Research Report

Students' Perceptions of Professors in Nontraditional Teaching Roles

Brien K. Ashdown, M.S
Saint Louis University

Kristin L. Kiddoo, M.S.
Saint Louis University

University students participated in 4 focus groups (Caucasian males, Caucasian females, ethnic minority males, and ethnic minority females). Participants were asked to discuss 3 classroom scenarios: (a) a White male teaching a race relations course, (b) a male teaching a women's studies course, and (c) a young, childless female teaching a child psychology course. Most participants preferred an ethnic minority professor for the race relations course, a female professor for the women's studies course, and showed a slight preference for a married female professor for the child psychology course.

Keywords: students' perceptions, professors' ethnicity and gender, nontraditional teaching roles, focus groups, classroom diversity

Previous research has addressed the hypothesis that professors who are members of minority groups—specifically, African-Americans, Latinos, and women—are evaluated differently than members of majority groups (Anderson & Smith, 2005; Hendrix, 1998; Kierstead, D'Agostino, & Dill, 1989). Basow (1998) reported that female professors are frequently evaluated differently by students than are male professors, and that these evaluative differences include differences in teaching style and perceptual biases.

Latina professors are often evaluated differently than European-American female professors with similar teaching styles. In one study, Latina women were seen as warmer when they had lenient teaching styles and less warm when they had stricter teaching styles than European-American female professors with comparable teaching styles (Anderson & Smith, 2005). In other research, student evaluations were impacted by three factors: professor's sex, facial expression and contact with students. Female professors who were perceived as more friendly were given higher student evaluations, but similarly perceived friendliness did not impact male professors' evaluations. In addition, male professors were seen as more effective than female professors regardless of facial expression or contact with students (Kierstead, D'Agostino, & Dill, 1989).

Hendrix (1998) conducted one-on-one interviews with students in classes taught by European-American professors and African-American professors. Students reported perceiving African-American professors as usually having to work harder to establish credibility, but having an easier time doing so when they are teaching courses that could be linked to their "Blackness." Thus, students conferred more credibility to African-American teachers who taught "ethnic" classes. Interestingly, students also conferred more credibility to African-American professors who taught English, stating that with a host of prevalent "Black" dialects, an African-American who could teach standard English was perceived as "an extra plus" (p. 749). At least one interviewee stated that it would be difficult for a European-American professor to establish credibility in a class that addressed ethnic studies because students may desire a "minority view" (p. 749), even if the European-American professor had experience living with minorities.

The Present Research

The objective of the current research was to determine whether there were certain professors that students would or would not be willing to learn from due to the professors' personal background and the particular course topics. For example, how would students feel about taking a race relations course from a White male professor? How would students feel about taking a women's studies course taught by a male professor? We wanted to address specific questions about professors in what might be called 'nontraditional roles'. How would the students perceive the professors' credibility and how difficult would it be for the professors to establish credibility with the students? Would students feel that a professor in a nontraditional role would evaluate students fairly, or would certain groups (i.e., ethnic minority students, women) raise the possibility of being subjected to different grading standards? We wanted to know whom these students would choose as the ideal candidates for certain courses.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Brien K. Ashdown, Saint Louis University, Department of Psychology, 3511 Laclede Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63103. Email: ashdownb@slu.edu

Method

Participants

Participants were undergraduate psychology students at a private Midwestern university who participated in exchange for credit toward a psychology course requirement. Four focus groups were held. Since race and gender were critical components of the research questions, focus group sessions were demographically divided as follows: Caucasian Males, Caucasian Females, Ethnic Minority Males, and Ethnic Minority Females. When signing up, participants were asked only to participate in the session that applied to them. The 4 focus groups had varying numbers of participants. There were 3 participants in the ethnic minority male group, 5 in the ethnic minority female group, and 10 each in the white female and white male groups.

Procedure and Materials

Participants signed up for the study via the psychology department's participant pool website (Experimetrix). The moderator for each focus group was of the same gender as the members of the group. A note-taker of the opposite gender was also present during each session.

After reading the recruitment statement and obtaining informed consent, which included a statement explaining that the session would be audiotaped to allow for transcription of the conversation, the group was given the first hypothetical scenario and asked to provide their personal opinions (see Appendix A). After answering all the questions, participants were thanked for their participation, debriefed about the study, and dismissed.

Analysis

After audiotapes from each of the 4 focus group session were transcribed verbatim, open-coding following the method provided by Strauss and Corbin (1998) was conducted. The statements of participants were organized into 'segments', which were then clustered together into categories, and finally coded into broad themes. Segments were simply key terms and phrases that were deemed important and relevant to the focus group conversation by the researchers. After segments were pulled from the transcribed conversations, segments that were similar to one another were grouped together into categories. Finally, similar categories were grouped together into general themes. These broad themes were then used to analyze the focus group conversations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

Initial Credibility

When given the scenario of a White male teaching a course on race relations, most participants indicated that they would view the instructor as being highly credible to teach, regardless of their own race or gender. One participant stated that, "Just because he's White doesn't mean he doesn't have knowledge or some kind of experience-base; this doesn't mean he's not qualified."

Only the minority males said that they would not be initially surprised that a White male would be teaching this course. All other groups said they would be surprised to find a White male as the instructor for the course. After this initial surprise, though, all of the groups said they would be satisfied with a While male instructor as long as he was qualified. At least 1 participant, however, cited the instructor's age as being a factor in whether or not he would be viewed as credible, indicating that they "would be very skeptical of him, especially if he was, like, anywhere under 50 [years old]."

When asked about a male teaching a course on women's studies, females (especially White females) were against the idea, and rated his credibility as very low. Their initial response to the suggestion was often a simple "No." Male students felt that while he could be well schooled, the instructor would still lack the personal experience of being a female. When asked what this instructor could do to gain more credibility, the most common reaction was along the lines of showing respect for and valuing women. One participant felt that he could gain credibility "if he was gay." All groups, other than the White females, eventually said that they would give the instructor "the benefit of the doubt," unless he did something like "mak(e) sexist remarks."

Asked about a young, childless female teaching child psychology, most participants assumed high initial credibility, often citing the research and academic experience that would be required to teach this type of course. Many also pointed to the fact that she was a female, and that "just the fact that she is a woman and not a male gives her more credibility."

Fairness in Evaluation

Participants were next asked to express their opinions as to whether the instructors in the given scenarios would grade all groups of students fairly. For example, in the race relations course, participants were asked whether they felt that the White male professor would grade White students and minority students without bias. In general, White participants thought that he would be fair in grading, while some minority students thought that he might favor White students, citing unavoidable biases. For example, one minority student said, "I think it would be difficult for him to be fair to everyone."

Evaluation fairness by the male teaching a women's studies course elicited less response, especially from the males. Some females, however, thought that he might "cut [males] a little slack," and expect more from the female

students.

When asked whether they felt that the young, childless female teaching child psychology might expect more from students with children than from the more traditional, young undergraduates, 1 participant agreed, saying that the instructor might "expect a little more out of older students," especially if a portion of the grade was for participation, when parents would have more stories to share.

Ideal Candidate

The final question posed to participants was whom they would select as the 'ideal candidate' to teach each of the courses given in the three scenarios. After being given the example of two résumés with equivalent qualifications but different demographic characteristics, most participants said that their ideal candidate would be the stereotypically appropriate one. Most believed that "the minority would get the job" to teach the race relations course, a woman would be the ideal candidate to teach the women's studies course, and a parent (and more specifically a mother) would be the best selection for a course in child psychology.

Discussion

Participants were hesitant to address the issue of a White male teaching a race relations course. This could be due to social desirability or a desire to appear politically correct, especially when speaking to a group of their peers where anonymity could not be guaranteed. Nearly all of the students, regardless of ethnicity or gender, stated that there would be no bias in teachers' grading of students, and that any person with the appropriate education and training could have credibility teaching the race relations course. Only when directly asked to select a professor did the students suggest that an ethnic minority professor would be a better choice for the class. Nevertheless, White students were defensive of a White male teaching the race relations class, stating, "White is a race, too."

Regarding the question of a male professor teaching a Women's Studies course, differences arose among some of the groups. The White females were adamantly against a male professor teaching women's studies. When initially asked the question, most responded with a simple but definitive "No." It took more questioning to get them to discuss the topic any further. Finally, most of them based their decision on the idea that all of the necessary information for this class could not be taken from a textbook. They claimed that first-hand experience as a woman was important, even imperative.

On the other hand, the group of minority females seemed most open to the idea of a male teaching women's studies. They claimed that a male might bring an interesting outside perspective to the class. Though he would

have to be careful and conscious about the way he taught the class and presented the information, an educated and trained male could do a good job. As a minority group, these women may have had experience trying to understand things from the majority group's perspective, and might be willing to admit that an outsider could indeed understand another group.

As for the scenario of the young, childless female teaching the child psychology course, some participants preferred a woman, a younger teacher, or a parent. However, the consensus was that anyone could teach the course. Most of the participants stated that all the information for the course could be gathered from a textbook or professional research.

An interesting contradiction in the way the participants spoke about the qualifications of the professors was the idea of a textbook versus personal experience. For the women's studies course and race relations course, nearly all participants said that in order to teach the course effectively and credibly, personal experience was required. On the other hand, for the child psychology course, participants said that experience would be helpful, but that textbook information would be sufficient. It appears that courses which participants saw as less "scientific" or more personal could not be confined to the information available from a textbook.

While an attempt was made to form focus groups of balanced numbers of European-American and ethnic minority students, it was difficult to form such comparable groups because of the overall student composition of the university from which the sample was taken. In order to form the focus groups of ethnic minority students, we were forced to assign all ethnic minorities together to the same group, consisting of 3 participants for the ethnic minority male group and 5 for the ethnic minority female group. Indeed, this is one of the limitations of the present study. If it had been possible to obtain groups of specific ethnicities, the study might have produced more varying and interesting results. For example, if it had been possible to construct a group of Latino males, a group of Latina females, a group of Middle Eastern males, a group of Middle Eastern females and so on, more detailed and ethnic-specific data might have been collected. Instead, the current research was limited to dividing groups simply by gender, ethnic majority and ethnic minority. It would be beneficial if future research on this topic could further delineate the focus groups by ethnicity in order to provide more ethnic-specific information.

The current research was conducted with focus groups of 3 to 10 participants. While at times this was helpful in creating a discussion in which participants fed off of each other's comments, it also seemed to cause some problems. Most participants quickly and readily agreed with the first

comment made by a fellow participant. Perhaps because they were discussing potentially controversial subjects in a group of peers where anonymity could not be guaranteed, participants were sometimes hesitant to make their personal views known. Perhaps one-on-one interviews, where both anonymity and confidentiality could be guaranteed, would produce an environment where participants would be more willing to share their personal, and possibly controversial, viewpoints.

While originally willing to grant most instructors "the benefit of the doubt," it is clear that students preferred what might be termed 'stereotypically appropriate professors'. This was especially true for courses that were regarded (perhaps incorrectly) as less scientific, such as women's studies and race relations. Many such courses are generally offered as diversity classes by universities. Yet students' expectations may subtly influence universities to employ only stereotypically appropriate instructors for such courses, thus passively eliminating other viewpoints on the topics. Ironically, this directly opposes the goal and purpose of diversity in the classroom. This might lead students to believe that conversations about topics such as race or gender are only open to stereotypically appropriate participants.

Steps should be taken to make students aware that this is not the case. Guest lecturers, nontraditional instructors, and new teaching methods should be utilized to ensure that students understand that these topics of learning and conversation are open to everyone, and that true understanding and knowledge take place only when everyone is participating, regardless of ethnicity or gender.

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Appendix A

Questions Asked of Each Focus Group

1. As a student, how would you view a professor's credibility as an instructor in the following scenarios:
   a. A White male teaching a course on Race Relations?
      i. How could the professor change that initial credibility perception?
   b. A male teaching a course on Women's Studies
      i. How could the professor change that initial credibility perception?
   c. A young, single female with no children teaching a course on Child Psychology.
      i. How could the professor change that initial credibility perception?

2. As a student, how would you view nontraditional professors' fairness in evaluating students?
   a. Do you think that the White male teaching Race Relations would grade ethnic minority students differently than White students?
      i. Do you think that students from a different race than you may have a different view?
   b. Do you think that the male teaching a course on Women's Studies would grade female students differently than male students?
      i. Do you think that students of the opposite gender to yours may have a different view?
   c. Do you think that the young, childless female would grade older students with children differently than younger students without children?
      i. Do you think that students that differ from you in age and parenting experience may have a different view?

3. In your view, who would best be qualified to teach the following courses:
   a. Race Relations
      i. Why?
   b. Women's Studies
      i. Why?
   c. Child Psychology
      i. Why?