

# Redefining masculinity



Mark Hines

Drs. Ramel L. Smith, William Seymour and Hector Torres want to “remove the aspects of strength that get [men] in trouble,” Smith says.

Three psychologists  
strive to build a  
‘better’ man.

BY REBECCA A. CLAY

William Seymour, PhD, was raised in a well-off white family in the small, conservative town of Elkhorn, Wis. Ramel L. Smith, PhD, an African-American, grew up streetwise in Milwaukee. Hector Torres, PsyD, grew up gay in Puerto Rico. Despite their very different experiences of boyhood, the three psychologists have at least one thing in common: a mission to redefine American masculinity.

According to the trio, all members of APA’s Div. 51 (Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity), American society socializes boys and men to conform to a definition of masculinity that emphasizes toughness, stoicism, acquisitiveness

and self-reliance. And that, they say, leads to aggressive, emotionally stunted males who harm not just themselves but their children, partners and entire communities.

To address these issues, the trio has launched an awareness campaign plus a pilot program that brings middle school and high school-aged boys of different ethnicities together in eight weeks of facilitated discussions. Their goal? To teach boys and men to keep what’s positive about traditional masculinity while jettisoning what’s bad.

“We want to teach men how we can remain positively assertive while removing negative aggression,” says Smith, a



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child and adolescent psychologist at the Children's Hospital of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. "While keeping men strong, we want to remove the aspects of strength that get us in trouble."

### Building a better man

The three psychologists came to their mission through their concerns about violence, the nation's burgeoning prison population and what they were hearing through their clinical work with boys and young men.

"Our current definition of masculinity is very limited, and it's that limited understanding of what it is to be male that may lead us to aggression," says Torres, who directs the Center for Latino/a Mental Health at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. "By having a limited scope of coping mechanisms, we go very quickly to explosion and aggression." That can be especially true when others question a young man's masculinity, says Torres, adding that being called gay is often the worst possible insult among adolescent boys.

What Torres and his colleagues hope to do is expand the notion of maleness. They want to retain such traditionally male, positive traits as bravery and protectiveness, while creating a new definition that also includes the full range of human emotions. The new definition would be flexible rather than dichotomous; it would no longer separate traits into rigidly defined categories of what is "male" and what is not. Smith draws on the 1970s-era television show *The Six Million Dollar Man* to explain what they want to do: "We can rebuild him ... better than he was before."

Take *machismo*. In the wider culture, Torres points out, it's often the negative aspects of *machismo* that are emphasized. "It's very common that you mention *machismo*, and people think about physical and domestic violence," he says. "But there's another concept in Latino culture — *caballerismo* — that has as its underlying values respect and responsibility. *Caballerismo*, he says, is about accepting personal responsibility and defending, honoring and protecting the family. A *caballero* opens doors for others — both women and men — as a sign of caring and respect, for example.

### Starting the conversation

Catching boys before they're fully socialized is key, the group says. "There are plenty of downstream interventions to prevent or reduce violence," says Seymour, also a child and adolescent psychologist at Children's Hospital in Milwaukee. "But we need to go further upstream to the source of the river, not the mouth."

Inspired by their work with adolescents and young men in their practices in Milwaukee and Chicago, the trio launched an evidence-based pilot program at Children's Hospital last year that encourages small groups of four to eight boys and young men — who are typically former patients or referrals from colleagues — to think about masculinity.

The groups concentrate on three themes: intrapersonal

awareness, interpersonal skill development and service to others. Together the boys explore such topics as what it means to be a man, how to handle difficult situations and why they should help others. The program also uses such diverse role models as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jesus and Che Guevara to spark discussions about how men can use their power appropriately and effectively. The boys leave with materials summarizing the lessons, plus an invitation to join "maintenance" groups.

"Nothing gets changed without conversation," says Seymour, who adds that as a multicultural trio, he, Torres and Smith serve as role models that show that very different men can agree to disagree without considering each other enemies.

The psychologists plan to evaluate the pilot program, then launch a full-scale effort to replicate it around the country.

The psychologists are also taking the discussion out into the broader world, with presentations at conferences and other venues, plus media appearances. They have appeared on Milwaukee's National Public Radio affiliate to discuss their views on masculinity. And they're discussing a possible series of programs on masculinity with Milwaukee's public television station.

Eventually, they also hope to include girls and women in the conversation. "We want to start the conversation men to men," says Torres. "At a certain point, we'll have to integrate more females into the conversation so that they can help us with their insights and understanding."

In the meantime, Stephanie A. Shields, PhD, president of APA's Div. 35 (Society for the Psychology of Women) thinks the group should rethink what it means to be a woman as well as what it means to be a man.

"As they guide men to understand the positive side of power and assertiveness, it will be important to help men understand that women, too, can be powerful," says Shields, a professor of psychology and women's studies at the Pennsylvania State University. "Instead of seeing strong women as a threat to masculinity, the new masculine identity will accept and work with strong and powerful women in constructive ways."

In the meantime, Div. 51 President Jay C. Wade, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at Fordham University, applauds the group's efforts.

"Certain parts of masculinity are positive, but certain parts are negative and aren't good for men, families or society," says Wade, speaking on his own behalf rather than the division's. "Those negative aspects of masculinity need to be challenged, redefined or gotten rid of." ■

Rebecca A. Clay is a writer in Washington, D.C.



To hear the psychologists' interview on Milwaukee's NPR affiliate, go to: [www.wuwm.com/programs/lake\\_effect/le\\_sgmt.php?segmentid=8246](http://www.wuwm.com/programs/lake_effect/le_sgmt.php?segmentid=8246).

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