

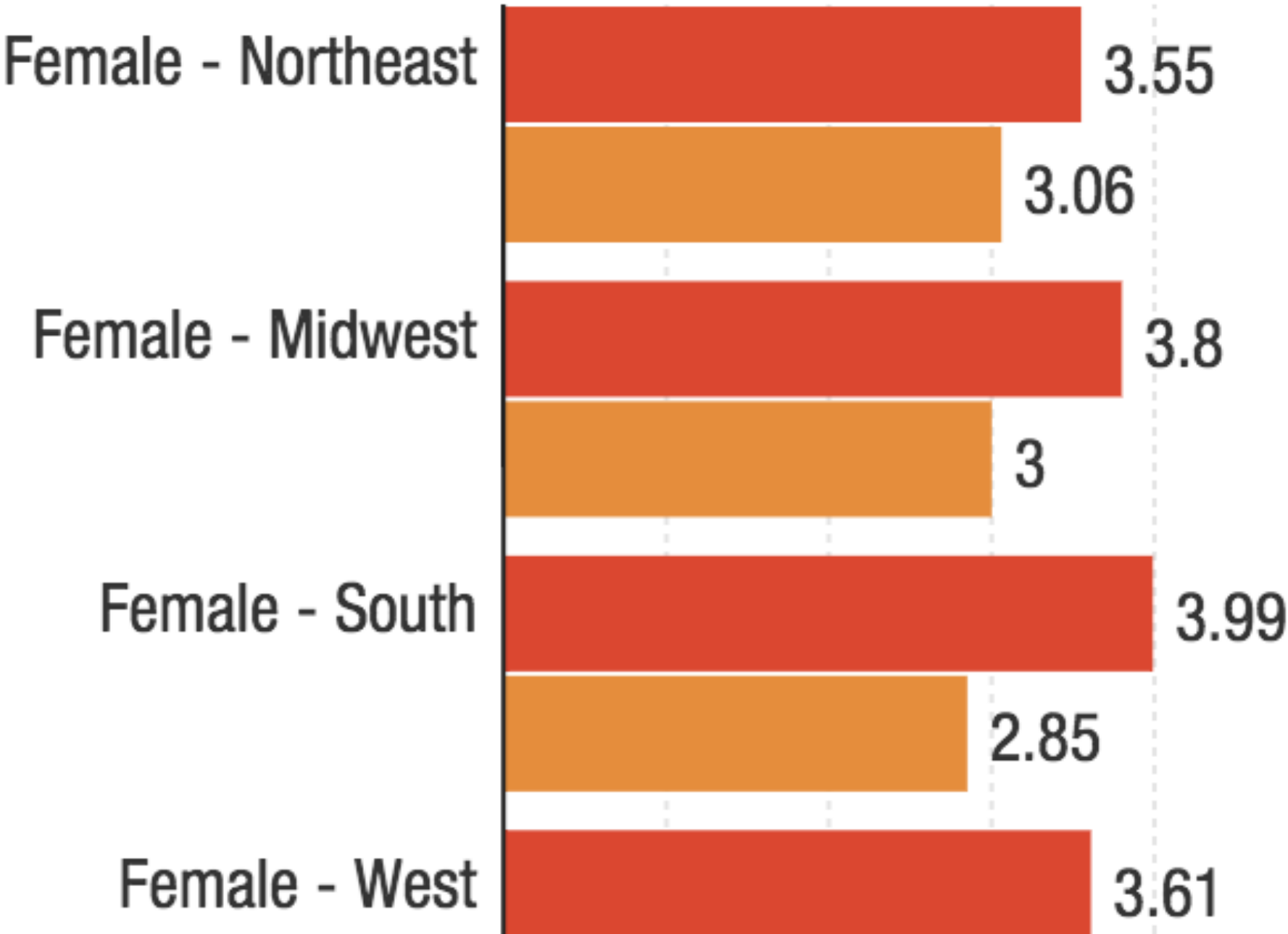
Study: At 'Rate My Professors,' A Foreign Accent Can Hurt A Teacher's Score

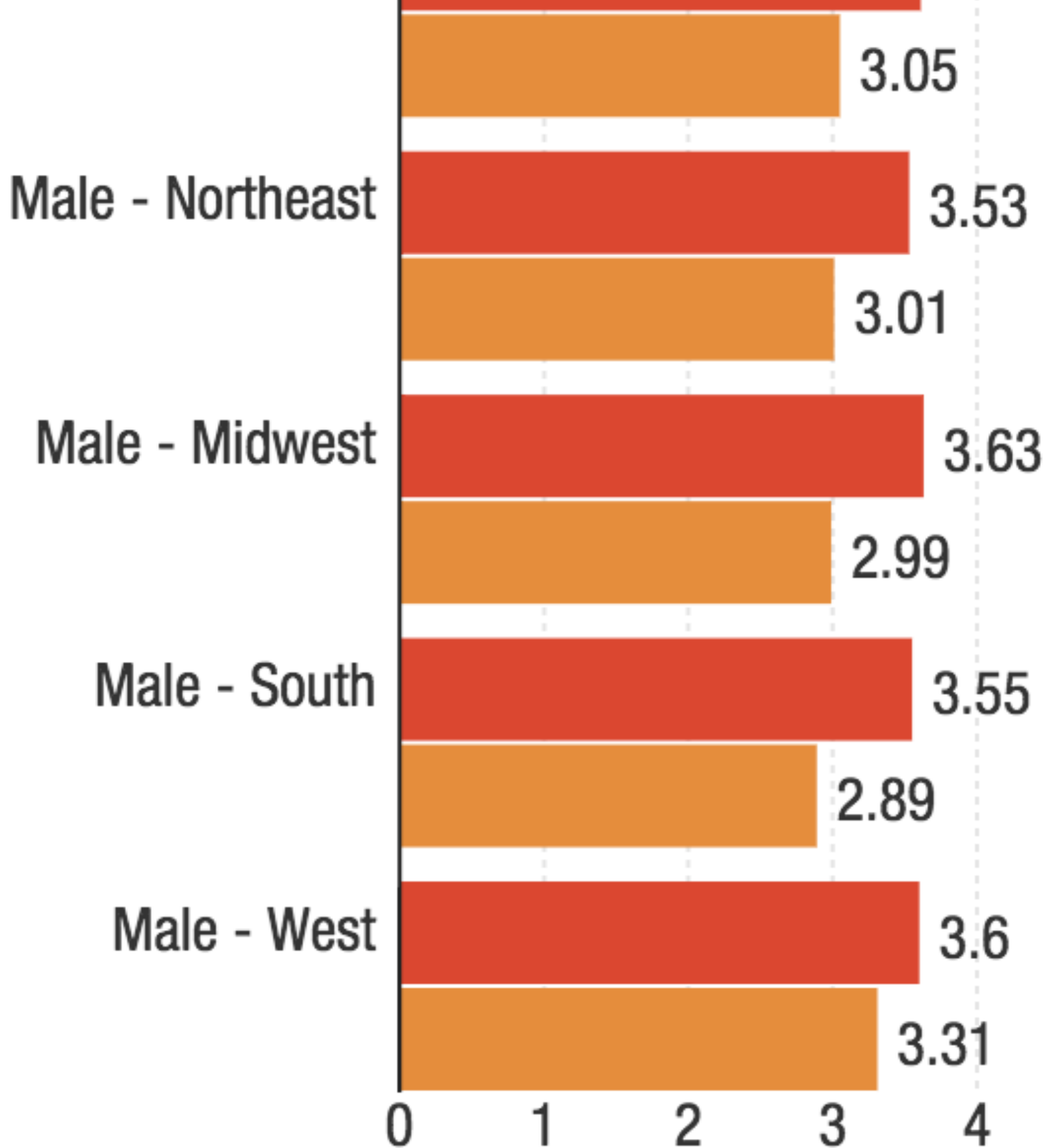
By [KAT CHOW \(/PEOPLE/KAT-CHOW\)](#) • MAR 5, 2015

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Ratings For "Clarity"

- Non-Asian Last Names
- Asian-Sounding Last Names





(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/shared/npr/styles/x_large/nprshared/201503/390693966.png)

The biggest gaps overall were in the South.

KAT CHOW/NPR

Originally published on March 5, 2015 7:21 pm

"So-and-so is really, really hard to understand." Or: "His accent is so distracting." I remember hearing off-the-cuff remarks like this a few times in college, complaints by classmates about teaching assistants and instructors, almost all of them of Asian descent and non-native English speakers.

Along these lines, Nicholas Subtirelu, a linguistics grad student at Georgia State University, recently published a study (<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=9531137&fulltextType=RA&fileId=S0047404514000736>) in the journal *Language in Society* about student bias against teachers who are non-native English speakers.

He skimmed through thousands of ratings of math professors at American universities on Rate My Professors (<http://www.ratemyprofessors.com/>), a source for hundreds of thousands of students' unvarnished takes on their teachers. He found that teachers with common Korean or Chinese names got low scores for "clarity" and "helpfulness" compared with teachers with common U.S. last names.

"I looked at the comments, and, perhaps not terribly surprisingly, it seemed this gap had to do with language," he tells me. Sometimes, he says, students latch on to an instructor's accent and it becomes all they can see; their overall perception of the teacher's skill goes down.

As he sifted through comments searching for specific keywords — *accent, English, language, speak, word, thick* — he found that students often pointed out the language abilities of their "Asian" instructors, sometimes unfavorably, sometimes in a way that was addressing *other* students' biases, like: *She has an accent, but it's not hard to understand*. On the other hand, non-Asian teachers were generally praised overall.

To further organize his findings, Subtirelu sorted the rankings by gender and region. In Western states, male teachers with Asian-sounding names received marks for "clarity" that most closely matched those of male teachers with non-Asian sounding names. Subtirelu isn't exactly sure why, but it's worth noting that universities out West have more students of East Asian descent, who may be more comfortable with Asian accents.

The gap between scores of instructors with Asian-sounding names and everyone else was most stark at universities in the South. (The chart to the right shows the full breakdown.)

Subtirelu says it's understandable that students get frustrated by unfamiliar accents in the classroom. They're "responding to the very real difficulty that they experience in communicating with someone who is different from them," he tells me. "What I think this study reveals is a need to address linguistic diversity at universities — to find ways to help people accept and work across their differences."

And that will be the tricky part. He points out that there have already been decades of policymaking at university and state levels to try and address this sort of thing (this (<http://www.statutes.legis.state.tx.us/Docs/ED/htm/ED.51.htm>) 1989 Texas statute — see Sec. 50.917, for example, mandates that instructors' English-speaking abilities be tested). This isn't a new issue, it's just one that has never really been solved.

But along with policies directed at instructors, Subtirelu says, universities should be thinking about "what students might do to better understand their instructors." And this is where he hopes his research could help. "There's a sort of ideological battle that needs to be fought in order to make students have a sense that ensuring successful communication with their international instructors is partly their responsibility."

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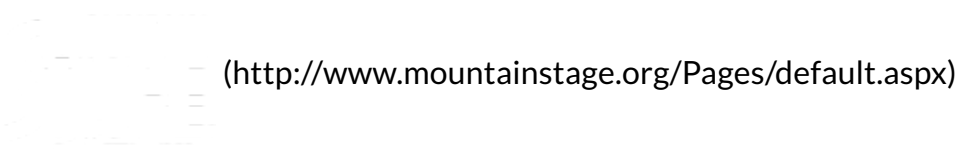
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