



Homegirls, Hoodrats and Hos: Co-constructing Gang Status through Discourse and Performance

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Abstract

Despite a growing literature regarding female gang membership, little is known about the ways in which gang-affiliated women negotiate the boundaries of gang membership. The current study, based on semi-structured interviews with twenty-four formerly gang-affiliated Chicana women involved with a prominent gang prevention/intervention organization, sought to understand how these women negotiated their interactions and understood their identity within the gang. Findings suggest that these women and the gangs in which they operate recreate broader gender norms that affect their standing and social mobility within the gang.

Keywords

Chicana gangs; homegirls; gender performance; street socialization; identity construction; cholo subculture.

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Introduction

In the past two decades, literature about female membership in gangs has proliferated (Maxson and Whitlock 2002; Miller 2002) due to the apparent increase in violent behavior perpetrated by 'unruly' girls. The rise of feminist criminology has created space for scholars to view crime and criminality from a gendered lens, and gain a more in-depth understanding of girls and women who engage in criminal behavior. This research has shown that girls join, remain involved in, and exit gangs for different reasons than their male counterparts (Esbensen and Deschenes 1998; Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995; Peterson, Miller and Esbensen 2001). In addition, it has addressed how 'doing gender' within the gang context produces gendered behavior that conforms to social expectations, and may simultaneously reshape the very gendered structure that defines, reinforces and promotes these expectations and norms (Campbell 1984, 1987; Hunt, Joe-Laidler and MacKenzie 2005; Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995; Miller 2001, 2002; Schalet, Hunt and Joe-Laidler 2003).

Feminist gang scholars have addressed the various ways in which discourse and gang-related behavior not only reinforce girls' marginalized status within the gang and but are also an expression of agency that may serve to promote their status within the gendered hierarchy of the gang (Campbell 1984, 1987; Miller 2001, 2002; Miller and Brunson 2000; Miller and Glassner 2010; Schalet et al. 2003). However, while these girls may push back against the gendered expectations that constrain them within the larger social environment and within the gang context, they are also responsible for reproducing social norms that privilege and promote emphasized masculinity (Miller 2001, 2002). For example, Jody Miller's (2001) seminal research with gang-affiliated African-American girls in Columbus, Ohio and St Louis, Missouri demonstrated how participants actively engaged in discourse that distanced themselves from and thus marginalized other girls who were perceived as being promiscuous from claiming such membership.

The current study adds to this literature through data collected from 24 in-depth, qualitative interviews with formerly gang-affiliated Chicanas in Los Angeles, which permits a more nuanced understanding of how girls/women perceive and (co)construct their gendered, hierarchal social positions within the gang. Specifically, we explore how gang-affiliated Chicanas residing in a densely-populated gang area negotiate gender roles and core versus peripheral status within the context of the gang.

Feminist gang scholarship

Feminist gang scholars have moved beyond simplistic categories that sexualized the roles of young women who belong to gangs (see Sanchez-Jankowski 1991). We now know that factors such as age, gender and ethnicity play important roles in aiding our understanding of women involved in gangs (Hagedorn and Devitt 1999; Klein 1997). In addition, some attention has also been directed towards the interconnectedness of structural constraints and the role of agency in the identity formation of young, gang-affiliated women, suggesting that they can and do use resources at hand to negotiate and construct a meaningful identity that works within the context of their lives (for example, see Mendoza-Denton 2008; Miller 2001; Moore 1991; Vigil 1988, 2007).

Portillos (1999) suggested that patriarchal norms specific to Mexican culture were often at play with respect to sexual abuse within traditional Mexican families. Gender performance within the barrio,¹ he further suggested, was constructed differently for females and males because females were taught to adhere to certain sexual standards such as *marianismo*.² Their experiences with abuse, he argued, facilitated their construction and performance of a specific type of 'oppositional femininity' in which these young women are more likely to become involved in substance abuse, promiscuous behavior, and spending time in the streets with homeboys.³

In her ethnographic work, Miller (2001) found that girls within the gang are not necessarily doing 'oppositional femininity' (Portillos 1999), 'bad girl femininity' (Messerschmidt 2002), or 'doing difference'. Rather, they are 'doing masculinity' in order to construct a masculine identity for themselves. She cites empirical evidence from her study of (primarily) African-American gang affiliated girls: 'As with the girls' accounts, these young men did not view the girls in their gangs as enacting a "bad girl" femininity, but a masculinity that was incongruent with their sex' (Miller 2002: 444). Miller (2002) and other scholars (see Thorne 1993) refer to gendered behaviors which fail to conform to normative definitions of femininity as 'gender crossing'. The concept of gender crossing is particularly relevant in terms of understanding gendered behaviors as dynamic rather than static and immobile. In fact, Miller (2002: 445) uses the example of young women's 'policing of one another's sexuality within these gangs'. She notes how the policing of sexuality occurs when young women, who identify more with the 'tomboy' label, subsequently 'put-down' other women who exhibit more traditionally feminine behavior.

In their study on the construction of femininity among girls in gangs, Joe-Laidler and Hunt (2001) discuss the fluid nature of femininity and how it changes for and among gang-affiliated women depending upon their 'situational context'. They show how femininity is constructed and constantly renegotiated by female gang members through their interactions with others. On the one hand, these women are expected to maintain traditional gendered expectations such as 'acting like a woman'. Their homeboys expect them to behave in a 'respectable' manner by controlling their sexuality, which is simultaneously policed by the homeboys and homegirls. In addition, these women are responsible for policing other female gang members' sexuality, and look down on girls who are not seen as 'respectable' (Campbell 1990; Miller 2001; Portillos 1999). On the other hand, these women join gangs in part to escape traditional patriarchal norms imposed on them within the home. They look for, and may find, the ability to attain a greater sense of autonomy within the context of the gang. For female gang members, the manner by which they negotiate these paradoxical expectations and beliefs about femininity, or being a 'good' girl, is to maintain 'respectable' behavior, meaning they actively negotiate and even regulate their behavior based upon the social context and among their social interactions.

We agree with those scholars who believe it is necessary to talk to these women on their own terms in order to understand some of the ways in which they construct their identities through gang affiliation and the ways in which their identities are simultaneously constructed for and imposed upon them (Joe-Laidler and Hunt 2001; Kolb and Palys 2012; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Miller 2001, 2002), and set out to do that.

Methods

The sample

Our primary source of data was in-depth interviews with 24 self-identified, formerly gang-affiliated women who were involved with a prominent gang intervention organization located in East Los Angeles. We sought out this specific organization as the desired site for the research because of the large, diverse clientele it serves. Clients are either self-referred or referred through the criminal justice system in order to learn alternatives to the gang lifestyle. As such, we took participants' reports of former gang membership at face-value. We did, however, take steps to address potential inconsistencies in participants' narratives. During the interviews, questions were rephrased, or participants were asked to elaborate on certain statements that seemed inconsistent with other participants' narratives.⁴

Our sample within the organization was a purposive criterion sample: participants had to be female, Chicana, a former gang member, and at least 18 years of age. The first five participants were referred to us by permanent staff at the organization; these participants then referred others to us and the sample snowballed from there. At the request of the organization and

because interview time detracted from the women's abilities to engage in paid work, each participant was compensated for her time with a \$40 Visa gift card.

The final sample of 24 participants included every woman involved in the organization who met the sampling criteria and wished to participate. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 56 years. All participants identified as second- or third-generation Chicanas (Mexican-American), though one young woman was born in Mexico and raised in Los Angeles. Interviews ranged from one to three and a half hours, with an average of two hours.

Ethics

The current study required approval from both the organization and our institution's Institutional Review Board. These approvals were granted in December and March 2013, respectively. Our main research questions had to do with women's gendered and sexualized roles within the gang; how these roles are performed and interpreted by other women on the streets and in the 'hood; and how participants negotiate insider versus outsider status within the context of the gang. Participants were asked to explain how they perceived their environments, major events in their lives, their social interactions, and themselves in relation to these experiences based upon their social positioning at various points in their lives. All interviews were minimally structured in order to facilitate a conversational-type interview process. Consistent with critical race and feminist epistemologies, this process allowed participants to address the issues they felt were most important in shaping their own identities.

All interviews were conducted by the first author, recorded with participant permission, and transcribed verbatim. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and chose pseudonyms in order to anonymize the data. Once the transcriptions were completed, they were uploaded into qualitative analysis software (NVivo), which allowed for systematic yet flexible data organization, coding and analysis processes. Line-by-line coding allows the researcher to examine each sentence and assign descriptive labels (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1978). In a second stage of more analytic coding, categories were clustered together based upon theoretical constructs.

With respect to interview content, we were informed by Becker's (1963) observation that there is a tendency within all social groups to construct and label certain members as outsiders. He suggested that the creation of outsider status, by way of labeling and exclusionary practices, enables those who are responsible for creating and imposing the distinction, discursively and behaviorally, to distance themselves from those perceived as not adhering to the groups' socially agreed upon rules. This in turn implicitly defines and reaffirms normative behavior and expectations within the group. In order to gain a better understanding of what women's gang roles look like and how the women who performed these roles understood themselves in relationship to others within the gang context, we sought information about how women gang members negotiated acceptable versus unacceptable behavior, and core versus peripheral status, within the gang context.

While a qualitative approach was appropriate for this research as our aim was to better understand the experiences of this specific population, there were limitations related to our sample and the method of choice. First, our sample was limited to women who participated in programming within the organization, suggesting that these women might be characteristic of individuals who are motivated to address and share their past. In addition, our sample consisted of former gang-affiliated women. Second, the retrospective interview method may have limitations, as participants may have difficulty accurately recalling historical information (Diaz-Cotto 1996), and may have a tendency to exaggerate or glorify their experiences (Hagedorn 1996).

Findings

Participants demonstrated how they were responsible for imposing and constructing insider and outsider status for themselves and other females, as well as being enforcers of a hierarchal system established by male gang members. Power-imbued status, which was necessarily gendered in nature, was established according to three primary criteria: (1) how a woman gained entrance to the gang; (2) how she 'carried' herself thereafter; and (3) her willingness to engage in delinquent acts, also known as 'putting in work', with true members willing to 'do anything' to prove their loyalty. A primary distinction arose between 'homegirls', who sought full membership status within the gang as 'one of the guys' (Miller 2001, 2002), and 'hoodrats' or 'hos' (or whores), who were useful and, as such, would be tolerated and even welcomed into some activities, but always remained on the periphery of the gang.

Gaining entry

Once a woman decided she wanted to be 'for' her neighborhood (officially becoming a member of the gang), she had to be initiated to gain entry. Initiation into the gang was always a gendered process unless someone was 'born in', or 'walked in' as a result of family history within the gang. More commonly, women gained entry into the gang in one of two ways: being jumped in; or being sexed in. Being jumped in involved receiving a beating for a pre-determined number of seconds from one or, more often, several female gang members, though some women reported they were jumped in by male gang members. Being sexed in involved engaging in sexual acts with one or more male gang members, or being gang raped. Getting jumped into the gang, or as Melissa suggested, 'getting in the right way', was the first step in acquiring the coveted homegirl status.

Homegirls subsequently were expected to maintain their status by not acting like a hoodrat or ho; that is, not engaging in promiscuous sex with the homeboys or homeboys from other gangs (Shalet, Hunt and Joe-Laidler 2003). Participants who took this route reported that they were either involved in monogamous relationships, or identified as lesbians and thus were not interested in sexual relationships with the homeboys. Women who were jumped in looked down upon those who were sexed in because they were seen as degrading themselves sexually in order to become gang members. Homegirls tended to reject these women and their ties to the gang while simultaneously affirming their own status as 'true' gang members.

Though some researchers have suggested that the portrayal of emphasized femininity and display of sexuality is used by women in the gang in order to create an oppositional femininity is appropriate within the gang context (see Portillos 1999), Miller (2001) argued that the participants in her study did not subscribe to any type of femininity but, rather, to masculinity. The data in the current study echo Miller's findings and suggest that females within the gang must work hard to ascend a gendered hierarchy that requires them to gender-cross to show they deserve equal status to their homeboys.

Interviewer: So when you get jumped in, is it something that you're proud of when it happens?

Melissa: Yeah. I was really proud of it.

Interviewer: What makes it such an important moment?

Melissa: In a lot of different neighborhoods, a lot of different girls, they walk in, like where nobody puts hands on you. When you walk in its like, 'oh, you got into the hood, but you didn't get jumped in'. And a lot of people don't respect people that walk-in. Or females who, I guess they say ... getting 'fucked in' ... sexed in, you know? You have sex with one of the guys to get in. They don't respect you, you

know. If you do something like that to them, it's like, 'oh you're just a ho'. You're not even from the hood so ... I said 'no, if I'm gonna get in, I'm gonna get in the right way', so I took my little beating and I ... That's how I got in.

Participants reported that men and women of all statuses within the gang spent a considerable portion of their days and evenings together hanging out in the street or in the park, holding meetings or partying. As this implies, homegirls are often forced to occupy the same space and be in close physical proximity to the women they perceive as being hoodrats if they want to be part of and privy to the goings on of the gang. This lack of distance creates a problem for homegirls to distinguish themselves from hoodrats while still maintaining their relationships with the homeboys.

But whether being jumped in is 'enough' is an interesting question. Some studies report mixed findings as to whether the homeboys consider any of their female counterparts as having equal status to them (even those who perceive themselves as homegirls) (Miller 2001; Moore 1991), a factor that some women suggested was responsible for their having to work harder to prove their loyalty and earn respect. Hoodrats' overt use of sexuality made it even more difficult for aspiring homegirls to distinguish themselves and be accepted as core gang members.

Rejection of emphasized femininity

Disdain for women who used or flaunted their sexuality while claiming gang membership was a common theme throughout the interviews. Participants were explicit about the importance of being 'down' for the gang, something that necessarily entailed 'doing' masculinity or engaging in criminal behavior. Many of the participants rejected women who were perceived as being 'sluts' or 'hos' because, they argued, these women were not showing their loyalty to the gang but rather using their sexuality to take advantage of their membership to party with the homeboys, use drugs and have sex.

While the men labelled women 'sluts' and 'hos' because of their sexual behaviors and treated certain women as 'pieces of meat' or as being useful only in their ability to provide sexual favors, the homegirls followed suit by rejecting these behaviors and labeling these women, thereby distancing themselves to show that they are 'not like them'. Similar to Kolb and Palys (2012) study, participants explained that the way a woman carried herself or used her body was important in terms of garnering respect from homeboys and homegirls alike. As Angela explained:

[I]t all depends on how you carry yourself, too. If you're dressed like a slut and you act slutty, of course they're gonna look at you like a slut. If you're dressed decent, and you always carry yourself in a proper manner, of course they're gonna look at you differently. And if you're dressed like a boy and you act like a boy, then, of course, they're gonna look at you totally different in another way ... I wasn't into too much [into wearing] makeup back then either. I always thought it looked funny.

Women who emphasized femininity through their corporeal expressions (movement through space, use of body and appearance) were looked down upon and seen as being too busy trying to get attention from the homeboys to participate in important gang work. Conversely, women who carried themselves in a less traditionally feminine way or, as many suggested, like tomboys saw themselves as being more masculine and thus true homegirls.

While hoodrats may have lost status because of engaging in promiscuous sex with the homeboys, they did have roles beyond dispensing sexual favors; their peripheral connection also made them ideal for holding the gang's guns and drugs. This made us curious as to whether

it was possible for a hoodrat to be seen as down for her gang because of her willingness to help fellow gang members. Most participants, however, noted that this was not possible because hoodrats' sexual proclivities were seen as too repugnant, thereby bringing disgrace on all the women involved in the gang, and also because hoodrats were quick to snitch if their activities were discovered by police. These two behaviors left hoodrats unworthy of respect by core female gang members. When asked how hoodrats made homegirls look bad, Michelle explained:

Because they're sleeping their way around into it. They might be doing some of the work, too, but they're sleeping around with all the guys. I seen hoodrats who done jobs but lots of times when they do jobs – when let's say the guys get busted or something – they're the first ones to tell.

It is noteworthy Michelle's description of respectable female sexual behavior within the gang mirrors the social standards of society at large for 'doing femininity' appropriately.

While traditional feminine attire was seen as taboo, women's use of makeup such as heavy eyeliner and lip liner has traditionally been associated with a 'chola' style. Some of the participants rejected the use of make-up, but a number of other participants who also considered themselves homegirls reported wearing it. According to Mendoza-Denton (2008), the strategic use of cosmetics among Latina women in gangs has been recognized to be an important identity marker that may actually be used to reject emphasized femininity and traditional notions of Western beauty standards. While most participants reported that they stopped wearing the heavy makeup typically associated with gang-affiliated Chicanas and Latinas because it 'looks stupid', Nicole suggested the opposite; that it was one of the features that turned her on to the gang lifestyle and that it was not necessarily associated with being a hoodrat.

Mendoza-Denton's (2008) study suggests that the girls in her research were homegirls despite their elaborate use of makeup; however, her study was conducted in Northern California among girls who identified as Norteñas.⁵ Do these findings apply to the barrios of Los Angeles? Based on participants' reports, it seems that perceptions of makeup use may vary depending upon the gang. Some participants suggested that, despite their use of makeup, they were doing masculinity by putting in work and dressing like the homeboys, albeit with an added element of femininity.

Desiree, for example, talked about adding a 'feminine twist' to the male gang style and how this was a common practice among gang-affiliated women and had been for decades. She reported that her sister, part of the Pachuco/a era⁶ of the 1940s and 1950s, wore the traditional Pachuco button-up shirts (Pendletons), but that 'she had a nice little spaghetti shirt under'. Despite all of their other efforts, it seemed unclear whether women who exhibited any form of femininity, like wearing makeup or any type of feminine attire, could ever really be one of the guys. However, from the participants' reports, it did seem likely that wearing makeup was deemed acceptable as long as the women carried themselves in a respectable manner and put in work. For example, one participant reported wearing heavy makeup paired with baggy, masculine clothes. She suggested that, despite her use of makeup, she dressed and acted like a homeboy and thus commanded respect. In other words, women might never be considered one of the guys but could earn a solid reputation as a homegirl nonetheless.

This distinction is important because it suggests the existence of a gendered hierarchy whereby males retain power and control within the gang and are responsible for calling the shots or deciding who will complete each task. The more a female can emulate male behavior (corporeally and through putting in work), the closer she comes to the coveted male status. How ironic that, in seeking a more egalitarian involvement, homegirls' rejection of overt femininity

serves largely to reaffirm the importance of gender in the operationalization of power within the gang context (Kolb and Palys 2012).

Putting in work

The second factor after being jumped in that was characteristic of core gang members involved a willingness to put in work for the gang. The importance of putting in work was two-fold. First, it was a way for women to distinguish themselves from other female gang members who did not engage in delinquent acts and thus legitimize themselves as true gang members who were down for the gang. Second, it reaffirmed to homegirls that they were able to ascend the gang's gendered hierarchy and thereby achieve status as 'one of the guys'. While gang-affiliated females were significantly less likely than their male counterparts to engage in serious criminal activities,⁷ putting in work for females often involved fighting with rival gang members, tagging, selling drugs and, less frequently, more extreme acts such as theft, car theft, engaging in drive-by shootings or being present during stabbings or murders.

While young women who engaged in more extreme delinquent acts have often been masculinized and demonized by society for stepping outside the bounds of what constitutes 'appropriate' behavior for females (Chesney-Lind 2006), engaging in these types of criminal endeavors might have worked in these women's favor within the gang context by allowing them to claim more power and higher status within the gang. Many of the women claimed to have engaged in illegal activities on behalf of their homeboys in order to work towards a more respectable status, whereby they could be seen as more down and thus more like one of the guys.

Often their achievements were commemorated in tattoos, visible signs of allegiance to the gang and the woman's status within it. For example, Arlene explained that her tattoos represented different crimes committed against others in order to show respect for her hood, which, in turn, earned her respect from her homeboys:

Arlene: I got my neighborhood [tattoo] over here [pointing to the side of her neck] and on my neck twice. All those I earned from doing some crazy shit. Shit like ... I don't even wanna talk about it. It was pretty much some burnt out shit, like pretty bad. The one on my back – BK – blood killer. You can get that if you pretty much put in work on a black person from a blood gang. I have a GK – I call them queers – but it's 'Gear Gang'. I think they're Crips. I've got a GK, too, for putting in work on them. All of this, I just wanted to get a portrait of where I was raised ... in LA. Here's my hood again [pointing to another tattoo]. I just know that my hood tattoos were earned every time I put in work.

While serious crimes such as murder were typically reserved for male gang members, Arlene reported that she wanted to show she was down for her hood and did not want to be known as someone who 'didn't do shit for the hood'. In order to prove how down she was, Arlene stated she took as many opportunities as she was offered to engage in crimes traditionally reserved for male gang members (for example, 'slashing out' other gang tags in rival gang neighborhoods and participating in drive-by shootings). Having earned the right to have tattoos representing the serious crimes she committed was one way Arlene distinguished herself as a down homegirl and considered herself to have status equal to the homies.

Angel, like Arlene, reported that she was just as respected, if not more so, as the guys in her gang because of her willingness to put in any work asked of her and, in her words, to be 'one of the guys'.

Angel: ... Most of the guys they like to get the girls, if anything, to be trophy pieces for them. I was never one of them. If anything needed to be done they would drive, and I would refuse to drive [during a drive-by shooting]. I'd be putting in work. Shooting. I was a gunner. I loved it at the time. It was like a high for me.

Interviewer: Drive-bys?

Angel: Yea.

Interviewer: What does it mean to be 'one of the guys'?

Angel: Actually I think I had more respect than some of the guys because if something needed to be done ... it would usually get handed over to me. 'Give it to Angel, and she'll take care of it'.

Angel explained how she distanced herself from 'other girls' by saying that she was never a 'trophy piece' for the homeboys. Through her discussion of her specific role within the gang, Angel discursively distanced herself from traditional female roles and, thus, other women. One of the ways in which she proved how down she was and how she was subsequently engaged in 'doing masculinity', was through her role in drive-by shootings. She stated that she was never the driver, but rather was one of the people putting in work. Interestingly, Angel stated that she was the 'gunner'. Use of this term was highly symbolic for two reasons. First, it suggested a military-like mentality. The idea of putting in work and showing her loyalty to protect her fellow gang members conjured the image of a patriotic soldier going to war to defend her country and fellow citizens. Because of the territorial nature of gangs in the United States, gang warfare is often executed in order to reinforce the boundaries of the hood, command respect from other gangs and exert power or retaliate for a wrong-doing. Second, Angel's use of the term suggested her highly gendered role, that of an infantryman, or someone whose role it is to fight the enemy on the front line. Participation in drive-by shootings, according to Angel, meant that she had earned the trust and respect of her male counterparts. In fact, Angel had to work hard by putting in work in order to avoid being seen as 'just a girl'. She reported having to put in more work than her homies in order to reach this status. This suggested that, while it may be possible that some women are seen as being just as down as the guys, the fact that female members saw themselves as having to live up to their male counterparts' status and work harder than their homeboys to do so, reaffirms they are not yet seen as equals (Miller 2001).

Alma, 18, stated that she was considered a homegirl because she worked hard to prove herself to the guys. She suggested that, each time the homeboys presented her with 'work', she took the challenge and was subsequently granted more power or higher status. While she never reached her goal of becoming an Original Gangster (OG) or *Veterana* (an older gang member with 'veteran' status), Alma reported that she was a true homegirl because of her willingness to put in work for the homies and the neighborhood. Indeed, she went so far as to suggest that some women were even more down than the men because they were smarter and able to use their looks to put in work.

Alma: There is some homegirls that are even downer than the homeboys. For real. There's not a lot of girls in hoods, but the ones that are will do anything. Like me, I can say that I'm downer than half of my homeboys ... like, whatever you do, you can do it, just be smart about it. You have more power like that 'cuz people will see you and they won't even think that you could do something like that. That's how homegirls prove ourselves. That's how we prove ourselves. We're girls, we can get what we want easier. They taught us, you gotta know how to use what you got to get what you want.

Interviewer: What do you mean use what you've got?

Alma: Like your beauty. You can use your beauty, like, to get somebody who's your rival. You can use your beauty to attract them and then do them dirty and then that's putting in your work.

The idea of a female using her beauty to prove how down she is would seem inconsistent with other participants' accounts whereby they report actively avoiding any display of their femininity and instead opting to adopt a masculine appearance instead. From other participants' accounts, however, it appears as though the women who are considered by both the homeboys and the homegirls to have the most power and respect are those who are most actively engaged in criminal endeavors and whose behaviors closely resemble those of their homeboys. In other words, females who do masculinity (as opposed to varying degrees of femininity) are more likely to earn respect and power within the gang.

Discussion

Structural constraints and street socialization among second generation gang members

The findings here regarding gendered hierarchies, identity construction through narrative and the role of naming, blaming, and othering among gang-affiliated women largely echo those of Jody Miller (2001) in her study of gender roles among female gang members in St. Louis, Missouri and Columbus, Ohio and those of Shalet, Hunt and Joe-Laidler (2003) in the San Francisco Bay area. Women receive messages about how to be 'respectable' from the larger social environment. These messages are then transmitted to and reproduced on the streets by male and female gang members and imposed within a culturally and socially relevant context. Individuals must learn to adapt to their social environments in order to avoid social exclusion, no matter their social or economic circumstances. The findings in this study regarding gendered and sexualized hierarchies and girls/women policing one another's sexuality within the gang context may echo those of Miller, Shalet and Hunt and Joe-Laidler because, regardless of their racial/ethnic background, girls/women residing in marginalized neighborhoods are subject to engaging in similar social practices in order to avoid rejection within their social milieu.

While Vigil (1988) discusses the process and role of street socialization among Chicano gang members in East Los Angeles, Miller's participants (who were largely African-American) and those who were involved in our research share similar social and structural hardships which socialize them for street life. The girls in Miller's and our studies spend more time on the streets as a result of loosening family ties, and they learn from one another as well as other family members accustomed to the street lifestyle how to 'do gang' (Garot 2010). Women who socialize with male gang members are more deeply entrenched in the gang lifestyle because they look up to male members and emulate their behavior in order to gain status within the gang. This suggests that female members may, in part, learn from their male counterparts to reject other women, especially those who represent emphasized femininity, and create hierarchies based on the males' perceptions of what it means for a female to be down. Vigil (1988) argues that girls may act tough in order to gain attention from male members. He continues by stating that 'the males always remain in command' (Vigil 1988: 102), which suggests that women learn to perform their gender in a way that commands respect from the homeboys, thereby reaffirming the homeboys' power and position at the top of the hierarchy.

Female gang members are impacted by the general presence of patriarchal beliefs prevalent within society at large and, specifically, the ways in which those beliefs are imposed and enacted within socio-economically marginalized areas, and among racially and ethnically marginalized groups. These values, beliefs and practices simultaneously constrain and work to further marginalize young, socio-economically disadvantaged minority women. Those who have traditionally had the ability to exercise power and control that legitimizes their positions of

power (that is, through the creation of specific, gendered legislation and enforcement of policies that protect self-interests) within dominant culture have largely embodied hegemonic masculine ideals. These values have led to practices that eschew anyone who does not embody specific raced, classed, gendered or sexualized characteristics. In other words, these hegemonic practices have worked to marginalize those who are not part of dominant culture. Hegemonic, heteronormative masculine ideals and societal values that reflect raced, classed and gendered interests 'trickle down' and are embraced by everyone, including individuals in gangs.

Through the exercising of power by those who retain it, these practices are institutionalized and mirrored by gangs. They also are, in part, responsible for dictating rules regarding acceptable or respectable behavior. In other words, understanding what is acceptable behavior is a process that people learn first in their homes and school, and through the media. These beliefs and values are embraced by gang members and transmitted to those active within the gang, particularly women, through the process of gang initiation, putting in work, carrying oneself in a respectable manner, and simultaneously labeling and othering one another.

While the girls in Miller's (2001) study and the participants here faced similar structural disadvantages, Miller's study was conducted in cities with a newly emerging gang population whereas the current study was conducted in a city with a long-standing gang presence. Differing cultural experiences might not only differentiate Miller's sample from ours but might also help to explain why and how participants within our sample created gendered and sexualized differences among each other. Similar to the participants in Schalet, Hunt and Joe-Laidler's (2003: 111) study, we also found that participants negotiated 'and, to a certain extent, accommodat[ed] constraining norms of femininity'. However, six of the participants in our study identified as lesbians; they embodied a masculine appearance and carried themselves in that manner. As such, these women actually rejected the idea that they embraced any notions of femininity.

In his review of the literature about second-generation gang members, Bankston III (1998) argues that gangs form as a result of limited social opportunity. That is, second generation gang members are the result of their traditional cultural traits as well as traits of American minorities. Expanding this assertion, one can argue that second-generation status is particularly relevant when considering gang-affiliated females because of their marginalized raced, classed and gendered status. While African-American girls residing in the ghetto do indeed experience multiple marginalization on account of their gender, race and socioeconomic status, Chicanas have the added dimension of socio-cultural positioning (Bankston III 1998). In other words, these women are essentially negotiating expectations of two cultures (Mexican and American), an experience that leads to the development of a new cultural identity (Vigil 1988, 2002). As previously discussed, the participants in this study are negotiating Mexican culture, values and traditions passed down by their families, and American expectations learned from the media and particularly in school, a process that leads to a cholo/a identity and subculture (Vigil 1988).

As a result of this socio-culturally constructed identity, these youth embrace a unique style of dress and even language that originated with second-generation Pachuco in the 1930s and 1940s and has continued to develop into the cholo subculture that is prevalent today in the barrios of East Los Angeles. Cholo subculture has emerged among second-generation youth from the distinct culture created by their Mexican-American predecessors. Joanna spoke about the significance of her homies and homegirls having a unique vocabulary involving words, phrases, and sounds to communicate with one another, thus avoiding rival gang members' and other outsiders' detection of her gang's activities:

Joanna: There's a lot of slang, you know, the slang language that you use and everybody around there they all say the same things, you know. It just becomes like your own little language, your own little slang language. Yeah it's [also]

certain sounds, clocking sound. That's what we used to do to distinguish ... and that's because you know we lived in the hills so we were in the bottom of the hill we used to do the clocking sound to see if anybody was up there.

Interviewer: So it's kind of your gang's own code to get in touch with each other?

Joanna: Yeah, pretty much that. I mean it wasn't like we had walkie talkies or anything ... so that way when we used to go look for somebody in a house that was our house, that was our sign for you to come out like we're outside, you know.

Through historical and ongoing negotiation of two distinct cultures and subsequent cultural values, Chicano/as involved in gangs have developed their own subcultural norms such as communication patterns and dress in order to claim an identity that is culturally relevant to them.

During the interviews a number of the women spoke about the unique dress involved in Chicano/a gang culture. Desiree stated that she often wore men's clothing in order to fit in with her homies, but that she retained a unique Latina style. She stated, 'I was wearing Pendleton shirts. They are all guy attire. I was dressing like a guy, but in a sense they had this female Latina twist. That's what I called it'. Desiree was clear about the importance of creating and claiming her identity as a Latina living in East Los Angeles. In fact, she talked at length about teaching her son the importance of acknowledging his cultural identity when he started to spend time with his African-American friends and adopt their style of dress.

... And I'm like, 'No. I really don't care if you have black friends. I really don't care. Just be yourself; don't try to act like him. You guys might be from different cultures, but you can have as many friends, but just be yourself'. He was having an issue, like 'What do you mean by yourself?' And I'm like 'Yeah, like be yourself! You know you are an American citizen, a Latino descendant. That's who you are'. And I think it's very difficult for kids nowadays to ... like ... really know who they are in school, because they are so prejudged. And you know that's a lot of pressure.

Desiree recognized that people in her community (and, specifically, her children) struggled in an attempt to find and establish their own culturally relevant identity. From this excerpt, she explained how she tried to instill a sense of cultural pride in her son. By telling her son that he is 'an American citizen, a Latino descendent', she acknowledged that her son was the product of two cultures and that both of these cultures were relevant for him in order to have an understanding of his own unique identity.

Interestingly, most of the women in this study were never taught that they were the product of two distinct cultures; this was something they learned from their interactions with their (often traditional Mexican) families, with their homies and homegirls, and within the American public school system. Often, these women were told that they were Latina and thus had an obligation to behave according to traditional Latino/a cultural norms. At school, on other hand, they were taught that they were American first and Latina second. In other words, they were taught to believe in and adhere to traditional American values and norms but were frequently reminded of their raced, classed and gendered status because the information transmitted to them was not necessarily socially or culturally relevant to them.

Vigil (1988) argued that gangs are an outlet for second and third generation Chicano youth to express themselves and act out their frustrations despite the constraints placed on them. Our findings echoed those of Vigil in that most of the participants explained that the gang provided

them with a means of understanding their own identities by allowing them an arena in which they could express themselves corporeally and discursively, through delinquent behavior, and through rejection of others seen as inferior. Among gang-affiliated Chicanas, the role of culture and, specifically, gendered expectations within both Mexican and American cultures is imperative to our understanding of the unique differences between Chicanas in the Los Angeles area and other racial minority women involved in gangs. The cultural dissonance that Chicanas experience may result in these women simultaneously accepting practices that shun other women for overt femininity and sexuality, and reward masculine behavior such as toughness and self-sufficiency. Despite the fact that all of the women within the gang experience marginalization based on their race, gender and socioeconomic positions, they also demonstrate how they organize themselves hierarchically through rejection of other homegirls gendered and sexualized behaviors in order to make a name for themselves and 'be somebody'.

Conclusion

Similar to Jody Miller's (2001) findings, the women in this study were adamant that they were equal to their male counterparts, yet they described distinct qualitative differences between the gendered expectations and experiences of males and females. While they argued that women had equal opportunities to ascend the hierarchy within the gang and attain the same status as men, they described having to work harder than the men to earn their status. The participants stated that they spent most of their time with male gang members and were even their confidantes when the men talked about the various women with whom they were sexually involved. Despite this, the women's accounts were riddled with contradictions. They argued that they were equal to the men, yet they compared themselves to the men stating that: (1) despite their hard work, they would never be equal to men; or (2) they were 'more down' than men because they put in more work, something which suggests that they may not have been considered equal to their male counterparts.

As in Miller's (2001) study, the participants here 'described systematic gender inequality ... which they themselves often upheld through their own attitudes about other girls' (Miller and Glassner 2010: 138). They discussed the ways in which they simultaneously negotiated being equal to the men and recognized that neither they nor other females were entirely equal. They did this by establishing power for themselves by putting in work, establishing discursive control over one another's gendered and sexualized status, and by creating a name for themselves, in part through rejection of other young women. The participants in this study suggested that gendered discrimination did not exist as long as they avoided engaging in behaviors seen as traditionally 'feminine'; specifically, using their bodies to gain attention from the homeboys and showing they were down by putting in work.

While they constructed themselves as being 'one of the guys', female gang members were simultaneously responsible for constructing other young women as 'others'. The women in this study suggested that in order to attain homegirl status they had to distance themselves from the outsider status of hoodrat. According to Miller (2001, 2002), the policing of sexuality and enforcement of sexual codes within the gang are not intended to encourage the maintenance of a specific type of femininity, but rather:

To *minimize* gender difference by limiting the extent to which boys could apply derogatory sexual labels to the girls in the gang. Thus the girls' policing of one another's sexuality – and the vilification of girls they deemed to be 'hos' and 'sluts' – allowed them to distance themselves from a denigrated sexual identity and maintain an identity as a 'true' member (Miller 2002: 446; emphasis in original).

The young women within Miller's study and ours blamed other females within the gang for their own victimization and mistreatment because of their emphasized femininity (Miller 2001; Miller and Glassner 2011: 139). It is likely then, as Miller (2001, 2002) suggested, that these women were not simply constructing an oppositional femininity, nor were they 'doing difference', but rather they were doing masculinity through their policing of sexuality and willingness to put in work as requested by the homeboys.

Despite the fact that Miller's (2001) sample consisted largely of young African-American women in newly emerging gang cities, and the current study was based on Chicanas in a city with a well-established gang presence, there were many comparable social and structural factors which might account for the similarities in the findings of both studies. Both studies consisted of young women who faced social, political, economic and cultural constraints and were subsequently marginalized by society as a result of their race, class and gender. This was apparent based on the communities in which they lived and the experiences they faced. Living a life of poverty as a result of being relegated to the ghetto or barrio bred a castaway mentality in which these young women were aware of their status as 'other' within society.

It is likely, then, that in order to make sense of their own marginalized positions, these young women subscribe to larger societal beliefs about gender and sexuality and engage in the very behavior that has been used to distance larger society from them. Miller and Glassner (2011: 140) argue that gendered hierarchies are not unique to gangs but reflect the 'broader social environment in which gender inequalities were entrenched'. By discursively constructing themselves as masculine and others as engaging in overtly feminine behavior, these young women demonstrated how they distanced themselves from behavior deemed socially unacceptable by society at large.

While these women were certainly constrained by larger social, political and economic structures within their environment, there is no doubt that they also work, in part, as agents who actively negotiated their social milieus and were responsible for constructing their own identities as well as perpetuating gendered beliefs through the creation of labels and subsequent shunning of other females for certain behaviors. In addition, these women demonstrated how they employed discursive practices to construct 'other' status for females in the gang, a practice which is representative of agency and, specifically, a constrained form of agency. One of the women, Destiny, stated that 'fear means respect' and 'power is respect'. These women demonstrated how they earned and continued to command respect from males and females within the gang. If gang structure is, as has been suggested here, a reflection of the larger social environment, females do, to some extent, actively make decisions that set them apart from one another. Through their choices regarding their gang initiation, their willingness to put in work, and their corporeal expressions, these homegirls were able to negotiate their roles and simultaneously use discursive practices to distance themselves from one another.

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¹ 'Barrio' is the Spanish for neighborhood. In the United States it is often used to refer to poor, predominantly Latino neighborhoods.

² The term *marianismo* describes the qualities of 'traditional' femininity which are reciprocal of those of machismo in men (Campbell 1987). These qualities revolve around passivity, virginity, and meeting the needs of one's husband and family.

³ Male gang members.

- ⁴ While gang researchers have acknowledged the tendency of gang members to exaggerate their experiences (see Campbell 1984; Moore and Hagedorn 2001), exaggeration was not a concern for the purpose of this research. Rather, we were interested in participants having the freedom to express themselves in a way that was meaning-making for them at that particular point in their lives. Being able to make meaning of their personal experiences, or the experiences of others, which they had witnessed or heard about was important for their self-presentation and, subsequently, understanding of themselves and their lives. Whether they recounted events exactly as they had occurred, or whether they shared stories pieced together from fragments of their own experiences and the experiences of others, the stories the women shared were clearly socially and contextually relevant for them.
- ⁵ Latino/a gang members who reside in Northern California. The division line between Northern and Southern gangs is generally accepted as Bakersfield, California.
- ⁶ The Pachuco era was defined by Chicano/as who created their own unique identity by sporting zoot suits and were thus seen as rejecting mainstream American norms.
- ⁷ This is consistent with other qualitative and quantitative accounts of female gang members. For example, see Miller (2001).

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