

Gender Effects in the Business School Classroom: A Social Power Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether students at two universities perceive social power differences between male and female business faculty. Using gender schema and social power theories, we posit that female faculty members will be perceived by students as having greater referent power and that male faculty members will be perceived by students as having greater expert, legitimate, reward and coercive power. Results of a survey involving 892 students at two universities indicate that male faculty members are perceived as having greater expert power, while no gender differences exist on referent, reward and coercive power. Contrary to our hypotheses, female faculty members are perceived as having greater legitimate power.

Introduction

The issue of social power and influence has received considerable attention from organizational researchers since French and Raven (1959) introduced their typology of social power nearly 50 years ago (Kipnis, 1984; Rahim, 1988; Raven, Schwarzwald & Koslowsky, 1998). However, very little of this research has focused on whether people perceive differences between men and women as influence agents (Carli 1999, 2001; Elias & Loomis, 2004; Johnson, 1976).

There are potentially significant consequences for gender differences in power. For instance, past studies suggest that women's career advancement, networking opportunities and access to benefits may be linked to power (Carli, 1999). In addition, research has shown that women may be penalized more than men for exercising certain types of social power (Elias & Loomis, 2004).

An interesting forum to explore gender and social power is inside collegiate schools of business. The number of female faculty in business schools has risen significantly during the past decade (AACSB, 2001). Despite these increasing numbers of new hires, research suggests that women faculty in business schools still face gender biases (AACSB, 2001), including biases from students (Centra & Gaubatz, 2000; Whitworth, Price & Randall, 2002). Such biases in student evaluations may in turn have significant effects on promotion and tenure decisions to the extent such decisions are influenced by student evaluations of teaching.

A number of different theoretical frameworks have been used to explore gender biases of students, including fairness (Basow, 1995), empathy (Tatro, 1995), and expressiveness (Arbuckle & Williams, 2003). However, as in other organizational settings, the role that social power plays in contributing to gender bias in the classroom has received very little attention (for exception, see Elias & Loomis, 2004).

The present study examines whether students perceive differences between male and female business faculty in the bases of social power. It also investigates whether student gender influences perceptions of faculty social power.

Theoretical Overview

In their seminal work, French and Raven (1959) described five types of social power: referent, expert, legitimate, reward and coercive. Referent power exists when a subject likes a person and wants to associate with or be like that person. Expert power is based on a subject's perception that a person possesses superior knowledge or expertise in a specific area. Legitimate power results from a subject's belief that a person has the right to exert influence and demand certain behaviors from the subject and that the subject has the obligation to comply. Legitimate power is typically derived from a person's external status or position. Reward power results from a subject's perception that a person has the ability to reward the subject for desirable behavior, while coercive power is based on a subject's perception that a person can punish the subject for undesirable behavior.

Researchers have suggested that individual instructors rely extensively on referent, expert and legitimate power to facilitate learning as well as manage their classrooms (Roach, 1991). In addition, instructors often use reward and coercive power to influence students using such mechanisms as grades and pop quizzes (Elias & Loomis, 2004).

Some scholars have posited that gender plays an important role in determining how others perceive these power bases (Carli, 1999; 2001). More specifically, gender schema theory (also called social cognitive theory) states that people have basic expectations concerning gender that affect their perceptions of others (Bem, 1981).

Gender schemas are cognitive structures of organized prior knowledge (Lemons & Parzinger, 2007) that determine gender role expectations of persons based on biological sex. In this view, gender specific roles are embedded in societal practices and therefore become internalized by individuals (Bem, 1981) As a result, gender-stereotyped attitudes emerge, with some roles viewed as primarily masculine, and others viewed as primarily feminine (Heilman, Block & Martell, 1995).

Such gender-role expectations are likely to be present when students evaluate an instructor in regard to social power. Because both social power theory and gender schema theory depend upon subjects' perceptions of the person being evaluated, these two theories may intersect in ways that can help explain student evaluations of their

male and female instructors. This idea is supported by Young and Hurlic (2007), who state that gender can be viewed as “an interaction between men and women within contexts of power and status” (p. 169).

In a classroom setting, we expect that students will view the exercising of social power through a gender schema lens, with each facet of social power (referent, expert, legitimate, reward and coercive) associated with specific gender-typed role expectations.

Hypotheses Development

Referent Power and Gender

Referent power depends upon a subject perceiving a person to be someone the subject likes and with whom the subject wants to associate. Because women tend to be better liked than men (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Fiske & Ruscher, 1993), and their power derives from their relationships with others (Guttentag & Secord, 1983), it seems that women should have greater referent power than men (Carli, 1999).

Extending the concept of referent power into the classroom, it seems likely that female instructors would have greater referent power than male instructors. This prediction is supported by studies that have shown that students expect female instructors to be warm, expressive, gentle, understanding, sensitive, and nurturing, (Bachen, McLaughlin & Garcia, 1999; Bauer & Baltes, 2002). For example, Kierstead, D’Agostino and Dill (1988) found that socializing with students outside of class improved female instructors’ ratings but not male instructors’ and that smiling improved female instructors’ ratings but depressed those of male instructors. Moreover, at least one study has found that students generally rate female instructors higher than male instructors on respect, sensitivity and student freedom to express ideas (Basow, 1995), while others have found that female instructors receive higher evaluations when they show behavior associated with referent power (Carli, 1999). Men, in turn, have not typically experienced any advantage from using referent power and, therefore, are less likely to adopt an androgynous approach – exercising this expected feminine source of power as a complement to their traditional masculine sources of power (Carli, 1999). Therefore, the first hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1: Female faculty will be perceived by students as having greater referent power than male faculty.

Expert Power and Gender

Expert power derives from a subject’s perception that a person has superior knowledge or expertise. Research suggests that men have greater expert power than women because women are stereotypically assumed to have lower levels of competency than men (Carli, 1999; Fiske & Risher, 1993; Johnson, 1976). For instance, research has shown that men are perceived to be more blunt spoken and direct than women and that

“directness” is associated with greater competency (Carli, 1999). Therefore, women have to demonstrate greater skill than men to be perceived as competent (Foschi, 1996).

These results are borne out in studies of undergraduate evaluations of instructors, which show that male instructors are expected to be competent, rational and intelligent (Bachen et al., 1999; Bauer & Baltes, 2002), and that students generally rate male instructors higher than female instructors on knowledge of the subject matter (Basow, 1995). “Even under conditions of face-to-face interactions and no objective gender differences in performance, undergraduate subjects rate men to have performed more competently than women.” (Carli, 1999, p. 84). Thus, female instructors are held to higher standards of competence than are male instructors (Sandler & Hall, 1993), and a female instructor must demonstrate a higher level of skill than a man must in order to be considered competent (Foschi, 1996). Therefore, the second hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 2: Male faculty will be perceived by students as having greater expert power than female faculty.

Legitimate Power and Gender

Legitimate power typically derives from a person’s status or position and is based on a subject’s perception that a person has the right to prescribe and control the subject’s behavior. Research shows that women have less legitimate power than men because women do not command the authority that men do (Fiske & Ruscher, 1993; Johnson, 1976; Wolf & Fligstein, 1979). As a result, an assertive woman who demonstrates her competence in self-promoting ways is penalized for such displays because they are inconsistent with the expected behaviors of a lower-status person who lacks legitimate power (Carli, 1991, Rudman, 1998).

Students’ expectations of their male and female instructors imply that students perceive male professors to possess more attributes associated with legitimate power than do female professors. For example, students expect men to be assertive, decisive, powerful, controlling, and to possess traditional authority, while they expect women to lack authority and to be weaker and more insecure than men (Bachen et al., 1999; Bauer & Baltes, 2002). Therefore, the third hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 3: Male faculty will be perceived by students as having greater legitimate power than female faculty.

Reward and Coercive Power and Gender

Reward power and coercive power are in a sense two sides of the same coin. Reward power exists when a subject believes a person has the ability to bestow benefits upon the subject in reward for behavior, whereas coercive power derives from a subject’s perception that a person can punish the subject for undesirable behavior. Johnson (1976) predicted that men have both greater reward and coercive power because men

can bring more resources to bear in favor or against the subject. Johnson's prediction on reward power is supported by Kanter (1977), who found that women had less access to resources to reward members of a business unit, and by Harlan and Weiss (1982) who, in replicating Kanter's study, also found that female managers had less control over assets than male managers. More recently, work on gender and leadership suggests that men tend to be more "transactional" than women, frequently using rewards and coercion to influence followers (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Research on student perceptions of instructors suggests that male instructors have more coercive power than female instructors because students see men as more controlling and powerful than they see women (Bachen et al., 1999; Bauer & Baltes, 2002). Based on the existing research and on the reported perceptions of students, the fourth and fifth hypotheses are:

Hypothesis 4: Male faculty will be perceived by students as having greater reward power than female faculty.

Hypothesis 5: Male faculty will be perceived by students as having greater coercive power than female faculty.

Student Gender and Faculty Gender

A number of studies have contended that student gender is also an important variable of interest. Some studies have found that female students rate instructors differently than male students (Bachen et al., 1999; Centra & Gaubatz, 2000, Elias & Loomis, 2004, Tatro, 1995). A subset of these suggest a same-gender bias for females only, with female students rating female instructors higher on various teaching-related dimensions (Centra & Baubatz, 2000) while others suggest a same-gender bias for both sexes, with both female and male students rating same-gender instructors more favorably (Bachen et al., 1999).

The most prevalent view on this topic however, suggests that female faculty will be viewed as having lower levels of social power than men specifically when being rated by male students (Elias & Cropanzano, 2006). This "male sexism" perspective (Carli, 1999; Elias & Cropanzano, 2006) is grounded in gender schema theory and is empirically supported both in the workplace (Elias, 2004) and in the classroom (Elias & Cropanzano, 2006; Roach, 1994). In this view, male students will have a bias against female faculty, especially if social power is exercised in a heavy-handed and explicit manner. Therefore, the sixth hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 6: Male students will perceive female faculty as having lower levels (in each of the five facets) of social power than male faculty.

Methods

Sample and procedure

Undergraduate business students enrolled at two universities (a private Southern California university and a public Rocky Mountain west university) were chosen to participate in the study because the authors had easy access to both the students and faculty. Business courses with at least 10 students registered were targeted and instructors were contacted in order to have their cooperation for a data collection that would last for 15-20 minutes at the beginning of their class. Data was collected during the last third of the 15-week semester (during week 11 or 12).

Upper division students (either juniors or seniors) were surveyed while attending a class. The survey was administered by trained student assistants who presented the study as a general survey about students' attitudes toward various school and class related issues. They informed students that participation in the study was not a requirement but a voluntary decision. Also, students were asked not to fill out the questionnaire if they had previously been in a course that was surveyed. Then, each student received a questionnaire and was told to read the first page (description of the study) and to wait for directions from the researcher. In the meantime, the class instructor was asked to leave the room while explaining to students that their responses would remain anonymous. Students were then asked to fill out the entire questionnaire, which required students to respond to a series of statements using a 7-point Likert-type scale to respond to statements about social power (more detail provided in the measures section below) as well as provide some demographic data. (Questions regarding student satisfaction with the instructor and course were also included in the survey as part of a second study on influence tactics and student satisfaction.) After twenty minutes, all questionnaires were completed and collected and the instructor returned in the classroom.

The final sample had 892 respondents (a 98% response rate) with 51% female and 49% male and with 559 responses coming from the Southern California private university and 333 responses coming from the Rocky Mountain west public university. Average class size at the Southern California university was larger, contributing to a greater number of respondents.

Fifty-five percent of the respondents were juniors and 45% were seniors. Ninety-nine percent of the students were under the age of 25. The classes surveyed involved multiple sections from 26 instructors (13 from the Southern California University and 10 from the Rocky Mountain University), 10 of whom were female (five females from each university).

Measures

A self-administered questionnaire was used to gather the data.

Dependent Variables: The questions from the questionnaire used in this study dealt with students' perceptions of social power of the instructor in the class. The five French and

Raven bases of power (referent, expert, legitimate, coercive and reward) were measured using items borrowed from the Rahim Leader Power Inventory (Rahim, 1988), a heavily used and validated instrument developed to assess various facets of social power, including the five bases proposed by French and Raven (1959). Five items per power basis were included in the final questionnaire with all items assessed on a 7-point Likert-type scale.

Independent Variables: Faculty gender and student gender were collected on the questionnaire and were coded 1 = Female, 0 = Male.

Control variables including the amount of work assigned by the instructor, instructor enthusiasm, and grading leniency, were all assessed through single item measures on a 7-point Likert-type scale. These variables have been used in previous studies that have investigated instructor performance in the classroom (Bacon & Novotny, 2002; Wilhelm, 2004). Additional controls included as dummy variables were whether the class was a required or elective course and whether the college of the respondent was the Southern California private university or the Rocky Mountain west public university.

Analyses and Results

Analyses

As previously described, the dependent measures used in this research came from a validated instrument. These measures are latent constructs measured by several indicators. Therefore, an initial step before performing any further analysis at the latent level was to ensure the internal consistency of the latent variable potentially created. All of the dependent variables used (referent, expert, legitimate, reward and coercive power) presented internal consistency ranging from 0.72 up to 0.84 (see Table 1 for specific results). These results suggest that each of these variables can be operationalized as the mean score of their individual items.

To test for gender differences in social power, we performed a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with the five bases of social power as dependent variables and faculty gender and student gender as the independent variables. We also included the amount of work assigned by the instructor, instructor enthusiasm, grading leniency, whether the class was a required or elective course, and whether the college of the respondent was the Southern California private university or the Rocky Mountain west public university as covariates. This approach to data analysis has been used by other researchers investigating gender effects in college classrooms (Elias & Loomis, 2004).

TABLE 1 – Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Instructor Gender ¹	.34	.47											
2. Referent Power ²	5.74	1.16	-.04										
3. Expert Power ³	6.02	.99	-.14**	.65**									
4. Legitimate Power ⁴	5.39	.95	.08*	.28**	.29**								
5. Reward Power ⁵	4.96	1.05	-.03	.53**	.46**	.30**							
6. Coercive Power ⁶	4.01	1.51	.14**	.18**	.07*	.31**	.27**						
7. Student Gender ⁷	.51	.45	.04	.00	.05	.08*	.03	-.05					
8. Grade leniency	3.63	1.71	.22**	.10*	-.01	.11**	.09*	.24*	-.08*				
9. Enthusiasm	5.73	1.30	-.11**	.68**	.60**	.26**	.43**	.12**	.00	.04			
10. Workload	4.28	1.81	-.25**	-.07*	.03	-.12**	-.14**	-.29**	.12**	-.57**	-.06		
11. Required ⁸	1.11	.31	-.03	.02	-.03	.01	-.00	.03	-.09*	.02	.01	-.02	
12. Institution ⁹	.63	.44	-.08*	-.09*	.09*	-.14**	-.16**	-.33**	-.08*	-.60**	-.01	.66**	-.12

1. 1 = Female, 0 = Male

* significant at .01 level

2. Cronbach's alpha = .84

** significant at .001 level

3. Cronbach's alpha = .84

4. Cronbach's alpha = .76

5. Cronbach's alpha = .75

6. Cronbach's alpha = .72

7. 1 = Female 0 = Male

8. 1 = Required, 0 = Elective

9. 1 = Private University, 0 = Public University

Results

Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability outcomes can be found in Table 1. The MANCOVA revealed a significant overall main effect for faculty gender (Wilks $\Lambda = .98$), $F(5, 795) = 3.1$, $p = .01$. Tests of between subject-subjects effects revealed a significant difference ($p = .01$) in expert power between male faculty ($M = 6.12$, $SD = .89$) and female faculty ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.15$), and a significant difference ($p = .05$) in legitimate power between female faculty ($M = 5.50$, $SD = .87$) and male faculty ($M = 5.34$, $SD = .99$)

The MANCOVA yielded a non-significant overall main effect for student gender (Wilks $\Lambda = .99$), $F(5, 785) = 1.72$, $p = .12$. However, tests of between-subjects effects revealed a significant difference ($p = .02$) in perceptions of legitimate power between female students ($M = 5.46$, $SD = .93$) and male students ($M = 5.31$, $SD = .96$). In addition, the MANCOVA yielded a non-significant main effect for the interaction of instructor gender x student gender (Wilks $\Lambda = .99$), $F(5, 785) = .72$, $p = .60$. There were also no significant differences in tests of between subjects. Following Elias and Cropanzano (2006), we tested for potential ordinal interactions between instructor and student gender. No significant results were found. Finally, the MANCOVA yielded significant main effects for four of the control variables: grading leniency, instructor enthusiasm, amount of work, and the specific institution. More specifically, grading leniency was positively associated with higher levels of referent power and coercive power ($p = .01$), instructor enthusiasm was associated with all five facets of social power ($p = .001$); amount of work was negatively associated with reward and coercive power ($p = .001$); and the public institution was associated with higher levels of referent, legitimate, reward, and coercive power (all are $p = .001$) and the private university was associated with higher levels of expert power ($p = .01$).

Our findings do not support H1, which stated that female faculty would be perceived as having greater referent power. There was no significant difference between male faculty ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.19$) and female faculty ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.10$)

Our findings do support H2, which stated that male faculty would be perceived as having greater expert power. Results revealed a significant difference ($p = .01$) in expert power between male faculty ($M = 6.12$, $SD = .89$) and female faculty ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.15$).

Our findings were contrary to H3, which stated that male faculty would be perceived as having greater legitimate power than female faculty. In fact, our results revealed a significant difference ($p = .05$) in legitimate power in favor of female faculty ($M = 5.50$, $SD = .87$) over male faculty ($M = 5.34$, $SD = .99$).

Our findings do not support H4 and H5, which suggested differences between male and female faculty in reward and coercive power, respectively. For reward power, no differences were found between male faculty ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.03$) and female faculty

($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.09$). Similarly, for coercive power, no significant differences were found between male faculty ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.56$) and female faculty ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.34$).

Finally, our findings do not support H6, which stated that male students would perceive female faculty as having less social power than male faculty. Neither the MANCOVA, nor a test of ordinal interactions, found any interaction effects between student and faculty gender. The only area where student gender proved significant was in the area of legitimate power ($p = .05$), where female students rated all faculty, regardless of gender, as more legitimate ($M = 5.46$, $SD = .93$) than did male students ($M = 5.31$, $SD = .96$).

Discussion

The findings of this study support the notion that gender influences perceptions of faculty social power. However, the way that gender influenced these perceptions in this study was both supportive of and counter to previous views.

First, our finding that male faculty members are perceived by students as having more expert power than female faculty is consistent with past research (Basow, 1995; Carli, 1999). This result is supported by gender schema theory which argues that female instructors are held to higher standards of competence than men (Sandler & Hall, 1993).

Second, our findings of no perceived significant differences between male and female faculty members' referent, reward and coercive power are not consistent with gender schema predictions. However, a competing perspective on the relationship between faculty gender and faculty role may provide insight to these findings.

According to a role expectations view (also referred to in the literature as a "structural" view), occupation or organizational position is the primary driver of perceptions of behavior and performance (Aguinis & Adams, 1998). In this view, the position, rather than gender, creates the expectations for behavior. As a result, male and female individuals holding the same position will be evaluated based on how well they fit the perceived role expectations of the position, not the gender expectations. Here, position or role expectations are thought to "trump" gender expectations to the point that there are no perceived gender differences (Mainiero, 1986; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1990).

A role expectations view of referent power suggests that both male and female faculty may believe that students perceive the role of a faculty member as someone who exercises referent power in a specific manner (Elias & Loomis, 2004). In particular, male faculty members may now realize that displaying likeability traits viewed as historically "feminine" actually increases their referent power, while female faculty members may now realize that displaying likeability traits viewed as historically "masculine" actually increases their referent power (Aguinis & Adams, 1998). This view is supported by Freeman (1994) who found that "students value androgyny in their instructors, that is,

both instrumental traits (assertive and forceful) and expressive traits (affectionate and sensitive)” (p.169).

Similarly, role expectations may be more important than gender expectations for students in evaluating reward and coercive power. This perspective contends that even more than other types of social power, reward and coercive power are primarily a function of organizational role or position (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1990). In this view, students are likely to perceive that reward power and coercive power are constrained by faculty role – that is the main rewards and punishments faculty members can bestow upon students are high/low grades and students do not perceive a difference between male and female faculty members’ ability to award grades. Students may also view faculty members as able to reward high performing students with (or withhold from low performing students) employment contacts and networks, but are also more likely to see this as a function of role, rather than gender.

Third, our findings that female faculty members were perceived by students as having greater legitimate power than male faculty members, is perhaps most surprising given previous research suggesting opposite effects. In particular, the college of business settings used in this study may provide insights.

Perceptions of legitimate power may be influenced by the male/female faculty ratios found in most business schools, including the ones in this study. As noted earlier, although the percentage of female faculty is growing in schools of business, women still comprise a minority of total faculty (AACSB, 2001). Hence, students view the “typical” college of business faculty member as male. Given this view, it is possible that students perceive women faculty who are employed by a college of business as having truly earned the right to be teaching in this type of environment, perhaps even more so than men. Students may therefore believe that these “atypical” faculty members must have the “credentials” to demand the compliance associated with legitimate power. This conclusion is supported by Bennett (1982), who suggested that female faculty who are distinct minorities in their departments are perceived by students as exceptions and are viewed as more charismatic and potent than their male colleagues.

Finally, our finding that female students view faculty, regardless of gender, as having more legitimate power than do male students is somewhat consistent with past research which suggests that female and male students often perceive faculty differently. For example, past research found that female students were more compliant than male students when instructors utilized coercive power (Elias & Loomis, 2004).

Implications of these findings are significant, especially for female faculty members. As our study indicates, issues other than gender expectations, such as role expectations, may be more critical for some facets of social power. This suggests that female faculty members may be able to successfully alter student perceptions of social power by acting in a manner that is consistent with how students perceive the role of a faculty member. Although some research shows that women tend to be penalized for behaving in ways that are inconsistent with gender expectations (Carli, 1999, 2001), our findings

suggest that student perceptions may be shifting and that other frameworks, such as role expectations, may be a more common frame of reference in the business college classroom.

Future Research

Future researchers are encouraged to look more carefully at student gender biases in business schools. To date, very little research on gender schema theory has taken place inside business school classrooms (Centra & Baubatz, 2000; Whitworth et al., 2002) and none of it has investigated issues of social power. More research is also needed to further clarify a pattern of results. Past research in business schools has been inconsistent with one study concluding that students viewed male faculty more favorably (Fandt & Stevens, 1991) while another study concluded that female instructors were evaluated higher in both quality and promotion of learning (Whitworth et al., 2002). It would, therefore, be particularly instructive to discover whether our results are generalizable to larger student populations at more undergraduate business schools.

Future researchers are also encouraged to look more directly at key outcomes associated with gender differences in social power. In particular, student satisfaction and compliance are two dependent variables worth considering. Finally, future research should also consider more field studies like this one to assess actual faculty-student dyads. A number of past studies (e.g. Arbuckle & Williams, 2003; Bauer & Baltes, 2002; Fandt & Stevens, 1991) have been laboratory-based.

A particular strength of this study is that it was conducted in two different collegiate schools of business which allowed for a more varied sample of faculty and students. This is reinforced by the fact that, despite significant institution effects, gender differences were still apparent.

Limitations

There are also limitations to this study. First, although we tried to get a cross-section of business school classes and students (from accounting, finance, marketing, management, business law, etc.) we only received access to classes from faculty who were willing to participate in this type of study. In addition, given some of the business-school specific issues raised earlier, the generalizability of the results to other types of colleges is limited.

Conclusion

The overall pattern of results is consistent with the views of those who argue that instructor gender has subtle and complex effects on student perceptions and evaluations of instructor performance (Carli, 1999). Our findings suggest that while student gender schemas influence perceptions of some facets of social power like expert power, other facets may be less influenced by this “gendered” view and more

influenced by other views such as role expectations. In short, while gender schemas seem to have some effect on student perceptions of social power, other factors seem to have considerable influence as well.

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