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Business Students' Perceptions of Best University Professors: Does Gender Role Matter?

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This study investigated the relationship between the gender and gender-role of students and their "best" university professors. Two hundred and ninety two business students in 2 universities in Atlantic Canada rated their best professors and themselves using Bem's Sex Role Inventory. Male business students were more likely than females to choose a male as their best professor, and female business students were more likely than males to choose a female as their best professor. The study also indicates that a student's own gender and gender role are significantly related to those of his/her best professor. Male professors with low femininity scores (but not necessarily high masculinity scores), and female professors who are gender-neutral (i.e., androgynous or undifferentiated) were more often chosen by students as their best professors. In general, masculinity seems to be valued more by older, part-time students with greater work experience. Implications of these findings for university teachers are discussed.

KEY WORDS: gender role; university teaching; teaching effectiveness; business professors; Canadian universities; femininity; student gender.

Recently, there has been an increasing appreciation of the relevance of feminine values and behaviors such as compassion, tenderness, warmth, participative decision making, compromising conflict-management style, and sympathy in business settings (Brabeck & Weisgerber, 1989; Eagley & Mladinic,

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1989; Portello & Long, 1994). As Rosener (1990) notes, there is a realization that "the command-and-control style of managing others, a style generally associated with men in large, traditional organizations, is not the only way to succeed" (p. 119). Rosener (1990) further states that today's workplaces—with their highly educated employees and fast-changing environments—require an interactive style of leadership, which, although not unique to women, comes more easily to them due to their unique socialization experiences (Bem, 1981a).

Universities are important settings for the professional and personal socialization of college students, both male and female, including the learning and enacting of gender roles (Holland & Eisenhart, 1988). As it is known that role modeling is a significant contributor to gender role learning in university students (Unger & Crawford, 1992), and it is likely that professors are important models of gender roles, it seems plausible that the gender roles exhibited by professors play a role in shaping the behaviors of future managers. In addition, it seems reasonable to assume that a student's favorite professor may have a greater effect on him/her than other professors whom the student was exposed to. Hence, this study focussed on the gender and perceived gender roles of the "best" university professors of business students.

An examination of the literature on gender and gender roles in the context of university teaching found that although there were several studies on gender (e.g., Basow, 1994; Basow & Silberg, 1987; Kaschak, 1978; Koblitz, 1990; Rutland, 1990, Tatro, 1995) and gender role (e.g., Bennett, 1982; Bray & Howard, 1980; Freeman, 1997; Kierstead, D'Agostino, & Dill, 1988; Wheeless & Potorti, 1989), most of them have focussed on the effect of these variables on student evaluations of professors and have yielded contradictory results (Feldman, 1992, 1993). Very few of the above studies examined the relationship between a student's gender and gender role and that of his/her instructor—especially in a business school context. In the only study using business students (Tieman & Rankin-Ullock, 1985), female business instructors were found to be rated higher than male business instructors. No study that examined the relationship between the gender role of students and professors in a business school setting was found. The researchers hope to fill this gap in the literature by examining the relationship between business students' gender and gender role and that of their best instructors.

THIS STUDY

A substantial amount of tangential evidence on homosociability makes it seem plausible that students feel an affinity to professors who are similar to themselves (Crosby & Reinardy, 1993). As Feldman (1993) noted, in

classroom settings, students tended to rate same-gender instructors a little higher than others. Howe (1984) suggests that female students feel closer to their female professors than to their male professors. Past studies with graduate student samples indicate that students prefer faculty members of the same gender for several reasons. For example, Schroeder and Mynatt (1993) found that male and female graduate students experienced more positive psychosocial (or nonacademic) benefits in same-gender faculty–student interactions than when the major professor was of the opposite gender. Female graduate students rated their female major professors higher on quality of interactions and concern for student welfare than their male major professors (Schroeder & Mynatt, 1999) and preferred faculty members of their own sex as mentors or role models (Gilbert, 1985; Gilbert, Gallessich, & Evans, 1983; Paludi et al., 1990). There is also some evidence that cross-gender student–professor relationships are not equally advantageous to male and female students (Schroeder & Mynatt, 1999). Students might tend to prefer professors of the same gender because (a) males use one set of rules for communicating with, and evaluating, the communications of others, whereas females use a different set of rules (Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990); (b) communications of male students with their male instructors and female students with their female instructors might be the most positive because of consistency between the students' and instructors' expectations for such communications; therefore it is hypothesized that

Hypothesis 1: Male business students are more likely than female students to choose a male faculty member as their best professor and female business students are more likely than male students to choose a female faculty member as their best professor.

Hypothesis 2: The gender role of a student is likely to be related to the perceived gender-role of his/her best instructor. In other words, students with masculine, feminine, androgynous, and undifferentiated gender roles are more likely to choose professors they perceive to be masculine, feminine, androgynous, or undifferentiated respectively.

Most university students (especially part-time and graduate students) are likely to have worked for at least a short period. Because even today, most managers are men and most organizations emphasize masculine values, these students are more likely to have seen males (and masculine individuals) in leadership positions. This may explain why most individuals, including undergraduate business students, part-time MBA students, and practising managers, still see managers as possessing masculine traits (Powell & Butterfield, 1989). Thus, it can be argued that students who have been exposed to work settings for long periods of time will value different—and probably masculine—gender roles on the part of their best instructor than

those who have only worked for a short period of time. Using this line of argument, the following hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 3: Compared to students with less work experience, male and female students with greater work experience are more likely to choose professors they perceive to be masculine as their best instructors.

Past research indicates that female professors adopting a stereotypically masculine teaching style are likely to be evaluated negatively by students (Statham, Richardson, & Cook, 1991). In the case of male students (but not female students), the evaluation of the teaching effectiveness of female professors has also been shown to be strongly associated with stereotypically feminine behaviors like perceived friendliness, frequency of smiling, and eye contact (Feldman, 1993; Statham et al., 1991). Further, as Powell and Butterfield (1989) found, males, more often than females, describe successful leaders and managers as being more like men (or masculine) than women. This may be even more true in the case of student samples for as Maher (1997) notes, "male subjects in a sample of college students may have more experience with male managers . . . (while) female subjects (are) likely have experience with both male and female managers." (p. 223). Further, as Smith, Noll, and Bryant (1999) note, undergraduate male students see themselves as more gender-typed or masculine and hence are more likely to value stereotypically gender-typed behaviors in their instructors. Thus, it is hypothesized that

Hypothesis 4: Male students (but not female students) are more likely to choose as their best instructors, professors with perceived gender-typed behaviors. In other words, male students are more likely to choose as their best instructors men they perceive as being masculine and women they perceive as being feminine.

METHOD

Sample

Two hundred and ninety-two students in two urban universities in Atlantic Canada participated in this study. Using a modified cluster sampling technique, students with at least 1 year of university experience were chosen for the study. In the case of the university with a graduate program in business, students in selected first and second year graduate business courses were included as well. The final sample consisted of 127 male students and 165 female students. Two hundred of the responding students were working toward their undergraduate degrees, 8 for a certificate, and 84 for their graduate degrees . Over 83.9% of the respondents were enrolled full-time in

the program. Sixty-three percent of the respondents were under 25 years of age, 19.2% in the 25–30 age group, 12% in 31–40 age group, and the remaining were 41 years of age or older. Over 55% of the students had worked full time for at least 2 years.

Research Design and Instrumentation

A self-administered questionnaire survey design was used to collect data. Data were collected during regular class meetings. The participants were asked to choose the "best" university professor they had (in their view) for the purposes of this study. Besides gender and gender role (of students and their best professors), information on a variety of demographic and background variables that have been shown to influence teacher evaluations was also collected.

Bem's Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) was used to examine gender roles (Bem, 1981b). Students were first asked to complete the BSRI for their best professor and, after they had answered other questions, for themselves. Although the BSRI has come under some criticism lately, it is still considered to be a psychometrically sound instrument with strong test-retest reliability. The coefficient alpha for femininity scores in past studies have ranged from .84 to .87 and masculine scores from .84 to .86. Past test-retest reliabilities for the femininity scale have ranged from .85 to .91 and .76 to .91 for the masculinity scale (Bem, 1981b).

RESULTS

Male faculty members were more likely to be chosen as best instructors than females—only 33.9% of the best instructors chosen were female, which is probably attributable to the fact that there were, overall, fewer female faculty members in the two universities (less than 30%). Although there was an almost even split (i.e., 25% per category) in the perceived gender roles of the instructors, most of the male professors were perceived to be low in femininity (i.e., masculine or undifferentiated), whereas most of female best instructors were seen as gender neutral (i.e., androgynous or undifferentiated). Most of the respondents were female (57%), but again, there was an almost even split in terms of the gender role of students (Table I). The gender and the perceived gender role of the best instructor were not related to the subject taught or the teaching method used.

To test the first hypothesis, the responding student's gender and the best instructor's gender were cross-tabulated and the significance of this relationship was tested. Chi-square tests indicated that this relationship was

Table I. Characteristics of Student Participants and Their Best Instructors

	Male	Female	Total
Perceived gender role of best instructors[a]			
Undifferentiated	48 (30.2%)	22 (25.9%)	70 (28.7%)
Masculine	48 (30.2%)	13 (15.3%)	61 (25.0%)
Feminine	30 (18.9%)	20 (23.5%)	50 (20.5%)
Androgynous	33 (20.8%)	30 (35.3%)	63 (25.8%)
Gender role of students			
Undifferentiated	36 (31.6%)	30 (20.8%)	66 (25.6%)
Masculine	43 (47.7%)	26 (18.1)	69 (26.7%)
Feminine	15 (13.2%)	52 (36.1%)	67 (26.0%)
Androgynous	20 (17.5%)	36 (25.0%)	56 (21.7%)
Subject taught by best instructor			
Arts/humanities	63 (21.6%)		
Sciences/computer studies	27 (9.2%)		
Business/tourism	200 (68.5%)		
Teaching method used by best instructors			
Lecture	129 (44.2%)		
Case/discussion	118 (40.4%)		
Combination	44 (15.1%)		

[a]The mean masculinity and femininity scores were used to classify students/professors into the BSRI categories. Those above the mean were classified as high in masculinity (or femininity); those below the mean were classified as low in masculinity (or femininity). Those at the mean were dropped from the analysis. This reduced the number of valid observations slightly. Students and instructors were classified into four groups: masculine (high in masculinity and low in femininity), feminine (high in femininity and low in masculinity), androgynous (high in both masculinity and femininity), and undifferentiated (low in both masculinity and femininity). The mean scores for masculinity and femininity of the participants were slightly less than the BSRI norms, but no consistent statistical differences were found.

significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 292) = 22.59$, $p < .001$, but as Table II indicates, both male and female students were more likely to choose a male as their best instructor. However, female students were far more likely than male students (45.5 vs. 18.9%) to choose a female as their best instructor. Thus, the results partly support the first hypothesis.

To test the second hypothesis, students' gender roles were cross-tabulated against the perceived gender roles of their best instructors. As shown in Table III, masculine students were more likely to choose instructors

Table II. Gender of Students and Gender of Their Best Instructors: Results of Cross Tabulations

	Student		
Instructor	Male	Female	Total
Male	103 (81.1%)	90 (54.5%)	193 (66.1%)
Female	24 (18.9%)	75 (45.5%)	99 (33.9%)
Total	127 (43.5%)	165 (56.5%)	292 (100%)

Note. $\chi^2 = 22.59$, $df = 1$, $p < .000$.

Table III. Student Gender Roles and Perceived Gender Roles of Their Best Professors: Results of Cross Tabulations

Instructor's gender-role	Student's gender-role				
	Undifferentiated	Masculine	Feminine	Androgynous	Total
Undifferentiated	30 (54.5%)	18 (32.8%)	13 (21.7%)	4 (8.5%)	65 (29.8%)
Masculine	13 (23.6%)	28 (50.0%)	8 (13.3%)	7 (14.9%)	56 (25.7%)
Feminine	9 (16.4%)	5 (8.9%)	23 (30.3%)	7 (14.9%)	44 (20.2%)
Androgynous	3 (5.5%)	5 (8.9%)	16 (26.7%)	29 (61.7%)	53 (24.3%)
Total	55 (25.2%)	56 (25.7%)	60 (27.5%)	47 (21.6%)	218 (100%)

Note. $\chi^2 = 93.56$, $df = 9$, $p < .000$.

they perceived to be masculine, and feminine students preferred instructors they perceived to be feminine. Similar relationships were found for both students with androgynous and undifferentiated gender roles, $\chi^2(9, N = 218) = 93.56$, $p < .000$. Further, chi-square tests indicated that, in general, students with masculine and undifferentiated gender roles prefer instructors perceived to be low in femininity (i.e., a low femininity score even more than a high masculinity score), whereas feminine and androgynous students seem to prefer instructors perceived to be high in femininity (i.e., high femininity score).

To test the third hypothesis, students were classified into three groups: those with a year (or less) of work experience, those with 2–4 years of work experience, and those with 5 or more years of experience. Chi-square tests indicated that the work experience of female students (but not male students) was related to the perceived gender role of their best instructors, $\chi^2(6, N = 143) = 18.66$, $p < .00$. As shown in Table IV, females with up to 4 years of work experience seem to prefer instructors they perceive as being androgynous, whereas those with 5 or more years of work experience seem to prefer instructors they perceive to be less feminine, that is, undifferentiated

Table IV. Work Experience of Female Students and Instructor's Perceived Gender Role: Results of Cross Tabulation

Instructor gender-role	Work experience of female students[a]			
	0–1 yr	2–4 yrs	5+ yrs	Total
Undifferentiated	15 (21.4%)	6 (14.3%)	15 (48.4%)	36 (25.2%)
Masculine	18 (25.7%)	7 (16.7%)	9 (29.0%)	34 (23.8%)
Feminine	16 (22.9%)	10 (23.8%)	3 (9.7%)	29 (20.3%)
Androgynous	21 (30.0%)	19 (45.2%)	4 (12.9%)	44 (30.8%)
Total	70 (100%)	42 (100%)	31 (100%)	143 (100%)

Note. $\chi^2 = 18.66$, $df = 6$, $p = .002$.

[a]This classification suited the sample the best as it differentiated between undergraduate and gratduates; most of the undergraduates fell under the first two categories whereas most of the graduates fell into the "5+ years of experience" category.

Table V. Gender and Perceived Gender role of Best Instructors Chosen by Male Students

Gender of best instructor	Gender role of best instructor				
	Undifferentiated	Masculine	Feminine	Androgynous	Total
Male	29 (32.2%)	26 (28.9%)	18 (20.0%)	17 (18.3%)	90 (78.3%)
Female	5 (20.0%)	3 (12.0%)	10 (40.0%)	7 (28.0%)	25 (21.7%)
Total	34 (29.6%)	29 (25.2%)	28 (24.3%)	24 (20.9%)	115 (100.0)

Note. $\chi^2 = 7.194$, $df = 3$, $p = .066$.

(48.4%) or masculine (29.8%). Thus, the results only partially support the third hypothesis as work experience seems to affect the choices of female—but not male—students. Interestingly, in the case of female (but not male) students, other variables related to work experience—full/part-time status and age—were also related to the perceived gender role (but not the gender) of their best instructor. Older, $\chi^2(6, N = 143) = 13.426$, $p < .05$, part-time, $\chi^2(3, N = 143) = 11.14$, $p < .01$, female students chose instructors perceived to be low in femininity (i.e., masculine/undifferentiated) as their best instructors more often than those perceived to be high in femininity (i.e., androgynous or feminine).

To test the final hypothesis, the gender and gender role of the best instructors chosen by male students were analyzed; the results were only marginally significant (Table V). While most (40%) of the female best instructors chosen by male students were perceived to be feminine, the male instructors chosen by them were more often perceived to be undifferentiated (32.2%) than masculine (28.9%). Thus the results lend marginal support to the final hypothesis. As expected, there was no significant difference in the perceived gender roles of the male and female best instructors chosen by female students.

Could the type of subject taught or the teaching method used by the professors have had an impact on the findings? Chi-square tests (with student gender controlled for) indicated that the subject taught was not related to the gender or gender role of the best instructors. However, female (but not male) students were slightly more likely to choose a woman as their best instructor, $\chi^2(2, N = 143) = 4.94$, $p < .1$, when the teaching method used was a case/discussion format than a lecture format—perhaps because these methods are perceived to be more relationship-oriented (or feminine) and hence there might be a greater gender-role congruence here. Tests also indicated that in 3rd and 4th year, undergraduate and graduate male (but not female) students preferred male instructors, $\chi^2(2, N = 115) = 11.45$, $p < .01$. When the student's gender role was controlled for, neither teaching method nor subject taught were related to the gender/gender role of the best instructors.

DISCUSSION

This study indicates that there is a strong relationship between students' gender and gender role and the gender and *perceived* gender role of their best instructors. There are several explanations for this finding: first, a student's choice may be significantly influenced by the perceived similarity between his/her own values/behaviors and those exhibited by the instructor. In other words, homosociability may be exerting a strong influence on student choice. Second, students may be influenced by the psychosocial elements of the student–professor relationship. There is some evidence that female students in particular, experience fewer outside contacts with male professors, feel that male professors treat them with less respect, and experience more negative psychosocial interactions with male professors (Schroeder & Mynatt, 1999). These factors may affect their choice of a best instructor. Third, as suggested by other researchers (e.g., Tannen, 1990) even if professors treat male and female students similarly, males and females may be using different rules to evaluate the communication patterns (and other behaviors) of professors. This may result in female professors being judged more negatively by male students and vice versa.

Given these findings, what are the implications of the present study? Although it is possible that student choices of best instructors and even their perceptions of gender roles of their best instructors are tied to other variables (e.g., other student characteristics), the correlational relationship between students' gender roles and the perceived gender roles of their best instructors do offer some possible implications for university professors. To begin with, because most students seem to pick professors with perceived masculine or undifferentiated gender roles as their best professors, one could argue that it would be beneficial for instructors to adopt one of these gender roles in the classroom. Both males and females have been found to see themselves as exhibiting different gender roles in different situations (Smith et al., 1999), and as Smith et al. (1999) note, "we are dynamic beings and those characteristics associated with gender are dynamic as well" (p. 499) and can be modified by us; hence, there is no reason why instructors cannot adapt their gender roles to meet the needs of the majority of students and exhibit more feminine behaviors (e.g., being sympathetic to student problems) or masculine behaviors (e.g., taking a strong stand on issues such as submission deadlines) depending on the situation.

Second, because demographic variables seem to affect only the preferences of female students, instructors may want to consider adapting their gender-role behaviors to suit student demographics in predominantly female classes. While teaching part-time, older females or those with greater work experience, instructors may want to adopt a less feminine teaching style, but

with younger, full-time female students or those with less work experience, they may want to adopt a more feminine teaching style. Even among males, graduate students and older students seem more likely to choose professors perceived to be low in femininity as their best instructors. This may also be an indication of the great influence that a masculine business environment has on students' perceptions of what constitutes a good leader.

Finally, given that these students are likely to be the business leaders of tomorrow, one also wonders about their future behaviors and expectations once they enter the business world. If the choice of a best instructor is any indication of student perceptions of what constitutes a good leader or manager, or if their best instructors are also their mentors, then management is likely to remain a man's world for a long time. This is of some concern, for although businesses seem to be recognizing the importance of feminine behaviors in business settings (Brabeck & Weisgerber, 1989; Eagley & Mladinic, 1989; Portello & Long, 1994), business students do not seem to do so—at least as far as the teaching environment is concerned. In this context, business educators may be well advised to take efforts to convey to their students the importance of feminine behaviors in the changing world of business.

It should be emphasized that this study has certain limitations: (1) it utilized students' *perceptions* of the gender roles of their best instructors (rather instructors' self ratings). Although it can be argued that perception *is* reality to the observer, it is possible that the results are subject to two biases—confirmation bias (i.e., students noticing feminine behaviors in female professors and masculine behaviors in male professors), and students seeing the professor they liked most as being similar to themselves;[2] (2) it is correlational in nature and, although the findings are significant, it is possible that student evaluations of both themselves and their best professors were affected by other variables; (3) it examined the gender roles of business *teachers*; although some writers have argued that teachers act as leaders in the classroom (e.g., Baba & Ace, 1975) and hence can be compared to managers, students may not perceive them to be so; (4) it was limited to two universities in Atlantic Canada and to students enrolled in business courses; and (5) students were asked to pick only *one* person as their best instructor; it is likely that they may have had other effective professors (of different gender and gender role). In spite of these, the findings of this study indicate that future research into this topic is warranted.

[2]It should be noted that because neither male or female faculty members were seen as highly sex-typed, confirmation bias was probably not very high. Furthermore, collecting student perceptions of the gender roles of their best instructors first (before asking them to rate themselves) may have reduced the likelihood of students reporting that their best professors were similar to themselves. The differences in the gender roles in both groups also lend credibility to this argument.

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