



Career vs. Romance: What Predicts a Woman's Choice?

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Background

- There is a national shortage in women pursuing degrees in the traditionally male dominated fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).
- Women's attempts to balance different life goals (e.g., career, marriage, having children) and the roles that accompany these goals (e.g., wife, mother, scientist) have been hypothesized to explain their career choices and lower representation in STEM.
- STEM majors are demanding and allow less time for non-academic pursuits, and thus women may have to choose between their career goals and other life goals.
- We know little about how women envision these life course events when they are in college.

Objectives

Therefore the current study examines:

- Sex differences in the importance of career and family life goals for students enrolled in STEM courses;
- How the endorsement of gender stereotyped attributes predicts the importance of career and family life goals.

Method

Participants

- 1392 undergraduate students (39% female)
- All were enrolled in STEM courses
- 87% majored in a STEM field
- 38% were upper classman (third year or above)

Procedure:

- Questionnaires were completed in class (~ 15 minutes)
- Measures investigated students career goals, their life goals, their attitudes toward gender typical roles and their gender typical self-concept



This project was supported by NSF Grant #HRD 1136266

Measures

Goals in Life Scale (Hammersla & Frease-McMahan, 1990): Participants were given the following prompt: *Students have to consider the trade-offs between different life goals when they are in conflict with each other. Suppose that you were in a serious romantic relationship. However, in order to stay with that partner, you might have to give up certain of your own life goals. If you had to choose between the romantic relationship and each of the goals listed below, which would you choose?* Response options consisted of a 4-point scale. A composite score was created averaging across the three items. Higher scores indicate favoring other goals over a relationship.

- Being financially well off
- Having a high status occupation with a great deal of power and influence
- Furthering your education

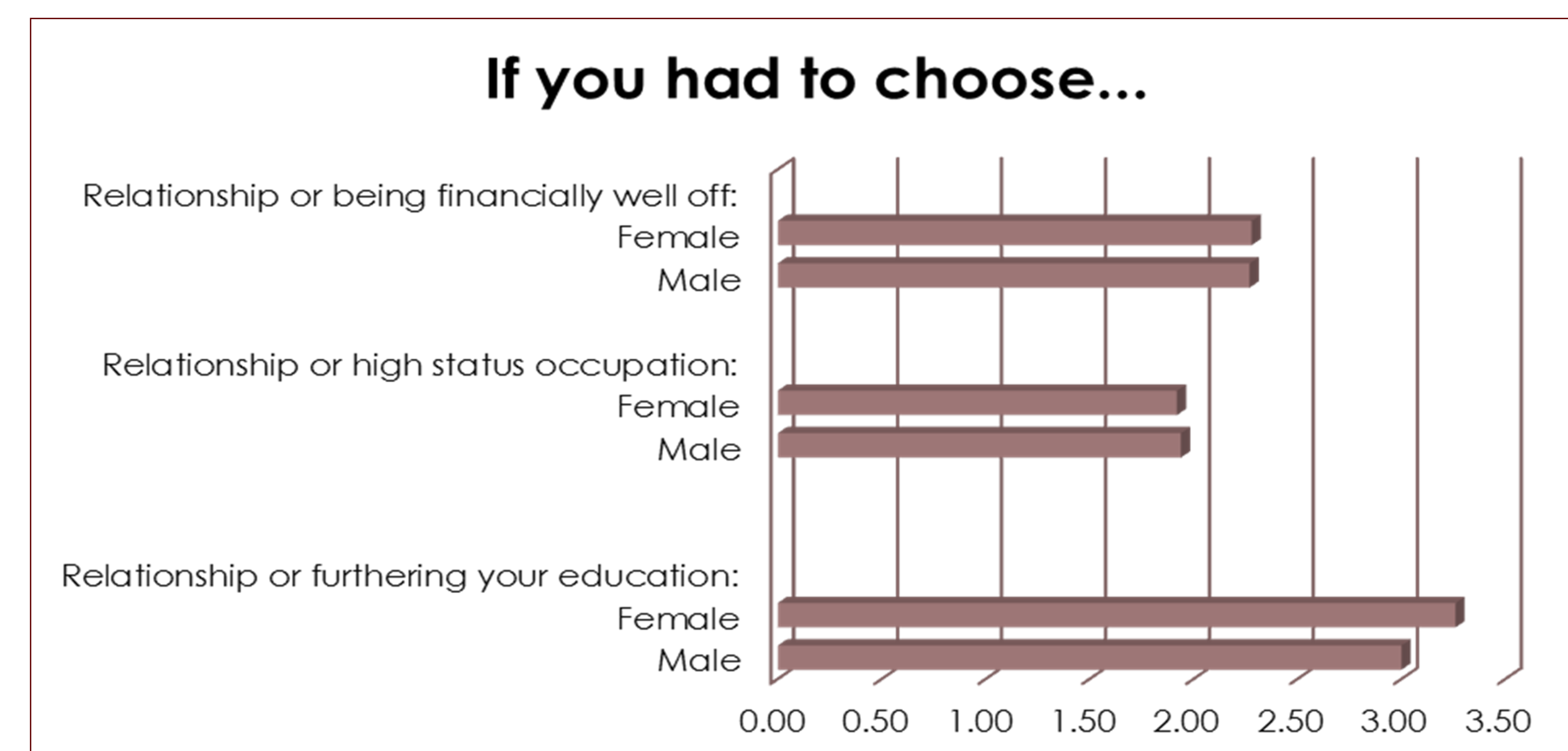
Gender Typical Self Concept Scale (Diekman and Eagly, 2000): Assessed the degree to which individuals believed that they possessed each of 16 traits on a 7-Point scale (1= not at all characteristic of me to 7 = very characteristic of me). Personality and cognitive subscales were included for each gender.

- Agentic/masculine Personality, e.g., competitive, daring, aggressive
- Communal/feminine Personality, e.g., affectionate, gentle, sensitive
- Masculine Cognitive, e.g., analytical, quantitatively skilled
- Feminine Cognitive, e.g., : creative, imaginative, intuitive

Egalitarian Sex Roles Survey (Suzuki, 1991): Assessed the extent to which individuals believed that there should be equality for males and females in relation to the roles that each sex plays in society. Participants indicated their attitudes towards 13 items on a 7-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. Two sample items are:

- *The differences of capabilities between individuals are more numerous than those between men and women.*
- *Working women put a strain on the family (reverse scored).*

Results



- **Sex differences in career and relationship goals:** *T*-tests were calculated comparing male and female responses to the *Goals in Life* questions. Overall, and somewhat contrary to hypotheses, **college women majoring in STEM areas were more likely than men to choose career goals over a relationship**, $t(1369) = -2.05, p = .04$. *T*-tests examining individual items for this scale indicated that, in particular, women were more likely to choose education over a relationship than were men. See figure above.

Egalitarianism & Gender Typical Characteristics Predicting Choice of Career Goals over a Romantic Relationship

Predictor	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <
Egalitarian Sex Roles	.16	5.9	.001
Masculine personality	.16	5.6	.001
Masculine cognitive	-.02	-0.8	NS
Feminine personality	-.20	-6.9	.001
Feminine cognitive	.00	0.1	NS

Notes: $R^2 = .08$ ($p < .001$)

Results continued

Regression Analyses

- A regression analysis was conducted employing a composite score for the *Goals in Life* scale as the dependent variable.
- Results indicated that, for both men and women choosing education and career goals over a romantic relationship was predicted by
 - ❖ More egalitarian views of sex roles
 - ❖ More “masculine” personality characteristics
 - ❖ Fewer “feminine” personality characteristics

Conclusions

- The pattern of sex differences for the *Goals in Life* scale do not support the hypothesis that women value relationship goals more than men.
 - ❖ Male and female college students were similar in the value they placed on relationships compared to being financially well off & having a high status occupation.
 - ❖ Although both valued education goals more than relationship goals, women rated education goals higher than men.
- Holding egalitarian views concerning marriage and possessing more traditionally “masculine” as opposed to feminine personality traits influenced whether or not male and female students valued education rather than a romantic relationship.
- Ongoing research will follow these students to assess if differences in the constructs assessed in this study predict continuing on in a STEM major.