

Sexi Pirate!: Gender and the Social Construction of “Tough but Good” Sociology Professors on RateMyProfessors.com



Caryn Ling, Jeff Erger, Ph.D. and Pam Forman, Ph.D. ❖ Sociology ❖ University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Research Question

Every semester when registration roles around many college students open two windows on their computers, the class offerings and 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 (ratemyprofessors.com). Daily traffic exceeds 200,000 users (Davison and Price 2009). While the site may not seem to 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 almost 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 too. This site has continued to grow in popularity and use since it first hit the web and has become 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 were doing that made a tough professor someone worth taking because the value they gained from the professor outweighed the characteristic 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 Research

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 examining the language used in evaluations) are utilized gender differences become apparent. Our study uses these qualitative methods and expands on the research 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 advantages 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 RMP, and mean scores for Ease, Clarity, Helpfulness, Hotness, and Quality. Multiple regression showed no significant effects of gender on RMP ratings. Binary Logistic regression showed no significant effects of gender on being in any teacher type. And bivariate correlations between gender and RMP ratings in the Tough but Good subsample were not significant.

The RMP comments were then entered into NVIVO 8 for qualitative analysis. The professor types were created based on RMP scores of Ease and Quality. Comments for Average, Easy and Good, Tough and Bad, and Tough But Good were analyzed by two coders. 158 codes were used and 16,1276 items were coded. The teacher type Easy and Bad was included in the Other category because there were only 2 comments.

Professor Types

Average (AVG)= Ease and Quality ratings in the 3s

Easy and Good (EAG)=Ease and Quality ratings in the 4s

Tough and Bad (TAB)= Ease and Quality ratings below 3

Tough but Good (TBG)= Ease rating below 3 and Quality rating of 4 or higher

Easy and Bad (EAB)= Ease rating below 3 and Quality rating below 3

Other=all other combinations of Ease and Quality

RMP Quality	RMP EASE			
	5	4	3	2
		TBG	other	EAG
	3	other	AVE	other
	2			
	1	TAB	other	EAB
		1 2	3	4 5

Results

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

	N	Percent of Total Sample	Percent Female	Percent Male	Number of Student Evaluations	Evaluations of Female Instructors	Evaluations of Male Instructors
All ^(a)	263	100	48	52	3352	1440	1912
OTHER ^(b)	130	49.2	44.2	55.8	1729	584	1145
TBG	27	10.3	44.4	55.6	235	99	136
EAG	27	10.3	48.5	51.9	367	109	258
AVE	38	14.5	50.0	50.0	527	245	282
TAB	41	15.6	61.0	39.0	560	284	276
Subtotal TBG+EAG+AVE+TAB	133	50.8	48.1	51.9	1689	737	952

(a) Mean (standard deviation) on RMP quantitative ratings for all professors: QUALITY, 3.62 (0.879);EASE, 3.08(0.835); HELPFULNESS, 3.6(1.917); CLARITY, 3.64(.902); HOTNESS, 0.98(3.029). (b) The OTHER category is composed of Easy and Average, Tough and Average, Average and Good, and Average and Bad (any RMP combination of 2-3 or 3-4 on mean Ease and Quality), plus the two EAB professor (ease four or higher, quality less than three.)

Table 2: Course Components and Self Learning for Tough But Good (TBG)

The mean comment rate for TBG is lowest for every evaluation concept except attendance and notes. Course components do not appear to be important for TBG professors which is something that sets them apart from all other professor types.

Looking at the overall MCR and the MCR for TBG professors the male and female comments change from females having higher scores overall to males having higher scores in the TBG subsample for most of the concepts.

TBG has the highest learned a lot and got me to think but the gender gap is larger within the category than the sample overall 4.47 to 3.25 and -4.36 to 3.18. Overall the gender gap favors men (see Qualitative Comments A) compared to female (see Qualitative Comments B)

The concepts in this table are important in starting to show the differences between what makes a TBG professor stand out from the rest but we can already see that the path to TBG is clearer for men.

Table 2: Mean Comment Rates (MCR) for Course Components and Self Learning Items by Gender and Professor Type^(a)

Evaluation concept	Percent Rater Agreement/ Kappa	MCR	Variation From		MCR TBG	Variation From MCR TBG	
			F	M		F	M
Tests	95/8316	34.58	4.36	-3.38	-25.53 (L)	-4.32	3.15
Grades	94/7633	23.86	5.58	-4.32	-14.89 (L)	-0.75	0.65
Lectures	98/7259	14.88	-1.85	1.29	-9.79 (L)	-3.73	2.71
Attendance	98/8527	14.03	1.03	-0.79	-13.82	-4.53	3.29
Reading	98/8750	20.07	1.50	-1.16	-16.60 (L)	-0.44	0.31
Book	98/8406	8.82	-0.68	0.53	-4.26 (L)	-1.23	0.89
Notes	99/9078	8.76	1.82	-1.41	-8.09	-2.03	1.47
Assignments	98/7533	6.75	1.80	-1.39	-3.40 (L)	2.66	-1.93
Papers	98/8597	6.57	1.71	-1.32	-4.26 (L)	-2.24	1.62
Extra credit	99/9118	3.67	2.84	-2.2	-0.85 (L)	-0.85	0.62
Power point	98/8549	3.26	0.67	-0.53	-1.70 (L)	-0.69	0.51
Groups	98/8458	1.95	1.85	-1.42	-0.00 (L)	0.00	0.00
Study	97/7134	7.70	0.98	-0.77	-7.23 (L)	-1.17	0.86
Learned a lot	99/8835	4.68	-0.75	0.57	-8.51 (H)	-4.47	3.25
Learned little or nothing	98/8623	3.08	0.99	-0.77	-1.28 (L)	-0.27	0.19
Got me to think	99/7645	3.32	-1.42	1.09	-6.38 (H)	-4.36	3.18

(a)MCR = comments mentioning evaluation concept/total comments for (TBG+EAG+AVE+TAB). MCR TBG is the mean comment rate for TBG professors only. (H) indicates the MCR for TBG professors was the highest of the four professor types in the qualitative analysis. (L) indicates the lowest MCR of the four types.

Table 3: Mean Comment Rates (MCR) for Professor Characteristic Items by Gender and Professor Type^(a)

Evaluation concept	Percent Rater Agreement/ Kappa	MCR	Variation from MCR		MCR TBG	Variation From MCR TBG	
			F	M		F	M
Easy	97/8528	19.78	-0.24	0.18	-11.06	-0.96	2.18
Hard	97/8080	17.05	3.71	-2.87	-31.91 (H)	-1.61	1.18
Caring	98/6954	6.28	-0.85	0.65	-9.36 (H)	-3.30	2.40
Uncaring	98/6065	2.72	0.40	-0.30	-2.13	-0.11	0.08
Passionate	99/8770	5.39	-0.10	0.07	-10.64 (H)	-4.58	3.33
Bored	99/7844	1.12	-0.03	0.04	-0.43	0.58	-0.43
Smart	99/8428	3.55	-0.02	0.02	-6.81 (H)	7.29	-5.34
Knows material	100/1,000	5.68	-0.80	0.62	-7.23 (H)	-2.18	1.59
Does not know material	99/8465	1.18	0.99	-0.76	-0.00 (L)	0.00	0.00
Fair	99/8296	3.37	-1.06	0.83	-8.09 (H)	-5.06	3.67
Unfair	98/6056	8.29	5.01	-3.88	-2.55	1.49	-1.08
Best/one of the best	99/8241	7.58	-1.75	1.35	-11.91	-0.80	0.59
Worst/one of the worst	99/9004	4.32	2.33	-1.80	-0.00 (L)	0.00	0.00

(a)MCR = comments mentioning evaluation concept/total comments for (TBG+EAG+AVE+TAB). MCR TBG is the mean comment rate for TBG professors only. (H) indicates the MCR for TBG professors was the highest of the four professor types in the qualitative analysis. (L) indicates the lowest MCR of the four types.

Table 4: Interactional Style (TBG)

Clarity is frequently mentioned by students showing nearly equal rate for male and female TBG professors, both of which are higher than overall MCR for both genders. Men show greater gains in clarity, and both genders show lowered rates of being unclear. It would seem to say that both men and women can improve their ratings if they improve their communication skills, but further examination of the comments for all professor types on unfair and unclear reveal that there is a key difference. Men might be called unclear because of poor wording, or confusing grading. (see E) Women who did this were labeled unfair (see F)

In comparison to men, who can be unclear but still be nice people, women who have poor wording or confusing grading criteria are described as unfair. The student label of unclear doesn't imply intent whereas the label unfair often does. Perceived role failure for men is less likely to translate into labeling them as a bad person. However evaluations of women fail to do this.

Status barriers and bridging which were categories that emerged during our coding. Status barriers refer to perceptions of maintaining role distance between professors and students. Status bridging refers to reducing the role distance in some way. (see G and H).

Table 4: Mean Comment Rates (MCR) for Interactional Style Items by Gender and Professor Type^(a)

Evaluation concept	Percent Rater Agreement/ Kappa	MCR	Variation From MCR		MCR TBG	Variation From MCR TBG	
			F	M		F	M
Interesting	98/8574	17.94	-0.57	0.44	-26.81 (H)	-1.56	1.13
Boring	99/9137	11.84	-1.12	0.87	-4.88 (L)	-0.84	0.47
Respectful	99/7466	0.77	-0.09	0.07	-1.29 (H)	0.74	3.46
Disrespectful	98/7650	5.03	0.13	-0.09	-2.13	-0.11	0.08
Status bridging	97/6344	6.87	-0.36	0.27	-8.09	1.00	-0.74
Status barriers	98/5029	4.85	0.44	-0.33	-2.13	1.91	-1.39
Helpful	99/8421	11.55	1.61	-1.26	-14.89 (H)	2.28	-1.65
Not helpful	99/7657	4.44	1.26	-0.97	-3.40	-0.37	0.28
Available	98/7181	2.43	0.56	-0.43	-2.98 (H)	-1.97	1.43
Not available	97/6288	0.41	0.27	-0.20	-0.00 (L)	0.00	0.00
Clear	98/7227	7.76	1.33	-1.04	-13.62 (H)	-0.49	0.35
Unclear	98/7853	10.54	-1.31	1.01	-2.13	-1.12	0.81
Flexible	99/7436	2.25	-0.89	0.69	-2.98 (H)	0.05	-0.04
Strict	99/6134	1.01	0.21	-0.17	-0.43 (L)	-0.43	1.04
Entertaining	99/8396	1.01	-0.87	0.67	-1.28	-1.28	0.93
Fun	99/9528	7.28	-1.58	1.23	-13.62 (H)	-4.53	3.29
Funny	99/9466	6.75	-2.14	1.65	-12.34 (H)	-4.26	3.10
Expectations of students	98/8623	3.37	1.51	-1.16	-5.11 (H)	0.95	-0.70

(a)MCR = comments mentioning evaluation concept/total comments for (TBG+EAG+AVE+TAB). MCR TBG is the mean comment rate for TBG professors only. (H) indicates the MCR for TBG professors was the highest of the four professor types in the qualitative analysis. (L) indicates the lowest MCR of the four types.

Qualitative Comments

A: (Male “learned a lot” and got me to think”) “Great professor! Absolutely brilliant! He will make you work harder than you thought you wanted 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 fall apart, he will show you how to build it back together. Take his classes”; “I love Professor Lastname. His strengths lie in his abilities to get you to question your strongest beliefs and challenge things that we normally take for granted. He IS the best professor that I have taken 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 with further explanation, especially if she knows that you care about her class and doing well.”

D: (Males intelligent) “This man is BEAUTIFUL. I wish I had met him before my last semester here. Professor Lastname is brilliant and funny...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 he 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 ambiguous 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 the reading guides and study guides are not help what so ever.” “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 her 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 seniority and respect before she can get away with that. And she can do that by learning how to teach.” (M) “I will agree that (prof name) comes across as arrogant. He definatly has a problem of relating to his students. It was a very difficult class and (prof name) did a very poor job of teaching the material in a clear fasion.”

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'll stop posting them. But great prof. (M) “He was the nicest teacher I had ever had. He understands the content and the students mentality. When he lectures he adds personal antidotes that are so cute! His class is worthwhile and everyone should definitely take it!”

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 delegitimation dilemma that female professors face which effects the types of comment female professors receive as well as the language used in those comments. Legitimacy in the classroom still remains a hurdle for many female professors which makes it more difficult to achieve being a Tough But Good female professor.

Our results show that being a Tough But Good professor is more than just the sum of being a good professor and a tough professor. 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 changing 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 professor 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.

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Acknowledgments

This research was supported in part by the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire Office of Research and Sponsored Programs *Summer Research Experiences for Undergraduates* grant.