THE IMPACT OF GENDER AND ATTRACTION ON STUDENT EVALUATIONS OF BUSINESS FACULTY

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, we examine whether students' perceptions of a faculty member's competence and qualifications are impacted by their gender. We surveyed students to measure student perceptions of the performance and credentials of a professor based on physical appearance only. Overall, male professors were rated higher on 79% of the measures, with the likelihood of having a Ph.D. and being clear and well organized in class presentations being significantly higher. Conversely, female faculty scored strongest for their expected enthusiasm in presenting material.

INTRODUCTION
As women enter the realm of academia in greater numbers, a number of issues arise concerning the experiences of male faculty versus female faculty in the academic environment. A significant body of research exists on whether female faculty are treated differently than male faculty on such issues as tenure and promotion and annual performance evaluations. At the same time, much research has been conducted on whether professor gender influences student teaching evaluations of faculty. Less studied is the "climate" in the classroom for women professors versus male professors. There is a growing body of research that shows that men and women faculty who teach the same subject to a similar class have very different experiences from one another (Sandler 1991). For example, Bennett (1982) finds that students expect female faculty to be more nurturing, more available outside of the classroom and more willing to grant concessions (such as extending a deadline). However, even when female faculty are more available to students, the students do not rate the women faculty any higher on their teaching evaluation.

In this paper, we set out to study whether students' perceptions of a faculty member's competence and qualifications are impacted by the gender (and/or the physical attractiveness) of that faculty member.

There has been a significant amount of research examining the effect of faculty gender on student teaching evaluations. However, we are not so interested in student teaching evaluations, but rather in overall student perceptions of the competence and performance of faculty members based upon gender. When a professor walks into class on that first day, students form some impressions and expectations of that professor based upon observable attributes that may provide little information about teacher competence. Students may not even be conscious of these perceptions; rather impressions and perceptions may arise from deep-seated, subconscious feelings. If these first impressions are not positive, it may be difficult for the professor to overcome them. In addition, perceptions and expectations can also affect the climate in and out of the classroom. If a professor feels that their competence or qualifications are questioned by some students, the professor may find it more difficult to teach, may be less motivated in the classroom, or may suffer in numerous other ways, such as lack of self-confidence or compromising their standards to please the students.

LITERATURE REVIEW
There is a rich body of research and diabolical debate about whether males have an advantage over females in the workplace. It was the original work of social psychologist Philip Goldberg (1968) that drew much attention to the subject of gender bias. In Goldberg's often cited study, female subjects were given identical booklets containing six different articles. For each article, however, half the subjects were told that the author was Joan T. McKay, a woman. The other half were told the author was John T. McKay, a man. On 44 of 54 measures, John McKay received higher ratings than Joan McKay. Research has since extended from general studies of biases in the workplace to the academic environment.

Gender variables have frequently been found to affect students' evaluations of professors.
Depending on the methodology, the sex-typing of the field discussed, the sex-typed characteristics of the instructors, and the types of questions asked, female professors sometimes receive lower ratings than male professors, especially from male students (Basow and Howe 1987). There is now a substantial amount of research showing how men and women are treated differently, and a growing body of research that describes how both male and female students treat women faculty differently than male faculty (Ryan 1989). Bennett (1992) found that female faculty received higher ratings from their students due to their perceived warmth and potency; however, the study also found that students rated greater interpersonal support from female faculty and females were judged more closely than male instructors in providing this support. The author concluded that while gender bias may not be observed in formal student evaluations of their instructors, “female faculty members are nonetheless subject to culturally conditioned gender stereotypes” (Bennett 1992, p. 170). (For a review of research on different ways in which male and female students communicate with women and men, see Sandler (1991).)

Feldman conducted an extensive review of the literature focusing on college students’ views of male and female college teachers (1992, 1993). The first review focused on research findings from the social laboratory and experiments (1992) and the second came directly from student evaluations of their classroom teachers (1993). In the majority of experimental studies reported, students’ overall evaluations of male and female college teachers as professionals were not different. However, when a difference was found, male teachers received higher overall ratings than did female teachers. In no study did female teachers receive a higher overall evaluation than did male teachers. Studies utilizing classroom evaluations also found that male and female college teachers do not differ in their overall evaluations; however, students did tend to rate same-gendered teachers slightly higher than opposite-gendered teachers, with males demonstrating a stronger preference for male teachers than females demonstrate for female teachers. Of the 39 studies summarized in Feldman’s review (1993), only one included a sample of undergraduate business students (Goldberg and Callahan 1991). Based on a 13-item evaluation questionnaire, business instructors were ranked “high” (if in the top quarter of the course scores), “mid” (if in the mid-half of the course scores), and “low” (if in the bottom quarter of the course scores). The difference between male and female teachers was reported as statistically significant; however, neither the direction of the association nor the correlation could be determined from the information provided in the article.

Early research studies show the physical attractiveness stereotype has more strongly affected judgments about females than about males (e.g., Kehle, Bramble, & Mason 1974). For example, male college students judged both an essay and the essay writer as more competent when the writer was an attractive female than when the writer was an unattractive female (Landy & Sigall 1974). A similar study was conducted which included female subjects’ impressions of the competence of attractive vs. unattractive female essay writers (Holahan & Stephan 1981). Female subjects’ impressions were affected by the competence of the stimulus person and by their sex-stereotypical attitudes, but were not influenced by the physical attractiveness of the writer. Lombardi and Tocci (1979) report an interaction between the teacher’s gender and physical attractiveness that affected the teacher’s rating of masculinity/femininity (the attractive female teacher was considered to be more feminine than the unattractive female teacher). Goebel and Cashen (1979) found neither the teacher’s age nor the teacher’s physical attractiveness by itself interacted with the teacher’s gender to affect overall evaluation, but that the teacher’s age and physical attractiveness did interact with the teacher’s gender to affect evaluations (the middle-aged, attractive male teacher was rated particularly low). An interesting gender difference was found: Ratings for the young, unattractive female teacher followed the pattern for those of older, less attractive teachers in contrast to ratings of the young unattractive male teacher, which followed the pattern for those of young, more attractive teachers.

METHODOLOGY

Most previous research has given students a description of a professor and then had them rate the professor on such things as effectiveness in the classroom. In this study, we are more interested in measuring students’ perceptions of the competence and qualifications of their professors based on initial expectations and impressions that may arise when the professor walks into the classroom on that first
day of class.

To study this, we developed a survey to measure student perceptions of a professor where those perceptions are based on physical appearance only. Students were first given information designed to disguise the purpose of the survey. They were then presented with a photograph of an individual identified as a prospective professor who if hired would teach junior and senior level classes in the College of Business. Photos varied by gender and attractiveness. A number of statements followed the photo; students were asked to rate the likelihood that each of these statements were true for this prospective professor. These (abbreviated) statements can be found in Table 1. The statements were designed to measure overall effectiveness in the classroom, organization and preparedness, dependability, accessibility, fairness and expertise. Students rated the likelihood that the statements were true on a 7 point scale, where 1 was very unlikely and 7 was very likely.

Because other studies have found that characteristics of the students can influence their evaluations, the end of the survey asked for student major, year in school, age and gender. Surveys were administered to three Principles of Marketing sections for a total of 188 responses.

RESULTS

Mean ratings are given for each statement in Table 1. The sample is then divided into male versus female professors; these means are presented in columns (1) and (2). Then the sample is divided by professor gender and attractiveness; the means for each of these four groups are presented in columns (3) - (6).

Comparing columns (1) and (2), the two female professors score worse than the two male professors on 15 out of the 19 statements. Of these, one of the differences in means is significant at the .10 level, the likelihood of "having a Ph.D." Of the four measures where the female professors are rated higher than the male professors, one of these differences is significant at the .10 level, the likelihood that the professor "is enthusiastic in presenting material" in class.

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Number of sample groups 81 107 42 30 67 40

LM = attractive male
AM = attractive male
UF = unattractive female
AF = attractive female

* signifying difference from male mean at .10 level

The results were subjected to three-way analysis of variance to explore the main effects of attractiveness, professor gender and student gender and any interactions among these variables. Males scored significantly better on "having a Ph.D." and "class presentations are clear and well organized" and females scored significantly better on "is enthusiastic".

There was a main effect for attractiveness for several statements. The attractive subjects scored significantly better on "has relevant business experience" and "would vote for Professor of the Year". The unattractive professors scored significantly better on "well prepared and organized" and "is an expert in subjects taught". Significant interaction effects between professor gender and attractiveness were obtained for "is a successful researcher" and "has a Ph.D". The male unattractive professor did significantly better on "has a Ph.D." than the other professors while the unattractive female scored significantly worse on "is a successful researcher".

A main effect of student gender was found for "would vote for Professor of the Year" with female
students rating that likelihood for any professor significantly higher than male students. Several significant interactions between professor gender and student gender were found. Male students rated the male professors significantly higher for "is an expert in subjects taught" while female students rated the female professor significantly higher on "responds willingly to questions" and "treats students fairly".

The items in Table 1 were factor analyzed using principal components analysis and varimax rotation for factor extraction. A four-factor solution was determined to best fit the data because of the factors’ interpretability and the summary statistics. The Eigenvalues ranged from 8.6 to 1.1 and 67.6% percent of the variance in the data was explained by the four factors.

The largest factor, PERFORM, consists of measures of performance in the classroom (items 1, 3, 7, 10, 13-17). These include both preparation and organization measures and interpersonal measures of teaching. The second factor, RECOMMEND, are measures describing whether a student would recommend a professor to other students (items 4, 9, 11, 18). Apparently, enthusiasm is important in this recommendation. The third factor, EXPERT, measures expertise in the professor’s field in terms of external credentials (items 2, 5, 6, 8). Finally, the fourth factor, GRADES, consists only of "is a hard grader" (item 12). A measure for each multi-item factor was calculated as the mean response for the items within that factor.

We performed three-way analyses of variance with each of the three multi-item factors. We found no significant main effects for professor gender, attractiveness and student gender at the .10 level. Part of the reason probably lies with the very small number of subjects in each group. Several main effects at the .20 level of significance were found, however. Unattractive professors scored better on PERFORM than attractive professors. Male professors were rated higher on EXPERT than female professors. In addition, a two-way interaction effect of attractiveness and professor gender on EXPERT and a three way interaction effect of attractiveness, professor gender and student gender on EXPERT were found. The unattractive, male professor scored significantly better on EXPERT while female students rated the female, unattractive professor significantly lower on EXPERT.

Finally, student major was grouped according to business majors and nonbusiness majors. A three-way analyses of variance on each of the 3 multi-item factors was performed using professor gender, attractiveness and student major as independent variables. A main effect of student major on RECOMMEND was found with nonbusiness majors scoring the professors significantly higher than business majors. Interaction effects between student major and professor gender were found for all 3 factors. Non business majors rated the male professors significantly higher than business majors.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The majority of differences found in this study were small; therefore, implications must be drawn cautiously. The lack of many significant differences may be a function of 1) the small sample sizes for the subgroups, 2) there actually is very little difference between how male and female professors are perceived, or 3) our instrument has not measured the subtle stereotypical behaviors and expectations that may occur in the classroom. In addition, responses were clustered in the middle range of the scale. This may be because the task of rating was relatively difficult with so little information, leading the students to choose the middle points of the scale.

Overall, males in the study were rated higher on 79% of the measures evaluated. Though most of these differences were not significant, the direction of the measures is meaningful. Males were perceived as being more likely to have a Ph.D. and more likely to be clear and well organized in their class presentations. Conversely, female faculty scored strongest for their expected enthusiasm in presenting material. Interestingly, these results are consistent with stereotypic gender qualities.

To make the strongest impression on the first day of class, it appears best to be an unattractive male professor. The unattractive male scored highest in half of the individual items and all of the multi-item factors. The largest difference in any of the scores was on the likelihood that the professor has a Ph.D. - the unattractive male professor scored 5.31 and the unattractive female professor scored 4.60. Unattractive professors scored highest on a performance summary measure and males were rated higher on being experts than females.
More research is needed before conclusions can be drawn. It would be useful to replicate this study to contribute to the sample size. Though the total number sampled in this study was 188, sample sizes for subgroups were low (i.e., only 20 male students rated the attractive female and only 15 female students rated the attractive male).

Future research is also needed to determine if females can compensate for first impressions which may be weaker than their male counterparts. Do students' perceptions change over the duration of a course? Can women make up for an initial disadvantage if one exists? Additionally, surveying female faculty would likely provide a wealth of information. Even if female faculty receive equal ratings to male faculty in their evaluations, they may have very different experiences in the classroom. Trying to better understand those experiences may reveal some effective techniques or methods for enhancing classroom experiences for both the students' and the faculty members.

REFERENCES


