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Power and Authority in the Classroom: Sexist Stereotypes in Teaching Evaluations

Elaine Martin

Recent studies indicate that, although significant sex inequities persist in the ranks of senior faculty, sex discrimination has been virtually eliminated in the hiring and compensation of academics seeking their first jobs.¹ The implication is that affirmative action has done its trick for younger academic women, and such inequalities as still exist for older women are a mere residual of the darker days before the women's movement. Some evidence even shows that younger women are better rewarded for high publishing rates than are their male counterparts.²

However, a closer look at the data raises several serious questions as to whether today's female junior faculty will fare any better than their senior sisters. Academic women, like women in the labor market as a whole, are more heavily represented in the low-paying fields, such as education and the humanities. In a system that rarely rewards good

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1. Alan E. Bayer and Helen S. Astin, "Sex Differentials in the Academic Reward System," *Science* 188 (May 1975): 796-801; A. M. Carter and W. E. Ruther, *The Disappearance of Sex Discrimination in the First Job Placement of New Ph.D.'s* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, 1975).

2. Howard P. Tuchman, *Publication, Teaching and the Academic Reward Structure* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1975), pp. 60-68. Women receive a far smaller salary increase than do men following publication of a first article, but the rewards for continued publishing are higher for women than for men.

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teaching, women spend more time on teaching than men do, and in a declining market far fewer women than men have tenure.³

As Florence Howe says, "To look closely at any institution is to discover the power of men over the lives of women in and around that institution."⁴ To look closely at most academic institutions is to see that in several different ways the reward structure places greater value on traditional male activities than on female activities. It is clear that women faculty are more likely to spend significantly more time and effort on teaching and committee work, while men are more likely to spend more time on research and administration.⁵ Although teaching, research, and institutional service are all important factors when faculty are evaluated for promotion and salary increases, the male activities are of course most consistently and most highly rewarded.⁶ Ambition cautions, therefore, that the surest route to success and tenure is through publishing and administrative work.⁷

Feminist principles, on the other hand, urge that the power to change male-dominated institutions lies in the ability to reach students through teaching and advising. Many institutions, faced with declining enrollments and decreasing revenues, are giving high priority to recruitment and retention of students through good teaching. This is especially true in the four-year and two-year institutions in which women constitute a high proportion of the faculty. Thus, it does not necessarily follow that women faculty who commit themselves to superior teaching—and who

3. Ruth B. Ekstrom, "Women Faculty: Development, Promotion and Pay," *Findings* 5, no. 2 (1979): 1–5. Only 46 percent of female faculty have tenure, while 72 percent of male faculty do.

4. Florence Howe, ed., *Women and the Power to Change* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1975), p. 13.

5. Women may spend more time on committees because, as junior faculty, they are often assigned to many of the "busy work" committees that abound in most institutions or because, as women, they are chosen to serve as tokens. See Bayer and Astin, p. 801. The American Council on Education surveyed over one hundred thousand college and university faculty in the academic year 1972–73 and found that 39 percent of women spent over twelve hours per week in the classroom, but only 29 percent of men did. By contrast, 33 percent of the men—but only 14 percent of the women—spent more than eight hours per week on research (*ibid.*). National Center for Education Statistics data show that 53 percent of male university faculty—but only 35 percent of female faculty—teach eight hours or less per week (Ekstrom, p. 2).

6. See Committee on the Education and Employment of Women in Science and Engineering, Commission on Human Resources, National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences, "Career Outcomes in a Matched Sample of Men and Women Ph.D.'s" (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1981) (available from the National Academy Press, National Academy of Sciences, 2101 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington D.C. 20418).

7. Tuchman, pp. 98–99, 59. Males are more likely to list administration as their principal activity (20.5 percent of senior men as compared with 9.4 percent of senior women) and more likely to be more highly rewarded for it. Male administrators earn \$3,044 more for their administrative work, females only \$2,345 more.

have commensurately less time left for research—will automatically lessen their chances for tenure. However, in an academic environment that persistently quantifies all that can be quantified and handily discards the rest, women who value teaching should be forewarned that evaluations of teaching performance may be reduced to a single “average mean” rating derived from student surveys and that those ratings may well reflect a sexist bias.

Review of the Literature

Given the pervasiveness of sexist stereotypes in our culture, it seems natural to ask whether students are influenced by the sex of the instructor when evaluating teaching performance. In fact, this question has been asked, with varying results, in two different types of studies. The strongest evidence that sexism biases evaluations of the work of men and women appears in laboratory research; studies of the results of conventional student evaluations routinely administered in the classroom have yielded less conclusive findings. Given the importance of student ratings in many personnel decisions, it is unfortunate that relatively little “real-life” analysis has been done on sex bias.⁸ Yet both laboratory and classroom studies isolate some interesting sex-related variables that may result in lower student evaluations of female faculty.

The degree to which sexist stereotypes affect a student’s evaluation of an instructor appears to be related to the student’s sex and to the instructor’s personal teaching style. In laboratory experiments, Ellyn Kaschek found that female students gave equal ratings to female and male professors, but male students assigned higher ratings to male professors in all personal traits measured, including likability, concern, power, and effectiveness. Susan Kay’s classroom studies yielded similar results, with the further complication that male students were far more likely to give lower ratings to those female faculty perceived to be hard graders. Mary B. Harris has discovered in two different laboratory studies that a teacher of either sex is viewed more positively in terms of competence, intelligence, and teaching ability when perceived as having “masculine” traits. The only area in which teachers with “feminine” descriptions excelled was warmth.⁹

8. Rhoda Unger, “Sexism in Teacher Evaluation: The Comparability of Real Life to Laboratory Analogs,” *Academic Psychology Bulletin* 1 (November 1979): 163–70.

9. Ellyn Kaschak, “Sex Bias in Student Evaluations of College Professors,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1978): 235–43; Susan Kay, “Faculty Evaluations: Sex Bias in Students’ Responses,” *NEWS for Teachers of Political Science*, no. 23 (1979), pp. 17–19; Mary B. Harris, “The Effects of Sex, Sex-stereotyped Descriptions, and Institution on Evaluations of Teachers,” *Sex Roles* 2, no. 1 (1976): 15–21, and “Sex Role Stereotypes and Teacher Evaluations,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 67, no. 6 (1975): 751–56.

The literature on student evaluations of female faculty suggests a tension between the qualities of warmth, on the one hand, and authority or competence, on the other. Thus, Barbarann Esp found in her studies that students learned most from women lecturers who adopted a "positive" style—frequent eye contact and regular smiles—and least from women with a "negative" style. Students learned equally well from both positive and negative male lecturers.¹⁰ This suggests that women faculty with masculine styles are perceived as most effective, but those with feminine traits of warmth and supportiveness *are* most effective. The ideal presumably would be to integrate these two seemingly conflicting approaches to teaching.

Patricia Elmore and Karen A. LaPointe found that any teacher—male or female—who is warm and interested in students receives higher ratings on teaching effectiveness than one who is brusque or impersonal, a fact which certainly supports the conventional wisdom in academic circles that student evaluations are in essence a popularity contest.¹¹ There is some evidence that students' ratings are also affected by the grades they expect to receive, but this phenomenon is most pronounced when male students rate female instructors. This finding is consistent with a series of experiments at the University of Dayton that indicated that college students of both sexes judged female authority figures who engaged in punitive behavior more harshly than they judged punitive males, but only when the woman in question was punishing a male subordinate and thus violating sex-role dictates.¹²

There is evidence that women may be considered superior workers only when they stay within their traditional roles. Harriet Mischel found that reviewers tended to evaluate journal articles more favorably when the sex of the author was consistent with the stereotype of professionals in the author's field. Esp's research suggests that, if an instructor's lecture style fits accepted notions of appropriate sex-role behavior, students will like that instructor more. Mary Issacs discovered that women instructors in "masculine" fields without some obvious sign of success, such as teaching awards, could not get unbiased evaluations. Kaschek's research indicated that, even when female faculty are given high ratings, students

10. Barbarann Esp, "Campus Prisoners of Stereotype," *Psychology Today* (November 1978), pp. 12–13.

11. Patricia Elmore and Karen A. LaPointe, "Effect of Teacher Sex, Student Sex, and Teacher Warmth on the Evaluation of College Instructors," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 67, no. 3 (1975): 368–74; Ruth B. Gross and Arnold C. Small, "A Survey of Faculty Opinions about Student Evaluations of Instructors," *Teaching of Psychology* 6, no. 34 (December 1979): 216–19.

12. Kay; Unger; Marsha B. Jacobson et al., "The Punitive Sex," *Human Behavior* 7, no. 8 (1978): 51.

are more likely to attribute their successful teaching methods to affective qualities and those of male professors to instrumental qualities.¹³

Authority

I contend that the common element in these studies is the issue of authority and that limits of authority or “zones of acceptance” are different for male and female instructors.¹⁴ An essential element of authority in the classroom must be the student’s voluntary acceptance of the legitimacy of the teacher’s behavior. Authority is a special form of power inspiring more or less unquestioning obedience without constant resort to force or coercion. One commands by one’s authoritative presence. Whether authority is conferred by a hierarchical power structure, personal charisma, or simply custom and tradition, it must be upheld by the subordinate’s voluntary obedience and acceptance of the legitimacy of the command.¹⁵

Authority in the classroom, then, is a consequence of an interaction between teacher and student. It seems not unreasonable to assume that, although women are being accorded the right to take positions of authority denied them in the past, the boundaries of their authority in those positions are different from those of their male colleagues. Thus many women faculty must deal with the incongruity between student sex-role expectations and traditional images of power and authority.¹⁶ Students have ambivalent expectations of women faculty: women are supposed to be warm, friendly, supportive, and deferential, yet professionals are supposed to be objective, neutral, authoritative, and able to offer constructive criticism. The resulting double bind in which many women faculty find themselves is best illustrated by a quotation from a female professor of social science at a large state university: “I

13. Harriet Mischel, “Sex Bias in the Evaluation of Professional Achievements,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 66, no. 2 (1974): 157–66; Esp; Mary Isaacs, “Sex Role Stereotyping and the Evaluation of the Performance of Women: Changing Trends,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 187–96; Ellyn Kaschak, “Another Look at Sex Bias in Student’s Evaluation of Professors: Do Winners Get the Recognition That They Have Been Given,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 5, no. 5 (1981): 767–73.

14. Herbert A. Simon, “Notes on the Observation and Measurement of Power,” in *Political Power: A Reader in Theory and Research*, ed. Roderick Bell, David V. Edwards, and R. Harrison Wagner (New York: Free Press, 1969), p. 76.

15. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. and trans. Talcott Parsons (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press and Falcon’s Wing Press, 1947), pp. 324–86.

16. See Dorothy Smith, “A Sociology for Women” (in *The Prism of Sex*, ed. Julia Sherman and Evelyn Beck [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978], pp. 135–89), for a discussion of how the very stuff of social science scholarship is itself based on male perception and experience, thus automatically belittling the authority of women and women’s experience.

feel as if I cannot win in the classroom. If I'm organized and 'professional' students perceive me as cold and rejecting. If I'm open and responsive and warm, I seem to be challenged and taken advantage of, perhaps considered not quite as bright."¹⁷

Within the normal scope of a teacher's authority are matters such as the type and quantity of material to be covered in a course, the timing of reading assignments and exams, the nature of the lectures, the ordering of classroom discussions, and the assigning of grades. Any instructor's authority is likely to be challenged if she or he assigns far more material than is customary, fails every student, or gazes out of the window instead of lecturing.¹⁸ In such an instance the instructor clearly is stepping outside the customary limits of authority as defined by years of classroom traditions. However, I suggest that there may also be a relatively clear set of limits to teacher authority based on years of sex-role traditions and that, when a woman teacher steps outside those limits, she is just as likely to be challenged as is the unconventional instructor described above.

A number of years ago at the University of Oklahoma several colleagues and I taught an experimental political science course in which we attempted to introduce the concept of illegitimate political authority in an experiential manner. In effect, we induced the students to reject our authority as illegitimate by stepping outside the bounds of accepted classroom behavior. It soon became quite clear that the students had very definite notions about the limits of teacher authority, and it was equally clear that, when that authority was exceeded, students became visibly upset and angry.¹⁹

Since it is reasonably certain that revenge plays a part in at least some low student evaluations, we may conjecture that it plays a larger part in the evaluations of those faculty who upset students by violating zones of acceptance. Further, it is likely that, because of conflicts between established sex roles and traditional norms for expressing authority, women faculty may more easily violate these zones of acceptance than will their male colleagues. On the basis of these conjectures, we may expect women faculty who err on either side of a rather fine line between "feminine" warmth and "masculine" professionalism to receive lower

17. Norma Wikler, "Sexism in the Classroom" (paper delivered at the American Sociological Association meeting, New York, September 1976), p. 7.

18. P. H. Partridge, "Some Notes on the Concept of Power," *Political Studies* 11 (June 1963): 113-15.

19. Elaine Martin et al., "An Experimental Approach to Teaching Introductory Political Science" (paper delivered at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, Los Angeles, 1969). We did several things to evoke this response. The least controversial involved selecting a shy, but alert, student in the front row and asking her or him a series of questions. The questioning began with queries about assigned material, then moved to study habits, and became progressively more personal until the student refused to answer.

student evaluations than those women able to combine these traits successfully. We may also expect male faculty, although subject to a similar set of standards, not to be judged as narrowly.

Method

In order to test the notion that student evaluations are influenced by zones of acceptance based on sex stereotypes, I conducted a survey designed to combine aspects of both laboratory and classroom experiments on teaching evaluations. Most classroom analysis is based on standardized evaluation forms with few or no questions about the instructor's personal traits. Laboratory experiments provide more information about the interactions between teacher and student but have limited value because they are isolated from actual classroom situations. My questionnaire included standard questions covering the instructor's classroom performance, organization, preparedness, enthusiasm, and fairness as well as questions about such personal traits as friendliness, warmth, and self-confidence. Students were also asked to rate their instructors on teaching effectiveness. My specific research question was, Do male and female students have different perceptions of the personal traits that contribute to good teaching, and do these perceptions differ according to the sex of the instructor?

My analysis was focused on comparisons of the ways male and female students rated the same instructor. I administered the questionnaire to 414 students enrolled in nine different courses at a large midwestern university and received 394 usable responses from 240 women and 154 men. Three of the nine professors being evaluated were male social scientists, three were female social scientists, and three were female women's studies faculty. I made no attempt to match up male and female faculty on the basis of equal teaching skills (an impossible task in any case). I assumed that, if there were statistically significant differences between the ratings of an instructor by male and female students, then I could attribute these differences to sex bias. I made no assumptions about the direction of the bias, that is, I did not attempt to determine which group of students was more realistic in its evaluation. I further assumed that, if high ratings were associated with different personal traits for male and female instructors, then students had different zones of acceptance for male and female authority figures.

I used four different methods of analysis. All data were analyzed by sex of student and sex of instructor. The first two steps were undertaken to determine whether there were any significant differences in the ways in which male and female students evaluated the same instructor. First, mean ratings on each questionnaire item were tabulated to check whether there were any apparent sex-based differences. Second, the *F*

test was run on each set of means to assess the statistical significance of any apparent differences between male and female students.²⁰ The next two steps of analysis focused on the relationship between measures of an instructor's teaching effectiveness and personal traits. The ratings on teaching effectiveness were tested for correlations with the ratings on the personal traits questions. I then established Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient and the coefficient of determination to test the strength of any associations found. Finally, I performed multiple regression analysis to test the simultaneous effects of the independent variables of instructor's personal traits on the dependent variable, teaching effectiveness.

Results

The table of means by sex of student and sex of instructor showed a tendency in most survey items for students to rate instructors of the same sex higher than instructors of the opposite sex. This tendency was most pronounced in the ratings of female social science instructors. However, of the twenty-five survey items subjected to the *F* test, only five yielded results indicating statistically significant differences between male and female students. I found no significant sex-based differences among students evaluating women's studies instructors—one difference among those evaluating male faculty, and four differences among those rating female social science instructors. It thus appears that, to the limited extent that sex bias operates in this group of students, it is most prevalent when students evaluate female social science instructors.

Significant differences between male and female student responses were found in questions concerning female social science instructors on classroom preparations, $F(1,57) = 4.83, p < .05$, decisiveness, $F(1,57) = 5.66, p < .05$, participative decision making, $F(1,57) = 4.63, p < .05$, and likability, $F(1,57) = 4.10, p < .05$. The average difference in ratings by male and female students on these questions was .55 points on a five-point scale; in every instance, female students gave the instructor a higher rating than did male students.

Only one significant sex difference was found between male and female students' ratings of male faculty. When evaluating decisiveness, male students gave male faculty an additional .35 points above similar ratings by female students, $F(1,95) = 5.98, p < .05$. This is particularly interesting since, on the same questions, female students rated female instructors .52 points higher than male students did. This suggests that

20. Many schools, including the one at which I teach, do not run statistical tests of significance; they simply use raw scores or translate raw scores into departmental rankings. Under these circumstances, statistically insignificant differences may become very significant for the individual instructor.

male and female students perceive decisiveness differently in men and women.

Why no sex-based differences appeared between male and female evaluations of women's studies instructors is unclear, but this finding could be explained several ways. It may be that male students assume that women instructors are naturally authorities in this field or that those male students enrolled in women's studies courses are less subject to sex-based perceptions of female authority. It may also be that female students do not rate women's studies female faculty as highly as they do regular female faculty because the students have higher expectations of these instructors. This whole question requires further study.

Next, I examined all survey responses for correlations between ratings on personal traits and ratings on teaching effectiveness. Again, I found differences between male and female students' evaluations of male and female instructors. Although my analysis yielded a large number of statistically significant correlations ($p < .05$), suggesting that there is some degree of relationship between student evaluations of teaching and all the personal traits of the instructor tested, there were only a few strong associations.²¹ My analysis relied on computing the coefficient of determination, r^2 , which expresses the percentage of the variation in the dependent variable that is "explained" by the independent variable. The higher the r^2 value, the more useful one variable is as a predictor of the other. Most of the r^2 values found in this study fell between 9 and 30 percent. I assumed associations to be strong only if the r^2 value was over 50 percent.

Results showed that, when male students were evaluating female social science instructors, high ratings on teaching effectiveness were strongly associated with high ratings on friendliness ($r^2 = 51$ percent), smiles ($r^2 = 61$ percent), eye contact ($r^2 = 61.6$ percent), confidence ($r^2 = 62.9$ percent), and decisiveness ($r^2 = 72.6$ percent). I found no similarly strong associations in male students' ratings of male instructors or of women's studies instructors. No strong associations between teaching effectiveness and personal traits appeared when I examined female students' ratings.

Because the combined effect of two or more variables on another variable is rarely the sum of their individual effects, multiple-regression analysis is used to establish their simultaneous effect. The proportion of the variance in the dependent variable that is explained by all the independent variables in the multiple-regression equation is called the coefficient of multiple determination, R^2 . When the regression equation was computed for male students' evaluations of female social science

21. The test of statistical significance determines whether the correlations found are different from those that might be found simply by chance. The test of association determines the strength of the relationship found. Many significant associations are not strong, and some that are strong are not significant.

instructors, R^2 was 84.4 percent, $F(5,20) = 15.81, p < .01$. That is, friendliness, smiles, eye contact, confidence, and decisiveness accounted for 84.4 percent of the variation in male students' ratings of the teaching effectiveness of women social scientists. The first three traits are generally considered to be "feminine" ones and the last two "masculine," a combination which supports the hypothesis that women instructors who successfully combine feminine and masculine traits fare best on teaching evaluations.

Discussion

The zones-of-acceptance hypothesis asserted causality between student perceptions of an instructor's appropriate sex-role behavior and student evaluations of the teaching effectiveness of that instructor. The hypothesis further asserted that the parameters of acceptable sex-role behavior would be construed more narrowly for female than for male faculty. The results supported the hypothesis only when male students were evaluating female social science instructors. Male students rated female social scientists lower than did female students on classroom preparation, decisiveness, participative decision making, and likability. Male students gave their highest scores on teaching effectiveness to female social science instructors who successfully combined "feminine" traits—exhibiting friendliness, smiling often, and establishing frequent eye contact—with "masculine" attributes.²²

It is currently fashionable to speak of the "imposter syndrome" and the "fear of success syndrome," both of which emphasize the ambivalence that women feel about high professional achievement. It is also currently fashionable to advise women professionals to adopt the male model of success—to be more assertive in speech and manner, to demonstrate their ambition and eagerness to succeed, and to dress the part with simple, tailored clothing. Ironically, this advice, too, gives evidence of some ambivalence by cautioning the woman professional not to go too far in her emulation of the male success model, that is, she should cultivate a "mentor," and she should be sure to wear a feminine blouse with her skirted suit.

With women increasingly entering academic fields that have been traditionally male, a certain amount of role confusion is bound to occur on both sides. This is to be expected in a period of transitional social values. However, if untenured academic women are to maintain their toehold on the academic ladder, they may be well advised to inquire into their institution's methods of evaluating effective teaching. The evidence

22. Lora Liss, "Why Academic Women Do Not Revolt: Implications for Affirmative Action," *Sex Roles* 1, no. 3 (1975): 209–23, esp. 216.

from this study strongly suggests that women faculty in the social sciences must try harder than their male colleagues to convince male students that they are well prepared, decisive, and likable. Also, more than their male colleagues, female instructors are likely to have their competence judged by male students on the basis of personal characteristics typically associated with feminine behavior, such as friendliness, frequent eye contact, and regular smiles. The message to women faculty seems clear: if your institution bases personnel decisions on student evaluations, make sure your colleagues are aware of the possibility of sex bias.

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