

Is the Professor Bossy or Brilliant? Much Depends on Gender

Claire Cain Miller [@clairecm](#) FEB. 6, 2015

Male professors are brilliant, awesome and knowledgeable. Women are bossy and annoying, and beautiful or ugly.

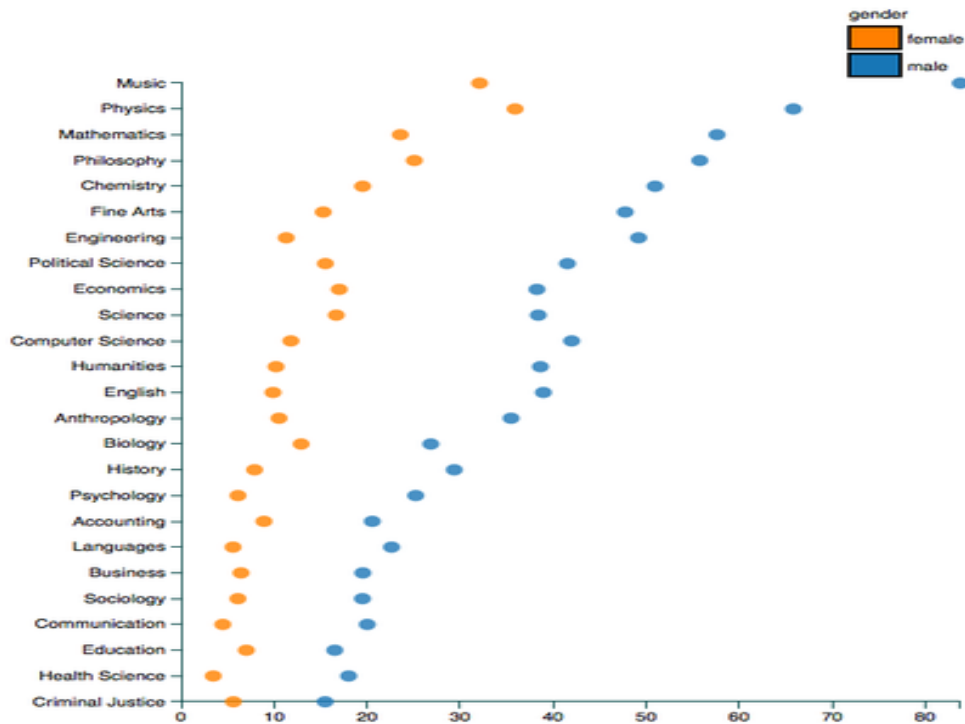
These are a few of the results from [a new interactive chart](#) that was gaining notice on social media Friday. [Benjamin Schmidt](#), a Northeastern University history professor, says he built the chart using data from 14 million student reviews on the [Rate My Professors](#) site. It allows you to search for any word to see how often it appeared in reviews and how it broke down by gender and department.

The chart makes vivid unconscious biases. The implications go well beyond professors and college students, to anyone who gives or receives feedback or performance reviews.

It suggests that people tend to think more highly of men than women in professional settings, praise men for the same things they criticize women for, and are more likely to focus on a woman's appearance or personality and on a man's skills and intelligence.

"When we use these reviews and evaluations to assess people, we need to keep in mind that the way people write them is really culturally conditioned," Mr. Schmidt said.

We've heard about these stereotypes before. Sheryl Sandberg, the Facebook executive who wrote "Lean In," has said that [women are called bossy](#) when they show the same behaviors that in men are called assertive. As Ms. Sandberg and Adam Grant, a business professor, wrote in [a New York Times article today](#) about men and women in the office, "A man who doesn't help is 'busy'; a woman is 'selfish.'"



Results for a search of "genius" on the interactive chart show students are likelier to apply this word to their male professors.

[A recent report](#) on 248 tech company employee performance reviews found that women are much more likely to receive critical feedback than men, and women who are leaders are more likely to be described as abrasive, aggressive and emotional. McSweeney's captured this double standard in [a humor piece titled](#) "Reasons You Were Not Promoted That Are Totally Unrelated to Gender."

[Studies have also shown](#) that students can be biased against female professors. In one, teachers graded and returned papers to students at the exact same time, but when asked to rate their promptness, students gave female professors lower scores than men. Biases cut both ways — teachers have also been found to [believe girls are not as good in math and science](#), even when they perform similarly to boys.

Mr. Schmidt, who made the chart as part of a project called [Bookworm](#) for searching and visualizing large texts, said he was struck by "this spectrum from smart to brilliant to genius, where each one of those is more strongly gendered male than the previous one was." He was also surprised that relatively few people commented on female professors' clothing or looks, which he had expected to be the case.

Another surprise, he said, was Shakespeare — apparently many more men than women teach it in English departments.

Men are more likely to be described as a star, knowledgeable, awesome or the best professor. Women are more likely to be described as bossy, disorganized, helpful, annoying or as playing favorites. Nice or rude are also more often used to describe women than men.

Men and women seemed equally likely to be thought of as tough or easy, lazy, distracted or inspiring.

Interestingly, women were more likely to be described in reviews as role models. Mr. Schmidt notes that the reviews are anonymous, so he doesn't know the gender of reviewers. It could be that more female students describe female professors as role models than men do when describing men or women.

[The Upshot](#) provides news, analysis and graphics about politics, policy and everyday life. Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). Sign up for our [weekly newsletter](#).