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Ruspini, Elisabetta. Diversity in Family Life: Gender, Relationships and Social Change

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Ruspini, Elisabetta. *Diversity in Family Life: Gender, Relationships and Social Change*.

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Family in the twenty-first century breaks away from the units of individuals set in the modern period, and in *Diversity in Family Life*, Elisabetta Ruspini sets out to explore the variations in gender roles, intimate attachments, parenting, and habitation which have led to an explosion of new family forms in the past fifty years. An environment of greater choice for how individuals construct their identity and chart their life courses results in greater family dynamics. The “traditional” or nuclear family rose with industrialization and modernity, but the post-modern family has no standard structure or requirements. Ruspini argues that “today, it is possible to live, love, and form a family without sex, without children, without a shared home, without a partner, without a working husband, without a heterosexual orientation and without a ‘natural’ (ie biological) sexual body. There are new forms of family life that could help us to move forward by bringing the rigidities, standardisations, constraints and fundamental unsustainability of modernity [...] to an end” (17-18). Gender identity, sexual orientation, a strong sense of individualism, and choices about parenthood diversify family life in the age of Web 2.0 and the Millennial generation born since the 1980s, which Ruspini characterizes as being more accepting of gender and family diversity than earlier generations.

Changes in gender identity options and acceptance power the social forces which have produced new family forms in Ruspini’s study. Individuals have greater options in how they identify themselves, whom they love, and how they

construct their families as they chart their life courses. Ruspini groups her subjects under “gender change and challenges to intimacy and sexual relations” and “gender change and challenges to traditional forms of parenthood,” a somewhat unnecessary schema which does not totally embrace the topics she discusses. The chapter on childfree families, for example, feels out of place in the first section but also does not quite fall under the second, either. The book’s methodology is secondary analysis, re-analyzing existing studies, censuses, and longitudinal surveys to examine asexuality, childfree families, “living apart together,” house husbands or stay-at-home dads, lone parenting, and LGBTQ individuals as parents. This method provides broad but not necessarily deep observations about new family forms, but more significantly reviews how research has responded to such changes in the social landscape.

Each chapter defines the scope of the topic, provides a brief literature review of relevant social research, analyzes the research and its implications for this family form, and describes social movements or support groups related to the gender identity or family form. The last section speaks to Ruspini’s interest in how Web 2.0 technologies affect how ideas and resources spread in self-constructed communities that are not geographically bound. While Ruspini covers a lot of ground, each chapter feels too short and ends abruptly. The scope of Ruspini’s secondary analysis, and therefore the conclusions she draws, is massive, encompassing research from throughout western Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia, and Japan.

In the book’s first chapter, Ruspini analyzes a nearly invisible identity in family life: asexuality. Her approach to this topic is nuanced, explaining that asexuality is not defined as an inability to love and that asexual individuals express intimacy, sexuality, and love in a multitude of ways. Ruspini argues that asexuality has often been oversimplified in research, and that it must be analyzed with attention to living in a “oversexed culture” of constant sexual stimuli (34).

The indifference of asexual people toward sexual activity does not preclude them from interest in romantic attraction, or parenthood, and options regarding assisted reproductive technology, adoption, and surrogacy allow asexual people to participate more fully in family life, sometimes according to non-nuclear models as lone parents, non-marital partnerships, or same-sex unions. Here Ruspini introduces a theme which emerges throughout the book: the existence of non-traditional family forms requires the development of new legal categories, as terms like “mother” and “father” are no longer universal.

The inclusion of childfree individuals or couples in a study of families is a powerful statement, and Ruspini attends thoroughly to the shift from *childless* to *childfree* self-definitions for these families. Ruspini traces the formation of the childfree family as a definitive group to the post-war prosperity that allowed for greater attention to non-material concerns and the resulting “cultural revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s (46). This argument could use further illumination, as prosperity was not a guarantee in all countries after World War II and the later “cultural revolution” was far from uniform. The childfree lifestyle emerged as a movement in the 1970s, Ruspini argues, but she also breaks down the childfree population by whether their childlessness was involuntary or self-imposed, and how those groups sometimes overlap (46-47). She also correlates the desire to be childfree with a high level of education for women, and notes the less traditional gender roles in childfree families. Despite the rise of this lifestyle and family form, stigmas and social pressures still surround those who are childfree due to cultural beliefs linking family formation with the biological imperative to have children. Ruspini does not discuss whether research exists on non-heterosexual couples and perspectives on being childfree.

The family form that relates least to gender identity is the last chapter in this section, on “living apart together,” or couples who engage in a relationship or marriage without cohabitating. Ruspini notes that this form of relationship occurs

more often as a choice rather than out of school, employment or other necessity, and is becoming more visible and common. Linking the rise of this family form to greater individualism in relationships, Ruspini cites research calling living apart together part of “the social transformation of intimacy” (62). It is still a difficult family form to analyze, however, because of the variety of choices throughout individuals’ life courses that could lead to it, and there is little research at all on gay and lesbian couples. Although Ruspini sets out to ask about the children of living apart together couples, there is little discussion of research on how living apart together impacts the parenting or childhood experience.

The second section of the book is more coherent, examining the relationships between variety of gender roles and sexual orientations and forms of parenthood. The cultural acceptability of house husbands and stay-at-home dads has risen in the areas Ruspini analyzes, due to changes in gender identity, “traditional” roles, and in the relationship between masculinity and work (80). Women are making more money in the workforce, and dual-earning households are no longer uncommon. Ruspini notes that parenting services tend to be targeted at mothers rather than fathers. In both this chapter and the next, which discusses lone parenting, she emphasizes the benefits of involved fatherhood (82, 103-104). Analyzing house husbands and lone parenting together may have enriched this section of the book; in the latter chapter, Ruspini focuses on women as lone parents, the stigmatization of lone motherhood (94-95), and the vulnerability to poverty and decreased social capital often experienced by women who are lone parents (101-102). Ruspini does analyze the positive emotional impacts lone parents can have on their children. Where gender identity and changing social norms are central themes in this book, further exploration of cultural perspectives on the genders of lone or stay-at-home parents would have been illuminating.

Perhaps the broadest group Ruspini analyzes are gay and lesbian parents, whose family units come from a variety of life events and choices. She recognizes

that this group is not a monolith, and may include children from heterosexual unions, adopted children, or extended family arrangements. As part of this chapter Ruspini also notes the emotional and legal challenges faced by transgender or transsexual parents, a condition which she notes is still pathologized. One of the most interesting conclusions in the whole book is one Ruspini draws in analyzing studies on the children of homosexual parents. These children do not exhibit differences from children in heterosexual families, and even the gender transition of a parent does not necessarily harm a child. Stigmatization of homosexuality and transsexuality, however, do affect children; in Italy, the forced divorce resulting from the gender transition of one partner impacts a child more than the transition itself (124). It is significant that in the activism section of this chapter, Ruspini includes more legal resources for homosexual and transsexual parents.

Web-accessible resources and information are important not only for analysis in *Diversity in Family Life*, but for dissemination to readers. While Ruspini recognizes the importance of Web 2.0 on the development, dissemination, and evolution of new ideas and support groups, she is less sure how to incorporate and analyze these resources according to academic standards. Several troubling citations refer to useful but non-academic sources with questionable authority such as Wikipedia and eHow for definitions and scientific explanations. Furthermore, in defining “fourth-wave feminism” in the otherwise thorough glossary, Ruspini quotes a lengthy blog post from the social networking site Tumblr. This post is one user’s interpretation, but it is unclear whether this definition has any authority in a wider community, especially a scholarly one. Because Ruspini cites the tag page for “fourth wave feminism” – a search results page rather than the original source – without any author information, it would take some digging to find the author or the post’s original context. Given how extensively Ruspini cites academic studies and research data throughout the rest

of the book, it is disappointing that she did not select, use, and cite emerging forms of publication with better care.

Diversity in Family Life is analysis with an activist twist, serving as a decent primer to introduce the reader to new ideas about gender identity, intimacy, and parenthood, and the ways in which social research addresses or fails to address new family forms. Ruspini's analysis is timely; she recognizes that the ascendancy of these new forms related not only to the Millennial generation's open-mindedness but to technology and the facility with which individuals can access and share new ideas about diversity and identity. Advocating for more complex research on gender, socialization, and technology, Ruspini argues that it must go beyond "documenting already-known phenomena" (135). Her suggestions explore potential intersections between her six topics, and where new social research could mine these intersections for new data on diverse family or intimacy units. Being more attentive to the evolution of families and individuals, Ruspini argues, is necessary to improving the problems and challenges faced by these emerging identities. In this last insight, Ruspini echoes one of the arguments of her book: that information and ideas lead to change.