Evaluating Communication Skills of Physicians: Specialty and Gender Biases
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Abstract
In a laboratory experiment undergraduate-analogue patients showed significant biases in their perception of the communication skills of physicians according to physician gender and specialty.

Introduction
Little is known about how patients respond to physicians of different specialties. However, some biases relating to physician gender have been documented.

Studies done in real-life settings do not allow actual physician behavior to be disentangled from the pre-existing biases patients may have. Therefore we used videos showing carefully scripted physician communication performed by professional actors, in order to hold actual physician behavior constant.

In the present study we used analogue patients- undergraduates pretending they are the patient. When comparing analogue patients to clinical patients the validity of scores is very high, meaning analogue patient studies can be used to study how clinical patients would react as well.

Method
In order to test this we showed 8 videos of a doctor talking to a patient that were identical except for the gender of the doctor to students who were put in the place of the patient (1 video per session, N=131). The students watched the video after being told the specialty of the doctor (Primary Care Physician, Psychiatrist, Neurosurgeon), which was randomly determined. Students then answered questions about their reactions to the physician.

• Physician Gender Bias
When rating female physicians analogue patients did not distinguish between specialties. However, when rating male physicians there was a significant difference according to specialty: In the two less technical and more “feminine” specialties (primary care and psychiatry) men’s skills were perceived as weak, while for the more technical “masculine” specialty (neurosurgery) men’s skills were rated dramatically high.

These results demonstrate that stereotypes about gender and medical specialties can come together to bias patients’ perceptions.

Results/Discussion
• Physician Specialty
Physician specialty had the greatest and most significant influence. Regardless of which video they watched, the Neurosurgeon received the highest evaluation followed by the Psychiatrist, and then the Primary Care Physician.

Communication Skill Rating Questions
(Scale from 1-unsatisfied to 9-extremely satisfied)
1. The respect and consideration the doctor showed me
2. How much the doctor thought of me as a whole person
3. The explanations the doctor gave me for why he/she was doing things
4. How much the doctor made me feel personally important
5. How much the doctor empathized with me or felt concern for me
6. How much the doctor allowed me to participate in decision making
7. How much the doctor encouraged me to ask questions

Ratings of Communication Skills by Specialty and Physician Gender