

Perceptions of Male and Female Lecturers at an American Style University in Nigeria

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Abstract

This quantitative study examines the data collected from end of year evaluations completed by students on their lecturers at an American style university in Nigeria in three key areas: course, instructor and student. The lecturers teach in different schools (Business & Entrepreneurship, Arts and Sciences, and Information Technology & Communications) and are from various countries and have differing educational and training backgrounds. This study delineates the data into two main groups: male and female lecturers. Literature suggests that women tend to be rated lower than their male counterparts due to a number of influencing factors such as stereotyping, contrast effect and selective perception which all contribute to bias exhibited by the students. In this paper we review these forms of bias as a complex set of expectations that students use to make their judgment. Despite the complexities of perception, the researchers offer an insight to the common errors of judgment that students make when they evaluate their male and female lecturers. Finally, we challenge the factors that affect bias in student perceptions when evaluating gender specific roles at a university which may distort and mislead results.

Key Words: *gender, lecturers, student, Nigeria, American Style University.*

1. Introduction

As far back as the 1960s, student evaluation of teachers has been a standard practice in the U.S. Such evaluations are used for promotion, retention, management decisions and salary adjustments. There is evidence to suggest that currently as many as 98% of Universities based in the U.S.A. readily use systematic student evaluation of classroom teaching (Magner, 1997) which is a marked increase from 29% in 1973. According to *Teacher Evaluation: A Conceptual Framework* (2009), a teacher evaluation has two major purposes: firstly to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the teacher; and secondly, to hold teachers accountable for students' learning. The objective of these evaluations is primarily to gauge teacher effectiveness and student learning over a course in a pre-set period of time such as a semester. These form of evaluations started in the American education system, and now be seen in many

other countries for different purposes e.g. in India these evaluations are used for quality control measures by policy makers (Lahiri, 2010). The rationale behind decisions based on these evaluations call for further investigation as to whether this practice is prone to bias in relation to gender.

This paper describes a study carried out by the authors that investigated students' perceptions towards their male and female faculty at a relatively small, private, American-style University known as the American University of Nigeria (AUN). This University is the first of its kind in western-Sub-Sahara Africa in terms of offering a comprehensive American curriculum and hiring a large number of American faculty including the President of the University.

For our study, the researchers studied the faculty evaluations results of fall semester of 2010 that student fill out at the end of each semester. The purpose of the evaluation is to gauge the overall quality of the course, instructor, and student self-assessment of their own learning. This analytical study is the first public review that summarizes the faculty evaluations from a gender perspective. Our analysis is an attempt to observe any differences in the student evaluations towards male and female faculty and explain any discrepancies identified by referring to existing theories.

The structure of this paper is as follows: in section 2 we will give the background to the study in the form of a literature review; section 3 we set out the study to determine the perceptions of students toward their male and female lecturers at the American style University in Nigeria; in section 4 we present the results of our findings; a discussion of our study is given in section 5; and final conclusions are given in section 6.

2. Literature Review

There has been much written on gender and the roles they portray. For the purpose of this paper, we identify that these roles are a set of beliefs and behaviours and attitudes that are expected for a specific gender (Bennett, 1982). Kite (2001) suggests that there may be some gender bias when students evaluate their teachers. Kite goes on to provide evidence that strong cultural conditioning on gender roles consciously and subconsciously influences the evaluator. These biases to certain roles and characteristics represent "quite complex interactions between gender, teacher characteristics/ behaviours and student perceptions and expectations" (Casey et al., 1997). By identifying bias we can determine the effects they have on students' perception of their male and female faculty with respect to the end of year evaluations.

In this study, biases are identified as the overall arching interference in objective judgement. Within these biases, there are three sources presented: *contrast effect*, *stereotyping* and

selective perception. A students' bias is the tendency to interpret information incorrectly. George & Jones (2005) explain that when bias exists, perceivers form inaccurate perceptions of the target, in this case, the male and female teachers. Bias can strongly influence assumptions that the evaluator makes on these targets.

Contrast effect is a symptom of bias. The principle of contrast according to Oskamp & Schultz (2005) is that when social stimuli are within a person's scope of rejection, contrast will result. For instance, when a behaviour or attitude is close to what is acceptable to our own, the judgement tends to be a favourable action, yet when the attitude is quite remote or unfamiliar from our own, there is a tendency to observe it as a contrast and rate it unfavourable. Hence, when attitudes and behaviours are expected on female and male teachers, the evaluator may use their own understanding of attitude and make judgemental errors of the target being rated. The issue here is when the perceptions of the target are distorted by the perceiver's sensitivities and expectations of others. This contrast effect may enhance or diminish perceptions related to performance and hence directly affect the rating of our research subject population.

Another source of bias is stereotyping, which has abundant literature in gender specific issues. However, very little is available in the way of understanding how stereotyping is applied in a 'foreign' setting, that is non-American students rating American female teachers in an American style University in Nigeria or a male Nigerian teacher in the same setting. George & Jones (2008) describe stereotype as a body of abstract knowledge that is often targeted at visible characteristics such as age, race or gender. Hancock et al. (1993) imply that any difference in gender specific rating may be contributed to gender expectations. Despite many negative connotations given to gender specific issues, there is literature to refute that stereotyping is a negative reference point. Hinton (2000) implies that if there is nothing to be gained by stereotyping then it should not interfere with judgement, but he goes on to support that stereotyping is a complex phenomenon that may not just be turned off/on.

The third source of bias is known as selective perception. Here Pulakos & Wexley (1983) state that during performance appraisals there is a higher rating of subjects who share similar traits to those of the evaluator. For instance, if the student is a male Nigerian with similar interests and likes as his male Nigerian teacher then it is expected that the student would rate his teacher higher than, say, a woman from Germany who shares no obvious common interest with that of the student even though both teachers share similar teaching styles and subject matter.

Many studies of evaluation bias using students and employees as subjects show bias in favor of men and against women (Nieva & Gutek, 1980). Sprague & Massoni, (2005) showed there were indications that students held teachers accountable to certain gendered expectations and that these expectations place burdens on all teachers, although burdens placed on women were

more labor intensive. They also showed that there was greater hostility toward women than toward men who did not meet students' gender-role expectations.

In this paper we wish to determine if there any bias in the student evaluations towards male and female faculty at AUN and explain using existing theories any discrepancies identified.

3. The Study

In this paper, we wish to determine whether there is any bias in the student evaluations towards male and female faculty, and to explain using existing theories of any discrepancies identified.

The study was performed at the American University of Nigeria (AUN), Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria. AUN was founded in May 2005. AUN is the first American-style University in the West African sub-region and currently has over 1,500 full-time students and around 100 faculty members. The majority of the students at AUN are from relatively well to do and knowledge-based working class families. When admitted, they are expected to purchase a laptop and activate their AUN email account to correspond with their lecturers, peers and administrators. This opportunity is extended 24 hours with steady internet connectivity.

The study took place in the fall semester of 2010 and involved studying the evaluations made by students of 11 courses taught by male lecturers and 11 courses taught by female lecturers. The teachers are from varying backgrounds, rank, experience, subject matter and departments. Initially, the subjects for our study were chosen based on purposive sampling, i.e. the participants were selected because of a common characteristic, which is that they are full time faculty members at AUN. Once this population was identified, a stratified sampling method was used to delineate the participants into two distinct groups: male and female. The total pool of 11 female faculty members was included. From 68 male teachers, 11 needed to be identified for equal and fair comparison. The 11 male teachers were identified by purposively selecting the first 11 male teacher evaluation results as the best time-wise method of compiling the results. Nationalities, background, age or experience were not a factor in this section. The AUN administration willingly participated in our research and made data of evaluations of faculty available to the authors for analysis and synthesis.

The primary question that pre-occupied the mind of the researchers was whether there would be a noticeable difference in the perceptions of the students to their course, the instructor and themselves when their course is taught by male lecturers compared to female lecturers. The perceptions were collected in the form of a student questionnaire and all three ratings were summative feedback. Perceptions were scored in the range 0 to 5 where 0 indicates unacceptable and 5 indicates excellent.

To obtain the perception of the course the average scores of the following 5 criteria were made: *organization* (whether the course was well organized, material was presented in a logical sequence, instructional time was used effectively etc.); *clarity* (whether the goals and educational objectives of the course were clear, faculty expectations of students were clear, grading policy was transparent), *content* (whether the course content facilitated students' ability to achieve course goals and objectives, and when applicable, was relevant to their career preparation); *fairness* (whether the material on exams was related to material covered either in class or in course assignments, and when applicable, was relevant to their career preparation); and *overall perception of the course* (whether the course objectives were met).

To obtain the perception of the instructor, the average scores of the following 7 criteria were made: *organization* (whether the instructor presented materials in an organized fashion; emphasized important points etc.); *clarity* (whether the instructor communicated effectively, explained well, presented content clearly, and gave comprehensible response to questions); *enthusiasm* (whether the instructor was dynamic and energetic, stimulated learner interest, and enjoyed teaching); *rapport* (whether the instructor discussed recent developments in the field, directed students to current reference materials, and provided additional materials to cover current topics); *contribution* (whether the instructor discussed recent developments in the field, directed students to current reference materials, and provided additional materials to cover current topics), *professionalism* (whether the instructor demonstrated role model qualities that were of use to the students), and *attitude* (whether the instructor was concerned about students learning the material, encouraged class participation, and was receptive to differing views).

To obtain the perceptions of themselves, the average scores of the following 6 criteria were made for each student: attendance and participation in class sessions; completion of assignments on time; required information learnt for the course; their laptop and technology successfully used in the course; library used as part of the class; and at least one learning support program used (writing center, math lab, tutor, etc.).

4. Results

To capture the perceptions, impressions and thereby gauge the positive or negative reactions of the students towards their male and female faculty, the researchers analyzed and collated students evaluation results from the comprehensive questionnaires given out to the students at the end of their courses.

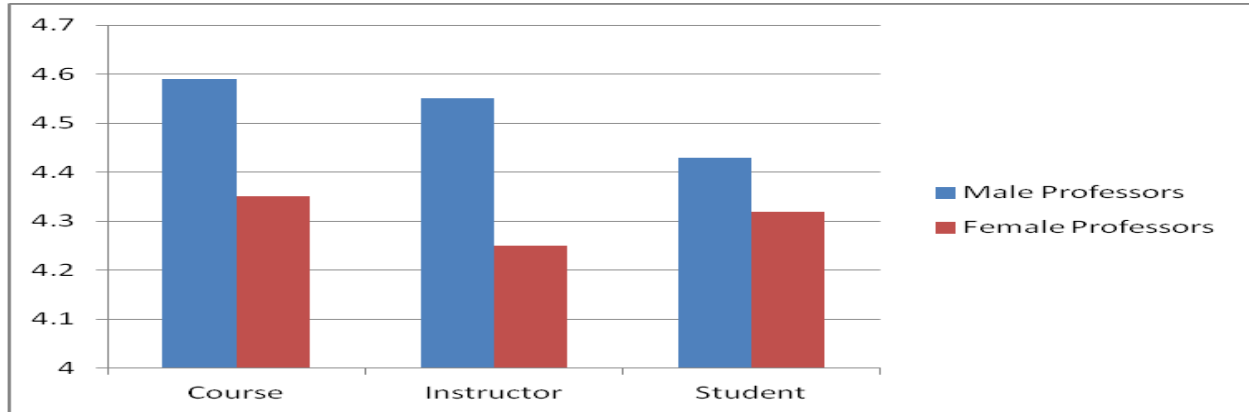


Figure 1: Student scores given to course, instructor and student for both groups

Figure 1 is a summary of the average scores given by the students to their course, instructor and themselves when their courses are taught by male and female faculty. For the perception of the course, the male faculty got an average score 4.59 out of 5 compared with an average score of 4.35 for the female faculty. For the perception of the instructor, the male faculty got an average score 4.55 out of 5 compared with an average score of 4.25 for the female faculty. For the perception of the students, the male faculty got an average score 4.43 out of 5 compared with an average score of 4.32 for the female faculty. Though both sets of lecturers scored very highly, it can be seen that the students evaluate their male lecturers better than their female counterparts with respect to their course, instructor and themselves.

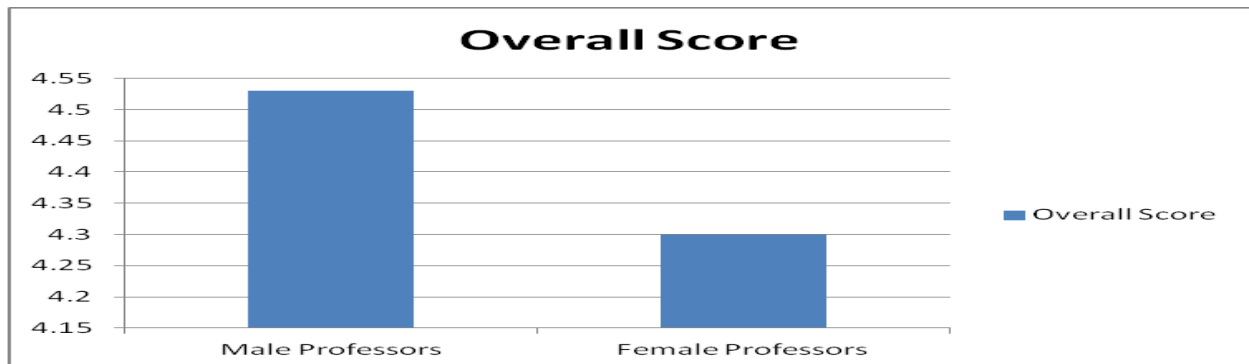


Figure 2: Overall student scores given to male and female lecturers

Figure 2 is a summary of the overall average scores given by the students to their male and female faculty. For the overall perception of their teacher, the male faculty got an average score 4.53 out of 5 compared with an average score of 4.3 for the female faculty. Again, though both sets of lecturers scored very highly, it can be seen that the students evaluate their male lecturers more highly than their female counterparts.

5. Discussion

From our results, it can be seen that students evaluate their male lecturers more highly than their female counterparts. This is consistent with other similar studies that show the extent to which student evaluations indicate that women's classroom performance is often rated more critically than men's (Sandler, 1991). Yet, considering the amount of literature on gender, very few of past findings offer any consistent justifications for male or female superiority (Basow & Distenfeld, 1985; Winocure, Schoen & Sirowatcka, 1989). However, (Basow and Silberg, 1987) have suggested that if women rate higher than men then this may be seen as women fitting the gender stereotypes.

In the course section, the male lecturers were rated higher than their female counterparts. This may be because of the biases which were described earlier in this paper. Other factors could include culture, student experiences, and the background, characteristics and capabilities of the teacher. Further research is required to establish the reasons for the discrepancy.

In the instructor section, questions like organization skills, clarity, enthusiasm, rapport and contribution were asked and male teachers ranked higher than female teachers under this section. This can be attributed to the fact that men were perceived more organized and enthusiastic than women. This would explain why they ranked higher. Again, further research is required to establish the reasons for the discrepancy.

The students rated themselves higher when taught by a male teacher. There is little literature in the area of how students rate themselves and the influence of their teacher's gender, however there is abundant information on the positive aspects of self-evaluation. Boud & Falchikov (1989) imply that self-evaluations encompass the learner to make judgments about their own independent learning, particularly about their level of engagement of their own learning. In part of their research, students rated themselves higher with male teachers rather than female teachers, which are consistent with the findings of the course and instructor section where the male teachers were rated higher. In support of the biases presented here, it may be suggested that the male students may be consciously or subconsciously referring to 'selective' perception or 'contrast effect'.

While a few studies have been performed in regard to gender segregation at the level of teachers, there is evidence on student gender performance which shows the possibilities that gender bias exists. According to (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2001) gender difference has been found in sex-based favoritism whereby girls tend to be more gender biased than boys while it appears that boys tend to be more biased in the ethnic domain than girls.

There is often a need to establish a school climate in which all teachers, staff, students, parents and community members know that equity is a high priority (Mewborn, 1999). There is call from the authors for education reform to ensure that all genders receive an equal and quality education. Therefore, school administrators need to pay close attention to teachers and be more aware of student bias so that they will make every student succeed to the best of their abilities.

6. Conclusions

The factors that affect the perceptions of students towards their male and female lecturers are complex and should not be dismissed with a general comment that a marked difference was established. Although the sample of faculty in our study was small, these effects may be quite specific on the teacher or subject matter. It is expected that ongoing observations in this field may be maintained with different criteria, for example studying how culture, nationality, experience and background may give rise to new results.

Our results are limited, and further studies at a wider range of institutions in Nigeria are required to assist scholars understand the gender factors that affect student ratings. Indeed, those who try to measure and evaluate female and male faculty should be vigilant to the many subtle ways in which gender bias can affect perceptions and overall ratings.

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