

“The Fact That the Author Was Male Instead of Female Provided for an Objective Opinion”: Implicit Bias in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an audit-style experiential learning activity intended to gauge students' perceptions of objectivity based on author gender, encourage students to apply the concept of bias to their own learning, and participate in a research study. In this activity, students were unknowingly randomly assigned the same reading on the gender wage gap with either a “male” or “female” author. Although the differences were not statistically significant, student numerical ratings of objectivity were higher when they believed the author was male. The discussion and reflection assignments demonstrated that this exercise provided students with a unique opportunity to evaluate their own biases, engage in discussion about bias, and apply course materials. Written rationale for ratings supported this perception that male authors were more objective. This activity is useful for students in thinking about and discussing the impact of implicit bias.

KEYWORDS

Audit Study, Experiential Learning, Gender Bias, Reflections, Research Methods, Sociology, Student Learning, Teaching Activity, Teaching Gender

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the use of an experimental audit experiential learning activity to examine students' implicit gender bias in multiple undergraduate sociology courses. We describe both the effectiveness of the activity in the classroom as well as the results of the activity looking at the effect of gender bias on students' perceptions of argument objectivity. In this activity, we assigned a reading on the gender wage gap in which we edited the authors' names so that half of the students had a “male” author and the other half had a “female” author. We asked the students to evaluate the strength and objectivity of the author's argument and gave the students an opportunity to discuss bias and their experience. While previous studies have used similar activities solely for collecting data on undergraduate students to test these questions (Jackson, Engstrom, & Emmers-Sommer, 2007; Lassonde & O'Brien, 2013), we chose to use this as a teaching opportunity for students to engage in experiential learning. Understanding implicit gender bias is crucial for students studying inequality as part of their education but also as part of their lives as these biases have real world consequences.

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Experiential learning deepens student understanding of concepts, enables students to be active learners, and has been shown to be more effective than lecture teaching styles (Davis & Arend, 2012; Luna & Winters, 2017; McKinney, 2007). The goals of this experiential learning activity were to (1) gauge students' perceptions of the strength and objectivity of an argument based on the gender of the author, (2) encourage students to apply the concept of bias to their own learning experience, (3) expose students to research on the wage gap or demonstrate the value of evaluating sources, depending on the course, and (4) expose students to the research process (informed consent, use of deception, debriefing) and provide them with an opportunity to be a part of a research study.

In the introductory level course where the activity was first used, the goal was for students to understand how implicit biases led them to interpret the objectivity or strength of argument differently. Implicit bias is defined as "a term of art referring to relatively unconscious and relatively automatic features of prejudiced judgment and social behavior" (Brownstein, 2017, para. 1). This activity was then replicated in an upper level research methods course to determine how students interpreted objectivity and strength of argument by author gender with a focus on reading and evaluating research. Although the goals for the activity in the two courses were somewhat different, the process by which the activity was carried out was the same for all courses. These activities were funded by two internal grants from the university that encouraged the implementation of applied learning activities.

BACKGROUND

While gender inequality has lessened over the past several decades in the United States (Fate-Dixon & Coontz, 2017; Hegewisch & DuMonthier, 2016), it persists in all aspects of social life. Gender inequality is reflected in ways that are observable and measurable (e.g., wages, legislation) and reflected in other more difficult-to-measure and observe ways (e.g., attitudes, biases, stereotypes). This paper focuses on an activity intended to generate thought and conversation on the difficult-to-measure and often unconscious ways in which gender inequality exists and is reproduced. Gender bias is a form of discrimination, which can be unintentional, unconscious, and even justified/internalized as fair (Auspurg, Hinz, & Sauer, 2017). Gender bias has consequences related to employment, pay, health, and housing, and many other areas; and has the potential to reinforce existing inequalities. This unconscious discrimination is sometimes referred to as implicit bias.

Gender bias is a heavily researched area, especially related to the workplace. Rice and Barth (2017) examined traditional gender role stereotypes in hiring decisions, with applicants more likely to be hired for traditionally female or male occupations. Sipe, Johnson, and Fisher (2009) considered perceptions of gender discrimination in the workforce among college students and found that students anticipated they would enter a workplace free of gender discrimination with gender discrimination not being a major concern. Gender bias is important to study in university populations in part because students anticipate equality upon entry into the labor market.

Research has established the importance of implicit bias in terms of our understanding of the world and the ways in which our biases direct our actions. While implicit bias is an important topic within sociology, it is also important to consider how our bias may impact the way in which we interpret information, an important issue in higher education. Understanding the role of implicit gender bias in how students interpret and understand information in the university setting is crucial given the limited existing studies on the topic (MacNell, Driscoll, & Hunt 2015; Richeson & Ambady 2001). Implicit bias can be addressed through bias literacy, which raises awareness of the fact that implicit bias exists and then can be combatted (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012; Isaac et al., 2016). Implicit bias is difficult to quantify in a real world setting despite its impact, but most often this has been done through audit studies or field experiments (Bendick & Nunes, 2012; Pager & Western, 2012).

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