Implicit Racial Bias in Letters of Recommendation: Medical Residency Programs

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Letters of recommendation (LOR) are a valuable component in the residency programs selection process used to support the application. Strong letters of recommendation can offer a comprehensive view of an applicant. The letters are used to provide the residency admission committees with a unique perspective into an applicant's work ethic, capabilities, and academic strengths (Rajesh, 2019). However, the subjective nature of the letter can introduce implicit biases and affect the overall perception of an applicant (Filippou et al., 2019). While many LOR writers attempt to be egalitarian, evidence suggests that implicit bias is still present (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). An example of implicit biases is the word count being dependent on the applicant's identity. If the LOR writer has a bias against a student's identity, the letter will often have a lower word count (Dutt et al., 2016). This has been a significant factor in diminishing the opportunities for African Americans (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) applying for residency in a medical program.

What is Implicit Bias?

Implicit bias found within the LOR may contribute to the low representation of minority communities in the radiation oncology physician workforce (Chapman et al., 2013). Researchers have shown that implicit bias, also known as unconscious bias, substantially contributes to racial

inequities in education. Our knowledge, behaviors, and choices are influenced by behavior or stereotypes that subconsciously affect us (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). In the 1990s, the Implicit Association was developed by Anthony Greenwald, a prominent researcher on implicit bias (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). It was designed to examine people's initial reactions to different words and images to understand prejudice better. The survey indicated that people are more likely to use disparaging terms to describe African American people, compared to their White counterparts (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). As a society, we encourage equality and diversity, but it appears that our instincts are laced with bias.

Shortage of African American Residents

Studies have shown a shortfall of underrepresented minorities in medicine and reveal a need to increase the pipeline of minorities pursuing careers in medicine (AAMC, 2017). Dr. Marc A. Nivet, a researcher from UT Southwestern Medical Center, stated that "… the primary problem for Black males in pursuing medicine or any professional career is racism and bias, but it does not take the form we traditionally think of such as closed doors or signs that say Blacks not allowed (Forbes.com; see Brownlee, 2020)." Furthermore, a lack of diversity in healthcare has long-term effects (AAMC, 2017). To ensure that residents better represent the population the medical community wants, it is vital to be aware of biases in language and conduct while writing LOR. If this issue is not addressed, the health outcomes of African Americans will suffer the most.

Recognizing Implicit Bias

Edgoose and colleagues (2019) strongly encourage using the mnemonic "IMPLICIT" to help mitigate implicit biases:

Introspection: Find out what kinds of beliefs you have by conducting implicit association tests or other self-reflective techniques.

Mindfulness: Focused breathing and other stress-reducing techniques can help you avoid succumbing to your biases when under stress.

Perspective-taking: Consider the stereotyped person's point of view when evaluating your own experiences. There are several ways to achieve this, such as reading or watching content about these experiences or directly interacting with people from those groups.

Learn to slow down: Pause and ponder before engaging in conversation with persons from marginalized groups.

Individuation: Evaluate people on their own merits, not based on affiliation with a particular organization, such as a shared hobby.

Check your messaging: Use comments that encourage and support multiculturalism or other differences instead of saying things like "we do not see color."

Institutionalize fairness: Promote an inclusive work environment by fostering an organizational ethos of tolerance and respect. An "equity lens" tool or a study of the images in your office can help you uncover your group's blind spots and help you avoid perpetuating stereotypes.

Take two: Resisting implicit bias is lifelong work. You have to constantly restart the process and look for a new way to challenge yourself.

Recognizing unconscious factors that impact African American in Medical Residency Programs are paramount. Unfortunately, research investigating implicit racial bias in the context of LORs is very limited, suggesting that the influence of implicit bias in LORs should be further explored.

Reflection Questions for Practitioners

1. What is the relationship between your work and implicit bias?

2. As a person and a professional, how may you benefit from examining your own unconscious bias?

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