

Not a Compliant Woman Colleague: A Case Study From Northwestern

In July, Northwestern University IL banned from campus Professor Jacqueline Stevens, a female tenured professor of political science. The ban came after the dean of her college and the associate chair of her department [suggested she was “erratic and uncivil” and was thus possibly a threat to campus safety.](#)

Northwestern did not allow Professor Stevens to return to campus until she underwent a fitness-for-duty evaluation by a medical professional. The evaluation had to show that she was fit—mentally—to return to work. [In September](#), Professor Stevens passed the evaluation and was reinstated.

Stevens published the letter from her dean online, and the adjectives are interesting. Along with “erratic” and “uncivil,” the dean also accuses her of being “threatening,” “aggressive,” “disruptive,” “disrespectful” and—again—“uncivil.”

By her own account and that of others, Professor Stevens was an outspoken critic of her “institution and her colleagues.” According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, she advised a student who sued the school and led a campaign to block a high-profile hire she disagreed with.

She was not—at all—a compliant woman colleague.

She most likely was aggressive, disruptive, disrespectful and uncivil. To me, an outside reader of the various accounts of this conflict, the list of adjectives the dean used to describe her behavior—set alongside Professor Stevens’ political disruptions on campus—seems to lead to a very disturbing conclusion.

The dean’s letter reads like Professor Stevens was sent to the psychiatrist for being an angry woman.

Gendered double standards

Lest we glorify Professor Stevens, she defended herself with incredibly ableist language in an interview with *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: “I have never been diagnosed with a mental illness, nor prescribed psychotropic medications, nor even had this suggested to me.... It’s not like I’m an unknown quantity and you can just run around and say that I’m a crazy person.” She does, indeed, appear disrespectful.

What I want to ask here is this: would a male professor who had been outspoken and critical of his campus and colleagues have been so easily branded as erratic and—let’s be honest about the accusation—unstable?

I believe the answer is no. Men are permitted a much broader range of emotions—including workplace emotions. Men are allowed to get angry at work, and women are not.

How women are expected to speak

It all starts with the way men and women are expected to speak.

We’ve seen it over and over again this election season. In [“Why Do So Many People Hate the Sound of Hillary Clinton’s Voice?”](#) Elspeth Reeve explains that women’s voices get much harsher scrutiny than men’s voices. “Men are supposed

to be assertive, loud, and competitive. Women are supposed to be soft-spoken, cooperative, and helpful,” she said.

Furthermore, Clinton’s voice alienates people because it projects strength. A linguist explains to Reeve: “There’s nothing breathy about Hillary Clinton’s voice. And if somebody doesn’t want a woman to be powerful they’re not going to like that voice.”

A woman who speaks powerfully will be disliked simply for how she is speaking. A woman who is not soft-spoken or cooperative is breaking strongly coded gender boundaries. Whether she is running for president or arguing a point to her department chair, she has certain ways she is supposed to talk—culturally.

It is no wonder, then, that a colleague defending Professor Stevens’ behavior in an interview with *The Chronicle of Higher Education*—a recent past president of Northwestern’s Faculty Senate, so perhaps he is a credible source—took pains to describe Professor Stevens as “not ‘coarse or rude.’”

Coarseness and rudeness are improper speech patterns for women. To be coarse or rude is enough, it seems, to get a woman branded as erratic and threatening.

A polite (read: sane) woman follows gender rules.

Branded as “crazy”

Women misbehaving and thus being branded as “crazy” is not a new thing. In an article from *Victorian Studies*,

“Victorian Women and Insanity,” researcher

Elaine Showalter pointed out these same connections in her now-famous studies of Victorian asylums and gender disparities.

For example, Showalter reports how female asylum inmates were often reported to be more vocal, rude and disruptive than male inmates. However, “Such reports primarily reflect the expectations and wishes of male observers that women should be quiet, virtuous, and immobile,” she wrote.

In other words, it wasn’t that the female asylum inmates were louder or more crass than the male inmates; it was that they broke the strict behavior rules for their gender.

Women in the workplace already have such a limited range of acceptable responses when they’re angry or upset. Women are not supposed to show their anger, and when we do get angry—say, by raising our voices—our behavior can be perceived as so outside the norm that we are seen as out of control, as “erratic,” as dangerous.

However we feel about Professor Stevens’ situation (I, for one, strongly dislike her ableist comments), we should be concerned about her treatment. We should be concerned that an institution can so easily silence a female colleague by calling her crazy.

Such actions are both sexist (as I’ve discussed here) and painful to those of us who actually have psychiatric disabilities. (But that’s another article.)

—KRGF

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