

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

Comments by Rachel Nickens

In this promising paper, Acosta explores the attitudes that middle-class Latina mothers hold about dolls and their daughters' doll play. This paper asks how Latina mothers seek to foster advantageous social identities in their daughters through their parenting practices, or more specifically, how Latina mothers manage and think about their daughter's doll access. This provides a lens through which to explore how race, gender, and ethnicity interact in shaping parenting decisions.

This paper is framed within the larger literature on how parenting styles vary by race, ethnicity, and class. In her oft-cited study, sociologist Annette Lareau found that class had a greater effect than race on parenting strategies. However, one weakness with Lareau's study (and much U.S.-based sociology) is that race was studied as a Black/White dichotomy. As Acosta argues, race is more complex than Black/White, and is further complicated when ethnicity, gender, nationality, and immigration status is considered. Acosta suggests that middle-class Latina parents, like middle-class Black parents, are tasked with teaching their children both the skills and dispositions necessary to success in “mainstream” (read: often white) society, as well as cultivating a sense of racial and ethnic pride and community. This paper also responds to weaknesses with the existing literature by sampling from multiple geographic sites.

As Acosta suggests and other researchers have found, mothers continue to be responsible for many day-to-day parenting decisions. Thus, it is appropriate that Acosta sought to interview mothers specifically, as mothers are usually the “gatekeepers” that control (or attempt to control) access to toys. Acosta's findings suggest that roughly half of the mothers valued “darker dolls,” wanting their daughters to have playthings that were physically representative of themselves and their community. Interestingly, some mothers sought out darker dolls that “looked like us,” even when the daughter in question had lighter skin and hair. The other half of mothers preferred for their daughters to own a variety of dolls that represented the full spectrum of marginalized and non-marginalized appearances. This group of mothers tended to identify less strongly with the Latino community and often identified their race as “other,” and saw diverse dolls as a way to teach their children to “get along with all.”

Finally, when mothers were asked to envision their ideal dolls, they imagined playthings that represented their Latino community (with all its variety and diversity), but how this should be achieved was difficult for mothers to pinpoint. Instead, the greatest consensus was about what should be avoided in the doll market: the “sexualized” look characterized by a large bust, skimpy clothing, and heavy makeup; and the exoticized portrayal of Latinas, as is common in dolls featuring folkloric rather than “modern” dress. Mothers know that they can only expect so much from the toy market, but would like to at least have dolls that “look like us” and present their daughter with positive images of her future possibilities. Given limited toy choices, mothers engage in a variety of practices to manage their daughter's access to dolls, including occasionally making undesirable dolls “disappear.”

Questions/comments moving forward:

1) In *Unequal Childhoods* and the article based on the same research, Lareau follows black and white children from two schools: one school is in the city and draws mostly kids from working-class families, many of whom live in racially segregated neighborhoods; the other school is in the suburbs and draws mostly students from middle-class families. Lareau finds that parenting strategies vary more by class than by race. Middle-class parents in her study see it their task as “develop” or “cultivate” their children’s talents and skills, often through enrolling their child in adult-managed, organized activities. In contrast, poor and working-class parents prioritized providing their children with necessities: food, housing, medical care, bed time, and clean clothes, with little focus on adult organized activities. Instead, working-class parents encouraged their children to play outside and spend time with neighbors and kin. In addition, Lareau found that there is more talking in middle-class homes than in working-class and poor homes, as middle-class parents seek to develop their children’s vocabulary, reasoning abilities, and conversational skills. Middle-class parents were also more likely to debate and reason with their child (including around disciplinary issues), while working class parents were more likely to issue directives (“do this” or “don’t do that”). Finally, middle-class parents were more likely to intervene in institutions (like schools) on their child’s behalf, while working-class parents were more likely to trust the “experts” within institutions. Lareau coined the term-concerted cultivation to refer to this collective set of middle-class parenting practices. Moving forward, I would suggest Acosta think about if this study should be framed as an exploration of concerted cultivation, as Lareau used the term. There are certainly parts of concerted cultivation going on, but this study might be better framed as an analysis of something more specific like perhaps the relation between parents’ or mothers’ consumer choices and social identity?

2) The section on responses to “undesirable” dolls is starting to get at parenting practices in earnest, with a consideration of the intrafamily dynamics involved in cultivating a social identity. I encourage the author to expand this section. Indeed, this may be the section where the literature on concerted cultivation as a parenting strategy is most relevant.

3) Acosta’s findings suggest that race and ethnicity do matter in parenting, and indeed, matter quite a bit. It may be interesting to expand this research to poor or working-class Latina mothers to see if the attitudes she found about dolls are unique to middle-class Latinas (showing how race and class intersect), or if these attitudes about dolls are shared by Latina mothers across social classes (perhaps suggesting that race/ethnicity is more salient in the link between consumption practices and social identity).

4) In the findings section, the author reports that seven participants preferred dolls that were physically representative of themselves and/or their daughters. The author also reports that seven other mothers preferred for their daughters to own a “variety” of dolls. What about the other four interviewees? Did they have no preferences for their daughter’s own doll collection, or were they unclassifiable for some other reason? As the paper currently stands, the reader is left wondering about this missing group, which distracts from the otherwise thoughtful research.