Research Questions

Every semester when registration roles around many college students open two windows on their computers, RateMyProfessor.com (RMP) houses an enormous and popular database of anonymous evaluations of over 800,000 instructors at 6,000 schools in the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain, and has over 10 million reviews (rateyourprofessor.com, July 2009). Although traffic peaks at 200,000 users (Davidson and Price 2009), the site may not be the most accurate source of information. It still remains to be a site of convenience for students. The site gives some insight that is impossible to get unless you happen to know people who have had each of your possible professors and can track them all down before you make your schedule. It ultimately comes down to it being the best source of data students have access to. This site then grew to include professors from private schools throughout the U.S. that have no formalized daily teaching periods and has a topic of interest for many different people in many different disciplines. This makes it an ideal source of data to study.

In the eyes of many students, professors who are seen as tough are automatically bad while professors who are seen as easy are automatically good. However, there are a few professors who manage to fall in a category of being tough but still good. We wanted to know what students perceived these professors to be doing that made such a professor worth taking because the value they gained from the professor outweighed the characteristics of being tough on top of that. We also wanted to see if and how their perceptions differed if the professor was male or female.

We wanted to take a look at the impact of gender differences in how students talk about professors overall but we also wanted to see how students talk about professors of different genders within the professor type of tough but good to see if the expectations students had differed by professor gender.

Previous Results

Some studies have shown that there are little to no gender differences in teaching evaluations in terms of the numbers and quantitative ratings. However, when qualitative methods (such as comment analysis or evaluations used in essence) are used, gender differences become apparent. Our study uses these qualitative methods and expands on the results in this area by looking at the language used in individual comments. Previous research on gender has also shown that lower grades in a class lead to lower ratings and studies show that this negative effect is larger for females than males. Female professors face a few different difficulties when trying to be seen as a legitimate professor. Legitimate authority performances are consistent with male interactional styles, however acting in this way tends to lower ratings for female professors given that they violate gender norms. Traditional professional expectations are ‘professor as expert, who lectures,’ and this causes problems for women who choose a more student centered, non-hierarchical pedagogy. Legitimacy in the classroom remains consistent with traditional notions of authority, which advantage male styles of interaction.

Methods

A stratified cluster sample from US regions (Northeast, South, Midwest, West) was taken including two public universities and three private universities in each region. Sociology professors names taken from schools website and cross checked against RateMyProfessor.com.

An SPSS database for quantitative analysis was created including professor’s gender, rank, percentage of the department that was female, number of comments at RateMyProfessor.com. The RMP comments were then entered into NVIVO 8 for qualitative analysis. An SPSS database for quantitative analysis was created including professor’s gender, rank, percentage of the department that was female, number of comments at RateMyProfessor.com.

Qualitative Comments

A. (Male "learned a lot" and got me to think) "Great professor! Absolutely brilliant! He will make you think…you won't want to, but you will, and you will love it. He will follow up on every comment you make, challenge you to go further, and after you fail apart, he will show you how to build it back together. Take his classes." I love Professor Lastname. His strength to teach. (M) "Great. I found my way to my major through your strong syllabus and challenge things that we normally only take for granted. He is the best professor that I have that at School." 

B. (Female "learned a lot" and got me to think) "Great prof. enjoyed her class - lots of fun. gets people thinking and talking about things you normally wouldn’t. If you study and pay attention, you will do well" 

C. (Females smart) "she's intelligent, humorous, and makes class interesting." "Prof Lastname is brilliant and I love her classes. She is challenging and a hard grader, but it's worth it. She is always willing to help and further explain, especially if she knows that you care about her class and doing well." 

D. (Males intelligent) "This man is BEAUTIFUL. I wish I had him before my last semester here. Professor Lastname is brilliant and the most of the people in the class were changed by the end of the semester. Take him." I loved Prof Lastname class, and I would take another one of his classes in a heartbeat. It was a difficult class, but I learned a lot, and it totally cracks me up." 

E. (Males unclear) "really sucks at being clear with his exams. too much material and too many unnecessary concepts for a soc 1 class." "He has a 36 page syllabus and sends out 3 e-mails or more per week. His expectations are incredibly arduous and, sadly, you can't expect to do well on everything due to his "perfect grading system" and high expectations. Nice, though." 

F. (Females unfair) "I hated this class. The exams were extremely unfair and hard, she likes to add tricky questions and I was nervous. I might cut and try again later if they fix their grading." "Out of any class I've taken at School, this was by far the worst. No matter how hard you work, your grade will only be a reflection of your mood and of meeting very random criteria. I wanted to bang my head against a wall all semester. Save yourself the trouble and avoid her" 

G. (Both males and females status barriers) (F) "Stay away from this class. She's flighty and on a power trip." (F) 'She talks to you like you are a 4th grader. She needs to gain a little more respect and treat me like I can get away with that. And she can do that by learning how to teach." 

H. (Both males and females status bridging) (F) "Great class! She's really accessible, even eats lunch w/ her students once a month... Exams are straightforward, particularly cuz she posts her notes online! But be warned, if attendance goes down the tubes, she's still posting exams. But the prof. (M) "It will help that (prof name) comes across as arrogant. He handles a problem of relating to his students. It was a very difficult class and (prof name) did a very poor job of giving out useful comments at the right time when it was needed." 

Conclusion

Examining individual comments as well as comment rates sheds light on what makes a professor Tough But Good and shows the differences between being a TBG male professor and a TBG female professor, which is something quantitative data does not pick up. Qualitative results show the delegation dilemma that female professors face which affects the types of comment female professors receive as well as the language used in those comments.

Legitimacy in the classroom still remains consistent with traditional notions of authority, which advantage male styles of interaction. Additional, male TBG professors are described as being tough but still good. Items like course components are not critical in student judgments about TBG professors, and female TBG professors have lower comment rates on these items than men. There are specific qualities and behaviors that professors who become Tough But Good have that others don't and these vary between male and female professors. Additionally, male TBG professors are described as caring students, whereas female TBG professors are described as being smart people, which grants less social influence to women over students. Because it is less likely for female professors actions to be seen as legitimate, as when unclear actions are deemed unfair for them but not for men, the road to becoming a Tough But Good professors is all the more difficult for women in the classroom.