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Teaching as a Southern in the North

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Maysam Behravesh ,

Today, student evaluations of teaching (SET) are widely used by academic authorities as a professional measure of teacher competence and teaching quality and effectiveness. Graduate students and teaching assistants are usually recommended to keep a record of student evaluations to append with their CVs for future job applications. And many universities around the world, not least in advanced Western democracies, are increasingly relying on SET results for decisions about employment, retention and dismissal of academic staff. Yet, the largely neglected question is how fair and thus reliable or otherwise biased are student evaluations of teaching, and to what extent they ought to be taken so seriously as to serve as a valid criterion for decision-making about instructors. The stakes are high for students and institutions that are striving for academic success and quality, but undoubtedly they are much higher for university lecturers and teachers as the latter are at the receiving end of such evaluative decisions and it is, at the end of the day, *their* career chances that are primarily affected, for good or bad.

A statistically oriented experimental [study](#) published in early 2016, which surveys student reports at two universities in Europe and the United States, shows a significant degree of gender bias against female instructors. “Student evaluations of teaching (SET) are strongly associated with the gender of the instructor. Female instructors receive lower scores than male instructors. SET are also significantly correlated with students’ grade expectations: students who expect to get higher grades give higher SET, on average. But SET are not strongly associated with learning outcomes,” conclude [Anne Boring](#) of Science Po, Kellie [Ottoboni](#) as well as [Philip B. Stark](#) of the University of California, Berkley, in the article, a synopsis of which later appeared on the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) [blog](#).

In this short piece, I draw on my own first substantive experience of teaching as a non-European PhD student – at Lund University, Sweden – to shed light on another potential aspect of the problem that may affect SET and thus disqualify it as a measure of professional judgment, namely, the *nationality-ethnicity bias* or the nationally-ethnically driven negative attitude that students in an academic setting may adopt towards instructors from migrant or minority backgrounds, particularly those from the global South.

During the spring semester, 2016, I taught two rather distinct yet related subjects within a master’s course at the university – I would rather refer to them as A and B to preclude immediate identification of other lecturers involved in the teaching. After a while and based on positive student reactions, including requests for assistance and friendly approaches on social media (mostly by international students), I started getting the impression that I was doing a pretty decent job. Encouraging and commendatory feedback, which I received from course administrators and senior colleagues towards the end of the course, reinforced such an impression. This is by no means to say that I did an impeccable job. I did not! It was evident, also to myself, that I was relatively inexperienced at this level of teaching, and basically saw the practice as an opportunity to learn and improve... and then came the student evaluation report at the end.

While only around half of the class had participated in the evaluation, two types of observations attracted my attention. First, there were the qualitatively critical comments – by “qualitative”, I mean subject to interpretation depending on the commentator and their perceptions – about my performance in the class and how different or better it could have been. Though some stood in stark contrast with the feedback I had received earlier from senior co-instructors as well as other students, they appeared to have been written in a largely impartial and professional manner, and thus constituted a constrictive part of the report that I took on board. Most significantly, however, there were also the factually mendacious yet destructive notes. In one instance, I was accused of teaching on subject A during the week that was supposedly dedicated to subject B. Another such comment contained a personal attack where the commentator urged the institutional authorities to replace me. I immediately suspected foul play, but was

also left wondering why a number of students should resort to nothing short of pernicious factual lies on a formal occasion to besmirch or otherwise undermine an instructor.

Having developed a degree of sensitivity to discriminatory treatment after a few years of diasporic life as a migrant from the global South, I suspected all this might have something to do with notions of identity, ethnicity and supremacism. To ascertain whether this was just an unfortunate case besetting me or the problem might be more prevalent, I talked to a couple of international instructors in Sweden about the issue, which only served to reinforce my hypothesis as the interviewees reported similar experiences about SET. Some asked to keep the contents of our conversation private, indicating the subtlety, yet enormity, of the problem. Of those I can quote (anonymously) “for some [students] as for others [outside of academia], your perceived national status matters and in fact sometimes trumps your institutional status and professional competences, particularly if you are not very established in your position. This also applies even within Europe itself where a Greek or Romanian instructor is viewed differently than, say, a German or Norwegian one.” A third interviewee asserted that “it’s not easy for a person to be lectured by someone they perceive as lower than or inferior to themselves, you know, though for wrong reasons and on false grounds. And, well, what space better than the anonymous evaluation questionnaire to express that resentment?”

Such types of violence seem to emanate from what I would call *supremacist resentment*, which is driven by the perceived superiority of a given race, ethnicity or nationality over another and which motivates attempts to sabotage “subaltern” success or hinder a supposedly inferior subject from climbing up the social-institutional ladder. In this sense, “outsiders” (or migrants for that matter) are expected to work hard enough to avoid being a burden on the supposedly superior host society, but not so hard as to secure a relatively higher position of influence. They are desired, from such a perspective, to operate within a limited middle space between parasitic dependence on their hosts and independent exercise of power on the society. Pertinently, I have been reminded more than once since the start of my doctoral studies that “your” hard work is jeopardizing “our psychological well-being” and that I had better adjust my work pace and productivity in harmony with the majority. While these critics clearly did not subscribe to any supremacist ideology and were mostly concerned about the “health” effects of the consequent comparison and competition, the reminders do suggest that at least in parts of the prevailing collective unconscious, “outsiders” are assumed or expected not to rise above the average in sociopolitical and institutional terms.

In the end, an important caveat is warranted. The aforementioned phenomenon and its various instances are not at all easily generalizable to the wider context beyond them, but my purpose here has primarily been to draw attention to its possible coloring of student evaluations of teaching. Like gender bias, it is a phenomenon that may drive a portion of the negative feedback against instructors in those reports, and therefore needs to be seriously considered by academic institutions and authorities before they make career-defining decisions about teaching staff.