Student Evaluations of Professors: Does A Professors' Gender, Race, or Age Influence Student Ratings?

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Info Articles

Abstract

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The purpose of this study is to examine and describe whether students' ratings of professors are influenced by the professor's gender, age, and race. A survey is used to collect data. The sample (n= 319) used in this study is drawn from 16 different undergraduate classes taught by 9 different instructors. Students in this survey are enrolled in required general studies courses from a large-size public university in Southwestern United States. Using analysis of variance and frequency distribution, the findings reveal that professors' gender, race, and age are related to how they are rated by students. The findings also indicate that female and male students differ in rating their professors. Furthermore, the research findings suggest that professors' attitudes and interactions, as well as whether or not they post student grade, or accept students' assignments online affects student ratings of professors.

INTRODUCTION

How students rate their professors and what influence their perceptions of rating professors have been a subject for research for decades. Although there are numerous studies on race, gender and to a lesser extent on age in relation to students' ratings of instructors, the findings are inconclusive. There are some who argue that gender, race, and age have no, or have very limited influence on how students rate their professors and there are others who believe and find these variables to play roles in how professors are rated by students. The purpose of this current study is to explain and describe if professors' race, gender and age influence or make a difference in students' ratings. In this study, I will also describe how some other variables such as professors' method of teaching and interaction may have impact on students' ratings.

How students rate their professors and what characteristics or qualities should a professor have in order to receive a higher rating by students? This is a difficult question to answer since students' evaluation of professors are subjective and many variables can play roles in how students rate their professors (Anderson 2003). According to Brophy and Good (1986) and Anderson (2003), some students may rate professors whom they think are understanding, friendly, enthusiastic, interactive, organized, and responsible. Other students may rate professors in terms of their teaching methods and providing assistance and feedback to students. Centra (1979), Centra and Gaubatz (2000) and Tucker (1996) identified communication, favorable attitude towards students, flexibility, knowledgeability of the subject, good organization, enthusiasm, fairness in grading, and examinations as some major variables that influence students rating of professors. Teven and McCroskey (1996), Hendrix (1998) and Simmons, 1996) stated that instructors who seem knowledgeable of the material and effectively deliver the information to the classroom are likely to be perceived as convincing, influential, and credible. According to Teven and McCroskey (1996), professors who are able to see things from students' perspectives and understand their views

and ideas may be granted more positive ratings by students. Nadler and Nadler (2001), stated that no matter who is teaching and what types of teaching styles are used, professors' communication are very important in how students would rate professors. Students prefer an expressive lecturer who exhibits a high level of assertiveness, responsiveness and uses various tone of voice; makes gestures, and lightens up students with humor or a joke (Centra and Gaubatz, 2000, Neusner, 1984). Tang (1987) and Callahan (1992) argued that students rate professors higher if they see professors' ability to explain material clearly and also find their teaching style compatible with their learning style. Generally, for professors to receive higher ratings from students, they should use any teaching styles that fit both the worst and the best students. Grasha and Hicks (2000) and Cashin (1992) argued that students' evaluation of professors does not provide sufficient information to make a valid judgment regarding overall professors' credibility and knowledgeability. Kougl (1997) stated that professor's rating by students is subjective and is seen through the eye of the beholder.

Review of literature

Research findings for decades have produced mixed and conflicting results about the relationship between students' evaluation and professors' race and gender. Some have argued that racial categories and gender influence students' perception of professors while others believe otherwise, that the findings on the correlation are either inclusive or exaggerated. Anderson and Smith (2005) suggest that gender and race have and continue to have influence on how students rate their professors. Anderson and Smith (2005) conducted a research on comparing Hispanic faculty with other racial groups in the United States and found that Hispanic faculty receive the lowest rate of student evaluations than white, Asian and African-American counterparts. Furthermore, when they analyzed for gender differences within the Hispanic faculty, they found that the Hispanic female faculty received lower rating than their males' colleagues. According to Hamermesh and Parker (2005) and DiPietro and

Faye (2005), white male and female faculty receive higher student rating followed by Asian, African American, and then Hispanic. Williams (2007) finds race and gender to partially play a role in how professors are rated by students. He asserts that male professors receive slightly higher ratings than females because males are seen as more competent than the female professors. Generally, white male and female professors receive a higher ratings from students than Latinos and African-Americans. Anderson and Smith, 2005; Hamermesh and Parker, 2005 and Williams, 2007 state that, in addition to race, professors with restrict teaching practices receive different ratings, with white female professors receiving higher ratings than minorities as well as white male professors, particularity from Latino students. Ogier (2005) is congruent with others that race and gender influence student evaluations; however, he argues that instructors for whom English is not their first langue receive less positive evaluation and feedback from students than other faculties.

Harlow (2003) conducted an in-depth interview with 58 faculty member; twenty nine white and twenty nine African Americans. His findings reveal that fifty percent of African American faculty were reluctant to claim that race influence students perception of rating faculty in any negative way. Concurrently, white professors seldom considered that race might influence students rating of professors. According to Harlow (2003), when asked how race and gender might influence students ratings of professors, female professors tended to focus on gender alone. Laube, Massoni, Sprague, and Ferber (2007) and Aleamoni (1999) argue that a majority of studies have found no relationship between professors' gender and students' evaluation of professors. According to Laube, et al., 2007, it is advising, mentoring, and professors' personality that makes a difference on students' perceptions and ratings of their professors. However, Laube, et al., 2007, also agree that in general, courses taught by female may receive lower student ratings than those taught by male professors. Renaud and Murray (2005) argue that it is the professors' teaching effectiveness and skills that impacts students'

rating of professors rather than other extraneous factors. Nerveless, according to Felton, Mitchell, and Stinson, 2004 and Goebel and Cashen, 1985, physically attractive professors receive better evaluation from their students, regardless of race and gender.

Students' rating of professors are also significantly influenced by students own characteristics such as gender, expected grade, major, age, and level of education (Radmacher and Martin, 2001:260; Chamberlin and Hickeys, 2001; Sheehan & Duprey, 1999; Shapiro, 1990; Greenwald and Gilmore, 1997). According to Chamberlin and Hickeys (2001) and Centra and Gaubatz (2000), students' gender plays a role when they rate their professors; female students tend to give lower ratings to male professors than do male students. This, according to Baumrind (1996) is the result of how people are socialized at an early age. As it relates to grades, students who are dissatisfied with their grades or expected higher grades are more likely to rate professors lower. In regards to students' major, students majoring in humanities and social sciences are more likely to give similar ratings to both male and female professors, whereas, students in natural and physical sciences tend to rate male professors slightly higher than female professors (Chamberlin and Hickeys, 2001; Greenwald and Gilmore, 1997; Laube, Massoni, Sprague, Ferber, 2007). This, according to Baumrind (1996) can be embed in socialization that female professors are less competent in science. Chamberlin and Hickeys (2001) note that female professors received higher ratings in feedback from female than male students. In considering students' level of education, as students move from one year in school to another and receive more education, they may also change their perception behaviors toward rating professors. This is because as students become more educated, more interactive, and more experienced, their evaluations become more rational and less judgmental.

The findings of the literature on the relationship between professors' characteristics and students' rating of professors is inconclusive. The majority of the researchers agree both

professor and student characteristics influence students rating of their professors. It is noteworthy that there is exceedingly limited studies on the relationship between professors' age and students' evaluation.

Theory

A theoretical perspective potentially useful in explaining students' ratings of professors as it relates to professor gender, race, and age is Expectation States Theory. This theory lays the groundwork for discussing how expected performances, social interactions, and definitions of situations can impact perception and judgement. Expectation States Theory is primarily the work of Berger, Cohen, Zelditch, and their colleagues and students at Stanford University (Meeker, 1981). It is a set of theoretical statements designed to explain a fundamental principle of human behavior (Meeker 1981; Berger, Ridgeway and Zelditch, 2002). Expectation States Theory can be used to explain how people evaluate other people's competency in small task groups and the amount of credibility and influence they should give to them as a result (Berger and Zelditch 1998). According to Berger et al. (2002; 1989:22), although the focus of Expectation States Theory is on task behavior and explaining the emergence of hierarchies in terms of power and prestige in small formal task-oriented group, it can also be used or applied to a wide range of sociological issues.

Applying Expectation States Theory enables us to relate findings on individuals or small groups to a broader sociological phenomenon. The theory suggests that individuals develop expectation and perceptions on the basis of their own as well as others' status characteristics. The status characteristics, which are also used as the independent variable in this research, includes professors' gender, race and age. According to Expectation States Theory, individuals generate expectations for themselves and others on the basis of various kinds of information in the situation, including cultural definitions, referential beliefs, specific personal evaluations, and so on. (Berger, Wagner, and Zelditch, 1989).

According to Berger and Zelditch (1998), an actor's status characteristic is associated with performance expectations—that is, with the belief about how an individual possessing a given state of a characteristic is expected to perform. Status characteristic is the individual's characteristic such as gender, age, and race. The possession or expected possession of status characteristics is relevant to performance output, and outcome states. Outcome state is the success or failure, or expected success or failure in accomplishing a task (Berger et al., 1998). For example, if male professors are perceived or expected to do better in teaching, then the status characteristic, gender, is relevant to expectations of teaching ability and as a result, higher student's ratings. If students expect or perceive old professors to be less effective in interaction and advising, age as a status is relevant to expectation of advising and interaction and can influence professors' ratings. The status characteristic becomes salient in the immediate situation if it is seen as relevant to the task-outcome in the situation (Berger et al. 2002). Salient, according to Berge, Fisek, Norman and Zelditch (1977), means that among the many states of the many status characteristics that an actor possesses in any social situation, a particular state may be regarded as useable and more significant in the immediate situation. For example, "if race is the basis of discrimination in a two-person task oriented group, i.e., one actor is white while the other is black, race will become salient even though it may have no initial relevance to the task in the situation" (Berger et al., 2002:164). If gender becomes the basis for evaluation, gender will become salient in situation. For example, if students value and prefer a course to be taught by a female professor, then it could be expected that the students will give the professor more positive evaluations regardless of her teaching effectiveness.

In general, "if a set of states possessed by the actors is relevant to the outcome states in the situation or is a basis of discrimination in the situation, these states and those that are strictly relevant to the immediate situation will become salient" (Berger, Ridgeway, and Zelditch, 2002:164). For example, if gender is the basis for evaluating males and females' teaching ability, and

if males are assumed to be more knowledgeable than females, then expectation states are associated with the states of the status characteristic (Berger et al., 1998). According to Turner (2001), expectations are either internalized or experienced from external sources or both. For example, a student may receive either positive or negative feedback about a female professor from peers or classmates, or a student may, at an early age, socialize and learn that females are less competent than males. Both internalized and externalized sources influence individual's perception and judgement. Of course, external sources of learning may or may not be internalized.

In summary, if students have different preferences and expectations of professors in terms of gender, then there should be a difference in ratings. If students have less positive perceptions toward professors in terms of race and age, then race and age as status characteristics should play roles in students rating of professors. In general, a group's judgments are affected by the nature of the situation, the objective and desired goals that need to be achieved. Based on the empirical generalizations derived from review of the literature and the theoretical generalizations, the following hypotheses have been developed and are tested in this research:

Ho$_1$: There is no relationship between professors' gender and student ratings of professors.
Ha$_1$: Students tend to rate male professors higher than female professors.

Ho$_2$: Professors' race has no impact on how they are rated by students.
Ha$_2$: Students rate white professors higher than professor of colors.

Ho$_3$: Professors' age does not influence students' rating of professors.
Ha$_3$: Students rate younger professors higher than older professors.

METHOD

The purpose of this study is to examine and describe whether students' ratings of professors are influenced by the professor's gender, age, and race. I made my best effort to obtain participants who would be the most useful and serve the purpose of the study by focusing on general study courses that all students are required to take, regardless of their field of studies. Using a survey, data was collected from 16 different undergraduate classes taught by 9 different professors at a large-size urban public university in Southwestern United States. The sample (319) was consisted of 147 (46.1%) males and 172 (53.9%) females, with 168 (52.7%) being between 18-20 year olds, 72 (22.6%) 21-23, 47 (14.7%) between 24-26 and the rest, 32 (10%) were over 26 year olds. The majority of the respondents were sophomore (32.6%) followed by freshmen (32%) and juniors (21.3%). The largest proportion (30.7%) were from professional and vocational field of studies, followed by social and behavioral sciences (28.8%), science and technology (20.1%), humanities (10.1%) and undecided (10.3%). In regards to students' expected grade, (39.8%) of the students indicated that they were expected a grade of B in the course, followed by (36.4%) who expected an A, and 21.3% who expected a C. Stude

A five response Likert-type scale was used with items related to the research questions, with strongly agree indicating the highest level of agreement and strongly disagree indicating the lowest scale of agreement. There were twenty three closed-ended questions with eight of the questions being specifically about professors' gender, race and age. The key independent variables in this study are professors' gender, race and age and the dependent variable is students' ratings of professors. For the test of hypotheses and analysis of data, frequency distribution and one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) are used. The frequency distribution is used to provide a summary of participant characteristics, the influence of covariates such students' age and gender, as well as the patterns and the range of values for each variable in the data layout. Analysis of variance is used to test the relationship between independent and dependent variables. The alpha level used in this study is set at 0.05 level of significance.

Findings

In order to better understand how gender, race and age might influence students' ratings, students were asked their opinions not only on the impact of these variables but also some other intervening variables such as professors' available time for students, interaction, and professors' field of teachings. Examining descriptive statistics of the data for race, gender and age, it was found that there were variations in students' responses with 18 (6 %) strongly disagreed and 173 (56.1%) disagreed that gender plays a role in how they rate their professors. In response to the question whether race influence their ratings, about 73.3 % of students indicated that race has nothing to do with how they rate their professors. It is noteworthy that there were more students who were neutral in responding to whether gender of the professors (34%) plays a role in their rating of professors in comparing with professors' race (24%). With reference to professors' age, 44.2 % disagree that they rate younger professors higher than older professors.

Generally, as the descriptive statistics indicates, race and gender slightly do influence students' rating of professors. However, age plays a more significant role on how professors are rated; older professors receive lowest students' rating. Analyzing for intervening variables, it was found that the majority of students (70 %) give higher ratings to professors who use technology such film, videos, DVD, internet and overhead in their teaching. Generally, students' responses (55.8%) also expressed that they rate professors higher when PowerPoint is used. The majority of the respondents (82.4%) indicated that professors who post students' grades online receive higher ratings, followed by accepting assignments (64.6%). It is important to note that 96.9 % of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that professors' interaction and attitude influence their rating.

Tests of Hypotheses

Three hypotheses were developed for this study to examine whether or not professors' gender, race and age are related to students' ratings of professors. An alpha level of 0.05 is used to either reject or not to reject the null hypotheses. The findings of the hypotheses are presented below and also displayed in table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Testing Hypotheses Utilizing Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Ratings of Professors by, Gender, Race and Age.

Hypotheses		Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 (Gender)	Between Groups	136.101	4	34.025	25.607	.000
	Within Groups	417.234	314	1.329		
	Total	553.335	318			
2 (Race)	Between Groups	27.875	4	6.969	29.843	.000
	Within Groups	73.323	314	234		
	Total	101.197	318			
3 (Age)	Between Groups	56.911	4	14.228	30.369	.000
	Within Groups	147.108	314	.468		
	Total	204.019	318			

Ho$_1$: It was hypothesized that there was no relationship between professors' gender and students' ratings of professors. Using a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA), the result indicated that there was a relationship between students' ratings and professors gender at f (4,314) =

25.607, p< 0.001. The null hypothesis was rejected and therefore it is concluded that there is a relationship between gender and students' rating of professors. The participants in this study rate males more positively than female professors.

Ho2: it was hypothesized that Professors' race has no impact on how they are rated by students. A one-way analysis of variance was utilized to see if race influenced student ratings. As shown in table 1, at F(4,314)= 29.843, p< 0.001, the null hypothesis is rejected and consequently one can infer that classes that are taught by professors of color receive lower ratings from participants in this study than those taught by white professors. Therefore, race does significantly affect students' ratings of professors.

Ho3: It was hypothesized that Professors' age has no effect on how they are rated by students. This hypothesis is also tested with one-way analysis of variance. The finding of this hypothesis reveals the rejection of null hypothesis at F(4,314) = 30.369, p<0.001. Thus, professors' age does significantly affect student ratings. Students in this study tend to rate younger professors higher than the older ones.

Discussion

There is an abundance of research on teacher evaluations with the majority agreeing that students' ratings and perceptions of professors are multifaceted. Although the findings are inconclusive, many believe students rate professors higher whom they think are understanding, friendly, enthusiastic, interactive, non-judgmental, organized, flexible, knowledgeable, and use different teaching methods. Additionally, some students rate their professors based on professors' fairness in grading, demandingness, responsiveness, using various tone of voice, and lightening up students with humor.

For this study, a survey was used from students who were enrolled in required general studies courses from a large-sized public university in Southwestern United States. Examining the data, it was found that many variables such as professors' interactions, help and providing students' with feedback, as well as teaching methods, which were also found significant by previous studies play roles in how professors are rated by students. For example, students give higher ratings to professors who use PowerPoint and utilize technology such film, videos, DVDs, internet, and overheads in their lectures than those who use chalkboards. The majority of students in this study also indicated that professors who post students' grades and accept assignments online receive higher ratings. It is noteworthy that among all variables used in this survey, 96.9 % of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that professors' interaction and attitude influence their ratings. The findings as relate to the significance of variables such as advising, teaching method effectiveness, responsiveness, and availability to help are consistent with the most previous research. Examining descriptive statistics of the data, particularly pertaining to students' opinions on race, gender and age, it was found that there were variations in students' responses in how gender, race, and age influence their ratings. In regards to race, the majority of students indicated that race does not influence how they rate their professors. With reference to professors' age, generally, older professor slightly receive lower ratings. Interestingly, there were more students who were neutral in responding to whether gender of the professors plays a role in their rating of professors in comparison with professor's race. Of course, this could be the related to the lack of diversity of the sample with the majority being white students. In other words, this could be related to colorblindness and political correctness in which it does not correspond reality. Obviously, race is not the sole variable that defines and influences individuals' adjudication. Gender and age can also result in how people are perceived, jugged and evaluated.

In the inferential part of the data analysis, using analysis of variance, it was found that at level of significance, .05, all three hypotheses were found statistically significant in rejecting the null hypotheses. The findings revealed that gender, race, and age influence students' rating of professors and this is congruent with the findings

by Hamermesh and Parker (2005), DiPietro and Faye (2005), Anderson and Smith (2005), Ogier (2005), and Williams (2007). The findings also support the findings by Salameh (1993), Matthew (1997), and Beazley (2000) that males are more likely to receive positive evaluations than female professors. The findings to some extent indicate that perceptions of race, gender, and age as related to academia have not significantly changed in society. By all means, there are various reasons as to why gender, race, and age might influence evaluations and ratings. However, one explanation can be that people are socialized differently, and the differences in social learning and socialization influences many aspects of individuals' lives; including interactions with one another to the choice of taking classes and evaluating others. The difference in perceiving different sexes, age, and races at an early age in societies that define expectations for males and females, the majority and minority, and the old and young differently, might in fact influence individual's judgment in later life, including expectations, competency, behavior, and abilities. As for age, where previous research is very limited, lower professors' ratings might not necessarily be related to their performance, but be associated with the assumption that elder professors are less competent and slow in action and reaction. The older professors might also be seen as less attractive and not having as much sense of humor as younger professors' might have. Obviously, this explanation cannot be generalized and it does not support the concept of cultural universalism. In some cultures, people usually evaluate elders whether in academia, or other professions more positively because they are perceived as ones who have developed knowledgeability and multidimensionality in thinking and encompass more life experiences.

The Expectation State Theory was adopted to guide this research. This theory focuses on how people's expectations, as well as the individuals' social factors, and experiences influence perceptions of others. It emphasizes human interaction, behavior, acts, and the expectations for performance of actors and the outcomes of those performances. As it was predicted by the theory,

gender, race, and age had a meaningful relationship regarding expectations and evaluations of professors. The findings of this study supports the notion that gender, race, and age are valued status characteristics, relevant to outcome states that influence expectations and judgement. The findings suggest that courses taught by minorities (having lower status characteristics) influence students' ratings of professors. According to the Expectation States theory, if a set of states possessed by the actors are relevant to the outcome states, then those states influence the evaluation of individuals in the situation. Of course, the evaluation also reflects socialization and socio-cultural norms. Generally, when people hold a certain feeling and attitude about an individual, the feeling and attitude are less likely to change in the situation, even if the person fulfills what is expected of her. For example, if a student expects a professor of color to be less competent, the student might evaluate the professor negatively even if the professor meets expectations.

Implications and limitations

Students' ratings of professors, which was the subject of this study, is worthy of research because professors have a major impact on students' learning and overall academic performance. The findings of this study may help to better identify students' expectations and evaluations in relation to professors' instructional strategies, most notably behavioral encounters. It might provide some feedback to professors so that they can use different strategies to increase students' awareness in fairness in relation to diffuse status characteristics and educating students to move away from biases that they might have about gender, race, and age. Since students' ratings of professors has a major impact on professors' employment stability, merit increase, promotion, their credibility, and self-worth, the results may be beneficial to university administrators and supervisors when evaluating promotions or contracts. Additionally, the findings would contribute to literature reviews which can be helpful when conducting further research in the same area of the subject matter.

This study is not without limitations and therefore, the findings need to be interpreted with some caution. First is the selection of the institution. The sample selected for this study was from a single university which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The second factor that contributes to the limitation of this study is composition of the sample, which comprised of mostly white students. The third limitation arises from the fact that "true" random sampling was not used and therefore, the concept of a nonrandom sample as it relates to generalizability may limit the generalizability of the findings.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to determine the nature of the relationship between professors' gender, race, age and students' ratings. Using analysis of variance, it was found that the relationship between students' ratings and professors' status characteristics is significant. Consistent with Expectation States Theory, the findings of this study support the notion that race, gender, and age are valued states and diffuse status characteristics that influence perceptions, expectations, and as a result, judgment and evaluation of others. Additionally, it was found that professors who use technology such as film, videos, internet, and overhead in their teaching receive higher ratings. Also using PowerPoint, accepting assignments and posting students' grades online significantly influence students' ratings. Furthermore, professors' interaction, attitude, and availability to help students are highly valued by students.

The ratings of professors by students are multifaceted and involves many dimensions. Therefore, care needs to be taken when interpreting students' ratings of professors. This study was conducted with students who were enrolled in lower level undergraduate classes. Future research may re-explore the findings of the research with other college students in upper level classes. This would help determine if students' expectations, experiences, and perceptions remain constant or change. Furthermore, for consistency and expanding consideration of the research topic,

future research should compare the current research findings with student ratings of instruction or faculty evaluation already completed in their institution, or alternatively conduct further research from multiple universities for comparison. Also given that there is limited research on professors' age and students' ratings, future research should have a closer look at this variable to determine its significance on students' ratings

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