

Gender-bias impacts women physicists

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While some might argue that the lack of women in physics is down to personal choice or perhaps even biological determinism, Amy Bug, a physicist at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, USA instead claims it could be due to small, unconscious biases in the evaluation of female physicists that can add up to have a significant impact on their careers.

Bug videotaped a series of lectures using professional actors - two male, two female - who posed as physics professors. After the 10 minute lecture, 126 physics students were then asked to fill out a survey evaluating the lecture and the professor's performance.

Detailing her finding in August's [Physics World](#), Bug's study found that, on average, male professors received higher scores than their female counterparts. The experiment also revealed that there is a distinct [gender bias](#) from both male and female students when it comes to gender-stereotypical attributes, for example associating a male professor as good with science equipment, and a female professor as more helpful.

Interestingly, Bug found that while female students gave slightly higher marks to the female professors than they did to the men, male students rated the male professors vastly better. Bug's findings show that not only does the gender of a physics professor determine how lectures are received, but also the student's gender plays a role as well.

These results are consistent with the theory that people associate different genders with different aptitudes and predilections. Female [physicists](#) break such associations prompting a negative perception.

Together with small disadvantages such as smaller start-up grants and unequal wages these can accumulate over time and have dramatic consequences on a career.

According to Bug, progress towards more equality will depend on the continuous effort of educational, professional and funding institutions. “Today, the big issues are acknowledging and correcting the implicit bias, workplace policy reform, bringing in students from ethnic minorities, retaining girls between school and college, and seeking equality in the developing world.” writes Bug.

Provided by Institute of Physics

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