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Students' Perceptions of and Preferences for Professors

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We examined the similarity of students' perceptions of and preferences for the behaviors of professors in three different disciplines. Undergraduate students who had taken a history, biology, or psychology class rated actual and ideal professors on 20 behaviors (e.g., disclosure of personal information). Students perceived psychology professors to be different than history and biology professors on several characteristics, despite similarity in student ratings of ideal preferences across these disciplines. We discuss implications for both professors and students regarding course evaluations and learning, respectively.

Keywords: teaching, student perceptions, attitude discrepancy

Students have distinct preferences for their professors for both professorial qualities such as classroom management and teaching styles (Beishline & Holmes, 1997) as well as personal qualities such as humor and approachability (Adamson, O'Kane, & Shevlin, 2005; Gurung & Vespia, 2007). However, professors and students have different perceptions of which behaviors an ideal professor should possess (Das & El-Sabban, 1996). For example, faculty indicated that ideal professors aid students in their development of general learning skills and encourage an intrinsic interest in learning, while students emphasized that ideal professors make educational materials, such as handouts, accessible to students and recognize socially appropriate behavior (Das & El-Sabban, 1996). Professors and students also disagree about which behaviors professors actually possess. Zhivkova (1992) found that students rated their actual professors lower on dedication to professional duty, knowledge within their discipline, and empathy compared to faculty's self-evaluations. Given that students and professors might value different professorial behaviors, students' preferences may not always match professors' *actual* behavior. In support of this possibility, students' experiences with their professors in reality differed from their preferences for an ideal professor, regarding course design, policies, and classroom behaviors (Epting, Zinn, Buskist, & Buskist, 2004).

Researchers investigating student preferences should consider the issue of generalizability when discussing the implications of their work for college professors. Several research studies on this topic have examined college students' perceptions of and preferences for professors in an unspecified discipline, in turn implicitly assuming generalizability across disciplines (e.g., Epting et al., 2004; Das & El-Sabban, 1996; Zhivkova, 1992). However, students in construction management courses differ from psychology students in perceptions of which professorial behaviors are most effective for students' learning (Jensen & Fischer, 2006). Santhanam and Hicks (2002) found that students in the hard sciences (e.g., science, mathematics) perceived their lecturers as more effective than students in the social sciences (e.g., arts, humanities). Thus, students retain differential perceptions of professors across disciplines, and they may possess discipline-specific preferences for professorial behaviors.

The present study empirically investigated this possibility. Specifically, we posed the following research questions: first, do students prefer the same behaviors from their professors, regardless of discipline, or do ideal standards differ across academic fields? Second, do students perceive professors as actually possessing different qualities depending on discipline? To address these questions, we measured students' perceptions of attributes and behaviors that are commonly assessed on course evaluation forms. Participants reported on professors' attributes and behaviors within the disciplines of psychology, history, and biology as a way to represent social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences, respectively. The broad scope of this study's sample provided a way to address the issue of generalizability across academic disciplines.

Method

Participants

We recruited 256 undergraduates (162 women, 93 men, 1 declined to indicate gender) ranging in age from

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18 to 28 (M = 19.3, SD = 1.49) to participate from St. Louis University's psychology participant pool. Participants received partial course credit for participating in the study. Eligible psychology pool participants had taken, or were currently taking, either a history or biology course. This eligibility requirement enabled the researchers to randomly assign participants to complete the survey about a psychology professor (to which all participants had been exposed) or either a history or biology professor. For example, participants who had only taken a history course were randomly assigned to complete the survey about either a psychology or history professor. In the cases that participants had taken both a history and biology course, the researchers randomly assigned them to complete the survey about a psychology, history, or biology professor.

Materials

To assess students' perceptions of professors, we developed the Students' Perceptions of Professors Survey (SPPS; see Appendix A for the survey instructions; see Appendix B for survey items), by adapting previously used measures (Epting et al., 2004; Zhivkova, 1992). We removed and consolidated the redundant items when combining the Epting and colleagues' (2004) and Zhivkova's (1992) measures. Additionally, we added other items as a way to increase the overall breadth of the SPPS. As a result, the SPPS consisted of two counterbalanced sections: (a) students' perceptions of how they would ideally like their professors to be and (b) students' perceptions of their professors' actual behavior and attributes. Because the main purpose of the current study was not that of a scale development, we did not assess the psychometric properties of the SPPS (e.g., construct validity, convergent validity, test-retest reliability). However, recent evidence suggests that Epting et al.'s measure–which our scale most closely resembles and was largely based on–has been validated (Keeley, Furr, & Buskist, 2010; Keeley, Smith, & Buskist, 2006), suggesting that the SPPS may also display similar psychometric properties.

Procedure

Each section of the SPPS contained 20 pairs of polar opposite traits, behaviors, and policies (e.g., funny versus serious, casual during lecture versus professional during lecture, has low expectations of students versus high expectations; see Appendix B). . The same 20 pairs were used for each section, but they were presented in different orders. Participants responded on a 5-point scale anchored by the word pairs. We randomly assigned participants to complete the SPPS about professors in one of the three disciplines: psychology, history, or biology. In assigning participants to conditions, we took into consideration whether participants had taken (or were taking) a history or biology course, since exposure to only one of those disciplines (in addition to current enrollment in a psychology course) was a requirement of participation in the study. After this consideration had been made, we randomly assigned participants to complete the SPPS about a professor in one of the disciplines in which they had taken or were currently taking a course.

Results

To assess whether students preferred the same ideal behaviors in professors across disciplines, we conducted a series of analyses of variance using student ratings. In other words, student ratings for psychology professors were averaged, as were ratings for history and biology professors. The mean scores for each group were compared. Only three comparisons revealed significant differences. Results from Tukey post hoc tests indicated the nature of these differences. Across all three significant findings, students wanted professors from one discipline to engage in higher levels of the behavior more than professors from another discipline. Specifically, students reported that history professors should curse more than biology professors ($F(2, 253) = 3.62$, $p < .05$, $M = 2.37$ and $M = 1.96$, respectively) and that psychology professors should both engage in more eye contact ($F(2, 253) = 4.76$, $p < .01$, $M = 4.74$) and share more personal information ($F(2, 253) = 3.45$, $p < .05$, $M = 4.02$) than history professors ($M = 4.36$ and $M = 3.68$, respectively)(see Table 1).

To address how students perceived actual professorial behavior across disciplines, we conducted a series of analyses of variance using student ratings of the professors' behaviors. Twelve of the 20 comparisons were significantly different. Tukey analyses served as post hoc tests for these comparisons (see Table 2). For eight of the behaviors, students viewed professors in one discipline as different from professors in the other two, which were no different from each other. Students reported that history professors used technology less

Table 1

Comparison of Professors by Discipline on Ideal Behaviors

	M (*SD*)			
Item	Psychology	Biology	History	*F*(*df*)
Make-up exam policy	2.77 (1.24)	2.99 (1.27)	2.64 (1.26)	$F(2, 253) = 1.64$
Funny	4.16 (0.68)	3.98 (0.93)	4.27 (0.83)	$F(2, 253) = 2.86$
Availability outside of class	4.76 (0.61)	4.74 (0.76)	4.76 (0.65)	$F(2, 253) = 0.23$
Level of expectations	4.22 (0.85)	4.35 (0.74)	4.31 (0.73)	$F(2, 253) = 0.68$
Cursing	$2.01_{a,b}$(0.97)	1.96_{a} (1.04)	2.37_{b} (1.19)	$F(2, 253) = 3.62$*
Respectfulness	4.87 (0.40)	4.92 (0.28)	4.87 (0.40)	$F(2, 253) = 0.46$
Includes other subjects	3.70 (1.07)	3.56 (1.16)	3.85 (1.15)	$F(2, 253) = 1.31$
Attendance policy	2.37 (1.12)	2.76 (1.35)	2.62 (1.24)	$F(2, 253) = 2.26$
Attractiveness	3.59 (0.80)	3.47 (0.93)	3.46 (0.86)	$F(2, 253) = 0.53$
Eye contact	4.74_{a} (0.47)	$4.51_{a,b}$(0.83)	4.36_{b} (1.04)	$F(2, 253) = 4.76$**
Relationship with students	4.87 (0.40)	4.85 (0.45)	4.81 (0.50)	$F(2, 253) = 0.43$
Management of class time	4.68 (0.62)	4.82 (0.44)	4.80 (0.46)	$F(2, 253) = 1.96$
Class discussions	3.91 (1.16)	3.64 (1.20)	4.04 (0.99)	$F(2, 253) = 2.82$
Hand gestures	4.02 (0.78)	4.00 (0.87)	3.92 (0.93)	$F(2, 253) = 0.35$
Sharing personal information	4.02_{a} (0.82)	$3.74_{a,b}$(0.94)	3.68_{b} (0.98)	$F(2, 253) = 3.45$*
Professionalism	2.54 (1.04)	2.66 (1.13)	2.46 (1.07)	$F(2, 253) = 0.70$
Expressiveness	4.16 (0.75)	4.07 (0.61)	4.19 (0.91)	$F(2, 253) = 0.56$
Self-improves	4.51 (0.68)	4.42 (0.93)	4.49 (0.86)	$F(2, 253) = 0.23$
	M (*SD*)			
Item	Psychology	Biology	History	*F*(*df*)
Technology use	4.32 (0.90)	4.32 (1.03)	4.32 (0.87)	$F(2, 253) = 0.00$
Movement	4.17 (0.93)	4.21 (0.86)	4.31 (0.79)	$F(2, 253) = 0.57$

Note. All items are on a 5-point scale. Higher values indicate more of a behavior. Row means with different subscripts differ at the $p < .05$ level.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

($F(2, 253) = 22.24$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.62$) than biology ($M = 4.56$) and psychology professors ($M = 4.61$). Also according to student reports, biology professors had stricter make-up policies ($F(2, 252) = 6.10$, $p < .001$, $M = 4.25$), generally higher expectations of students ($F(2, 253) = 5.63$, $p < .01$, $M = 4.44$), and less frequent class discussions ($F(2, 253) = 7.95$, $p < .001$, $M = 2.44$), than history ($M = 3.86$, $M = 4.12$, and $M = 3.15$, respectively) and psychology professors ($M = 3.69$, $M = 4.07$, and $M = 3.11$, respectively). Finally psychology professors were funnier ($F(2, 253) = 19.67$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.99$), more emotionally expressive ($F(2, 253) = 13.75$, $p < .001$, $M = 4.05$), had more lenient attendance policies ($F(2, 253) = 12.52$, $p < .001$, $M = 2.15$), and made more attempts at self-improvement ($F(2, 253) = 5.84$, $p < .01$, $M = 3.83$) than history ($M = 3.14$, $M = 3.30$, $M = 2.90$, and $M = 3.37$, respectively) and biology professors ($M = 3.29$, $M = 3.55$, $M = 3.12$, and $M = 3.35$, respectively).

For three of the four remaining significant analyses of variance, students viewed differences between just two disciplines (while the third discipline did not differ significantly from either of them). Specifically, students reported that psychology professors were more likely to move around the classroom while teaching ($F(2, 253) = 4.64$, $p < .01$, $M = 4.22$) than history professors ($M = 3.64$) and that they were more physically attractive ($F(2, 253) = 6.23$, $p < .01$, $M = 2.98$) than biology professors ($M = 2.46$). Students viewed history professors as having a more professional lecture style

($F(2, 253) = 6.34$, $p < .01$, $M = 3.19$) than psychology professors ($M = 2.56$). The remaining behavior, sharing more personal information ($F(2, 253) = 20.52$, $p < .001$), varied across all three types of professors such that psychology professors ($M = 3.92$) shared more personal information than biology professors ($M = 3.32$),

Table 2

Comparison of Professors by Discipline on Actual Behaviors

Item	*M* (*SD*) Psychology	Biology	History	*F*(*df*)
Make-up exam policy	3.69_{a} (1.12)	4.25_{b} (1.06)	3.86_{a} (1.03)	$F(2, 252) = 6.10$**
Funny	3.99_{a} (0.74)	3.29_{b} (0.94)	3.14_{b} (1.12)	$F(2, 253) = 19.67$***
Availability outside of class	3.92 (0.88)	3.98 (0.98)	3.80 (0.99)	$F(2, 253) = 0.78$
Level of expectations	4.07_{a} (0.77)	4.44_{b} (0.68)	4.12_{a} (0.86)	$F(2, 253) = 5.63$**
Cursing	1.47 (0.68)	1.56 (0.91)	1.79 (1.09)	$F(2, 252) = 2.73$
Respectfulness	4.63 (0.65)	4.40 (0.85)	4.37 (0.82)	$F(2, 253) = 2.96$
Includes other subjects	3.46 (1.11)	3.15 (1.17)	3.20 (1.23)	$F(2, 253) = 1.71$
Attendance policy	2.15_{a} (1.23)	3.12_{b} (1.44)	2.90_{b} (1.32)	$F(2, 253) = 12.52$***
Attractiveness	2.98_{a} (0.98)	2.46_{b} (0.95)	$2.67_{a,b}$(0.99)	$F(2, 253) = 6.23$**
Eye contact	4.26 (0.91)	4.13 (0.88)	3.95 (1.02)	$F(2, 253) = 2.38$
Relationship with students	4.20 (0.97)	3.89 (1.06)	3.94 (0.92)	$F(2, 253) = 2.33$
Management of class time	4.01 (1.06)	3.98 (1.02)	4.21 (0.85)	$F(2, 253) = 1.44$
Class discussions	3.11_{a} (1.38)	2.44_{b} (1.19)	3.15_{a} (1.38)	$F(2, 253) = 7.95$***
Hand gestures	4.11 (0.92)	3.78 (1.05)	3.92 (1.06)	$F(2, 253) = 2.44$
Sharing personal information	3.92_{a} (1.05)	3.32_{b} (1.08)	2.81_{c} (1.27)	$F(2, 253) = 20.52$***
Professionalism	2.56_{a} (1.03)	$2.84_{a,b}$ (1.14)	3.19_{b} (1.28)	$F(2, 252) = 6.34$**
Expressiveness	4.05_{a} (0.82)	3.55_{b} (0.91)	3.30_{b} (1.11)	$F(2, 253) = 13.75$***
Self-improves	3.83_{a} (0.78)	3.35_{b} (1.26)	3.37_{b} (1.02)	$F(2, 253) = 5.84$**
Technology use	4.61_{a} (0.69)	4.56_{a} (0.94)	3.62_{b} (1.50)	$F(2, 253) = 22.24$***
Movement	4.22_{a} (1.11)	$3.93_{a,b}$ (1.19)	3.64_{b} (1.39)	$F(2, 253) = 4.64$*

Note. All items are on a 5-point scale. Higher values indicate more of a behavior. Row means with different subscripts differ at the $p < .05$ level.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

who in turn shared more personal information than history professors ($M = 2.81$).

Discussion

Most previous research on students' perceptions of professors has not explicitly addressed the issue of generalizability in terms of applying findings across disciplines (e.g., Epting et al., 2004). However, preliminary evidence suggests that the discipline in which students take courses influences the behaviors students prefer their professors to possess (Jensen & Fischer, 2006; Santhanam & Hicks, 2002). Thus, we investigated whether students preferred similar qualities in professors, regardless of discipline, and whether students perceived professors as similar on these qualities.

Although students held similar standards for professorial behavior, they perceived discipline-specific differences. Specifically, students rated psychology professors higher on interpersonal behaviors (e.g., funny and self-improving). Given psychology's focus on human behavior and interaction, professors in this field might be able to incorporate students' preferences into their own behaviors and interactions with students. Previous studies support this interpretation, finding that psychology students ranked relationship-oriented behaviors, such as "interacts with students in a positive manner" and "treats students with respect," valuable to learning (e.g., Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, & Saville, 2002).

Alternatively, our findings suggest that students generally prefer that professors possess the same professorial qualities, regardless of discipline. These findings differ from those of Jensen and Fischer (2006), who found that the opinions of construction management students differed significantly from psychology students' opinions of which professorial behaviors best facilitated student learning. For example, construction management students preferred qualities that pertained to resource management (e.g., provides constructive feedback, presents current information) while psychology students preferred attributes geared towards relationship maintenance (e.g., respectful, cares for students; Jensen & Fischer, 2006). A possibility for this inconsistency may be due to the nature of the disciplines examined. We asked participants to report their preferences for professors in traditional university disciplines, whereas Jensen and Fischer focused on construction management, which is a nontraditional discipline that is more focused on vocational training. Thus, differences between students' preferences may be due to the extent to which a discipline is vocationally oriented.

However, the question still remains regarding the implications of students' discipline-general preferences–for both professors and students. Professors may benefit from knowing how students use these standards when processing and evaluating their behavior. For example, if students have a discipline-general professor schema, they may use it when completing course evaluations. Because past research has shown that evaluations of individuals who conform to expectations (e.g., gender roles) tend to be more positive than those of individuals who fail to conform (Blakemore, 2003), professors who possess the qualities that students desire might receive more positive course evaluations than professors who do not conform to student expectations. Numerous studies indicate that factors external to course design and policy influence course evaluations. Examples of these external factors include grades received (Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997), professor's appearance (Gurung & Vespia, 2007), and hard sciences vs. social sciences (Santhanam & Hicks, 2002). These findings suggest that many aspects of students' experiences in a course affect how students rate the course, not just how well the professor taught. Although professors do have significant control over various aspects of a course, such as course policies, their control of other factors, like course discipline, is limited. As course evaluations may influence important decisions made about professors' careers (e.g., hiring, promoting, and granting tenure), future research should examine potential consequences of professors meeting or violating student expectations.

The current study is limited because it did not address the link between student preferences and student learning. Having professors who meet expectations may not guarantee students' success in the classroom. Prior studies recommended that professors try to adopt some of the behaviors reported by students as helpful to their learning (e.g., Keeley et al., 2006). However, this study provided behaviors from which participants chose. Results may have differed if students were asked to generate a list of behaviors they preferred and perceived. Additionally, how recently students have taken a course may impact their current evaluation of

the professor. All participants in the current study came from a psychology participant pool, meaning they had to be currently enrolled in a psychology course, but we did not control for when participants had taken courses in either of the other two disciplines (history and biology). Even though the SPPS instructed participants to think of a typical professor in each discipline (see Appendix A), the possibility exists that participants thought of one particular professor when completing the questionnaire. For example, memory research indicates that people tend to remember best information they are exposed to initially, as well as the most recent information, but are typically not aware of these memory effects (e.g., Bjork & Whitten, 1974; Castel, 2008; Murdock, 1962). Student-reported differences between professors across disciplines may be affected by time providing less generalizable results.

The results from the current study should be interpreted with caution because professors and students may have different ideas about what professors can do to facilitate learning (Das & El-Sabban, 1996). The qualities that students prefer in professors may not be more likely to facilitate student learning than those characteristics that students dislike. Students may prefer behaviors that make class time more enjoyable but do not contribute to their understanding of the material. Likewise, professors may have well-established teaching behaviors and might not take the time to understand or to try to teach in ways that could meet the specific needs of their students. Future research should explore the relationship between students' and professors' perceptions of effective teaching behaviors and student learning outcomes.

Another way that future research can improve upon the current study is by collecting data from multiple sites. Generalizability of this study's findings may be affected by the fact that all participants attended the same university, a private Jesuit school. Having these qualities may make the school different from other universities. Its mission is focused on educating socially conscious leaders which translates into an emphasis on service learning. Given this focus, the students who choose to attend the university may not be representative of all college students across the country. A similar point can be made about the professors who choose to work at this school. For example, across disciplines, students at this university rated self-improvement as characteristic of an ideal professor. Students at schools with missions less focused on serving others may not believe as strongly that professors should work towards self-improvement. However, conclusions drawn from the current study do not attempt to describe specific characteristics of ideal or typical professors, both of which require generalizability across universities. Instead, this study examined the generalizability of students' ratings of professorial behavior across disciplines. Within the setting of one university, the study met its intended goal. Of course, replication of the current study needs to occur at different types of universities. Ideally, such research would recruit students from several universities to participate in the same study.

In conclusion, our findings support the assumption that students' perceptions of professors are generalizable across disciplines. For years researchers have investigated student preferences of professorial behaviors without explicitly questioning whether these preferences could be applied outside of the discipline under investigation. Empirical evidence of the generalizability of their findings may promote unification within the field of pedagogical research. For example, researchers working with psychology students may now feel justified in collaborating with researchers working with biology students. Such interdisciplinary efforts can only serve to improve the quality of research and to broaden our knowledge base.

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Appendix A

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSORS SURVEY

ABOUT YOUR PERCEPTION OF YOUR ACTUAL PROFESSOR:

INSTRUCTIONS: On the following page are a series of items regarding the qualities and characteristics of [psychology/biology/history] professors. Your task is to identify each item in terms of *your* "typical" [psychology/biology/history] professor – the type of professor *with whom you have had experience in [psychology/biology/history] classes*.

Please indicate the extent to which the *typical* [psychology/biology/history] professor *actually* is on each of these dimensions.

ABOUT YOUR PERCEPTION OF YOUR IDEAL PROFESSOR:

INSTRUCTIONS: O n the following page are a series of items regarding the qualities and characteristics of college professors. Your task is to use your responses to create what you feel is the "ideal" or "perfect" [psychology/biology/history] professor in terms of *who would most effectively teach you.*

Please indicate the extent to which the *typical* [psychology/biology/history] professor *ideally* is on each of these dimensions.

Example:

Cold ○ ○ ○ ● ○ Warm

Appendix B

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSOR SURVEY

Has a strict make-up exam policy	○	○	○	○	○	Has a relaxed make-up exam policy
Funny	○	○	○	○	○	Serious
Available outside of classroom	○	○	○	○	○	Unavailable outside of classroom
Has low expectations of students	○	○	○	○	○	Has high expectations of students
Always curses during lecture	○	○	○	○	○	Never curses during lecture

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSORS

Disrespectful of others	○	○	○	○	○	Respectful of others
Includes other subjects into lecture	○	○	○	○	○	Doesn't include other subjects into lecture
Has a relaxed attendance policy	○	○	○	○	○	Has a strict attendance policy
Attractive	○	○	○	○	○	Unattractive
Does not maintain eye contact with students	○	○	○	○	○	Maintains eye contact with students
Has positive student-teacher relationship	○	○	○	○	○	Has negative student-teacher relationship
Manages class time well	○	○	○	○	○	Manages class time poorly
Infrequently conducts class discussions	○	○	○	○	○	Frequently conducts class discussions
Frequently uses hand gestures	○	○	○	○	○	Infrequently uses hand gestures
Shares personal information	○	○	○	○	○	Withholds personal information
Casual during lecture	○	○	○	○	○	Professional during lecture
Shows no emotions	○	○	○	○	○	Emotionally expressive
Attempts to self-improve	○	○	○	○	○	Does not attempt to self-improve
Does not use technology during class	○	○	○	○	○	Uses technology during class
Stands in one place while teaching	○	○	○	○	○	Moves around while teaching