

Agriculture Teachers' Preferred Teaching Partners Based on Physical and Professional Appearance

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Abstract

As new teachers enter the workplace, their ability to integrate into the school's professional community is critical to their job satisfaction. While teachers may meet many quality indicators of good teaching, his or her ability to integrate into a professional community can be shaped instead by coworkers' initial perceptions of his or her physical and professional appearance. In this study, we asked a convenience sample of agriculture teachers attending the National FFA Convention to select their ideal teaching partners based on their physical and professional appearance. Results displayed a strong preference for male teaching partners, regardless of age and attire. Among female confederates, the younger confederate was selected over 10 times more frequently than the older confederate. Small relationships were revealed between respondents' gender and the confederates' age, respondents' NAAE region and confederates' gender, and the respondents' gender and confederates gender. Despite recent increases in the number of female agriculture teachers, the results herein suggest men may be desired over females in an already male-dominated industry. Additionally, results suggested that ageism may be a greater concern for females than males within agricultural education. The results herein are not generalizable, but provide a starting point into further inquiry within the profession.

Keywords: agriculture teacher, first impression, teaching partner, professional community, retention

Introduction/Conceptual Framework

Historical trends have long suggested a need for more teachers in agricultural education (Foster, Lawver, & Smith, 2016). Teacher retention has been cited as a method for reducing the teacher shortage, as many open positions are created as a result of teacher attrition (Ball & Torres, 2010). Beginning teachers are especially vulnerable to attrition; “approximately one-third of beginning teachers leave their jobs after three years of teaching, and approximately 40% leave after five years of teaching” (Ball & Torres, 2010, p. 276). As new teachers enter the workplace, keeping them satisfied with their jobs is a critical factor in retaining them within the teaching profession (Ball & Torres, 2010). One aspect influencing teachers' job satisfaction, and ultimately, their decision to remain in a teaching position, is their ability to integrate into the school's existing professional community (Chapman, 1984). While teachers may meet many quality indicators of good teaching, his or her ability to integrate into a professional community can be shaped instead by coworkers' initial perceptions of his or her “physical attractiveness...by their age or race, and by their apparent similarity to [one's] self” (Simons, 1995, p. 22). Regardless of one's noble intentions, “all humans have preconceived notions, biases and abilities that influence the quality of the judgements they make when assessing the competence of [others]” (Wood, 2014, p. 410). These first impressions, made within five to 300 seconds of interaction with an individual (Carney, Colvin, & Hall, 2007), can have significant social consequences on a teacher's ability to connect with other teachers “because they guide how we initially interact with the person, what information we remember about the person and our predictions about future behavior” (Wood, 2014, p. 410).

Contrary to the adage, “you can never tell a book by its cover” (Fuller & Rolfe, 1946), one's initial judgements of others are quite accurate (Wood, 2014). First impressions, also termed thin

slice or zero acquaintance judgements (Wood, 2014), are shaped via observation of physical attributes and behaviors, and have been proven to be accurate in forming judgements of positive and negative affect, extraversion, conscientiousness, intelligence, neuroticism, openness, and agreeableness (Carney et al., 2007). Studies have identified 60-second durations of observation as producing the best ratio of accuracy and time; while accuracy of impressions of one's personality traits increases up to five-minute durations, the increase beyond 60-seconds has been found to be minimal (Carney et al., 2007).

This study focused on how physical and professional attributes of teachers influence other teachers' judgements about them. Barrick, Shaffer, and DeGrassi (2009) found that both physical attributes, including uncontrolled aspects such as gender and age, and professional attributes, including controlled aspects such as attire, influenced interviewers' perceptions of interviewees.

Gender remains an influential characteristic in impression forming. Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid (1977) concluded that among partnered participants asked to converse with one another for 10 minutes, males with negative impressions of their female partner's attractiveness treated them in a less friendly manner than they did females whom they judged to be attractive. Kierstead, D'Agostino, and Dill (1988) found that female teachers were perceived to be better instructors when they displayed behaviors indicative of friendliness, while the same behaviors in male teachers did not affect students' perceptions of their instructional quality.

Age also plays a part in interpersonal judgements (North & Fiske, 2013). Descriptive stereotypes of older individuals focus on "illness, incompetence, invisibility, and irrelevance" (North & Fiske, 2013, p. 720); studies have found that within groups, elders are avoided in an effort to bolster group self-worth and favoritism for the fittest (Burnstein, Crandall, & Kitayama, 1994; Kite & Wagner, 2004). Within the teaching profession, older beginning teachers face "considerable discrimination" when competing for jobs with younger applicants (Redman & Snape, 2002, p. 355). Perceptions among peer teachers regarding older colleagues have displayed notions that older teachers are "less up to date in their subject knowledge, inflexible in their attitudes, unwilling to adapt to change, and less willing to engage in out of school activities" (Redman & Snape, 2002, p. 355).

Finally, numerous studies have focused on the role of teacher attire in the forming of impressions. Morris, Gorham, Cohen, and Huffman (1996) found that while students perceived more formally dressed teachers as more knowledgeable, intelligent, and competent, they were also perceived as less likable or approachable. Carr, Lavin, and Davies (2009) reported that instructors wearing informal clothing, operationally defined as a sweater and jeans, were perceived as approachable and flexible but not well-respected. Similarly, Butler and Roesel (1989) found that teachers dressed in suits were viewed by students as most teacher-like, but least preferred.

Approximately 3,443 school-based agriculture programs across the nation employ multiple agriculture teachers (J. B. Bledsoe, personal communication, September 30, 2016), suggesting their personal and professional appearance both influences teachers' impressions of one another and influences others' perceptions of both the individual teachers and the collective agriculture program (Damhorst, Miller-Spillman, & Michelman, 2005; Freeburg & Workman, 2009). Serving as one another's coworkers, the professional identities of teachers within multi-teacher agriculture programs play a vital role in the program's social environment (Schneider, 1987). Further, teachers choose whether to welcome others in to their social environments, work or

otherwise, based on how they perceive the new-comer’s personal and professional appearance (Damhorst et al., 2005; Lennon & Miller, 1984; Wood, 2014). Teacher retention depends on the ability of newly employed agriculture teachers to successfully integrate in to a shared professional community, and their ability to do so is influenced by the first impressions other teachers form based on their physical and professional attributes. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how teachers perceive the personal and professional attributes of other agriculture teachers when forming first impressions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is rooted in Chapman’s model for teacher attrition/retention (1984) (Figure 1) and expectancy violations theory (EVT) (Burgoon, 1993).

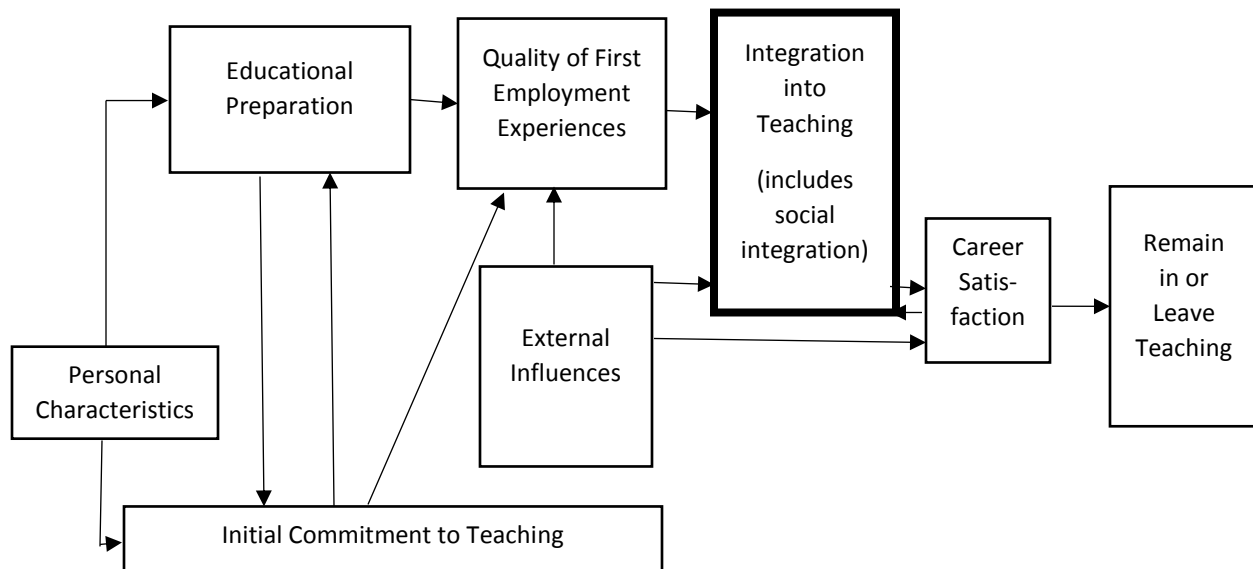


Figure 1. Chapman’s model for teacher attrition/retention (1984) (bold added).

Chapman’s model depicts the factors that lead to a teacher’s decisions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. Integration into a professional community of teachers is included within Integration to Teaching (Chapman, 1984), bolded here for emphasis. As teachers form first impressions of new or potential coworkers, they do so through the lens of their own expectations of what a teacher, or in this case, an agriculture teacher, should be. Expectancy violations theory asserts that cultural norms establish expected interpersonal communication patterns, and that violations to these expectations draw attention due to their novelty (Dunbar & Segrin, 2012). Violations can be viewed positively or negatively, and shape how individuals perceive other aspects of the individual’s message.

Violations to one’s expectations can only occur if expectations are first established within a society. Currently, 54% of public school teachers are between the ages of 30-49 (United States Department of Education, 2012). Within agricultural education, 55% of agriculture teachers are male (Foster, Lawver, Smith, & Thompson, 2016); in the past, the ratio male to female agriculture teachers has been skewed to a greater degree, with males holding the majority of teaching positions (Kelsey, 2006). Expectations regarding teacher attire have also been set. The

majority of school dress codes specifically prohibit attire that would be considered inappropriate for the roles of the educator. While an exact definition of inappropriate dress has not been agreed upon, media materials have labeled inappropriate articles as those that are sexually revealing, or violates conventional norms for teachers (Workman & Freeburg, 2010).

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of this study was to describe the association between agriculture teachers’ demographic attributes and their selection of preferred teaching partners based on the physical attributes of gender and age and the professional attribute of selected attire. The following objectives guided the study:

1. Describe respondents’ genders, ages, geographic locations, and community types.
2. Describe the frequency with which respondents selected teaching partners displaying specific demographic characteristics and types of attire.
3. Describe the associations between respondents’ demographic characteristics and the demographic characteristics of their selections of preferred teaching partners.
4. Describe the associations between respondents’ demographic characteristics and the attire of their selections of preferred teaching partners.

Methods

This study used a correlational design to describe the relationship between agriculture teachers’ demographic characteristics and their selections of preferred teaching partners. We collected data over a two-day period using a convenience sample at the 2015 National FFA Convention exposition. The exposition features booths and exhibits from universities, companies, and organizations across the nation, and draws the attendance of “thousands of [FFA] advisors” (National FFA Organization, 2016, para. 1). Teachers were recruited as they passed the study booth, which was located in a central area of the exposition center. Once their roles as current agriculture teachers were confirmed, respondents were each given a response form on which they indicated their gender, age, and zip code. Respondents were asked to complete the response form and then were verbally given a scenario in which they were able to hire an additional agriculture teacher for their current program. On the table in front of the respondents, boxes presenting images of the potential teaching partners were displayed. Respondents were instructed to view each of the potential teaching partners and place their response forms in the box displaying the teacher they would prefer to work with in their agriculture program. Following the procedures of Morris et al. (1996), we displayed headless images of trained confederates of different ages (20s and 40s) and genders (male and female) dressed in two categories of attire. Sartorial categories included business casual (dress shirt or blouse, dress slacks or skirt, dress shoes), or casual (polo shirt or plain shirt, jeans or khakis, and boots or shoes) (Morris et al., 1996) (see Table 1). Attire categories were operationalized using previously established norms for business and casual attire (Fraz, 2001), and were evaluated for validity by an expert in apparel merchandizing.

Table 1
Teacher Confederates and Their Attire

Photograph Identification	Gender	Age	Attire
A	Female	20s	Casual

B	Male	40s	Business Casual
C	Female	40s	Casual
D	Male	20s	Casual
E	Female	40s	Business Casual
F	Male	20s	Business Casual
G	Female	20s	Business Casual
H	Male	40s	Casual

Images of confederates were displayed on white backgrounds for consistency. Boxes on which confederates' images were displayed were opaque with small holes for response submissions, preventing respondents from viewing one another's selections. (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Respondents selected their preferred teacher by placing their response forms in the corresponding box.

Data was analyzed using SPSS v. 22. Respondents' demographic characteristics and selections of preferred teachers were analyzed via descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies. Rural-Urban Continuum Codes were utilized to identify the community type of each respondents' provided zip code (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012). While nine community types are recognized by the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, for ease of analysis, we condensed codes to indicate urban (codes 1-3), micropolitan (codes 4-6), and rural (codes 7-9). The magnitude of any relationships between respondents' characteristics and their selections were analyzed using Cramer's V (ϕ_c), which measures "the strength of association between two categorical variables" (Field, 2006, p. 695). While Cramer's V is calculated following chi-square analysis, which tests for statistical significance of an association between categorical variables (Field, 2006), the convenience sample used for this study limits findings to the sample. Inferential statistics such as the chi-square analysis are inappropriate when findings are not intended to be generalized to a larger population; therefore, results of the chi-square analyses are not reported. Results of each Cramer's V were interpreted using Cohen's (1988) guidelines, wherein small effect sizes are those of 0.1, medium effect sizes are those of 0.3, and large effect sizes are those of 0.5.

Results/Findings

The first objective sought to describe respondents' genders, ages, geographic locations, and community types (Table 2). Responses were received from 400 agriculture teachers during the two-day data collection period.

Table 2

Respondents' Demographics

Characteristic	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
male	262	65.5
female	138	34.5
Age		
20-29	115	28.8
30-39	129	32.3
40-49	98	24.5
50-59	56	14.0
≥60	12	3.0
NAAE Region		
I	39	9.8
II	84	21.0
III	74	18.5
IV	123	30.8
V	52	13.0
VI	26	6.5
Community Type		
Urban	146	36.5
Micro	75	18.8
Rural	173	43.3

Nearly two-thirds (65.5%) of respondents were male, while 61% were under 40 years of age. All six regions of the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) were represented, with Region IV being represented to the greatest degree (30.8%) and Region VI being represented to the least degree (6.5%). Teachers most frequently taught in rural communities (43.3%) and least frequently taught in micropolitans (18.8%).

The second objective sought to describe the frequency with which respondents selected teaching partners displaying specific demographic characteristics and types of attire. The most frequently selected teacher was the younger male dressed in casual attire ($n = 89$), while the least frequently selected teacher was the older female dressed in casual attire ($n = 3$). It should be noted that all male confederates were selected more frequently than female confederates (Table 3).

Table 3
Confederates selected as preferred teaching partners

Confederate	<i>f</i>	%
Younger, male, casual	89	22.3
Older, male, business casual	75	18.8
Younger, male, business casual	73	18.3
Older, male, casual	66	16.5
Younger, female, casual	48	12.0
Younger, female, business casual	41	10.3
Older, female, business casual	5	1.3

Older, female, casual	3	0.8
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The third objective sought to describe the associations between respondents' demographic characteristics and the demographic characteristics of their selections of preferred teaching partners (Table 4).

Table 4
Strength of Associations Between Respondent and Selected Confederate Variables

Association	ϕ_c	Interpretation (Cohen, 1988)
Respondent Gender*Confederate Age	.146	Small
Respondent NAAE Region*Confederate Gender	.112	Small
Respondent Gender*Confederate Gender	.105	Small
Respondent NAAE Region*Confederate Age	.097	Negligible
Respondent Age*Confederate Age	.089	Negligible
Respondent Age*Confederate Gender	.075	Negligible
Respondent Community*Confederate Gender	.069	Negligible
Respondent Community*Confederate Age	.044	Negligible

The gender of respondents was associated with the selected confederates' age and gender to a small degree. Seventy-three percent of the female respondents chose younger confederates, while 58% of the male respondents chose younger confederates. Seventy-nine percent of the male respondents ($n = 207$) and 70% of the female respondents ($n = 42$) selected male confederates. A small association was also found between the NAAE region in which the respondents taught and the gender of their selected teachers (Table 5). Male teachers were chosen by the majority of respondents in all NAAE regions.

Table 5
Frequency of Selection of Male Teaching Partners by Respondents' NAAE Region

Respondents' NAAE Region	f	%
I	29	74.4
II	68	88.3
III	50	67.6
IV	91	74.0
V	38	73.1
VI	21	80.8

The fourth objective sought to describe the associations between respondents' demographic characteristics and the attire of their selections of preferred teaching partners. Cramer's V scores indicated negligible relationships between respondents' gender and the attire of their selected teaching partners ($\phi_c = .062$), respondents' age and the attire of their selected teaching partners ($\phi_c = .021$), and respondents' community type and the attire of their selected teaching partners ($\phi_c = .064$).

Males selected confederates dressed in business casual attire 50.8% of the time ($n = 133$), while females selected confederates dressed in business casual attire 43.5% of the time ($n = 60$). Between 47% and 48.5% of respondents under 29 years of age, between 30 and 49 years of age, and aged 50 and over selected confederates dressed in business casual attire. Urban respondents selected teaching partners dressed in business casual attire 52.7% of the time ($n = 77$), while similarly dressed confederates were selected by metropolitan respondents 43.4% of the time ($n = 33$) and by rural respondents 46.33% of the time ($n = 81$). A small relationship was found between the NAAE region in which respondents taught and the attire of their selected teaching partners ($\phi_c = .114$) (Table 6).

Table 6
Frequency of Selection of Teaching Partners Dressed in Business Casual Attire by Respondents' NAAE Region

Respondents' NAAE Region	<i>f</i>	%
I	17	43.6
II	39	46.4
III	32	43.2
IV	69	56.1
V	21	42.0
VI	11	42.3

Teachers from Region IV selected confederates dressed in business casual attire at least 10% more than any other region. Teachers from Region V selected these more professionally dressed confederates least frequently.

Conclusions/ Recommendations/Implications

The findings gleaned from this study are not generalizable beyond the sample; however, they do provide a starting point for researchers to consider trends within agricultural education hires. Results from this study yielded an overwhelming preference for male teachers; 75.8% of respondents selected male confederates. While more male respondents than female respondents selected male teaching partners, over half of both genders preferred male teaching partners. The profession of school-based agricultural education has been dominated by males, but shifts in recent decades have led to growth in the number of females employed as agriculture teachers (Whittington & Raven, 1995). With preservice teacher programs reporting a female demographic of up to 64% (Foster, Lawver, & Smith, 2016), further research must be conducted to better understand why both male and female agriculture teachers within this sample preferred to work alongside a male. The tenets of EVT may suggest that males align more with society's expectations of the agriculture teacher, as has been seen historically (Kelsey, 2006; Whittington & Raven, 1995).

Additionally, a small relationship was found between respondent gender and confederate age, with female respondents selecting younger confederates at a higher rate than their male counterparts. This relationship was stronger than that between respondent age and confederate age. As the nation continues to experience a shortage of agriculture teachers and seeks ways to recruit more high school graduates to enroll in postsecondary agricultural education programs,

recruiters can assure younger graduates of the ease with which they can integrate into professional communities who are eager to welcome them. However, further research should be conducted to explore reasons for female respondents' preference of younger teachers more than their male counterparts, as mid-career moves are common among millennials (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Perhaps females feel the tension of holding employment within a traditionally male-dominated profession, and perceive younger teaching partners as more accepting of their roles as leaders in the agriculture program. While we offer this as a possible hypothesis, qualitative research could provide a more thorough investigation of this phenomenon.

While results did not suggest a preference for younger males over older males, they did suggest ageism may be a concern for female agriculture teachers, as the younger female confederate was selected over 10 times more frequently than her older counterpart, regardless of attire. Redman and Snape (2002) posited that older teachers are discriminated against, which again, was found only among female confederates. Older teachers entering the workforce as a second career could alleviate some of the strain within agricultural education caused by the teacher shortage (Redman & Snape, 2002); therefore, research should investigate teachers' perceptions regarding new teachers who are older than the traditional college graduate. By understanding ageism within agricultural education, particularly directed toward females, teacher educators can prepare graduates to overcome ageist stereotypes and integrate more successfully within existing teaching communities.

Little difference was observed between selection of confederates based on clothing; slightly over half of the respondents (51.5%) selected teachers dressed in casual attire, while slightly under half (48.5%) selected teachers dressed in business casual attire. This 3% difference implies that when selecting between teaching partners that were dressed in business casual and casual attire, respondents as a whole did not value one style over another to any substantial degree. Similar results regarding teachers' credibility based on clothing by Dunbar and Segrin (2012) concluded that there was no significant difference between teachers who dressed moderately and those who dressed formally. However, business casual and casual attire are only two styles of clothing, and they fall toward the center of the clothing continuum's level of professionalism. Further research should be conducted to determine whether teachers value these two more moderate styles of clothing over those more casual or more professional.

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