Female academics face huge sexist bias – no wonder there are so few of them

A new online tool reveals the stark gender bias in how students evaluate their university lecturers. This is yet another hurdle for women in academia to overcome

Laura Bates

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B enjamin Schmidt, an assistant professor at Northeastern University, has created an online tool that allows users to compare the frequency of particular words in evaluations of male and female professors. Schmidt created the interactive chart using data from 14 million student reviews on the website RateMyProfessors.com. The results are striking.

We already know that performance evaluations can reveal serious gender bias, whether deliberate or unconscious, and that women and men can be judged very differently for exhibiting similar behaviour. Where a man is seen as assertive, decisive or passionate, a woman risks accusations of being shrill, overbearing or hysterical; a phenomenon that can have a particularly negative impact for women in the workplace. But this new data seems to suggest that the problem starts earlier, and is already in full effect during higher education.

There is something almost hypnotic about typing search terms into Schmidt's tool and watching the coloured dots swim from one side of the chart to the other, splitting themselves repeatedly along gender lines. The more terms you can think of, the more the tool reiterates (most) societal stereotypes. Try switching from "funny" to "annoying", for example, and watch the dots zoom towards opposite sides of the screen.

Reviews of male professors are more likely to include the words "brilliant", "intelligent" or "smart", and far more likely to contain the word "genius". Meanwhile, women are more likely to be described as "mean", "harsh", "unfair" or "strict", and a lot more likely to be called "annoying".

Immediately recognisable societal stereotypes emerge – the words "disorganized" or "unorganized" [sic] come up much more frequently in women's evaluations, while men are far more likely to be described as "cool" or "funny", with one of the widest gender splits of all on the word "hilarious". Women are more commonly called "nice" or "helpful", but men are more often described as "good".

There is a silver lining here – while the results certainly reinforce gender stereotypes about intelligence and personality, there is less focus on female professors' looks than one might anticipate. The search term "hot" reveals completely mixed results, and, though it is used rarely, the word "sexy" is more likely to appear in evaluations of male rather than female teachers. The battle isn't entirely won, however, as "beautiful" does crop up for female teachers, albeit far more rarely than other descriptors such as "good" or "funny".

As Schmidt himself points out, the reliability of the data is limited – these are online reviews rather than official student feedback; it's not possible to break down the results by the sex of the reviewer; and, of course, there is room for error in making assumptions about the sentiment of a sentence containing any given word.

But this can be mitigated in part by Schmidt's tool, which allows users to see the frequency of each word (with higher frequency results likely to be more reliable), and to filter for results from only positive or negative evaluations. The findings are also backed up by other studies, one of which surveyed college students' feedback about online course professors and found that the ratings were higher in every category when students were told the professor was male.

The strength of this unconscious bias is quite astonishing – even for a relatively objective measure such as promptness, students rated a "female" professor 3.55 out of 5 and a "male" professor 4.35, despite the fact that they handed work back at the same time.

The implications are serious. In the competitive world of academia, student evaluations are often used as a tool in the process of hiring and promotion. That the evaluations may be biased against female professors is particularly problematic in light of existing gender imbalance, particularly at the highest echelons of academia. According to the American

Association of University Professors, in 2012, 62% of men in academia in the US were tenured compared to only 44% of women, while women were far more likely to be in non-tenure track positions than men (32% of women in academia compared to just 19% of men).

Meanwhile, statistics obtained in 2013 by Times Higher Education revealed that only about one in five UK professors are female, with the percentage of female professors at some universities as low as 8 or 9%. Data from the non-profit organisation Catalyst suggests that the imbalance persists internationally, too.

Set alongside the unconscious bias of academic recruiters themselves, as well as the difficulty of juggling parenthood with the demands of research, the apparent sexism in student evaluations provides yet another hurdle for women in academia.

It is interesting to consider these results in the context of a wave of troubling recent reports about sexism and misogyny on campus. Perhaps it will be difficult to tackle biased and sexist appraisals of female professors until the wider issue of student sexism is also seriously confronted.

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