Please Call Me Doctor! How Professor's Gender and Preferred Form of Address Affect Student's Perceptions

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INTRODUCTION

- Using student evaluations to assess the quality of a professor's instruction are commonplace at universities today, and these evaluations can impact faculty members' salary and tenure (Cashin, 1999; Basow, Codos & Martin, 2013). Yet some researchers contend that these evaluations are biased against female faculty (Mitchell & Martin, 2018).
- Use of informal address titles for faculty has become more commonplace in modern academia (Cashin, 1999; Paulsen, 2002). However, students use professors' first name more frequently when the professor is female, reserving more formal options (such as title and last name) for male professors (Rubin, 1981).
- Stewart, Berkvens, Engels, and Pass (2003) had students in The Netherlands rate transcripts of a class session. Participants rated professors higher in status when they were addressed by their title. In addition, participants rated male professors higher in status than female professors.
- Messner (2000) argued that White male professors can maintain professional respect and appear more approachable by asking students to refer to them by their first names, while female professors risk losing status if they don't require students to address them as "Professor or Dr."
- When addressed by title, students perceived female professors as less accessible than their male counterparts in a study where participants read a transcript of a class session (Takiff, Sanchez & Stewart, 2001).

METHOD

Participants

225 undergraduate students received partial course credit in Introductory Psychology. 211 of these participants correctly answered the manipulation check questions, and their data was used in the analysis.
Gender: 143 female, 67 male, and 1 declined to state
Average age: 21.53 years (*SD* = 5.45 years), ranging from 18 to 48 years
Ethnicity:

- 5.21% African American
- 8.53% Asian American
- 45.97% European American/White
- 34.60% Latino/Hispanic
- 10.90% Multiethnic

Year in School: 57.8% freshman, 26.5% sophomores, 13.3% juniors, 1.9% seniors, and 0.5% post-baccalaureate

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METHOD, cont.

Procedure

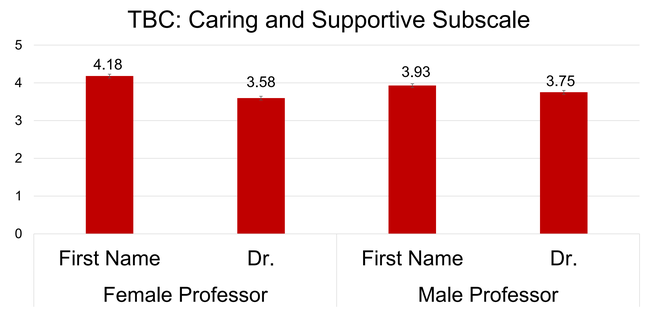
- Participants completed this study online.
- After consenting to participate and answering some demographic questions, participants were randomly assigned to read a brief pre-semester email (see Legg & Wilson, 2009) in which the professor either asks to be called by his/her title or by his/her first name.
- Next, participants answered
  - manipulation check questions to assess whether they remembered the aspects of their condition correctly,
  - questions about accessibility and professor status (α = .78), taken from Takiff et al. (2001), and
  - the Teacher Behavior Checklist (Keeley, Smith & Buskist, 2006) which has a caring and supportive subscale (TBC – CS; α = .90) and the professional, competency, and communication skills subscale (TBC – PCC; α = .86)

RESULTS

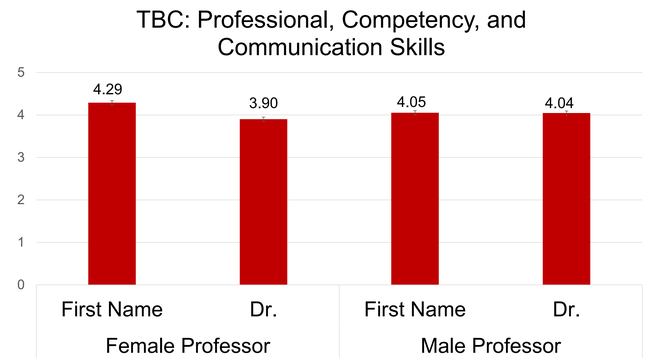
The professor's gender did not significantly impact students' ratings of the professor on the TBC, Wilks' lambda = .99, $F(2, 206) = 0.23$, $p = .80$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$.

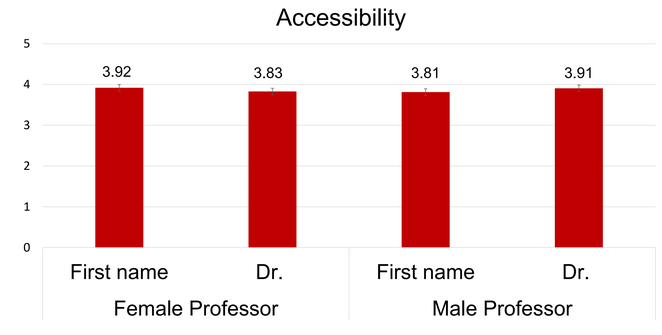
The professor's preferred form of address significantly impacted the student's ratings of the professor on the TBC, Wilks' lambda = .88, $F(2, 206) = 14.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$. Students who read an email from a professor who asked to be called by their first name rated that professor significantly higher on both the caring and supportive subscale (CS), $F(1, 207) = 23.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$, and on the professional, competency, and communication skills subscale (PCC), $F(1, 207) = 7.24$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.

On the TBC, there was a significant interaction between professor's gender and professor's preferred form of address, Wilks' lambda = .97, $F(2, 206) = 3.74$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, with an interaction on both the TBC – CS, $F(1, 207) = 6.89$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, and the TBC – PCC, $F(1, 207) = 6.63$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.



RESULTS, cont.





The professor's gender did not significantly affect participants rating on the professor's accessibility, $F(1, 207) = 0.03$, $p = .86$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$. Further, the professor's preferred form of address did not significantly impact ratings of accessibility, $F(1, 207) = 0.00$, $p = .00$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$, and there was no interaction between professor's gender and professor's preferred form of address, $F(1, 207) = 1.41$, $p = .24$, $\eta_p^2 = .007$.

DISCUSSION

Contrary to previous research (Takiff et al., 2001), there was no effect on the professor's accessibility ratings based on gender or whether professors were addressed by first name or title.

However, professors who asked to be called by their first names were evaluated more positively on both subscales of the Teacher Behavior Checklist (Keeley et al., 2006), with a medium effect size.

There was also an interaction (with a small effect size) between the professor's gender and their preferred form of address, such that female professors who asked to be called by their first names had the highest ratings on both subscales of the Teacher Behavior Checklist (Keeley et al., 2006).

Using only these research results as a guide, professors, especially female professors, might be evaluated more positively if they ask students to call them by their first names. However, further research is needed to make conclusive, substantiated claims regarding the impact of term of address and gender on student evaluations of teaching, especially with so few studies in this area.