

## Book Reviews

*The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What It Means for American Schools.* By Thomas A. DiPrete and Claudia Buchmann. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013. Pp. xviii+277. \$37.50 (paper).

Erin A. Cech  
*Rice University*

Women are now more likely than men to graduate with a college degree and girls earn higher grades than boys from elementary school onward. This presumed “boy problem” has been the source of much hand-wringing in recent popular media. In *The Rise of Women*, sociologists Thomas A. DiPrete and Claudia Buchmann lend much-needed social science insight and detailed statistical analysis to the discussion. The goal of this book is to document the changes in men’s and women’s educational attainment in the United States over the last century and to shed light on the growing female-favorable gap in academic performance and educational attainment. Using a fruitful life course perspective that attends to both “local” and more “global” environmental factors, DiPrete and Buchmann marshal statistical evidence from a decade of their own and their colleagues’ research and new analyses of more than 15 separate datasets.

In their straightforward and balanced style, the authors begin the book by documenting historical and current trends in gender differences in college completion and in K–12 academic performance. By the end of part 1, the reader is convinced of two things: that there is a female advantage in educational performance that is cumulative from middle school onward, and that this performance advantage is the primary reason why more women than men graduate with college degrees.

This analysis sets up the puzzle for part 2: Why do girls tend to perform better academically than boys? DiPrete and Buchmann consider a wide array of explanations—from cognitive ability and test scores, to teacher bias, to “feminization” of the classroom, to parental background factors, to students’ gendered responses to the education process—and settle on two main factors: boys are more sensitive than their sisters to their parents’ (particularly their fathers’) education level, and boys are more likely to have social and behavioral traits that are disadvantageous for academic success. The authors point to a common denominator in both factors: some boys develop an oppositional “adolescent masculinity” that is at odds with academic success in middle and high school.

For permission to reuse a book review printed in the *American Journal of Sociology*, please contact [journalpermissions@press.uchicago.edu](mailto:journalpermissions@press.uchicago.edu).

DiPrete and Buchmann argue that boys, particularly those from poor and working-class families, often “experience pressure—especially from peers—to adopt masculine identities that interfere with the development of emotional attachment to school” (p. 154). Such masculine identities encourage behaviors (such as being disruptive in class) that undermine boys’ learning. The authors contrast this adolescent masculinity with a more “adult” masculinity that emphasizes an *instrumental* attachment to school, which plays up the long-term career benefits of educational success. Boys whose fathers are highly educated, who are enrolled in strongly academically oriented schools, and who show interest in “high culture” activities such as art and music are buffered from this interference to some extent and are more likely to develop an instrumental attachment to school. Girls, in contrast, are generally better able to develop an *emotional* attachment to school that enables their academic success.

Although the idea of an adolescent masculinity is intriguing, this concept—and the policy changes it implies—is theoretically underdeveloped in the book. Deeper engagement with the masculinities literature, especially how masculinities vary by race and ethnicity, would have strengthened their argument. Specifically, how does this adolescent masculinity fit into the broader gender structure? What makes it a facet of masculinity, other than the fact that boys are more likely than girls to adopt it? Similarly, DiPrete and Buchmann do not discuss how girls’ emotional attachment to school may be interwoven with their development of a feminine identity. They argue that girls “work harder in school because they receive greater intrinsic satisfaction from high academic performance than do boys” (p. 204), but is such emotional connection actually part of an “adolescent femininity” that pressures girls to follow rules and be good students? Such dialogue would have allowed this already-powerful book to contribute more directly to our understanding of the intersection of gender and education structures.

Additionally, the authors too quickly brush past literature on the cultural and structural underpinnings of oppositional masculinities. Iconic ethnographies such as Jay MacLeod’s *Ain’t No Makin It* (Westview Press, 2008) illustrate how oppositional cultures are a rational reaction to limited socioeconomic opportunities. Spending more time confronting popular “blame the victim” explanations of oppositional cultures would have been beneficial, given the book’s potentially broad readership.

Third, given their argument that adolescent masculinity is central to boys’ academic disadvantage, I expected that processes of degendering (e.g., confrontation of norms of appropriate masculine behavior within schools and communities) would be at the core of the book’s policy suggestions. Instead, the authors endorse policies that accommodate rather than challenge these gendered experiences of K–12 education. Specifically, they recommend that schools and parents encourage boys to develop instrumental attachment to school consistent with a more “adult” masculinity. This different-but-equal approach to academic motivation (i.e., girls try hard because they like school; boys try hard because they want successful

careers) seems to reproduce an emotional-instrumental divide that may buttress existing gender stereotypes and segregation by field of study.

Less gender-differentiated responses to the gap in educational attainment—responses the authors themselves suggest—would be to support those who begin college to complete their degree (a key point of gender divergence) and to lobby for broad improvement of K–12 education. To this second recommendation, the authors find that young men and women perform at similarly high levels in the most academically rigorous educational settings. As such, this book serves as yet another justification for improving the funding of primary and secondary education in the United States.

Beyond a modest need for deeper theoretical engagement, this book is admirable. DiPrete and Buchmann establish their scholarly authority from the first chapter and demonstrate command of an impressively broad range of data and topics. The analysis is expertly done, measured in tone, and presented in a crisp and easy-to-interpret manner. They have much to offer scholars of education, gender, and economic stratification. Most useful, this book at its core is a strong refutation to those who believe, in zero-sum fashion, that *The Rise of Women* has happened at the expense of men.

*Celebrating Debutantes and Quinceañeras: Coming of Age in American Ethnic Communities.* By Evelyn Ibatan Rodriguez. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. Pp. xii+213. \$29.95 (paper).

Yen Le Espiritu  
*University of California, San Diego*

Fun, fresh, and fast paced, Evelyn Ibatan Rodriguez's *Celebrating Debutantes and Quinceañeras* is theoretically engaged, research-based, and public-minded sociology. Like most good sociology, it began with the author's curiosity about a widespread social phenomenon: the oft-lavish young women's coming-of-age rituals in Mexican and Filipino communities, *quinceañeras* and debuts respectively. In an effort to move beyond the surface critiques of these celebrations as valorizing sexist cultural values and promoting conspicuous consumption, Rodriguez conducted three years of fieldwork, attending numerous coming-out celebrations as well as the beforehand planning meetings, costume fittings, and rehearsals, supplemented with 50 in-depth interviews with both organizers and participants conducted in English, Tagalog, Spanish, or a combination. The product of this painstaking research is an intimate, informative, and illuminating portrait of the various ways immigrants deploy coming-of-age rituals to activate their key social networks, to assert their cultural pride, to fashion their daughters into respectable ethnic subjects, and to both challenge and assimilate into U.S. culture.

*Celebrating Debutantes and Quinceañeras* is notable because it focuses on the experiences of Mexican and Filipino immigrants, the two largest immigrant groups in the United States for almost four decades. The book's

Copyright of American Journal of Sociology is the property of University of Chicago Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.