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

Photo credit: North Carolina State University

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Lillian MacNell

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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," 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.

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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

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.