

# **DIFFERENT PATHS, DIFFERENT VOICES: RETHINKING THE DEVELOPMENT OF FAMILIES**

*Special Issue Co-Editors*

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As editors, we took different paths to arrive at this Special Issue of *JSPR*. For Laurie, the need for an issue about rethinking family development theory was brought home by a comment from a student in her course on critical transitions in families. An African-American student, originally from the Cabrini-Green projects in Chicago, confided that she didn't know any families like the ones talked about in family development theory. For Laurie, the student's observation epitomized the field's ethnocentric bias of studying intact, white, middle-class families. The lack of systematic information about life experiences of individuals in different types of families seemed increasingly difficult to explain or defend.

For Cathy, the Special Issue represented an opportunity for people from diverse backgrounds and family circumstances to be recognized and legitimized in the realm of scholarly discourse. As a clinical community psychologist, Cathy saw the Special Issue as a chance for researchers from different perspectives to speak about the people of their concern—people who have typically been marginalized by society. She hoped that the issue could also reflect different methods available to researchers to systematically investigate family life. Cathy felt that providing a forum that valued diversity as an initial premise might lead to new approaches to describing families across the life span.

Our journey has culminated in a collection of papers that attempt to describe aspects of family transitions across a wide range of families. Dilworth-Anderson & Burton begin the issue by outlining conceptual issues to consider in re-evaluating family development perspectives, particularly as they apply to the study of ethnically diverse populations. Papers by Timmer, Veroff & Hatchett and Adelman, Chadwick & Baerger then offer empirical data regarding experiences of marriage for African-American and Caucasian couples. Ingersoll-Dayton and her colleagues offer a rich descriptive study of marital interdependence for older Japanese and American couples and Merrill discusses how adult siblings negotiate the role of caregiver for their elderly parents. Demo & Allen highlight issues of sexual orientation for family theory and research. The final two papers, by Gil & Vega and Freeberg & Stein, begin to examine the role of ethnicity and acculturation on family life for Hispanic adolescents and adults living in the United States. Aldous provides a commentary

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on the papers and offers her perspective on the future directions for family development theory.

We feel that the Special Issue adds to a discussion of family development approaches by highlighting relevant factors that researchers and theorists must consider in describing family experience. In assembling the collection, we were struck both by the different challenges that families face across the life course and the different paths that researchers have taken when investigating critical family transitions. In this issue, family scholars are asked to seriously consider issues of culture and acculturation, gender, family role, sexual orientation and social class when describing family life. The issue includes literature reviews and thought papers, secondary analyses conducted on large family-survey data sets, empirical work sensitive to assessing family constructs relevant to people of their concern and qualitative interview studies that give participants opportunities to describe their experience of marriage and family. Authors recognize the limitations of the methods they use to describe families. Yet, the various methods of 'knowing' represented in the issue hopefully serve as a reminder of the increasing number of acceptable ways to learn about families.

A call for papers for a Special Issue on family diversity can be viewed as a 'Rorschach Test' by means of which to interpret the state of the field. We were struck by how often researchers attempted to assimilate their findings into the existing structure of family development theory, rather than to create new theory. It was also curious that in following the 'good' standard practice of using a control group, most researchers compared their group of interest with white, middle-class families. Only one study chose to compare family members from two different nationalities representing one ethnic group and did not include a white comparison sample. Although authors of conceptual pieces were often quick to discuss the limitations of current approaches and offer critical issues for consideration, they stopped short of proposing new theory. The commentary on the collection encourages readers to refine existing approaches while being cognizant of similarities across diverse families as well as possible differences.

Co-editing this Special Issue provided us with a deep appreciation for the difficulties involved in shaping new approaches to the study of families but has not dissuaded us from the need to do so. It may be that the dominant normative sense of appropriate social behaviour—that was inadvertently captured by Duvall & Hill (1948) in their original approach to family development—cannot be 'refined' away, no matter how hard we try. The meaning and composition of families have changed dramatically since these original perspectives were first advanced. The intact, white, middle-class, male-headed household, used as the basic template for much of family development theory, now describes a minority of American families. Rethinking the development of families may require us to start with assumptions relevant to our current societal landscape, recognizing the role of economics, ethnicity and culture, and reflecting on the relative nature of concepts like family stability and change. It may require us to consider issues of family continuity and intergenerational connectedness as well as autonomy and individuation from family in adulthood. Rethinking the development of families may challenge us to define the concepts of both family and development within the context of the 21st century.

## REFERENCE

- Duvall, E. & Hill, R. (1948) 'Report on the Committee on the Dynamics of Family Interaction', paper presented at the National Conference on Family Life, May, Washington, DC.