

Gender Bias in Peer-to-Peer Feedback:

Awareness and Intervention Strategies for Management Educators

A 2021 article in the Harvard Business Review reminds readers that “not all feedback is created equal” (Dolder, et. al., 2021). The article, focused on employee development, reported on findings from a computerized textual analysis of 1,000 pieces of written feedback for 146 mid-career leaders. Results indicated women tend to receive less actionable and less effective feedback. Specifically, men are encouraged to focus on vision while women are asked to focus on operational tasks; men are prompted to leverage politics and women “cope” with them; men asked to display more confidence (framed as an actionable item) and women told to “be” more confident (Dolder, et. al., 2021). Feedback is not free from gender bias, regardless of how well-intentioned the feedback, or how unconscious the giver is of their bias when delivering it.

The purpose of this roundtable session is to encourage discussion and problem-solving around gender differences in peer-to-peer assessment in the management classroom. The same gender biases that present themselves in feedback between manager and employee in the workplace can also be perpetuated in the classroom. At the same time, the classroom is a space to recognize, reflect, discuss, and modify feedback practices in ways that help male and female students, and later employees, reach their full potential. We see this session as directly related to the conference theme of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

The following questions motivated our submission: 1) How do gender stereotypes present themselves in peer-to-peer feedback in the management classroom; 2) how do we facilitate conversations with students about gendered feedback; and 3) how can we bring to consciousness our own biases and help students recognize theirs when engaging in peer assessment? Although both authors teach management classes, this session is not limited exclusively to management

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majors or courses, but rather any course that uses peer-to-peer feedback as a way of assessing student performance.

Theoretical Foundation & Teaching Implications

Peer assessment has well-documented advantages as a pedagogical strategy, including the opportunity for students to practice giving and receiving feedback, engage in collaborative learning, foster cognitive development, increase their self-awareness, and critical thinking skills (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Sluijsmans et. al, 2002; Topping and Ehly, 2001). In general, the process of peer assessment prompts students to develop an understanding of assignment goals, apply evaluative criteria, and make judgements (Topping, 2003). When students are asked to engage in peer assessment, they have the opportunity to become active participants in their own learning, which in turn, promotes their development as autonomous learners (Cheng & Warren, 1999).

Some scholarship has made an effort to recognize that assessment is not a gender-blind, neutral process of measurement, but rather an inherently value-laden process subject (and shaped by) gender (Croussard, 2016; Elwood, 2007). The theoretical foundation of this roundtable is built on this same assumption; following Croussard (2016), we view learning and assessment as co-constructed cultural activities shaped by historical and lived experiences that ultimately influence the norms and expectations that students bring to the classroom. Similarly, we recognize gender as a social construction that is discursively produced, fluid, and dynamic, not an invariable binary characterized by male/female. As Butler (1990) astutely argued, gender is not something one *is*, it is something one *does*, a series of repeated acts that occur within a rigid regulatory frame.

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We combine our assumptions about gender and assessment with research from social role theory, which offers explanatory power for how behavioral expectations tend to differ for men and women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Whereas terms such as friendly, nurturing, and helpful, are more likely to be attributed to women, characteristics such as assertive, ambitious, and self-sufficient are more closely ascribed to men. When men and women act differently than the attributes socially ascribed to them, prejudice can occur (Eagley & Karau, 2002). In management education specifically, research on gender inequity has drawn attention to how these differing behavioral expectations contribute to inequality in the classroom, specifically when it comes to how women faculty in business schools are more likely to experience unfair treatment compared to their male colleagues (Balkin et. al, 2021). This research ultimately informs our examination of how gender shapes peer feedback processes, and our discussion of how we, as management educators, can bring to consciousness gender bias in our classrooms.

In general, the impact of gender on the peer assessment process remains relatively understudied and offers an important opportunity for future research; several scholars have called for additional research on the impact of gender in the peer assessment process (Croussard, 2016), the use of gender-awareness sessions to facilitate more effective peer and self-assessment (Torres-Guijarro & Bengoechea, 2015), and the effects of gender on peer feedback in heterogeneous or homogeneous learning groups (Noroozi et. al., 2020).

We see this roundtable as contributing to both scholarship and effective teaching; namely, this roundtable will recognize and raise awareness about gender biases in the peer feedback process; facilitate problem-solving conversations about how to address this topic in the classroom; and provide a space for discussion and collaboration regarding future research on the impact of gender in peer-to-peer assessment.

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Session Description

The 60 minutes session will be broken into four components, as follows:

Component One (5 minutes), Introductions and interest in the topic:

The session moderators will introduce their backgrounds, the topic, their personal experience, and investment. The moderators will then encourage all session participants to share their backgrounds and interest in the topic.

Component Two (15 minutes), Peer feedback in the classroom: Depending on the number of participants, groups of 5-6 individuals will be formed and will engage in a guided discussion about the peer assessments used in their classrooms. Questions asked will include:

- What type of courses use peer-to-peer feedback?
- What type of peer assessments are used?
- Why was that type of peer assessment(s) chosen by the participant?
- What are the challenges and rewards associated with using that type of feedback?

Component Three (20 minutes), Gender in the classroom: In the same small groups, participants will engage in a guided conversation about gender in their classrooms. Participants will be given theoretical frameworks on which to rely to better help identify gendered expectations or gendered feedback in their classrooms. Questions asked will include:

- What is the typical gender make-up of participant classrooms?
- What observations have been made by participants about peer treatment and assessment based on gender in their classrooms?
- What strategies can instructors use to help mitigate or bring awareness to gendered feedback issues?

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- As management educators, what is our responsibility for incorporating discussions of gendered feedback into the classroom?
- What does future research in this area look like?

Component Four (20 minutes) Bringing it all together: Small groups will report out.

Questions asked will include:

- What types of peer assessment were discussed? Did anyone learn of any new ideas or novelties that they may want to try in their own classrooms?
- What stories and experiences were shared about gendered expectations or gendered feedback in the classroom?
- What mitigation or awareness strategies were discussed?
- What is our ethical obligation to address gender bias in peer assessment and how do we move forward with scholarship and classroom management?

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