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Students Praise Male Professors

Study finds gender of instructors influences evaluations they receive, even if they have fooled students (in an online course) about whether they are men or women.

December 10, 2014

By [Kaitlin Mulhere](#)

College students' assessments of their instructors' teaching ability is linked to whether they think those instructors are male or female, according to new research from North Carolina State University.

In the [study](#), students in an online course gave better evaluations to the instructors they thought were male, even though the two instructors – one male and one female – had switched their identities. The research is based on a small pilot study of one class.

Student evaluations can carry a lot of weight in decisions about promotions, tenure and pay raises. But the

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findings demonstrate that gender bias can have a big impact on student ratings of teachers, according to the study.

To conduct the study, researchers compared instructor evaluations of four discussion groups in a technology and society class within the sociology and anthropology department at North Carolina State. Two groups were taught by a female instructor and two were taught by a male instructor. Students in one of the female instructor's groups were told their instructor was male, and vice versa.

Neither the actual male nor actual female instructor received significantly higher ratings. But the same instructors received different ratings when they "switched" genders. The male instructor had lower ratings when students were told their instructor was female. The female instructor had higher ratings when students were told their instructor was male.

The authors say that their findings suggest a female instructor would have to work harder than a male to receive comparable ratings. The study was published this month in the journal *Innovative Higher Education*.

The lead author, Lillian MacNell, said personal experience encouraged her to conduct the study. (The co-authors are Adam Driscoll, an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and Andrea Hunt, an assistant professor at the University of North Alabama. Driscoll and Hunt earned their Ph.D.s from N.C. State.)

MacNell, a doctoral student at North Carolina State, was grading for an online course and often received emails from students challenging her decisions. They complained about her grading, and in some cases, went over her head and emailed the professor directly.

She vented to a male colleague who was also grading for the course, saying that it was frustrating how much students were protesting her decisions.

"He said, 'What are you talking about?' He hadn't received anything."

Both MacNell and the male colleague were using the same language and rubric to grade students, she said, so there was no reason why students should be accepting his decisions but not hers.

The study cites previous research that has found gender bias in students' evaluations of articles -- identical articles were ranked higher if they had male names -- and in students' judgment of faculty qualifications -- male candidates were judged as more qualified despite identical credentials.

In teaching evaluations, previous studies have focused on how female instructors are expected to be nurturing and supportive; when they're not, it may count against them in evaluations. At the same time, if they are nurturing and supportive, female instructors risk being perceived as less authoritative and knowledgeable than their male counterparts, according to the study.

But it's difficult when evaluating teaching to isolate the instructor's gender from other factors that influence class instruction, such as teaching style. So while previous research has revealed differences between instructor evaluations for each gender, it hasn't determined whether those differences were the result of gender bias, according to the authors.

That's where online education comes in. Unlike those doing research on face-to-face instruction, researchers in this study were able to hide the gender of the instructors, and to keep equal all the teaching components, such as grading standards and the speed of responses.

When comparing the evaluations of the perceived gender identities, the male identity received higher scores across all 12 variables students evaluated. In six variables -- professionalism, promptness, fairness, respectfulness, enthusiasm and giving praise -- the differences were statistically significant.

In promptness, for example, the instructors matched their grading schedules so that students in all groups received feedback at about the same rate. The instructor whom students thought was male was graded a 4.35 out of 5 for promptness, while the instructor perceived to be female received a 3.55.

With just 43 subjects, this study was a pilot; the authors plan to expand their research with more classes

and different types of courses. Still, higher education administrators should be aware of the findings when using evaluations to make faculty decisions, since evaluations could reflect a gender bias rather than an actual difference in teaching abilities, MacNell said.



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Uncle Noodle · a year ago

This doesn't seem to be newsworthy, even as a pilot if there were only two instructors. It's possible the instructor behavior was influenced by the change of identity. Why not simply render all online instructors gender neutral mean by neutering the instructor. That has already been accomplished-- just normalize the pronouns. It is easy to execute, cheap and will test the thesis if it must be tested.

www.adjunctularnoodling.com

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Erin → Uncle Noodle · a year ago

The instructors behavior could not have been influenced by the change of identity, because the instructor instructed a usual and at the end of the course only the students critiquing them were lied to about the the instructor. Rendering online instructors as gender neutral might help solve gender bias with online classes, but would have no effect in solving gender bias in face to face classes. You have to look at the bigger picture.

P.S. My name is actually Stephen. I'm on my wife's login. Just so you know that I'm a man and my opinion is valid.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



po · a year ago

This is a useful study and one that speaks to my personal experience as a professor and as the department chair and a former member of the university rank and tenure review committee. I have seen this bias play out over and over, with mediocre male profs getting higher ratings than their female colleagues who have better pedagogic

Of course, race and ethnicity are also factors that influence the way students evaluate instructors, and I hope researchers include that in the larger studies.

21 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



ProfT · a year ago

I'm trying to figure out from the description what the study consisted of, and here's what I come up with. There were four sections, but it does not indicate if it was the same course or not. Let's assume so.

Section 1: Taught by male professor, identified as male.

Section 2: Taught by female professor, identified as female.

Section 3: Taught by male professor, identified as female.

Section 4: Taught by female professor, identified as male.

From the IHE description of evaluations, there was no significant difference between #1 and #2. There was a significant difference between #3 and #4.

The study concludes that it is gender bias at work. But that doesn't make a lot of sense given their very small set. If it was gender bias at work, sections #1 and #2 would see the same type of variation in evaluations. But they didn't, so gender bias would have to be ruled out.

Much more likely explanations? One, a bad set of students in the low evaluated section -- I have had occasional outliers myself over the years, and with an appallingly small sample size of four, it is easy for one bad section to skew the entire study. Two, the fact that the professors knew they were adopting a false identity changed their behavior in the course and led to differing outcomes.

15 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



Anonymous → ProfT · a year ago

The paper confirms that your description of the study is accurate. It's an interesting idea for a study, but the paper's conclusions are unconvincing. I think there's some gender bias going on, but also (as you point out)

the false identities are clearly playing an important role as well. In particular, the instructors participate actively in online discussion boards, and they had to maintain their false identities throughout this inter One theory is that the women pretending to be a man felt more confident thanks to her disguise, while man was not good at imitating a woman and was judged harshly by the students for failing to act sufficiently feminine. That would still indicate a form of gender bias, but a more complicated form than just "students systematically rate women lower than men". Instead, it might be "students respond well to confidence poorly to women who don't come across as sufficiently caring and nurturing". In any case, it's an interesting experiment, but so far the results are really inconclusive. I hope they follow up on this pilot study.

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



OccupareVeritas → Anonymous · a year ago

As a matter of genuine curiosity, since my institution does not have ready online access to the at this time, did they break out the results based on the gender of the respondents? Based on anecdotal experience, I would be very interested in knowing whether the gap in evaluations was greater among male or female respondents. Did a gender breakout suggest that females were evaluating female instructors more or less harshly than the males? Based on many conversations I have had with people, on related topics, I can't help but be curious.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jessica Toste → OccupareVeritas · a year ago

I would be very interested in that question as well. I doubt they had a large enough sample the current study to look at gender of respondents, but it should definitely be included in work.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Sophie Gublo-Jantzen → ProfT · a year ago

I could be wrong, but the way I understood it was that Sections 1 and 2 were the control. The difference

were significant between Section 1 and Section 3, which were both taught by the male professor and between Section 2 and Section 4, both taught by the female professor.

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Matt Shipman → ProfT · a year ago

Not quite right. There was no significant difference between Sections 1 and 4, or between 2 and 3. The Sections that believed they were being taught by a male gave much better evaluations. Sections that believed they were being taught by a female gave worse evaluations. It didn't matter which instructor was actually leading the group, only which instructor the students *thought* was leading the group.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



John Muccigrosso → Matt Shipman · a year ago

Haven't read this carefully yet, but...

On the design: they combined the data from two sections in each of their columns, so that per male category is made up of two sections (one actual male, one actual female), and similarly for perceived female. The data for actual male/female are also combined. So each of the four groups has an N of 20 or 23, therefore counting each section twice. (The actual male taught 23 students, the female 20.)

Awfully small N's there. It's easy to imagine that such small sections could have been highly affected by their membership.

I'm confused about them saying that "[b]oth instructors performed equally well from the student perspective." They're combining two sections, one of which was a section with an instructor of a perceived sex different from their actual sex. If sex introduces a bias, then one section in each group rated the instructor differently than they would have had they known the actual sex. So the male professor would have received higher scores in his perceived-female section and the woman lower from her

perceived-male section. IOW, the man's ratings would have been higher than the woman's. So data actually suggest that the actual male performed better than the actual female, but was ha by his perceived sex with one section.

The std dev in the actual and perceived male groups is a lot smaller those in the actual and pe female groups, another thing that makes me wonder whether the sections were really quite dif how they responded. (Was one of the actual male sections very uniform and/or one of the actu female sections very varied?)

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jessica Toste → ProfT · a year ago

Actually, I believe the differences were between 1 and 3, as well as 2 and 4. We can't simply compare and male instructors because, as the article states, often female instructors work harder to earn good evaluations. The point is that the SAME male instructor had lower evaluations when he taught the exact content as a female, and the SAME female instructor had higher evaluations when she taught the exact content as a male. Each instructor served as his/her own comparison. It is a much better design than comparing general course evaluations wherein you have no way to control other influences. (Small sa pilot data that needs to be replicated, but still interesting findings!)

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



TJ → ProfT · a year ago

Actually, the paper concludes that there is significant difference between #1 and #3, and significant dif between #2 and #4. Meaning the same faculty member was rated lower when students were told that faculty was a woman (regardless of whether the faculty was actually a woman or a man). Hence the (bias. It's not about how differently the two professors taught because they are being compared to their 'other' section.

9 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Manny → ProfT · a year ago

Yes, In order to eliminate behavioral bias in cases 3 and 4 the instructors would have to have had no knowledge that they were being represented as the other gender. Sounds like they did know. Unconscious (or conscious), adjustments in behavior in response to an assigned role are definite sources of bias. If studies are there for this reason.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



ezry · a year ago

Fortunately, ProfT and others don't have to guess; we can go look up the study online. It's teeny in terms of number of discussion groups of 8, 12, 12, and 11 students from the same online class. The authors acknowledge this tiny pilot study. But "promptness," for instance, in providing feedback was regulated objectively, and was measured as a statistical difference ($p < 0.05$) based solely on whether students thought their discussion board leader/coordinator was male or female, despite the fact that mean overall ratings of the two instructors were generally pretty close. This is definitely enough to make me interested in what the follow-up study would look like.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Campbell Stanley · a year ago

I am open to the possibility that there are gender differences in student evaluations, but this study contributes little to providing an answer to that question. Not only is the sample size small, but there appear to be numerous threats to validity in the authors' design. This is the kind of thing that would have been a nice little preliminary test that the authors might discuss among themselves and that might later set up a more detailed study with a higher sample size. Of course the authors note that this is a "pilot study" and that they intend to conduct a larger study. But I would not submit such a weak study for publication, and how did a study like this get published in ANY scholarly academic journal? Moreover, I have read about this study in numerous outlets, so it is clear that folks are jumping over these findings as if they are "true." It may well be the case that there are gender differences in student evaluations, but this study certainly does not provide sufficient evidence to confirm that. Can we have just a s

of the normal kind of skepticism and detachment that we apply to most scholarly work?

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jon → Campbell Stanley · a year ago

insecure much?

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cool story, 'bro → Jon · a year ago

Ad hominem much?

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jon → Cool story, 'bro · a year ago

Well, the guy doesn't provide much of an argument, just hysterical reaction. Therefore, not much else to do other than point out the hysteria.

(and by not argue, it's the hyperbole: "this study contributes nothing to providing an answer to that question", the "numerous threats to validity in the authors' design" even though none were actually mentioned, the "sure the authors admit that this is a pilot study" but then they attack them for submitting a pilot study, the attack on journals who would accept a study, the apparent lack of awareness that this is part of a broader field of research, etc., etc., etc)

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



gaston123 → Jon · a year ago

I've read the paper and agree with Campbell Stanley. His/her reaction is not hysterical at all. We are making a big deal out of a paper that probably shouldn't have been published in the first place. Can we have at least some research standards here before jumping to the conclusions that you and others seem to want to make based on such flimsy evidence?

flimsy evidence?

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jon → gaston123 · a year ago

Can you at least make an argument, instead of just dictatorially stating on your own authority that the paper shouldn't have been published? Maybe this is just what you're used to? Either way, I'm not jumping to conclusions or "making a big deal of it." I think it's an interesting preliminary study and calls for further investigation. It's a fun thing to talk about though, given the time of year (student evaluation time), and it naturally draws howling critiques from those suspicious of the claims made by those of us in Gender Studies regarding the persistence of bias in the classroom.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Chip → Jon · a year ago

You must not do any quantitative research, Jon. No one is making dictatorial pronouncements. Rather, they are demonstrating a concern for standards of evidence. This is entirely reasonable. It is you who is offering a knee-jerk reaction.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jon → gaston123 · a year ago

I've read the paper and disagree with Campbell Stanley. His reaction is hysterical. Hyperbole, vacuous claim. Can we at least have some research standards here before jumping to the conclusions that you and others seem to want to make on no evidence?

[see how easy it is to make an absolutely empty "argument?"] Again, please actually say something.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Chip → Jon · a year ago

Your own effusive, hyperbolic, and grammatically challenged posts do not amount to an argument. The claim has been made that the sample size is simply too small for any sort of dramatic claims about gender bias.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Michael → Campbell Stanley · a year ago

It has been a while since I read the research but I think there has been a number of published studies on gender bias. My recollection is that overall the bias is positive for women. However, I think there are several factors and that there is some interaction between type of course and the instructors' gender. I also think there was an interaction with the sex of the student (men versus women).

Also, the research was not experimental since you cannot manipulate gender in face to face classes.

It should not be too hard to find the research using a database or Google Scholar.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Virginia → Michael · a year ago

Why would you call online research "not experimental?" And why didn't you look up the research you are citing if it is not hard to find?

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Michael → Virginia · a year ago

I have no need to do a literature review. If you want to look at the literature then look you up. My main point is that this is not a new topic and it is not a simple question.

The research is not experimental because you cannot randomly assign gender to instr

The research is not experimental because you cannot randomly assign gender to instructors or students to classes. There are an incredible number of confounding variables (sex of student, discipline (physics versus sociology), grading, etc. The little research project on online teaching that manipulated perceptions of the instructor's gender might be considered experimental but certainly limited in terms of external validity.

I ran the student evaluations of teaching effectiveness at a large university for about 7 years. The data were very skewed. We used a 7-point scale which I had helped develop years ago. The committee that developed the instrument meant for it to be used as a basis for improving teaching (formative evaluation) but the faculty senate turned it into a evaluation. I analyzed the data (this is for something like 80,000 student evaluations) over 3,000 sections of courses each semester over several semesters.

I did not look at gender bias (but it has been looked at by some of my colleagues) and it is a very complicated set of variables.

[see more](#)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Jessica Toste → Campbell Stanley • a year ago

Please expand on the numerous threats to validity. I agree that we can't make broad generalizations based on one pilot study, but I think it was a small and clean study. I don't know what field you are in, but I sure as hell publish findings from my pilot studies.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Guest • a year ago

The effect of gender bias on student evals pales in comparison to grading bias. Nonetheless, this study is valuable that it contributes to the overwhelming body of evidence demonstrating that student course evals are useless.

that it contributes to the overwhelming body of evidence demonstrating that student course evals are useless assessing instruction.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



alme → Guest · a year ago

To what grading bias do you refer? I can imagine a multitude of possibilities.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Guest → alme · a year ago

It's well established that grades are positively correlated with student evals. Teaching to the test, less experienced and less qualified are also positively associated. Successfully stimulating deep learning is negatively associated with student evals scores. Take all this together with the hypothesized gender bias, and it seems obvious that these surveys are next to useless for evaluating instructors.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jane · a year ago

As a dept administrator, I can say without certainty that the results are correct, even if the study is flawed. We get the best course evals, even when they are sorry teachers. Black women get the lowest. This is true at my school in the Atlanta burbs. The problem is getting male administrators to see this. Students also complain more about women professors than they do about males professors.

14 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



stannadel → Jane · a year ago

as a male former dept. head and former dean I have to agree--I've seen this in operation for many years

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jonathan Dresner · a year ago



Jonathan Proctor · a year ago

This is not the first study to find statistically significant gender bias in student evaluations of teaching. There are studies showing racial bias, attractiveness bias, grade expectation bias.

Why we still use these things for important employment decisions mystifies me.

16 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



JeDaCo · a year ago

The issue is interesting, but not really the relevant one. Does anyone really feel that gender and other forms of bias have been removed from society? Students are clearly a simple reflection of the society from which they come. At the same time, our faculty colleagues are also raised in that same society. Student evaluations can form an important component of professional evaluation, BUT it must be realized they carry the same flaws as the society from which they are derived. Some will use this small study to argue that because students have the social bias that permeates our society that they are without merit. That is simply not true - as with many tools of evaluation (colleague letters, reviewers comments, editors decisions, elections to society offices) they need to be used in that proper context.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Nate T. · a year ago

This rings true to so many professors I know and I assume is a preview for a larger study in the future. The people who have the biggest problem with this article seem to be male. Yes, we should absolutely take these findings with a grain of salt but not be so quick to discredit this.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



S. · a year ago

Not exactly conclusive, but I'd like to hear more from these researchers.

After twenty years of teaching, my unscientific impression is that students have higher standards for their female faculty in some ways. Several times, I've heard respected male faculty admit to blowing students off in ways

imagine female faculty getting away with--not having office hours, for example, or ignoring emails. Students just seem to accept this kind of thing more readily from men. Perhaps there are things they accept more readily from women too.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



TJ · a year ago

A couple of graduate students. A single online course. 40 students. Researchers who have a personal vested interest in the specific situation that they are testing with a personal history in school that they are using as the test case. Seriously? What kind of journal publishes this nonsense? And how is this meaningful research? MacNell should approach a psychology or sociology department at her university with this study design. Of course the science department will laugh at her out of the room--and it will cement an image of English professors as an academics at her school--but I'm guessing MacNell will then be able to distinguish the difference between her personal hobby pursuits and actual research. Lastly, if this is the type of scholarly rigor MacNell uses when publishing her own research, no wonder students questioned her judgment when she graded papers.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Suzanne → TJ · a year ago

Lillian MacNell is in a sociology department.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



rvnc · 3 months ago

I read about this study and one of the most persuasive indicators was that students ranked the perceived work worse on returning papers on time, even though the professors literally returned all the papers to students from their sections (one taught as a male, the other as a female) at the same time. So the double-blind aspect (a woman behaves differently when she is being perceived to be male) didn't seem to be the dominant factor. It seems to be instead a status issue. Students tend to give "high status" professors a lot more latitude in things like returning papers, simply because students are excited to be taught by a "high status" professor -- and the male is seen

higher status by default.

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