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Review of *Good boys, bad hombres*

Singh, M. V. (2024). *Good boys, bad hombres: The racial politics of mentoring Latino boys in schools*. University of Minnesota Press. Pp. 268. ISBN- 13: 978-1517912987

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In *Good Boys, Bad Hombres: The Racial Politics of Mentoring Latino Boys in Schools*, Michael V. Singh offers a provocative and timely critique of school-based mentorship programs targeted at Latinx boys. Drawing from two years of ethnographic research in an urban California school district, Singh argues that these initiatives—often touted as progressive interventions—frequently reproduce racial, gender, and class hierarchies under the guise of empowerment. The book challenges readers to rethink what it means to "mentor" youth of color and interrogates how even well-meaning programs may entrench harmful ideologies. Singh's work contributes a critical voice to education research that interrogates neoliberalism, race, and masculinity in schools.

This book speaks to a broad interdisciplinary audience. Researchers in education, Latinx studies, gender studies, and critical race theory will find in Singh's work a rigorous theoretical and methodological intervention. At the same time, the book is essential for educators, school counselors, youth mentors, and policymakers engaged in the design or implementation of programs for boys of color. For these practitioners, Singh offers an invitation to critically reflect on the assumptions underlying their work and the institutional logics that shape mentoring programs in schools. The book is also a powerful tool for community-based organizations invested in creating more inclusive and liberatory spaces for Latinx youth.

At the heart of Singh's book is a compelling critique of the racialized and gendered logics embedded within school-based mentoring initiatives. Singh introduces the concept of the "good

boy/bad hombre" binary to describe how Latino boys are positioned either as redeemable and respectable or as deviant and dangerous. Mentoring programs, he argues, are often less about liberation and more about containment. These programs seek to cultivate a form of "respectable" Latino masculinity that is heteronormative, patriarchal, and aligned with middle-class behavioral norms. In doing so, they promote respectability politics and discipline behaviors and identities that fall outside dominant scripts of manhood.

The book takes aim at how these initiatives align with broader neoliberal multicultural ideologies. Singh shows how the programs valorize the family, hard work, and "positive" male role models while marginalizing queer, disabled, and nonconforming youth. Rather than confronting structural inequalities—such as racism, anti-Blackness, and economic dispossession—the programs often place the burden of success on individual boys and their ability to self-regulate, persevere, and conform. Empowerment, in this context, becomes a disciplinary project.

Yet Singh's analysis does not stop at critique. He also brings attention to moments of youth resistance—when boys reject the narratives imposed on them, challenge the authority of mentors, or creatively reimagine their identities. These acts, however small, become sites of possibility for rethinking what mentorship might look like if it were grounded in relationality, care, and decolonial ethics.

One of the book's most compelling features is Singh's use of ethnography to interrogate the racialized and gendered logics of school-based mentoring. Over the course of two years, he conducted fieldwork in a California school district, observing and participating in a district-wide initiative focused on improving the "success" of Latino boys. His qualitative approach incorporates detailed observation, interviews with students, educators, and mentors, as well as close analysis of institutional discourse and affective dynamics. These methods allow Singh to trace how empowerment narratives are operationalized in everyday school life.

The ethnographic descriptions are richly textured and offer a nuanced account of how mentoring programs function not only as supportive interventions but also as mechanisms of social regulation. Singh captures how students both take up and push back against normative

ideals of masculinity, respectability, and success. His approach is rigorous, relational, and theoretically grounded, illuminating the complex interplay between policy, pedagogy, and student experience.

Rather than relying on abstractions or policy analysis alone, Singh's grounded methodology makes visible the contradictions within institutional efforts to "help" Latino boys. This critical attention to everyday practice provides a compelling foundation for the book's broader argument about the racial politics of school-based mentorship.

Singh's work builds on and extends a lineage of critical scholarship examining the intersections of race, schooling, and discipline. It echoes and deepens the insights of Victor M. Ríos's *Punished*, which examined the criminalization of young men of color, and Carla Shalaby's *Troublemakers*, which challenged deficit frameworks in education. Like these authors, Singh is attuned to the structural forces that shape youth experiences. However, *Good Boys, Bad Hombres* makes a distinct contribution by focusing explicitly on school-based mentorship and the politics of Latinx masculinity.

What sets Singh's work apart is his incorporation of queer-of-color critique and decolonial thought. While many studies call for culturally relevant pedagogy or more diverse representation in schools, Singh asks more difficult questions: What forms of Latinidad are being promoted? Who gets to be seen as "successful"? And at what cost? His analysis pushes the field beyond inclusion and representation, toward a fundamental rethinking of the logics that undergird youth development programs.

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its theoretical clarity and refusal to accept dominant narratives about empowerment. Singh does not romanticize mentorship, nor does he offer simple solutions. Instead, he asks readers to sit with discomfort, to examine their own complicities, and to imagine alternative frameworks grounded in justice and relationality.

Another strength is Singh's attentiveness to youth voices. Rather than treating young people as passive subjects, the book centers their agency, humor, critique, and complexity. These moments are some of the most powerful in the text, illustrating how students navigate, resist, and negotiate the institutional expectations placed upon them.

That said, readers interested in programmatic alternatives or concrete models of liberatory mentorship may find the book more gestural than prescriptive. While Singh offers a compelling critique of dominant frameworks, his suggestions for practice remain largely theoretical. Additionally, while the focus on Chicanx boys in a California district provides valuable depth, a broader engagement with the diversity of Latinx experiences—particularly Afro-Latinx and Indigenous youth—would have expanded the book's reach and resonance.

For educators and mentors, Singh's work offers a necessary invitation to reflect on the underlying assumptions of their programs and practices. Rather than asking how we can "fix" youth, Singh prompts us to ask what kinds of futures our programs are preparing youth for—and who is excluded from these visions. He encourages us to consider mentorship not as behavior management, but as a space for affirming complex identities, building relationships, and fostering collective transformation.

At the policy level, the book suggests the need for a shift away from individual-level interventions and toward structural change. Singh's critique of neoliberal multiculturalism has implications for how school districts fund, assess, and publicize mentoring initiatives. His work asks whether these programs genuinely serve youth or serve to protect institutional interests and public image.

One of the most powerful contributions of this book emerges from Singh's inclusion of reflections by two mentors who took a critical stance toward the mentoring program in which they participated. Drawing from these reflections, Singh articulates seven justice-oriented principles for men of color working with boys of color. These principles are: (1) challenge deficit-based perspectives; (2) refuse the roles of hero and savior; (3) disrupt the heteropatriarchal imagination of male mentorship; (4) deconstruct, rather than reconstruct, manhood; (5) critically analyze how cultural relevancy is framed and valued; (6) challenge anti-Black framings of multiculturalism; and (7) teach and dream toward educational justice. These principles extend the book's theoretical critique into the realm of praxis, offering a generative framework for mentors committed to transformative and liberatory work.

Good Boys, Bad Hombres is a powerful and necessary book that challenges readers to fundamentally reconsider the goals and consequences of mentorship in schools. Singh's analysis is sharp, grounded, and politically urgent. He refuses to offer easy answers, instead equipping us with better questions—questions that disrupt the binaries of "at risk" and "successful," "good boys" and "bad hombres," and that push us to imagine mentoring as a radical, relational, and liberatory practice.

For educators, researchers, and community advocates committed to justice for Latinx youth, this book is essential reading. It is not simply a critique—it is a call to build something better.

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