

The Big Stall

At school, on the job, and in mating life, young men are making no progress and even backsliding. This isn't the way women's advancement is supposed to work.

By Hara Estroff Marano, published on March 8, 2016 - last reviewed on March 8, 2016



Richard Holler: A grad student in psychology aiming to build a hybrid [career](#), Holler draws [motivation](#) from a desire to disprove negative [stereotypes](#) of Hispanics. (Photo by Bryan Anselm)

He was born Roberto Valero in Bolivia and grew up as Richard Holler, first in Washington, D.C., then in Philadelphia, the adopted son of Caucasian [parents](#). After graduating from Penn State, he spent a year interning at the University of Texas with one of the rock stars of [evolutionary psychology](#), wending his way toward a Ph.D., which he hopes to ply in some unorthodox way—maybe in law, or in [education](#), or as part of a traveling delegation. His friends consider him that rare specimen, an emotionally expressive male. “I’m not pure anything,” he says proudly. “I have a multifaceted [identity](#).” And from it he draws an unusual degree of motivation. “I’m aware of the stereotypes of Hispanics,” he says. “Part of my success comes

from being in a group often seen as inferior. I see that as not true. Now I'm proving it." There is, however, one thing that makes Holler utterly typical of his peers. He is one of only three males in a graduate psychology program with 17 females.

A master's student in evolutionary psychology at the State University of New York at New Paltz, Holler is a frontline witness to the growing [gender](#) disparity in higher education in America, where 60 percent of undergraduate students today are female and more than 58 percent of all graduate degrees are earned by women. At New Paltz, with strong liberal arts programs, the gender ratio skews even more female, close to 70:30. The field of psychology hews even more so, a swift reversal since 1970, when barely 20 percent of Ph.D. degrees went to women.

As head of the evolutionary psych lab at New Paltz, professor Glenn Geher has seen research move from such gender-neutral topics as sex differences in response to [infidelity](#) to more female-centric work on the origins of women's [sexuality](#), the effects of hormonal contraception on social behaviors, and backup romantic partners from a woman's perspective. In his lab as elsewhere, "the shift is helping us learn about things that simply were never studied before," he says.

With their greater education, women are now getting more jobs and more [management](#) jobs than men, and closing in on the earnings of males; economists report that their wages are rising faster than those of men. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, among recent college graduates, women earn 97 percent of what their male peers earn. "At the start of their careers, women actually out-earn men by a substantial margin for a number of college majors."

As women advance, however, men are stalling in their development, increasingly stuck in place and even backsliding as postindustrial American culture fractures along educational, economic, and behavioral fault lines. Almost daily, reports announce that men are lagging by almost every measure there is—school enrollment rates (71 percent of female high school graduates enrolled in college in 2012 versus 61 percent of males, according to the Pew Research Center), number of graduate degrees (women earned 61 percent of master's and 51 percent of doctor's degrees in 2012–2013, finds the National Center for Education Statistics), and labor force participation. As Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton report in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, data now show that, uniquely among advanced countries, the physical and mental [health](#) of American men has begun to decline, seen especially in rising rates of [suicide](#) and accidental death due to [substance abuse](#) among white middle-aged men.

Behind the big stall lies a new fact of life. In our increasingly complex economy, education is ever more tightly tied to work and family. Not only are the three domains together the pillars of the American Dream of mobility and success, but with rising gains in the payoff from formal and informal education, it's no longer possible to advance in one sphere without taking steps to improve the others, contends a new report on poverty and the American Dream jointly issued by the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution. Increasingly, education determines economic prospects, and education and earnings prescribe relationship prospects. And family functioning, thanks as much to social-emotional advantages as to the [cognitive](#) ones that stable adult relationships confer on the young, is now a significant determinant of educational attainment.

The changing gender composition of classrooms would be significant if all it did was represent a shift in numbers. But it does more; it has downstream effects all its own. Research shows that it shifts male psychology as well. Specifically, it changes the motivation of many men and sets them up for disengagement—from the classroom, from relationships, from futures yet to be carved. As a result, many young men get caught in the compelling algorithms of gaming, [pornography](#), and fantasy football. Even more, the changing gender balance sets in motion a downward spiral of commitment, mission, and performance just when they are needed more than ever.

Her Success—or His Failure?

It may be that while many males openly welcome the progress of women, deep down, beyond even their own awareness, they can't help interpreting it as their own failure. And a dented sense of [self-efficacy](#) is highly subversive, derailing achievement motivation and destroying [resilience](#), among many effects.

Reporting in the *Journal of [Personality and Social Psychology](#)*, Kate Ratliff and Shigehiro Oishi found that a woman's success at a task—whether an intellectual achievement or something social like hosting a party—negatively affected the gut-level self-esteem of her partner. It was true of men whether they were American or Dutch (known to be among the most socially advanced in the world). Contemplating a partner's success, whether or not it was something at which they themselves had failed, led men to choose negative descriptions of themselves, although they said they felt fine. Women's self-esteem, by contrast, was unaffected by the performance of their partner, although a partner's achievement warmed their view of the relationship.

The results took Ratliff by surprise. She had expected all subjects to bask in the reflected glory of a partner's success, but the gender difference in response was swift and strong. Ratliff attributes the effect to the male orientation to [competition](#) as a major way of navigating the social universe. “There is some evidence that men automatically interpret a partner's success as their own relative failure,” she reports. They may be especially given to detecting and focusing on signals of dissimilarity, whereas women focus more on similarity. “Men are more likely to think of everything as a zero-sum game.”

Further, she says, a partner's success conflicts with the male stereotype of strength, competence, and [intelligence](#). “Men face lots of pressure to be successful,” she says. A partner's success may hurt men's implicit self-esteem also because it threatens their romantic aspirations. Male ambition and success are important to women seeking mates; “thinking of themselves as unsuccessful might trigger men's fear that a partner will ultimately leave them.”

Her concerns are not strictly academic. More than 500 young men responded to an online survey conducted by *Psychology Today*. When asked what bothers them most these days, many said, in the words of one 34-year-old, “the fear that they will not be enough for the women they [love](#).” “We're scared that we won't have the ability to keep up,” said a 29-year-old.

The Sensitive Sex

Although more male fetuses are conceived than female ones, from conception on males are more subject to developmental disruption and disease and die at a higher rate than females. Recent reports indicate that they are more sensitive to the effects of environmental stressors, including pollutants. The fragility is built into maleness—into the XY genotype, which fails to provide backup chromosomes as the female XX genotype does, and into the complexity of male development, which requires extra physiologic activity; the default gender of humans is female.

Male vulnerability also reflects the high cost of [testosterone](#), which shapes the [brain](#) as well as the body. The [hormone](#) of [risk-taking](#) and competitiveness gives males self-esteem, but it shorts them on [self-control](#), observes Florida State University psychologist Roy Baumeister. From early on, they have more discipline and learning problems than girls. With their large muscle mass and wiring for impulsivity, men have always been hard to harness prosocially.

“Men are more like wild cards,” says Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at New York University’s Stern School of Business and a co-author of the joint AEI-Brookings report. As Baumeister points out in his book *Is There Anything Good About Men?*, there are more males than females at the extremes—of intelligence as well as height, of ambition as well as wealth. That very variability is what makes them so highly sensitive to circumstances.

“The challenge for every society has always been to restrain men and get them to commit to and support women and children, which is why [marriage](#) is so important for and has a greater effect on males than on females,” says Haidt. Commitment to a partner, data have long shown, abets self-control among men. Married men commit fewer crimes, earn more money, take better care of themselves, feel happier, and live longer than unattached men. Commitment, in turn, stabilizes families, which boosts the wellbeing and behavior of children, especially boys, and sets them up to succeed in education and the job market.

Along with their relative status, however, men’s commitment is on the decline. Colleges provide almost a laboratory for observing the phenomenon. There, men and women are housed together in a fairly closed community at a time when people are primed for pairing off—for the moment and as they get set to march through life.

The way people match up varies according to how many partners they sense are available. With the number of men declining relative to the number of women, the 60:40 ratio means there are now 50 percent more women than men on campus. The gender ratio may be closer to 50:50 at selective schools—with an excess of applicants they can draw deep into the pool to balance their classes. The gender mismatch at such schools is not one of numbers but, at some point, of quality. The complaints of women, especially at selective schools, that men “act like they’re in high school” or “don’t have it together” are not losers’ laments; they reflect a true and growing reality.

But what isn’t at all obvious is that the very desire to pair off—and on what terms—changes radically as one’s number of possible mates changes, and in ways that are extremely counterintuitive. It turns out that men are more apt to be single when males are rare than when they are abundant. They’re surrounded by potential partners but have little interest in committing



to or, downstream, marrying them, University of Utah anthropologist Ryan Schacht reports in *Royal Society Open Science*.

When males are abundant, on the other hand, they are especially eager to put considerable effort into finding a mate and settling down; marriage rates go up and [crime](#) rates go down. Conventional [wisdom](#) would have us believe all that testosterone on the loose would lead to mayhem—lots of promiscuity, maybe rampant violence. But that is not the case.

It's when males are in short supply that men turn promiscuous and spawn babies out of wedlock, and male violence rages: Male-male homicide rates go up; so do sexual assault rates. Men muster little energy for finding a mate and, preferring casual sex, engage in multiple relationships. They are happy with hooking up.

As much a social experience as an academic one, college provides the largest mate pool most people will ever encounter. But in pursuit of romantic companionship, college women may feel compelled to behave in ways they are not entirely comfortable with, particularly hooking up.

Dave Hanley: "How men my age talk about women and how we engage them are two different things," says Hanley, 32. "We talk in pornographic terms." (Photo by Tim Gray)

Data from campus counseling centers spotlight relationships as a leading cause of serious distress among students, especially women. Given a generation generally shielded from failure, breakups—typically due to “commitment issues” among men—hit young women particularly hard. Further, although much controversy surrounds the matter, many observers point out that at

least some reports of rape on campus stem from regret over drink-fueled encounters that lack emotional connection.

Relationship preferences and sexual behavior of individuals are highly responsive to context, Schacht says. “Men want fundamentally different things from relationships when males are rare than when they are abundant. The rare-male male is the stereotypical fling-seeking cad we expect him to be. The abundant-male male is the committed, devoted male from the age of Camelot.”

The shift in gender ratio exerts its effects beyond awareness, tapping [mating](#) psychology deeply embedded in the psyche by eons of evolution. An excess of females, says psychologist David Buss at the University of Texas, favors a short-term mating strategy because it “caters precisely” to the fact demonstrated by research that “men harbor, on average, a greater desire for sexual partner variety.”

Other factors operate in the open. Making any kind of commitment now is just too anxiety-provoking for many. Men themselves note that as much as they would like someone “to share my secrets with,” they find relationship discourse “too unpleasant” for passion. They are particularly worried that the career paths they’re choosing will soon be dead ends.

Slow to Adapt

If men’s own fragility in response to a relative status shift contributes to their big stall-out, so, too, does their active failure to adapt to cultural change, contends psychologist Ron Levant, longtime researcher of men and masculinity at the University of Akron. He points to ongoing evidence that, as gender roles expand for both sexes, many men are stuck in an outdated stereotype of what a male is and does. Even among younger men, guys are still not doing a proportionate share of housework or family work. Studies show they continue to have 10 percent more leisure time than their partners.

Women are moving toward androgynous roles while men, and especially less educated ones, still feel “it is dangerous to deviate from masculine norms.” Levant draws hope from the next generation, however. Studies of boys in grades six through 11, he says, show that they are resisting traditional-male socialization, especially into emotional straitjackets. “They reject growing up as automatons.”

Once men do adapt, they can expect a substantial bonus—a longer life. The male death rate will decline, predicts psychologist Daniel Kruger, a research professor at the University of Michigan School of Public Health, because power differentials between the genders will diminish, and that will spare men lots of dangerous competition for status that occurs when men hog all the power. Counterintuitively, says Kruger, patriarchy is terrible for men’s health.

When he and colleagues examined mortality data from around the world, they found that a country’s level of gender inequality predicts the excess of male deaths from behavioral causes. Not only does the study demonstrate that women’s empowerment eliminates sex differences in mortality rates, the [team](#) reports in *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*, it shows how very

sensitive men's behavior and physiology are to social conditions and perceived threats to their relative status.

Blue-collar jobs for men have been vanishing for some time; now white-collar office jobs are threatened, both by outsourcing and, increasingly, by the growing sophistication of technology. That, Kruger says, brings unprecedented uncertainty to all men, even those educated as professionals.



Benjamin Crosier: The 31-year-old strategically decided to minimize economic uncertainty and safeguard a career in psychology by adding coding expertise. (Photo by Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonquist)

Benjamin Crosier is taking no chances. Early in his path to a Ph.D. in psychology he made a strategic decision to learn how to code. “Technology is a great way to ensure a career and is an advantage to a psychologist,” he says. Now, 31, he’s a postdoctoral fellow at Dartmouth’s Center for Technology and Behavioral Health. He puts in 12-hour days, but it’s because he sees a future.

The job contraction also changes men’s social roles in ways that seem to be especially confusing to them, at least at this moment of history. Men are facing a limited number of opportunities but more people to

compete with. “They’re used to competing with men and trying to attract women,” Kruger explains. “Now, however, they are competing with women for jobs. They’re thrown for a loop by the intensified competition alone, to say nothing of their different social role.”

Bothered and Bewildered

As the multiple fronts of uncertainty crush motivation at a time when the economy is splitting into winners and losers, they also leave men confused and disoriented—about their purpose, their future, their very identity.

One typically male response to uncertainty is risk-taking, Kruger points out: “That’s why they’re all hoping to develop an app. It’s a big gamble. Only a few will succeed.” Regina Barreca, professor of English at the University of Connecticut, observes what might be called the app trap among her students. “Young men are not living in reality, especially privileged white ones. They’re [fearful](#) of not doing as well as their fathers—and now their mothers. They all say ‘I want



to develop an app' or 'a video game.' But they're not taking the steps. They have no sense of vocation. They're stuck in a gambling mentality."

And no one is offering them help. "Every young man wants to make a mark in the world," Barreca notes, "but no one is asking them for a commitment. We've raised girls to conquer the world. But we haven't told boys the same thing." For them, in the changed milieu, the lack of encouragement may be experienced as discouragement. "The instructions for males have always been implied. Now they need to be explicit."

Rich Holler agrees. He is pleased to be surrounded by women who, by working hard, are raising the standards for everyone. "They are making a powerful effort. Men haven't needed it. They lack a powerful motivator."

Guys themselves feel abandoned. "Men are almost forgotten as far as what it means to be a man in the modern age," says Tom Halligan, 27, a graphic designer in Whitby, Ontario. "They are left spinning their wheels while trying to find their purpose, whereas women fully know what they are doing and are empowered to do so." As a 26-year-old respondent says, his peers are bothered most by "the feeling of not being needed or necessary." Another, 24, puts it even more bluntly: "It seems like society is against us as a group. At the very least, they are for everyone else except us."

Indeed, agrees Kruger, "Young white males are the least desirable demographic right now—to universities, to employers. The messages they get could be interpreted as 'I'm not wanted.' It takes a toll." Especially on their identity.

Undesirable?

Tom Halligan: "Modern men have it kind of rough because gender roles really no longer matter, and this leaves men with almost no sense of purpose." (Photo by Finn O'Hara)

"Men in my age group are pulled from all sides," says a 28-year-old, "to both comply with and discard traditional ideas of male identity. On the one hand, we feel the need to conform with frankly broken models of 'how men should behave' to be taken seriously by our male peers; on

the other, we feel increased pressure to progress past ancient ideas of patriarchy to create a more enlightened society.” “Being a man entails a lot of inner conflict,” adds a 35-year-old.

Many young men report that they are bewildered that women aren’t helping them move to the new model of masculinity that those very women say they want. As a 27-year-old exhorts: “Girls, please don’t misuse this leverage. We are cool to accept your growth as our growth.” Instead, says a 35-year-old, young men “feel that they are being ‘check-listed’ and dismissed.”

Economic insecurity compounds the identity confusion young men are experiencing, says Vancouver, Washington, psychologist Will Meek. “It precludes a long-range view. They do not want to commit to a definition of themselves prematurely.”

Caught in a no man’s land between identities, many young males feel “pressure to be ‘masculine’ while not being antisocial,” says Grant Turner, 33, a human-performance coach in Victoria, British Columbia. “We’re really like pioneers. Each man is left to define dating and fatherhood in a way that is different from previous generations. As we move toward a more open society, those living the change will be the ones who experience the most growing pains.”

But others find heterosexual [social life](#) now so “increasingly frustrating and unfulfilling” that they have retreated from relationships altogether, despite fears of “ending up all alone.” Dave Hanley, 32, a sales rep for a medical software company in Boston, considers himself lucky. “Pornography has become ubiquitous in the life of young men, and it is stunting them. The Internet, with sudden access to everything, arrived in my life at [adolescence](#). At least I was old enough to have had real relationships and to know that porn is not really real.”

Young males understand that they potentially have a lot to gain from women’s advancement. Which may be why so many, asked what they expect out of a relationship, responded: “Reciprocation.” “To be understood.” “Someone who will add a new dimension to my life.” As a 28-year-old says, “More and better-quality shared experiences.” And, at some point, perhaps when young men and women have found a new rapprochement, “more dancing.”