

Conundrums of Desire: Sexual Discourses of Mexican-Origin Mothers

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Abstract Given the social construction of Latina sexuality as a social problem associated with high fertility and over-sexualization in popular media, Mexican-origin mothers use protective discourses to educate their daughters about their sexuality. Based on in-depth interviews with 34 Mexican-origin women (seventeen mother-daughter dyads), this study explores how mothers communicate with their daughters about not only sexual relations and virginity directly, but also the relevant topics of menstruation, tampon use, and masturbation. I find that mothers' tend to employ one of two types of sexual discourse: disembodied and objectified or embodied and subjective. In the disembodied and objectified view, mothers urge their daughters to remain virgins until marriage—even avoiding tampon use in order to do so—and expect their daughters to have no interest in sexual pleasure prior to sexual initiation by a man. In the embodied and subjective view, mothers emphasize that sex should be an expression of love and connectedness, ideally in marriage, but they have more flexible views regarding menstruation and masturbation. These findings suggest that Mexican-origin women's ideas about sexuality are dynamic and complex, while also broadening our understanding of how and through what topics mothers and daughters talk about sex.

Keywords Latina sexualities · Sexual subjectivities · Mothering · Menstruation · Virginity · Masturbation

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Introduction

My mother told me “cuida tu jarrita porque si se rompe ya no va detener agua [take care of your pitcher because if it breaks it will no longer hold water].” That’s all she ever said about sex. So I try to talk to my daughter more openly and tell her to wait until marriage because women need an emotional bond for sex, we’re not like men.

—Connie, 2nd-generation, Mexican-origin mother

I am not ok with premarital sex. My parents didn’t condone it and neither do I. First of all, they [my daughters] can get pregnant and I don’t believe in birth control. Second, it doesn’t look right and people talk about the family.

—Violeta, Mexican immigrant mother

Violeta and Connie, both Mexican-origin mothers, hold similar viewpoints about premarital sex; both would like their daughters to abstain from sex until marriage, yet the two mothers employ distinct rhetoric and rationales. This article examines not only how Mexican-origin mothers prefer their daughters to act (in terms of sex) before marriage but also how they rationalize these preferences and the broader rhetoric they employ concerning their daughters’ sexualities. Far from simply voicing their own personal views, these mothers’ sexual discourses show how they negotiate multiple, often conflicting societal messages about female sexuality as they attempt to protect their daughters from gendered sexual inequalities and double standards. Mothers express fear that their unmarried daughters could become pregnant, contract a sexually transmitted infection, and/or face social stigma if they engage in premarital sex. At the same time, their conversations with their daughters are shaped by more than just these fears and their desire to have their daughters delay sex until marriage; their discourses also reveal particular understandings of women’s bodies and sexual desires in general.

I approach sexual discourse broadly—considering a wide range of topics that are discussed between mothers and daughters, spanning from bodily practices to premarital sex. Closely looking at how mothers talk about the body and sex reveals that some discourses promote sexual subjectivities while others do not. I bring several literatures into conversation with one another—studies examining the sexual socialization of daughters via the parental-child relationship, the development of sexual subjectivities, and Mexican and Latina sexualities,¹—in order to answer the following questions: (1) How do mothers convey knowledge about the sexual body?; (2) How do they discuss menstruation, tampon use, and premarital sex with their daughters?; (3) What rhetoric do they employ when probed to discuss desire and masturbation?; and (4) How do mothers’ discourses reflect their understanding of their daughters’ sexual subjectivities? I draw on interviews with seventeen mothers of Mexican origin and their adult daughters to answer these questions.

¹ I use literature about Latinas and about Mexican-specific sexualities to contextualize my research. Lorena Garcia (2012) has noted that similar processes affect the construction of Mexican and Puerto Rican adolescent girls’ sexual identities.

To understand how sexuality is constituted within the mother-daughter relational context, I study the discourses mothers employ to educate their daughters about their bodies and sex.² By examining not only how mothers broach the topic of sex directly, but also how messages about sex and sexuality are conveyed through topics such as tampon use and masturbation, this research expands understandings of how sexual socialization happens. Moreover, by linking mothers' discussions of bodily practices to those of premarital sex, I expand the scholarly discussion about the development of sexual subjectivities among Mexican-origin women.

Literature Review

Daughters' Sexual Socialization and the Development of Subjectivities

American girls come of age in a context fraught with sexual inequalities—a culture that objectifies women while simultaneously imposing sexual double standards (Martin 1996; Tolman 2002). It is in the face of these realities that mothers make parenting decisions about how to educate their daughters (McKee and Karasz 2006).³ Many mothers' overall goals are to be protective—to prepare their daughters to make safe decisions in order to avoid unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Ayala 2006; Gonzalez-Lopez 2003; Schalet 2010a, b). As a nation, we are overwhelmingly committed to abstinence-only sex education.⁴ Not surprisingly much of the public debate about young women's sexuality focuses on avoiding pregnancy and maintaining virginity,⁵ and sociologists have studied these topics thoroughly (Fields 2008; Fields and Tolman 2006; Fine 1988; Garcia 2009a, b).

Sociologists have made critical advances in our understandings of the social construction of virginity. Laura Carpenter (2002) identifies several ways in which virginity gets constructed, one of which pertains predominantly to women: virginity as gift. In this first construction, women come to see their virginity as a gift they give to a significant other, which implies losing something. In the second construction, virginity as process, losing one's virginity is seen as a necessary stage and normative step in one's sexual life span. These ideas are found in society writ large but many times, transmitted through the parental relationship. Because these parental messages are socially constructed, it is important to situate their messages in the particular contexts in which they are communicated.

² The discourses presented are based on self-reported disclosures of mothers and daughters as they recall them. This project was not longitudinal.

³ Importantly, it is almost always *daughters* who are targeted for such education, as the sexuality of sons/men is far less likely to be problematized. This disproportional focus has been rightly critiqued by writer Jessica Valenti (2009).

⁴ See Luker (2007) for a discussion of competing visions of sex education in the United States.

⁵ I acknowledge my respondents keep with widely held heteronormative assumptions by defining virginity in purely heterosexual terms. The mothers in my study remained silent on the topic of sexual orientation.

In a comparative study, Amy Schalet (2010a, b) studies how both Dutch and American mothers and fathers approach their adolescent daughters' sexualities. She finds that parents treat teenage sexuality quite differently across these contexts. While American parents expect their children to avoid sex and do not allow sleepovers in their homes, Dutch parents talk about their daughters' readiness for sex and condone the teenage sleepover. Schalet's work highlights not only the importance of national cultural approaches toward adolescent girl's sexuality but also, the importance of the parental-child relational context in shaping sexual subjectivities. Sexual subjectivity is an "awareness of one's feelings, to enjoy sexual desire and pleasure, to conceive of oneself as the subject of one's sexual acts, and to experience a certain amount of control in sexual relationships" (Schalet 2010a, b, p. 305). The Dutch daughters develop this sense of agency over their sexualities and bodies. Ideas about the body and sexuality are fundamental to the development of these sexual subjectivities.

The mother-daughter relationship⁶ is the foci of much research about young women's sexualities because parents play such an important role in transmitting messages about sexuality—in the most general sense and in the most concrete sense via messages about the body (Martin 1996). Martin finds that some parents successfully transmit "subjective body knowledge" that gives girls a sense of agency over their bodies—the exact opposite of learning that their bodies are objects. Conversely, in their study of college women, Waskul et al. (2007) find that many young women lack full body awareness, as revealed when they are asked to discuss their clitorises. The authors describe a process of "discursive erasure" through which young women are not given the language to discuss their clitoris and thus feel alienated from it; Waskul et al. coin the term "symbolic clitoridectomy" to describe this (Waskul et al. 2007, p. 152). The process of symbolic clitoridectomy reflects a lack of discursive embodiment or the absence of experience speaking of "the sensual and subjective body" (Waskul et al. 2007, p. 152).

The studies above reveal how critical language is for establishing knowledge about bodies and for the development of women's sexual subjectivities. Rather than just focusing on sexual behavior and attitudes, an analytical focus on the discourse about bodies, and desires brings sexual subjectivity within the frame of analysis—a perspective too often absent in discussions of young women's sexualities (Fine 2003; Tolman 2002, Garcia 2009a, b).

Most studies cited above are about the sexual socialization of white, middle class girls. Different processes are at work with Black and Latina girls, who have to deal with racialized stereotypes of high fertility rates and oversexualization (Garcia 2012; Tolman 2002). Likewise, Black and Latina mothers must grapple with these issues as they prepare their daughters and employ protective sexual discourse. To understand how the process of inculcating sexual knowledge from mothers to daughters plays out within a population often publicly scrutinized for perceptions of its sexual behavior (stereotyped as simultaneously hypersexual and sexually conservative and religious) (Molina-Guzmán 2010), I study the discourses used by

⁶ The mother-daughter relationship is most often the focus of sexual socialization studies. Few studies focus on the father-daughter relationship (see Gonzalez-Lopez 2004 for one of the few exceptions).

Mexican-origin mothers to discuss a range of issues with their daughters, from the body and its regulation and acceptable desires to actual sex with partners.

Mexican and Latina Sexualities

There is a substantial body of literature about Latina teenage sexual behavior, contraceptive use, and child-bearing (Foulkes et al. 2005; Romo et al. 2008, 2010). Abundant research tests whether the lack of sexual communication between parents and children correlates with risky sexual behaviors among Mexican-origin young women (Killoren et al. 2011; Raffaelli and Green 2003; Upchurch et al. 2001), and explores the nature and content of mother-daughter sexual communication (Foulkes et al. 2005; Romo et al. 2010). Research about Latina mothers' conversations about sex with their daughters have already taught us quite a bit about how parents talk about premarital sex (see Asencio 2002; Ayala 2006; Garcia 2009a, b; Gonzalez-Lopez 2003; Hurtado 2003; McKee and Karasz 2006; Villenas and Moreno 2001). For example, Gonzalez-Lopez (2003) notes that upon migration some Mexican immigrant parents shift their ideals about sexuality from a "cult of virginity" to a sexual moderation ideal, in which they emphasize the importance of safe sex rather than simply avoiding sex altogether.

But the various ways in which Mexican-origin mothers conceive of their daughters' sexuality remains an understudied phenomenon, especially in relation to understandings of female bodies, desire, and pleasure. Latinos construct their sexualities within what Asencio (2002) calls the "sex-gender systems," which are shaped by dynamics such as ethnic-cultural heritage and socioeconomic status, to name a few. Lorena Garcia (2012) notes that adolescent Latinas negotiate their sexual identities within the contexts of daughterhood, patriarchy, heterosexism, racism, and socioeconomic marginality. Her research reveals how sexually active adolescent Latinas develop a sense of sexual subjectivity through the "politics of respectability"—a strategy employed by Latino girls to portray their "community's sexual values as similar to white middle and upper class culture or to claim superiority over the dominant society" (Garcia 2012, p. 6). This is a rhetorical strategy that girls use when explaining how they manage their sexual lives. Garcia's (2012) and Zavella's research (2003) show that the discourse women employ reveal quite a bit about sexual understandings; it is important to examine sexual discourse.

I push Garcia's analysis further by examining precursors to the development of subjectivities—the language mothers use to discuss bodily practices. Are mothers' discourses about the body and sex subjectified or objectified? Do discourses express a view of women as sexual objects or subjects? I trace this within their discussions of tampons, virginity, and masturbation. This research approach is unique because little research on Latino sexualities has placed self-pleasure and desire at the forefront and even less work includes discussions of tampon-use and masturbation. Discourses about menstruation (see Jackson and Falmagne 2013) and masturbation remain understudied areas in general, let alone in connection with sexual subjectivities and mother-daughter communication, especially among Latinas.

Data and Methods

This research draws on in-depth interviews with seventeen Mexican-origin mothers and their daughters to examine the rhetoric they employ when asked to discuss and to remember previously discussing menstruation, virginity, and masturbation. I was originally interested in studying Mexican origin mother-daughter dyads of different immigrant generations because I wanted to grasp the diversity of ideas about sex. Therefore, I recruited daughters between the ages of 18–24 who were born in the United States but whose mothers or grandmothers are Mexican immigrants. I recruited daughters from a community college because these sites serve young women in various stages of their academic careers; community colleges also have the highest concentration of Latinos in the postsecondary educational pipeline.⁷ Community colleges serve students who have just graduated from high school, those who have returned to school after leaving for a while, and those who intend to transfer to four-year institutions. I posted flyers on campus bulletins and made announcements in Sociology and History classes. During announcements, I explained that all interviews would be conducted separately and would encompass sex-related topics. The community college where I recruited respondents is located in a well-established Mexican–American community in Southern California.

Sample

Over half of my sample came from the community college and the other half came from snowball sampling through the community college students' personal contacts. The only women who were eligible to participate in the study were daughters who met my age and generational criteria and also communicated that their mothers were willing to participate. During the recruitment process there were several daughters who wanted to participate but whose mothers refused. I confirmed consent in written form for all mothers and daughters. I interviewed a total of thirty-four women.

Nine mothers were 1st generation (immigrant) and eight mothers were 1.5 (migrated before the age of 12)⁸ or 2nd generation. Nine interviews with immigrant women were conducted in Spanish; the remaining interviews were conducted in English. Seven of the nine immigrant women migrated over eighteen years ago. The other two immigrant women migrated seven and eleven years ago. Mothers varied in educational attainment and marital status. Three out of the seventeen women in my study have less than a high school education; these three women are all immigrant mothers (see Table 1). Five out of the seventeen women in my study had a Bachelor's degree: three of them were 1st-generation mothers and two them were

⁷ More than 30 % of Latinos with a high school GPA higher than 3.5 go to a community college at some point in their academic career. This number doesn't account for those with lower GPAs who are more likely to enroll in community college (see Carnvale and Strohl 2013).

⁸ One and one-half (1.5) generation refers to any person who was emigrated from their country of birth to another country, before the age of 12 or during the onset of puberty. This generation comes of age in the receiving country, and their adaptation process is different from someone who migrates later in life (Rumbaut and Ima 1988). Immigration scholars analyze their experiences alongside the second generation.

Table 1 Demographic profile of mothers

Generation	Marital status		Educational attainment			
	Married	Divorced	Less than H.S.	H.S.	B.A.	Professional
Immigrant 1st n = 9	5	4	3	0	3	3
U.S.-raised 1.5 and 2nd n = 8	4	4	0	6	2	0

1.5/2nd-generation mothers. The three Mexican immigrant mothers were professionals with nursing or teaching degrees. Additionally, eight of the mothers in this sample were divorced at the time of our interview (four immigrant and four 1.5/2nd generation). All the women in my study identify as heterosexual.

Compliance with Ethical Standards and Interviews

This study followed all ethical procedures to ensure confidentiality and protection of participants and was approved by the Human Subjects Board (IRB) of the University of California Irvine. After obtaining written consent, I proceeded with in-depth semi-structured interviews. Because the goal of this research was to understand *how* mothers of Mexican descent employ sexual discourse, I asked women open-ended questions about a variety of topics, including menstruation, virginity, masturbation, sexual satisfaction, orgasm, sexual communication with partners and non-coital activity. The average interview lasted about 40 min, the length was dependent on each respondent's comfort with speaking about sex-related topics. Women who spoke with ease about sexuality had significantly longer interviews.

Mothers and daughters were interviewed separately at different times and places. Most interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes. All the women were very welcoming and eager to contribute to my research for two reasons. First, many expressed interest in the topic of this research, namely how Mexican-origin mothers and daughters communicate about sex. Second, I believe my insider status, as a Spanish-speaking, Mexican-origin woman facilitated the research process (Vo 2000). The mothers often asked questions about my relationship status and my educational trajectory. Mothers commended me on my educational attainment and said they were happy to help a fellow Latina on her "way up." Regardless of how shy women were when discussing sexuality, they were very welcoming. Mothers used familial words in their interactions with me; many of them called me "*mija*"⁹ and offered me meals.

Analysis

I obtained consent to audio-record all interviews. I then transcribed all interviews. I coded each interview transcript line-by-line, taking an open-coding approach. In this

⁹ Although, the term *mija* means daughter in Spanish, it is often used as a term of endearment outside family boundaries in Latino communities.

initial coding phase, I looked for emerging concepts and codes (Huberman and Miles 1994;). After open coding, I used the emerging concepts and codes to conduct “second cycle coding,” line-by-line coding for these concepts (Miles et al. 2014). This cycle revealed the themes expressed by my participants about sexual disembodiment and embodiment. Throughout I conducted a dyadic analysis looking for patterns between mothers’ and daughters’ interviews. When I coded the dyad interviews side-by-side, I found that daughters understood their mother’s perspectives on sex and the body. However, the most compelling patterns that emerged from the data were the two different sexual discourses.

Due to the nature of sexuality research, there may be a selectivity bias. This study does not claim to encompass the views of women who refused to participate because they were too shy and private; nor does it claim to represent the sexual rhetoric employed by all Mexican- origin women. Instead, the object of analysis is to examine themes in discourses around tampon use, virginity, and masturbation in the narratives I collected.

Findings

This research was designed for dyadic analysis but the most compelling findings emerged from mothers’ rhetorical strategies themselves as two distinct themes dominated their sexual discourse: the disembodied/objectified (DO) perspective and the embodied/subjective (ES) perspective. In the first discourse type, disembodied/objectified, daughters’ sexualities are contingent on relations with men and are initiated through men’s desires. There is little to no discussion or encouragement of daughters’ embodied existence as desiring sexual subjects. In the second discourse type, daughters’ sexual bodies and desires are recognized, though they are still encouraged to preserve themselves for the context of love and marriage. These discourses also corresponded with ideas about tampon use, which I discuss below.

Sexual Disembodiment (DO)

I asked all of the women in my study to reflect on how they came to know their bodies, the language to talk about their anatomy, and their experiences with menarche (first menstruation). I asked the following questions: Did your parents teach you about menstruation? What did they say? What did you teach your daughter about menstruation? Do you use sanitary napkins? Tampons? (If you use one over the other why?) Have you imparted your preferences to your daughter? Immigrant mothers overwhelmingly answered that there was a silence concerning their bodies at home while they were growing up, especially their first menstrual period. For example, Marina shares,

My parents never talked to me about my body and my period came without me being prepared. I told my older sister and she told me it was normal but my mother never mentioned it, ever.

This was a common story among mothers. The silence created a sense of confusion about their own bodies and even a sense of alienation. These mothers wanted to ensure their daughters did not feel the same way, so they reported explicitly discussing menstruation with their daughters. Marina explains her strategy with her daughter:

This is why I talked to my daughter about her menstruation. I told her she was going to become a *señorita*¹⁰ and that would mean she would bleed once a month.

The U.S.-born daughters of these women confirmed that their mothers explained menstruation to them and there was no silence on that matter at home. However, as these mothers guided their daughters through the rite of passage of menstruation and into womanhood, they continued to be skeptical about tampon use. Pamela explained:

I know it's a myth that you lose your virginity with tampons but I rather my daughters not use them until they are *señoritas*.¹¹

Both Marina and Pamela invoked the gendered construct—*señorita*—in their discussions about their daughters. A *señorita* was first used by Marina to indicate becoming a young woman, who is menstruating and fertile. It was then used by Pamela to indicate a grown woman who is sexually active. In Pamela's discourse about tampons we see a literal interpretation of virginity; she explains that she prefers for her daughters' anatomy to remain untouched and perhaps undiscovered—something I unpack further in the section about masturbation.

Aide had similar thoughts and discussed some push-back concerning tampons with her daughter. She said:

I use pads. I've always found tampons to be uncomfortable. I told my daughters that I would like them to wait until after they are married and have had sex to use tampons. They can use whatever they want after that. However, one of my daughters is rebel and she uses whatever she pleases.

Aide was displeased with her daughters' decision to disobey her preferences. Pamela and Aide express similar sentiments about tampon use, however only Pamela reports explicitly communicating to her daughter that tampon use will affect her virginity, despite her acknowledgement during our interview that it is a myth. Elizabeth elaborated on her thinking regarding tampons:

I use pads because I've never used tampons. I don't think we had them in Mexico. In Mexico we saw tampons as affecting your virginity and we associated it with negative health consequences. We were ignorant. Now that I've been here I've read and learned more but I still prefer pads maybe it's because it's what my mom taught me. I'm resistant even though I know it's not true.

¹⁰ *Señorita* is a gendered construct that is used to describe a young woman, someone who is unmarried and fertile. However, it is sometimes used by some of my respondents to indicate a non-virgin.

¹¹ See above.

These mothers continue to prefer pads and would rather their daughter not insert anything in their vaginas. This reflects the disembodied approach toward their daughters' sexualities. Daughters are expected to manage their menstruation but not penetrate their bodies with an object—the tampon—thus leaving part of their bodies untouched and left part mystery, an object, not totally understood by them. The discourse of tampon use was also connected to discussions of virginity, which mothers expected their daughters to maintain.

Virginity

I asked all women the following questions about premarital sex. How was premarital sex viewed by your parents? What have you taught you daughter in terms of premarital sex? How do you feel about your daughter engaging in premarital sex? Disembodied and objectified rhetoric about virginity is used to protect daughters from sexual double standards, social stigma, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases. The mothers' who used this rhetorical strategy reflected on their direct and indirect experiences with gendered sexual inequalities. For example, Marina described learning about the appropriate way to date while growing up. She said:

In Mexico, the boys would come to our house and talk by the window. My dad let us talk there but we couldn't hold hands. I never would even imagine hugging boys in front of my family. I know there were some girls having sex, but that was taboo. It looked really bad and those people looked really bad.

She described the boundaries drawn around girls' sexuality and the social stigma that sexually active girls faced in her hometown. Aide recalled learning similar lessons about premarital sex in her hometown in Mexico; she shared:

In my town, sexual relations were intended for after marriage. People always told me that I had a treasure and if I gave it away, I would be worthless afterward. And, it's true the guys always wanted a virgin to marry; if you had sex with them, they would leave you.

Other women described real penalties women faced for engaging in sexual activity. For example, Carmela shared her sister's experiences with sex and her parents' accusations:

My parents thought my sister had sex before she got married and she had to leave our house; she didn't want to. She didn't love him. She was so scared of my parents. She had a rough life with her husband all because my dad made her marry him. My dad thought 'if she's already intimate with him then she needs to marry him.' It was shameful for my dad, so she was forced.

Aide, Carmela, and Marina's quotes demonstrate the intense community-level taboo around premarital sex, especially for young women. Given their experiences with gendered sexual double standards, mothers use rhetorical strategies to protect their daughters. Alma had to overtly protect her daughter from her husband when she ran away from home briefly. Upset that she could not attend a school dance,

Alma's daughter ran away. Alma and her husband found her the same day—she was at a shopping mall with a group of friends, including some boys. Alma recounted her husbands' words when they found her:

...he said, "You see your daughter? Go check her underwear because if she's been whoring around I will not longer support her."

Alma's story reveals the real need mothers feel to protect their daughters from fathers' distrust and social stigma. This narrative also demonstrates her husband's control over both his daughter and wife. He expects her to take moral responsibility over her daughter's behavior. Several mothers used an emphasis on virginity to communicate to their daughters about sexual danger and protection. Aide explained:

Sex has many consequences, well there are a lot of diseases and besides that, guys want it and when they get it they lose interest. So, they can't sleep with one and another one. It's preferable that they get married. If not then, they better not.

Of course, entangled in Aide's discourse are implicit messages about men's sexuality too, accounting for gendered sexual inequalities and promoting virginity for protection, both physical and social. But most importantly, the mothers' strategy of virginity preservation had disembodied undertones. Carmela, who migrated forty years ago, said the following about her daughters engaging in premarital sex:

Well it doesn't look right. I would like my daughters to be with their husbands the right way. And it looks bad, people start to talk "oh look at her" and then men do not respect her the same. They talk about her.

Marina also emphasizes loss of respect with loss of virginity:

If she [her daughter] has sexual relations with this guy, afterward another guy will not take her seriously.

Carmela and Marina conveyed to their daughters that they would lose social respect if they engaged in premarital sex. These mothers also implied that sexually active daughters risked squandering a specifically gendered (albeit negative) form of power over men, essentially losing their *capital femenino* (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005). This power hinges, however, on a disembodied form sexuality in which desire is not an essential part of a women's sexual experience. Marina and Aide emphasize the importance of avoiding sex to their daughters in order to protect their reputations and help them survive gender inequality. These excerpts show that mothers employing the disembodied/objectified discourse promote their daughter's virginity as a strategy to avoid male reproach and judgment. These messages carry no discussion of pleasure or desire and reflect a disembodied and objectified view of sexuality. Because these messages lack subjectivity, it is not surprising that when probed about masturbation most of these mothers were completely perplexed.

Masturbation

Some mothers were completely confused by my questions about masturbation. I asked the following questions: Did you receive any messages about female masturbation growing up from your mother? What are your opinions about this? Have you discussed female masturbation with your daughters? How do you feel about your daughter engaging in masturbation? Laura said, “I didn’t even know it existed. I only heard of young boys masturbating.” Mothers who employed the disembodied/objectified view of premarital sex used similar discourses about masturbation; they preferred their daughters to abstain from the practice altogether. Their discourse prohibited premarital sex and masturbation and reflected a view that their daughters were not sexual beings until initiated by a man. Aide explained:

I think that once you have sex, that’s when your sexual necessity is awakened. You do not need satisfaction prior to that. I have talked to my daughters about that and told them that they should not do that.

Aide contends that women should have no sexual interest prior to having sex with men, specifically their husbands. This suggests that women have something—an object—that ignites their sexual needs and that only a man should start this process. Thus, if daughters avoid sexual contact with men they should have no need for masturbation. Violeta opposes masturbation for similar reasons, especially since she was unfamiliar with the act. She said:

I do not agree with this [masturbation]. I have never tried to do it. I have never talked to my daughters about this. I would feel really bad if they masturbated because I have never done it. As of now I do not agree with it. Sexual satisfaction should be experienced with a man.

Unlike Aide’s discourse on masturbation, Violeta’s quote suggests that solitary sexuality might exist for women, but she does not condone sexual pleasure without men. Other mothers equated masturbation with a sexual aberration or a mental disorder. Alma, for example, stated:

I think that masturbation is bad. It is not good psychologically. It’s not good for women. I think that it can create an addiction and your mind starts to be distorted and you start thinking about other things. Some people become promiscuous. It starts to become excess instead of it being something healthy.

Several women mentioned that they had never really heard of women masturbating and no one ever spoke about it. This should be no surprise given the silence around female bodies and menstruation as many women grow up. The silence around masturbation and solitary sexuality reflects the disembodied and objectified discourse concerning female sexuality in general. Mothers’ using the disembodied/objectified discourse do not educate or empower their daughters to explore their desires, nor do they give them the rhetorical space to discuss them.

Sexual Embodiment (ES)

Like mothers employing the disembodied/objectified perspective, the mothers employing the embodied/subjective perspective described a general sexual silence about sex at home. However many of them did describe learning about menstruation from their immigrant mothers. Both Connie and Nancy recalled their mothers teaching them how to use menstrual pads. Nancy shared her mothers' lessons:

She taught me how to use pads. Back then they didn't have the adhesives. You had to use a belt, she taught me how to clip it and take it off.

Connie also remembered her mother buying her first "kotex belt" and showing her how to clip the pad. Many of the U.S.-raised mothers remembered being taught how to manage their menarche and approached their own daughters with elaborate lessons about their bodies. For example, Gina said, "I taught my daughters with videos about their menstruation. I told them to tell their teacher to call me when it happens. I gave them tampons." Indeed, Gina went to her local library to find resources to educate her daughters about menstruation. She also taught them how to use tampons, which she also uses. Mothers employing the ES perspective were more open to the idea of their daughters using tampons than their counterparts who used the DO discourse. They discussed practical reasons for tampon use; as Lucy put it, "They like to swim, so they use tampons." Vicky mentioned similar reasons:

At first when they told me they wanted to use tampons, I said, "Oh no," because I don't like them. But they told me that it was more practical for them when they are doing sports.

These mothers' discourse on menstruation and tampon use demonstrate openness and flexibility. Unlike the previous group of mothers, those employing ES discourse did not express concern about the intrusive nature of tampons. They discussed the practical reasons for using tampons and generally left the choice up to their daughters. Both Nancy and Susana explained their daughters' preferences for pads over tampons. Susana said, "She uses pads. She doesn't like tampons. She used them once when she went to the beach and she didn't like them." Similarly, Nancy described the differences between her two daughters:

I remember talking to the oldest about tampons and her reaction was "I am not putting that thing in me." But for the youngest it's much more common now for girls her age to use tampons. I offered her a choice, we have the supply, she can grab either kind.

In their discourse about tampons, these mothers claim to give their daughters a choice and, in doing so, they impart their daughters with a sense of agency over their bodies. Empowering their daughters to take control over their bodies reflects an embodied approach toward sexuality that promotes sexual subjectivity. These mothers' embodied and subjective perspective was carried through their discussions of premarital sex.

Virginity

Mothers employing the embodied/subjective perspective also promoted and expected their daughters to remain virgins until marriage. They also had protective reasons for this preference such as avoiding sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies; however, their rhetorical strategies differed from the mostly immigrant mothers who employed a disembodied/objectified discourse. The ES-discourse mothers did not foreclose the idea that their daughters might experience sexual desire prior to engaging in sexual intercourse. To understand how these mothers came to understand and view premarital sex, I asked them to reflect on their own upbringing. Connie chuckled as she shared her mothers' message about sex:

She said "*cuidate tu jarrita porque si se quebra ya no va detener agua.*" [take care of your pitcher because if it breaks it will no longer hold water].

Similarly, Susie explained her parents' point of view:

My parents did not approve of premarital sex! My mother would say that it was such terrible things about having sex before marriage and my dad never talked about it.

Both Connie and Susie disagreed with the teachings they received about sex. Connie laughed at the metaphor her mother employed and Susie found her mother's messages to be "terrible." They both described being taught to fear the dangers of sex. They did not wish to impart the same messages to their daughters. Nancy similarly disagreed with her mothers' teachings:

My mom didn't approve of it [premarital sex]! I don't know if she suspected that I was active or not. She wouldn't talk about it openly. My mom would sometimes make comments but not directly to me. She saw me kissing a boy once and that started a whole conversation about it. It was in my room and she was not happy about it. I do remember her telling me that a few minutes of feeling very good could be really costly for the rest of my life. I wish she had been able to tell me more because at the time that didn't make sense to me.

Nancy recalled her mother monitoring her behavior and disciplining her for kissing a boy, but she also described feeling confused about the reasons. Remembering this lack of clear communication has informed her efforts to educate her own daughters about sex. Connie, Susie, and Nancy's own experiences with parental sexual education ranged from disapproval, fear-instilling strategies, and silence. These experiences were not that different from those of the mothers employing the DO perspective, though the mothers using the ES perspective did not recount stories with sexual double standards and male reproach. For example, the mothers who used the embodied/subjective perspective relayed no tales of friends or relatives left homeless because they got pregnant or lost their virginity. In short, they did not describe any *social penalties* for engaging in sexual activity.

Like the mothers using the DO approach, the mothers employing the ES perspective also wanted their daughters to abstain until marriage, but their reasoning was different. Instead of social penalties, they emphasized instead the need for love

as a prerequisite for sexual intercourse and said that only marriage could guarantee the true dedication of their daughters' partners. These mothers advocated virginity for "love reasons," explicitly tying sex to an idealized rhetoric of love. As Susana put it:

It's better to wait until you are sure someone really cares for you. I told her [the daughter] that you have to be in love. And she has friends that have had premarital sex and it hasn't worked out for them. You can only be sure when you're married.

Similarly, Vicky told her daughters to wait until they are married for sex, adding her ideas about love:

I have told my daughters that when you really love somebody and feel that love for that person, you give yourself that way. I think you should be in love with that person and not just to have sex.

Lucy shared similar sentiments:

I have taught them to wait and I wouldn't like to have premarital sex but ultimately that's their decision. But I've taught them that sex is about love and that if they go just based on attraction that will fade. Sex fades and love is what sticks around. It was really important to me that I marry in a white dress.

Such discourse ties sex to love, but even as these mothers emphasize their preference for sex within a loving marriage, they also note that, ultimately, it is their daughters who will decide what to do. Mothers employing the ES perspective emphasized their daughters' choices in their discussion about sex. Gina said:

I want them to wait because they could pregnant and possibly get something like a disease or infections. But I don't want to be one of those mothers that acts like an investigator. All I can do is hope they preserve themselves.

Gina understands that she has communicated her preferences to her daughters and hopes they will make the right decision. She is not interested in violating their privacy.

Other mothers emphasized they would like their daughters to make this choice in the context of emotional readiness. Nancy said the following about her eighteen-year-old daughter:

I don't think she is emotionally ready because I think there is a lot for her to lose besides the obvious, her virginity or whatever, and I don't ever want her to feel uncomfortable about herself.

Andrea shared a similar viewpoint:

I want her to wait until marriage but I'm not going to hold her to it, as long as she is in a caring and solid relationship. I want her to be safe against STDs, not get pregnant, but I also want her to feel right when she has sex.

Mothers using the ES approach convey to their daughters their preference for abstinence to their daughters. Like the mothers using the DO approach, they worry

about sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies. But the embodied/subjective discourse not only leaves room for the existence of female sexual desire, it also expresses concerns regarding the quality of daughters' sexual experiences. Mothers talk of wanting their daughters to "feel right" and be emotionally ready and safe to explore sexual sensations. These mothers still urge their daughters to wait until marriage to engage in sexual intercourse—but this is framed as a strategy to protect their feelings and emotions, not to shame or punish them in any way. Some mothers even explicitly reject the notion of policing their daughters' virginity, like Gina who wishes "not to be an investigator" or Andrea "who will not hold her daughter to it." By acknowledging the subjective dimensions of their daughters' sexuality, these mothers allow greater room for their daughters to develop a sense of sexual agency and empowerment. This cultivation of agency was also reflected in mothers' discussion of masturbation, which I turn to next.

Masturbation

Although mothers using the embodied/subjective perspective also disapprove of premarital sex, they see masturbation as a healthy alternative. Unlike the mothers using the DO perspective, the ES mothers were not puzzled by my masturbation question. They were all aware that women could masturbate and saw it as a natural act. Teresa described the evolution of her ideas toward masturbation:

Growing up, masturbation was a "no- no." It was kinda like voodoo or something. Don't touch yourself down there, you have to be careful. So, masturbation was not talked about with anyone until we were all grown and had our own kids. But I think there is more talk about this now with all the new gadgets that are out there, and the pleasure parties. I don't see anything wrong with my daughter doing this.

Teresa has reevaluated her views on masturbation and she notes a perceived change in society and has chosen to evolve with the times. She also finds it permissible for her daughter to engage in masturbation, as did other respondents. Vicky explained her views on the subject:

If that makes them happy, why not? They are not hurting anybody. I think it is fine as long as you are not playing with yourself in front of anyone. If they did it, I would think it's natural.

Gina expressed a similar idea, saying "If my daughters engaged in masturbation, I think it's fine; like I said, it's a normal thing." In short, Gina, Vicky and Teresa communicated a level openness with me about masturbation that was drastically different from that of their counterparts employing the disembodied/objectified perspective. For the mothers using the embodied/subjective discourse, they were much more likely to express an understanding and acceptance of their daughters as innately sexual beings. Andrea explained:

Nicole was masturbating from the age of 4. She did it constantly as a child. When we talked about puberty, I mentioned sexual feelings. She was like ten-years-old. I knew she was still masturbating so we talked about it then too.

Andrea emphasized that she taught her daughter about privacy and where it was appropriate to engage in this activity. Connie similarly explained how she talked to her daughter about sexual feelings:

I told my daughter that her body reacts but she can stop it because we're human. But it might interesting to talk to her about masturbation. I used to use my dad's vibrating massage tool and look at dirty magazines.

Many ES mothers laughed as they related their first experiences masturbating or learning about it. Nancy shared:

I remember having a counselor when I was about 17 or 18 who talked to me a little bit about it. I was kind of surprised but I really haven't thought about very much. I think she brought it up because I was active with my boyfriend at the time. I remember her talking about the tub and water in the tub and I thought "Oh that's kind of an interesting thought." If my daughters engaged in masturbation, I would probably not feel bad. I think that my oldest is probably more adventurous in that area than I was even at her age. I say that because I found some undies one day in her drawer that I thought "I would never wear this!" They were quite provocative, that leads me to think that she is more adventurous.

When probed many ES respondents even expressed that they saw masturbation as an alternative to sex. Unlike the disembodied/objectified view of women's sexuality, mothers using the ES perspective did not question whether their daughters were sexual prior to contact with a partner. Far from being something that lies dormant within daughters but must be awoken by a man, these mothers see sexuality as something innately part of their daughters' being—something, moreover, that daughters can explore on their own. This discourse considers female sexual desire to be natural and provides daughters with the rhetorical space to explore their bodies for pleasure, much like the Dutch parents in Schalet's research.

Daughters' Reflections on Mothers' Discourse

Although I collected dyad data, I have focused on the rhetoric employed by mothers in this paper. In my interviews with daughters I asked them to reflect on both their mothers' views and their own. The way college-aged daughters described their mothers' views when asked what their mothers' have communicated about topics such as menstruation, virginity, and masturbation matched the discourse mothers employed during our interviews. For example, recall mother Aide said that she was against tampon use and believed her daughters should wait until she engaged in sex with their future husband to use them. Aide employed the disembodied/objective

framework. Her daughter Alma said the following about her mother's perspective on tampon use:

My mom wanted me to use pads because supposedly you lose your virginity with tampons, she feels very strongly about that! Since I'm the youngest, I get to see what happens. My older sister was using them and my mom didn't like it. But I don't think she knows I'm using them too. I don't think you lose your virginity from it.

Alma clearly knows her mothers' opinion about tampons but exerts her agency while choosing to use them anyway. Alma communicated a similar process while discussing premarital sex:

She [her mother] says to wait until I get married. She said that if you do it before getting married you are pretty much a slut and a whore. I do not agree with people sleeping around just because of a moment. But I think if you have one boyfriend and you love him it's ok.

Alma understands her immigrant mother's views—namely, a disembodied/objective view that both assumes and asserts that her daughters should have no sexual interest until initiated by a man. When it comes to formulating her own view, however, Alma employs the embodied/subjective framework employed that emphasizes the importance of love.

I found no differences in the discourse employed among the daughters about premarital sex, regardless of the discourses their mothers used. Additionally, about half of the daughters in my sample still hold virginity until marriage as an ideal, despite their own sexual activities. These young women mention love and intimacy as a prerequisite for loss of virginity. Grace, a 2nd-generation, 22-year-old daughter said this about casual sex:

I think it says a lot about a person. I mean, I have friends that slept around with anybody that wanted sex and that just says a lot how much they value themselves. That is just something special you just don't go give it up to anybody and I mean that a lot girls just think like guys and say "Oh, I'm just going to get whatever I want from them."

Grace's mother Gina has communicated her preference that she "preserve" herself emphasizing the importance of love for sex. Grace says that she understands this and also continues to associate love with sexual intercourse. In Grace's quote above we see that she understands that sexual desire is innately part of being a woman but that women must exert control and wait for love. The discourse Grace employs reflects a sense of agency to have sex before marriage *if* she is *in love*. However, her discourse is still restrictive as she judges her peers who choose to "sleep around with anybody that wants sex." She also questions her peers' ability "to get whatever they want" from men. Her discourse reflects a sense of agency over her body but also frames that agency as largely exerted through her own self-control; it's a limited sense of agency. Her discourse is embodied but reflects a sense that women are objects that men want and women must ensure that they are not taken. Her views, in other words, reflect her effort to negotiate her own views on sex in a

confusing time, with multiple competing messages coming from parents, peers, partners and society at large.

About half of my daughter respondents did not believe virginity until marriage should be expected. These young women advocated women's entitlement to sexual pleasure through sexual relations with male partners. Once again, there was no clear correlation between this view and having a mother who used either ES or DO discourse; the mothers of these daughters employed both the ES and DO perspectives. These daughters did not deem love as a necessary prerequisite for loss of virginity. Samantha's mother Teresa communicated the embodied/subjective discourse on sexuality and urged her daughter to wait for love and marriage. However, Samantha felt differently about sex:

I think if casual sex works for the person it is fantastic but if it is not for you, it's not for you! I don't think it is a bad thing.

Samantha and other daughters who did not deem virginity until marriage as ideal expressed a more radical feminist perspective toward sex that posits female sexual liberation as a process of "reclaiming control over female sexuality by demanding the right to practice whatever gives them pleasure and satisfaction" (Tong 1998). In their interviews daughters demonstrated a clear understanding of their mother's stances on various sexual issues, yet they did not always agree with them. In fact, many daughters expressed conflicting perspectives on the rhetoric employed by mothers. Like Grace, who still believes in waiting for love to have sex, even daughters who did not believe in this view seem confused. Daughters seem to be negotiating their mother's discourse and attempting to construct new discourse to explain their behaviors. The following quote from Irma, Lucy's daughter, demonstrates this negotiation process. Irma talked about having sex with a new partner after having lost her virginity with another:

It's like if you have chocolate you won't stop having chocolate just because it's not the right price or something like that. It's human nature. It's something I always debate with myself. Because I believe that when you have a lot of love and affection with somebody.... You can really relate, sometimes it just happens. Like my last relationship, we really got close and it was just a week.... And I kept thinking to myself, "Oh I'm such a slut," but we made such a good connection. Actually that's why we broke up, because I related what my mom was teaching me to something he said which I took the wrong way. I felt guilty, but it felt right. But I kept hearing my mom, "He's not gonna respect you, *esto no es de señoritas*." It was just in my head.

Irma, like all of the daughter respondents, is clearly in the process of constituting her own sexual discourse—a dynamic, sometimes uncertain blend of competing views and messages. This process of developing one's own discourse is a complicated one; the mothers not only speak in different voices, but those voices are very much in their daughters' heads.

Conclusion

The Mexican-origin women I interviewed employed two primary discourses toward sexuality. By connecting how these mothers discuss tampon use, premarital sex, and masturbation, I show how mothers understand the nature of their daughters' sexualities and help construct their sexual subjectivities. Although not generalizable to the Mexican-origin population at large, the discourse my respondents employed demonstrates the benefit of looking beyond just mothers' stances on premarital sex when trying to understand Latina mother-daughter sexual socialization and communication. These narratives show that mothers' sexual discourse conveys distinct ideas about the body. Mothers employing the disembodied/objective perspective prohibited tampon use and masturbation, and (however inadvertently) obscured their daughters' understanding of their own bodies. This perspective allotted little to no rhetorical space to women's sexual desire or pleasure. In contrast, mothers employing the embodied/subjective perspective asked daughters to abstain from sex until within the loving and secure context of marriage, so as to ensure their own positive experience. Of course, as Garcia (2012) and Carpenter (2002) have pointed out, love operates in such discourse as a social construct that still limits daughters' freedom to pursue sexual desires. But when compared to the disembodied/objective discourse employed by the other group of mothers, this view does give women's desire a place of consideration. According to this idea, women's desire is natural and not dependent on a man for its existence, but it should still be handled with restraint. From this perspective, tampon use and masturbation are acceptable, but sex intercourse is still idealized in the context of marriage. Notably, none of the mothers explicitly discussed masturbation as a positive alternative with her daughters, though some were open to the idea of doing so once probed to discuss the topic. Future studies might examine if there are shifting ideas about women and masturbation, perhaps considering whether there are life course or cohort differences.

Mother-daughter communication has been studied quite a bit by sexuality scholars because it plays an important role in how daughters understand their sexualities. Moreover, we know language matters; recall Waskul et al. (2007) finding that limited language shapes how young women understood their clitorises. As my findings reveal, it is clear that daughters understand their mothers' views on tampon use, virginity, and masturbation, even when they may disagree or struggle with those views. The interviews with daughters demonstrate how their perspectives are both similar and divert from mothers' perspectives. Moreover, through daughter's interviews we see how the ES and DO discourses present different values and obstacles for young Latinas. A larger survey-based study is needed to systematically investigate the relation between the specific discourse used by mothers and its effect on daughters' sexual subjectivities.

Factors such as mothers' experiences with their own mothers, immigrant versus U.S.-raised, and mothers' own sexual experiences, shaped which discourse they employed. Although the embodied/subjective discourse was employed primarily by U.S.-raised Mexican-origin mothers, while the disembodied/objective discourse was

employed mainly by immigrant Mexican-origin mothers, a larger, controlled study would be needed to examine precisely how immigrant generation shapes these perspectives. Importantly, however, since explaining this difference was not the goal of the paper, I note these patterns here only to highlight directions for future research. Ultimately, the paper's main contribution is its demonstration that the discourse between Mexican-origin mothers and daughters about sex is far from narrow or univocal. What we do know is that mothers talk about sex and sexuality with their daughters in a variety of ways, and their daughters seem to be listening. Now in their early adult years, daughters are negotiating through their mothers' messages as they try to give their desires and pleasure a place in their lives. These daughters' sexual discourses reveal dilemmas of desire. Future research might study how these different discourses shape behavior.

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