“And a Charming Wife”: Gender, Marriage, and Manhood in the Job Search Process*

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The academic job search process, and the applications and reference letters that are constitutive elements of that process, are central to the creation and re-creation of a discipline. Disciplines and departments renew and re-create themselves—or do not, and merely replicate themselves—through hirings. A job search process can serve to hinder changes in the membership, culture, “look,” and the norms of the discipline, or it can facilitate dramatic and often rapid transformations. Job search materials thus provide an insight into the prevailing norms and conventions of a discipline. A review of a recent set of such materials reveals subtle gendered and racialized differences in the job search process. Such differences are apparent in the composition of referee committees, in the evocation of marital status both by applicants and by referees, and in the surprising persistence of themes of robust manhood. The referee pool, the applicant pool, and the search committee pool in an academic discipline are interlocked constituencies, and the job search process plays a “gatekeeping” role. The extent to which gender or racial differences are inserted into the job process thus has a bearing on the long term social construction of the discipline. Key Words: gender, job search, manhood.

My department, a midsized one in a public university, has recently experienced considerable faculty turnover, primarily as the result of a rapid succession of retirements. Consequently, in the mid-1990s we conducted six national job searches in geography in as many years, some for tenure-track and some for temporary openings, split between jobs in physical and human geography. Having served as a member on each of the search committees for these jobs, I feel as though I have reviewed applications from most of the geographers who have recently been on the job market in North America, and have read reference letters from a sizable share of all geography faculty in North America. (While this may be somewhat of an exaggeration, it is surely not too much of one.)

In the course of reviewing the hundreds of applications and referee letters that these searches yielded, I developed a general sense that there persist some significant gender and racialized differences in the nature of applications and reference letters. This vague and poorly defined sense was brought into sharper relief during one job search in which two of the referee letters detoured into egregiously inappropriate discussions of personal matters about applicants. Provoked by those letters, and given the opportunity to reflect on these issues as a participant in a 1998 AAG conference panel on women’s experiences in the academic job market, I decided to undertake a more systematic and purposeful examination of applications and reference letters.¹

Scope of the Study/Use of Sources

I believe that this study is the first in geography to use job application files and reference letters as a data source for disciplinary research. Such materials were long ago discovered as a valuable source for scholarly study—and retrospective examination—in disciplines such as psychology (Fidell 1970; Lunneborg and Lillie 1973; Bronstein et al. 1986), English (Hoffman 1972; Wermuth 1982), education (Guillemin et al. 1979), and women’s studies (Farley 1978), but not in geography. Perhaps because of the relatively small proportion of women in geography, there has been limited scrutiny of the internal structures and systems of employment in our discipline. However, the value of using these sources for glimpsing the inner workings of a discipline should not be minimized: the job search process, and the applications and reference letters that are key constitutive elements of that process, are central to the creation and re-creation of a discipline. Disciplines and departments renew and re-create themselves—or

¹ My thanks to the anonymous reviewers, and also to Heidi Nast, Janice Monk, Phyllis Bronstein, and the co-panelists in this session.
do not, and merely replicate themselves—through hirings. A job search process can serve to hinder changes in the membership, culture, “look,” and the norms of the discipline, or it can facilitate dramatic and often rapid transformations. Within this process, referee letters are key gatekeeping tools. Applications provide an insight into the prevailing norms and conventions of a discipline.

This study provides a snapshot of the contemporary job search process in our discipline, but it is a limited one. First, this study is primarily focused on the gendered dynamics of applications and referee letters. I had hoped to undertake a multidimensional analysis, looking not just at gender but also at “race”/ethnicity. However, while I have been alert to “racialized” aspects of the job search process, and identify them when possible, a systematic examination of this is not possible using applications and reference letters as sources. Nondiscrimination norms have become widely adopted, at least to the extent that applicants and referees seldom identify racial or ethnic identity (of themselves or of each other). Further, it is difficult to build a comprehensive “race”/ethnic profile of the actors in a job search process by looking at names, and most “secondary” signifiers such as pronouns (which reveal gender even if a name is gender-neutral) are of no help in discerning “race”/ethnicity. Secondly, while I cast this study as an examination of the “job search process,” I restricted my examination to the use of the written applicant and referee materials that constitute that process; I have not attempted to assess the dynamics of hiring committees or interviews. Finally, I focus primarily on the intrusion of the personal into the professional: this is the realm of greatest concern in employment discrimination case law in North America, this is where some of the most serious violations occur of both the letter and the spirit of regulations governing the job search process, and this is also often the most contentious issue internally in search committees. In the labor history of North America, the conflation of the personal and professional has especially worked against the interests of women in the job search—and employment—process. Childbearing and marital status are particularly fraught for women on the job market (and are interpreted quite differently for men, as I discuss below) so I especially focused on the representation of these issues in my review of applications and reference letters.

To compile this snapshot, I reviewed the universe of job application files and referee letters received by my department for five job searches conducted between academic years 1994 and 1998: in total there were 496 applications, 388 (78%) of which were from men, 108 (22%) from women. Two of the searches were defined as physical geography jobs, two were in human geography, and the fifth was for a loosely defined “human-environment relations” opening. All five positions were for openings at the assistant professor level, and all five specified a requirement for PhD completion by time of hire.

At 22%, the proportion of female applicants is slightly lower than the proportion of female PhD recipients in geography (approximately 27% for the ten-year period ending in 1994-1995, according to latest AAG figures). This asymmetry is not unusual: other disciplines have reported that the proportion of female applicants for academic jobs is noticeably smaller than the proportion of women with suitable academic credentials. For example, a mid-1980s study of job searches in psychology found that while women represented 45% of PhD recipients in that discipline, they represented only approximately 30% of academic applicants (Bronstein et al. 1986). The smaller gap in geography between the rate of PhD credentialling and academic job applications of women is a promising sign, although a more meaningful signifier would be the hiring rate of women; current data on this for the discipline are not available.

Referees

It will come as no surprise to any of the “senior” women in geography (most of whom feel as though they are constantly writing reference letters) that women applicants rely heavily on other women to serve as referees for jobs in geography. What may be somewhat more surprising in the mid-1990s is the converse: that the majority of male applicants for jobs list no women as referees. As Table 1 shows, two-thirds (67%) of women applicants relied at least to some extent on women to serve as referees; this was only true for just more than one-third (38%) of male applicants. But it is also the case that there is a corollary gender asymmetry:
women applicants are much more dependent on men for recommendations than male applicants are on women. Only two women applicants listed an all-female suite of referees (and no male applicants did so). And, as Table 1 also indicates, for 98% of women applicants men were part of the referee contingent, while for only 38% of male applicants were women referees part of the referee cohort. The finding that women rely heavily on other women for job support and networking, and that men do not, is congruent with studies of referee structures in other disciplines (see, for example, Bronstein et al. 1986), and also with broader research on employment networking, including research by geographers (particularly Hanson and Pratt 1991, 1995).

### The Legal Context of Job Searches

In the US, it is now against federal law to take into account certain categories of “personal information” about job applicants in making employment decisions. Federal law is supported in this by local and professional protocols. For example, in 1992 the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a “Code of Recruitment Ethics”—meant to be used by and for faculty searches, among other things—that echo these legal strictures, mandating that only those qualifications explicitly listed in the job advertisement can be taken into account in hiring decisions (Report 1993). Similarly, many disciplines (though not geography) have developed codes of ethics that identify a “clean” line between what is appropriate information and what is inappropriate in job searches.

The foundation for virtually all fair employment law in the US dates to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which (unintentionally, it turns out) included gender protection. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 further specified gender-based protections under federal law. Equally important in academia is the Title IX legislation of 1972, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex in educational programs or activities which receive Federal funds. Building on these foundations, an accumulation of “case law” (case-by-case legal decisions) refined the scope of what are considered to be inappropriate bases for employment and hiring decisions (Gray 1985). This is still shifting legal terrain, but currently a legally “clean” job search is one that takes no account of sex, racial, or ethnic identity, national origin, marital status, childbearing status, age, religious preference, or disability. (It is not illegal to have such information, nor, technically, even to ask for it—but since it is illegal to take such factors into consideration, it is wisest for search committees to avoid these and related “personal” topics.) Additionally, local regulations—especially at universities—may forbid consideration of other factors, most often including sexual orientation.

Much of the case law in the US on fair employment practice derives from specific gender discrimination complaints that have been tested in courts since the early 1970s. These cases were prompted by substantial and irrefutable evidence that inappropriate consideration of personal attributes had resulted in systematic discrimination against women in employment—in hiring, compensation, retention, promotion, and assignment of duties. At much the same time, feminist rhetoricians and linguists began a systematic study of the ways in which language was gender-encoded, and of the role of language in perpetuating gender differences in power relationships. Scholarly work in this area raised consciousness and helped to shape the legal context that now frames job searches (see, for example, Lakoff 1975; Miller and Swift 1980; Spender 1980; Frank and Treichler 1989; Schwarz 1995).

### The “Marriage Factor”

In modern labor history, the relationship between women, work, and marriage has been par-

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**Table 1  Gender Differences in the Use of Male and Female Referees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Women Applicants</th>
<th>Male Applicants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Of the 108 women applicants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listed no female referees</td>
<td>36 (33%)</td>
<td>241 (62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listed at least one woman referee, but in total</td>
<td>53 (49%)</td>
<td>125 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women referees comprised less than half of all those listed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>for 19 (18%), women referees comprised half or more than half of the full complement of referees listed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Of the 388 male applicants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listed no female referees</td>
<td>241 (62%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>125 (32%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women referees comprised less than half of all those listed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for 22 (6%), women referees comprised half or more than half of the full complement of referees listed</td>
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particularly fraught with negative connotations. Women have faced concerted job discrimination based on childbearing and marital status. Considerations of whether a woman is married or not, has children or not, or is deemed “likely” to have children have been routinely inserted into decisions about women’s employment.

A long-standing “marriage bar” (Goldin 1988) to women’s employment operated both formally and informally in the American economy. Until surprisingly recently, in many occupations—including, prominently, teaching—women were expected to stop working when they got married (and most certainly if they got pregnant). The bias against married women participating in the waged workforce reflects myriad factors. For conservative ideologues, married women’s participation in waged work was considered a blow to manhood, a sign that the husband was not the good provider he was supposed to be. Male labor organizers have often seen women as competitors in the workforce, a “threat” that could be reduced by the imposition of tangible and ideological barriers to married women’s participation in the workforce. Feminist analysis has extensively detailed the extent to which it served the interests of both patriarchy and capitalism to keep married women in the home (see, for example, Amott and Matthaei 1996; Markusen 1980), and geographers have extensively studied the spatial structures constructed to contain this ideology. Statistics on labor force participation reflect the effectiveness of the “marriage bar”: married women’s rate of participation still lags behind that of single women. It should be noted in passing that this bias against married women (or, conversely, a preference for single women) in the workforce is neither exclusive to the US nor simply an historical curiosity. For example, much of the contemporary global economy runs on the labor of single women, who are the explicitly preferred workers in export processing zones (EPZs) and assembly production of all kinds. Although the legal (and almost all of the ideological) “marriage bars” in the United States have been dismantled, the fact of marriage still does not have the same resonance in the workforce for men and women. Married women are still often construed as wives first and workers second.

A reverse set of ideologies and assumptions revolve around marriage, men, and work. In terms of employment prospects, marriage for a man has long been construed as an asset: it suggests stability, a man with responsibilities, a man who will “settle down.” Until recently, a wife—assuming she was an acceptable variety of wifedom—was generally seen as a contributor to her husband’s career, or at least someone who could potentially make such contributions. In American labor history, there are only a very few examples of jobs that privilege (let alone have required) singleness for men. One example might be the military—over the past hundred years or so, military personnel planners have equivocated on whether it is better to have single or married (male) soldiers (Enloe 2000)—but even this equivocation is exceptional: overwhelmingly, marriage has worked in the interests of men in the labor force.

This is particularly the case in American academia. Until recently, the professoriate was almost entirely male, and the academic man was expected to have a “wife.” Charles Eliot, an influential architect of American higher education during its formative years of professionalization at the turn of this century, explicitly expected male professors to marry. At Harvard University, Eliot fashioned blueprints for what would become the model for a successful academic career in American universities, a model that historian Burton Bledstein (1978, 308–9) describes:

Eliot asserted internal institutional control by laying out the career pattern any faculty member must follow who had expectations of advancement at Harvard and in the American university. After the bachelor’s degree, the young scholar should expect to spend successive periods of three to four years in professional study, in annual appointments in subordinate places, and as an instructor. Then followed five to ten years as an assistant professor. He should not expect promotion to the rank of full professor before the age of forty and perhaps never. All this time, of course, he must behave as both a good citizen and a worthy representative of the institution. The period of probation for promotion was lengthy, during which time a candidate was evaluated in various ways. For example, Eliot expected aspiring university teachers to marry, and before promoting an individual he observed the suitability of the wife. “It is a good deal safer,” he said euphemistically, “to give a life office to a married man on whom marriage has proved to have a good effect, than to a single man who may shortly be married with uncertain results.”
By the 1950s, the “faculty wife” had become such a distinctive role that it was virtually its own sociological type. Such a wife would, of course, provide household “support services,” relieving the husband of responsibility for managing daily life in the family. More than this, the academic wife (who would have to be intellectually lively and smart, but not so much as to overshadow her husband) would provide hospitality for colleagues and students; she would serve as the emotional prop for the husband as he climbed the academic hierarchy; and, at her best, the wife of an academic man would be practically useful, providing in-house typing and editing services, for example. In the early 1970s, Jill Johnston (1973, acknowledgement) parodied the classic male academic book acknowledgment that captured the role of the faculty wife:

I wish I could say that I had a number of wives who cheerfully read my manuscript and made the most helpful suggestions throughout and contributed invaluable encouragement and criticism at each stage of work as well as untiring help typing and retyping and reading proofs and assisting in bibliographic work in various American and European libraries and without whose loving inspiration this book would not have come into being and so on but I can’t.

While these representations of “the faculty wife” may be, by now, outmoded caricatures, the evidence from this review of the job search process suggests that it is still the case that a “wife” is seen as an asset to a husband’s academic career in a way that a “husband” is not to a wife’s career. Contemporary American academia is still cocooned in a cultural memory of a presumed golden age of academia represented by a particular configuration of wives, husbands, and faculty careers. There appears to remain generalized conventional wisdom (often unarticulated in today’s EEOC-monitored job searches, but present nonetheless) that husbands will distract women from their job responsibilities, while wives will facilitate men’s professional path; that husbands will demand attention from the woman worker, while wives will give attention to the male worker; that husbands act as a centrifugal force, while wives are centripetal.7

Applicant Self-Disclosure About Marriage

Despite changes in the cultural and legal context of marriages and job searches and in the composition of the professoriate, a review of job applications and reference letters reveals that the “marriage factor” remains an element in the job search process in geography. While the great majority of applicants, both male and female, included no information about their marital status, a surprising share did, as shown in Table 2.

That men are broadly more willing than women to reveal personal information about themselves in their applications is suggested by the number who identify age/birthdate: 31% of male applicants and 16% of female include this information on their CVs. The convention of listing age on the CV may be partially a function of cultural/national differences in norms of resumes: about half of the applicants (in both male and female pools) who listed their birthdate are non-American, and it is evident from my review of applications that listing age or birthdate is more of a European and “Commonwealth” convention than an American one. While this explains the prevalence of age revelations, it does not dilute or explain the significance of the gender difference in applicants’ decisions to reveal personal data.

The gender gap on marital self-disclosure is striking.8 Clearly by the time most women are in graduate school they have developed a sense that revealing personal information about themselves will not necessarily improve their job prospects. Accumulated lifetime experiences make women leery about revealing personal information—of any kind—in profes-

Table 2 Gender Differences in Applicants’ Mention of Marital Status and Other Personal Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male Applicants</th>
<th>Female Applicants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of applicants listing marital status on CV</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as % of respective m/f pool</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional number of applicants mentioning spouse in cover letter</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of applicants naming spouse on CV</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as % of respective m/f pool</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as % of those who listed marital status</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of applicants listing birthdate on CV as % of respective m/f pool</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as % of those who listed marital status</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of applicants: male = 388; female = 108.
sional contexts, more so than men: women have safety concerns that men do not, but they also realize that information about age, for example, is likely to be received differently for men and women. Even if women applicants in geography are unaware of the detailed history of marriage-based employment discrimination (and the efforts to combat it), a review of these applications suggests that most women understand that revealing the presence of a “husband” adds little to their application for jobs and indeed may work against them. This conclusion is supported by studies of job applications in other disciplines (see, for example, Bronstein et al. 1986) which also indicate that women on the academic job market consciously decide not to reveal marital status.

Conversely, a surprisingly large share of male applicants feel no hesitation about revealing their marital status. Indeed, many advertise prominently the presence of a “wife” in their job applications. Sixteen percent of male applicants (compared with 9% of female applicants) listed marital status on their CVs. The fact that it is “being married” and not just an unsigned category of personal information that is being presented is suggested by further analysis of the presentation of marital information. Although most candidates who include this information usually put it on their CVs under the neutral heading of “marital status,” in fact 54 of the 62 men (87%) who listed marital information were married, as were nine of the ten women (90%). Clearly, then, it is being married itself and not just the more neutral “marital status” that is being presented as the salient characteristic of the applicant’s candidacy.

In addition to the 62 male applicants who listed marital status on their CVs, another ten mentioned their wife in their application cover letter (and one did both); another two women mentioned their spouse in their cover letter (and one included it in both letter and CV). The practice of naming the spouse on the CV was gender-specific: no women did this, and although only a minority of men did so (5% of the total male applicant pool), I was surprised to find anyone at all doing so. As a proportion of the number of men who listed marital status, almost a third (29%) also named their wife on their CV.

There are several ways to interpret the findings around the inclusion of marital information on application materials. Although it is impossible to read the intentions of applicants, it might be reasonable to draw different conclusions depending on the ways in which marital information is presented. Mentions of spouses in cover letters were typically made in closing comments, and took a form similar to “my wife Fran and I would look forward to living in this area.” This sort of marital reference appears to be offered up as a way of providing a contextual frame; it identifies the personal circumstances under which an applicant is applying for a job—perhaps it is also an attempt to make the applicant seem more “real”—and it is less likely to be interpreted or intended as a presentation of credentials for the job. In listing marital status on a CV, it is possible that some applicants may be staking out an egalitarian, even feminist, position: they may be signaling the presence and significance of a partner who will be involved in decisionmaking about jobs and job location. Or, in marking marital status on a CV, an applicant might intend it to be read as one of the many characteristics which he is presenting by way of making as strong a case as possible for his candidacy: as in, “I have a PhD from XX University... I have these three publications... and I am married.” The naming of a wife in a job application seems to reflect an assumption of embeddedness in the husband’s career: it is here that we see perhaps most clearly revealed the implication that a wife is part of the “package” of credentials that a male applicant is offering up.

Overall, it is evident that male applicants believe that providing information about a “wife” will be received positively—or at least neutrally—whereas women do not feel that information about their marital status will be similarly received. Given the larger social frame (and recent history) of the role of marriage in men’s and women’s careers in academia, and given that there is still a lingering aura of privilege or “rightness” attached to married men in academia, even introducing marital issues in the most benign context is problematic.

Referee Disclosures About Marriage

Only a minority of referee letters, but again a surprising number nonetheless, include commentary about the marital status of the applicant. Referee letters provide more direct evi-
dence that a “wife” is still seen as an asset in an academic job search in a way that a “husband” is not. I reviewed a total of 273 referee letters, 212 of which were written for male applicants, 61 for female applicants.10 Of the total number of letters, 242 letters were written by male referees, 31 by females.

As indicated in Table 3, of the letters written on behalf of male applicants, 9% (nineteen in total) mentioned a wife. Of those letters for female applicants, only one mentioned a husband. A few of the “mentions” of spouses were literally just that—passing mentions with no embellishment. For example, one referee remarked that “he [the applicant] and his wife moved here 4 years ago . . .”; another observed that “his [applicant’s] wife is also finishing up her degree in . . .” Indeed, the sole mention of the husband was of this variety—a perfunctory mention, made in passing, and with no “editorial” signification. Nonetheless, no matter how perfunctory, such remarks might well be judged to be out of place in a job search. And no matter how perfunctory, the very mention of spousal arrangements serves to highlight a normative heterosexuality: in no letter by applicants or by referees was there any mention of same-sex or non-marital partners. (Indeed, it would be inappropriate to mention such partners, but no more or less so than the mention of a married partner).

However, most of the remarks about wives were not unembellished. In most cases, a referee who mentioned a wife elaborated the remark by providing editorial information and commentary. The specific nature of the remarks about wives reveals the persistence of some of core traditional assumptions about the relationship of wives (and families) to a man’s faculty career, which may be broadly categorized as:

wife as asset, wife as part of the package, and responsible manhood.

a) Wife as asset: Two referees mentioned the extent to which the wife facilitated departmental life, as in “Fred and Ellen often invited students and faculty over to their house . . .” More striking was the preponderance of “charming” wives (at least three separate ones) and “delightful” women, as in: “Simon is a friendly and well-liked individual with a charming wife;” “Rick is a charming individual with a charming family;” “Walter is recently married and along with his charming wife he . . .” One referee compounded these themes by casting departmental relations as familial: “Charles and his wife Bethany would be a welcome addition to the department family.”

b) Wife as part of the package: A few of the references to wives made it sound as though wives were also being hired for the job, as in the last example above, and these: “Frank and Susan are truly delightful people. They would make wonderful colleagues . . .”; or, “You could scarcely find a more talented, hard-working and congenial couple than Bill and Nancy.”

c) Responsible manhood: Several of the referees suggested that the fact of being married improved the man’s character. I will return to this theme in the next section on children and families, but by way of example I might quote this: “John is married now and has a new sense of responsibility . . . to get a job.”

To the extent that “racial” and ethnic identities were discernible, the only applicants whose marital status was discussed by referees were white North Americans.

The Family Factor

As with marriage, there is a long history of a double standard in assumptions about the significance of families (particularly children) in relation to women’s and men’s careers. As Figure 1 humorously suggests, the presence of children is often interpreted as a potentially limiting factor in a woman’s professional life—a presence that will distract her and serve as a competing claim for her attention and energy. Indeed even the potential for child-bearing has worked against women in employment practices. For men, on the other hand, children and families are less likely to be considered relevant in any way to their professional lives. Indeed,
when men are identified as fathers or more generally as members of families, this is usually cast in positive terms. The patterns of disclosure about children—which I dub the “family factor”—in job searches in geography reflect these conventions.

**Applicant Self-Disclosure About Families**

There was considerably less disclosure about children than about marriage in the CVs of job applicants: only 34 men (9% of the total male applicant pool) and seven women (6% of the female pool) listed children on their CVs. This may be in part the result of the relatively young age of the applicant pool for entry-level jobs: quite possibly a smaller number of applicants had children than were married. But the gap between marriage-revealing and child-revealing also no doubt reflects judgments about the salience of different sorts of personal information in the job process.

In most cases where children were mentioned, applicants simply noted the number of children—including a line on the CV stating something such as, “Married; 3 children.” A small subset of male applicants named their children, as in “Married; 3 children, Winnie, Joe, Maude.”

No applicant mentioned children or other family responsibilities in a cover letter, although a half-dozen or so applicants (proportionately split between men and women) mentioned parents or family living in the region as a positive incentive for their application, as in “My parents have a house in Nearville, so it would be especially wonderful to be in the area again.”

**Referee Disclosure About Families**

Several referees made a virtue of male applicants’ roles as fathers or as “family men.” No referees mentioned any such thing in letters for women applicants.

The notion that a married man is stable and responsible echoed throughout several of the letters of reference: “John is married now and has a new sense of responsibility along with pressure to finish [his PhD] and get a job.” A related theme raised by several referees was the dedication of men to their families and the extent to which they were responsible parents: “Bob is dedicated to his family and their well-being,” “Brian is dedicated to his family;” and, “Mark has a young family and is a conscientious parent.” Clearly the referees found the applicant’s degree of family involvement to be both notable and exceptional—and thus worthy of mention—but these testimonials about men’s dedication to family and children in all instances seemed strikingly out of place.

The most striking discussion of a male applicant’s family role combined all of the themes of ennobling fatherhood and salutary marriage in a rousing exhortation:

Tony is also a family man and has a terrific family. Judy matches him in personality, attractiveness, and professional competence . . . during the period of Tony’s doctoral work, they produced two
boys and a girl. What more can I say? You may have the opportunity of recruiting an American Family Success Story [caps in original] of the first order.

To the extent that “racial” and ethnic identities were discernible, the only applicants whose family status was discussed by referees were white North Americans.

Robust Manhood

In addition to the theme of responsible manhood sounded by several referees, the insertion of a second theme about manhood was even more striking: eight different male referees, writing of eight different male applicants, discussed their physical fitness. There was no commentary about women’s physical capacities (although, as I discuss below, there were a few references to women’s appearance). To the extent that “racial” and ethnic identities were discernible, the only applicants whose physical fitness was celebrated by referees were white North American males.

Four of the eight references to physical ability were confined to short observations, as in “Ralph is a pleasant individual and is physically fit.” But four referees launched into more extended examinations of robust manhood. One referee took several sentences to discuss an applicant’s commitment to and zeal for team sports. Another made an oddly clinical assessment: “At the personal level, Tim is extremely presentable, attractive as a personality, and a superbly fit physical specimen.” Another remarked that “... energetic, enthusiastic, receptive, and physically fit, Jason is well suited for the challenges of teaching.” But the most extraordinary commentary was this:

... This [a prior reference to leadership capacity] goes back to his days as an Eagle Scout, as a multi-sport team captain in high school, and as a multi-sport varsity athlete in college. He relishes leadership responsibilities ... walks or rides a bicycle virtually everywhere he goes, recycles all manner of things, and isn’t afraid of work.

All of these remarks, especially the last one, evoke a turn-of-the-century version of virtuous American manhood—celebrating the well-rounded exemplar of man, sound in body and mind, ready to assume a position in the intellectual elite. As Michael Kimmel (1996) points out, the core substantive ingredients of the cultural construction of American manhood—of which physical stamina and virtuosity were key characteristics—were formulated at the turn of the century and have not altered much since. Indeed, interest in the manliness of candidates in geography has a long lineage, a glimpse of which is afforded by Ellen Churchill Semple’s 1924 recorded assessment of a potential student as having “too much of the ‘eternal feminine’ about him, too little masculine brawn” (quoted in Monk 1998, 21).

In mentioning physical fitness, referees are apparently assuming that geography departments would find such a ‘chap from the Teddy Roosevelt school of manhood’ to be an especially good candidate for an academic job. This notion that manly attributes might be salient in a contemporary job application is unusual, and among the social science disciplines this may be particular to geography. I mentioned this to colleagues in other disciplines, and none can remember any references to the physical fitness of applicants in their own departmental job searches.

The focus on physical capacity, I think, can only be explained by the centrality of the “field” in the geographic imagination (and thus this may also be a feature of job searches in disciplines such as archaeology, or in some of the science disciplines with a field tradition). Within our discipline, there remains a certain Romanticism about “the field.” In truth, a relatively small amount of most geographers’ time is spent in “the field,” and few geographers today venture into fields that require particularly brisk physical conditioning. The “field” today is just as likely to be a suburban shopping mall or a damned river in the Southwest, rather than the ferocious encounter with the wilds that some versions of field narrative might suggest. Nonetheless, the iconography of “the field” in geography is imbued with a masculinist ethos, and fieldwork is often represented as a proving ground for manhood. Gillian Rose (1993) persuasively details the extent to which much of the (male) writing about fieldwork in geography lauds it as simultaneously a tough and heroic activity and a distinctively masculine endeavor. An important part of this trope is the representation of the field itself (and Nature) as a feminized site; success in taming/conquering/companionship field thus can be
construed as a signifier of manly achievement, not just of professional accomplishment (Rose 1993; Sparke 1996; Seager 2000). As Matthew Sparke (1996, 212) riffs:

All the while work in the field has been sanctified as a character-building rite of passage into a world described as real, the field itself has been feminized, cast as a seductive but wild place that must be observed, penetrated and mastered by the geographer, who, having battled with it, revealed in it, and, in the end, triumphantly risen above it, returns to the academy, his education complete, his stature assured and his geographical self proven, definitely, bis.

Beyond the Pale

The majority of the 273 reference letters written on behalf of applicants for these job searches were responsible and professional documents, composed with care and probity. A small number, however, contained particularly startling violations of personal privacy or a casual disregard for basic tenets of professional assessment. What is most striking about these instances, especially in light of the findings above, is that almost all of the most egregiously inappropriate remarks proffered by referees were in letters written for women (both white and non-white) or for nonwhite male applicants. In order not to compound the problem, I will not repeat the most egregious of remarks, but I will give a brief sense of the scope of them. One referee revealed information about an applicant’s past problems with substance abuse. Another discussed an applicant’s responsibilities in caring for an ill parent, while a third discussed an applicant’s weight problems.

Remarks of this sort about appearance (e.g., weight) are of a quite different character than the previously cited remarks about physical fitness: “appearance” is culturally coded as female, “strength” as male. Indeed, most of the remarks about applicant appearance were made in reference to women, but most were also about racialized minority women. A few of the referee letters written for minority women mentioned physical stature (the word “diminutive” cropped up more than once), and several described minority women in terms of their “smiling-ness,” as in “she has a smile on her face at all times.” Two other letters for women, both white, also mentioned the extent to which they were quick with a smile. It is not entirely irrelevant to note that unsolicited commentary on smilingness (or unsmilingness) is prominent in the ordinary public harassment that women experience from men every day on the streets (“Hey, babe, give me a smile”) (Gardner 1995). Inappropriate comments about women’s “personality,” particularly about their smilingness, have a long lineage in referee letters; the earliest consciousness-raising about sexism in academic admissions and job applications processes—and some of the earliest legal complaints—focused on exactly these sorts of remarks (see, for example, Lunneborg and Lillie 1973; Farley 1978). With one exception, there was no equivalent to this in the letters about male applicants. Some referees mentioned that male applicants were “pleasant” or “warm individuals,” but these rhetorical devices have significantly different meaning. The only reference to smiling males was in a letter written for an African national, a remark that can perhaps best be read in light of the generalized American white anxiety about black males.

The most explicitly racially marked commentary was made in a reference letter for a Chinese-national applicant. At the end of an extraordinarily positive and persuasive professional assessment, the referee proffered these personal comments: “Dr. XX is a perfectly charming individual who possesses many of the old-fashioned virtues of civility. He has spent many years in [the United States], but he has not lost his grasp of what is known as Chinese propriety . . . mannerly and collegial.” A second referee, writing of the same applicant, evoked a feminized racial code in describing the applicant as an individual “with a delightful personality” and as “courteous and assiduous.”

Although perhaps not too much should be made of a mere handful of remarks out of almost three hundred letters of reference, these letters, I believe, are signs of an unbridged cultural gap in geography: they point to the unsettled position of racial and sexual “others” in what is still a mostly male, mostly white discipline.

Conclusion

This study reveals patterns of gender differences in the representation of job applicants and their “credentials”, both by the applicants themselves and by their referees. The results
may give some individuals pause, and may prompt some individual reflection about the ways that gender and “racialized” stereotypes are internalized and perpetuated.

I think this study offers a few cautionary lessons for individuals involved in the job process. Job applicants and referees should weigh carefully their decisions to insert “personal” information into the job process, especially since neither applicants nor referees can control how such information is received or interpreted. Fairness and equality of treatment in the job search process are best ensured in an environment of maximum transparency. Job applicants have a legal right to see reference letters written about them; I strongly urge applicants not to waive these rights, and I urge referees to welcome (or, indeed, encourage) this reciprocity.

Beyond recommendations for individuals, I hope this study might also prompt a broader disciplinary reflection. I propose two directions for the discipline. First, this study suggests that geography might be well served by an internal discussion of the appropriateness—and the consequences—of bringing personal information into discussion of professional qualifications. Indeed, this question is more complex than a first examination suggests, and our discipline would benefit from an understanding of this complexity. It may not always be the case that revealing personal information is “bad.” For example, Paul Wermuth (1982) describes the case of a Harvard physician who was accused of rape by a nurse (there was also supporting evidence that lent particular credibility to this accusation). The doctor left Boston and secured a new position at a Buffalo hospital largely on the basis of letters of reference from Harvard colleagues—none of whom mentioned this “personal problem.” When this came to light and the referees were criticized for providing “cover” for their colleague, they replied by asserting that it would have been a violation of professionalism to remark on a candidate’s character, personality, or past activities. The case described by Wermuth may be an extreme, but could prompt thoughtful discussion. What would, or should, geography referees do in similar circumstances? If referees know that the applicant for whom they are writing has a history of violence, or of substance abuse, or of sexual harassment, or of shoplifting, is concealing this more or less right than revealing it? As a discipline, it would serve us well to grapple with these sorts of ethical questions embedded in the applicant/referee/search relationship. Without a broader airing of these issues, individual applicants and referees are left to their own devices and prejudices, and the result is the stereotyped and uneven handling suggested by this study.

Secondly, following from the first, I think that our discipline might want to include job process considerations in our code of ethics. By “job process considerations” I mean some assessment of the ways in which searches are conducted at the department level. The job search is an institution-building process; I identify some of the gendered and racialized imprints of these processes, but go no further.

It is not clear what effect the gender differences in the job search “narratives” have on actual job outcomes. Can it really be the case that hiring committees are positively impressed, even subliminally, by mentions of charming wives and sporting men? Do sexist presumptions about “marriage effects” and “family factors” influence hiring outcomes? Given that the population within which these comments circulate is a more or less closed and self-referential one, they cannot be dismissed as entirely inconsequential. The referee pool, applicant pool, and search committee pool are interlocked constituencies, and are all representatives of, derivatives of, and participants in a structuration process (the creation and re-creation) of the same institutional culture. The referee who writes to my department about an applicant’s proud fatherhood is serving, perhaps simultaneously, on search committees in his own department, in which capacity he will be the recipient of such letters. The applicant who inserts his own marital status into the job process today will most likely be tomorrow on the other side of the job search table. This might not “matter” in explaining the configuration of final hiring decisions; then again, it might.

Notes

1 There is no ethical precedent for the use of job materials as a material source in our discipline, although there is in other disciplines. I had at first intended to write an article in which I used more specific and detailed examples of the gender and racial stereotyping found in referee letters; ultimately, though, I felt this skated too close to an untested
ethically. I conferred with my university’s legal counsel and the university’s Committee on Human Research before proceeding with this research. I have gone to great lengths to protect the identities of applicants and referees. All names are pseudonyms; all other identifying features have been excised or altered. Anonymity is further provided by the large size of the pool and the use only of aggregated data.

Earlier I mentioned “six” job searches. One set of applications was no longer available for review because it was older than the mandated period for which files are retained at my university; thus, of six searches conducted I reviewed the files for only five. In addition to the 496 applications included in this study, there were another half-dozen excluded because I could not reliably determine the applicant’s sex.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act was initially drafted only to include protections against discrimination on the grounds of race, national origins, and religion. Sex discrimination clauses were introduced by southern opponents of the measure, who felt that the addition of sex-based protection would kill the bill. See Mankiller et al. (1998, 101–3).

Good summaries of relevant legal protection statutes can be found in Gray (1985) and Wallace (1982).

The preference for single women in EPZs especially is well documented; see, for example, Tiano (1990). Good overviews of the history of marriage and women’s labor can be found in Goldin (1988, 1990) and Amott and Matthaei (1996).

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References


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