him to succeed at any position he may encounter.

Mental Agility

Mr. Smith requested that I write a letter of recommendation to support his record while working for us. I am honored to be able to write a reference letter for such a resourceful employee. This person was one of the most insightful workers ever to work for our company. All of the work completed by Bill reflected his judicious approach towards the job.

Beside doing skilled work, Bill has a very inquisitive personality. His thoughtful attitude always enhanced the office area. I am confident that a person like Bill who possesses so many adaptable qualities will be a beneficial addition to your staff.

Once again I would just like to stress that Bill was an astute employee whom I predict will do discerning work if given the chance to exhibit his capabilities. I am sure that Bill's ability to use good judgment will allow him to succeed at any position he may encounter.

Neutral

Mr. Smith requested that I write a letter of recommendation to support his record while working for us. I am honored to be able to write a reference letter for such a respectable employee. This person was one of the most determined workers ever to work for our company. All of the work completed by Bill reflected his enterprising approach towards the job.

Beside doing insightful work, Bill has a very gregarious personality. His pleasant attitude always enhanced the office area. I am confident that a person like Bill who possesses so many hard-working qualities will be a beneficial addition to your staff.

Once again I would just like to stress that Bill was a knowledgeable employee whom I predict will do polished work if given the chance to exhibit his capabilities. I am sure that Bill's industriousness will allow him to succeed at any position he may encounter.

APPENDIX C: Questions used for analysis in this study.

1. How well do you think this person performed at their previous job?

very poorly

very well

2. How well do you think this person will perform at the job for which they are applying?

very poorly

very well

3. What would be the possibility that you would call this person in for an interview?

none

high

4. Given that the person in question provided a competent, yet not an exceptional interview, what would be the possibility of you hiring this person, if there was a position available?

none

high

The following are adjectives which could be used to describe the person applying for the job, please check the space which reflects your image of this person.

5. Unreliable reliable

--- --- --- --- --- --- --- ---

6. Not dependable dependable

--- --- --- --- --- --- --- ---

7. Lacks social skills refined in mannerisms

--- --- --- --- --- --- --- ---

8. Inconsiderate considerate

--- --- --- --- --- --- --- ---

9. Uncooperative cooperative

--- --- --- --- --- --- --- ---

10. Lazy vigorous

--- --- --- --- --- --- --- ---

11. Lacks cognitive ability quick to comprehend

--- --- --- --- --- --- --- ---