

## reviews

Messner, Michael A. *It's All for the Kids: Gender, Families, and Youth Sports*. University of California Press, 2009. 288 pp.

With the publication of *It's All for the Kids*, Michael Messner has in a certain sense come home. This is the first research driven book since Messner wrote his groundbreaking book on sport and the problem of masculinity *Power at Play* (Beacon Press, 1992). *It's All for the Kids* began in 1995 when his elder son first started participating in soccer with the simple question, "Why are there so few women coaches in youth sports?" Answering that question led to seven years of ethnographic research on South Pasadena, CA youth athletics, where Messner's sons played, and the interviewing of 50 research subjects. Contrary to the popular image of out-of-control dads fighting on the sidelines and self-involved soccer moms using their children to gain community status, which certainly do exist, Messner finds that youth athletics and parental voluntarism are central in the production of a community that people want to live in. At a time when academics, pundits, and politicians decry the disintegration of communities, it is reassuring to know that youth athletics serves such a powerful force integrating families into communities. But this is not Pollyanna celebration of middle class communities, instead Messner takes pains to demonstrate how people's volunteerism or 'free choices' are in fact guided and patterned by often-unseen institutional forces.

Messner has long been a proponent in the field of critical masculinities studies of R.W. Connell's conception of *hegemonic masculinity*. Which means, *It's All for the Kids* comes at a fortuitous time in debates over the concept's contemporary viability. In recent years, critics decry hegemonic masculinity as an overly rigid, deterministic concept that cannot explain the true variations in men (and women). In the field of sport studies, critics claim this has led to a preponderance of studies on elite athletics since non-elite athletes cannot substantiate the concepts core assumptions. In *It's All for the Kids*, Messner deftly demonstrates not only the flexibility of the concept in the study of youth athletics across age groups, and that hegemony works even when people are not consciously engaged in acts of domination, but also that assumptions about gender link different institutions together in the social-spatial formation of a community. In other words, people's lives traverse an inter-locking system of institutions in which gender provides a structuring logic to people's 'free and voluntary' decisions. The decisions they make are thus conditioned and limited by the institutional configuration of society that is structured by the force relations of race, class, and gender. As a result, Messner finds that women overwhelming take on roles such as "team mom" rather than "coach", and those that do decide to coach are often weeded out early or cycle back from the higher status older kids teams to the younger kids regardless of their technical knowledge of the sport.

Similarly, men who do not conform to the dominant or hegemonic patterns of masculine behavior are similarly weeded out or cycle back to the lower age groups. As a result, professional, white men absolutely dominate the higher age brackets in South Pasadena to the detriment of Latino, non-professional class men.

Messner emphasizes that domination in a 'good' community like South Pasadena rarely, if ever, occurs in blatantly sexist or racist ways. He argues that a "soft essentialism" structures the interactions of South Pasadena's white, professionals. This soft essentialism is informed by liberal feminist ideas on gender equality. As a result, girls are allowed a greater gender non-conformity than boys that is based on a reversal of the old nature-culture binary where women now enjoy cultural choices and boys are biologically destined to a world of competition.

Despite its many laudable strengths, *It's All for the Kids* will not bring an end to debates over hegemonic masculinity, even if such a thing were desirable. Indeed, theoretical limitations of hegemonic masculinity implied in the book's research question leads to an occlusion of Messner's field vision when surveying South Pasadena's urban geography. So while Messner bravely recognizes "the limitations of [his] own standpoint as a white, male, professional-class homeowner in South Pasadena" (201), a stronger engagement with the San Gabriel Valley's uneven development and a more thorough exploration of the land-use issues in the arroyo where the kids play and that divide South Pasadena from its neighboring working class communities of colour would provide a deeper analysis of race and class-based inequality.

My criticism notwithstanding, *It's All for the Kids* is a wonderful ethnography filled with valuable theoretical insights. As a theoretically sophisticated yet accessible book, it is excellent for popular audiences and undergraduate sociology classes. It is also a must read for anyone entering the field of coaching.

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