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Study: Are Women Choosing Romance Over Math Science?

By **MEREDITH MELNICK** Thursday, August 18, 2011 | [Add a Comment](#)



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the way.

Women are notoriously underrepresented in the fields of (STEM, for short). Now a new study suggests it's because

Only about a quarter of STEM jobs in the U.S. are **held by women**, and women who major in STEM in fields after graduation, compared with men. Lora Park, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Utah, says a stereotype about how men don't find brainy girls attractive could be holding some women back.

In a series of experiments, Park and her colleagues primed college men and women to think about dating by showing them pictures of beach sunsets, candles and the like, or having them overhear a researcher's staged conversations. They were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their interest in STEM and their preference for academic or non-academic activities.

Women who were primed to think about romance were less likely to be interested in STEM or to choose to major in such "feminine" subjects as English or foreign language — compared with women who were primed to think about friendship. (Those cues involved pictures of books, libraries and glasses, or overheard conversations.) For men, interest in STEM did not change regardless of what they were primed to think about.

Park and colleagues wrote:

When the goal to be romantically desirable is activated, even by subtle situational cues, women are more likely to choose romantic goals over academic goals. One reason why this might be is that pursuing intelligence goals in masculine fields, such as STEM, is often associated with traditional romantic scripts and gender norms.

In a final experiment, 54 female students were recruited from a college math class and asked to fill out questionnaires about their interest in dating, academic achievement and homework for three weeks. All the women said they were interested in both dating and academics.

But on days when women reported focusing more on dating-oriented goals than academics, their interest in STEM activities was lower, researchers found. "[W]hen women were striving to be romantically desirable, they engaged in more non-STEM activities (e.g., studying for math class, completing math homework)," wrote the researchers. "When women were striving to do well academically, they engaged in more math activities."

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