Caught between the Man and the Lucrative Career: The Relation between Women's STEM Goals and Partner Mismatch Explained

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Introduction

- Holland and Eisenhart (1990) and Gilmartin (2005) suggest that college women place the pursuit of romantic relationships above that of academic interests and often struggle to deal with the conflict inherent in the pursuit of both these goals.
- Park et al., (2010) report that the activation of a romantic goal was associated with women doing worse on math tests and less positive attitudes, identification, and interest in STEM.
- Thus, women who try to succeed in a male dominated career AND pursue romantic relationships may experience role conflict that could undermine their career success.
- On the other hand, career and educational goals may also affect who women choose as romantic partners. Eagly et al. (2009) found that the future roles anticipated by men and women influence their choice of mates.
- Consequently, the degree to which a romantic partner is supportive of a woman's efforts toward achieving both relationship and educational goals may be related to the degree of role conflict that a female STEM college student will experience and the likelihood that she will continue toward a STEM degree.

Present Study

- The present study examined the relations between female STEM majors' and their partners' perceptions of the importance of student and romantic roles.
- We also examined how similarity in the perceptions of these roles was related to their commitment to the romantic relationship over career goals.

Method

Participants

- 30 female undergraduate STEM majors and their male romantic partners were recruited for participation.
- Female participants had earlier completed a survey concerning life goals and gender roles as part of a larger research study. On that survey, they indicated that they were in a serious romantic relationship for at least 4 months, and were interested in participating in other studies.
- 80% of the couples had been together 12 months or longer, and 23.3% were living together.
- Average age for women was approx. 20 years; average male partner age was 21 years.
- Participants were primarily Caucasian.

Procedures

- Couples arrived to the session together and participated in a number of activities individually and together. The entire session lasted approximately 75 minutes.
- Measures used in this study were completed individually by men and women.

Measures

Penny Role Sort (McBride & Rane, 1997)

- Participants indicate how invested they are in different roles by dividing 18 chips across 6 different roles (student, work, relationship partner, social relationships, volunteer, and other) to indicate their commitment to each role.
- They complete the sort 4 times:
  - Their own current commitment
  - Their ideal commitment
  - Their partner's current commitment
  - Their ideal for their partner's commitment

Measures Continued

Penny Role Sort Continued

- *Women's Commitment discrepancy scores* were calculated to reflect the differences between the woman's commitment to her **relationship** and **student** roles compared to her partner's perceptions of her commitment to these same roles:
  - Difference between the woman's commitment and the man's perceptions of her commitment for each role.
  - Scores were calculated for current and "Ideal' roles.

Love 'Em or Leave 'Em Scale (Griskell & Barth, 2013)

- Individuals were given 18 occupation pairs and asked to rate their preference between the two.
- One occupation was described as furthering a career goal (professional development, higher salary or helping others), BUT forced them to sacrifice fulfillment of a relationship goal by resulting in less time with a partner (having to move, working night shift or a great deal of travel).
- The second comparable occupation sacrificed the career goal, but fulfilled a relationship goal by virtue of not having to leave one's partner.
- A career was selected using a 4-point scale: Definitely prefer career A, Sort of prefer career A, Sort of prefer career B, Definitely prefer career B.
- Scores were calculated so that a high value indicated a strong inclination toward career goals.

Results

Role Investment

- A repeated measures ANOVA 2 (Gender) X 2 Role (student or relationship) was calculated to assess the differences between the couple's perceptions of the woman's investment in her **current** student and relationship roles. Significant effects were found for:
  - Gender $F(1, 29) = 4.31$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .129$, indicating that men overall rated women's investment in both roles higher than women did, *M's* = 5. 37, 5.78, for women and men, respectively.
  - Role $F(1, 29) = 5.73$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .165$, indicating that the student role was rated higher than the relationship role, *M* = 5.95, 5.20, respectively.
- A repeated measures ANOVA 2 (Gender) X 2 Role (student or relationship) was calculated to assess the differences between the couple's perceptions of the woman's investment in her **ideal** student and relationship roles. Significant effects were found for:
  - Gender $F(1, 29) = 7.26$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .225$, indicating that men overall rated women's investment in both roles higher than the women did, *M's* = 4.73, 5.27, for women and men, respectively.

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Results Continued

Love'm or Leave'm

- Correlations were calculated between the Love'm or Leave'm scores and the discrepancy scores for relationship roles for current and ideal ratings
  - **For women, discrepancy scores for Ideal relationship** investment were negatively correlated with choosing to leave for salary and helping others (Table 1).
  - **For men, discrepancy scores for Ideal relationship** investment were positively correlated with choosing to leave for professional development (Table 1).
  - There were no significant correlations with the **Current relationship** discrepancy scores.

Table 1. Correlations between Love'm or Leave'm and Discrepancy Scores for Ideal Relationship Investment

	Salary	Prof. Dev.	Help
Female	-.36*	-.15	-.39*
Male	.10	.35*	.05

Discussion

- Women in STEM majors reported less investment in their romantic relationships compared to their male partners' perceptions, for both their current and ideal investments.
- Both women and men perceive women to be more invested in the student role than the relationship role.
  - Interestingly this was only true for the current investment, which suggests that both members of the relationship recognize the importance of school work for the female STEM majors.
  - However, in an Ideal situation, the investment in student and relationship roles would be more equitable.

- Analyses with the discrepancy scores indicated that
  - When a woman's ideal relationship investment was less than her partner's perception of her investment (negative discrepancy scores), she was more likely to leave behind her partner in pursuit of a higher paying career or a helping profession.
    - *In other words, when partners hold similar perceptions of the woman's investment in the relationship, the woman is more likely to forgo career opportunities for the relationship.*
  - When a woman's ideal relationship investment was greater than her partner's perception of her investment (positive discrepancy scores), he was more likely to leave behind the relationship for an opportunity for professional development.
  - Interestingly, these relationships were not found for the current discrepancy scores, suggesting that couples' images of their ideal relationships are more critical to relationship stability.

Limitations and Future Directions

- Additional data are being collected to increase the sample size.
- Follow-up surveys will be conducted one year later to determine if the couples are still together.