Gender Bias and the Role It Plays in Student Evaluation of Instructors

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Abstract : Often, student ratings of instructors play a significant role in the career path of an instructor in higher education. So then, how does a student view the effectiveness of instructor teaching? This question has been address by literally thousands of studies found in the literature. Yet, why does this question still persist? A literature review reveals that while it is true that student evaluations of instructors can be biased, there is still a considerable amount of work that needs to be done in understanding why. As student evaluations of instructors can be used in a variety of settings (formative or summative) it is critical to understand the nature of the bias. The authors believe that not only is some bias possible in student evaluations, it should be expected for the simple reason that a student evaluation is a human activity and as such, relies upon perception and interpersonal judgment. As such, student ratings are affected by the same factors that can potentially affect any rater's judgment, such as stereotypes based on gender, culture, race, etc. Previous study findings suggest that student evaluations of teacher effectiveness differ between male and female raters. However, even though studies have shown that instructor gender does play an important role in influencing student ratings, the exact nature and extent of that role remains the subject of debate. Researchers, in their attempt to define good teaching, have looked for differences in student evaluations based on a variety of characteristics such as course type, class size, ability level of the student and grading practices in addition to instructor and student characteristics (gender, age, etc.) with inconsistent results. If a student evaluation represents more than an instructor's teaching ability, for example, a physical characteristic such as gender, then this information must be taken into account if the evaluation is to have meaning with respect to instructor assessment. While the authors concede that it is difficult or nearly impossible to separate gender from student perception of teaching practices in person, it is, however, possible to shield an instructor's gender identity with respect to an online teaching experience. The online teaching modality presents itself as a unique opportunity to experiment directly with gender identity. The analysis of the differences of online behavior of individuals when they perceive that they are interacting with a male or female could provide a wealth of data on how gender influences student perceptions of teaching effectiveness. Given the importance of the role student ratings play in hiring, retention, promotion, tenure, and salary deliberations in academic careers, this question warrants further attention as it is important to be aware of possible bias in student evaluations if they are to be used at all with respect to any academic considerations. For experimental purposes, the author's constructed and online class where each instructors operate under two different gender identities. In this study, each instructor taught multiple sections of the same class using both a male identity and a female identity. The study examined student evaluations of teaching based on certain student and instructor characteristics in order to determine if and where male and female students might differ in their ratings of instructors based on instructor gender. Additionally, the authors examined if there are differences between undergraduate and graduate students' ratings with respect to the experimental criteria.