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Online Students Give Instructors Higher Marks If They Think Instructors Are Men



Photo credit: North Carolina State University

For Immediate Release

December 9, 2014

[Lillian MacNell](#)

[Matt Shipman](#) | [919.515.6386](tel:919.515.6386)

A new study shows that college students in online courses give better evaluations to instructors they think are men – even when the instructor is actually a woman.

“The ratings that students give instructors are really important, because they’re used to guide higher education decisions related to hiring, promotions and tenure,” says Lillian MacNell, lead author of a paper on the work and a Ph.D. student in sociology at NC State. “And if the results of these evaluations are inherently biased against women, we need to find ways to address that problem.”

To address whether students judge female instructors differently than male instructors, the researchers evaluated

a group of 43 students in an online course. The students were divided into four discussion groups of 8 to 12 students each. A female instructor led two of the groups, while a male instructor led the other two.

However, the female instructor told one of her online discussion groups that she was male, while the male instructor told one of his online groups that he was female. Because of the format of the online groups, students never saw or heard their instructor.

At the end of the course, students were asked to rate the discussion group instructors on 12 different traits, covering characteristics related to their effectiveness and interpersonal skills.

“We found that the instructor whom students thought was male received higher ratings on all 12 traits, regardless of whether the instructor was actually male or female,” MacNell says. “There was no difference between the ratings of the actual male and female instructors.”

In other words, students who thought they were being taught by women gave lower evaluation scores than students who thought they were being taught by men. It didn’t matter who was actually teaching them.

The instructor that students thought was a man received markedly higher ratings on professionalism, fairness, respectfulness, giving praise, enthusiasm and promptness.

“The difference in the promptness rating is a good example for discussion,” MacNell says. “Classwork was graded and returned to students at the same time by both instructors. But the instructor students thought was male was given a 4.35 rating out of 5. The instructor students thought was female got a 3.55 rating.”

The researchers view this study as a pilot, and plan to do additional research using online courses as a “natural laboratory.”

“We’re hoping to expand this approach to additional courses, and different types of courses, to determine the size of this effect and whether it varies across disciplines,” MacNell says.

The paper, “[What’s in a Name: Exposing Gender Bias in Student Ratings of Teaching](http://news.ncsu.edu/2014/12/macnell-gender-2014/),” was published online

Dec. 5 in the journal *Innovative Higher Education*. Co-authors are Dr. Adam Driscoll of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and Dr. Andrea Hunt of the University of North Alabama. Driscoll and Hunt received their doctoral degrees from NC State.

-shipman-

Note to Editors: The study abstract follows.

“What’s in a Name: Exposing Gender Bias in Student Ratings of Teaching”

Authors: Lillian MacNell, North Carolina State University; Adam Driscoll, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse; and Andrea N. Hunt, University of North Alabama

Published: Dec. 5, *Innovative Higher Education*

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Abstract: Student ratings of teaching play a significant role in career outcomes for higher education instructors. Although instructor gender has been shown to play an important role in influencing student ratings, the extent and nature of that role remains contested. While difficult to separate gender from teaching practices in person, it is possible to disguise an instructor’s gender identity online. In our experiment, assistant instructors in an online class each operated under two different gender identities. Students rated the male identity significantly higher than the female identity, regardless of the instructor’s actual gender, demonstrating gender bias. Given the vital role that student ratings play in academic career trajectories, this finding warrants considerable attention.

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24 responses on “Online Students Give Instructors Higher Marks If They Think Instructors Are Men”

1. *Jill* says:

[December 9, 2014 at 1:37 pm](#)

Oh please.

[Reply](#)

2. *Jane* says:

[December 9, 2014 at 5:58 pm](#)

How on earth did this get published? The methodological errors in this are dreadful! Sample sizes of 8-12 students and 2 professors are woefully small, for starters (especially given how many other parameters there can be – time of day for assignments, covariates of other class interactions etc. There are likely more parameters than data points by this stage!). Then, why weren't the professors blinded to the gender they were presenting to the students? How do we know they didn't (even subconsciously) bias the results in their interactions? It's poor science like this that lets the rest of us in sociology down, and makes us look like poor scientists when compared with our colleagues. Hiding behind a “pilot study” doesn't count either – if you're going to blare this out loud at least try to have some legitimacy! Someone's advisor needs to start giving some advice...

[Reply](#)

3. *Rebecca* says:

[December 9, 2014 at 6:02 pm](#)

Do you have some substantive to say, Jill?

[Reply](#)

4. *Bill* says:

[December 9, 2014 at 9:01 pm](#)

A press release with a sample size of four? Is this what we now consider sociological research? I notice there are two female authors and one male author. From this I infer that NCSU is sexist against men. Sample size of 3.

[Reply](#)

5. *Nancy Swisher* says:

[December 9, 2014 at 9:12 pm](#)

Very interesting. Kudos to the authors of this study.

[Reply](#)

6. *Nat* says:

[December 9, 2014 at 11:03 pm](#)

Would be interesting to know the gender make up of the student group.

[Reply](#)

7. *Sugiri* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 12:36 am](#)

I would like to know, how many of the students in the study were male, and how many were female? If there was not an equal number of female and male in the study then this study is flawed.

[Reply](#)

8. *Jane* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 3:24 am](#)

Ok, you didn't publish my response because it was critical? Seriously?

[Reply](#)

9. *James Driscoll* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 9:33 am](#)

Serious scientists at respectable institutions would be embarrassed if they published conclusions based on such a small sample size. Do your homework. Readers must feel that you got the result that you wanted, so you stopped. We try to teach students to wait and publish only what is statistically meaningful, and there are mathematical rules that define meaningful.

[Reply](#)

10. *Elvira Vilches* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 11:11 am](#)

I want to thank the authors of this study for looking into one of the everyday challenges that female instructors face in the classroom. Gender bias is pervasively present and manifests in multiple ways such as students's resistance to address female professors by their academic title, engage in original teaching approaches, and simply accept us, female profs, as figures of authority.

[Reply](#)

11. *Sam* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 11:13 am](#)

Entirely true.

[Reply](#)

12. *Retired Teacher* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 11:15 am](#)

I am not surprised by the findings. Gender inequity is more subtle than is used to be but it is alive and well. The young women I meet at a local college are very aware of it and openly speak about it.

[Reply](#)

13. *James Driscoll* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 11:39 am](#)

Your conclusions are based on too small of a sample size. Do your homework and spend a year getting more data. Readers must feel that you got the result that you wanted, so you stopped. We try to teach students to wait and publish only what is statistically meaningful, and there are mathematical rules that define meaningful.

[Reply](#)

1. *sugiri* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 5:54 pm](#)

I totally agree with you James, I know they said it was a pilot study but I just don't think nc state should post about it until some more research is done. That's journalism for ya.

[Reply](#)

14. *Phillip Ortiz* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 11:48 am](#)

This study exposed yet another reason why teaching evaluations are worse than worthless.

[Reply](#)

15. *ilan* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 11:51 am](#)

Perhaps one improvement to the method would be to introduce the fiction that a woman teaches the first half of the course and a man teaches the second half of the course. That really more directly gets at the

biases of the students more directly.

[Reply](#)

16. *Jane* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 12:32 pm](#)

And now I have enough evidence that you only publish positive feedback. Amazing – on the same page that you promote your study of biased student responses, you bias the responses!

[Reply](#)

17. *Tyrone* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 12:36 pm](#)

Very interesting, it's apparent that some people prefer men to women.

[Reply](#)

18. *BC* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 12:42 pm](#)

As someone who has spent much time in academia, I strongly urge you to investigate teaching styles. Even a feminist such as myself, preferred male instructors and found this alarming. Why? They were easier to deal with, fretted less about the small stuff, usually were better about organizing the course, and consistent with their feedback. Some female instructors had those characteristics too, but I found them most often in males.

[Reply](#)

19. *Stephen Burwood* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 12:58 pm](#)

Yes, keep up the good work. Exactly what many of us have suspected for a long time. I'd be interested to also know how age, ethnicity and disability affect the outcome of 'evaluations'. I'd like to bet that a young,

foreign, female academic has a harder time establishing her epistemic authority than her older or younger, indigenous, male counterpart – as long as he is not too old, of course.

[Reply](#)

20. *gerry* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 3:04 pm](#)

what was the gender ratio of the subjects? It would be interesting to know, for example, if male students were more likely to give higher ratings to perceived male instructors, etc.

[Reply](#)

21. *birdbender* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 3:43 pm](#)

How many men and women were in each group?

Since students had email of instructor, they could easily find sex of instructor. Lots of questions!!!!

[Reply](#)

22. *Chandler Armstrong* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 3:51 pm](#)

did the study really have only four instructors and the same two claiming to be male? if so then it would be very easy for the two 'male' instructors to be truly better. Similar findings are replicated elsewhere, so I believe the findings, but as a stand-alone study this lacks validity. it's a good pilot study, perhaps, but it definitely needs follow up.

[Reply](#)

23. *Morgan Leigh* says:

[December 10, 2014 at 5:36 pm](#)

I agree that this study is way too small a sample size to be usefull on its own. However it does raise the

important issue of teaching assesment in universities. In my institution student feedback is the only measure of teaching performance. Hiring and firing decisions are based on it. Strangely enough there is a correlation between those students who get the best marks and those who give high marks on teaching feedback scales.

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