Book Review

Men on a Mission: Valuing Youth Work in Our Communities, by William Marsiglio. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, xvi, 394 pp.

Marsigilio opens his book-length qualitative study with two points: first, we know very little about "how men's interactions and relationships with youth matter"; second, "despite our spotty understanding … their value should not be underestimated" (p. 2). The author offers a backdrop for the study by stating that in the post-industrial era women have spent significantly more time than men teaching children in the classroom—a pattern that has broadened to most areas of social interaction with children and youth. This pattern of "the feminization of care-work," Marsiglio argues, has far-reaching and often damaging consequences, for children, for youth, for women, and even for men themselves. Conversely, when men invest effort and emotion in children and youth, there are several benefits, including improved well-being in the men themselves—due to positive influence that relationships with youth can have on men's personal development. This angle for advocating men's involvement with youth echoes Rob Palkovitz's (2002) conclusion in his book-length study *Involved Fathering and Men's Adult Development* that "good fathering is good for child development, good for the mothers of children, good for communities … and good for men" (p. 265). In short, youth work/mentoring mirrors fathering—when it is done well, everyone wins.

In chapter 2 ("The Landscape"), Marsiglio commences to take the reader on a textured and multi-stop tour that reveals myriad forces that stand between or at least push against men who want to help youth and communities. These forces include the prevalence of non-nurturing (even violent) models of masculinity; poor wages; lack of respect and status surrounding child/youth professions; and the fears of being perceived as soft, feminine, or worst of all, as a pedophile. Additionally, there are the stereotypical male expectations of "sturdy oak," "give 'em hell," "big wheel," and "no sissy stuff" (p. 82) which engender the problem of "an underdeveloped form of 'emotional literacy'" in U.S. boys (p. 85). With these and other substantial barriers identified, Marsiglio shares responses from several of the 55 diverse men he interviewed as they explain why youth work is worth their time. For some, it is a desire to emulate their father's positive involvement—for others, it is a desire to be a diametrically different man than their own abusive or abandoning father. Others are driven by a desire to "give back to community," while a few confessed that they were striving to fill a personal void.

Marsiglio concisely summarizes what we know about single-parent contexts and child outcomes, citing Andrew Cherlin's conclusion that "substantial evidence [has] mounted indicating that growing up in a single-parent family … is associated with a lower level

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of well being and poorer life outcomes" (p. 15). If the reader will pardon a personal interjection here, I was reminded of an occasion during graduate school when I made this same point in a classroom debate over the importance of fathers. A close friend, a young recently widowed mother with a 12 year-old son, turned squarely toward me and said, "So, *what am I supposed to do for my son now that he has no father*?" This, of course, is the real-life quandary that many women are left with following nonmarital childbirth, abandonment, or divorce. Marsiglio points out that a critical element in responding to this father-need is the involvement of other *generative* men.

Erik Erikson's concept of generativity—the deep investment of one's self in subsequent generations—remains one of the most optimistic concepts in the social sciences. However, as Marsiglio acknowledges, Erikson clearly forwarded the idea that "biological and parenting generativity…[are] the foundation for the subsequent expression of social generativity" (p. 94).

Here we reach two points of tension that are not explicitly addressed: *Point 1*—If Erikson was correct in forwarding biological parenthood as the typical predecessor to cultural/societal generativity, then the promotion of generative fathering seems to be the key way to promote generative mentoring and concern outside the family [an argument implicit in Hawkins and Dollahite's (1997) edited volume *Generative Fathering*]. *Point 2*—By contrast, Michael Kimmel's review (on the rear cover) claims that "Marsiglio has single-handedly redefined the study of fatherhood … so that it now includes mentoring." In Point 2, mentoring is elevated from an outgrowth of biological generativity to "fathering" in its own right—perhaps even as an alternative to biological/parental generativity. Consistent with Point 1, Marsiglio offers multiple participant examples of married, biological dads whose youth work seems to be an extension of their biological fathering—including Grady, who argues that "there's no substitute for having a child and being a father" (p. 259). However, Marsiglio is inclusive by interviewing single, gay, and divorced non-fathers that seem to embody the point that biological fatherhood is not required (consistent with Point 2). I do not perceive Marsiglio as championing either Point 1 or Point 2 above, and appreciate Marsiglio's candor and balance in implicitly addressing the importance of both. While I am sympathetic to both, I am concerned about those who might be tempted to focus solely on Point 2. Despite the richness, complexity, and dualism of Marsiglio's writing, the purposive/non-random nature of the sample prohibits generalizable responses to the critical question: "What *are* the most frequently used and vital 'on-ramps' to youth mentoring?" If the most salient catalyst or "on-ramp" to youth mentoring work is becoming an involved father, then forwarding youth mentoring as an *alternative* (instead of *additional*) form of generative fathering might amount to repaving an interstate highway while overlooking the deteriorating condition of the primary on-ramp.

Shifting gears, in terms of qualitative craftsmanship Marsiglio's work reaches its peak in chapter 7 where he offers themes addressing "the men's appreciations for and frustrations with the kids." Marsiglio presents both the ups and the downs of youth work in a way that integrates yet contrasts the costs and benefits. As a reader, I came away with the sense that these 55 men have intermittent moments when they want to either strangle or embrace the youth (and parents) that they serve. The arrogance, the disrespect, and the bad (and even violent) behavior among the youth are perennial sources of frustration for several of these youth mentors. For those who have done youth work, these strains ring with authenticity. However, without waxing triumphal, Marsiglio cap-

tures something of the meaning these mentors experience when their efforts bear fruit. One such note is a co-created definition of generativity offered by one of Marsiglio's participants, Carlos (who had seen one of "his" troubled youth, Malik, grow into a mentor in his own right). Carlos stated: "To me, true mentoring takes place when the person that you've reproduced reproduces…. [T]hey need to be pointed in the right direction, turned around, and passing on what they've been given" (p. 97). Erikson would have been pressed to say it better.

Based on nearly 15 years of my own successes and failures as a qualitative researcher, I am aware that a researcher is rarely given gems like Carlos offered, until the researcher has invested time, energy, and concern sufficient to win the trust of his participants. Marsiglio clearly passed muster with his participants, and this makes a monumental difference in the depth of the data and value of the finished product. Marsiglio returns respect to his participants by allowing their voices to be heard (not paraphrased) on the majority of his book's pages.

On a critical note, there is little triangulation of participants or of method—the volume is based almost solely on the reports of the men themselves. Also, the author occasionally double-dips by using participant quotations more than once, but this is forgivable in 300+ page volume. Marsiglio slips a few times by using words like "prove" in connection with his data and findings, but these overstatements are conspicuous due to their rarity in an otherwise careful and balanced book.

In closing, some of Marsiglio's participants cling hard to traditional, committed fathering as the primary source of strength and hope for both today's and tomorrow's youth. One man named Jackson stated, "[I]f we had one generation of men that took fatherhood seriously … if one generation of men … said, 'I'm gonna be a father to my children,' we'd have so many less problems than we have today" (p. 309). However, for the millions of youth who do not have such a father, Marsiglio asks, "Is it possible that for these boys … [that] some of the men I interviewed … may offer a glimmer of hope? I tend to think so ...." Marsiglio further posits that that most important effect of his participants' accounts is that they "offer us the means to think more clearly about how we can inspire other men to make a difference in kids' lives" (p. 304). Perhaps, however, the most significant effect of this study is not ideological but invitational. Pulitzer Prize-winning author and psychiatrist Robert Coles (1990) has offered his view that the hallmark of great literature is not its entertainment value, but an inherent moral call. On occasion, qualitative research, when done with the right blend of rigor, humanity, and engaged participation, can rise to a level where the author invites the reader not only to think differently, but to *be* different—to be more generative. For me, Marsiglio's *Men on a Mission* was such a book.

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LOREN D. MARKS, LSU
lorenm@lsu.edu

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