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Young Mother (in the) Hood: Gang Girls' Negotiation of New Identities

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Abstract

This article examines the experiences of young women in street gangs who become mothers. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 65 young women in the San Francisco, CA, Bay Area, we examine their narratives about the transition to motherhood. In particular, we focus on the ways these young women negotiate femininities and attempt to reconcile their identities as young mothers and gang girls—both stigmatized identities. For many of the young women, motherhood entails a retreat from the street and a renewed emphasis on time spent in the home. While many receive (financial and childcare) support from their families, this also often means a diminution of the autonomy they experienced while more heavily involved in the gang. Issues of respect and respectability remain important for the young women, but the dimensions on which these are based change.

Keywords

motherhood; gangs; femininity

Introduction

Despite declines in teen births internationally, young motherhood has been the subject of much heated media attention and policy debate in locales from the US to the UK to Australia and New Zealand (McDermott and Graham 2005, Angwin and Kamp 2007). Policy discussions, drawing from scientific discourse, center on the problems associated with early motherhood, including poor perinatal outcomes, child neglect or abuse, unstable employment, marital instability, and poor educational outcomes for both mother and child (Wilson and Huntington 2006). Young motherhood is presented as threatening the very foundation of society, undermining beliefs and values associated with childhood, innocence, marriage, and family (Roseneil and Mann 1996, Furstenburg 2003). Given the opposition between childhood and adulthood, combining childhood and motherhood provokes a deep sense of unease: "…it is adults who bear and beget children; a child cannot beget or bear a child. Yet that is precisely what a pregnant teenager is about to do" (Murcott 1980, p. 7). Although traditional objections connected to moral prescriptions and ideologies of feminine sexual purity have not disappeared, they have been joined by other arguments. For example, policymakers find it difficult to accept the moral affront young mothers present in today's neoliberal state where welfare dependency and social exclusion are being replaced by new educational and employment opportunities meant to spur economic growth and allow

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individuals to construct a reflexive and autonomous self (A. Harris 2004, Wilson and Huntington 2006). These young mothers are deemed as having rejected these opportunities, and hence, are defined as an “at risk” group and “a risk” to social stability (Mitchell and Green 2002, McDermott and Graham 2005). In this article, however, we wish to move beyond this one-sided, negative view of young motherhood.

This article is concerned with one particular group of young mothers: gang-involved girls. We hope to demonstrate, drawing from qualitative interviews, the ways these young women negotiate and attempt to reconcile their identities as young mothers and gang girls. The lifestyle of girl gang members, including violence, drug and alcohol use, drug sales and other criminal activities, has been noted by some gang researchers as an environment that may be harmful for raising a healthy child and conducive for the generational transmission of delinquency (Fleisher 1998). Motherhood and gang membership join together moral concerns about under-age sexual activities, childhood parenting and welfare dependency, as well as law-and-order worries about delinquency. Given the recent attention not only with girl gang members but also young motherhood in general, it is somewhat surprising that the issue of motherhood and gang membership has not generated more research (see Campbell 1991, Moore 1991, Dietrich 1998, Moore and Hagedorn 1999, Miller 2001, and Vigil 2008 for key exceptions). In contrast to popular stereotypes of gang girls as either irredeemably violent or sexually promiscuous (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995, Nurge 2003), an understanding of their experiences of pregnancy and motherhood may challenge these dominant images. An analysis of these young mothers will reveal the extent to which becoming mothers shapes their life trajectories, as well as provide an opportunity to understand how these young women negotiate between two conflicting identities: gang member and mother.

From teen mothers to young mothers

In spite of ongoing public concerns with teen pregnancy, recent research has questioned earlier studies purporting problematic outcomes of young mothers (Furstenburg *et al*. 1987, Luker 1996, Furstenburg 2003, SmithBattle 2009). Increasingly studies challenge commonly held assumptions that perinatal and postnatal outcomes are worse for teenagers than for older women. Also, although studies consistently show that early motherhood is related to dropping out of school, the path to leaving school is more complex than previously understood. Pregnancy may follow, rather than lead to leaving school early (Furstenberg *et al*. 1987, Social Exclusion Unit 1999, Dawson 2006). Moreover, motherhood can be a driving force for re-engaging in education (Hosie and Selman 2006, Angwin and Kamp 2007). Many early studies were plagued by issues of selection and failed to control for confounding factors; poor maternal or child outcomes associated with teenage births may be the result of underlying causes or contributors to teenage pregnancy rather than the teenage births themselves.

Recent research indicates that the key factor in determining the outcome of teenage pregnancy and motherhood is not age but poverty (Konner and Shostak 1986, Luker 1996, Geronimus 2003). Poverty, and related risk-factors, may explain unfavorable outcomes associated with teenage motherhood (Furstenberg 2003, Holmlund 2005, Hotz *et al*. 2005). Moreover, poverty combined with social and institutional stigmatization can negatively affect the transition to early motherhood (Kirkman *et al*. 2001, Yardley 2008). In considering the role of poverty and stigma, feminist researchers challenge implicit middle-class assumptions about the appropriate age for childbearing and the importance of delaying parenthood (Murcott 1980, Phoenix 1991, Jacobs 1994, McRobbie 2000, Edin and Kefalas 2005). While historically late-adolescence was perceived as physiologically an ideal time for young women to give birth, and motherhood in later years (over age 30) was identified as a

period of increasing risk, this "age appropriateness" has been redefined in the opposite direction (Wilson and Huntington 2006). Today, delayed parenthood is promoted in public policy as consistent with the expansion of opportunities for women to attain higher education and a career outside the home, and the rise of a new "democratized family," (McDermott and Graham 2005) within the "new competitive meritocracy" (McRobbie 2007). As such, today's young mothers are marked as not having taken advantage of those opportunities, and instead have made "bad choices" rather than being in "bad circumstances" (Rolfe 2008). And as a result, teen (as distinct from young) mothers are highly stigmatized individually and collectively.

In response to this backlash, feminist scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding not only the cultural, economic and social factors that encourage early motherhood in marginalized communities but also the ways in which these youth negotiate new identities as women and as mothers within these structural constraints. Studies show that young mothers are fully aware of their stigmatization as being irresponsible, immoral, and lacking respectability (Kaplan 1997, Hanna 2001, Yardley 2008). Moreover, young mothers face the challenge of coming to terms with no longer having the freedom of adolescence, giving up youthful pleasures of partying, isolation from friends, financial insecurities, and feelings of unattractiveness (Kirkman *et al*. 2001, Baker 2009). In essence, this is a period of transition in femininity – from girlhood to motherhood, but is complicated by the stigma attached to their age.

Yet young mothers are highly resilient, negotiating poverty and stigma through social support from family and others. They report positive experiences with motherhood, finding it provides personal satisfaction, an impetus to pursue school or work, or a healing of family relationships (Rolfe 2008, Arai 2009, Gregson 2009).[1] Despite the challenges of securing childcare and scheduling class time, young women find not only self satisfaction, but a way to build self confidence for entering the job market (Dawson 2006). But more than this, for many young mothers, the transition to motherhood marks the transition to adult femininity with "good mothering" as a key to this new identity and defined by the belief in their strengths such as competence as a mother and the advantage of youthful age (McDermott and Graham 2005, Baker 2009). Young mothers are engaged in "consoling plots" (Prettyman 2005) or competitive parenting (Higginson 1998), an interactional process in which they reject the "teen mother" as "unfit mother" identity by "investing in the good mother identity" (McDermott and Graham 2005, p. 71). This includes "othering" the "welfare mom" and projecting a self-sufficient and autonomous image (i.e., mature, responsible, financially independent) (Higginson 1998, Rolfe 2008). As McDermott and Graham (2005) have observed, this projected autonomous self is consistent with, although by a route counter to the middle-class prescription, the neoliberal agenda of new 21st century woman (A. Harris 2004). Young mothers who are or have been involved in gangs, though, may face additional obstacles to challenging the "teen mother" and "unfit mother" stigma and to securing this autonomous identity, due to their gang involvement.

Young mothers in the hood

Early gang studies traditionally downplayed and minimized the roles that young women play in street gangs as well as the social processes and consequences of their involvement in gangs. Female gang members were portrayed in stereotypical ways from personal property to sexual chattel to maladjusted tomboys (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995). Female gang participation has generated much public concern and media attention in recent years, in part because they are becoming more visible, and in part because they are presumed to be

[1]Edin and Kefalas (2005) find similar satisfaction among low-income single mothers in their study.

rebelling against traditional notions of femininity. In recent decades there has been a significant expansion of scholarship focusing on young women in gangs (Quicker 1983, Fishman 1988, Fleisher 1998, M. Harris 1988, Campbell 1991, Moore 1991, Joe-Laidler and Hunt 1997, [2001], Venkatesh 1998, Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn 1999, Miller 2001, [2009], Miranda 2003, Nurge 2003, Hunt *et al*. 2005, Valdez 2007). Gang researchers have particularly focused on how these young women interpret their participation in delinquency and violence (Joe-Laidler and Hunt 1997, Campbell 1999, Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn 1999). This focus on delinquency, violence, and other public/street features of gang girls' lives, although important, has been questioned by some feminist writers. They argue that a focus on the traditionally masculine space of the street misses key elements of the social world of girls, which are often in more private or domestic locations (Griffin 1993, McRobbie and Garber 1976, see also Hunt *et al*. 2000, Wingood *et al*. 2002). Understanding their experiences in the private sphere may be just as essential to understanding their gang involvement as the more visible street activities. Having a child is one development that may lead a gang girl to alter her involvement in gang life. Furthermore, an analysis of how these young women view their relationships to their boyfriends and their families once they become pregnant and have children may illuminate their changing notions of femininity. Although in becoming gang members these young women may resist normative femininity (Joe-Laidler and Hunt 2001), by having children they may be obliged to accept some elements of traditional femininity.

Many key predisposing factors likely to encourage pregnancy are quite common among young women in gangs. Involvement with men significantly older (six or more years) is associated with both young mothers (Office of Population Affairs 2000) and with young women in gangs (Dietrich 1998). Experiences with childhood sexual abuse or assault may be related to adolescent pregnancy, with some estimating 50–75% of teenage mothers have histories of such abuse (Stevens-Simon and McAnarney 1996, see also Mason *et al*. 1998). Family abuse, physical and sexual, has been identified as a feature common among female gang members (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995, Miller 2001, Fleisher and Krienart 2004, Gosselin 2005, Valdez 2007). Neighborhood influences are also linked to early pregnancy, particularly in communities where adolescent childbearing is increasingly common or socially acceptable (Anderson 1999, Schlegel 1995). This may be especially true in impoverished neighborhoods where the "lack of opportunities for personal advancement may lead to a lack of motivation to avoid pregnancy," and where "adolescent childbearing is considered normative" (Stevens-Simon and McAnarney 1996, p. 318). Similar social and cultural factors encouraging early pregnancy have been identified by gang researchers in studies of female gang members (Moore 1991, Deitrich 1998, Miller 2001).

However, these predisposing factors may not be the only elements in determining either the likelihood of female gang members becoming mothers or the ways they care for their children. We also need to consider the perspectives of these young women themselves. Although their choices are shaped by structural constraints at home and on the streets, these young women attempt to establish an identity of being a gang member within often conflicting cultural forms of femininity. Girls' participation in gangs offers an avenue for challenging and testing normative gender roles or what Connell (1987) calls "emphasized femininity."

Miller (2001) argues that young women in gangs participate in masculine gender norms, attempting to display toughness and fit in as "one of the guys." This street reputation and status translate as power for girls who operate within the patriarchal power structure of the gangs, the streets, and community. At the same time, many girl gang members embrace some forms of "culturally appropriate" femininity (Messerschmidt 1997, p. 83). Ethnographic studies on female gangs find that gang girls concentrate on 'feminine

activities' such as appearance and conversation. Many also find themselves in typically gendered lower- and working-class jobs like cleaning services, babysitting, and clerical work (Campbell 1991, Joe and Chesney Lind 1995). Gang girls also achieve their identity of emphasized femininity by engaging in such gender-specific activities as cooking and preparing food within the gang (Messerschmidt 1997). Messerschmidt contends that female gang violence and displays of toughness are "resources" for establishing a particular notion of femininity, that of the "bad girl." Others emphasize how these adolescent girls respond to two conflicting cultural forms of femininity. For example, Dietrich (1998) observes that Latina adolescents "are confronted by a conflict between their gender and their gang membership" (p. 151). In adopting a masculine code of conduct or 'macho' homegirl image, they reject a more traditional Latino cultural norm of 'femeninidad.' "[T]he homegirls are a symbol of improper femininity" (Dietrich 1998, p. 151).

Given this already existing conflict between multiple, sometimes opposing, forms of femininity, how do gang girls negotiate femininity once they become pregnant and become mothers? This paper focuses on how these young women attempt to resolve their notions of being "bad girls" with being pregnant and a mother while at the same time maintaining respect within the gang. Our objective is to uncover the process by which they negotiate early motherhood, how they handle the reactions and controls placed upon them by family members, and how they reconcile these potentially conflicting identities of gang girl and mother.

Research methods

The data for this paper are drawn from an ongoing comparative qualitative study of ethnic youth gangs in the San Francisco Bay area. We conducted face-to-face interviews with 350 self-identified female gang members, who were located using a snowball-sampling approach (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Approximately one-fifth (exactly 65) of these gang members were mothers. The analysis in this article is based on these interviews.

The mixed-methods interviews included a pre-coded quantitative schedule and semi-structured, open-ended questions about substance use, violence, and criminal activities as well as kinship and support networks. The interviews were conducted by field workers who were matched to the groups they were sampling, either by their knowledge of the neighborhoods, their ethnic background, or their own experiences with gangs. The interviews took place in a variety of settings including residences, parks, church youth centers, and coffee shops. We gave a $50 honorarium in recognition of their participation and time.

We utilized self-nomination as the most reliable way of assessing gang membership (Esbensen *et al*. 2001, p. 124). We took several steps to address validity and reliability issues. Given the interviewers' familiarity with the scene and some of the respondents, respondents were less likely to exaggerate or minimize their experiences. During the interview, questions were rephrased at different times to detect inconsistencies. Interviewers were required to assess the respondent's veracity at the end of the interview, and found them to be truthful.

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read and coded using qualitative textual-analysis software (NVIVO), using categories to capture different aspects of the respondents' narratives (e.g., gender relations, substance use, family relations, children).

Sample

The sample for this analysis is based on interviews with 65 mothers from the larger sample of 350 gang-involved young women. They came from a variety of low-income neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area. The majority of the women had just one child, with 14% having two or more. Five of the mothers were pregnant at the interview.

Table 1 offers an overview of their personal characteristics. Almost half of the sample were Latinas (32 in all), 32% were African American, 6% Pacific Islanders and 12% had classified themselves as being of mixed ethnicity. Twenty-three percent were immigrants, 12 having been born in Mexico or Central America, one in the Philippines, one in Samoa, and one in Germany. This is a diverse sample and clearly ethnicity may have a major influence on both experiences within the gang as well as kinship networks and experiences with motherhood. However, in the various narratives we discuss below, we find a remarkable commonality among young women from very different cultural backgrounds. Despite being raised with very different cultural and familial traditions, and participating in different ethnic-gangs, many of the young women faced similar challenges in reconciling gang and mother identities. In addition, our sample size (n=65) is not large enough to comfortably be able to make generalizations about key differences in the gang/mother experience based on race or ethnicity. Hence, in this article, contrasts between gang members of different races and ethnicities will not be a primary focus.

At the time they were interviewed the mothers ranged in age from 15 to 31 years old. The median age was 21 with slightly over 47% being 18 or under. The average age at first birth was 16.5 years of age, with 70% of them under 18 when they had their first child, and nearly half were 16 or less. Six of the respondents were 13 years-old when they had their first child and two were 12. Nearly two-fifths (38.5%) of the mothers had never finished high school nor were they pursuing any other form of education. Over 40% of the mothers had either full or part time jobs, the remaining women relied on a number of different sources of income, including public assistance (9%) and family members or male partners (8%).

The respondents were members of a variety of types of gangs, from large, multigenerational gangs with many sub-groups on different blocks or regions, to smaller, more transitory gangs and cliques, and are similar to those described in the Eurogang project – which exhibit flexibility, a street orientation and crime involvement (including drug use and sales and violence) (Klein and Maxson 2006, p. 415). There was also diversity in the gender structure of the gangs represented, including all-female gangs as well as gangs with male and female members. The young women we interviewed typically had engaged in multiple risk behaviors, especially early on in their gang affiliation, including street fighting, drug sales, substance abuse, assaults, robbery, boosting (shoplifting), and other criminal behaviors. As we will see, however, for many of the young women involvement in these behaviors began to modify, decrease, or even cease upon pregnancy or the birth of their child. **Gang girls and motherhood** While there are many reasons for joining a gang, many respondents identified the familial bond with the group as one of the most important as it offers acceptance and protection within a group they come to see as a surrogate family. In attaching themselves to the gang, they often found themselves in relationships with men who are significantly older and more experienced. The girls often feel under pressure to become sexually attached and in some cases encouraged and even pressured to have children. In opposition to the stereotypes of gang girls as being either too sexually available (sluts) or not sexually available enough (tomboys) (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995), and in spite of their becoming pregnant, our respondents' accounts of their relationships with their boyfriends and the fathers of their children suggest a more nuanced picture. The majority of respondents had had little sexual experience prior to discovering that they were pregnant. About one-fifth of our sample became pregnant by their first sexual relationships.

For instance, Aesha[2] (African American, 20) described how at the age of 14 she was pursued by an 18-year-old man who lived in the same neighborhood. They got involved sexually and "ain't never really went anywhere but in his room." She ran away from home, moved in with the boyfriend and his mother, and "then [I] popped up pregnant." During the pregnancy, her boyfriend went to jail and, while incarcerated, denied he was the father. Prior to the start of this relationship she had no previous boyfriends because "I wasn't wanting to pop."

Yet their first relationships were not solely with older men. Approximately one-half of those who had children as a result of their first relationship were with young men of a comparable age. For example, Sonya, (African American/Latina, 17), described how her boyfriend, who although the same age, "was a little bit more advanced… I was like a little good girl…. I didn't do anything at all that you weren't supposed to." Because of their different sexual experiences, they decided to break up. But, at age 15, it was different because "I was already into the gang. And then I was kickin' it around there more." Soon after, she got pregnant, at the age of 16. He told her, "you ain't gonna get an abortion… and you ain't gonna give him up for adoption. So, we're gonna take care of it."

Respectability

According to Sonya, the father's willingness to look after the child was due to his strong belief that the child was his: "I only had sex with him. That was it. Nobody else. And he knew that … He knew I wasn't sluttin' around with no dudes." Sonya emphasized her respectability; she was not a "slut," and was not that enthusiastic about sex:

> I'm the type of girl who has had sex. I'm not into sex… I have sex with him because he wants to. I'm even embarrassed… I'm not that kind of girl… he's my man and because I got feelings for him.

This young mother, like others in this study, took pains to assert and establish her "respectability." Although teen motherhood may cast young women as embodying deviant femininity, as violating norms for sexual propriety, many respondents present their sexual experiences and resulting pregnancies in a more traditional light, appealing to their disinterest in sex, their commitment, or desire to become a mother.

Paradoxically the concern for respectability may also be a factor in explaining erratic birth control use. Sonya went on to explain:

> I was taking birth control. I got pregnant maybe four months after I started taking birth control because I would take it sporadically. Like, during the day, I would take it one day at three o'clock, the next day at four, the next day at nine … And so I got pregnant even on birth control.

While contraceptives offer protection, their use also signifies that she is sexually active and can raise doubts about her respectability or "spontaneity" (Kaplan 1997 p. 42, see also Luker 1996, Dietrich 1998). This points to the extent to which she must attempt to negotiate competing cultural forces. Young women in gangs wished to be "bad girls" but they were also concerned about their reputations. If they insist on using birth control they may stray into the male sphere of power and control and become identified not as sexually knowledgeable but much more damagingly as sexually promiscuous. To be characterized as such may lead to the loss of reputation as a "decent" girl and being labeled as a "ho." Consequently, femininity is constructed within these boundaries. Regardless of whether she knows about contraceptives,[3] she may be unwilling to enforce their use and thus risks

[2]All names of respondents are pseudonyms.

pregnancy. Issues of respectability weigh heavily on some of the girls. Esmeralda (Latina/African American, 15) expressed relief at attending a high school for teenage mothers: "So another girl can't say 'she's a ho cuz she has a baby,'" something she says she hears "all the time."

Good mothers

Becoming pregnant requires a gang girl to accommodate to a new identity of mother while at the same time negotiating what this will mean for her as a gang member. Becoming a mother does not mean that she necessarily gives up her identity as a "bad girl," but it does require her to find a compromise between being a good gang member and a good mother if she wishes to maintain respect(ability) (Hunt *et al*. 2005). Similar to other work on young motherhood (Higginson 1998, Yardley 2008) gang girls invest in the good mother identity by distancing themselves from other young mothers, and are particularly critical of other gang girls who continued to "hang out" on the block and even took their children out with them:

> There are so many other girls that I know with kids and they're still out there banging with their kids two, three in the morning. So many things have happened to babies because their moms are stupid, taking them out to parties, parks, while they're drunk, drinking in front of them, smoking in front of them. That's something I wouldn't do. (Giggles, Latina, 16)

Similarly, when asked how her life might differ from other young women, Frosty (Latina/African American, 17) commented "Some girls don't even take care of their babies … going to the street all the time and nothing about babies, you know." By highlighting the actions of "bad mothers" these young women shore up their claim to good motherhood.

Yet their attempts to construct themselves as good mothers do not always go without challenges. One source of conflict is often between the new mother and her own mother or grandmother, who in many cases provides a great deal of financial and/or childcare support for the babies. Becoming a mother means that the girls, who often joined the gang as a way of seeking greater independence beyond the private domestic sphere, now find themselves in a situation where they need assistance from others. The most common domestic arrangement was the young mother lived with her children and members of her family of origin (57%), often with her mother (41%), grandmother (6.5%), or both her parents (12%). The young women's families frequently provide financial support as well as child care, which is crucial for the young mothers who are attempting to graduate from high school or get jobs. Many of the young mothers express gratitude for the help and support they have received from their families. It was common for them to comment that becoming a mother brought them closer to their own mothers, whereas relations had often been strained when they were more involved with the gang or the streets.

However, this family support presents its own dilemmas. Given the troubled family history of many gang girls (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995, Hunt *et al*. 2000), these adolescents are often drawn to gang life as an alternative family and as a way of removing themselves from family controls and the consequences of family problems, including alcohol- and drug-related violence and physical and sexual abuse. Consequently, to return to the family and become reliant on family members may produce a new set of problems. As McRobbie noted "it is not hard to see the more negative dimensions of the 'advantages' of a supportive

[3]Some of the girls discussed their previous naïveté about birth control methods, having believed in folklore remedies that did not work. Gorda (Latina, 17) is a particularly vivid example, explaining that she thought she couldn't get pregnant because she sniffed chemo (glue), she didn't have sex with more than one person, and because her boyfriend smokes weed and wears briefs rather than boxers, which she thought would reduce his sperm count enough to keep her safe from pregnancy. See also Kaplan (1997).

family … dependency on the parents puts the young mothers in a powerless position" (2000, p. 167).

Whereas before they faced controls and criticism for not being good girls, they were now criticized for not being good mothers. Were they looking after their children properly and spending enough time with them? Were they spending too much time still 'hanging out' and 'partying'? As Esmeralda recounted, her mother:

> Tell[s] me how to raise my son, or if I wanna go out: 'No, you're not bringin the baby with you, it's too cold outside,' She doesn't trust me with him so she takes him from me. And if I leave him, usually she'll say she'll call the police cuz I'm abandoning him or whatever. It's too much.

Criticisms of their mothering skills came not only from mothers but also grandmothers: "I don't get along with my grandma 'cuz she makes me feel like a bad mother. She's like, 'I know Teon better than you. Why are you making Teon suffer?'" (Gorda, Latina, 17). These new criticisms were difficult to accept, especially given their relationships with their mothers, whom many of the girls believed had failed to be "good" parents (Hunt *et al*. 2000).

Still many young women report that while they feared telling their mothers about their pregnancy and the announcement initially led to heated tension, ultimately motherhood enabled many young women to become closer to their families, particularly their mothers. Motherhood led them to mature and allowed them to spend time with their families. Deici (Latina, 20) comments: "Oh yeah, now I get along with my mom really good. And cause, I think because me getting pregnant, it was like a way for me to mature. Now I'm seeing things different."

Off of the streets, into the home

Before becoming mothers, the gang girls had been able to leave home and 'hang out' if things got too difficult, or even run away. They now found themselves tied to the home because of their children. For many young women, one of the most significant transitions to motherhood involves the realization of a loss of adolescent freedom. They report a decline in the amount of time spent on the streets with their friends and gang members, and increase in the amount of time spent within the home. Graciela (Latina, 19) comments "Before I used to go out a lot with my friends … I don't go out no more, and I just stay home with the baby." Ebony (African American, 17) concurs:

> I don't have time ta have friends now … I want ta like take care of my son, and just go home and be with my son … Sometimes I do feel like goin out, but that's kinda like once every six months.

Some describe separation from their friends, because their friends continue to socialize primarily through "partying," smoking weed, and other activities they choose not to partake in when they have their children with them. Star (Latina, 21) expresses feeling isolated from even her friends with children: "I don't really talk ta my friends anymore … Most of 'em got kids and everything now … It's just different cuz we can't go outside."

This can be seen as a retreat from the male-dominated sphere of the street (in which they nevertheless had often carved places for themselves), to the domestic sphere of the home (where they often feel out of place, especially initially), and hence a physical move from an oppositional femininity within a masculine sphere to inhabiting a seemingly more conventionally feminine sphere. This move inside removed them from some of the real dangers of violence and victimization they faced on the streets. It also, however, sometimes meant they grew apart from the social networks and support with their fellow gang girls.

And, as so many of them are in their mothers' homes, it meant difficulties finding a place to assert their independence.

Not surprisingly, some yearned for a place of their own:

> I would like ta get my own place because everybody's always telling me like how to raise my baby… Like every time she cried, my grandma'll be like "Oh, what's wrong with her? Did you feed her? Did you change her?" And I already changed her. And I already fed her. (Lucia, Latina, 17)

However, few of the women had the necessary financial resources to set up home independently. Attempts to be self-sufficient are often undermined as they find themselves totally ill-equipped, not only because of their youth and inexperience but also because of their lack of financial resources. Only 12% of the respondents lived on their own with their children, and those that did so were typically the older members of the sample. This increasing distance from peers marks the loss of adolescent autonomy and the negotiation of a new sense of adult autonomy, one which is based on demonstrating to others (and the self) one's mothering skills. These "good mothering" skills entail not only being a good care giver but also financial provider.

The fathers of the children

To rely on the fathers of their children was not feasible in most cases. Some young men were unwilling to help, and of those who desired to help, many lacked the resources to do so.[4] From the available data, only 31% of the respondents said that they had any relationship with their children's fathers. An additional 6% said that a relationship did exist, but that the fathers were currently in jail. Twelve of the 65 respondents lived with their child's father, sometimes as a couple alone, but often with his or her family. Although for many of the aspects studied we did not see clear racial/ethnic differences among our sample, we do see a suggestive association between ethnicity and cohabitation. The only two African American respondents who were living with the father of their child were both biracial (African American/Latina). On the other hand, an additional ten other Latina respondents were living with the fathers of their children, including the only two respondents who were married. This finding matches other research that has found cultural variation in the meaning of cohabitation with unmarried African American mothers significantly less likely to cohabit with their child's father than Latinas or non-Hispanic whites (Manning and Landale 1996,Smock 2000).

The most common reason for the father's absence was his violence. Indeed, nine young women specifically recounted stories of the fathers behaving violently toward them after the pregnancy was announced. A second important reason for the father's absence was that they had proved to be unwilling to provide child care either emotionally or financially.

Rocio (Latina, 19) complained that although her boyfriend "had always wanted a baby," when she had the child, he was unwilling to help in childcare activities. "If I ask him like to change the diaper, he's like 'Oh, I don't wanna change a diaper, she's a girl' and I'm like, 'don't use that excuse'… He only wants to do the fun things." Given this unwillingness to help look after the child, she now rarely sees him, a situation that she regrets:

> I wish I had like a real family to bring her up in. I know I hated it when my dad wasn't around. And look at my child's dad. He's out doin' who knows what. I can't even imagine spending one day without my baby, how is he about to spend two months?

[4]For an analysis of young men in gangs who become fathers see Moloney *et al*. 2009.

As in many of the other cases, this young woman faced a situation where initially her boyfriend had been keen on looking after his child, but gradually lost interest in caring for his daughter and drifted away. Esmeralda similarly recounts: “he came by a couple of times. And that was it. He doesn’t show up no more… He don’t care no more… so it’s just me and the baby.”

A gang member *and* a mother?

In some instances, gang girls were able to turn to their fellow members for support. Four women belonged to one all-female Latina gang. As they became mothers, the group took on a new focus.

> After you have a baby, you can only be friends with other people who have babies because all the single ones think, “Oh, she probably can’t go out. She got the baby.” … I mean, it’s like once you have a baby, you only stick to people that have babies mostly. A lot of my friends have babies … We’ll be there at my house or someone else’s house with all our kids. We’ll be like, “the Baby-Sitters Club” (Rocio).

This group continued to get together after they became mothers. Previously they tended to gather on the streets and were actively involved in risky behaviors, including substance use and fighting. Now their interaction occurs in the private sphere, getting together for occasions like baby showers and birthday parties. Moving beyond the public gaze of the street, the group has become a distinctive context to support one another emotionally, to exchange information, advice, child care, and even items like baby clothes. This social outlet serves to reduce social isolation and disconnection from others of their age. This type of ‘baby club,’ in which the young women support one another and their babies, is not uncommon among street girls (Hagan and MacCarthy 1997, Anderson 1999). However, as found in previous research (Lauderback *et al*. 1992, Joe-Laidler and Hunt 2001), these are exceptions in the world of gangs and may occur primarily in female-only gangs, as opposed to the more common mixed-gender, often male-dominated gang formations.

While in this baby-club example, the women found support for their mother identity from their gang group, in most other cases, they describe conflict between their ability to remain good members of their gang and their responsibilities as a mother. Some young mothers described a newfound wariness of the dangers of gang-related violence, now that they had children to worry about. Some expressed a desire to curtail hanging out and partying due to their commitment to be a responsible parent and role model. Others expressed concerns about not “being there” for the gang or not being able to blow off steam with the gang, though they’d like to, due to having to be at home. Nearly one-half of all respondents were either no longer or less involved in the gang. Over one-half of them specifically mentioned their children as the primary reason for this change.

Many young women believed that becoming a mother was a positive development, which allowed them to reassess their role in the gang. Graciela described her transformation:

> It kind of made me grow up faster than I should have because now it’s like I think about my baby first before I think about myself … Before, I don’t care about nothing and, you know, I’m goin to do what I want to do. And then when I had my baby, I thought of him first and I changed my way of thinking.

Some of their modified behaviors occurred because they were unwilling to expose their children to everyday gang life, especially in the use of drugs and alcohol.

> Well, I stopped talking to them really because, my friends go out a lot …and I don't want to take my baby out with me and hang around my friends, and drink and hang out on the corner or whatever …I don't want my baby there. (Graciela)

In these cases, motherhood enabled an important shift in the girls' outlook, priorities, and time spent in gang-related risk activities. Their new mother identity, and the desire to be the "good mother," increasingly supplanted their gang identity.

Upon becoming a mother, keeping themselves and their children safe by avoiding the streets, reduces the risks associated with gang violence and leads most mothers to cease some if not all of the common gang risk behaviors, including shoplifting, fights, and drug sales. The most pervasive activity that many young moms continued is the use of marijuana. A third of the mothers admitted to still smoking marijuana which demonstrates the increasing trend toward normalization of marijuana use (MacKenzie, Hunt, and Joe-Laidler 2005). Many mothers who carry on using marijuana generally do so in private and not in the presence of their children. The ongoing use of more serious and more addictive drugs, such as crack cocaine and methamphetamine, is sporadic and minimal among most of the mothers.

Some young women (18%) decided they would still hang out and party with the gang but remained committed to being responsible. For them, the key to balancing the tension between adult responsibilities and adolescent freedoms was to define acceptable boundaries of motherhood. Deliberately exposing their children to "harmful activities" such as using drugs was deemed unacceptable, and too much like those mothers they distanced themselves from. Yet leaving their children in the care of trusted others while hanging out meant they were still acting as responsible mother.

> I smoke weed like every once in a while. I don't like doin' it 'cuz I'm always with my baby… My mom sometimes she goes "Okay, you can get away for like three hours." I'll go around my neighborhood with my friend… we'll go smoke, and I'll go back home when I'm better … I breastfeed her, so that's one of the reasons I don't like smoking weed. Or we go outside. (Smiley, Latina, 17)

These respondents describe a somewhat compartmentalized identity—sometimes highlighting their motherhood, taking care of their children, other times highlighting their gang membership, hanging out with their homegirls, while their mother or grandmother watched the baby or only engaging in gang behaviors when they were not with the child.

Frosty describes:

> As long as I don't have my baby with me, I'm down [will join in a fight]. If I got my baby with me, I'm a punk [won't join in a fight]. Cuz I'm not gonna do nothing violent with my kid with me.

Yet motherhood did not automatically lead them all to sever the ties to the gang. Twenty-nine percent of young mothers gave little or no indication that they had lessened their involvement or modified their behaviors.[5] One mother, for example, brought her infant son to the interview, wearing shoes and sports gear that she pointed out as being associated with her gang. Drug sales were a continuing activity for this third of the mothers in the sample, who are willing to take a risk to subsidize or supplement their incomes. Many of the mothers who engage in sales rationalize their activity as a critical income-producing option in a competitive market, and a risk that a good mother is willing to take to provide for her children.

[5]Five of these respondents did not live with or take care of any of their children, at the time of the interview.

For those who continued gang involvement, it was not uncommon for them to find themselves with their children in potentially violent situations.

> I don't wanna get jumped [attacked] because of the baby … Like for a month, I had to go to [a rival gang's street]… I was confronted… . I was like "I'm with my baby, what the fuck are you coming up ta me? Come up ta me when I'm by myself. I don't care what you do ta me, but with my baby, no." (Silvia, Latina, 16).

And even for those who choose to leave the gang to take care of their children, this poses a number of challenges. Some were challenged by members of rival gangs who are unaware that they are no longer in the gang. Others describe resentment from their fellow gang members for having left.. However, many do report that leaving the gang for motherhood is an acceptable exit route from gang life, one that does not, for instance, require being "jumped out" [beaten up to leave]. Still, constructing a motherhood identity around a gang identity proves challenging.

Conclusion

This analysis suggests that gang girls who become mothers share much in common with young mothers, more generally, in other locales around the world (McDermott and Graham 2005, Rolfe 2008, Yardley 2008). The initial discovery of pregnancy is often met with disbelief and yields mixed reactions from family and the father. After the initial period, the father's presence and support often remains tenuous with his own struggles with young adulthood (e.g., finances, employment, freedom, and male peer interactions). This can be a source of anxiety as she comes to terms with the realization of her loss of adolescent freedom and of the sacrifices of responsible adulthood. These findings run counter to the popular characterizations of the "teen mother" as the irresponsible dependent and the gang girl as "bad girl." These young women clearly understood and rose to the challenge of moving from girlhood to womanhood.

Similar to other studies (Baker 2009), we also found respectability to be a key dimension in young mothers' attempts to negotiate adult femininity. In our earlier work on gang girls, we argued that respect is highly gendered and that it must be understood beyond the masculine power of the street (Joe-Laidler and Hunt 2001, Schalet *et al*. 2003). For gang girls, adolescent femininity is connected with the pursuit of respect(ability) and enacted through demonstrations of personal autonomy and sexual reputation. Maintaining respect alters for many of these gang-involved girls when they become mothers. Whereas previously respect(ability) was negotiated in their role as gang girl where much time was invested in demonstrating to others one's autonomy and sexual reputation on the street, once pregnant, their gang identity often conflicts with maintaining respect as a good mother. Caring for children while still being a gang member places these young women in a precarious, contradictory position. They also face challenges in reconciling respectability with their visibility as teenagers who are pregnant or young mothers. Whether still heavily involved in the gang, or having left the gang entirely, for most of the young women in this study, the meaning and negotiation of respect(ability) shifts as they move into motherhood. The pursuit of autonomy is no longer tied to wanting to be on the street and out of family controls and conflict but linked to the desire to feel independent (e.g., financially, emotionally) from others including the child's father and her own family members.

We were struck by how their new motherhood responsibilities—and specifically their return to family homelife and the necessity to rely on the support of parents and other relatives—did not allow many of these young women to fully express or experience feelings of adulthood or independence. Whereas prior to becoming mothers, they countered family criticisms and controls by being involved in the gang, once they have children, their older

relatives may question their ability to raise her child or to be good mothers. Other studies have observed young mothers' resistance to what they perceive as "adversarial advice" from family and relatives (Higginson 1998). Because young mothers are newly reliant on family support, they may find themselves even more restricted than previously. Moreover, their ability to negotiate some private space to define their own identity can become more curtailed as they seek to care for their children.

Overall, most respondents attempted to care for their children in difficult circumstances with often insufficient support. For many of the young mothers the task was especially difficult and tiring: "It was like kinda hard because you don't get much sleep, and there always waking up and they're always hungry" (Rocio). Given these difficult circumstances it is not surprising that some of them, although loving and caring for their children, wished motherhood came at a later stage in their lives. "I don't regret my daughter because I love her but I wasn't ready, you know" (Giggles). Nevertheless most young mothers expressed resiliency, and in spite of severe problems with families and boyfriends, few gave the impression of being downtrodden. In fact they articulated a sense of agency and willingness to be a responsible, good mother.

Our study cannot and is not meant to generalize the experience of gang girls and young motherhood, and reflects a small group of young women in a particular locale. Young women in gangs are more likely to have histories of substance abuse, of drug sales, of criminal involvement, and of participation in fights and violence (Miller 2009, Wingood *et al*. 2002). The challenges faced by these young women if they attempt to finish their education or enter the workforce to support their children may be even greater than those faced by non-gang-involved young mothers, due to their criminal records and the stigma of gang membership as well as pressures from fellow gang members. Despite this, we found many similarities in gang girls experiences with young women reported elsewhere who had no affiliation with gangs. In spite of the structural inequalities and the stigma of "teen motherhood," gang and non-gang girls are resilient in navigating from adolescence into adulthood. At the core of this journey is a realization of the new meanings and responsibilities of adult femininity. As others have observed, this is articulated in their discourse as "good mothers," independence, and self-growth; attributes associated with middle class neo-liberalism. Yet as these young mothers try to balance the desires and demands of motherhood and the gang, they are still constrained by the possibilities of the neo-liberal state which although on the surface promise greater freedom for young women, in fact, place further controls on their everyday life.

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Table 1

Personal characteristics of respondents (N=65)

	Latinas N=32	African Americans N= 21	Asian/Pacific Island N= 4	Others N=8
Median Age = 21	19	18	21	19
Age Group				
15 and Under	1	2	0	0
16 through 18	16	9	1	2
19 through 21	10	6	1	5
22 and older	5	4	2	1
Birthplace				
San Francisco	16	17	2	6
Bay Area	1	2	0	0
California	1	1	0	0
United States	1	1	0	2
Mexico	4	0	0	0
Central America	8	0	0	0
Pacific Islands	0	0	2	0
Other	1	0	0	0
Domestic Unit 16				
Both Parents	7	3	2	1
Mother	12	10	0	3
Father	4	0	2	0
Grandparent	2	4	0	2
Various family	4	4	0	1
Foster care	0	0	0	0
Other	3	0	0	1
Highest Grade Level				
Less than grade 6	0	0	0	0
Grade 6 through 8	4	1	0	1
Grade 9 through 11	21	12	4	5
High School Grad	5	8	0	2
Some College	2	0	0	0
Job/Income Source				
Job	14	8	2	4
Welfare	3	0	2	1
Family	2	2	0	1
Hustle	0	1	0	0
Combination	0	2	0	1
Unknown	13	8	0	1