

A Guideline Checklist To Avoid Writer Bias in Social Science Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Researcher / instructor bias, refers to the possibility (or tendency) of the researcher or instructor biasing scientific objectivity by injecting their own subjective viewpoints. *Instructor / researcher bias* is particularly a problem in the social sciences. In this paper, we develop guidelines for writing techniques facilitating writers retaining their point of view and simultaneously avoiding bias. These guidelines are useful for instructors and researchers in the social sciences. To develop this checklist we examine several essays on biblical feminism. The suggested guidelines include some obvious things such as avoidance of purely emotional terms, misrepresentation, exaggeration or omission of balancing factors. The guidelines also include advanced methods including skillful use of mediating variables, mention of alternative explanations and skillful use of definitions. Although this paper is theoretical, it opens the possibility of further questionnaire-based research to test the validity of the given guidelines.

Keywords: Social sciences, relativism, Kuhn, science II, observer bias, feminism, biblical feminism.

1. BACKGROUND AND GOALS

Kuhn [5] has shown that the researcher and instructor may inject their own biases in science. This is particularly true in the social sciences.

The goal of this paper is to develop guidelines, useful to both the instructor and researcher. The goal of the guidelines is to enable the instructor/ researcher to simultaneously retain their point of view while avoiding certain features which blatantly bias a reader.

To achieve this goal we selected a particularly controversial area, biblical feminism. We selected a collection of essays of Tikva Frymer-Kensky [3] on feminism in the Bible. There were a number of reasons for making this selection.

- Awareness of the observer-bias issue: Kensky herself, is aware of the “observer” problem. Consequently, she has already avoided “blatant bias” but has occasionally succumbed to minor bias. The following passages show her awareness of researcher/instructor subjectivity.

In the past two decades, there has been a tremendous change in biblical studies. The scientific philosophy that prevailed for more than a century has given way, in biblical studies as in other humanities, to a more

sophisticated understanding of the interaction between the now and then, the reader and the text. Old ideas of history as “what actually happened” and text as having one correct and original meaning have yielded to a current view of the continual interaction of the viewer and what is seen, of the text and its reader. No longer do we believe that there is a truly “value-neutral” way of reading literature or reconstructing history [3, pg. 159].

The last three decades have seen an enormous paradigm shift in our perception of reality and history. The old ideas of “objective science” on which many of us were raised, the old conceptions of History as “what actually happened,” of Text as having “one correct reading and original meaning,” and of Law as “what is legislated” have yielded to a view of complex interactions of the viewer and the viewed, the text and its readers, the law and its adherents [3, pg. 255].

- A respected researcher: Kensky is a respected researcher whose writings are scholarly. Her scholarship is useful to our goals in two ways. First, because of her scholarship, Kensky’s writing illustrates advanced techniques of avoiding bias not always found in other researchers. Secondly, many of Kensky’s errors of bias are minor, subtle, and therefore easily correctible. This is consistent with our goals. For our goals are not to critique a particular author, but rather, to show how to retain the scholarly skeleton - the arguments and viewpoints of a writer - but simultaneously avoid certain features which bias the reader.
- An emotional field: Feminism is associated with strong emotional biases. Hence, writings on this topic are fertile for observer bias. In other words, we chose this topic and writer to expose the types of errors that even respected researchers succumb to.
- Known, but bears repetition: Although several of the guidelines presented in this paper are also discussed in introductory methods courses, they bear repetition. The fact that a respected researcher succumbed to well known errors motivates gathering all guidelines – both elementary and advanced – in one location.

We close this section with a light discussion of the philosophical implications associated with guidelines. On the one hand, we certainly wish to preserve the democratic ideal of

freedom of speech and diversity of opinion. On the other hand, we wish to *restrict* certain forms of communication.

We point out that there are precedents for such balances in other subject-matter areas. For example, laws governing nutrition advertising similarly seek to balance marketing freedom with avoidance of consumer bias. Some nutrition laws focus on the prohibition of omissions, for example, by requiring the addition of nutrition labeling. These objective labels balance the biased marketing. Other nutrition laws prohibit exaggerations and unfounded claims [1]. Hence, these nutrition laws provide precedents for the types of guideline recommendations that will be acceptable to a modern mind. They provide models for the types of restrictive requirements that can be imposed but do not truly inhibit freedom. There are other subject matter areas, for example healthcare advertising, also concerned with striking balances.

We believe the findings of this paper are useful to both instructors, writers, reviewers and referees in the social sciences.

2. GUIDELINE #1: INTERJECTIONS

In each of the remaining sections of this paper, we cite actual passages from [3], identify syntactic forms facilitating bias, and suggest remedies.

Consider the following passage: *Yet women were not secluded in their homes. They could be seen in public, they could sing and dance, and women of talent could compose and perform victory dances, love songs, and laments. Surprisingly, women could be prophets* [3, pp 160-161].

The underlined word, surprisingly, functions as an interjection, it imparts to the reader an emotional bias and does not contribute content. The cited passage reads fine with this word omitted.

Consequently, a suggested guideline to writers would be avoidance of interjections. An author can still express personal viewpoint using traditional content words.

3. GUIDELINE #2: TWO-COLUMN LISTS

We quote from the same passage: *They [women] were not judges, courtiers, or diplomats; they were not military leaders; and they were not priests. ... and women of talent could compose and perform victory dances, love songs, and laments. Surprisingly women could be prophets. ... In biblical Israel, individual women could become powerful.*

The underlined words collectively describe a spectrum of positions. Certain of these positions were available to women and certain were not. The clearest way to communicate such aggregate spectrums is with an accompanying 2-column list or table. [3], lacks such a table. We advocate a guideline of using 2-column tables whenever spectrums are presented. One possible 2-column list is presented below. Note how the form of the 2-column list by itself communicates contrast and clarity.

Although tables and other graphical aids primarily deal with clarity, not content, several research studies [4] [6] have shown them critical to proper understanding, especially in multi-dimensional areas.

The nutrition analogy presented in the introduction also advocates use of tables to eliminate bias. Nutrition laws require supplementing food marketing with nutrition labels, which list the presence and absence of important nutrients. These nutrition labels are nothing more than a table or multi-column list. The legislators argue that supplementing free marketing with a single compact multi-column list is sufficient to facilitate avoidance of consumer bias. [1], besides discussing the laws also discusses the effect of such labels on consumer practices.

Societal positions which women could/could not do

Could do	Couldn't do
Prophets	Judges
Compose/Perform	Courtiers
Social power	Diplomats
Priests	
Generals	

Figure 1: A list of positions (not) available to women.

4. GUIDELINE #3: MEDIATING VARIABLES

We continue citing from the above passage: *Women were not part of the great public hierarchies that developed. The central public organizations of court, temple, and army did not include them. The presence of women as prophets but not as priests may be attributed to the fact that prophecy is by its very nature nonbureaucratic. Prophets operate individually, without a hierarchy of command. As a result, their authority is based on personal charisma and believability rather than on an organizational power base. Although women's skill and charisma could help them attain prophetic authority (much as their skills could lead to considerable power in the household), the hierarchical structure of the priesthood was closed to them, as it was to all men not born into priestly families.*

The two-column list from Figure 1 explains the significance of this passage. The contrasting columns in this two-column list require further clarification: *Why* are women allowed in certain functions but disallowed in others. In other words, what *mediating variables* account for the disparate placements in the two columns.

Kensky correctly acknowledges this problem and attempts to solve it using the mediating variable of *public hierarchy of command*. Positions with a public hierarchy were closed to women; all other positions were open to women. Figure 2 augments the two-column list in Figure 1 by adding the presence or lack of this mediating variable.

By identifying the true cause of women's allowed and disallowed positions, we obtain a holistic picture; we also avoid exaggeration and caricatures. As a simple example, Figure 2 shows us at a simple glance that the possibility of female skills, charisma and intelligence is *not* an issue. In fact, traditional caricatures of women's lack of certain rights in biblical times

portray biblical conceptions of women as lacking intelligence and skills. Kensky correctly identifies the issue as the allowance of female presence in public hierarchies.

Societal positions which women could/could not do

Could do because it is a <u>Non Hierarchy Position</u>	Couldn't do because of <u>Public Hierarchy</u>	
Prophets		Judges
Compose/Perform	Courtiers	
Powerful socially	Diplomats	
	Priests	
	Generals	

Figure 2: A list of positions (not) available to women with a mediating explanatory variable of *presence in a public hierarchy*.

Mediating variables may require considerable skill to identify. Consequently, we classify mediating variables as an advanced guideline.

5. GUIDELINE #4: EXAMPLE COMPLETENESS

Proper procedure, requires examples illustrative of *both* the presence and absence of the mediating variable, presence in public hierarchy of command, as determining women's biblical rights. We cite below a Talmudic passage using modern database techniques to find such illustrative examples. The Talmud, an early rabbinic legislative text with many explanatory comments on biblical laws, queried the biblical text for commandments specifically introduced with the phrase *man or woman* vs. the more standard *when one* or *when a man* the word *man* referring to a person of either gender. The database inquiry uncovers three passages spanning a spectrum of basic individual rights: *monetary, atonement/ expiation, and responsibility*. The Talmud, noting the broadness of spectrum of these illustrative examples, concludes that if individual women are equal to men in rights of ownership, atonement and responsibility (punishment) then for all practical purposes they have individual equality with men. Although the Talmud was written at a much later period, a period with different values and perspectives, this particular Talmudic passage performs a database inquiry on biblical texts and consequently accurately reflects biblical perspective.

Notice my emendation of the Talmudic passage. I interpolated the underlined word individual not present in the original Talmudic text. I did this for two reasons. First, an examination of the three commandments uncovered by the database query, beginning *when a man or woman*, only shows that men and women are equal as individuals. It produces no examples illustrative of equality in the public sector. Second, the interpolation of the word individual harmonizes the Talmudic passage with Kensky's mediating variable, *public hierarchy*.

The guideline recommended in this section is supplementation of examples illustrative of *all* aspects of the mediating variables used by the author. We feel that the examples cited by Kensky, compactly summarized in Figure 2, would be further enriched if the examples in the cited Talmudic passage were added.

The English translation of the Talmudic passage is as follows:

*WOMEN ARE ALSO SUBJECT TO THE LAW OF TORTS. Whence is derived this ruling? — Rab Judah said on behalf of Rab, and so was it also taught at the school of R. Ishmael: Scripture states, When a man or woman shall commit any sin. Scripture has thus made woman and man equal regarding all the **penalties** of the Law. In the School of Eleazar it was taught: Now these are the ordinances which thou shalt set before them. Scripture has thus made woman and man equal regarding all **civil ordinances**. The School of Hezekiah and Jose the Galilean taught: Scripture says. It hath killed a man or a woman. Scripture has thus made woman and man equal regarding all the laws of **manslaughter** in the Torah. Moreover, [all the quotations] are necessary: Had only the first inference been drawn, [I might have said that] the Divine Law exercised mercy towards her so that she should also have the advantage of atonement, whereas civil ordinances which concern as a rule man who is engaged in business, should not include woman. Again, were only the inference regarding civil ordinances to have been made, we might perhaps have said that woman should also not be deprived of a livelihood, whereas the law of atonement should be confined to man, as it is he who is subject to all commandments, but should not include woman, since she is not subject to all the commandments. Moreover, were even these two inferences to have been available, [we might have said that] the one is on account of atonement and the other on account of livelihood, whereas regarding manslaughter [it might have been thought that] it is only in the case of man, who is subject to all commandments, that compensation for the loss of life must be made, but this should not be the case with woman. Again, were the inference only made in the case of compensation for manslaughter, [it might have been thought to apply] only where there is loss of human life, whereas in the other two cases, where no loss of human life is involved, I might have said that man and woman are not on the same footing. The independent inferences were thus essential [2].*

6. RETAINING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

We have dealt with the passage [3, pp 160-161] in Sections 2-4. Let us summarize the guidelines:

- Removal of the interjection, *surprisingly*
- Supplementation with a 2-column list
- Supplementation with mediating variables
- Supplementation with further examples

We also noted above that the introduction of explanatory mediating variables is an advanced guideline.

In the introduction we emphasized that our goal was to avoid bias *without* compromising the author's freedom of expression. To illustrate how we have not compromised the author's freedom of expression we cite the following passage from the same section:

Nevertheless, we make a profound statement when we acknowledge that the Bible is patriarchal. We are brought to the realization that the Bible contains a fundamental moral

flaw: it does not treat all humans as equals. We in the modern world are learning that respect for the equality of all human beings and their common dignity is a moral imperative. Our perception of a moral imperative that does not derive from biblical teaching indicates that the Bible is no longer our only or even our final arbiter of morality. This has enormous religious implications. The authority of the Bible must be tempered with the authority of our experiences as human beings and our principles of morality.

7. GUIDELINE #5: EXAGGERATION

The following passage, cited from Judith Plaskow, is referred to multiple times and heads multiple sections in [3] (e.g. pp 168,203-207). Plaskow and Kensky analyze a biblical passage where the people are instructed to prepare for the Divine revelation.

As the people are encamped at Sinai, Moses goes up to God and brings back word of the divine intent to make the people God's own treasured possession. After the people agree, Moses ascends a second time. He is told that God will come in a cloud so that all the people will see. God instructs Moses to go to the people and tell them to sanctify themselves for two days, wash their clothes and be prepared for the third day, when God will come down to the mountain in the sight of the whole people. Moses brings back this word and the people purify themselves and wash their clothes. And then Moses say: "Be prepared these three days: go not near woman." Moses looks at the people and sees only the men. It is to them that he speaks: "Go not near a woman." The leader of men speaks to men – the women become objects of men's actions, rather than subjects in their own right! Moses' tunnel vision gets the better of him. Perhaps (to psychologize a bit) his past dependence on women and his massive obligation to them blinds and blocks him. If he actually were to see women, he constantly would be reminded of their crucial place in his life. Whatever the reason for the myopia, it gets the better of him. This is a pivotal moment. When Moses looks at the people and sees only the men, he excludes women from the congregation of Israel. At this moment, the women reenter bondage. They lose their status as full members of the community. They are no longer the redeemed, but ones that the redeemed should not approach. This pronouncement by Moses is the exact mirror of Pharaoh's command to kill the boys, which occurred at the beginning of the Exodus. Yes, the women of Israel who defiled the Pharaoh are silent here. When the men of Israel were weak and the oppressive authority external, the women were strong and defiant. Now, when a man of Israel become the oppressive authority, nobody speaks. Zipporah who spoke sharply to God and Moses before, now is silent; perhaps having been sent away once, she does not want to risk it again.

Just to clarify the content of this passage the authors juxtapose two biblical passages:

- God's command to Moses to relate to the people: *Tell the nation to prepare and sanctify themselves* (Exodus 19:10-11).
- Moses command to the people: *Sanctify yourselves; ...don't go near a woman* (Exodus 19:14-15).

As the underlined words show, Moses has taken a command from God to the entire nation and restricted this command to the men.

We have underlined certain sentences in the above passage to indicate the exaggeration introduced. Even if Moses made a mistake (we will discuss this in the next section):

- It is certainly an exaggeration to see this mistake of Moses as an exact mirror of Pharaoh's command to kill the boys.
- It is certainly an exaggeration to see Zipporah's and the midwives' silence as weakness; after all, how would they know that God's message was different than Moses'! And if they are unaware of this difference, they shouldn't be expected to protest.
- It is certainly an exaggeration to say that because of this one instance where women did not share obligation that they reentered bondage.

Kensky has exaggerated both quantitatively and qualitatively: [3] excessively cites this example and titles several sections "Don't go near a woman." While she had a right to cite the passage her enumerated consequences are clearly exaggerations.

8. GUIDELINE #6: ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

As seen in the last section, Kensky citing Plaskow explains the contrast between God's command to Moses, *tell the nation to sanctify themselves*, vs. Moses' actual command to the nation, *sanctify yourself, don't go near a woman*, as illustrating an incapacity for women to take responsibility.

But, alternate explanations are possible. Moses was speaking to a nation of slaves who had just been emancipated. Had he equally commanded men and women not to have intimacy he would place women in a vulnerable position exposing them to danger.

Here is an alternate way to view this: Moses did not create female vulnerability; indeed, the tendency of men, especially slaves, to abuse women who refuse their overtures, is an empirical fact. Moses did not think it appropriate to place responsibility on women because of this vulnerability. By so doing, Moses did not deprive women of anything. Furthermore, since the women heard the command to the men, each woman, based on her individual circumstances could participate in the command on a voluntary basis.

It is important to emphasize that the sole effect of Moses' omission is protective. We can contrast this with e.g. laws that have existed at one time or another prohibiting women to work night shifts lest they come to harm because of their greater vulnerability at night. Moses' legislation and the night-work laws are very different. The night-work laws actually deprive women of the right to a job because of their greater vulnerability. By contrast, Moses did not deprive women of

anything by his emendation of God's command. Therefore, the sole effect was protection.

This guideline, *alternate explanations*, also requires considerable skill to implement, and is therefore classified by us as an advanced guideline.

We close this section with another illustration of alternate explanations: The prohibition of women being Priests. Here women have been deprived of the right to service God in the Temple solely because of gender.

A possible alternate explanation is the observation that in other religions, female priests serving in Temples invariably introduced religious followers to sexual rites. A blatant difference between the Jewish Temple and pagan Temples is the total absence of sexuality in the Jewish God or the Temple services. By creating a priesthood solely of men a strong message is sent that under no circumstances can women communicate religious ideals sexually.

We emphasize that this alternate explanation is not fully satisfying:

- First, independent of the nobility of motives, women *are* being deprived of something, namely, service in the Temple.
- Second, the Bible is clear that the absence of female priests does not eliminate Temple corruption as demonstrated by the infamous case of Eli's sons who sexually used Temple seekers (Samuel I, 2:22-36).

Nevertheless, we have brought this example to emphasize alternate explanations need not be full proof or very satisfying. An author, instructor or researcher has an obligation to cite alternate explanations and then conclude which among competing explanations is best.

9. GUIDELINE #7: MISREPRESENTATION

As justified by the nutrition analogy introduced in the first section, freedom of speech and respect for diversity of opinion, does not allow false statements.

We illustrate misrepresentations using cases reviewed in previous sections.

- The statement that women could not be judges (Figures 1,2) is contradicted by Deborah who *judged Israel* (Judges 4).
- The statement that women could not be diplomats and courtiers – actually in this case intelligent agents – is contradicted by the contrast of the Samson and Esther stories (Judges Chapters 13-16, Esther).

Let us contrast the Samson and Esther episodes:

- Both Samson and Esther liasoned sexually within enemy territory to achieve protection goals for the Jewish people.
- But Esther, the woman, sought guidance and communal support before so doing while Samson acted on his own and was in fact afraid of what the community might do to him.
- Samson was caught, exposed, and imprisoned, dying a tragic death after being blinded. By contrast, Esther succeeded in saving the Jewish nation from extermination.

This analysis clearly shows that women were superior to men as intelligence agents.

We close this section by noting a frequent cause of misrepresentation: statistical frequency. A correct statement is that overall there were more male judges than female judges and more male intelligence officers than female ones. However, statistical infrequency does not justify misrepresentation.

10. GUIDELINE #8: BALANCE

Very often deficiencies in one area are compensated for by balancing factors. It biases the reader to omit mention of the balancing factor. Such omissions are distinct from outright misrepresentations, explored in Section 9, and exaggerations, explored in Section 8.

Here are some illustrative examples of balance:

- Although women were not military leaders, we find that military leaders sought the counsel and support of female prophets (Judges 4).
- Although women were not communal leaders, they emerged when they had to. An interesting story is presented in Samuel II, Chapter 20: The head general, Joab surrounds a city and is prepared to destroy it because a rebel against the king sought asylum in the city. Undoubtedly (reading between the lines), the city was interested in what this rebel could provide – in other words, they had partial guilt. So no men spoke to Joab. Had nothing further happened, the city would be destroyed. But an unknown woman demands to speak to general Joab, accuses him of being a bloodthirsty military man, and when he apologizes, she promises to take care of the matter and delivers the rebel's head to the general.
- Although women did not run government, female prophets were not afraid to rebuke corrupt governments (e.g. Kings II, 22: 14-20). Their success should be contrasted with male prophets who were stoned to death at the King's command for prophesying against them (Chronicles II,24: 20-22).

Although balance doesn't deny deficiencies, omission of balance unnecessarily biases a reader. All the above stories are open to the criticism that had these women held public offices they could have accomplished more. Our point is that communication of balance is necessary to enable the reader to form a holistic evaluation.

11. GUIDELINE #9: ALTERNATE DEFINITIONS

Kensky defines democratic equality in terms of identical treatment. To treat people differently is to deprive them of their equality.

This is certainly a popular point of view. Any alternative could possibly raise more questions than answers.

However, skillfully finding alternate definitions can often enhance a discipline. We therefore close this paper with this method of alternate definitions. Although its use is controversial it sometimes sheds insight.

In Jewish law, women do not inherit with men. That is, if a person left sons and daughters, only the sons inherit. We cite another author who presents an alternate form of equity based on the contrast of inheritance and dowry and certain limited inheritance rights of women.

In surveying the evidence from cuneiform and biblical sources, scholars have frequently stressed that the dowry is an advanced form of inheritance. The daughter receives her share of the father's estate upon marriage; her brothers must wait until their father's death for their shares. Functionally, this is certainly case, but in legal terms there is a vital difference between the female dowry and the male inheritance. The male heir has a stake in a proportionate share of the paternal estate. He can only be deprived of that share for cause by a court order, and retains his rights under certain circumstances even when the property has passed into the hands of strangers. The dowry on the other hand is a voluntary gift. ... There is no evidence that a daughter could sue her father or his heirs for a dowry unless perhaps property had formally been assigned to her for that purpose, or that there was any fixed proportion of the paternal estate that constituted a minimum entitlement. In a few special cases concerning priestesses, Codex Hammurabi does lay down proportions of the estate which the various priestesses, according to their rank are entitled to take if not dowered in their father's lifetime and in one case obliges a priestess's brothers to dower her according to the size of the paternal estates. But the limited class to whom these provisions apply indicates that no such rule existed for the ordinary daughter entering a secular marriage. ... On the other hand, there is repeated evidence from the earliest cuneiform records onwards that a daughter could receive an inheritance from her father's estate whether as sole heir or dividing with the other heirs. A daughter did not therefore, lack the legal capacity to inherit [7].

12. GUIDELINE SUMMARY

In this paper we have explored nine guidelines which facilitate avoiding observer bias. Figure 3 summarizes the nine guidelines.

Guidelines 1 and 2 are purely formal and independent of meaning. Guidelines 3, 6 and 9 are advanced requiring skill in the instructor or researcher. Guidelines 5, 7 and 8, although dealing with content are easily implementable.

1. Avoidance of interjections
2. Supplementation with 2-column Tables
3. Advanced: Supplementation with mediating variables
4. Completeness of relevant examples
5. Exaggeration
6. Advanced: Alternate explanations
7. Misrepresentations
8. Balance
9. Advanced: Alternate Definitions

Figure 3: Summary of the guidelines.

Although the examples we presented were selected from a specific content area, the guidelines have wide applicability to many disciplines. These methods are applicable in instruction and research and should prove useful to teachers, writers, reviewers and referees.

We especially emphasize the important of guidelines 3, 6, and 9. We suggest that introductory methods courses in the social sciences focus on development of needed skills to identify mediating variables, alternate explanations and alternate definitions. These three characteristics distinguish ordinary researchers from advanced researchers.

Although this paper is theoretical, it opens the possibility of further questionnaire-based research to test the validity of the given guidelines.

13. REFERENCES

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