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Kristi D. Treviño

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## Book Review

# Men on a Mission: Valuing Youth Work in Our Communities by William Marsiglio



Reviewed by: Kristi D. Treviño\*

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Marsiglio, William. *Men on a Mission: Valuing Youth Work in Our Communities*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 2008. 416 pp. \$60.00 hardcover, \$30.00 paper.

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In *Men on a Mission: Valuing Youth Work in Our Communities*, William Marsiglio studies men who care enough to take the time to mentor and guide youth in the U.S. About his book, Marsiglio writes, "I paint a sweeping portrait of men's involvement with contemporary youth in all sorts of settings, at times placing this involvement in historical and crosscultural context" (p. 7). By and large, this book describes the many ways men are involved in youth work and their reactions to such work while at the same time emphasizing two important social problems. First, a large number of children lack male role models and second men are all too seldom involved in youth work. Other issues relating to men working with children are also raised in the twelve chapters, ranging from the feminization of the profession to the effects of race and ethnicity in youth work. *Men on a Mission: Valuing Youth Work in Our Communities* is the most current and comprehensive study of men who work and volunteer with youth in our country.

Anecdotal stories are included throughout the manuscript from various men Marsiglio interviewed in his research. These short but vivid accounts enliven the book and ameliorate the somewhat lackluster writing style. Marsiglio is at his best in matching these stories with excellent explanations of current issues. For example, Marsiglio explains that society holds an

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\* Kristi D. Treviño, graduate student, South Dakota State University, Department of Rural Sociology, Brookings, SD 57006; e-mail: [kristi.trevino@sdstate.edu](mailto:kristi.trevino@sdstate.edu)

assumption that men are more likely than women to be abusers of children. He goes on to clarify how this "culture of fear" affects our society by highlighting one of his own encounters with a group of unfamiliar children. He tells the following story. While walking his dog, Jessie, a cadre of young children came running up to him to pet his dog and ask questions about her. Marsiglio writes, "[m]indful of the unwritten 'adult-child protocol', I wondered how much I should talk to these gregarious kids... I was self-conscious about being an adult male and a stranger. My decision: I was pleasant, I answered their questions but did not ask any, I allowed them to revel in the excitement of being with Jessie, and then I left. The kids learned my dog's name, not mine" (p. xii). In recounting this story, Marsiglio stresses that men are often deterred from having meaningful and nurturing relationships with our nation's children for fear of being accused of wrongdoing. It is through these poignant illustrations, when Marsiglio shares how men negotiate difficult situations encountered in their work, the real value of this book is revealed.

The remaining material in this book, I found to be relatively dull and somewhat incomplete. This disappointment, I believe, is a consequence of the author's indecisiveness in choosing a clear and conscientious readership. On one hand, Marsiglio presents this book to the sociological community as a qualitative and exploratory study about males who work with children in public settings. On the other hand, he presents his book as a guide for men who want to get more involved in youth work. To neither audience does he do justice. In writing to the sociological community, Marsiglio does submit a balanced account of the data and includes appendices for an enhanced explanation of his research methodology as well as for suggestions for further research. Yet, the theoretical foundation of his research is noticeably lacking. At only two points in this more than three hundred page exposition does Marsiglio invoke theory to explain specific issues. When he does include theory it feels like an afterthought, not a guiding

framework. For the other readership, men who may want to become more informed or engaged in youth work, Marsiglio claims “I suggest ways to get men more involved in youth work” (p.7). This is misleading. The most he offers are examples of how other men have done this type of work and vague questions for them to reflect upon. Marsiglio gives only confusing and ambiguous suggestions.

Overall, Marsiglio represents his book as a rally for men’s youth work, explaining that it “celebrates their passions, hard work, sacrifices, and contributions to making sure the youngest generation has a chance to thrive” (p. xvi). I think at best it describes their work and subtly praises them for accomplishing a difficult job in a complicated time. It does not rally men for the cause nor does it suggest conclusively how they can improve. *Men on Mission: Valuing Youth Work in Our Communities* has a lot of good qualities—like reminding readers how important it is for children, especially boys, to have healthy relationships with men—and a few downfalls. Read this book for what it is: a comprehensive overview of men involved in youth work that gives the men involved a high five and a hearty pat on the back.