The Problem for Black Professors: Judged Before Met

Anish Bavishi, Juan Madera, and Michelle Hebl

Rice University

ABSTRACT

The current study employed a 2 (Department: Humanities or Science) X 2 (Gender: Male or Female) X 3 (Ethnicity: African-American, Asian-American, or Caucasian) between-subjects design to examine student evaluations of professors. The data was analyzed using a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). Follow-up simple effect tests (one-way ANOVAs) were performed as necessary to examine the interactions.

In the measure of legitimacy, African-Americans (M = 5.23, SD = 1.19) were rated as less legitimate compared to Asian-Americans (M = 5.44, SD = 1.10) and Caucasians (M = 5.37, SD = 1.05). Both African-Americans (M = 4.80, SD = 1.20) and Asian-Americans (M = 4.81, SD = 1.17) were perceived similarly in the dimension of integrity. In this dimension, both groups were negatively evaluated compared to Caucasian professors (M = 5.08, SD = 1.04).

There was a significant interaction between professors’ gender and ethnicity in the measures of competence [F(2,722) = 4.71, p < .05, η² = .02] and integrity [F(2,722) = 3.19, p < .05, η² = .02]. Follow-up simple effect tests revealed that both female science professors (M = 5.21, SD = 1.07) and male humanities professors (M = 5.88, SD = 0.89) were rated to be more competent compared to female humanities professors (M = 5.21, SD = 1.14).

BACKGROUND

There is a growing recognition that underrepresented minorities face particular challenges that impede their academic progress, including high levels of social isolation, slower advancement, and a significantly lower rate of academic mentors compared to their non-minority counterparts. The present study focuses on how students about to enter college view professors on several dimensions as a function of the professor’s ethnicity. These ethnic groups were specifically selected as African-American, Asian-American, and African-American.

One of the relatively unexplored possibilities for why African-American professors are not as prevalent in academics is the reason these stereotypes work against them. This research is the first that links stereotypes about African-Americans to a professional context and examines the extent to which students engage these stereotypes. Using past studies and findings, three hypotheses were formulated and tested.

Hypothesis 1. African-American professors will be perceived more negatively on all dimensions compared to Asian-American and Caucasian professors, while African-American professors will be evaluated in between Asian-American and Caucasian professors.

Hypothesis 2. Female professors will be perceived more negatively on all dimensions compared to male professors.

Hypothesis 3. Humanities professors will be perceived more negatively on all dimensions compared to science professors.

Hypothesis 4. Academic discipline will moderate the relationship between professor ethnicity and student evaluations of professors.

METHOD

Sample

Participants were drawn from two private high schools (9th to 12th grades) in Houston, Texas. For this study, 600 surveys were distributed. The final sample included 375 usable surveys returned for a response rate of 62.5%. The mean age of the sample was 16.23 years (SD = 1.02 years).

RESULTS

The data was analyzed using a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). Follow-up simple effect tests (one-way ANOVAs) were performed as necessary to examine the interactions.

Table 1: Sample Correlations and Descriptives

Table 2: Scale Correlations and Descriptives

Ethnicity

Table 3: Scale Correlations and Descriptives

Design and Procedure

A 2 (Department: humanities or science) X 2 (Gender: Male or Female) X 3 (Ethnicity: African-American, Asian-American, or Caucasian) between-subjects design was implemented using CVs of fictitious college professors to examine student evaluations.

Upon receipt of the self-report questionnaire, students were provided instructions to imagine themselves in a scenario in which they have received an acceptance letter from their top-choice university and are set to attend with a full tuition scholarship. As part of the scholarship, they are required to work with a professor as a research assistant. Participants were instructed to read a CV of a professor that included the professor’s name (in bold and large type), the department (large type), honors, awards, and memberships; research areas; courses taught; selected publications; selected presentations and positions that the professor holds. They were then instructed to examine the CV and evaluate the professor on three scales: competence, legitimacy, and integrity.

Additional Results

Gender displayed no main effects. However, the factor of department presented main effects in competence [F(1,361) = 12.20, p < .01, η² = .033] and legitimacy [F(1,361) = 7.192, p < .01, η² = .019]. Science professors (M = 5.64, SD = 1.07) were perceived to be more competent compared to humanities professors (M = 5.23, SD = 1.13). Similarly, humanities professors (M = 5.29, SD = 1.04) were respected as less legitimate compared to science professors (M = 5.08, SD = 1.04). There was a significant interaction between professor department and gender in the measure of competence [F(1,361) = 4.30, p < .05, η² = .012]. Follow-up simple effect tests revealed that both female science professors (M = 5.46, SD = 1.09) and male humanities professors (M = 5.88, SD = 0.89) were rated to be more competent compared to female humanities professors (M = 5.21, SD = 1.14).

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that students did make decisions based upon stereotypes and preconceived notions of ethnicity. Our hypotheses were validated for the effects of race. The current research begins to assess reasons why underrepresented academicians might face barriers to their success and advancement. We can see that ethnic stereotypes do play a role in student evaluations of professors but we cannot fully predict the outcome of such negative perceptions and how they translate into the academic workplace. However, if such negative perceptions persist in the academic environment, minorities might not get access to the best or same number of students as non-minorities would and so such stereotypes may impede their progress.