

Why are More Women in the Helping Professions? Hint: It's Not the Patriarchy's Fault

“Want to close wage gap? Step one: Change your major from feminist dance therapy to electrical engineering.” This [tweet](#) by American Enterprise Institute scholar Christina Hoff Sommers has been loved 32,000 times since 2015. It points to a fundamental truth about the reason that women are on average paid less than men. It's because they are doing different work. And while you could argue that sociologists should be paid more than physicists, the truth is that the market doesn't agree.

If we needed any more evidence that women simply tend to choose lower paying fields to study in college and to enter after graduation, there's a [new study](#) out this week by Oklahoma sociologists Ann Beutel, Stephanie W. Burge, and B. Ann Borden in the journal *Gender Studies* that reiterates this point. The authors write: “In sum, although women's participation in higher education has increased, persistent gender stratification in college majors contributes to gender stratification in the contemporary labor market, with women generally faring worse than men in terms of employment and earnings.”

But the paper's authors are unwilling to simply assume that women might actually prefer to go into social work or elementary school teaching. Instead, of course, they are deemed victims of the patriarchy (which of course means the culture more broadly). “Through socialization processes, children and adolescents learn and internalize ... gender norms, stereotypes and beliefs, and in turn develop their own

gendered preferences,” they write.

You don't have to be a [software engineer at Google](#) to wonder exactly how these norms developed in the first place. Was it all based on some vast conspiracy to keep women in more social, helping professions? Or might there be some other basis for these preferences?

The authors measured how much respondents adhered to certain ideas about femininity, including “being nice in relationships” and “caring for children” and found that the more that they held these ideas to be true, the more likely they were to avoid STEM majors. Again, the obvious explanation is ignored. Maybe people who think that being nice in relationships or caring for children is a fundamental part of their identity (as women) are inclined to pursue careers that make it possible for them to exhibit those qualities more fully. Maybe they haven't simply been brainwashed by those vague, nefarious forces: “Culture, media, and, literature.”

The researchers are willing to acknowledge that there are some gaps in their conclusions. As a [summary](#) of the study at *InsideHigherEd* explains, “The authors note that the study does face some limitations – namely, that the data can only point to associations, not causations.” No kidding.

Assuming that women don't make legitimate and worthy choices for themselves is the worst sort of [false-consciousness](#)-mongering; it also suggests that money should be women's only calculation in determining which profession they should pursue. As for the idea that women are too weak-minded to resist the supposedly oppressive cultural messages surrounding them? That's the kind of condescending logic feminist critics are always attacking the “patriarchy” for promoting. Fem-plaining to women that their own reasonable choices are wrong is the opposite of empowerment.

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