

# "Tough, but Good"

## A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE DEVIANT LABELING OF SOCIOLOGY PROFESSORS ON RATEMYPROFESSOR.COM

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### INTRODUCTION

RateMyProfessor.com (RMP) is a website where students can rate their professors on a variety of criteria. While many studies look at quality and ease, no studies currently exist analyzing certain professor actions as deviant and how student reactions to these "deviant" professors differ. Heckert & Heckert (2004) proposed a way to classify different forms of deviance in terms of overperforming and underperforming norms, combined with the reaction to those norm violations being positive or negative. The current research uses Heckert and Heckert's work to classify sociology professors as deviant based on their under- or overperforming norms established by students' comments on ratemyprofessor.com

### QUESTIONS:

- Do comment rates show an underlying normative structure?
- What is "underperforming" a norm?
  - Not doing something that should be done?
  - Doing something that should not be done?
- Are professors and professor types arranged on a spectrum according to norms and norm performance, or are there qualitative differences that do not fit on a linear spectrum?

### METHOD

- Sample:** A stratified cluster sample of 263 Sociology professors was collected from RMP in June 2009.
- Professor types:** Professors were organized into nine professor types based on RMP quality ratings and ease ratings (see Table 1).
- Coding:** Each of the 3357 comments in the nine professor types were coded by two raters for various indicators of student reactions to the professor and/or the class.
- MCR (Mean Comment Rate):** calculated by dividing the number of concept mentions in a professor type by the total number of comments for that professor type.
- Norm Measures:** The concepts that fit into all four categories for either quality or ease are the most strongly and clearly normative concepts (see Table 3)
  - Linear Norms** (n = 69 quality norms; n = 49 ease norms) - show a pattern of increasing OR decreasing use of concept as quality or ease categories change.
  - Other norms: Categorical quality/ease norms** (N = 47, 26) (the highest and lowest MCRs for a concept are not in one of the average professor types; EATQ (N=44 quality) (the three good professor types must have the highest or lowest MCR within a given ease rating, for all three ease ratings), T3Q (n=16) (all three good professor types have higher or lower MCR than other types; all T3Q all are EATQ); GABE (N=21) (the tough professor types have the highest or lowest MCR within a given quality rating, for all three quality ratings), T3E (N=5) (all three tough professor types higher or lower MCR than other types; all are GABE).

### RESULTS - NORMATIVE ANALYSIS

	Quality (BAQ) 1-3 99999 (N=57 for analysis, not using EAB)	Quality (AVE) 4-5 3 99999 (N=9)	Quality (GOOD) 6-5 N=14
<b>Ease (TOUGH) 1-3 9999</b> N=108	TAB - tough and bad	TAA - tough and average	TBG - tough but good
N=41, 525 M=25, 244 F=25, 284	N=40, 617 M=21, 384 F=19, 233	N=27, 235 M=16, 136 F=12, 99	
<b>Ease (AVERAGE) 3-3 99999</b> N=134	AAB - average and bad	AAE - average and average	AAG - average and good
N=16, 304 M=10, 145 F=6, 159	N=38, 311 M=19, 282 F=19, 239	N=48, 724 M=31, 425 F=29, 299	
<b>Ease (EASY) 4-5 N=18</b> (for analysis, not using EAB)	EAB - easy and bad	EAA - easy and average	EAG - easy and good
N=2, 4 M=1, 2 F=1, 2	N=21, 115 M=10, 147 F=11, 109	N=21, 356 M=10, 247 F=11, 109	

TABLE 1: Sample, by professor types, gender, and number of comments

- We can see that the modal professor type is AAG.
- We find that for the three good professor types, we have a very normal distribution by ease. Ease seems unrelated to quality for good professors in our sample.
- We can say from this table that EAB professors are clearly deviant, in that they barely exist.
- It seems that gender might have an effect on ranking female professors as TAB instead of TAA, AVE, or AAB.

TABLE 2: Professor types, with over and under overall MCR performance by category of comments

- It's normal for students to talk about the details of the course. We can see that TBG professors had the least frequent mention of course components in general which sets them apart from the other professor types. Whatever they do, details of the course are not important to mention.
- Good professor types seem to avoid the bad labels while bad professor types seem to attract them. EAG professors are outside the norm in terms of completely avoiding high levels of "badness."
- AAB professors, in contrast, avoid all goodness. TAB professors do over perform the norm on some good concepts. Also, AVE professors have more good than EAA, leading us to question the appropriateness of using RMP quality and ease scores to make claims about "buying" higher ratings with ease.

TAB	TAA	TBG
COURSE COMPONENTS 6/15 GOOD 4/23 BAD 3/12 NEUTRAL 5/8	COURSE COMPONENTS 7/15 GOOD 5/22 GOOD 2/43 BAD 3/12 NEUTRAL 5/8	COURSE COMPONENTS 2/20 GOOD 23/3 BAD 3/12 NEUTRAL 9/4
AAB	AAG	
COURSE COMPONENTS 9/19 GOOD 0/25 BAD 21/2 NEUTRAL 9/9	COURSE COMPONENTS 11/10 GOOD 9/15 BAD 1/24 NEUTRAL 6/7	COURSE COMPONENTS 11/10 GOOD 14/13 BAD 0/25 NEUTRAL 1/12
EAB	EAG	
COURSE COMPONENTS 10/12 GOOD 2/24 BAD 9/16 NEUTRAL 6/7	COURSE COMPONENTS 11/11 GOOD 14/13 BAD 0/25 NEUTRAL 1/12	

X/Y means the professor type was over the overall MCR for X concepts and under the overall MCR for Y concepts.  
Course Components: Tests, Lecture, Assignments, etc.  
Good: Helpful, Clear, Caring, etc.  
Bad: Not Helpful, Unclear, Uncaring, etc.  
Neutral: Compared to Other Classes, Expectations of Students, Stories, etc.

MCR Range	Comments, in descending MCR Order
120% or higher 10-15.5%	Tests, advice for other students, grades, great-really good, interesting, easy reading, hard, lecture, attendance, lastname, take, boring, helpful, nice, avoid, bad, unclear
5-9.99%	Notes, good, tedious, Professor, MS, etc, assignments, fun, funny, clear, bridge of status, study, best, unfair, papers, passion/love of subject, caring, book, knows material, learned a lot, personal results
2.5-4.9%	Discussion, status gap, unorganized, firstname, disrespectful, gendered evaluation, love, smart, review sessions, fair, work load, average/OK, not helpful, learned little or nothing, extra credit, handouts, got me to think, worst, ego, disagree w/ comments, not nice-mean, expectations of students, participation, available, flexible, RUCs, level of class, bias (all kinds), tangents, distract from class, bad voice.
1-2.4%	Power Point, cool, close minded, TAs, hate, stories related to class, group work, uncaring, tangents, reason for avoiding, political bias, mandatory, reason for taking, entertaining, strictness grading, open mind, organized, too fast, physical description (non-sexual), other readings, stories, too slow, hotness, compared to other classes, agree with other comments, does not want appropriate ideas, does not know material, favoritism, rigid-rules, respectful, gender bias

TABLE 3: Ordered Commenting Frequencies for Linear Normative Concepts

- The concepts near the top of Table 3 are frequently used in student comments about professors. While some frequently used concepts are simply rare, some of them are much more frequent for certain of our professor types, as seen in the typology below.
- The concepts that meet criteria for all four normative types, and thus are strongly and consistently normative, are:
  - Quality: best, take, fun, great-really good, bridge of status gap, avoid, learned little or nothing, bad, insults, preserving/eg in status, caring, not nice-mean, good, clear
  - Ease: review sessions, easy, expectations of students, hard, got me to think

TABLE 4: (Mostly) Paired Norms and Differences in Commenting Rates for Professor Type with Highest Comment Rate

- There are three cases where the "good" label is applied more frequently than paired "bad" label for the highest MCR professor type; 15 cases where "bad" is applied more frequently than "good", with 12 of those being more extreme than for the three cases where good labels are more frequent. Doing bad things (negative deviance) elicits stronger reactions than doing good things (positive deviance).

Calling into question Heckert's typology, some paired norms change their normative structure when going from positive to negative, e.g.:

- Flexible E2 - Rigid Q2
- Interesting Q1 - Boring Q3E2
- Nice Q2E3 - Not Nice Q3
- Helpful Q3-Not Helpful Q1E3

- Students may see professors as helpful due to material presented (quality norm), but only when seeking help & the professor fails to be helpful are they seen as unhelpful (ease norm), an active problem not a lack of a good thing.

Code	Overall MCR	High Professor Type MCR	High Professor Type MCR/NewsMCR
Crash math/pool (Q4 E2)	231	349	1.51
Typed (Q3 E1)	090	131	1.46
Tab (Q4 E2)	102	241	2.36 (No 0.85, 0.90)
Crash (Q4 E2)	187	417	2.22 (No 0.27)
Hard (Q4 E2)	172	319	1.85
Clear (Q3 E1)	077	136	1.77
Engaging (Q3 E1)	079	228	2.78 (No 0.40)
Helpful (Q3)	118	149	1.26
Non helpful (Q3 E2)	037	091	2.46 (No 1.20)
Clear (Q4 E1)	115	243	2.11
Avoid (Q4 E3)	111	250	2.25 (No 1.87)
Interesting (Q3)	396	294	1.48
Boring (Q3 E2)	125	270	2.16 (No 0.68)
Nice (Q3)	152	153	1.37
Not nice - mean (Q3)	061	067	2.16 (No 0.79)
Flexible (Q3)	028	067	2.30 (No 0.39)
Eng (Q2)	010	020	2.00
Eng of status (Q3 E3)	077	117	1.52
Gap in status (Q3 E3)	047	091	1.94 (No 0.42)
Caring (Q3)	046	094	1.47
Open (Q3)	055	055	2.80 (No 1.42)
Open Mind (Q2 E2)	055	300	2.00
Close minded (Q3 E2)	024	061	2.54 (No 0.54)
Unorganized (Q3)	010	013	1.64
Disrespectful (Q3)	043	091	2.02 (No 0.58)
Low (Q1)	045	074	1.72
Low (Q2)	022	068	3.00 (No 1.37)
Best (Q4 E1)	073	142	1.95
Worst (Q1 E1)	105	107	1.06 (No 1.11)
Fair (Q2 E1)	019	081	2.08
Unfair (Q4 E2)	073	166	2.27 (No 0.19)
Disagree with other comments (Q1)	013	015	1.36
Disagree with other comments (Q1E2)	012	059	1.84 n.a.
Organized (Q3)	055	038	2.53 (No 0.10)
Unorganized (Q3)	046	112	2.43
Knows material (Q1 E1)	057	072	1.26
Does not know material (Q2)	013	022	2.00 (No 0.74)
Top (Q3)	014	023	1.64
Too slow (Q1 E1)	013	041	3.15 n.a.
Learned a lot (Q3 E1)	054	085	1.57
Learned little or nothing (Q4)	056	094	2.41 (No 1.09)
Got me to think (Q1 E2)	055	054	1.82
Funny (Q4)	079	128	1.62 n.a.

Q1-Q4: number of quality norm definitions met. n= number of ease norm definitions met. N+ the negative concept is used more. P+ the positive concept used more. \*quantitatively ranked on RMP.

### PROFESSOR TYPE ANALYSIS

**AVE - THE SUIT:** Highest MCR - Reading, TAs, Extra credit, Too fast, Agree with other comments, Tangents, Ego, Political, Distract from class, Titles, Lowest MCR - Book, Other (reading), Participation, First, Gendered evaluation, Compared to other classes, AVE professors keep their distance (high awareness of status gap) and have a bit of an ego, similar to the slightly aloof boss at a cubicle office job ("she talks fast and it is hard to take notes, but she does give you the PowerPoints"). They rely more on TAs ("they are super helpful") and class participation seems to be an irrelevant waste of time. Much like the average suit-wearing professional, they are standard (although slightly biased as, "most Sociology professors are") and mostly role focused in a generally competent way, "...and do the extra credit"

**TAB - THE NEMESIS:** Highest MCR - Power point, Participation, Uncaring, Disrespectful, Gap in status preserved, Not helpful, Close minded, Hate, Worst, Unfair, Bad, Avoid, Strictness, Reason for avoiding, Does not want to hear opposite ideas, Gender bias, Lowest MCR - Hotness, Other(reading), Book, Discussion, Attendance, Extra credit, Flexible, Bridge of status difference, Nice, Easy, Great-really good, Open mind, Cool, Entertaining, Funny, Stories, Hotness. "BEWARE", TAB professors are cold, distant, actively and sometimes intentionally evil, their purpose in life is to make the student's life miserable in every single way "I've never seen a teacher treat students with such disrespect". They design entire courses to torture students ("because you know we SHOULD be able to copy 10,000 words per slide in 30 seconds"). Their disorganization "is always somebody else's fault". They are superhero movie villains. "This man is the plague...blacklist him at all costs!!!"

**AAB - THE TRAINWRECK:** Highest MCR - Learned little or nothing, Does not know material, Too slow, Unorganized, Unclear, Boring, Bias, Bad voice, Favoritism, Gendered evaluation, Lowest MCR - Other (reading), Assignments, Papers, Mandatory, Power point, Learned a lot, Got me to think, Helpful, Organized, Right, Advice with other comments, Take, Best, Last, Hotness, Reason for taking, Reason for avoiding, Related to class, Titles, Fun. How many ways can things go wrong? The list goes on and on for AAB professors - "Not helpful, irrelevant lectures, completely boring and pointless, boring and slow paced, extremely monotone and boring". They are not malevolent, just boring and causing chaos with their off-the-rails disorganization. They are a complete mess. Very self-focused, ignoring the perspectives outside their own. "I spent more time trying to keep my eyes open then paying attention...where is the interest?"

**TBG - THE TRANSFORMER:** Highest MCR - Work load, Knows material, Got me to think, Learned a lot, Organized, Fair, Caring, Shows passion/love of subject, Clear, Helpful, Hard, Respectful, Reason for taking, Hotness, First, Fun, Last, Expectations of students, Smart, Gender bias, Compared to other classes, Lowest MCR - Other (reading), Book, Lecture, TAs, Tests, Review sessions, Group work, Extra credit, Grades, Does not know material, Rigid, Worst, Unorganized, Boring, Tangents, Bias, Ego, Average or OK, Advice for other students. TBG professors change students. They push good students to "think about things in a new way" which "can be difficult, but in challenging way that makes you feel like you accomplished something". They "geek out" about the material, and their passion is infectious. They also act in the ways that make students feel comfortable with talking with them. "So expect to work hard, but in the end it's worth it"

**AAG - WILLY WONKA:** Highest MCR - Lecture, Mandatory, Group work, Attendance, Other (reading), Available, Love, Interesting, Respectful, Entertaining, Cool, Funny, Advice for other students, Lowest MCR - Learned little or nothing, Uncaring, Disrespectful, Bad, Hate, Close minded, Does not want to hear opposite ideas, Gender bias, Political, Distract from class, Insults. AAG professors are the golden ticket. They are engaging and entertaining and keep attention focused on them so classes fly by. Before you know it you'll be stuffed like a blueberry, full of knowledge. Their charm and unpredictable nature makes them a little wonky, but they do many different things, changing things up to avoid routine ("video clips, great discussions, entertaining anecdotes"). They are "sooooo willing to help." They are loved for all of this. "His class is pretty much entertainment I would most def take another class with him"

**EAG - THE GRAND TOUR GUIDE:** Highest MCR - Handouts, Review sessions, Discussion, Notes, Tests, Study, Open mind, Bridge of status difference, Good, Best, Nice, Take, Great-really good, Easy, Stories, Related to class, Lowest MCR - Book, Other, Level, Work load, Too fast, Not nice - mean, Gap in status preserved, Hard, Not helpful, Disagree with other comments, Bad, Close minded, Avoid, Unclear, Unfair, Expectations of students, Bad voice, Strictness. EAG professors, "want you to get an A. [They] will help you understand", by providing a clear path to follow, and constant guidance along the way. They are excited about sharing their knowledge (which they have a lot of, "he knows his stuff"), and that excitement (stories, encouragement, discussions) carries people along so they don't boring parts of the "tour": "Not only a good teacher, but not entirely too difficult" and "extremely helpful"

**TAA - THE BRAINAC WHO CAN'T EXPLAINAC:** Highest MCR - Level, Disagree with other comments, Average or Ok, Lowest MCR - Handouts, Too slow, Physical description (non sexual). While these professors are seen as brilliant, most but not all students tend to find them distant, confusing, and unable to talk in ways that make sense. They come across as "making things way harder than they should be" but overall, "a decent person". "Don't get me wrong, he does have good intentions but you'd never believe that after taking his tests". They are seen as good people, unlike the nemesis, but not so-good at "normal-people" things. "Seriously grad level". Television's Bones or Sheldon Cooper would be perfect examples of the TAA professor type.

**EAA - McPROFESSORS:** Highest MCR - Book, Papers, Assignments, Grades, Not nice - mean, Rigid, Flexible, Insults, Physical description (non sexual), Lowest MCR - Other (reading), Reading, Good, Notes, Study, Does not know material, Fair, Shows passion/love of subject, Clear, Knows material, Clear, Interesting, Respectful, Smart, Favoritism, OK, limited variety, not memorable. But fast and efficient ("you don't even need a textbook") way to fill your stomach (schedule), especially on a long road trip (busy semester). Perfectly predictable and not at all challenging - "Open note short quizzes and easy homework makes up grade...If you put in even the slightest effort you are guaranteed an A. You might not learn much aside from textbook definitions from this class though."

### DISCUSSION

- AVE professors are highest on some concepts (such as Ego), which does not fit with Heckert and Heckert's typology in any way. They are also politically biased "...as all Sociology Professor are."
- As shown in Table 1, EAB professors barely exist. We believe it's likely that professors who start out as EAB quickly change their ways and subsequent ratings shift them into other categories.
- We think that RMP ratings are NOT independent; students tend to see the rating before conducting a rating, so using a professor typology adds richness to our understanding of professors in the classroom and how students react to them.
- Toughness seem related to higher level learning outcomes. More difficult professors are seen by students as teaching at a higher level, show by the high relative comments on "got me to think" as well as the comments for these professors that disagree with other comments (not shown).
- Taken as a whole, we believe that toughness does not buy lower quality ratings, but rather toughness creates RISKS for the professor that can lead to lower quality ratings (TAB) but negotiating the risks successfully leads to very high praise (TBG). Help is more needed as rigor of material presented increases, opening up an opportunity for students to judge the professor as not helpful.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & SOURCES:

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