American girlhood: sexuality, sociality, and first generation parents

This talk is based on interviews with teenage girls attending a Los Angeles high school torn by racial conflict in the spring of 2005. Girls from first or second generation families told me about the pressures they receive from their immigrant parents to date and eventually marry a boy of their own race and nationality. Whether Filipina, Armenian, or Mexican, girls said their parents (or mothers in the case of single parented households) worried about the multiracial context of their school because it meant that girls were exposed to boys of other races. Girls overwhelmingly said that they personally had no ‘problem’ with integrated romance, and some said they would marry whom they wanted despite racial difference (at the same time normalizing a life course of proper womanhood and heterosexual households). Most girls surprisingly at the same time said that they would ‘choose’ a boy of their own race and nationality because only that type of boy would truly understand them. Thus, even while complaining about parents’ old fashioned and immigrant ‘racist’ ways, the girls took on parental expectations within the cloak of progressive integration (‘we should be free to date whomever we want, no matter their race’). The stories that girls tell about their family migration experiences indicate the ways that they develop their own national and racial-ethnic identities in the US. These identities are both results of understandings of filialness and of girls’ attempts to distinguish themselves as different kinds of Armenians/Filipinas/Mexicans than their non-American parents. I consider what these examples mean for the question of racial integration in multiracial educational contexts in the urban US.

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