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EVALUATING COURSES: AN EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF STUDENT GENDER

Jenny A. Darby

Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire. LE11 3TU. E mail J.A.Darby@lboro.ac.uk

Previous research into the effects of gender differences on course evaluations has failed to take into account a number of intervening variables. In part one of the present study a questionnaire was administered to 504 female and male students measuring whether they noticed, remembered things, and related to others. These are all measures which have been linked to evaluation abilities. Females were found to score more highly on all three. In part two of the study 23 presentations of a course were evaluated and it was shown that females and males do respond differently. Females evaluated certain, but not all, aspects of the courses more favourably, but the pattern of differences varied depending whether the measure used was a structured or an open-ended evaluation.

Keywords; Evaluation; Gender; Scales; Students; Open-ended.

Research by Morgan and Ogden (1981) highlighted the gender of the students as one of a number of variables which need to be taken into account when evaluating courses. More recently Feldman (1993) in a review of the literature identified 39 articles which investigated the relationship between gender and student evaluations. Attempts to investigate this issue by previous researchers have for many years produced confused and inconclusive findings. Worthington (2002), for example, has shown a difference in ratings of quality of instruction between males and female students. Other researchers such as Liaw and Goh (2003), have shown no difference in the rating of the performance of male and female instructors. On the other hand studies by Basow (1995) and Tatro (1995) have shown when looking at the ranking of same sex instructors females have been consistently shown to rate female instructors more highly than they do male. Carson (2001) contradicts this and outlines the evidence that students generally appear to rank male instructors higher than they do female. These findings are not provide a clear pattern of gender differences and all fail to take into account and control for many variables which can effect evaluations.

Variables such as course topics, gender of tutor and student are rarely, for practical reasons, taken into account in undergraduate studies. As the content of courses is often updated and so changes year by year it is quite rare for exactly the same course to be repeated many times in colleges. Furthermore the tutors themselves change as they become more experienced after years in the job, and rarely do female and male tutors teach the same courses. Students evaluating different courses will also differ in terms of interest. Typical of the format used is that of Sheehan and DuPrey (1999) who simply examined a large number (161) of psychology courses over a two year period. These courses were on different topics, were taught by many tutors, and were attended by a wide variety of students in various class sizes. Feldman's (1993) summary, that the evidence of gender differences in evaluating is not too convincing and shows differences only occur on a small number of scales, is still applicable to this and other more current research studies.

A weakness of much previous research is that it seeks gender differences without evidence they would be expected in the context of teaching evaluation. The present study looks first at whether there is any reason to believe gender will have an influence on how females and males evaluate teaching by looking at factors involved in the evaluation process. In the second part of this study many of the variables which previous studies have neglected are taken into account.

Part one

Is there any reason to believe gender will have an influence on evaluating behaviour?

Patrick (2000) outlined a number of characteristics which could well influence evaluations of courses. These included noticing, remembering things, and relating to people. Patrick (2000 p110) points out it is important the exact skills are identified which are needed for evaluations. A major criticism of studies concerning gender research into evaluations, is they have not identified which differences actually relate to the ability to evaluate. This is the task of stage one of this study.

One of the areas highlighted by Patrick (2000) has been well researched in contexts other than evaluations. This concerns gender differences in relation to other people. Lytton and Romney (1991). Fagot and Hagan (1991), and more recently Wilgosh (2002), are among many researchers who highlight traditional gender stereotype differences with females being more sensitive to relationships. In a practical application Bailey and Zucker (1995) suggest that female teachers are generally more aware, and sensitive, than male teachers. A study by Lawlor (1993) indicates this was the case with reference to child abuse. This latter can however, be an emotionally charged situation, and many courses do not involve this. Any difference in sensitivity between the sexes needs to be shown in a less emotionally charged situation or relationship if it is to be related to course evaluations. Whether the findings of studies about teacher reactions can be applied to the evaluations of their students is open to question.

The first part of this study examines possible gender differences with evaluation in mind, trying to identify whether gender differences occur in relevant skills or attributes. To make a fair comparison between females and males it was necessary to have something as a test or measure which did not have a clear interest bias. It did, however, need to be something which could include an emotional reaction. To select cars, or clothing choices as topics, for example could be considered gender biased. A further difficulty was that it is not easy to compare the relationships females and males have with others because of the large variety of combinations of relationships, for example, male/female, or female/female, parent/child.

A questionnaire was used in the present study which controlled for many of these variables by making reference to pets as the object of a relationship rather than other humans. Relationships with pets are arguably gender neutral as far as interests are concerned. Melson (1989) reported some children are more closely attached to their pets than others but gender does not play a consistent part in any differences. Researchers such as Entin (2001) have examined pets with regard to their place in the family and note they are very real members of the group. Sable (1995) reported that young people can have a strong attachment to their pets. Indeed Franklin and White (2001) reported that many young people display anthropomorphism towards their pets giving them human characteristics. The relationship between humans and their pets may well provide some insight into the gender difference in perceptions. It is necessary to determine whether specific differences are shown to be present which, according to Patrick (2000), can be related to evaluating behaviour. If these are present then there is a justification for looking at gender as another social influence on evaluating.

On the basis of evidence from studies of stereotypic gender differences it was hypothesised that females more than males would notice, remember and relate more towards their pets.

METHOD

Participants:

These were 252 male and 252 female students attending school and university courses. The mean age was 18.67 years with a range from 16 to 22 years. All had been living with a pet some time during the previous three years. This population and age range was selected for two reasons. First, their emotional development would be reasonably 'mature'. Second the relative importance of pets would be less likely to be in competition with a long standing human relationship than it would for older people.

The Questionnaire:

To measure how much they notice and remember a selection of imaging questions were devised by the researcher as a result of focus group discussions. The rest of the questionnaire was partly based on previous studies and included attachment questions which were derived from Sable (1995) and a number of anthropomorphism questions which were derived from Albert and Bulcroft (1988). Examples of the questions included are:

To notice and remember: Imaging question

Do you remember the exact marking on your pet when it is not there?

To measure relations towards others: Attachment:

Did you feel you received affection from that pet?

Anthropomorphism

Pets should have the same rights as people:

RESULTS

The data in table 1 shows females more than males image (notice and remember) their pets when they are not present. They are also more attached to their pets than are males. In addition they see their pets as having more human characteristics. Table 2 shows the correlations (all above .6) between imaging and the relationship people have with their pets. According to Sheenan and Duprey (1999) these correlations fall at the top end of the range of moderate relationships.

Table 1
Showing comparisons on three factors between males (n=252) and females (n=252). High score indicates better imaging, more attachment and more anthropomorphism.

Statement category	Mean scores	Standard deviation	t. score df. = 502	Significance
Imaging Male	5.42	1.44	4.861	.000*
Female	6.02	1.33		
Attachment Male	34.79	7.52	5.15	.000*
Female	38.15	7.11		
Anthrop Male	18.56	4.67	6.47	.000*
Female	21.36	5.04		

Table 2
Showing correlation for the three attitude/perception elements for imaging and the relationship people have with their pets.

Elements	Total sample N=504
Attach/Anthro	.636 sig .000
Attach/Image	.612 sig .000
Anthro/Image	.600 sig 000

DISCUSSION

The results of stage one of this study show females more than males notice and remember about details of their pets (image) and have a more 'emotive' relationship (attachment and anthropomorphism scales) with their pets. This finding would suggest a real difference between females and males, in characteristics which, according to Patrick (2000), are significant with regard to the evaluation of courses. This provides some support for the view gender is a variable which it is reasonable to conclude will have an impact when evaluating courses. If these findings transfer to completing evaluation forms it suggests, for females more than for males, they will be more likely to notice and remember detail and relationships established during a course. There is therefore reason to believe gender will have an influence on how students evaluate courses.

Part two

What influence does gender have on how students evaluate courses?

The findings of previous researchers about the effects of gender on evaluating, outlined in the literature are not clear. The second part of this study takes into account experimental variables which are not typically taken into account by other researchers. These, as mentioned previously, include course topic, the gender of the tutor and the gender of the student. In addition to characteristics mentioned in part one there are a number of other issues which have been raised in completely different areas of research which may also provide clues as to why gender differences in previous evaluation studies have proved ambiguous.

How we express our reactions positively or negatively has been shown to differ and there are hints here of gender differences which may apply to evaluations. Parrot Sabini and Silver (1988) stressed the importance of positive reactions to persons and the use of other areas to express negative views. Morgan, Carder and Neal (1997) stressed the importance of groups and how we turn to them for support but how we do not readily criticise them. Herzberg (1966) referred to feelings of achievement and satisfaction which people express when they are feeling positive about their work but how when they wish to react negatively they select very different less personal things to criticise. There is evidence females and males look at aspects of the environment differently. Heckert et al (2002), for example, noted with college students, females more than males, in their criteria for choice of career, put more emphasis on factors such as working conditions, facilities for child rearing, career certainty and working hours. These are the sort of things which Herzberg (1966) highlighted when referring to things which are often the subject of criticism when workers are dissatisfied. He used the term 'hygiene factors' to categorise them.

A further area of possible difference between the sexes concerns use of language. Seifert et al (2000 p 214) are typical of many other researchers who point out females use more words than males to say the same thing. This raises the whole issue of the design of evaluation measures to be used in the present study. Likert style structured evaluation forms are noted by Jackson and Trochim (2002) to restrict the student's opportunity to express themselves. To take this into account Sommer and Sommer's (1997 p 132) recommendation is adopted in the present study and a structured form is combined with an open-ended form. This makes it possible to check for gender differences in the use of words.

It was hypothesised:

1. *Females rather than males would react favourably on the Likert style scales* (following Heckert et al 2002).
2. *Females rather than males would react favourably on the open-ended sections of evaluations.*
3. *Females would use more words than males in open-ended evaluations* (following Seifert et al 2000).

METHOD

Part two was conducted with students attending a postgraduate teaching skills course. The course consisted of three half days held over a three week period. In this study an attempt is made to control some of the variables commonly neglected by other researchers into gender and evaluations. These include variables such as the sex of presenters or tutors, gender mix in classes, class size and sex of presenters. The content of the teaching skills course was arguably gender neutral. The teaching techniques used included lecture, groupwork, and student presentations. These were the same for each group of the 23 presentations of the course ensuring the experience for each group of students was very similar.

Participants;

95 females and 120 males attended the course in mixed sex groups averaging between 9 and 10 students. This controlled for the link found by Defusco (1999) between class size and favourable evaluations. 25 per cent of the participants had English as a second language. All courses contained female and male participants, to eliminate the chance of varying demographics occurring in single sex classes.

The presenters:

The same female and male lecturers tutored on all courses. Both were experienced lecturers in their late fifties. The female tutor was the researcher. This ensured the same two tutors were being evaluated by all participants. Both tutors were involved in each style of tutoring so style and approach were largely constant. The age difference of approximately twenty five years between tutor and student was thought to be a means of reducing the likelihood of physical attractiveness being an influence on the results of the study. Aronson, Wilson and Akert (1997) indicate the perception of attractiveness between individuals is partly determined by judgements of similarity. The evaluation form asked for the student's view of the 'presenters' and did not differentiate between the female and the male. This strategy appears justified as only five students made reference to individual lecturers in the open ended section of the evaluation forms. Three praised the female and two the male lecturer. All other comments were addressed to 'the lecturers/tutors'.

Evaluation forms:

These were given each participant at the end of the third session. The forms consisted of a number of structured Likert style statements which required a response on a five point scale from very poor to very good. In addition there was an open-ended section with trigger words 'The best thing about the course' and 'the worst thing about the course'.

Analysis:

The twelve structured statements, outlined in table 3 were analysed individually on five point scales from very poor to very good. They were classified into three categories by five raters acting independently. First, 'Human related factors' concerned items such as the presenters/tutors, other members of the group and participation in class (after Parrot et al 1988). Second, 'feelings about content' which referred to the material presented, according to Furedi, F. (2003), is an important measure of student evaluation. Third, 'hygiene factors' which referred to items such as room temperature, comfort of chairs, refreshments, administrative factors such as joining instructions, visual aids and library resources (after Herzberg 1966).

Each of the Likert sub scales was scored out of 5 but averaged for the overall category score. This gave a minimum score of 1 and maximum of 5. The reason for categorising these scales was to provide a means of handling the data from the open ended forms in a comparable manner. The statements on the open-ended evaluation forms were categorised by the researcher. Twenty per cent were selected at random by an assistant, who was instructed in the categorisation scheme. Totally independently a total of 50 forms were scored by this assistant. 168 individual statements on these forms were placed in categories and 147 were placed by the assistant in the same categories as the researcher. This was a 87.5% matching rate.

The open-ended responses were analysed using the same three categories. In addition the number of words included in the favourable and unfavourable responses were calculated for each category.

Numeric scoring of the open ended evaluations:

The evaluations of the participants were scored according to the order of the comments made. The 'best' comments were recorded separately from the 'worst' comment. For each the first comment made was awarded a score of four the second comment was awarded three, the third comment was awarded two, and the fourth and subsequent comments were awarded

one. When there was no comment made that category was awarded zero. The favourable and the unfavourable responses were scored separately but both were scored in the same way, so the first favourable comment made would be scored 4 and the first unfavourable comment would also be scored 4. This took into account the order effect noted by Sherman and Klein, (1994); Wyer et al, (1994) and Swann and Gill, (1997).

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1. *Females rather than males would react favourably on the Likert style scales*

The first hypothesis receives only partial support. In relation to the 'human related factors' (see table 3). There was a significant difference on only one aspect namely the integration of the parts of the course. The three 'hygiene factors' show a gender difference, with females being significantly more favourable than males. It would appear gender differences are only occurring on certain scales which probably goes some way to explain why previous results have tended to be ambiguous. They have measured different things.

Table 3

Showing female (n= 95) and male (n= 120) comparisons on the measures recorded on the structured section of the evaluation forms

Individual statements grouped in categories	Mean scores	Standard deviation	t. score df. = 213	Significance
Human Related statements				
Quality of presentation Male	4.63	0.57	0.35	.73
Quality of presentation Female	4.65	0.60		
Quality of group mang Male	4.60	0.57	0.87	.39
Quality of group mang Female	4.66	0.48		
Appropriate -ness of level Male	4.18	0.79	1.34	.18
Appropriate -ness of level Female	4.03	0.87		
Integration of parts Male	4.18	0.55	2.02	.05*
Integration of parts Female	4.34	0.55		
Total human related Male	17.59	1.70	0.37	.71
Total human related Female	17.68	1.92		
Feelings about content statement				
Enjoyability of course Male	4.60	0.53	0.58	.57
Enjoyability of course Female	4.56	0.54		
Meet needs Male	4.28	0.76	.821	.41
Meet needs Female	4.19	0.76		
Useful Male	4.36	0.73	.743	.46
Useful Female	4.27	0.94		
Total Feelings Content Male	13.23	1.61	0.921	.358
Total Feelings Content Female	13.02	1.76		
Hygiene statements				
Consistency publicity Male	4.31	0.63	1.15	.25
Consistency publicity Female	4.21	0.60		
Quality of audio-visual Male	4.10	0.70	4.28	.000*
Quality of audio-visual Female	4.51	0.65		
Quality of handouts Male	4.17	0.74	5.43	.000*
Quality of handouts Female	4.64	0.48		
Administration Male	4.40	0.56	5.16	.000*
Administration Female	4.76	0.43		
Good equal Opportunities Male	4.53	0.59	0.08	.93
Good equal Opportunities Female	4.52	0.62		
Total Hygiene Male	21.52	2.28	4.02	.000*
Total Hygiene Female	22.64	1.67		
Overall Male	4.32	0.71	1.27	.20
Overall Female	4.18	0.87		

Hypothesis 2. *Females rather than males would react favourably on the open-ended sections.*

This hypothesis received some support with open ended responses for the females responded more favourably than the males to the presenters and to the audio visual aids, as can be seen in table 4. This is a different pattern to that shown with the Likert style scales where far more 'hygiene factors' were regarded favourably by the females and there was no

difference in the view of the presenters. Unfavourable statements are recorded in table 5 and here females only make more negative remarks than males about their participation in the session.

Table 4
Showing favourable responses on the open ended section of the evaluation questionnaire.

Statement category		Mean scores	Standard deviation	t. score df. = 213	Significance
Human related statements					
Presenters	Male	1.24	1.66	2.87	.005*
	Female	1.91	1.77		
Participation	Male	1.85	1.87	1.36	.17
	Female	1.51	1.80		
Group	Male	0.79	1.37	0.26	.80
	Female	0.84	1.48		
Total	Male	5.54	2.06	0.19	.85
Favourable	Female	5.60	2.52		
Human related score					
Number of Words	Male	9.63	6.42	1.38	.17
	Female	8.50	5.30		
Human related					
Feelings about content					
Content	Male	1.66	1.88	1.27	.20
	Female	1.34	1.78		
Hygiene factors					
Audio-Visual aids	Male	0.18	0.77	2.12	.04*
	Female	0.44	1.06		
Venue	Male	0.30	0.88	1.03	.30
	Female	0.19	0.64		
Total	Male	0.48	1.12	0.99	.32
Favourable	Female	0.63	1.14		
Hygiene Score					
Number Of words	Male	0.53	1.38	1.92	.056
	Female	1.09	2.42		
Hygiene					
Total	Male	10.16	6.46	0.63	.53
Favourable	Female	9.60	6.47		
words					

Hypothesis 3. *Females would use more words than males in the open-ended evaluations*

The third hypothesis was partially supported, for although there are no gender differences (see table 4) for favourable comments, as can be seen in table 5 female participants use more words to express their displeasure about both 'human related' and 'hygiene factors' than do males.

DISCUSSION

The findings of part one of this study suggest a gender difference could be anticipated in course evaluation responses. This was demonstrated by differences in three relevant characteristics seen by Patrick (2000) as being important in evaluating courses namely: noticing, remembering things and relationships. This supports the view of this researcher, that a study of evaluating is incomplete without taking gender into account.

The findings of part two have highlighted two features concerning the link between gender and course evaluations, which have not previously been investigated under such controlled conditions. First females and males do differ in how they evaluate certain aspects of courses but not others and differences depend on the type of evaluation form used. This supports Feldman's (1993) finding which shows gender differences occur only on some scales.

For the 'human related factors' with the Likert style structured evaluations the difference between females and males is limited to views on the integration of the parts of the course. With the open-ended section the females responded to the

presenter more favourably than the males. From the perspective of gender differences this partially supports the view noted in part one of this study, and also the research findings of Carson (2001), that females are more concerned with their relationships than are males.

Table 5
Showing unfavourable responses on the open ended section of the evaluation questionnaire.

Statement category		Mean scores	Standard deviation	t. score df. = 213	Significance
Human related statements					
Presenters	Male	0.00	0.00	-	-
	Female	0.00	0.00		
Participation	Male	0.10	0.63	3.80	.000*
	Female	0.67	1.50		
Group	Male	0.00	0.00	-	-
	Female	0.00	0.00		
Total	Male	0.57	1.40	1.52	.13
Unfavourable	Female	0.88	1.66		
Human related Score					
Number of Words	Male	1.42	3.43	2.11	.04*
	Female	2.79	6.00		
Human related					
Feelings about content					
Content	Male	0.47	1.29	1.65	.10
	Female	0.21	0.89		
Hygiene factors					
Audio-Visual aids	Male	0.63	1.38	1.84	.07
	Female	0.32	0.99		
Venue	Male	0.43	1.25	0.05	.96
	Female	0.32	1.13		
Total	Male	1.06	1.87	1.30	.19
Unfavourable	Female	0.75	1.40		
Hygiene Score					
Number Of words	Male	1.45	2.74	1.92	.056
	Female	2.96	8.03		
Hygiene					
Total	Male	2.86	3.89	2.77	.006*
Unfavourable	Female	5.75	10.54		
words					

For the 'hygiene factors' the work of Heckert et al (2002) would imply different reactions could be expected between females and males. In the present study this would seem to be the case with the females being more favourable about the 'hygiene factors' on the Likert scales but not noticeably so on the open-ended ones. If the 'human related' and 'hygiene scales' are taken together females were generally more favourable in their evaluations than the males on both the structured Likert style and the open-ended questionnaires but with regard to different issues. This does mean that when comparing evaluations of one module with another the gender of the students needs to be taken into account, if that comparison is to be meaningful.

This study has gone further than previous researchers who have looked at gender differences in evaluating. Controls were implemented for many variables not commonly taken into account. Gender differences have been examined by other researchers in terms of factors such as liking for presenters (Basow 1995 and Tatro 1995), but not in terms of questionnaire design. It does seem from the results of this study there are differences in the way females and males respond on evaluation forms. They notice and react differently in predictable ways. Most importantly it has been shown these differences vary depending on the format of the evaluation questionnaire. This is something which has been neglected in the research literature into gender and evaluations. These findings may go some way towards explaining why previous research, which has looked at gender differences in evaluating has produced ambiguous results.

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Biographical note:

Jenny Darby has a varied career in Education. She taught in an inner city Comprehensive school for 25 years completing her service as Head of Science. For two years during a secondment she was responsible for a county wide training programme for head teachers and senior teaching staff. She has recently been running training workshops in teaching skills for postgraduates at Loughborough University, where she completed her doctorate. Her main research interest concerns evaluation of training programmes. E mail J.A.Darby@lboro.ac.uk