

COMMENTARY

Juggling in heels: The struggle of female professors to balance civility and free speech without suffering from negative student evaluations

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Cortina, Cortina, and Cortina (2019) bring attention to a very important issue, civility, that is essential to cultivate a culture of dignity in the academic field. The focal article emphasizes the importance of viewing this issue from an industrial and organizational (I-O) perspective to address disruptions on a daily level. On the other hand, the authors highlight the flipside of civility. Civility can be used as a weapon to silence the weak. Further, it can be used to undermine unpopular opinions, which, in turn, may promote a lack of creativity and individual thought among colleagues for fear of being ostracized or ridiculed. We expand on the downside of civility with a more nuanced perspective. Incivility is a complicated phenomenon wherein the intent of the actor cannot be observed. Perception of the target, hence, plays a major role in determining the occurrence of incivility. What if the perception of the target is influenced by implicit biases? What if the actor is perceived as uncivil merely because his or her behavior is inconsistent with the expected role?

This commentary discusses how gender role expectations affect female professors in the academic field. Specifically, we discuss how the expected roles of female professors can influence student perceptions of civility exhibited by the professors. Further, we discuss the consequences of these perceptions and provide research and practical implications for I-O psychologists to abate the negative effects. We strongly agree with Cortina et al. (2019) that I-O psychologists should implement necessary steps to control the disruptions and protect the right to freedom of speech. Similarly, free speech of faculty should not be compromised due to stereotypical gender roles. The outcomes associated with civility are largely based on the perceptions of others, so it is essential to understand how one person's behavior may be perceived as civil, whereas that same behavior by another individual may be perceived in a different manner. We argue that women have to go above and beyond significantly more than men in order to receive the same rewards for their civil behaviors. We end this commentary by discussing the potential consequences of these perceptual differences and suggesting practical implications for those in higher education to consider for the betterment of university settings.

Gender role expectations

Although organizations are moving more and more toward gender equality every day, men and women still face different expectations in the workplace. In line with social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 1991), people are more likely to act in accordance with gender stereotypes (i.e., women are more likely to be communal and men are more likely to be agentic) in order to increase their likelihood of social rewards. Expanding on social role theory, role congruity theory suggests that

women are more likely to experience less favorable evaluations when their behaviors do not match particular gender stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Characteristics that are seen as “feminine” are often not aligned with characteristics associated with professional success. Based on gender stereotypes, women are expected to be *warm* and *caring*, whereas professional success is associated with people who demonstrate *independence* and *assertiveness*. Unfortunately, this can put women in tough positions, where their behavior is likely to be perceived as likeable but incompetent, or as competent but unlikeable (Schneider, Tinsley, Cheldelin, & Amanatullah, 2010). An assertive woman hence violates the expectations set by stereotypical roles, and this may lead to negative consequences for her in the workplace. Men, on the other hand, experience positive outcomes when acting agentic, because it is seen as typical and “masculine” in the workplace. Rudman and Phelan (2008) highlight numerous backlash effects that agentic women may face in the workplace compared to agentic men, including a lower likelihood of being hired, being seen as less “nice” when negotiating for a higher salary, and lower leadership evaluations.

Women in academia are not exempt from the effects of these expectations. El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, and Ceynar (2018) found that female professors face more work demands, especially in the form of personal and emotional favors from students. When female professors do not meet these communal expectations, students are likely to be irritated or disappointed, in addition to persisting with their requests even upon being told “no.” Further, students were more likely to negatively react to a female professor denying their requests than a male professor. Although students expect female professors to adhere to these stereotypical roles, not doing so may lead students to believe that the professors dislike them. Students may perceive female professors as being uncivil more often than male professors due to these expectations. Unfortunately, these expectations can dictate what counts as civil and result in agentic female professors as uncivil. Overall, El-Alayli et al. (2018) highlight the negative consequences that may accompany being a female in academia, in that women are more likely to engage in higher amounts of emotional labor and deal with more pleading and negative emotions from students, and that, possibly, these increased favor requests may come from colleagues and other staff members, as well as students.

Consequences of gendered expectations

If female professors have to expend more energy to be seen in a positive light, it is likely that they will experience negative outcomes associated with these increased psychological and physical expectations. To start, higher workloads in an organizational setting are associated with increased emotional labor and decreased well-being (Ilies, Dimotakis, & De Pater, 2010). For women in academia, this means they are more likely than their male coworkers to experience negative physical and psychological effects from their work. As they do not have control over student expectations and requests, these negative outcomes may be more extreme. But, if the university or college acts as a supportive atmosphere and provides more faculty resources, female faculty members are likely to benefit.

Second, it is likely that these gendered expectations will lead women to being less satisfied in the academic setting. Occupational health psychology literature suggests that workload is negatively associated with job satisfaction, especially when employees have low job control (e.g., Dwyer & Ganster, 1991; Landsbergis, 1988). Again, because women may feel restricted by their expectations and desire to appease students, they may experience the ruinous combination of high workload and low job control that tends to lead to lower job satisfaction.

Third, but arguably most prevalent, when faculty members are first hired, they often have to face the stressors that come along with not being tenured. Because tenure decisions are at least partially based on student evaluations, appeasing student requests, even if they are unreasonable, is in the professor’s best interest. If female faculty members are expected to be more communal,

they are much more likely than male faculty members to suffer from negative evaluations as a result of students' stereotypical expectations.

Theoretical implications

We propose that stereotypical expectations affect female professors in an academic setting. Research has shown that women who are more agentic and less communal report higher levels of incivility at work (Gabriel, Butts, Yuan, Rosen, & Sliter, 2018). In addition to being the target of incivility, female professors can also be viewed as the actors of incivility. El-Alayli et al. (2018) found that perceptions of students are indeed influenced by the extent to which female professors meet communal expectations. Future research should specifically test how these expectations influence perceptions of incivility and, in turn, affect various work outcomes.

Practical implications

I-O practitioners and those in academia can consider this commentary and take away many valuable implications from it. First, reducing gender bias can have important benefits in higher education. Educating students and administration alike on the implicit biases we all may possess can help increase the validity of the data we collect. As a secondary measure, administration may want to take these gender biases into account when utilizing student evaluations for promotion and tenure decisions or in consideration job resources for faculty members. If female professors are likely to experience higher workload demands due to student perceptual biases, universities and colleges may want to consider ways to support these faculty or encourage more objective policies (e.g., mandatory attendance policy, nonnegotiable final grade policy) to prevent students from projecting their biases onto their professors.

In addition, we feel it is important to highlight the issue of academic entitlement. Students in higher education should not feel as though they are entitled to a particular grade without earning that grade. When entitled students feel more inclined to ask for favors or increased grades, it hinders the entire academic system. It is also unfair that this tends to put more of an undue burden on female professors compared to male professors. With gender inequality still a prevalent concern in organizations, it is a necessity to address this concern so that student perceptions do not create a larger disparity between female and male performance in the college or university setting.

Conclusion

Perceptions of incivility can be influenced by failure to meet the expectations of the target. It is extremely important for students to feel safe in a university setting in order to learn and grow. This calls for awareness of the gender stereotypes that might lead students to perceive female professors as uncivil and thus feel unsafe. Likewise, addressing this issue is essential for the well-being of female professors. Female professors should be able to perform in an academic setting without the burden of the stereotypical expectations and be recognized for their hard work and accomplishments. Overall, this will positively contribute to all aspects in higher education.

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