Moral panic about sexual promiscuity: Heterogeneous scales in the identification of one middle-school Latina girl☆

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on data from ten years of ethnographic research in a New Latino Diaspora town, this article analyzes how heterogeneous resources become relevant to the social identification of one Latina middle school girl as sexually promiscuous. We describe how the focal girl, her parents, teachers, family members, and peers mobilize resources from several different scales as they position her. Following Latour (2005) and drawing on linguistic anthropological accounts of heterogeneous resources across scales (Agha, 2007; Wortham, 2012), we describe the networks and trajectories across which one identity is produced.

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Marshall Middle School (MMS) Latino Community Liaison: "Many Latina girls date much older boys, which leads them to negative behaviors and holds them back from academic success." (Interview, 06/12/12)

MMS 8th Grade Latina Girl: "Everybody thinks that Latina girls are sluts. But that is not the truth; I'm still a virgin!" (Personal communication, 07/15/14)

MMS Administrator: "Mexican girls assimilate too quickly, which causes them to initiate sexual activity at earlier ages". (Fieldnote, 12/19/11)

Characterizations of Latina girls circulate through Marshall Middle School (MMS) in Marshall, a "New Latino Diaspora" (NLD) town that has only recently become home to Mexican immigrants (Gouveia, Carranza, & Cogua, 2005; Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2002; Zúñiga & Hernández-León, 2005). In this town and beyond, Latina girls are often perceived as promiscuous and likely to make poor choices about sexual relations, drop out of school, become teenage mothers, or girlfriends of gang members (COSSMHO, 1999; Denner & Guzman, 2006). Most Latina girls do not in fact behave in these ways, and characterizations shift depending on the context (Denner & Guzman, 2006; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002; Wortham, Mortimer, & Allard, 2009). At MMS, however, staff and students often employ these stereotypes of Latina identities (see De Costa and Dong & Blommaert, this issue, for other implications of scaling processes on people's identity positioning). Such characterizations of Latina girls as sexually promiscuous can strongly influence their identity development, educational outcomes, and future successes. In this article we tell the story of one Latina girl and develop an account of how and why

Latinas are being socially identified in this way, describing the heterogeneous resources that help constitute her social identification as sexually promiscuous.

Marshall is a suburban town of about 35,000 in the Northeastern U.S. that has only recently become home to large numbers of Latinos, the majority of them Mexican. Over the past two decades, the percentage of residents of Mexican origin in Marshall grew from less than 3% to almost 30%. This rapid growth has drastically changed student demographics in Marshall schools. In 20 years, the Latino population in the school district has increased from 2% to 28% (Wortham et al., 2009). Such rapid demographic changes have been seen across other parts of the NLD, and this has led to situations in which educators struggle to serve language learners and to understand unfamiliar students (Hamann et al., 2002). At MMS, staff have struggled to understand and support Latina adolescents in particular. Educators often claim that some Latina MMS students confront unique emotional challenges, have lots of conflict within their peer groups, date older boys, have sex, become pregnant at earlier ages than other girls, and are victims of sexual abuse more frequently. To address these concerns, MMS administrators asked Clonan-Roy to create a group for Latina girls to support them in dealing with these challenges in productive ways.

Drawing on ten years of ethnographic research in Marshall and three years of girls groups at MMS, in this article we describe how Latina girls are socially identified in MMS and analyze how people bring together resources from multiple scales in order to accomplish this social identification. The social and natural worlds provide heterogeneous resources that contribute both to events of social identification and to life trajectories. Any individual can claim or be assigned membership in various groups, which emerge at different spatial and temporal scales, and resources for social identification are often combined in novel ways to yield unexpected identities. To account for the trajectories of identification that any individual actually travels, analysts must determine which configurations of resources become relevant in any focal case. Of the many resources that might be relevant to identifying an individual, event or setting, only some end up playing a role for a given individual (Wortham & Rhodes, 2013). We illustrate this contingent process by describing how one Latina girl was positioned and positioned herself during her middle school years. We describe family interactions, educational practices, local community characteristics and national discourses that played an important role in her social identification. The focal girl, together with her family, peers, teachers, and other actors, mobilized contingent, heterogeneous resources from various scales and established a trajectory of identification across which this girl became identified as sexually promiscuous.

Resources, scales, networks and trajectories

In this article we ask: What resources, drawn from which spatial and temporal scales, contribute to the social identification of one Latina girl at MMS? How do we know what resources are relevant in this case? We answer these questions by drawing on Latourian (2005) network theory, cross-event theories of language and social relations (Agha, 2007; Agha & Wortham, 2005; Wortham, 2006), and theories of scales (Blommaert, 2007, 2010; Blommaert, Westinen, & Leppänen, 2014; Goebel, 2009; Hult, 2010; Lemke, 2000; Lempert, 2012).

"Resources" are anything that can become relevant to a focal process—in our case the social identification of an individual across months and years in one school. Resources can be diverse semiotic artifacts, such as widely circulating stereotypes, more local knowledge, laws, customs, taste preferences, languages, etc. We will present concrete examples in the case study below. Not all potential resources are relevant to any given process of social identification, nor can the relevant resources be known a priori (Lempert, 2012). Analysts must determine which of many possible relevant resources in fact play central roles in the focal process (Wortham, 2012; Wortham & Rhodes, 2013).

We understand "scale," following Blommaert (2007), as a vertical, hierarchical, power-laden ordering of social space-time. Scale is both temporal and spatial. Following Blommaert et al.'s (2014) more recent work on scale, we also recognize that it is semiotic—scale is "semiotized space and time" (p. 5). In a school, for instance, many processes take place across an academic year and within a classroom: Students develop identities as diligent or resistant, teachers present curriculum, and students learn themes from that curriculum, etc. This is a relatively restricted spatial scale and an intermediate temporal scale. As Lemke (2000) argues, processes in the human world inevitably draw on resources from across scales. Learning curricular themes across an academic year, for example, also depends on longer timescale processes through which curriculum is developed, including enduring power relations in the construction and legitimation of knowledge. And it depends on more local norms about how teaching should proceed in a particular school, academic department, or special program. Almost no significant human process draws only on one or two timescales. We have argued elsewhere that social scientists must move beyond "macro-micro analyses," which focus only on allegedly homogeneous "macro" social processes together with "micro" events (Wortham 2006, 2012; Wortham & Rhodes, 2012). The resources relevant to human processes are contingent and heterogeneous. The resources that do the work of constituting a given process come from different configurations of scales for different processes, and often for different instances of those processes. Instead of assuming that we can understand any instance of a given process—like the social identification of Latina adolescents in New Latino Diaspora towns—by citing the same set of resources, we must explore for each case the contingent, heterogeneous set of resources that are actually involved.

From a linguistic anthropological point of view, speech events are crucial to processes of social identification. A speech event involves a sender communicating a message to a receiver, on some topic, through some channel (like speech, but also including nonverbal semiotic resources), in some code (like English), in some spatiotemporal location (Hymes, 1962). Resources from other spatiotemporal scales always enable and constrain a speech event. Participants and analysts cannot understand or react coherently to acts within a speech event without presupposing models of or habits developed across