

## THE EFFECT OF INSTRUCTOR RANK ON EVALUATION BY STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION This is a first attempt to determine the effect of the college instructor's academic rank on student evaluation of the instructor's performance. Assumption: Students' knowledge of their instructors' academic rank reflects the students' perception of their role in the formal organization structure.

. Studies of student evaluation of teaching activities have usually operated with one of 3 assumptions concerning the student role in the organizational structure of the university. 1) The student is a client of the organization, and as a consumer of the organization's services, is fundamentally outside the aegis of bureaucratic operations. 2) The student is a part of the organizational structure, but at such a low level of status and power as to have minimal effects on vertical authority or patterns of structure. 3) The student is an integral part of the organizational structure, and must therefore be considered a salient, low-power actor with a two-way flow of structural effects. Assumptions about the structural place which students occupy make a profound difference in the way the student is treated in models of university bureaucratic structure.

. Nowhere is this more important than in the area of student evaluations of course effectiveness. An example of the difference these assumptions make can be seen in the common use of the academic rank of university teachers as an independent or intervening variable in the evaluation of teacher performance and effectiveness. In this context, these assumptions may manifest themselves in the treatment of the hypothesized relation between academic rank and effectiveness evaluations in several forms.

Assumption 1, in which the student is seen as a client, implies that students, as mere consumers of university services need not be concerned with the academic rank

of the instructor, which is merely a bureaucratic status designation. Thus it should not affect students' evaluation of their role performance.

Assumption 2, that the student is a low level bureaucratic participant, implies that students are technically bureaucratic personnel but are temporally short-range, and incapable of controlling long-range bureaucratic outcomes. Again, the bureaucratic rank of their teachers should make little difference.

Assumption 3, that students are an integral part of the functioning of organizational structure, implies that the bureaucratic authority held by their instructors should logically affect the students' evaluation of teacher role performance.

## THEORETICAL RELATIONS

. Formal organization theory in the form of Max Weber's image of formal bureaucratization tends to serve the researcher of university structures much more adequately than more utopian collegial models suggested by those who would see academic personnel in colleges and universities as professionals (Weber 1952 21; Goode 1969 304). There is considerable dissensus as to the exact nature of the professional status of the university teachers, and the degree to which the different ranks share professional status equally. Adding to the confusion, Kleingartner cataloged the traits used by 7 authors to characterize professions, and found 10 such traits, but no consensus as to whether these were defining characteristics (Kleingartner 1967 10).

. Earlier, Wardwell had pointed out that the relation between bureaucratization and professionalism has much to do with the factors of autonomy and authority. By definition, autonomous professionals should resist bureaucratization as it usurps the professional's prerogatives in the area of their

expertise. Authority for professionals should reside in aggregations of professionals, or as Wardwell put it: "The appropriate basis for social organization for a professional is therefore the groups-of-equals pattern of the professional association rather than the bureaucratic type of organization" (Wardwell 1955 358).

. Critical to this discussion is the need to define the client of the professional. Goode, in maintaining that faculty members are professionals, held most strongly that the student is the client of the scholar, and that this relation should be regarded as having all the ethical and legal deference of their counterparts in medicine and law (Goode 1969 304). However, were this the case the faculty member's academic rank would be of little or no significance. Patients in hospitals accept medical doctors by medical specialty, and not by status ranking, in assessing the adequacy of treatment. In the hospital, deference is given to the socially esteemed title, doctor, and not to bureaucratically derived status.

. The question raised at the start of this research was whether university students not only deferred to the title professor, but whether they also used bureaucratic ranks of assistant, associate, and full professor, as a factor in evaluating a faculty member's role performance. This issue bears upon: 1) professionalism; 2) the appropriateness of bureaucratic structure along with the role of professor and student; and 3) performance evaluation by the university's most immediate client, the student. The first issue cannot be dealt with here except as an exogenous factor. However, it is possible to examine the second and third issue in combination.

. The ideal-type traits of Weber's classical bureaucracy have begun to appear almost in lock-step fashion in modern American universities, and even in small colleges. Looking at a university, one sees members of these formal organizations relating to each

other, not as whole persons, but as increasingly specialized position holders. From the Weberian point of view, the inescapable conclusion is that the university is a bureaucracy, and that it is equally likely that the status levels such as academic rank in bureaucratic positions should moderate the role performance evaluations of students. One should expect to find a halo effect mediating the performance evaluations of high-status members at the expense of low-status members.

. If higher academic rankings correspond to the bureaucratic status differences, then students should be expected to assume that superior status position, as a reward of achievement in Weberian terms, is ipso facto evidence of prior superior role performance. The evaluation of the higher position should be affected accordingly.

. As a testable hypothesis, we could say that students who know their teachers' rank should give higher evaluations to high status than to low status teachers. This hypothesis raises a new question. What can be said of students who do not know the academic rank of their instructors? Experienced teachers know that they have students in class who never discover their instructor's name or rank even at the end of the course. This raises the possibility that students may vary in the degree to which they perceive themselves as involved in the bureaucratic process. The drastically different rates of participation in university life suggests as much.

. The implications of this observation are important. First, it suggests that one of the cutting criteria of student response to university phenomena, of which teacher evaluation is only one, might correspond to their degree of acceptance as to their own legitimacy and salience in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Second, it suggests that this perception of salience may be the intervening variable which is paramount in defining the student's reactions. Might students of some specialties or

social background be more disposed to accept the bureaucratic significance of their participation? If so, the student evaluations of any professor may reflect 1) the luck of the draw; 2) the professor's ability to attract such students; or 3) the ability to instill such perceptions in the students so attracted.

. Considering the importance of these questions, especially for faculty, it is surprising that so little research has probed the issue. The few who have used these concepts have used them in a manner similar to Aleamoni and Yimer (1972), who used academic rank as an independent variable to examine instructional effectiveness ratings, and found no relation whatever! But this is a misuse of the idea that organization or academic rank should affect student evaluations, because they made no attempt to assess the degree to which the academic rank affected the student's perception of the instructor's role performance. Rather, they noted that only colleague ratings were found to be significantly related to teacher effectiveness ratings. Finally, it would seem that new directions have been mandated by the modest and often contradictory findings of research on teacher effectiveness. After surveying literature from 1910 to 1964, McDaniel concludes that there are very few aspects of teacher evaluation about which we know enough to say that they qualify as facts (McDaniel 1972).

**HYPOTHESIS** A simple test is possible, wherein the student evaluators are asked to indicate academic rank of their teacher. These student responses can be right or wrong, and if wrong, students may guess higher or lower than the true rank. By asking students who do not know to volunteer a guess on the teacher's rank, some more conclusive measurement is possible.

. The hypothesis to be tested is that there will be a direct positive relation between student

perception of the professors' academic rank and performance evaluation, such that professors with high perceived status will be accorded a higher evaluation of role performance than those with low perceived status. Permutations of possible responses are diagrammed on Table 2.

**METHOD** The hypothesis can be tested readily by finding out whether students know the organizational status or academic rank of their teachers, and by determining the effects of this knowledge on the students' evaluations of teacher performance. Since a significant number of the respondents may be expected not to know the academic rank of the instructor, the design of the survey must be expanded to examine the effects of the students who are unsure of the status, and who guess what the status might be.

. A standard teacher evaluation form used at Iowa State University was amended in two ways for this study. 1) Questions relating to the academic rank of the instructor were included near the middle of the form. 2) A single overall evaluation item was made more direct and rewritten to read: "The instructor conducted a useful and effective course." The students rated the item on a 5-point Likert-type scale with these choices: 1) Far below average (lowest 10%); 2) Below average (next 20%); 3) Average (middle 40%); 4) Above average (next 20%); 5) Far above average (top 10%). These evaluations were institution specific, as the instructions indicated that the student was to make the rating to indicate "how this instructor compares with all other instructors whom you have had at I.S.U." Evaluation forms were administered during the final week of the quarter. Responses were machine-scored from mark-sense sheets, and key-punched for analysis by computer.

. Sampling of instructors was accomplished by asking students in an undergraduate course in sociology to request the participation

of their instructors in other courses. This method was non-random, but was considered applicable for a theory test in exploratory areas. At the same time, the sample was thought to be of a size adequate to dispel some of the more extreme biases. The most serious biases may have emerged from the approachability factor, in that the most student-accessible faculty members were chosen. Participant teachers, without prior planning, represented the spectrum of academic ranks surprisingly well. There were 2 each in the graduate teaching assistant and instructor ranks, and three each in the assistant, associate, and full professor ranks. Total sample size consisted of 13 faculty members or graduate teaching assistants and 455 student raters. There were 19 cases omitted due to unduly contradictory or ambiguous responses. Student volunteers administered the evaluation forms where instructors requested them to do so. Otherwise the materials were left for the teacher to administer. Most of the legwork in this study was performed by 6 lower division sociology students as a required group project in a course taught by the author.

**RESULTS** Students were fairly capable of indicating the teacher rank. According to Table 1, 54 percent of the students could either tell or guess the correct rank of their teachers. Of those guessing wrong, 37 percent guessed too low, compared to only 10 percent who guessed too high. If the knowledge of academic status differences is an indication, then students are aware of the university bureaucratic structure. Students ignorant of their teachers' rank were a minority. This fact raises some serious research questions as to what role performance and attitude differences exist between those students who do and those who do not know their teachers' rank. A hint appears in the aggregate categories and responses in Table 2.

The lowest rating of teacher

TABLE 1: RATING OF INSTRUCTOR  
BY PERCEIVED ACADEMIC RANK  
(5-point scale)

Perceived rank	Rating	N
Correct	3.50	244
Too High	3.59	44
Too Low	3.92	167

$$F_{2,452} = 11.24; p = .001$$

performance was delivered by students who knew and correctly guessed teacher ranks. Meanwhile, the highest instructor ratings came from those students who guessed, but guessed lower than the actual rank of their teacher. Those who guessed wrong, but higher than the correct rank rated their teachers slightly higher than those who were correct. The magnitude of the differences was significant ( $p=.001$ ), as shown in Table 1. The hypothesis was that students knowing the status of their instructor would deliver higher evaluations than their un-informed counterparts. The data indicates the opposite: that such students give lower evaluations of the teacher. The hypothesis is not confirmed.

. One interpretation of the data is that the degree to which students perceive themselves a part of the bureaucratic operation, as shown by knowledge of teachers' academic rank, clearly does affect the evaluations.

. The parallel between those who were correct and those who guessed too high requires some explanation. It might be that the two bear such striking similarities due to the use of rather demanding bureaucratic standards of judgment. In that case, the students may use the same standards but guess the teacher to be of higher rank, and consequently expect a higher quality role performance. For the students guessing low, a different dynamic may operate. It may be that from their viewpoint, lower academic rank may be perceived as a virtue, and not as a negative status factor. As a result, they may have felt an affinity with these

TABLE 2: ACCURACY OF PERCEIVED INSTRUCTOR RANK WITH ASSOCIATED RATING

<u>Rank known?</u>	<u>Answer</u>	<u>Guessed rank</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>N</u>
Yes	Correct		3.56	127
	Incorrect	Too High	3.50	8
		Too Low	3.97	58
No	Correct	Correct	3.43	117
	Incorrect	Too high	3.61	36
		Too low	3.89	109

teachers, or may have judged them by less demanding standards. . The differences between responses of students who knew their teachers rank and were correct and those who guessed correctly were trivially small, and are within the range of sampling error according to a statistical test. The second group of guessers who guessed correctly may have been drawn from the same population of students as those who know their instructors' rank, but simply lacked the confidence to declare such knowledge. Excluding the wrong categories of aggregated data, the two groups of students who guessed correctly, and those who answered yes and were correct yielded the lowest and the third from the lowest ratings of teachers' performance. . Why should this be so? Could it be that those students who know the academic rank of their instructors bear a fundamentally different view of what constitutes good role performance for college teachers? It is no more far-fetched to assume that they may feel more a part of the bureaucratic hierarchy than it is to assume that they simply felt warmer toward the teachers, or that they found the atmosphere of the classroom more conducive to learning. Another way of approaching this question would be to find out which groups of students gave the highest

evaluations. The highest rating came from students who answered yes, but were wrong, and guessed too low. The next highest rating came from those students who had answered no, and then guessed too low. That these responses appear to be logical opposites of the first set suggests that in cases where students assume lower than actual academic rank for their instructor, the explanatory factor may well be the student's degree of hierarchical involvement. . Students guessing too low may have perceived the status proximity of the somewhat younger teacher as closer to their own status. This coupled with a lower expectation of quality performance based on lower organization status may have yielded higher ratings. Young-looking and young-acting assistant and associate professors, one suspects, are likely to receive higher ratings from this phenomenon. Note too, that students guessing incorrectly appeared much more ready to give the benefit of the doubt to the professor, and to assign him or her lower status and higher ratings. . Statistical tests of the means in Table 2 indicate that the evident differences were sufficiently large to suggest underlying substantive differences. For example, between all correct and all incorrect answers, T-tests indicated that the

differences were statistically significant for yes responses and for no responses. Similarly, between those who correctly answered yes, and those who guessed correctly, there was no statistically significant difference. There was no significant difference either for both groups who answered too high, and those who answered too low.

. If those who did know their instructors' academic rank are considered as a group against those who did not, the statistical evidence suggests that the two samples are sufficiently different as to be assumed to come from different populations.

. These populations represent those who do, as opposed to those who do not see themselves as bureaucratic participants. Note that there was no statistical significance within groups, between students correctly identifying instructor rank, whether they answered yes or no. This absence of effect continues between the incorrect but too-high guesses, whether their initial claim was yes or no, as well as for the too-low guesses.

. Regarding the hypothesis that there might be a halo effect around higher-status faculty members, matched by a loss of performance rating for low-status members, the findings were exactly the opposite. Teachers perceived by students as having low status were given significantly higher evaluations than teachers perceived by students as higher status. Equally important, students who did not know their teachers' status but guessed it high gave the lowest ratings to their teachers.

. The results imply that students should be more often considered as bureaucratic personnel and role-players, and not merely as clients and consumers of university services. It is unclear, however, whether students were aware of these perceptions of structural location either for themselves or for teachers. This preliminary evidence suggests that students who perceive themselves to be active

bureaucratic participants, and thus internalize a concept of the ideal role expected of faculty, deliver lower instructor evaluations. This is probably based on the student's contrast of the actual with the expected role performance.

. Tentative conclusion: Students should not be regarded merely as clients, but as position-holding members of the hierarchical bureaucratic structure of the university.

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