

Book Reviews

***Diversity in family life: Gender, relationships and social change*, by Elisabetta Ruspini
Chicago: Policy Press, 2013, 164 pages.**

The concept of "family" has changed dramatically over the course of history. The roles of men and women in families, as well as the visual picture of a family, have transformed overtime. *Diversity in Family Life* by Elisabetta Ruspini (2013) examines the notion of family - what makes a family, gender change and sexuality, and how gender roles have changed family life. Ruspini challenges the traditional view of family and discusses many different gender roles and family types become more recognized and prominent over the past few decades. *Diversity in Family Life* will be of particular interest to individuals interested in social change, as well as educators seeking to understand changing views of family and those who recognize the importance of knowing all families in school communities.

In order to teach effectively, it is important for teachers to know the families they are teaching. The family units that Ruspini discussed in her book are ones that may be considered to be on the fringe of society, or the "other". As Madrid in Turner-Vorbeck & Marsh (2008) states,

Being *the other* means feeling different; is awareness of being distinct; is consciousness of being dissimilar. It means being outside the game, outside the circle, outside the set. It means being on the edges, on the margins, on the periphery. Otherness means feeling excluded, closed out, precluded, even disdained and scorned. It produces a sense of isolation, of apartness, of disconnectedness, of alienation. (p. 2)

By being aware of these "other" families, the teacher can help the students to see themselves in the literature, themes, and work of the classroom. The teacher can also help to make sure that these families are welcomed and given a place within the culture of the school.

Diversity in Family Life (Ruspini, 2013) helps to provide needed information to allow schools to successfully teach students of differing family backgrounds. According to Allen (2007), "Each of us has tacit assumptions about what a 'normal' home environment is like; humans have the tendency to assume that their own experiences are the norm" (p. 13). This book gives educators the information they need to understand different kinds of "normal" home environments. Schools need to provide meaningful ways for teachers to understand families that are different from what is seen as the 'norm' (Rishel, 2009). In order to know and begin to understand the families in schools, educators need to become aware that families are diverse, and present such diversity in our classrooms and schools.

Diversity in Family Life begins with an introductory chapter that discusses the change in family over time, from the modern era to the Millennial generation. This book is then divided into two

sections. Section One of the book, chapters one through three, addresses the relationship between gender change and sexuality. The remaining chapters in Section Two address how changes in gender roles have impacted family life. Additionally, at the end of each chapter, Ruspini has included different organizations that the reader can contact for more information or support.

In chapter one, Ruspini discussed asexual men and women, defining the many facets of asexuality from different sources, “what is considered ‘asexual’ ranges widely, and there is a huge variety in the experiences of people who identify as asexual” (Ruspini, 2013, p 34). This helps to give the reader a fuller understanding of what it means to be asexual. On the asexuality.org website, it states, “at its core, [asexuality] is just a word that people use to help figure themselves out” (The asexual visibility and education network, 2012). Asexuality is a self-describing label that can be useful for some people in determining sexual orientation. Ruspini pointed out that asexuality may not be a term that most people associate with family, but “children and marriage are not choices determined by sexual orientation” (Ruspini, 2013, p 31). The term family has come to encompass all kinds of family units.

Chapter two deals with childfree women and men. Ruspini used the term childfree to “describe[s] women and men who have made the personal decision not to have children” (p 45). With the emergence of trustworthy birth control in the 1970’s, the childfree movement has become more popular (Ruspini, 2013). Ruspini discussed the “social discrimination” that might be experienced by childfree couples because of their choice to not have children” (2013, p 53). People who choose not to have children are generally held in lower regard than those who choose to have families (Ruspini, 2013).

Chapter three discussed couples that are living apart together. According to Ruspini, “A living apart together (LAT) relationship describes a couple, of the same or different gender, who live together but do not share the same home” (p 61). Ruspini noted that “a large number of couples in Europe and North America have chosen to make a commitment to each other with the agreement that they will live separately” (p 62). Throughout the chapter, Ruspini suggested the various reasons that a couple may be in a LAT relationship, these reasons include things like: wanting independence, financial situations, and employment situations. Ruspini also examined the way technology has changed these types of relationships; LAT couples are able to stay more connected to one another than in the past because of social networks.

In chapter four, Ruspini examined stay-at-home husbands and fathers. A stay-at-home husband is a husband that chooses to stay at home instead of pursuing a vocation. Similarly, a stay-at-home father is a father who stays home to take care of the children and manage the family unit. Although the number of men staying at home is still fewer than women, “trends seem to indicate that the number of stay-at-home men is likely to increase, and that might be at least partially a result of evolving attitudes about gender roles in parenting” (p. 80). As this traditional female role is taken on by more and more men, it might be slowly becoming more socially acceptable.

Chapter five focused on lone mothers and lone fathers. A lone parent family is a family that consists of an adult with one or more dependent children. The number of lone parent families continues to be on the increase, but this can be a fluid situation, changing as the parent moves

into or out of a relationship (Ruspini). The majority of lone-parent households are run by women, and on average, these households are low income families.

Chapter six, the final chapter, addressed homosexual and trans parents. Ruspini noted that in the past, most children of homosexual or trans parents were the result of previous relationships, but now, with couples gaining greater access to adoption and assisted reproductive technology, this is no longer the case. Ruspini discusses the effects on children in having homosexual or transgendered parents. Many of these children feel alone in the struggles that they are facing (Ruspini, 2013). By normalizing this family structure through inclusion in literature in the classroom and class discussions, teachers can help these students see that they are not alone; there are other families just like their own.

In the conclusion, Ruspini restated the notion that there are many different kinds of families, and each kind of family can exist as a loving unit. Ruspini also investigated the need for further research into the area of family, addressing areas like masculinity, family diversity, technology, and how gender identity is influenced by social construction. Further research into these areas can help bring about greater understanding and a sense of community that might be missing from individuals who may feel that their family is “different” from everyone else’s. This is a wonderful way to conclude the book, as Ruspini is able to show the importance of valuing loving families, regardless of the makeup of the family unit. It is important for educators to understand that there are many different kinds of families and each one can be loving, happy and functional.

Just as teachers do, students enter school with the stories that have shaped their lives. Each of us is shaped by our lived experiences. “These early experiences shape the way we view the world and our relationship to others and ourselves” (Marsh and Turner-Vorbeck, 2010, p. 101). We cannot leave our family stories behind when we enter the classroom, and we cannot ask our families or students to leave theirs behind either. Eng stated, “In order to make a place for many different family stories, I have to create a classroom where all students and families see themselves reflected and represented” (Eng, 2013, p. 200). Through understanding different family structures, we are more able to allow families to share their stories, building stronger home/school relationships, and deepening understanding between individuals.

In *Diversity in Family Life*, Ruspini clearly explained many different types of families that exist in today’s world. This book may help inform people, about the different situations that are present in family life, and in turn, may help to normalize the different types of families in existence today. Understanding changing views of family life is an important consideration for educators and to other individuals working with families and children. In trying to understand different types of family formations, the needs of children in these families can be better met.

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