

Preference for dating smarter partners negatively affects women's attitudes toward STEM

March 31 2016, by Bert Gambini



Women with a preference for more intelligent partners are less likely to show interest in male-dominated fields such as math and science, according to a newly published study from the University at Buffalo.

The research, published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, builds upon previous findings that found that thinking about romantic goals affected [women](#)'s attitudes toward careers in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

In particular, previous research suggested an incompatibility between romantic goal pursuits and intelligence goal pursuits for women, but not men. The current paper suggests that the incompatibility may be most pronounced for women who prefer partners of greater intelligence.

"What we found is that not all women reacted equally to these romantic goal primes," says Lora Park, a UB psychologist and the study's lead author. "Women who had a traditional romantic partner preference of wanting to date someone smarter than themselves were the ones who distanced themselves the most from STEM fields when they thought about romantic goals."

The women in this research also performed worse on a math test and tended to show less identification with math, an academic discipline at the base of science and technology careers.

The diluted interest and identification is specific to the perceived masculine fields of math and science and is not a general effect. Participants did not show less interest in careers often considered feminine, such as those in social work or elementary education, says Park.

"This suggests there might be something strategic about the lack of interest or perhaps women are downplaying their interests in these fields," says Park. "On the other hand, it could be a process they're not even conscious of. It could be an automatic reaction."

Though women represent 48 percent of the overall U.S. workforce, they constitute only 24 percent of the country's STEM workers, according to the Census Bureau's 2009 Community Survey.

"In general terms, women have made many advancements, but in certain fields of STEM they haven't made that much progress," says Park.

The published paper includes four studies, among them a preliminary study involving more than 900 participants that established a link between a preference for dating smarter partners and traditional gender roles. Women show greater preference for dating smarter partners compared to men and the more they endorsed this preference the more traditional they were in their gender roles.

The three additional studies examined math performance, math identification and interest in STEM when thinking about romantic goals. Each activated a romantic goal and across the studies a pattern emerged that showed worse math performance, less identification with [math](#) and less interest in STEM careers for those women with traditional romantic partner preferences.

"I was surprised by the fact that some women have this preference," says Park. "But I wasn't surprised that this preference led to worse outcomes in these masculine fields."

Parks says it's interesting that women who didn't have this partner preference tended to show better STEM outcomes, suggesting the more non-traditional [preference](#) might contribute to greater interest in STEM.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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