

Gender norms are still important for women's choice of college major

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Traditional cultural norms about gendered roles and femininity still matter for women's choice of college major, says Ann Beutel of the University of Oklahoma in the US. Beutel and her colleagues published a study in Springer's journal *Gender Issues* showing how long-held cultural norms about femininity may contribute to ongoing gender segregation in academia, and to the college majors that women decide to pursue in particular.

The study was motivated by the persistence of [gender](#) segregation in terms of [college](#) major choices, despite the tremendous strides that have been taken by young US women in their overall level of educational attainment and representation in the workplace.

Data were collected from 657 undergraduate female students at one US university. Participants answered questions about their intended or current study programme. They completed the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory which measures to what degree women conform to eight dominant feminine norms held in high esteem in US culture. This includes being relationship-orientated, caring for children, thinness, sexual fidelity, modesty, being domestic and physical appearance.

The results suggest a relationship between the extent to which young women conform to feminine norms and their choice of college major. For instance, women who reported greater conformity to feminine norms generally had significantly lower odds of choosing a major in science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) or doctoral track-

medicine (e.g., pre-medicine) or arts or humanities. Women choosing majors in social sciences, education, and social services generally aligned more to the norm of caring for children than did those choosing to major in arts, humanities, business, communication and journalism.

Interestingly, those who reported greater conformity to the domesticity norm were more likely to choose a major from the STEM, doctoral-track medicine or clinical and health sciences fields.

"Given that the college years are a time when [gender norms](#) may be increasingly salient to young women, it is important to understand whether conformity to norms about women's sexuality, appearance, and relationships, as well as [conformity](#) to norms about women's caregiving and domesticity, are associated with college major choice," says Beutel.

"At least some of the barriers to increased gender integration of academic fields of study may come from cultural norms about gender, and in particular femininity, which have been durable in spite of increases in gender egalitarian ideology and [women's](#) educational attainment and labor force participation," Beutel explains.

More information: Ann M. Beutel et al, Femininity and Choice of College Major, *Gender Issues* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s12147-017-9195-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-017-9195-8)

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