

# When Teaching Is Evaluated on Political Grounds

*Stanley Coren*

**P** sychologists and other behavioral scientists who teach courses containing material on individual differences often find themselves presenting research findings that are politically unpopular in today's social climate. For example, segments of most introductory psychology courses deal with intelligence and mental abilities. An honest treatment of this material requires that evidence be presented indicating that *both* environmental and genetic factors determine intelligence. The evidence for heritable factors in intelligence is supported by data from selective breeding studies using animal subjects, from twin studies, and from family studies. In exploring the implications of this work the lecturer generally presents the evidence that different racial groups score differently on intelligence tests, and then analyzes the factors that contribute to this observed difference. Most researchers (and most textbooks) agree that although environmental factors are important, genetic contributions cannot be ignored, since they play a large role in determining group differences in mental abilities scores.<sup>1</sup>

The case is quite similar in the discussion of sex differences in cognitive abilities. There are systematic differences in the pattern of abilities displayed by males and females on standardized tests. Although many of these differences may be environmental in origin or reflect differences in the socialization of males and females, some ability differences appear to be genetically determined. It appears that the disparity between male and female scores on certain abilities measures are the direct consequence of hormonal, neurological, and even brain structure differences between the sexes. The conscientious lecturer interested in presenting the full picture must discuss these physical differences as well as the environmental factors.<sup>2</sup>

## **Potential Evaluation Problems**

Unfortunately, in the current political climate on college and university campuses, it appears that the teaching of research on ability differences among racial or sexual groups may have implications for the careers of faculty members. The potential problem arises in institutions that use teaching evaluations as part of the data upon which decisions about tenure, promotion, and merit pay increments are based. This became clear to me during the course of some committee deliberations at my institution, the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, Canada.

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The UBC psychology department follows teaching evaluation procedures that are common in many universities. One important component in the evaluation process is the mandatory distribution of a questionnaire to every student at the end of each course. Traditionally, students are asked to comment on their perception of a number of aspects of the course and the instructor. Items addressed include the fairness of evaluation procedures, instructor preparation and interest in the material, clarity of delivery, availability during office hours, rapport with the class, and so forth. Comments are numerically coded and summarized. These summaries then become a part of the instructor's permanent file. Student evaluations have often played a pivotal role in tenure and promotion deliberations pertaining to particular faculty members. They are most likely to have a major impact when the candidate is borderline in some other respects, in which case the teaching evaluations may swing the decision in one direction or another.

Probably as a response to social pressures within the university, the UBC teaching committee decided to "modernize" the current course evaluation questionnaire. This revision involved the deletion of several objective items, such as whether the course was organized logically, or whether the final grade was based upon several evaluations or tests rather than a single assessment. More disturbing was the introduction of several items involving issues of sex and race. Thus students were asked to assess whether the instructor used "examples or stories that were demeaning to members of certain racial or cultural groups" or "demeaning either to women or to men." Additional items highlighting racial or sexual identity were also included.

To some faculty members the inclusion of such potentially "political" items in the questionnaire seemed inappropriate, for terms like "demeaning" involve certain assumptions and interpretations in which the listeners' biases are as much a factor as the content of the lecture. A student who is told that one racial group does not do as well as another on certain mental abilities tests may well interpret those remarks as "demeaning" to that group. (As President Harry S Truman once quipped, "I never did give anybody hell. I just told the truth and they thought it was hell.") The committee revising the questionnaire did not perceive any such risk. The chairman of the committee felt that students know the difference between opinion and scientific data and would not negatively evaluate an instructor for presentation of data, no matter the conclusion reached. Thus, despite objections, several items involving race and sex were included in the revised teaching evaluation questionnaire.

### **Some Concerns**

I was quite concerned about the inclusion of such items. My major trepidation was that students would mistake the conclusions reached in presenting material dealing with race and sex as reflecting the attitudes of the instructor

rather than objective reporting of scientific data. I was also concerned that such questionnaire items are based upon the presumption that we can ask students of eighteen and nineteen years of age, who are less than a year beyond high school, to answer difficult questions about what constitutes racist or sexist content in a course and whether their lecturer is guilty of purveying such content. Given that society as a whole and many academics and scholars have struggled with these issues for many years and still have not reached a consensus, the validity of this presumption seems dubious. If student judgments lack validity or, worse, if they are biased by the conclusions reached by the research under discussion, this could prove quite disastrous for faculty members who teach about individual and group differences in behavior.

My long-range concern was that the knowledge that such politically charged items are to be used in teaching evaluations would inevitably serve to “muzzle” faculty. The likeliest targets are young faculty who know that their teaching ratings will affect their chances for promotion and tenure. In effect, the inclusion of “sensitive” items could eventually cause faculty simply not to teach certain substantive areas. The fear motivating such behavior is that lectures that reach politically unpopular conclusions will lead some students to apply labels of “sexist” or “racist” to the lecturer.

### **An Empirical Assessment**

As an experimental psychologist it seemed to me that the best way to address this issue would be to collect some data from the very students who would be called upon to evaluate faculty members. In this way I could either clarify the problems inherent in this form of teaching evaluation, or set my own misgivings to rest.

My test sample consisted of 198 students enrolled in an introductory psychology class. There were 109 women and 89 men; the mean age was 18.7 years. Each received a questionnaire. Students were told *not* to put their names on the survey form, just as they are not required to sign the teaching evaluation questionnaires. The introduction to the survey reads:

#### *University Teaching Questionnaire*

Recently, the public and press have brought to light some issues that are important to the normal functioning of the university. Two, which have been mentioned many times, are:

1) In the minds of many people there are some topics that are appropriate and others that are inappropriate topics for university and college classes.

2) It has been occasionally suggested that some professors may let their own personal views enter into their teaching and these views might be inappropriately presented as fact.

Both of these issues are controversial and many individuals hold different viewpoints about them. We are interested in your opinions about these issues.

Below you will find some sample descriptions of lectures that might be given in an introductory psychology course. Consider what you feel your own reactions would be to such lectures and briefly answer the questions below them.

Four simple lecture summaries were presented in paragraph form:

1) Professor W gives a lecture about learning. In it he notes that simple repetition does not improve learning. He concludes that rereading the textbook several times will not result in good comprehension. He suggests several working techniques and activities that he feels will improve memory.

2) Professor X gives a lecture about intelligence. In it he describes some evidence for biological factors, such as genes, that affect intelligence. He suggests that although culture and experience are important in determining scores on intelligence tests, genetic factors can be used to explain some portion of the differences in IQ scores that are obtained when different races take intelligence tests.

3) Professor Y gives a lecture about aging. In it he notes evidence that older individuals have difficulty learning certain material and solving certain problems. He suggests that these differences may reflect a slowing in thinking processes in elderly people.

4) Professor Z gives a lecture about sex differences. In it he notes evidence that males consistently score better than females on spatial and mathematical tests. He suggests that while societal and environmental contributions should not be ignored, some portion of these sex differences in ability may be due to genetic factors or differences in the brain structure of males and females.

After each lecture summary, several questions were asked. The first was simply, "Is this material appropriate for a psychology course? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No." The second and third questions were much more open-ended: "What are the professor's reasons or motives for presenting this subject matter?" and "What does this lecture tell you about Professor \_\_\_?"

The results of this survey supported my fears about how students would evaluate faculty members who present unpopular conclusions. The relevant lectures, of course, are 2 and 4. Although each lecture summary contains subject matter that is often taught in introductory psychology courses, lectures 2 and 4 also deal with the more politically sensitive issues of race and sex differences in intelligence and mental abilities.

Before looking at the data, it is important to note that the viewpoints expressed by Professors X and Z in lectures 2 and 4 are quite consistent with data in the behavioral literature. They agree with the conclusions of many researchers and are in accord with several large literature reviews.<sup>3</sup> Many textbooks for introductory psychology courses also present material of a similar nature. Notice as well that these lecture summaries are clearly moderate in tone, and do not contain anything inflammatory or demeaning to any group. Nevertheless, the results suggest that these eighteen- and nineteen-year-old students saw the lectures as much more negative and problematic.

## Lecture 2: Evidence for a Genetic Contribution to Intelligence

In lecture 2 Professor X suggests that there is a genetic contribution to intelligence. Although he acknowledges contributions from culture and environment, he concludes that the genetic contribution to intelligence might account for “some portion” of the differences observed in IQ scores between the races. An amazing 38 percent (76/198) of student evaluators felt that this was *not* an appropriate topic for a psychology course. Furthermore, in the question on the professor’s motives for presenting this material and the question about what this lecture indicated about Professor X, 24 percent (48/198) specifically mentioned “racist,” “racism,” or notions of “racial superiority” as motivating the presentation of this material. Thus the very discussion of genetic and racial differences in intelligence, if the conclusion is that they exist, renders the lecturer a racist in the minds of nearly one-quarter of these students.

## Lecture 4: Evidence for Sex Differences in Cognitive Skills

In this lecture Professor Z suggests that there are differences between males and females in spatial and mathematical ability. Although acknowledging the contribution of social and environmental factors, he concludes that “some portion” of these differences may be due to physiological or genetic differences between males and females. Again, the results are quite distressing. Thirty-one percent (62/198) of the class felt that this was a topic that was *not* appropriate for a psychology course. There was a strong difference between male and female respondents. Forty-eight percent (52/109) of females, while only 11 percent (10/89) of males, felt that the topic was inappropriate. In the discussion of motives, or what this lecture indicated about Professor Z, 26 percent (51/198) mentioned “sexist,” “sexism,” “anti-women,” “putting women down” or the equivalent as the primary motivation for the presentation. Again, there was a strong difference between the sexes, with 94 percent (48/51) of the sexism charges coming from female students. Thus, in the minds of more than a quarter of all the students, and nearly one-half the female students, simple presentation of data and conclusions that are accepted in the experimental psychology literature makes the lecturer a sexist.

## Implications for Faculty Assessment

The conclusions that can be reached based on these data should be obvious—and somewhat frightening. It is quite clear that many students, especially the freshmen tested here, cannot separate the scientific evidence presented by an instructor from the instructor’s own opinions. Also, they make one variety of the “fundamental attribution” error so well-known to social psychologists.<sup>4</sup> In this case, the error involves the belief that the

conclusions *reached* by the lecturer are the conclusions *desired* by the lecturer. In other words, the observer (here the student) believes that the lecturer must be driven by internal motives consonant with the data he presents.

Based on the data described above, what can we conclude about how students would describe Professor X if asked whether he "used examples that demeaned any racial or cultural group"? How would students evaluate Professor Z if they were asked whether he used any "examples that demeaned women"? Obviously, many students would describe Professor X as a racist and Professor Z as a sexist.

These data, if they are a valid indicator of how students form opinions about instructors based upon the presentation of particular material in class, have dire implications for faculty members whose courses include the topic of individual differences. In light of teacher evaluation forms that require students to draw conclusions about the political and social attitudes of their professors based upon the content of lectures, this situation can have only one outcome. If faculty members are aware of or suspect there are student biases about such material, then a sizeable proportion of junior faculty will refuse to teach this material. The same is probably true for senior faculty, who know that poor teaching ratings might adversely affect decisions about merit pay increases.

Where up to a third of your students will negatively evaluate you simply for presenting data that reflect the dominant thinking and empirical results reported in the literature, perhaps it is better to select a book that reaches the "politically correct" conclusions. And in lectures, perhaps it is better to "tailor" the data to reach those same conclusions. Or perhaps it is better not to bring up the topic at all, and thus be absolutely sure that no charges of racism or sexism can be leveled at you.

We must ask ourselves and our teaching evaluation committees: What are political questions doing on an instrument that is supposedly designed to evaluate teaching effectiveness? By allowing political interpretations to form a component in our teaching evaluations we effectively subvert the ideal of dispassionate research and teaching. Teacher assessments based on the student's political or social interpretation of the empirical data or on how well the conclusions accord with his preconceptions and social attitudes must lead to suppression of unpopular data.

It seems that the academic establishment has not recognized what Adlai Stevenson knew about the public psyche. He observed, "You will find that the truth is often unpopular and the contest between agreeable fancy and disagreeable fact is unequal. For, in the vernacular, we are suckers for good news."<sup>5</sup> If teaching evaluations use student opinions about the social or political implications of the material taught, then behavioral scientists will soon find themselves pressured to teach only the "good news" that there are no differences in the abilities of racial or sexual subgroups—even if this

involves ignoring or suppressing the bulk of the research data. Thus the evaluation of teaching ability will become nothing more than the evaluation of how well a faculty member's lectures conform to the political norm. It is sad to think that humorist Josh Billings may have been correct when he said, "As scarce as the truth is, the supply has always been in excess of the demand."

### Notes

1. These issues have been covered extensively elsewhere, as in Robert Plomin, "Environment and Genes: Determinants of Behavior," *American Psychologist* 44, no. 2 (1989), or the sprightly debate in H.J. Eysenck, *The Intelligence Controversy* (New York: Wiley, 1981).
2. For an excellent and remarkably balanced review, see Diane F. Halpern, *Sex Differences in Cognitive Abilities* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1986).
3. See Robert Plomin, *Nature and Nurture: An Introduction to Behavioral Genetics* (Pacific Grove, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1990).
4. See L. Ross, "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process," in L. Berkowitz, ed. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (New York: Academic Press, 1977).
5. Adlai Stevenson, *New York Times*, 9 June 1958.

**From "Forward, March!" by William A. Rusher, in the  
15 February 1993 *National Review*:**

Not long ago a kindly philanthropist agreed to finance the construction, on a mountain-top in Arizona, of an important new telescope. The plan was quickly assailed by "environmentalists" on the ground that this particular site was the sole remaining habitat of an endangered subspecies of red squirrel. Investigation soon disclosed that the squirrel could be found in many other areas. The opponents of the telescope thereupon simply shifted their ground: the area in question, they now object, is the site of an ancient Indian burial-ground, sacred to local tribes.