Original Paper

Academic Contrapower Harassment and Student Evaluations: The Gendered Experience of Bullying, Intimidation, and Entitlement

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Abstract

Student evaluations are subjective and oftentimes arbitrary, skewed by stereotypes students have of the professor rather than the actual merit of the instructional style. Yet student evaluations are frequently necessary for promotion and tenure requirements regardless of known gender bias. As such, student evaluations have the potential to foster a culture of academic contrapower harassment (ACPH). A convenience sample of 150 professors and instructors (41.3% male, 56.7%, female, and 2% declined to specify) from two separate liberal arts colleges were surveyed to explore the gendered differences of perceived bullying of professors by students on anonymous student evaluations. Using Pearson's chi-square test for independence (categorical variables), results support differences in the psychological consequences of student evaluations between male and female faculty but fail to confirm instances of ACPH.

Keywords

student evaluations, contrapower harassment, gender differences higher education

1. Introduction

Coined by Benson in 1984, the term "contrapower" is still a relatively neglected area of research and no study to date has applied this concept to student evaluations of professors. Academic Contrapower Harassment (ACHP) is defined as someone with less institutional power, in this case a student, harassing someone with more institution power, such as a professor. Research over the past three decades suggests that ACPH is a ubiquitous occurrence and part of being a professor in the modern era, and many studies to date have explored the psychological and physical tolls this type of bullying and have on instructors.

The current study hypothesizes that the university practice of anonymous student evaluations of professors encourages an atmosphere of contrapower harassment. The anonymous nature of student evaluations allows students to hide behind aggregate reporting and this ability to be anonymous online is often tied to the issue of online harassment (Davis, Amelink, Hirt, & Miyazaki, 2012; Duggan, 2017). According to the Pew Research Center, 89 percent of Americans say the ability to post anonymously online enables people to be cruel to or harass one another (Duggan, 2017).

Indeed, the Pew Research Centerreported that 66 percent adults have witnessed online abuse and 41 percent state that they have personally been victim to harassing behavior online. Duggan (2017) argues that harassment is often focused on personal or physical characteristics; political views, gender, physical appearance and race are among the most common. The culture of normalizing ad hominem attacks and general online incivility bleeds over to classroom conduct which is then in turn reflected in anonymous student evaluations. Within this platform of evaluations students are at liberty to say whatever they want with no repercussions. Utilizing survey research, the current study examines the issues of incivility and harassment of professors by students via anonymous online student evaluations.

2. Literature Review

Bullying is defined as unwanted, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Much of the literature focusses on bullying between students and bullying of students by faculty in secondary education. A 2004 study found that among surveyed college students, a large majority had witnessed or been the victim of peer bullying (Chapell et al., 2004). More alarming, Chapell et al. (2004) found about 60 percent of respondents reported witnessing a professor bully a student. Despite these results, the survey did not ask about student bullying behaviors toward professors, and most literature is lacking in this singular area.

Lampman et al. (2009) examined bullying in brick and mortar educational settings and found substantial evidence of faculty experiencing bullying over grades, assignment requirements, and non-classroom-related issues, such a gender or family. The faculty experienced repeated and intentional disruptions by students, outward expression of disdain, and verbal disrespect or challenges to authority; moreover it appears that tenure-track faculty were more at risk for ACPH than their non-tenured counterparts (Lampman, Crew, Lowery, & Tompkins, 2016; Lampman, Phelps, Bancroft, & Beneke,

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2009). Additionally, in a study of 524 professors it was found that 91 percent reported at least one act of student incivility or bullying (Lampman, 2012). Women were more likely than men to experience ACPH during their career; moreover, women were more likely to experience instances of bullying and incivility in the past year than were their male peers. However, Lampman (2012) asserts that gender was not the only predictor of ACPH; racial minorities, younger faculty members, and those with less experience and credentials reported these incidences occurring more frequently. More women than men reported "serious incident" of student incivility, and female faculty reported they were more seriously impacted emotionally by these instances (Lampman, 2012, 2014; Lampman et al., 2016, 2009). Lampman (2012) found that faculty age was negatively correlated with unwanted sexual attention.

These instances of incivility have real and lasting consequences. Lampman et al (2016) found that female professors reported significantly more negative outcomes as a result of contra-power harassment that their male counterparts including anxiety, stress-related illness, difficulty concentrating or wanting to quit. These finding correspond to those of Wildermuth and Davis (2012), who found that female faculty, younger teachers, and those faculty of color were more likely to face incivility in the classroom and online. Interestingly, male professors were more likely to highlight experiences with sexual harassment, which were relatively uncommon. Conversely, women were more likely to recall instances where students challenged their authority, were disrespectful or disruptive (Lampman et al., 2016; Wildermuth & Davis, 2012).

Earlier research on harassment of university faculty by students focused almost entirely on sexual harassment (Carroll & Ellis, 1989; DeSouza & Fansler, 2003; Dziech & Weiner, 1990; Grauerholz, 1989; Matchen & DeSouza, 2000). It was believed that students did not have enough power in the student-professor relationship to bully faculty. However, evidence suggests this is quite the contrary and indeed is not uncommon (Meires, 2018). As such, more recent research conceptualizes ACPH more broadly to include student behaviors that are rude, disrespectful, and/or uncivil. It also includes bullying, threats, intimidation, aggression, and challenges to a professor's authority, or involve racial-ethnic or sexual harassment (DeSouza, 2011; Lampman, 2012; Lampman et al., 2009). Bullying by students occurs for several reasons, including personal gain (Meires, 2018). Significant predictors of contrapower harassment include being tenure track, teaching in Arts and Science, and having larger classes. Interestingly, more years of experience and being younger are significant predictors of ACPH for women, but not so for men (Lampman et al., 2009).

May and Tenzek (2018) and Wildermuth and Davis (2012) both found that ACPH harms the professor's psyche, makes them change grading practices, disrupts the learning environment, instills distrust, anxiety, and fear of personal safety. The researchers also found this affects women more than men. Since stereotypes of women professors dictate they be accessible and kind, if they veer from these ideals, they experience more ACPH (Burke, Head-Burgess, & Siders, 2017; E. R. DeSouza, 2011; May & Tenzek, 2018; Wildermuth & Davis, 2012).

2.1 Gender Experiences

In part, ACPH may be driven by gender stereotypes and an emerging consumerist attitude among students (May & Tenzek, 2018). Prescribed gender stereotypes, such as women being accommodating or men being authoritative, govern student expectations of normative gender characteristics (Burke, Head-Burges, & Siders, 2017; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Lampman, 2012; Lampman et al., 2016; Matchen & DeSouza, 2000). It is suggested that these prescribed gender stereotypes are the reason why more female professors report instances of ACPH than their male counterparts. Moreover, male professors may be more reticent to report instances of ACPH because of the "threat to their masculinity" which violates the perceived gender characteristics of the authoritative male (Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). Lampman (2012) found 25 percent of faculty experienced at least one "sexual behavior" from a student and more women than men reported a "serious incident" of student incivility, bullying, aggression or sexual attention during their careers. Furthermore, in their research, May and Tenzek (2018) reported several female professors feeling very uncomfortable with male students who exhibited overly masculine displays. In fact, one female respondent detailed an "… almost like a sexual dominant thing happening", in her description of how a male student made direct references to her body and encouraged her to keep working out. Another student used language, such as "bitch", that was "very slanderous toward a woman" (May & Tenzek, 2018, p. 283). Moreover, May and Tenzek's (2018) accounts are far from unique, other female professors detail instances of sexual harassment, stalking, and incivility by male students (Bartos & Ives, 2019; King, 2019).

2.2 Cyberbullying and Anonymity

Bullying has been defined as a problem at least in part due to an imbalance of power. Power imbalances are widespread in the hierarchical context of universities: administrator to faculty member, senior to junior faculty, faculty to student. And while research around bullying within academia often focuses on peer bullying or the student victim, the student bully who targets professors is a neglected area of study yet just as destructive, demeaning, and intimidating.

Cyberbullying can take many forms. It can include harassment, insults, spreading rumors, threatening behavior, outing, and trickery. It can be conducted via email, text message, or social networking cites or websites (King, 2019; Pieschl et al., 2013). One such platform where this might be seen is on ratemyprofessor.com. One professor noted that with online attacks he was: "Unfairly treated with no chance to defend myself" (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2017, p. 895). In Cassady et al.'s (2017) research on cyberbullying in the academy, another professor said, "I know there are cruel and disparaging remarks posted about me on ratemyprofessor.com … The unpoliced internet allows students to post demeaning and often untrue comments anonymously. How is this not libel?" (p. 895). Cyberbullying provides anonymity to the bully, which is not possible with conventional old-fashioned bullying. Because of the anonymity, offenders cannot see the reactions of their victims and research shows that because of this, the bully feels less remorse. Cyberbullying causes harm with no physical

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interaction, little thought or planning, and a slim chance of being caught or identified (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012).

The online world has resulted in a "rapid increase in uncivil online discourse" (Wildermuth & Davis, 2012, p. 380). Women are about twice as likely as men to say they have been targeted as a result of their gender with regards to cyberbullying; 11 percent of women reported being targeted because of their gender, while only 5 percent of men reported their gender made them a target for harassment. Men, however, are around twice as likely as women to say they have experienced harassment online as a result of their political views, with 19 percent of men saying that have experienced harassment of this sort versus 10 percent of women (Duggan, 2017).

Email, for example, is a prime medium for cyber bullying. Wildermuth and Davis (2012) assert that communication between faculty and students has increased as higher education has become increasingly digitalized, meaning that the opportunity for bullying of faculty via email has also increased. Cyberbullying disrupts typical powerhierarchies by providing the option of anonymity and enabling indirect forms of bullying (Cassidy et al., 2017). Moreover, technology makes cyberbullying easier due to the perceived anonymity, asynchronous nature of online and email interactions, lack of nonverbal cues, and the intangible nature of online interactions (Wildermuth & Davis, 2012). In addition, the "consumer" attitude of higher education allows students to designate the professor as a service, rather than a person, resulting in the "I paid. You deliver", ethos which dictates ACPH (May & Tenzek, 2018; Wildermuth & Davis, 2012). This mentality negates the need for civility or respect in the relationship between student and professor.

3. Methods

The current research examines ACPH in the form of student evaluations of professor teaching effectiveness. These evaluations are the primary measure that many colleges and universities use to evaluate professors' teaching and are given to students at the end of the semester or term. Such evaluations ask students to rate the teaching effectiveness of their professors and are generally both qualitative and quantitative. Students are asked to rate professors on a scale (1 being ineffective and 10 being effective) and to elaborate via qualitative feedback. Qualitative questions often ask students "What did you like best?" or "What did you like least"?

With such open-ended free evaluation reign, it was surmised that students would use this anonymous platform to engage in instances of ACPH against faculty. To uncover this, the current research surveyed a convenience sample of 150 professors and instructors at two separate liberal arts universities, one on the west coast and one in the Midwest, to examine the prevalence of ACPHP professors and instructors of all rank were invited to participate if they were currently teaching and had taught at least one course in the last academic year. Adapting questions from Lampman's (2012) research instrument, faculty were asked14 questions pertaining to how many times in the past three academic years they received comments on their course evaluations that could be considered uncivil

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and ten questions pertaining to the personal and psychological consequences of student evaluations (see Appendix A). All surveys were administered online in the Fall of 2018 using Qualtrics survey software to ensure participant confidentiality. Using Pearson's chi-square analysis, which represents one of the most utilized statistical analyses for answering questions about the association or difference between categorical variables (Franke, Ho, & Christie, 2011), the current study aimed to discern if there was a difference in ACPH between male and female faculty.

4. Results

The sample was drawn from two liberal arts universities, one on the West Coast and one in the Midwestern United States. Results yielded 150 usable responses; 62 of the respondents identified as male (41.3%), 85 respondents identified as female (56.7%), and 3 respondents declined to specify (2%).

Years as an Instructor as a correlate

Table 1 presents the results from asking faculty about the frequency of uncivil or bullying comments. Respondents were asked to indicate how many years they have been working as a university level instructor. The results utilized correlation analysis using years as an instructor versus each of the survey items. While most items showed no significant relationships there were a number of items that did show a significant correlation with years as an instructor.

Table 1. Rate of Uncivil or Harassing Comments on Student Evaluations

	R	Significance
Made a comment about your appearance/body	0.2	0.033
Contain other inappropriate comments	0.156	0.1
Feeling anxiety before reading evaluations	-0.177	0.058
Seeking the social support of colleagues	-0.168	0.073
Feeling embarrassed to talk with colleagues	-0.155	0.1
Discuss/Share with department members	-0.251	0.007

The negative correlation with the last 4 items on the above list might give some hope to instructors, in that the some of these severe consequences are, in fact, mitigated with time on the job.

Sex/Gender Analysis

The literature is replete with examples of gender bias in student evaluations. The current study reveals several examples of a marked difference in responses between males and females (see Table 2).

Table 2. Psychological Consequences of Negative Comments

	Gender	Mean	SD
Made remarks about a disability that you might have *	Male	1.239	0.766
	Female	1.031	0.175
Feeling anxiety before reading evaluations *	Male	2.72	1.51
	Female	3.36	1.47
Trouble sleeping after reading evaluations *	Male	1.66	1.01
	Female	2.11	1.18
Feeling depressed after reading comments**	Male	1.76	0.937
	Female	2.3	1.2
Suffering from stress related illness *	Male	1.298	0.072
	Female	1.6	0.981

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Out of the 14 items that measured ACPH, only one item reflected a difference between the genders. The results indicate a difference in relation to students making remarks about a disability the faculty member might have ($p = .05$). Four out of the ten survey items relating to personal/psychological consequences of evaluations yielded statically significant results. The results show that women were statistically more likely to feel depressed after reading comments on student evaluations ($p = .01$). Moreover, women were also more likely to feel anxiety before reading the evaluations, have difficulty sleeping after reading them, and from suffering from stress related illnesses ($p = .05$).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

While the results from the current study failed to show evidence of ACPH in student evaluations, it did provide some interesting results. First, as Lampman et al. (2009) found, years in rank was a significant predictor for uncivil comments on student evaluations. However, as mentioned, these aspects might be mitigated with more time and experience in the classroom.

Second, the results of the current study also support previous research that examined the psychological aspects of student evaluations. While the student comments did not explicitly elicit feelings of being bullied or harassed, evaluations of faculty still created negative psychological strain. Most notable was feeling depressed after reading comments. More women than men experienced negative emotions associated with student evaluations.

And third, the failure of this study to find overwhelming support of ACPH in student evaluations is a positive development showing that students are not using this platform to harass, belittle, and demean faculty. Students are able to appropriately harness their emotions and provide general feedback on evaluations, instead of using them to singularly target a faculty member.

The practice of using Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET) has been under attack in recent years because of the plethora of research that shows how ineffective and biased it is (Beleche, Fairris, & Marks, 2012; Braga, Paccagnella, & Pellizzari, 2014; Burke et al., 2017; Lawrence, 2018; Uttl, White, & Gonzalez, 2017; Wagner, Rieger, & Voorvelt, 2016). Yet little research discusses the psychological impacts evaluations have on faculty. It is problematic to continue a practice which causes depression and anxiety to faculty in general and women faculty in particular.

Limitations of the current study include a relatively small sample. While the study attempted to be more generalizable by utilizing a sample from two separate universities, the demographics of the sample were not diverse.

Additionally, qualitative feedback on the surveys revealed that ACPH is much more prevalent in the classroom, face to faceinteractions, and in emails, not anonymous evaluations. This is supported in DeSousa (2011), Wildermuth and Davis (2012), Lampman (2012), Lampman (2016). It was hypothesized that the anonymity of online student evaluations would allow students to hide their disdain behind a cloak of invisibility, but apparently students need no such shield. Those who challenge, bully, and demean professors do so openly and without regard. More research should be directed at this problematic occurrence.

And finally, future research should look at the still widely adopted practice of using SET. Universities should strive to promote emotional wellbeing of faculty, self care, and a safe learning environment for everyone, faculty and student alike.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Survey of faculty

How many times in the past 3 academic years did you receive comments on your course evaluation that:

- Requested that you make your exams or assignments easier

- Contained inappropriate comments

- Questioned your credentials or qualifications to teach a course

- Made a hostile or threatening comment

- Made a derogatory comment concerning race, ethnicity, sex, or sexual orientation

- Communicated something intimidating (e.g., lawsuits or grievances)

- Accused you of racism, sexism, or discrimination

- Called you a name or insulted you

- Made remarks about a disability you might have

- Flirted with you

- Made a sexual advances

- Asked you out on a date

- Made a comment about your dress/attire

- Make a comment about your appearance/body

Personal/Psychological consequences of student evaluation comments

How many times did you experience:

- Feeling anxiety before reading evaluations

- Trouble sleeping after reading evaluation comments

- Felt depressed after reading comments

- Did not want to teach the class again after reading comments

- Suffered from stress-related illness (e.g., migraines or stomach problems)

- Needed medical treatment for stress-related illness as a result of the evaluations

- Reported the harassing comments to Department Chair, Dean, or other Administrator

- Sought the social support of colleagues

- Felt embarrassed to talk to colleagues about the incident

- Changed assignments or teaching based on fear of harassing comments