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ABSTRACT

A control study involving 26 college students was undertaken to determine reasons why they generally claim to prefer "easy" professors, while contradictory evidence is offered by evaluation research. The subjects were randomly assigned to conditions in which each made anonymous or non-anonymous evaluations of four hypothetical male professors described in short printed narratives. Two of the professors were described as very demanding, while the other two were described as very lax. One of each pair of professors was described as generally giving high grades, while the other was described as generally giving low grades. After reading the hypothetical descriptions, the subjects completed six eight-point scales for each description. Student evaluations indicated that: (1) most students preferred lax, high-grading professors better than demanding, low-grading professors; (2) demanding professors were evaluated as being more effective than lax professors; (3) the demanding, high-grading professor was perceived as more likable than the other professors; and (4) students in the non-anonymous condition were more likely than others to express a desire to take a class from lax professors. (TJH)

The Effects of Course Demands and Grades on Anonymous versus Nonanonymous Evaluations of Professors

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Running Head: Demands and Grades and Student Evaluations

The Effects of Course Demands and Grades on Anonymous versus Nonanonymous Evaluations of Professors

Abstract

This study investigated the issue of why students say they prefer easy professors when student evaluation research says they don't. Twenty six subjects were randomly assigned to anonymous and nonannoymous conditions and received short descriptions of four college professors. Two professors were very demanding, two very easy: one of each pair gave high grades, the other gave low grades. Subjects were asked to estimate for most students and for themselves the likeability of, effectiveness of, and preference for each professor. Most students were seen to like easy and high grading professors better than demanding and low grading professors, to evaluate demanding and high grading professors as more effective than easy and low grading professors, and as more likely to take a class from high grading professors than from low grading professors. Subjects themselves liked high grading professors better than low, saw demanding and high grading professors as more effective than easy and low grading professors, and subjects in the nonanonymous condition were more likely to take a class from easy professors than subjects in the anonymous condition.

The Effects of Course Demands and Grades on Anonymous versus Nonanonymous Evaluations of Professors

A study by Marsh (1980) rejects the notion that "instructors need only give higher grades and demand little work of students to be evaluated favorably" (p. 234). At the same time common talk among students seems to indicate the opposite--that students prefer to get their grades by doing as little work as possible and, therefore, if given the opportunity would choose the "easy" professor before the demanding professor. This discrepancy between typical student talk and research findings may be explained by the fact that student evaluations of instructors are anonymous whereas typical student to student talk is very public (Brady, 1985, Note 1). This publicity may bring self-presentational concerns into play (Baumeister, Cooper, & Skib,1979). No student likes to be called "a brain" i.e. to appear to enjoy studying. Conformity pressures would then make students put on the appearance of not liking study and course taking, and so, in public, students would indicate that they liked the professors with the easy courses. Seeing other students making these public choices of easy professors each individual student would hypothesize that the other students have an underlying trait supporting this behavioral preference. And if the other students behave "consistently with the observers expectancy, the observer will in all probability feel simply that the hypothesis has been confirmed" (Baumeister et al, 1979, p.425). In his 1985 study Brady manipulated the anonymous-nonanonymous conditions by having subjects estimate for themselves and for most other students how they would evaluate professors. The present study extended the Brady, 1985 study by randomly assigning subjects to anonymous and nonanonymous conditions and by assessing the likelihood of students taking a class with the professor in the future. It was hypothesized that in the nonanonymous condition subjects would choose the easy professor over the demanding professor.

From a review of 300 studies Feldman (1976a) concluded that one could neither prove nor disprove a bias in teacher evaluations due to actual or expected student grades. Marsh (1980), following a suggestion by Feldman, showed that "a sizeable portion of the relationship between expected grades and student ratings is spurious and attributable to Prior Subject Interest" (p. 232). A similar conclusion was drawn by Scheurich, Graham, & Drolette (1983). The remaining portion of the relationship, after prior subject interest has been accounted for, is, itself, subject to two different explanations. The first explanation flows from the intuitive expectation that if instructors are known to give

high grades, they will be better liked by students and so will receive higher student ratings. The second explanation argues that higher grades stem from better student learning, derived from better instruction, giving rise, therefore, to deservedly higher ratings of instructors. This second explanation would seem to be the more correct one. The finding by Marsh (1980) that demanding courses and high grading professors were rated more favorably would indicate that students not only wanted high grades but wanted to earn them too. It was hypothesized, therefore, in line with this second explanation, that professors who gave high grades and demanded a lot would be preferred to professors who gave high grades but demanded little. The present study also sought to replicate the Brady (1986,Note 1) finding that subjects would prefer to take a course from the demanding, high grading professor rather than from the easy high grading professor.

Method

Subjects. Twenty-six undergraduate students volunteered to take part in the experiment.

Materials. Subjects were given a short description of four hypothetical male professors. Each description was composed of two parts: the first part described the demands made by the professor of his students--and the demands were either high or low; in the high demand version the professor set "high standards" and "made a lot of demands", and his courses required "much study and hard work." In the low demand (easy) version the professor set "low standards" and made "few demands", and his courses did "not require much study or hard work." The second part stated the kind of grades the professors generally gave--these were either high or low. The two versions of each section of the description were combined to give four descriptions: the high demanding-high grading, the high demanding-low grading, the low demanding-high grading, and the low demanding-low grading professor. Four names were picked for the professors and each name was rotated through each description. This gave four sets of names by description and the order of the descriptions in each set was arranged randomly.

Procedure. Subjects were randomly assigned to either the anonymous or nonanonymous conditions. In the anonymous condition anonymity was manipulated by instructing the subjects to complete the scales on their own and by instructing them not to put their names on the evaluation sheet. In the nonanonymous condition the lack of anonymity

was manipulated by randomly assigning the subjects into pairs: each member of a pair was first introduced to the other member; each member of the pair was then instructed to complete the evaluations independently but was told, at the same time, that he/she would have to show his/her evaluations to the other member of the pair and would have to discuss the evaluations with him or her.

To complete the evaluations subjects in both the anonymous and nonanonymous conditions were asked to read through twice the descriptions of the four hypothetical male professors mentioned above, and then to complete a set of six 8-point scales for each description. In the first three scales of each set subjects estimated how most students would evaluate the likeability and teaching effectiveness of the professor, and how likely they would be to take a course from that professor in the future. In the second three scales subjects gave their own evaluation of the professor's likeability and teaching effectiveness, and how likely they themselves would be to take a course from that professor in the future.

Results

The means and standard deviations for anonymous and nonanymous conditions are given in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The data were analysed using a between-within analysis of variance design with anonymous versus nonanonymous as the between factor and demands (high-low) and grades (high-low) as the repeated measures factor.

Most Students

Likeability. There was no main effect for the anonymity factor. The easy professor was liked more than the demanding professor, $F(1,24)=20.23$, $p<.001$, and the high grading professor was liked better than the low grading professor, $F(1,24)=134.03$, $p<.001$. An interactional effect, $F(1,24)=3.92$, $p<.06$, showed that the easy, high grading professor was liked better than the demanding high grading professor. A second (marginal) interactional effect, $F(1,24)=3.42$, $p<.08$, showed that in the nonanonymous condition the easy high grading professor was liked better than the demanding, high grading professor.

Effectiveness. There was no main effect for the anonymity factor. The demanding professor was considered more effective than the easy professor, $F(1,24)=10.83$, $p<.003$, and the high grading professor was considered more effective than the low grading professor, $F(1,24)=92.99$, $p<.001$. An interactional effect, $F(1,24)=3.97$, $p<.06$, showed that the

demanding, high grading professor was considered more effective than the easy, high grading professor.

Choosing a Class. There were no main effects for the anonymity and demand factors. Subjects were more likely to choose a class from the high grading professor than for the low grading professor, $F(1,24)=211.52$, $p<.001$. A marginal interactional effect, $F(1,24)=3.53$, $p<.07$, showed that subjects in the anonymous condition were more likely to take a class with the high grading professor than subjects in the nonanonymous condition.

Subjects Themselves

Likeability. There were no main effects for the anonymity and demand factors. The high grading professor was liked better than the low grading professor, $F(1,24)=167.28$, $p<.001$.

Effectiveness. There was no main effect for the anonymity factor. The demanding professor was considered more effective than the easy professor, $F(1,24)=19.84$, $p<.001$, and the high grading professor was considered more effective than the low grading professor, $F(1,24)=131.52$, $p<.001$. An interactional effect, $F(1,24)=8.85$, $p<.006$, showed that the demanding high grading professor was considered more effective than the easy high grading professor.

Choosing a Class. There was no main effect for the anonymity factor. Subjects were more likely to take a class with the easy professor than with the demanding professor, $F(1,24)=26.96$, $p<.001$, and with the high grading professor than with the low grading professor. An interactional effect, $F(1,24)=7.32$, $p<.01$, showed that subjects in the nonanonymous condition were more likely to take a class from the easy professor than subjects in the anonymous condition. A second interactional effect, $F(1,24)=7.60$, $p<.02$, showed that subjects in the anonymous condition were more likely to choose a class from the high grading professor than subjects in the nonanonymous condition.

Discussion

The basic aim of the present experiment was to show that the discrepancy between students preferring the demanding professor (research findings) and students preferring the easy professor (common observation) could be explained by the fact that research obtained student preferences in anonymous conditions whereas common observation sees student preferences in nonanonymous conditions. In previous research Brady (1985, 1986, Notes 1 & 2) had shown this to be the case by asking subjects to give their own preferences on the demanding versus the easy professor (anonymous condition) and then to estimate the preferences of most other students

for the demanding versus the easy professor. This estimate of most other students was assumed to be based on the subjects' observation of students talking among themselves and would, therefore, address the nonanonymous condition. While the present study randomly assigned subjects to anonymous and nonanonymous conditions it retained the most student estimate condition for both the anonymous and nonanonymous subjects. The findings on most students for both anonymous and nonanymous conditions were similar to the findings of previous experiments (Brady,1985, 1986, Notes 1 & 2): most students were seen to like easy and high grading professors more than demanding and low grading professors; most students were seen to evaluate demanding and high grading professors as more effective than easy and low grading professors; and most students were seen as more likely to take a class from the high grading professor than the low grading professor.

When it came to the subjects own preferences the expectation was that there would be a clearcut main effect on the anonymity factor. It was expected that subjects in the anonymous condition would respond as in previous studies and that the subjects in the nonanonymous condition would respond similarly to the most student estimates of this study and previous studies. This, however, was not the case: there was no main effect for the anonymity factor on any of the three dependent measures. The expected liking for easy professors in the nonanonymous condition did not materialize : on the other hand, there was no liking for demanding professors over easy professors in the anonymous condition. On the effectiveness measure no differences were expected since in previous research (Brady,1985, 1986, 1987, Notes 1,2 & 3) subjects themselves and their estimates for most other students indicated that high demanding and high grading professors were considered more effective than easy and low grading professors. On the choosing of a class measure the expected preference for the easy professor in the nonanonymous condition was not found. Instead a main effect for choice indicated that subjects would prefer to take a class from the easy professor than from the demanding professor. However, an interactional effect showed that this was true only for the nonanonymous condition, not for the anonymous condition. Collapsing the high and low grades the interactional effect showed that subjects in the nonanonymous condition were more likely to take a class from the easy professor (M=5.75) than from the demanding professor (M=3.71): in the anonymous condition subjects were equally likely to take a class from the easy professor (M=4.82) as from the demanding professor (M=4.18). This differs from previous research (Brady,1985, 1986, Notes 1 & 2) where subjects when given anonymity were more likely to take a class from the demanding professor than from the the easy professor.

Research in student evaluations of professors shows that, generally, these evaluations are both reliable and valid and that students can discriminate between factors relating to overall teaching effectiveness (Costin, Greenough & Menges, 1971; Feldman, 1977; Hoffman, 1978; Marsh, 1982; Spencer and Aleamoni, 1970; Suchner, 1985, Note 4). As Feldman (1976) points out while students respect instructor characteristics like helpfulness, openness, and availability they use factors such as teaching effectiveness as the main basis for their evaluations. In this experiment the demands made by the professor were considered to be criteria of effectiveness and subjects clearly indicated that the higher the demands the more effective the professor: and this was true of both the anonymous and nonanonymous conditions. But while students might rate demanding professors as more effective than easy professors would they actually take courses from these demanding professors ? Might they not, if they had a choice, opt for courses from easy professors. This experiment indicates that this would be true only in the nonanonymous condition, not in the anonymous condition. An interactional effect showed that subjects in the nonanonymous condition were more likely than subjects in the anonymous to take a class from the easy professor.

From this experiment it appears that subjects themselves in both the anonymous and nonanonymous conditions evaluate the demanding professor as more effective than the easy professor. From this study also it is clear that students in the anonymous condition, even though they judge the demanding professor as more effective, they do not like the demanding professor more than the easy professor. Again, this study indicates that subjects in the anonymous condition, even though they judge the demanding professor more effective than the easy professor, were not more likely to take a class from the demanding professor than from the easy professor. This general pattern of liking, effectiveness, and class choice may indicate that students are pulled in two opposite ways - emotionally to the easy professor and rationally to the demanding, more effective professor. While not having to work hard would be the reinforcing factor in the choice of the easy professor, efficacy motivation would be the reinforcing factor in the choice of the demanding professor. This conflict may have resulted in the subjects not showing a liking or a class preference for either.

The same issue arises when one examines the findings on grades in this experiment. From this study and from others (Elmore and Pohlman, 1978; Feldman, 1976b; Pohlman, 1975; Treffinger and Feldhusen, 1970) it is clear that there is a strong preference for those professors who give high grades. This is often interpreted by administration and faculty as indicating a lenient grading bias, i.e., that professors who give high grades will get better student evaluations. But

is this preference for the high grading professor really a bias ? A bias would imply that the higher grades were given without much being demanded in return and so would imply a corresponding bias toward the easy professor. But again from this study and from others (Brady, 1985,1986, Notes 1 & 2; Marsh, 1980) it is clear that there is not a corresponding bias in favor of the easy professor. But if not why not ? Why, if students like to get high grades, should they go about it the hard way (through demanding courses) when they could do it the easy way (through easy courses)? A possible explanation may be that as mentioned above students are pulled in two ways - emotionally to the easy - cognitively to the demanding. This creates cognitive dissonance for them - to aim for high grades and at the same time choose easy (inefficient) professors. If students want high grades and choose an easy professor they are, in effect, aiming at an outcome (high grades) and going at it in an ineffectual way (easy professors). It would be somewhat like going for an operation and saying: "I want a surgeon who will perform the operation but I want one who isn't really much good at it."

With competition for teaching positions increasing, and with evaluation by students as an increasingly important determinant of a professors continuance on staff (especially in smaller colleges), it is tempting for a professor to think that if he or she is easy on students he or she will receive high student ratings. This study shows that the temptation to link easy courses with higher student ratings is based only on the public statement of students. The reality, in fact, seems to be quite different. This study shows that students do not like the easy professor more than the demanding professor,and they are not more likely to take a class from the easy professor than from the demanding professor. Instead, they see the demanding professor as better (more effective) than the easy professor.

These results have important motivational implications for college professors. Most professors would agree that if greater learning demands are placed on students higher educational standards will result. The present study indicates that placing greater demands on students so that they learn more and get higher grades will bring about higher student evaluations of professors. In addition professors should be aware that despite what students may say among themselves students still abide by American ideals. The vision of America as the land of opportunity - where anything is possible if one is prepared to work for it - is still alive and well on college campuses. Even if the vision only encompasses high course grades, subjects in the study clearly expected to have to work hard to achieve them. They saw no magical outcomes, no free meals.

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Table 1
Means and standard Deviation Summary

	Anonymous				Nonanonymous			
	Professor				Professor			
	Demanding		Easy		Demanding		Easy	
	Grade		Grade		Grade		Grade	
Dependent Variable	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
Liking								
Most Students								
M	5.64	2.93	6.93	4.14	5.00	2.92	7.75	3.58
SD	1.45	1.21	1.14	2.18	1.91	1.08	.45	1.83
Subjects Themselves								
M	6.21	2.64	6.36	3.29	6.33	3.25	6.08	3.08
SD	1.48	1.39	1.65	1.59	2.06	1.60	1.88	1.62
Teaching Effectiveness								
Most Students								
M	6.79	3.21	5.57	3.36	7.08	3.92	5.17	2.92
SD	.97	1.12	1.99	1.78	.09	1.44	2.55	1.38
Subjects Themselves								
M	6.79	2.93	4.93	3.00	7.08	3.67	4.17	2.50
SD	.97	1.44	1.64	1.71	1.00	1.56	2.59	1.31
Taking a Class								
Most Students								
M	6.29	2.21	6.71	2.14	6.25	3.17	5.83	2.25
SD	1.38	1.37	1.38	1.23	2.09	1.75	2.25	1.22
Subjects Themselves								
M	6.00	2.36	7.14	2.50	4.58	2.83	7.75	3.75
SD	1.47	1.08	.95	1.40	2.07	1.40	.45	1.66