Exploring the Construct Validity of Letters of Recommendations in Graduate Admissions: The Hidden “Unknowns” Within

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Introduction

- Letters of recommendation (LORs) are ubiquitously used in academia as they are assumed to predict performance. Despite their wide use, LORs are controversial in their reliability and validity.
- Kuncel, Kochevar, and Ones (2014) found that although many correlations between LORs and performance were small, there were “reasons for hope” that LORs can be powerful tools.
- In a business setting, Hanisch (1992) found “unknown” responses to have negative nuances.
- This study examined the construct validity of “unknown” ratings on LORs.

Research Question

What is the relationship between the number of “unknowns” given by a recommender and other applicant information?

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: More “unknowns” will tend to be associated with weaker applicant credentials.

Hypothesis 2: More “unknowns” will be given by recommenders who had a shorter relationship.

Hypothesis 3: Characteristics dealing with unobservable behaviors in a lab setting will receive more “unknowns.”

Methods

- Subjects were 194 applicants from a graduate biomedical engineering program at a large research university.
- Archived applications were deidentified so researchers could extract information, such as undergraduate GPA (UGPA) and GRE scores.
- Applicants’ research accomplishments were quantified on an anchored scale. “Unknown” responses were totaled across 17 qualities.

Results

- “Unknown” responses significantly correlated with research accomplishments, GRE-Analytical and Verbal scores, and length of recommender-applicant relationship.
- International and domestic applicants differed in GRE-Analytical and Verbal scores and ratings.
- Qualities ‘professional experience,’ ‘graphic expression,’ ‘leadership ability,’ and ‘teaching potential’ received the most “unknown.”

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Discussion

- “Unknown” responses within LORs are not neutral. They reflect an applicant’s qualification and the relationship with a recommender.
- The next steps of our research entail removing the less relevant qualities and reexamining the relationship between “unknowns” and applicant information.
- Future researchers should seek to understand why recommenders respond with “unknowns.”
- Limitations include having access to information about a single graduate program at one university. As a result, other programs should attempt to replicate our findings.

References
