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THE PICTURE FOR MEN: SUPERHERO OR SLACKER

Recent scholarship and popular journalism both suggest an unappealing future for American boys: You're screwed.

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At the end of the fourth season of the critically loved and chronically underwatched *Friday Night Lights*, the former football star Tim Riggins martyrs himself for the sake of his brother and newborn nephew. For much of the season, he and his brother Billy have been stripping down stolen cars and making the type of fast cash they cannot make legitimately. Tim wants the quick cash to fund his desire to buy a bit of sun-drenched Texas countryside, and Billy needs it for his new duties as a father.

As the season finale starts, the brothers are talking to a lawyer and working through their options after they have both been arrested and released. Through the duration of the television hour, it becomes clear that Tim is going to take the fall so that his brother can be a present father to his new son. Their own father had run out on the brothers early in their lives. In a couple of truly emotionally stirring scenes, Tim tells his brother of his decision and then heads into the sheriff's office to turn himself in.

In the show, the character of Tim Riggins is a poster child for what Hanna Rosin has provocatively referred to, in a recent *Atlantic* [cover story](#), as "The End of Men." Rosin argues that in our postindustrial society, women are succeeding in a way in which men cannot keep up. Women are attending and graduating from college and professional schools at a higher rate, and women are entering and ascending in the work force in greater numbers and more successfully.

And in the recession we are living through, men have been the hit hardest. "The worst-hit industries were overwhelmingly male and deeply identified with macho: construction, manufacturing, high finance."

Riggins had plenty going for him: handsome, athletically gifted, a full scholarship at a state university to play football. But in line with the self-destructive behavior the character has displayed — quick to throw punches, quiet on verbal communication — he throws much of this away. A year after the end of high school, he has abandoned college and returned home to open a mechanics shop with his brother, where business is quite slow.

In contrast, his love interest has long abandoned the small Texas town where the show takes place and moved on to her new life at Vanderbilt.

If the makers of *Friday Night Lights* and Rosin are to be believed, there is a simple message being transmitted: Men are screwed. Or to put it another way, for a large subsection of American men, their options in life have become severely limited.

The possible reasons for this are layered and complicated. But recent research points to one possible culprit: traditional forms of masculinity.

In two different studies presented Aug. 16 at the American Psychological Association meetings in San Diego, researchers examined the lives of boys.

Sharon Lamb, a distinguished professor of mental health at the University of Massachusetts-Boston along with her co-authors Lyn Mikel Brown and Mark Tappan of Colby College, found that media images, particularly of superheroes, severely limit the models of boys' behavior. Today's movie superheroes offer a basic template for superhero behavior: nonstop violence when in costume, and the exploitation of women, the flaunting of money and wielding guns when not.

In the past, Lamb argues, comic book heroes "were heroes the boys could look up to and learn from because outside of their costumes, they were real people with real problems and many vulnerabilities."

Now, boys between the ages of 4 and 18 have only two choices.

"In today's media, superheroes and slackers are the only two options boys have. Boys are told if you can't be a superhero, you can always be a slacker. Slackers are funny, but slackers are not what boys should strive to be; slackers don't like school and they shirk responsibility. We wonder if the message boys get about saving face through glorified slacking could be affecting their performance in school."

Lamb suggests teaching boys to distance themselves from these images by helping them recognize the problems with them.

Lamb's fellow researcher on the panel, Carlos Santos of Arizona State University, offers another set of questions and solutions to this larger question of masculinity. Santos examined 426 middle school boys and posed a series of sharp research questions. Are middle school boys able to resist being emotionally stoic, autonomous and physically tough — the traditional, stereotypical markers of masculinity — as they moved from the sixth to the eighth grade? What difference does ethnicity make? Do relationships with families and peers foster resistance? Does resistance affect psychological health?

His conclusions provide a certain amount of hope, given the right type of influences.

Santos found that boys who remained close to their mothers, siblings and peers did not act as tough or shut down emotionally. However, close relationships with fathers encouraged greater autonomy and detachment from friendships.

One assumes that these fathers had learned how to be men from their own fathers, thus maintaining a certain cycle of traditional masculinity. How can the cycle be broken?

"If the goal is to encourage boys to experience healthy family relationships as well as healthy relationships, clinicians and interventionists working with families may benefit from having fathers share with their sons on the importance of experiencing multiple and fulfilling relationships in their lives," Santos said.

Santos also found that boys from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds were able to resist masculine stereotypes, thus breaking another type of stereotype about the hyper-masculinity of certain ethnic minorities.

Time is of the essence in resistance. Santos suggests that the ability to resist internalizing macho images declines as the boys grow older.

And what happens to these boys when they grow older is that they encounter Hanna Rosin announcing their end even before they have had an opportunity to begin.

Certainly, changing media images and encouraging broad-ranging relationships are both important in subverting traditional, and often socially harmful, markers of masculinity. But there is another factor that might also contribute to broadening the choices beyond gun-slinging superhero and slacker: the availability and variety of work.

Of course, making work available now and in the future is no simple task. Among the bad job and unemployment numbers that seem to come out every week, it is clear that there is a bumpy road ahead not only for men, but also for the economy as a whole.

As much as I am worried about my two young boys being bombarded by superhero-slacker images, I am even more worried about the jobs that might not be available to them when they hit adulthood.

And here the studies by Lamb and Santos come back into play. Rethinking certain masculine traits for boys — stoic, autonomous, tough — may be the key for the men they will become to survive in a postindustrial economy. Rosin writes, "The attributes that are most valuable today — social intelligence, open communication, the ability to sit still and focus — are, at a minimum, not predominantly male."

We may not be able to control the availability of jobs, but we can control how boys prepare for them.