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Is a Mediocre Female Professor Evaluated More Negatively than a Mediocre Male Professor?

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Abstract

Prior research has shown differences in student's evaluations of male and female professors. This study was designed to examine if these gender differences occurred in mediocre professors. Participants read a mediocre female or male candidate's teaching philosophy and an evaluation by a colleague. They were then asked to evaluate the candidate. The materials were be identical except for the gender of the candidate. It was predicted that mediocre female candidates would be punished to a greater extent than mediocre male candidates. No significant results were found- possibly due to a floor effect.

Introduction

Female professors are often held to higher standards than male professors. For example, average female professors are expected to have higher positive interpersonal traits and lower levels of negative interpersonal traits (Bacon, 2015). Therefore, average female professors are punished in the classroom when they are not able to meet these unrealistic expectations. Contrary to the standards of female professors, average male professors are held to lower student expectations allowing them to often appear impressive when they exceed the low expectations that are set for them (Bacon, 2015).

In the study conducted by Bacon (2015), attitudes toward average professors were examined. This study aims to further Bacon's research by examining how these attitudes extend to gender discriminatory behaviors by students.

Current Study

Participants read a mediocre female or male candidate's teaching philosophy and an evaluation by a colleague. They were then asked to evaluate the candidate. The materials were identical except for the gender of the candidate.

Hypotheses

- The mediocre female candidate would be viewed as less exciting to take a class with, less understanding, less approachable, less likely to fit the atmosphere of CSB/SJU, and less likely to learn from during class than the male candidate.
- The mediocre male candidate would be viewed as more understanding, more approachable, more likely to fit the atmosphere of CSB/SJU, and more likely to learn from during class.

Method

Participants

- 106 students (29 men and 77 women)
- Students from Introductory Psychology Classes

Procedure

- Participants were told that due to a suggestion from a recent departmental review, they would be assisting the psychology department in providing feedback about the qualities students look for in professors.
- Participants were randomly assigned to evaluate applications from a male or female candidate.
- Participants were asked to read a candidate's teaching philosophy and an evaluation by a colleague, and then were asked to evaluate the candidate.

Materials

***Teaching Philosophy*.** A narrative from a candidate describing the professor's idea of teaching and learning, along with a description of how they teach (e.g., "I hold my students to the same professional standard I hold myself to... I am only available via e-mail and in person during my office hours and do not extend these office hours past the work day").

***Observer Evaluation*.** A 16-item evaluation of the candidate. Items on the evaluation rate the candidate on their behavior inside the classroom (e.g., "Instructor is understanding to student needs," "Instructor can relate/connect with students").

***Student Evaluation*.** An evaluation of the candidate rating the professor on their traits and behaviors from a student standpoint (e.g., "How understanding do you feel this professor would be if you had a personal issue come up?" "How comfortable would you be asking this professor for help?").

Results

- There was no significant difference between the evaluations of mediocre male and female professors on the level of understanding, $t(104) = 0.78$, $p = .44$, $d = 0.15$.
- There was no significant difference between the evaluations of mediocre male and female professors on the level of approachability, $t(104) = 0.25$, $p = .81$, $d = 0.05$.
- There was no significant difference between the evaluations of mediocre male and female professors on the likeliness of fitting into the CSB/SJU atmosphere, $t(104) = 0.43$, $p = .67$, $d = 0.08$.
- There was no significant difference between the evaluations of mediocre male and female professors on the amount which would be learned in class, $t(104) = -0.12$, $p = .91$, $d = -0.02$.

Conclusion

- We predicted mediocre female candidates would be punished to a greater extent than mediocre male candidates because female professors would be held to a higher standard than male professors.
- Our hypotheses were not supported as there was no difference in evaluations of mediocre male and female professors.
- There was likely a floor effect due to a perception the professor was less than mediocre for both the hypothetical male and female candidates. This floor effect caused a lack of variability within the data as the evaluated hypothetical professor scored low on nearly all traits and behaviors across genders.

Limitations

- The participants ranged from first-years to seniors. Seniors might use less gender stereotypes after their educational experience.
- First-year participants may not have developed gender stereotypes of professors.
- Risk of social desirability-students many may not want to come across as sexist.

References

Bacon, P.L. (2015, February). *He's sarcastic and she's caring: Students' stereotypes of the typical male and female professor.* Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Long Beach, CA.