

“Dolls that look like us”: An Analysis of Latina Mothers Practicing Concerted Cultivation

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Abstract

Research has overlooked the importance of social identity in concerted cultivation. Through analysis of eighteen ethnographic interviews with middle class Latina mothers in Austin, Texas and Sacramento, California, this study explores the role of social identity in concerted cultivation, offering a more complete understanding of how the racial, ethnic, and gender identities of both mothers and daughters interact with the social realities of their broader communities to affect the concerted cultivation process. Interviews focused on dolls, which Christine Williams (2006) identifies as objects used in parenting practices. This study reveals that mothers attempt to provide their daughters with dolls that encourage a social identity based on either a socially fluid group membership or an explicitly Latino group membership, tailoring their cultivation efforts according to their own racial, ethnic, and gendered identities, as well as those of their daughters. Mothers' efforts are often thwarted by a limited doll market, peer/family pressures, and their daughters' doll preferences, which often conflict with mother's desired doll characteristics. These findings highlight the need for more intersectional research on concerted cultivation, especially for mixed race individuals and immigrant groups.

Introduction

Middle class parents in the United States practice concerted cultivation, a parenting style aimed at helping children develop qualities that lead to social success. Annette Lareau's (2003) initial investigation of the concept found that Black and White middle class children are exposed to activities that foster socially advantageous traits, with mothers serving as the primary gatekeepers in the concerted cultivation process. However, Christine Williams (2006) observes that Black and White middle class mothers also use cultural objects, specifically toys, as tools for raising socially competent children. She suggests that concerted cultivation may also be aimed at the development of a desirable *social identity*, as parents choose toys representing a fantasy of their child's identity. Social identity encompasses a person's understanding of their social status, group membership, and position within social structures. Studying objects used in concerted cultivation exposes the social identities middle class parents desire their children to develop.

Lareau's original work examined race and class, but showed that class has a greater effect on parenting styles. However, subsequent research has shown that concerted cultivation varies according to the racial, ethnic, and gender identities of parents and children (Cheadle & Amado 2010; Carter, 2005; Lacy, 2007). Latina mothers present a complex and unexplored case with regards to middle class parenting beyond the Black vs. White framework used in most parenting studies. While middle class Latina mothers are afforded a high social status, they must contend with this status being challenged by their gender, race, and ethnicity, and must prepare their daughters for similar threats to their own social status. Latina mothers may also desire to foster in their daughters a fluid social prowess that will lead to success both in middle-class America and in interactions with co-ethnic relatives and friends, where a strong Latino identity may take precedence over class in determining social prestige (Miller & Harwood, 2001; Lacy, 2007).

Williams (2006) notes that middle class mothers are particularly forthright about the identities they desire for their daughters when purchasing dolls, observing that mothers act as gatekeepers for the messages dolls convey to their daughters. I use dolls as a mechanism for understanding how middle class Latina mothers practice concerted cultivation with regards to their daughters. Eighteen in-depth interviews with Latina mothers reveal that middle class Latina mothers use dolls not only to promote socially advantageous skills and qualities, but also as tools for cultivating desirable identities in their daughters. Mothers differentially define what qualities and identities are desirable, tailoring their cultivation efforts to their own racial, ethnic, and gendered identities, as well as those of their daughters. During this process, Latina mothers struggle to limit their daughters' access to "acceptable" dolls in the face of a limited doll market, peer and family pressures, and their daughters' own, oftentimes conflicting, doll preferences.

Although the Latino population in the United States is expected to comprise 28% of the total population by the year 2050 (Taylor & Cohn 2012), it has been left out of research on middle class family dynamics. The present study will add to our understanding of concerted cultivation among Latinos, helping to foster an intersectional understanding of this process. Furthermore, it will explore Christine Williams' (2006) finding that concerted cultivation involves the promotion of socially advantageous identities.

Concerted Cultivation in the Middle Class

Theoretical Background, Promotion of Social Identity, and Parenting Roles

Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986) theorizes that class reproduction is the result of parents transferring *habitus* (structural dispositions regarding what is appropriate) and *cultural capital* (socially advantageous non-financial assets) to their offspring. In *Unequal Childhoods* (2003), Lareau conducted an empirical exploration of Bourdieu's hypothesis, and found that middle class

parents practice *concerted cultivation*, a parenting style characterized by exposure of children to activities that will help them develop skills and qualities that are socially valued. Lareau suggests that activities are one mechanism through which capital is transferred and habitus is developed.

Bourdieu says habitus is the embodiment of *social identity*, or an individuals' "view of their own position in the world" (Bourdieu, 1987, page 727). This connection suggests that parents fostering habitus in their children may also endeavor to cultivate social identity. Christine Williams' (2006) explored this connection, and found that middle class parents buy toys that reflect an identity they desire for their children. Her analysis indicates that concerted cultivation aims to foster specific identities in children, and that these identities are brought to light when studying the objects parents employ in this process.

Both Williams and Lareau note that mothers bear the most responsibility in the concerted cultivation process. Mothers, not fathers, deal with the scheduling demands of their children's activities and scour toy stores for toys that will encourage socially advantageous identities. These findings coincide with past scholarship on parenting roles, and reveal the importance of mothers in the concerted cultivation process. (Declercq, Sakala, Corry, & Applebaum, 2007; Hays, 1996).

Intersectional Dimensions and Social Identity Revelations

Lareau's 2003 study included both black and white middle class participants, but class divergence yielded "the biggest differences in the cultural logic of child-rearing" (page 240). Still, she notes that unlike White middle class parents, Blacks worry about the impact of race on their children, and describes strategies they used to deal with these concerns. She also observes that concerted cultivation practices depend on children's gender, with boys participating in more athletic activities and girls relegated to sedentary extracurriculars. Lareau's findings indicate that concerted cultivation depends upon the intersecting class, racial, and gender identities of parents

and their children, and subsequent studies confirm that both race and gender affect how concerted cultivation is practiced (Banks, 2012, Cheadle and Amado, 2010; Carter, 2005; McCoy, Byrne, & Banks 2012). However, its intersectional dimensions are understudied.

Research on middle class Blacks bolsters the argument that fostering social identity is a goal of concerted cultivation. Carter (2005) theorizes that cultural capital can be either dominant (knowledge and skills of the socioeconomic elite) or non-dominant (tastes and appreciations that low-status individuals can use to gain authentic cultural status positions within their own communities). She notes that Black parents transfer non-dominant cultural capital to their children, and this transmission can be seen as geared towards the development of a Black social identity. Similarly, Lacy (2007) notes that middle class Black parents imbue their children with Black racial identities while simultaneously preparing them to live and work in a White, middle class world. Parents actively seek out Black spaces (eg: a Black church) where their children can gain a cultural tool kit that will aid them when interacting with the Black community, which can then serve as a refuge from the discrimination encountered among Whites. Despite these findings, fostering social identity has not yet emerged as an important goal of concerted cultivation.

Research on parenting in the middle class has focused on Black and White parents, failing to engage with parents that don't fall into these categories. In many ways, the circumstances of middle class Latinos mirror those of middle class Blacks. Middle class Latino parents are tasked with transmitting socially desirable skills to their children as well as preparing them for the complications presented by their racial-ethnic position and gender, and must ready their offspring for social interactions with the Latino community as well as the White

mainstream. As the primary gatekeepers in concerted cultivation, Latina mothers bear the brunt of this burden. However, we know little about how this group engages in parenting practices.

The Latino Middle Class in the United States

Race and Ethnicity: Context Dependency, Identity, and Implications for Concerted Cultivation

While many sociologists differentiate between race and ethnicity¹, social definitions of these terms are subjective and dependent on context (Omi & Winant, 1986; Rodriguez, 2000). Rodriguez (2000) argues that culturally, Latinos do not discriminate between race and ethnicity, instead inhabiting multiple racial/ethnic identities that shift over time and place. This stands in contrast to conceptualizations of race and ethnicity in the United States, where race is an unchangeable, mutually exclusive matter of phenotype and genetic lineage and ethnicity a separate, cultural attribute. Latinos are socialized into cultural conceptions of race, from both United States and their home culture, and will interact with individuals on both sides of this spectrum. For Latinos, racial identity is “provisional, contextually dependent, and sometimes contested” (Rodriguez, 2000, page 6).

Latinos in the United States can belong to any racial group, but scholars observe that Latinos have been racialized, integrated into a racial hierarchy that places Whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom (Cobas, Duany, & Feagin, 2015). Cobas, Duany, and Feagin (2015) argue that Latinos have had their cultural characteristics “blackened;” regardless of their racial phenotype, individuals with Latino ethnic markers (e.g. speaking Spanish, having a Spanish surname) are subject to a lower social status. Thus, even white-passing Latinos may be subject to

¹ In this paper, race and ethnicity will be defined theoretically as separate concepts, with race referring to classification based on physical characteristics and ethnicity to classification based on shared cultural attributes and perceived common ancestral lineage. However, there will be times when participants fail to differentiate between the two terms. In those instances, race and ethnicity will be discussed as synonymous, preserving the embedded meanings of participants’ responses.

discrimination, although research indicates that white-passing people of color experience less discrimination than their non-passing counterparts (Montalvo, 2005; Wald, 2000).

Despite the diminished social status that accompanies Latino traditions, many middle class Latino parents pass Latino cultural practices on to their offspring (Miller & Harwood, 2001), and identify their children as Latino even when they are of mixed-White heritage (Qian, 2004). Like Blacks (Lacy, 2007), middle class Latinos depend on their communities for support (Vallejo, 2009; Chavez, 2011), and may encourage their children to develop a Latino social identity, especially if they are not white-passing and more likely to experience prejudice. This will help their children access the support of co-ethnics when confronted with discrimination.

Middle Class Latinas: Stereotypes, Expectations, and Class Collide

Latina women in United States are subject to physical and behavioral stereotypes, including exotic, aggressive sexuality, uncontrollable tempers, and servile domesticity (Merskin, 2009; Mendible 2010). Reinforced by representations of Latinas in popular culture (Cofer, 2005; Mastro & Greenburg, 2005), these stereotypes contribute to the discrimination professional Latinas face in the workplace and other high-status spaces (Suero, 2015; Vallejo, 2009). Furthermore, these tropes result in an overarching tendency to classify Latinas as lower-class (Lott & Saxon, 2002), which challenges the social status of middle-class Latina women.

Judith Butler (2004) theorizes that women “do” gender, acting out societal conventions of femininity to assert their gender identity in ways that are recognizable to others. Middle class Latina women must perform gender in ways that mitigate the complications their ethnicity and race present to their class status. Moreover, when practicing concerted cultivation, they must ensure that their daughters are equipped with skills and qualities that will enable them to manage their marginalized Latina identity.

Dolls as Tools for Cultural Transmission

As powerful instruments for identity formation and mechanisms of cultural transmission, dolls are useful tools for studying concerted cultivation (Chin, 2001; Rogers, 1998; Sherman & Zubriggen, 2014). However, dolls have been the subjects of academic criticism, accused of discouraging exploration of non-traditional gender roles and socializing girls into heteronormative femininity (Forman-Brunell 1993; Jacobs 2008; Zelzizer, 2002). The doll market has also been criticized for underrepresenting racial and ethnic minorities, and the few Latina dolls that do exist often devolve into dominant culture stereotypes (duCille 1996; Rudolph 2009; Ward 2004). “Latina” dolls are overwhelmingly given brown, straight hair, tan skin, and brown eyes, rendering invisible the physical heterogeneity of the Latino population. Furthermore, Goldman (2011) notes that Latina Barbie dolls depict Latina/o culture as homogenous and exotic, obscuring cultural differences (e.g. dress, food) between Latino groups and portraying Latinas in stereotypical traditional dress. While more representative ethnic dolls exist, they are generally difficult to find and expensive (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002).

As the gatekeepers of toy access and managers of their children’s psychological well-being, middle class Latina mothers are tasked with finding dolls that portray positive, authentic, and appropriate Latina representations in a severely limited market. However, their efforts are often thwarted, if not by well-meaning friends and family gifting undesirable toys to their children, then by their daughters preferring toys that have undesirable qualities (Williams, 2006). By investigating how middle class Latina mothers manage their daughter’s doll access, this study will shed light on how race, gender, and ethnicity interact to shape parenting decisions, and may illuminate how parents attempt to transmit advantageous social identities to their children.

Methods

To investigate the intersectional dimensions of concerted cultivation within the Latino community, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 middle class self-identified Latina mothers. Mothers were considered middle class if they or their spouse were employed in positions of significant managerial authority or worked in professions that required college-level skills. I limited my sample to mothers with at least one daughter between the ages of 4 and 14 to ensure that they would answer from immediate experience rather than distant memory.

I recruited participants from Austin, Texas and Sacramento, California, affluent capital cities with diverse populations and large numbers of Hispanic families. Having worked in childcare for many years in both sites, I was able to recruit 11 out of the 18 participants through referrals from mothers that I knew in each area. The remainder were recruited through a Chicano and Latino listserv at a university near Sacramento. Interviews were conducted between September 2015 and March 2016. Mothers were interviewed at a location and time of their choosing and conversations lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Most mothers asked to be interviewed at coffee shops, but three mothers invited me to interview them at their place of employment.

Interviews had two sections. The first focused on the ethnic and racial identities of mothers, their spouses, and their children, and asked mothers to talk about how they were raising their children in terms of cultural heritage and traditions. The second section had mothers speak about their preferences when buying dolls for their daughters, as well as their experiences with their daughters and dolls overall. During interviews, I was candid about my own ethnicity (Puerto Rican) and about my extensive experience working with children. Participants seemed to relax after learning about my background. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded

using Dedoose. After fifteen interviews, new information and coding schema failed to emerge, indicating that saturation had been achieved (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Analysis

Sample Demographics

Mothers self-reported their race and ethnicity, as well as that of their spouses and children². All 18 participants identified ethnically as Hispanic/Latino³, although fifteen chose to specify their nationality rather than use a pan-ethnic label⁴. Ten participants identified racially as White, one identified as Black, one identified as Native American, and six identified as Other. Eight of the ten mothers who identified as White expressed dissatisfaction with this label, either voicing displeasure with race as a concept or explaining that “White” did not represent their experiences as racialized individuals.

One-third of participants reported being in inter-ethnic marriages (i.e. spouse was not Latino) and one third reported that their marriages were interracial, three with white individuals, two with Asian- American individuals, and one with a Black individual. Only three mothers reported that their daughters were of a different race than themselves, classifying them as mixed-race (one Black and White and the other two Asian-American and White). However, half spoke of having different phenotypes than their daughters, with skin color, hair texture and body hair emerging as markers of difference.

Looks like Who? Race and Ethnicity in the Doll World

² Mothers were asked about their ethnicity and race in several ways. First, they were asked “What is your ethnicity,” and “What is your race” and allowed to respond with whatever they felt was most appropriate. Then, they were asked to explain how they would respond to the 2010 United States census (see Appendix B). When reporting on the race and ethnicity of their spouses and children, mothers were only asked to respond using the census.

³ Participants in Texas used the pan-ethnic label “Hispanic,” while those in California preferred “Latino.” Mothers in Texas indicated that while they used the term “Hispanic,” it was equivalent to “Latino.”

⁴ Participants responded to recruitment material that specifically requested Latina mothers, indicating that they did identify with the Latina label. However, most mothers chose to specify nationality when given the opportunity.

Thirteen mothers expressed a preference regarding the racial makeup of their daughters' doll collection, either preferring dolls who were racially similar to themselves and/or their daughters or favoring racial variety. All 18 participants had preferences in terms of what race Latina dolls should be, describing skin color, hair texture, and other racial markers. At some point in every interview, mothers conflated race and ethnicity when talking about dolls, even when they had differentiated between race and ethnicity in other parts of the interview. In part, this may have been due to the nature of dolls: most dolls use cosmetic changes to hair and skin to show ethnic as well as racial difference (Chin, 1999). However, this shifting use of race and ethnicity also reflects tensions observed by other scholars between Latino's cultural conception of race and ethnicity as synonymous, and general understandings of race and ethnicity as separate in the United States (Rodriguez, 2000).

"Looks like me:" "Darker" Dolls and Marginalized Identities

Seven participants who occupied what they felt to be marginal social positions based on their appearance, or who had daughters who occupied marginal positions, preferred dolls that were physically representative of themselves and/or their daughters. Six of these seven participants expressed that they favored "darker" dolls, most notably of skin and hair.

Mothers who preferred darker dolls explicitly tied their (or their daughters) "darkness" to a Latino identity, and expressed stronger ties to the Latino community in the United States. These women spoke at length about instilling their children with non-dominant cultural skills and a Latino social identity. As Cristy, an Austin engineer explained, "I want [my daughters] to understand [Latino] culture... they're different and I don't want them to think that they're not."

Mothers who preferred darker dolls specifically wanted dolls to be representative of the most marginalized position occupied *between* themselves and their daughters. Most of the time,

it was daughters who occupied these positions, and mothers justified their preferences by explaining that physically representative dolls would allow their daughters to develop high self-esteem around their marginalized appearances. However, if mothers were darker, or had curlier hair, they wanted their daughters' dolls to embody these characteristics, even if their daughters themselves did not possess them. These situations resulted when mothers were in interracial relationships, and therefore had children who passed as White. Rebecca, a first-generation Peruvian woman with a White, non-Latino husband and strong ties to the local Latino community, had two daughters (Bianca and Lorena) who had darker skin and hair, much like their mother. In contrast, her youngest daughter Alicia was born with light skin and hair, like her father. Rebecca described the tension she experienced when her daughter Alicia chose a blond Barbie doll over darker dolls on display:

LA: Do you have a preference as to what the dolls you buy your children look like?

Rebecca: I prefer that they look like us. And that was true until I bought the... until the Barbie. Which is so funny because with Blanca and Lorena, it's almost like I wanted [the dolls we purchased] to look like me. Like me or [my oldest daughters]. But with Alicia, it totally shocked me...she just picked a doll that [was blond and light-skinned] like her. I was like 'Oh, let's pick something else Alicia.' I actually tried to talk her out of it. Because I was like 'What do you want a [blond] Barbie for?' And then my husband was like... '[Alicia's] blond. She is blond.' And I'm like... 'Could that be it?' And here I am upset.

LA: Why did you react that way when she picked the Barbie?

Rebecca: Because I still look at Alicia and see us. Eventually I see her hair turning brown, and dark, and being like us... [White] is not how I identify myself. I'm Hispanic. I tan. Both my girls, my older girls, tan...Whereas... you know, I don't think Alicia's going to look like that forever.

In dissuading her youngest from getting the blond Barbie, Rebecca shows that her doll preference has more to do with her own appearance and that of her oldest daughters than Alicia's. When Rebecca says "us," she is referring to Hispanics, and including her older daughters (with their darker skin and hair) in that grouping. Earlier in the interview, Rebecca recounted experiencing discrimination due to her Latino ethnicity, an ethnicity she felt people

could read in her physical (darker) appearance. For Rebecca, darkness (race) and ethnicity (Hispanic) are synonymous. “I’m Hispanic,” she explained. “I tan.” Alicia, light-skinned and blond, is not part of “us.” Furthermore, she never will be; while her hair may darken with age, her skin will not.

During her interview, Rebecca described at length the many ways in which the Latino community has supported her, helping her through school and allowing her to vent about discriminatory experiences in the workplace. Rebecca’s access to this support is dependent on her Latina social identity. Should Rebecca’s youngest daughter remain blond, she might not develop a social identity that will allow her to thrive in the Latino community, limiting her access to co-ethnic support. When Rebecca was trying to convince her daughter to buy a darker doll, she was attempting to encourage her daughter to identify as Latina.

Variety and the “Exposure and Acceptance” Imperative

Seven mothers said that they preferred for their daughters to own a “variety” of dolls, representing a full spectrum of marginalized and non-marginalized appearances. These participants identified racially as Other, or identified as White but expressed dissatisfaction with their inclusion in this racial category, or with race as a concept altogether. They also had weaker ties to the Latino community than mothers who preferred dolls that looked like themselves and/or their daughters. Five of these mothers expressed some desire to pass down Latino-specific non-dominant cultural capital (ex: Catholicism, Spanish language), but all seven wanted more specifically to expose their children to an array of cultural experiences in the hopes that they would learn to “embrace all cultures.”

Mothers’ motivations for providing their daughters with diverse cultural experiences centered around the positive effects of exposure on their children’s ability to navigate a diverse

world without judgement, and equipping their daughters with dolls of different phenotypes was a way to instill acceptance of difference. Susanna, a Sacramento mother, explained that after her daughter received a White Disney Princess doll, she immediately purchased the entire set:

Lorena got the whole group. So you had Mulan, you have Tiana, you have Jasmine, you have Pocahontas, and then the rest. To me that was kind of important, if she was going to [get White princess dolls], she'd also know that there was different cultures... and like before, be accepting.

In this case, Susanna used the phenotypes of the Disney princesses to expose and teach her daughter about various cultural identities, and tied her decision to purchase the Disney Princesses to an earlier assertion about raising Lorena to be multicultural and accepting of differences.

As mentioned, mothers who preferred their daughters' dolls to represent a variety of phenotypes self-identified as occupying contentious racialized (and therefore social) positions, either saying their race was Other or expressing discomfort with labeling themselves as White. These mothers acknowledged that they could be subject to prejudice. For example, Elida, a White-identifying mother, described being harassed when returning from a vacation to Mexico:

[The customs agent] got really nasty. She made me empty out my purse, she started questioning me. It got a little bit ugly. But that's about it [as far as discrimination goes]. Being here, I don't get singled out [because I look White].

Although Elida is light-skinned, she is still vulnerable to discrimination. For women like Elida, raising their daughters to be accepting of a diverse range of appearances and identities is advantageous. Their racialized daughters might be grouped with any number of diverse individuals, and must learn how to foster friendships in a variety of groups.

Unlike mothers in the "look like me" category, the racial ambiguity and weak Latino community ties of mothers advocating for a variety of dolls meant that it was not as important for them to ensure that their daughters have strong ties to the Latino community, or identify strongly as Latinas. This was evidenced in their doll preferences, their more relaxed approach to

fostering a Latina identity, and their insistence that their daughters be accepting and familiar with a wide range of cultures and people.

Latina Dolls and Race

When asked to describe their “ideal” Latina doll, all 18 of the mothers interviewed were specific about their racial preferences. These preferences had no correlation with the racial makeup of the dolls they favored for their own daughters, and were tied to the racial diversity of their Latino family and friends. Mothers whose Latino community was racially diverse advocated for Latina dolls to encompass that racial diversity. Noelia, who identified as racially Black, had both White-passing and Black family members. She expressed frustration with U.S. mainstream culture’s insistence that Latinas all look one way:

Growing up, I was a history lesson. I always had to explain to people what I was. I’m like yeah, I’m Black, that’s my skin color, but I’m not African American. I’m Hispanic. I think that people need to realize that we come in a variety of colors and flavors, and even different body types. I think it would be hard to just say [that one doll] was a Latina doll. Most of the [Latina dolls] have dark hair, but that is a misconception. Kind of like with Sofia Vergara, how [she has naturally blond hair] and they made her dye it [dark] so she could look more ‘Latina.’ It’s like... really?

Noelia’s husband is White, but her daughters are not White-passing, and Noelia prefers for her daughters to own dolls that have darker complexions. Even so, for Noelia, Latina dolls should not simply be darker, but should more specifically represent the full range of racial diversity that exists within the Latino population in general and her Latino community in particular. Noelia’s desire that Latina dolls to be racially diverse was echoed by other participants with racially diverse Latino communities, even when they had a more stereotypical Latina appearance. For example, Marianella, who had tan skin and brown hair but whose family and friends were racially diverse, wanted Latina dolls at both ends of the racial spectrum, noting that dark hair and skin “doesn’t cover the whole of what it is to be Hispanic or Latina.”

In contrast, when mothers were part of a Latino community that was racially homogenous, they described an “ideal” Latina doll that was representative of that homogeneity. These mothers wanted Latina dolls with “a little bit of pigment:” “darker” skin, eyes, and hair, exactly the stereotypical appearance for which doll manufactures have been criticized.

The pattern and content of these responses illustrates that mothers’ “ideal” Latina doll was meant to be representative of their Latino community rather than their/ their daughters’ individual Latino identities. In addition, Noelia’s connection of Latina dolls to broader, inaccurate portrayals of Latinas in popular culture and to her own experiences with being ethnically ambiguous, suggests that some mothers see dolls as indicative of mainstream understandings of the Latino community. In describing the race of their ideal doll, mothers advocated for accurate representations of the racial makeup of their Latino communities. Such increased visibility would arguably imply greater mainstream acceptance of Latinos, which would benefit both Latina mothers and their daughters.

Dolls Do (Racialized) Gender

Sexy Dolls: The Great Unifier

Mothers expressed a variety of preferences with respect to what they wanted their daughters’ dolls to look like, but all 18 mothers interviewed were clear on what they *didn’t* want their daughters’ dolls to look like. A series of undesirable characteristics often went together: large bust, skimpy clothes, excessive makeup, and an “older” look. Many mothers specifically called these dolls sexualized, but others simply recited these characteristics as a unit.

While Bratz and Monster High dolls were the toys most often accused of possessing these undesirable traits, Barbie also made several appearances in these discussions. Some mothers felt that she was too sexualized, but many mothers did not, saying that at least “she [didn’t] have the

big ol' blue eyeshadow" of Bratz dolls. This suggests that mothers were specifically concerned with transmitting appropriate sexualized femininity to their daughters: feminine (i.e. wearing a dress and makeup) without crossing the line to signal sexual promiscuity. It is possible that this emphasis on appropriateness reflects class status, with mothers desiring their daughters to inhabit the appropriate high-class heteronormative space. However, there may also be an intersectional component to this pattern. Two mothers noted that the Bratz dolls were clearly Latinas, and lamented that Latinas are often portrayed as "trashy. As future women of color, Latina daughters are at risk of being mistaken for low class/ trashy based on sexualized femininity in ways that non-Latinas are not. Aversion to sexualized dolls, but not necessarily to dolls that included sexualized components such as Barbie, represented an attempt to give Latina daughters the skills to manage the stigmatizing combination of their racial, ethnic, and gender identities when interacting with dominant culture.

Latina Dolls and Gender

Beyond racial preferences, one-third of mothers specified that the ideal Latina doll should go past common Latina stereotypes. They desired dolls that were not over-sexualized (e.g. "classy") and not exoticized (e.g. not wearing folkloric dress). Furthermore, mothers wanted dolls that were modern and showed Latinas working in the sort of high status respectable professions their daughters were expected to eventually achieve. However, they also requested that Latina dolls be feminine, describing their ideal doll as "fashionable" and "elegant." These toys represent future identities mothers wanted to foster in their daughters, and reveal tension between the traditional and non-traditional roles expected of women today:

Beatrice: Well...[the doll] would probably be a professional woman. Because it's empowering to [Latina girls]. It's important to me that [my daughters] have a job, and their own place before they get married...I'd like to instill that in them, they don't need a man to do a, b, and c.

Angelica: Sometimes in the TV show they'll put Latinas wearing the tight dress, making the jokes, like she doesn't know what she's talking about. I would like to see a professional Latina who knows how to dress. Who is more fashionable, elegant.

While Beatrice is determined to empower her girls, she assumes this empowerment will occur before settling down and marrying. Similarly, although Angelica wants Latinas to be shown as professionals, she also is adamant that these professional should be fashionable. Angelica's call for "fashionable" dolls was echoed by four other mothers. These participants expressly said they disliked Latina dolls that were clothed in traditional dress. Sandra said that she had a problem with dolls dressed in traditional Mexican garb because "that's all you ever see," and that Latinas "don't look like [that]." Similarly Ava, an Austin mother, lamented that the American Girl Dolls were "a little stereotypical" because they depicted dolls in folkloric skirts.

Only one-third of the mothers asked for Latina dolls that depicted their daughters' professional futures. Possibly, this reveals that mothers did not think it was particularly important that their daughters grow up to have professional careers, or that they were advocating for a more traditional, housewife oriented future for their daughters. However, this seems unlikely considering that most participants were proud professionals themselves. Instead, this could speak to the degree that Latinos have been made invisible in the United States. At the very least, mothers seemed to be saying, we want Latina dolls that look like us.

In mothers' articulations about the race of their ideal doll, they made clear connections between Latina dolls and their Latino community, indicating their view that these Latina dolls were representative of how mainstream culture understands Latinas. By advocating for Latina dolls that embody "classy" femininity, mothers were again hinting at a desire that mainstream culture show acceptance of Latina women in the middle class. Whereas acceptance along racial terms was expressed in terms of visibility, acceptance along gendered terms centered around the desire that mainstream culture see Latinas as high-class.

Conflict in the Dream House: Sources and Solutions to “Undesirable” Dolls

Conflict Resolution: Gatekeeping in Action

Mothers employed several gatekeeping techniques to ensure that their daughters had access only to dolls that were deemed desirable. At the extreme ends of the gatekeeping spectrum were mothers who resigned themselves to their daughters owning undesirable dolls (5/18), and mothers who refused to compromise (4/18). A favorite of uncompromising mothers was making dolls “disappear,” throwing or giving away dolls they didn’t like without telling their daughters. Extreme techniques such as “disappearing” seemed to exclusively happen around preferences for non-sexualized and “darker” dolls. The ferocity with which some mothers enforced these preferences reveals the relative importance of passing down appropriate femininity and fostering pride in non-White appearances and a Latina identity.

Daughter’s Preferences and Limited Choices

Over half (10/18) of the mothers interviewed described experiencing conflict between their own desires with regards to dolls and those of their daughters. Most of these encounters involved daughters asking for dolls that were, by their mother’s definition, overly sexualized. Four mothers shared stories involving their daughters preferring white dolls to “darker” dolls. Mothers blamed their daughters’ unacceptable preferences on a variety of sources, usually making television and peers the primary culprits. Many described limiting television access to keep their daughters from asking for toys they deemed unacceptable.

One-third of the mothers complained that even when their doll preferences coincided with their daughters, the doll market limited their ability to purchase desirable dolls. Specifically, mothers complained that they could not find moderately priced dolls that “looked like” themselves or their daughters, which usually meant they could not find “darker” dolls, or

dolls with racialized aspects such as curly hair, or body hair. Many of these mothers noted that they liked the American Girl Dolls and other specialty brands that they felt were more inclusive, but felt these dolls were unaffordable. Mothers couldn't justify buying expensive dolls when, as one mother noted, they would most likely end up "naked and at the bottom of a drawer 60 to 70 percent of the time." Thus, the doll market can thwart mothers' gatekeeping attempts, preventing them from providing their daughters with dolls that possess desirable characteristics.

Undesirable Gifts

Conflict over dolls was often the result of friends and family (including spouses) gifting daughters undesirable dolls, which ranged from "lighter" skinned to "sexualized" to "messy" (e.g. Baby Born dolls, which "pee" real water after being bottle-fed). Four of the nine mothers whose daughters had received undesirable dolls noted that these toys were given without the gifter knowing they were forbidden. However, five mothers said that dolls were given despite knowledge that mothers disliked them. For example, Jesenia's White in-laws ignored her requests that they gift her daughters darker dolls, buying her daughters White dolls repeatedly.

Jesenia explained that her in-laws were "from another generation," and didn't understand why "darker" dolls might be important. In fact, over half (10/18) of Latina mothers expressed doubt that their non-Latino White friends understood the importance of providing representative dolls for their children. They hinted that non-Latinos were missing some crucial knowledge about what it means to be Latino, and that this was why Latinos were so poorly represented in the doll market. Sandra explained: "If it's a doll made by someone in Mexico, it's different. But when it's at Target, it's not very authentic." Remarks like Sandra's suggest a sense of exclusivity about membership in the Latino community, revealing the importance of mothers transmitting non-dominant cultural capital to their daughters should they want them included in this group.

Conclusion

My investigation of concerted cultivation, which uses dolls to understand how race, ethnicity, and gender interact during the parenting process, represents an enrichment of Lareau's findings; it provides a focused analysis of the less-studied, intersectional elements of concerted cultivation. My research reveals that middle class Latina mothers practice concerted cultivation in ways that reflect their race, gender, and class identities. Furthermore, my analysis suggests that their efforts are aimed at the promotion of advantageous social identities in their daughters, and the transmission of skills for identity management. While these findings corroborate research on parenting in the Black middle-class, my investigation is a departure from the predominant Black vs White approach of most research. Instead, the diverse racial and racialized identities of my participants illuminates the divergent strategies non-White middle class parents use to provide their children with the tools to survive in the middle class, White world.

Future research should explore concerted cultivation not only in mothers and daughters, but also in Latinos as a family unit, in order to more directly make comparisons with Lareau's work. In addition, while my findings support studies that show race is a guiding element of concerted cultivation, they also suggest we should be cautious in applying a Black vs White framework to research on parenting; not all non-Whites practice concerted cultivation in identical ways. Researchers should specifically think about concerted cultivation with regards to mixed and ambiguously racialized individuals and immigrant populations, such as Asian Americans. Finally, future studies should include not only data on the use of activities in concerted cultivation but also the employment of cultural objects like toys, in order to continue to illuminate how middle class parents foster social identity in their children.