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Toy Stories:
Mothers and the Meanings of Toys

by
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Introduction

The role of the modern mother is changing dramatically from that of the traditional mother of the past, as mothers spend more and more time outside the home (Pugh 2005; Seiter 1993). Often, these women are part of the workforce, but even stay-at-home moms are becoming busier with rights and responsibilities that bring them into the public sphere. Busy, contemporary mothers must balance child-rearing with all of their additional responsibilities. Toys can be used to provide insight into this demanding role of the mother. In the past, toys have often been studied as instrumental in developing the child as a social actor, and therefore as a potential tool for reproducing larger problems of society (Sutton-Smith 1986; Thorne 1993; Best 1998). Toys serve as a fascinating connection between private life and public life, and since toys are generally marketed toward and purchased by mothers, they can be used as a means to examine modern motherhood (Hochschild 1989; Thompson 1996; Risman 1998; Pugh 2005). Often, researchers have studied this connection of toys and motherhood through looking at toy advertising and the toy industry itself (Pugh 2005; Williams 2006). These studies use toys as a way of examining the complex role of the modern mother, drawing conclusions about her obligations, commitments, and motivations by looking at how toys function as a parenting tool. However, current claims about mothering based on toy advertisements may be inaccurate, or at least incomplete, as these studies draw conclusions about what mothers do and how they think without actually talking to them. Toys themselves do not carry an innate meaning, and sociologists must look beyond the presentation of toys in advertisements to find how they are understood by *people*, and how these people shape or subvert the intended function and meaning of these objects. In my study, I expand past work on toys and motherhood to see how important theories and

representations of toys apply directly to real people. I interviewed eleven mothers with at least one young child to find out if and how past scholars' findings apply to their daily lives. I asked broad, open-ended questions about their children and toys to examine how mothers understand and experience toys in their everyday lives.

I found that moms understand toys in two seemingly conflicting ways. First, mothers understand toys and play in very social ways, and view toys as learning opportunities for their children that they can take an active part in. But at the same time, moms value toys that require only a small investment of time and energy on their part, and that are “open-ended,” allowing them to be as involved in or absent from their child’s play as they want. First, moms understand toys as social through the kinds of play they describe, where this play occurs, how they decide to buy toys, and the role they take in mediating the toys their children have access to. This social understanding leads mothers to value creative and open-ended toys because they view these as the toys their kids have the most fun playing with. Their social understanding of toys also makes them dislike what they call “educational” toys, or toys they think of as both encouraging development and being boring. Second, mothers don’t like spending a lot of time teaching and learning new rules, or assembling and figuring out new toys. Ultimately, mothers seem to have a dual understanding of toys, and value “creative” toys they don’t have to be too involved in and the child can figure out for himself. Additionally, I found mothers across class lines valued “fun” as the most important aspect of a toy, and despite the polarized gender binary of the toy world, mothers expressed a flexible understanding of gender appropriate toys.

I will begin by providing a brief background on past literature and findings relevant to my topic, and show how this literature has directed my study. Then, I will present my research design to explain how I collected my data. Finally, I will present my findings and conclude by showing how mothers have a dual understanding of toys.

Literature Review

In general, past sociologists have studied toys as a means of both developing a child into a social actor and reproducing larger sociological problems, such as gender inequality (Ball 1967; Sutton-Smith 1986; Fine 1987). In recent times, sociologists have started looking at toys in new ways and applying their findings beyond simply the children who play with toys and into other areas society. In this section, I will discuss some key bodies of work dealing with mothers and/or toys, and introduce some of the wide-ranging perspectives that influenced my study.

Toys for Solitary Play

Brian Sutton-Smith's pivotal work, *Toys as Culture* (1986), offers an extensive historical account of toys and play over the centuries. He argues that in modern times toys are given for a child's solitary play, while in the past toys were more social and the nature of play was with other children rather than with the toy itself. While some toys sold today, such as balls and board games, encourage group play, most toys indeed seem to be marketed as providing entertainment for a single child. Sutton-Smith argues that toys serve as an introduction to the isolation of the modern, adult working-world, where a

productive citizen is required to go about and successfully complete solitary tasks (1986:37-43). This notion that a child plays alone with a toy suggests a somewhat unregulated use of the toy. As the sole actor, the child is in control of how the toy is used and takes an active role in attributing meaning to it. However, parents, especially mothers, are key actors in getting the toy into the child's hands. This makes the relationship more complex than simply the child and the toy. In addition to bringing the toy into the home, the mother is in a position to witness, influence, and take part in the child's play with that toy.

Toys for Learning: "Concerted Cultivation"

Annette Lareau coined the phrase "concerted cultivation" to describe a process she saw among middle-class mothers, where moms attempt to "develop" their children into success by encouraging experiences that foster skills, such as giving them piano lessons, tutors, or playing organized sports (2003). With toys, this idea is often understood as buying "educational" toys that will aid in areas of development. For infants and toddlers, physical skills such as gross motor skills and hand-eye coordination are often emphasized, while for preschoolers and older, traditional academic skills are stressed (Pugh 2005). Similar to Sutton-Smith's idea that toys serve as a model for kids to become productive members of society, concerted cultivation makes it *easier* for kids to turn into productive members of society because they have advantages starting at an early age. Lareau shows for middle-class mothers, the main function of toys is to foster educational development and aid in the gaining of other important life skills. Studies of advertisements support these findings by concluding that printed ads and TV commercials make repeated and particular claims about the toys they are promoting,

always stressing educational value over fun (Seiter 1993). In contrast to middle-class families, working-class families buy toys less frequently and do not understand them as a means for education, but instead simply as play things (Lareau 2003).

Ellen Seiter finds middle-class parents buy toys based on not only their educational value, but also on the ideology and aesthetic value they attribute to those toys (1993). Seiter argues middle-class parents steer children away from cheaply made plastic toys and redirect their attention to the “better to like toys,” which are often made from natural, high quality materials (p. 213). In addition to being aesthetically pleasing, these toys are often viewed as educational, with an emphasis on promoting skills and knowledge. Seiter understands this push toward “better to like toys” as parents’ ability and willingness to spend more money on toys. Many middle-class parents use toys as status symbols to reflect their values, such as the importance of education, and also their sophisticated taste, such as the preference for more expensive items. Often, these middle-class parents express this status by shopping at specialty retail toy stores, which often sell the exact same merchandise as larger chain stores, only at higher prices and in an environment focused more on customer service (Williams 2006).

Toys and Mothers’ Time

Several researchers have illustrated a relationship between a mother’s available time and the kinds of toys she buys for her children (Seiter 1993; Hochschild 1997; Williams 2006). Ellen Seiter finds that as mothers spend more time in the workforce and less in the household, they spend more money on commercial goods in

general, and spend more money on toys (1993). This overall trend suggests that as working takes up more of a mother's time, she turns to commercial products to make household tasks quicker and easier to complete because she has less time available to spend in the home. When applied to toys, this may mean mothers turn to toys as a quick and easy fix for parenting, since they themselves don't have time to play with and care for their children.

Arlie Hochschild extends this argument to say toys don't just stand in for mothers while they're at work, but are in fact bought by parents to make up for time spent away from the home and family (1997). Hochschild calls this notion "time deficit paybacks," and argues one of the main motivations for parents to buy is simply to relieve feelings of guilt about spending so much time away from the child and home. Working mothers are often especially vulnerable to this, as many feel entering the workforce necessarily detracts from the quality of their mothering and in turn feel guilty.

Toys and Gender

Many discussions of toys focus extensively on gender issues (Thorne 1993; Risman 1998; Yelland 1998; Williams 2006). In the discourse of gender, toys are often viewed in terms of "socializing" children into gender and are frequently blamed for promoting gender inequalities. This view suggests some toys, such as Barbie, are "gendered" and serve to teach children the appropriate behavior of each gender. While it

is easy to blame toys for reproducing gender inequalities in society, it is extremely problematic because it assumes particular toys have inherent meanings that leave no room for individuals to shape or interpret them (Seiter 1993; Best 1998). However, studying the layout of toy stores and looking at advertisements of different toys shows that toys are often targeted at a specific gender (Williams 2006). Studies looking at the behavior of children playing with toys often conclude that children understand social constructions of toys in relation to gender and in fact follow gender norms when selecting which toy to play with (Thorne 1993; Raag 1998).

Expanding the Issue: My Contributions to Central Texts

Allison Pugh's 2005 study of holiday season toy catalogs is an important starting point for my research because it draws conclusions about all four of the areas discussed above: toys as solitary objects, toys in relation to a mother's time, concerted cultivation, and gendered toys. In her study, Pugh analyzes the types of language and images used to promote products within these catalogs and finds they act much like self-help books, offering parenting solutions in the form of toys for the busy, modern middle-class mother who doesn't have time to nurture and teach her children directly. First, Pugh finds that toys in catalogs are shown to provide solitary play, and are even depicted as companions for the child, completely standing in for human interaction. Secondly, she concludes that toys function in relation to the mother's time, as they are offered as companions in order to fill in the void left by the absence of the busy, working mother. Thirdly, she finds toys are almost always described as educational to reassure the mother that the child can and will continue to learn, even if she's not there to teach him or her. Finally, Pugh finds toys are presented in gendered ways, as toys related to care-giving and other stereotyped

feminine behavior are discussed using language that appeals to emotion, while toys dealing with traditionally masculine interests, such as math and science, are almost always discussed in terms of educational value. Toys relating to stereotyped feminine areas, such as cooking, cleaning, care-giving, and shopping, are not recognized as skills, while toys coded masculine are.

Pugh's study is a response to women's changing roles, as they have grown to extend past just motherhood and include involvement in the workforce. Yet, despite their time spent working outside the home, mothers are still the primary care-givers. Pugh argues that in order to negotiate the two conflicting time obligations of caring for children and working, toys are presented in toy catalogs as means for the mother to be a "good mother" even when she is absent. Pugh acknowledges the limitations of her study: she knows she cannot draw conclusions about how mothers interpret or potentially subvert the meanings and uses of toys presented by catalogs, but can examine what types of broader visions the ads are trying to sell. While Pugh observes how toys are presented in catalogs, my research extends her study to look beyond the intended vision and see how toys are actually understood by mothers in the home. The meaning of objects is created and shaped by social interactions, and one cannot just look at advertisements to see how mothers understand them.

In addition to looking at how Pugh's findings apply to how mothers actually understand toys, I want to see specifically how past theoretical frameworks discussed earlier hold up in the lives of real mothers. First, do mothers understand the main function of toys as providing solitary play? In what ways do mothers take part in the

child's play with toys? To what extent do mothers see themselves as regulators of toys, and how do they understand this role? Secondly, does the mother's time seem to affect what toys she buys and how she uses them? Thirdly, do middle-class mothers view toys as a means to give their children advantages later in life? Do they view toys as a valuable way to learn? And finally, do mothers see toys as gender specific, and in what ways do mothers discuss gender in relation to toys?

Methods

The findings of this study came from eleven semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with mothers, lasting between 45 minutes and one hour and fifteen minutes. These interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and pseudonyms were given to all participants to maintain confidentiality. The sample was gathered through the "snowball method," where participants provided me with references of other potential participants. To select my initial participant, I made a list of everyone I knew in the area who had at least one child between the ages of three and eight, then folded that list in half and selected the name on the crease. Through the snowball method, I was able to obtain interviews with eight middle-class and three working-class moms, whose class I determined based on her occupation, her husband's occupation, and field notes about her dress and home, when applicable. Two of the participants were stay-at-home moms, while nine were working moms. No additional efforts were made to diversify the sample, and because the selection process relied on social networks, there was a degree of homogeneity: all participants were married heterosexuals, and all but one were Caucasian.

I decided to interview only mothers, rather than parents in general, because existing literature on toys so often draws conclusions about motherhood. I was interested in situating my results into the work of others, particularly Pugh's study discussed previously, to see how those results compared to how mothers actually understood and experienced toys. Mothers are frequently targeted by toy advertisers and marketers as potential buyers, and are also largely responsible for caring for the child within the home. This leaves them in a unique position to offer insight into both how a toy is selected and purchased, and how that toy is used and understood. While interpretations of advertising ploys are useful in understanding how toy companies would like their products to be viewed and used, interviews allow us to gauge how mothers concretely approach toy buying and use, and provide us with insight as to how parents genuinely understand toys. While the toy industry and the views of mothers do in fact merge at some point, as advertisements are often made after extensive market research, it is important to talk to mothers to see how they actually understand these toys for a more complete understanding of this issue.

I interviewed mothers with at least one child between the ages of three and eight years old, an age range when toys are still an important part of children's lives. Before age three, it is difficult to gauge a child's understanding of and interest in toys. At and after age three, however, children begin using language to communicate and are capable of being involved in both play and non-play activities, making play easier to determine and evaluate. After age eight, toys often become less central to children's lives as their interests shift.

Ethnographic interviewing, like all research methods, is not completely perfect. One of its major limitations is that it is very time consuming and allows for only a small sample size. This small sample is not representative and cannot be used to make large generalizations about all of society. However, the qualitative data it produces can still be used to provide insight into processes and meanings for this particular set of people, and the results can be applied to understanding larger sociological issues. Examining how mothers decide to buy certain toys and how they discuss the meaning of these objects tells us what matters to mothers when they think about toys and their children, and what their priorities and motivations actually are.

During the interviews, I asked a range of open-ended questions that allowed participants to discuss their children's toys, and asked follow-up questions about their responses. My first and main question was, "What kinds of toys does your child play with?" This question and its follow-up questions took up a large portion of the interview, and the answers often resulted in a huge pool of information about toys in general, play in general, and the mother's overall understanding of toys. I also asked: what is your child's favorite toy, where does your child play, what kinds of toys do you enjoy seeing your child play with, and what kinds of toys does your child dislike or show no interest in? In follow-up questions, I asked: *how* does the child play with these toys, how frequently does the child do this, and what is play involving siblings like? After discussing toys and play extensively, I asked, "Are there any toys you don't feel are appropriate for your child, or that you don't allow in the home?" Later in the interview, after thoroughly discussing toys and play, I asked the participant, "Can you tell me about your last toy-purchasing experience?" The participant often explicitly said whether this

toy purchase was or was not typical behavior for her, and after this question and its follow-ups, I concluded with, “In general, when you purchase a toy, what kinds of information do you take into account before you decide to buy it?”

Findings

Toys as Solitary Play

While previous studies have argued that toys today are intended for a child’s solitary play, my findings show that mothers *do not* understand solitary play as the main function of a toy. In fact, participants understand toys in very social terms, which I determined through: the kinds of play described, where the play occurs, the way mothers decide to buy toys, and the mother’s role in mediating toys the children have access to.

First, and perhaps unsurprisingly, play was mentioned over and over again in relation to toys. Sometimes this play was described as solitary, but more frequently play with others was said to be most important and enjoyable for the child. Molly, mother of three children, views toys as an opportunity to engage with her children, and said, “I think lots of parents use toys just to occupy their kids or keep them busy, like with a video or movie, but I don’t think this is the purpose of toys. And I think these parents are missing out on the potential of play.” While Molly said her children’s play was sometimes solitary, more often it was between siblings, with parents, or with friends, and she understood this social interaction as part of a toy’s purpose. Miranda, mother of a four-year-old said, “My daughter would rather be in the kitchen with me than alone in a

room full of toys.” Like many other participants, Miranda stressed that toys are not companions equal to people.

Participants loved, and said their kids played most with, what they called “open-ended” toys. When talking about the toys their children played most with, every single participant described the importance and value of “open-ended” toys, or toys they defined as lending themselves to multiple uses, such as balls, blocks, vehicles, dolls, art supplies, puppets, costumes, and toy dishes and food. Participants said these toys were favorites and most played with among children because there’s no single, correct way to use them and the children stay interested. Mothers see these toys as “inspiring creativity” since they allow children to actively create the meaning and use of the toy. For example, Lucy, mother of a boy 3 ½ years old, said,

I like toys with multiple uses; toys that can be adaptable. And I really like things that will grow with him a little bit, and these tend to be more open-ended things. Like, right now he has this huge floor puzzle that is a little too advanced for him, but sometimes he’ll still play with the pieces in different ways, lining them up, stacking them, or whatever. So I like to get him things like that, that he can just have fun with a lot of different ways, even as he gets older, without just doing the same boring thing over and over.

Some moms even talked about open-endedness as part of a definition of a toy, such as Molly, who said, “I think a toy should be open to more than one use, and used in constructive play to encourage [kids] to develop things and create.” Additionally, open-ended toys serve as an opportunity for mothers to play with their children. Nearly every participant gave examples of her participation in play with open-ended toys. This

highlights how mothers understand toys as social objects, rather than solitary objects. In particular, playing “café” or “restaurant” with their mothers seemed to be popular for children across all ages and gender. When describing this kind of play, mothers often said they sat at a table and ordered food or drink from the child, who would then use toy dishes and food to make and serve the request. In this form of imaginative play, toys were used as props, and included menus, aprons, dishes, and food, and the play often included elaborate setup, such as dolls representing other customers. Other forms of open-ended toys, such as building blocks, train tracks, and Legos were discussed as toys mothers would frequently use with their children.

The popularity of creative toys was reflected in the discussions of art and art supplies. Again, virtually every interviewee named art and art supplies at least once in the discussion of favorite toys and playing. When talking about art, some mothers questioned whether or not art items counted as toys. Others simply talked about the kinds of art their children liked to make, from coloring with markers to gluing cotton balls on paper, as if it were as much a toy as anything else. In general, because mothers valued creativity so much, art is viewed as a central “toy,” even when moms couldn’t decide if they should classify it as such. Art materials of all kinds, like many other open-ended toys, allow kids to play alone, but also provide an opportunity for the mother to help and interact. If the mother is not actually involved in helping to make the art or making art of her own, the child can at least show her the work when he’s done, giving her an opportunity to become involved.

The social aspect of toys was brought up again when talking about where play occurred. Often, the child would play wherever Mom was. Molly said, “If I’m in the kitchen cooking dinner, they’re right there playing at the counter.” Participants suggested their kids wanted to play with them as much as possible, but that the kids would settle for playing *near* them, if not actually *with* them. Participants also talked about their kids playing with toys in social areas of the house, such as the living room, dining room, or kitchen, where the family generally spent much of its time. So, even when play is solitary, it still happens in a social space.

Participants again showed they understand toys as social when they talked about purchasing toys for their children. As Erica, mother of four, put it, “When I’m buying for the kids, I just think about what they like and what I see them doing at home. Sometimes we branch out and try something new, but usually there’s some sort of connection to the stuff they like now.” Every single participant said she decided to buy based on her own experiences with her children’s play, showing she was involved in, or at least aware of, the types of activities the children enjoyed doing. Moms also said they were likely to buy open-ended toys, because these were the toys their kids enjoyed and played most with, and they were enjoyable for mothers to play with as well. By using their own experiences playing with the children and the toys, participants showed how they don’t think of toys functioning to provide solitary play; instead, toys are viewed as social objects to be used with others.

While the effects of advertising certainly shouldn't be underestimated, mothers did not mention seeing an ad for a toy and then going out and buying it based on that ad, and never once said advertisements are considered in their decision to buy a particular toy. When buying toys for their children, these mothers drew on their own experiences with their children and their children's play. They thought about what their children like to play with now, and how the toys in question compare to the kinds of toys and activities the children enjoy doing. These same feelings came up repeatedly in the interviews, and suggest moms are at least aware of, if not actually physically involved in, their children's play and the types of activities they enjoy. One mother, Kathy, described buying toys for her 5 year old, saying, "I consider interest on his level. I tend to write down what I see him doing and use that to decide what to buy. I don't just go in, look around, and get something." For her, toy buying cannot be rushed or done on a whim because it requires reflection about what her child likes now and a comparison to the new toy in question. While participants often used information on the product's box (including pictures and descriptions about what the toy is and does), they said this information alone didn't convince them to buy it – they only bought the toy if the information pointed to an interest or another toy similar to ones the children currently enjoyed.

When asked about their most recent toy purchase for their child, most mothers described buying a toy while running other errands or going out to purchase something else. No one talked about making a special trip out to buy a specific toy, illustrating the idea that toys are not necessary for a child's play and happiness, which I will discuss more later. In fact, only one participant's most recent toy purchase was in any way

premeditated. Jane told about a recent family outing to a pumpkin farm which also sold high quality metal toys, and she told the children they could each pick out one toy while they were there, since toys of this quality were hard to find other places. Every other mom said she bought her last toy while shopping for something else, and four mothers said their last toy purchases happened while filling prescriptions. In one such example, Clara bought a board game because one of her two children was sick: “I knew we were all going to be indoors for a while because Josh wasn’t feeling well. I thought a new game might make us being stuck inside more enjoyable.” Mothers use their own involvement and experience with their children’s play when purchasing a toy, illustrating how the toys aren’t used by the child in isolation.

Finally, mothers thought of toys as social when looking at their own roles in mediating the toys the children had access to. Overall, mothers recognized that they played a role in getting toys into the house and allowing them to stay there. This came out most directly when I asked, “Are there any toys you consider inappropriate for your child, or don’t allow in the home?” because mothers were able to talk about the kinds of toys they prohibit from the house. Toy guns were restricted from all but three of the households. Clara, the mother of boys ages 2 ½ and 3 ½, discussed at great length her decision to allow her sons to play with toy guns:

My husband hunts, so the boys see guns and know what guns are. And the boys pretend everything is a gun anyway – like they even make guns out of their sandwiches at lunch time. So I decided I would rather have toy guns around so I can direct the play and tell them what they can and can’t do with them. Like, they

can't [pretend to] shoot at people, but it's okay to shoot at cans. At least with the toys I can regulate the play and talk to them about it, you know?

The other two mothers that allowed toy guns in the house gave similar explanations, and all included the rules of what the kids can and cannot do with those toy guns. Of all the other mothers that said no toy guns were allowed in the house, most did not feel the need to explain or justify their answers. Only two mothers gave further explanation of their decisions. Miranda, mother of a 4 ½ year old, said it wasn't that she didn't allow toy guns, it was just that her daughter wasn't interested in them. She said she didn't know how she'd respond if the child wanted to play with toy guns. Jane, mother of two, said she doesn't allow guns or other violent toys because she wants to "encourage the use of words to resolve conflicts, and encourage understanding. [She doesn't] want them to think physical violence is the way to end conflicts." Since most of the mothers didn't allow toy guns, and the ones who did immediately justified their decision, it seems moms think toy guns carry some kind of innate meaning that generally doesn't line up with what's appropriate for childhood toys and play. Even when the mothers allowed toy guns in the house, they seemed to think I would judge them for it and quickly explained their decisions. In the discussion of restricted or inappropriate toys, toy guns were the only item to be mentioned repeatedly. While nearly every mother said she disliked toys with batteries, most allowed them into the house anyway. Also, gendered toys, which I will discuss more later, were never mentioned as being inappropriate – no one outwardly said she thought pink dolls were inappropriate for her sons, or that trucks were inappropriate for her daughters.

Outside of restricting toy guns, the mother's role in mediating the toy choices wasn't often explicitly addressed, and only two participants directly acknowledged their roles in mediating toys in the household. The first, Jane, restricts toy use to only metal, wooden, and cloth toys for health and environmental reasons, feeling that plastic toys are often detrimental to the environment and a potential health risk for her children. She realized this has limited the types of toys the children have access to, but doesn't think her restrictions have affected them too much, saying,

The kids are on board with this. And they've never asked for a name-brand anything. It's not like they've said they really want a Hotwheels track or anything like that ... Plastic toys have come into the house through gifts and birthdays, and they realize those toys usually break. So they tend to like the metal or wooden ones anyway.

Erica talked about how she actively weeded out toys from her home that she didn't like:

I *hate* Bratz dolls, but the girls got some as a gift. I finally convinced them they don't like those dolls, and just threw them away. I also don't like Polly Pocket, and used that last recall [of a different toy brand] as an excuse to throw those out.

In this case, Erica shows how she takes a very active role in what toys her children play with, beyond just what she buys or doesn't buy – she throws out toys she doesn't like. Erica believes her position of mother entitles her to control what toys are within the house. For her, toys were not just for her children to play with in isolation: she had to see them and interact with them, so she felt justified in throwing out the ones she didn't like. Erica also talked about bringing *in* certain types of toys, saying, “I don't mind Barbie though, because you can just buy her non-trampy clothing.”

Time & Toys

Like the findings of previous works, my findings show toys do function in relation to a mother's time. The amount of time she is willing to invest in a new toy shapes the kinds of toys that enter the house, and how those toys are used. As previously mentioned, most mothers don't think toys should be used to just to keep kids busy. In fact, keeping the child busy was only mentioned once as being an important part of the toy's purpose, and seemed to be a passing reflection of the child's age: Sarah, the mother of a four-year-old, said, "When I buy her a toy, I look for what will keep her busy for the longest. You know, what will she enjoy playing with by herself?" Sarah talked about her last toy purchase, which was a Hama Bead set, where you fit little beads together on a pegboard and then iron them to melt them together into a solid piece. Sarah said,

She's at an age where she wants me to play along, but she's really bossy. So it's more, "You do this," and she tells me exactly what to do, and I don't have much room to make my own choices. So I like finding toys she can play with by herself and still enjoy. But actually, with these beads, I found myself sitting down next to her and helping. I was next to her making my own, and I found it really fun and relaxing. It was really quite meditative, and was something we were enjoying together. And so, I still think it turned out to be a great toy, but its use has been different than what I originally intended and expected.

However, even though moms said toys weren't meant to keep kids busy, their own time often shaped what toys were brought into the house and how those toys were used. First, mothers often decided to buy a toy based on the initial time investment involved, considering how quickly and easily the toy would be ready to play with.

Karen, mother of a four-year-old girl, said, “Charlotte has two board games that she loves playing. And actually, I think she’d like it if we [my husband and I] got some more because she seems to enjoy the ones we have. But we haven’t gotten her any new ones because we don’t want to learn the rules.” Even though she suggested she would eventually buy more games, not wanting to learn the rules was enough to stop Karen from buying more games for her daughter now. Erica, mother of four children, also expressed concern about the initial time investment of toys, and said, “I think about assembly when I get a new toy. How long is this going to take me to set up? How difficult are the instructions going to be? Are there a million little pieces that I’m going to have to figure out?” For her, the assembly time was an issue, and she didn’t want to spend lots of time reading instructions and putting together tiny pieces. Instead, she would rather have something that’s ready to go right from the package.

Other correlations to a mother’s time came up while talking about open-ended toys. Michelle, mother of three, said, “I like sitting on the floor with him [my 6 year old son] and playing with wooden blocks. I like that this is something I can do while talking to my husband, and it’s easy to clean up.” Open-ended toys like blocks require only a limited time investment: Michelle can still carry on a conversation with her husband, and can clean up quickly and easily. Interestingly, this same mother said,

I think when it comes to playing, kids just need more time. Open-ended play time is so limited these days. Kids don’t need to be in ballet and swimming and soccer, getting carted from one place to the next. What they need is more time to play. They *need* to play, and they just need more time.

Michelle clearly values giving her children time to play, and also expressed how much she enjoys playing with her children, but she is unable to invest as much time as she'd like in playing with them. While she never said what else is taking up her time, Michelle did seem concerned that her time is limited, and perhaps this is why she multi-tasks while playing with her son. Other types of open-ended toys revealed similar trends of mothers having only limited involvement in play. For example, when discussing the imaginative play of "café" or "restaurant," mothers described their own role in the play as just sitting at a table, while the children were actively engaged in pretending to make and serve the food. While sitting at the table pretending to be customers, mothers were able to read magazines, make shopping lists, or just relax: playing with the child did not require all of the mother's time and attention. Although mothers took part in this play, making it a social rather than solitary experience for the kids, the moms weren't completely engaged. And instead of having to sit down and spend time putting together, learning, or explaining the proper use of a new toy, moms turn to "creative" toys they can give kids to figure out on their own. Like Michelle described with the blocks, open-ended toys also allow moms to be involved in the play as much or as little as they want. Creative toys have the advantage of being able to be used in multiple ways, allowing the child to use his or her imagination to figure it out, rather than requiring the time and attention of the mother to explain the rules or put together the pieces. On top of valuing creativity as an actual skill, which I will discuss in greater detail later, moms value open-ended toys because they don't require a large time investment.

Arlie Hochschild discusses an idea she calls “time deficit paybacks,” where working parents buy gifts for their children to relieve feelings of guilt about spending so much time away (1997). However, this idea was only brought up in one interview, and was not about the mother herself. Clara talked about a recent purchase her husband got for the kids, saying,

He was deer hunting all weekend, and when he got back he bought them this huge Hotwheels track. I think he got it because he felt guilty for being gone. But the boys can't even play with it because it's way too advanced for them. It's made for ages seven and up [and the boys are 2 ½ and 3 ½], so it just sits there.

By shaking her head and rolling her eyes, Clara made it clear she thought her husband's attempt to use toys to buy his way out of guilt was unsuccessful, and an inappropriate reason to buy a toy. She was also upset that he got a toy that was too advanced for them to play with, suggesting she knew her sons well enough to know what they could and would play with. Her comments also made it clear she thought buying a toy the children couldn't use made the toy worthless.

Concerted Cultivation: Toys for Advantage and the Question of Class

My findings support previous findings that toys are used as part of “concerted cultivation,” where middle-class mothers develop their children into success. Furthermore, my findings expand existing research to show that like middle-class mothers, working-class mothers understand toys as important to development and valuable for the skills they foster. These skills or “advantages” are discussed differently by mothers than by toy advertisements. Pugh's findings show toy catalogs “emphasize

educational skill building over fun” and classify almost everything as “educational” (2005:729). However, I found mothers did not adopt the catalog’s language to call skill building toys “educational.” Participants only used the word “educational” to describe toys that explicitly fostered learning *and* were thought of as boring. While moms valued toys that stimulated a child’s development, both working-class and middle-class mothers valued fun *as much as* the learning itself. Mothers used the word “creative” to describe toys that fostered learning or skills and were still fun, while reserving the term “educational” for only the toys they viewed negatively.

First of all, mothers *do* understand toys as an important means for learning and enhancing both physical and cognitive abilities, but unlike the catalogs in Pugh’s study, they view fun as a critical element of the toy. While catalogs emphasize “educational” toys, mothers reserve this term for the toys they value least. For example, Baby Einstein products (DVDs advertised as enhancing the cognitive development of infants), were mentioned as an example of educational toys in four separate interviews, and each mother said she didn’t like them. Molly said, “I won’t buy stuff that is supposed to just encourage development, like those Baby Einstein DVDs. I think those are just garbage. They’re garbage! ... You’re not supposed to put your baby in front of the TV, you’re supposed to play with your baby!” Other specific skill-building toys were discussed in negative ways and classified as educational. For example, Clara talked about lacing cards, saying, “Some of the educational stuff doesn’t go over very well. The string-along cards just don’t hold their interest. They’re just not very fun. I like them, and I think they’re great for building fine motor skills, but the boys just don’t really like them.

They're not fun." Clara labels lacing cards "educational" not just because they encourage skills, but because they're not fun. This same mother goes on to talk about how much she and her boys love blocks: "I like getting them building toys, like blocks, because they learn on so many levels – there's math and counting, geometry, problem solving, creativity. And the boys really love them. They probably get played with the most, and in so many different ways." Here, Clara defines the blocks in terms of the many levels of learning, yet still doesn't call them "educational" because her kids like them. Michelle expressed similar feelings about educational toys while talking about interactive toys:

Electronic toys always end up at the back of the closet and never get played with. I don't buy Leap Frog [brand] anymore because no one ever uses it. The kids might play with it for a little bit right when I first get it, but they don't end up using it for long. It's boring.

These examples illustrate the dichotomy between fun and educational toys that most participants discussed. Instead of parroting toy catalogs, which describe most toys as educational, participants modified the language to give it a negative connotation, and instead used the term "creative" for fun, educational toys. While the catalogs seemed to view fun as an afterthought to the educational value of toys, mothers viewed it as a determining factor in whether or not a toy was a good one. The main reason moms seemed skeptical about "educational" toys was because most felt children were constantly learning anyway. Miranda said, "When I buy a toy, I don't ask 'Will this teach her?' because she learns from everything." Mothers frequently addressed this idea of learning through play and learning constantly by saying their kids play "all the time." Moms seem to understand play as a child's job. Molly described this by saying, "Playing

is how kids learn, and it's what they should do ... My kids play all the time. All the time. Anytime they can. Always."

Because play is happening at all times, toys are not always central to play. Mothers explicitly expressed this concern by telling of the frequency at which children played with items that were not toys. One mother described these as "non-toy-toys," and these items ranged from nothing at all (imaginary friends), to real household items (Tupperware), to makeshift props (a pretend computer made out of cardboard). Moms made it clear play happens all the time, even without toys. The fact that all moms mentioned kids playing with things that were not toys shows that toys aren't necessary for play, and aren't necessary for learning, even though they are frequently used as tools for both. Because children learn through play, and play does not have to involve toys, mothers don't seem to be too concerned with how blatantly a toy "fosters development." While they recognize the learning that takes place through playing with toys, they believe toys need to be fun. In addition to being fun, mothers value toys which encourage development beyond fact-building in scholarly subjects like reading and math. Moms value "creative" toys that foster creativity, imagination, and critical thinking, and see these as skills equal to those like reading and writing. Lucy, mother of a three-year-old, said, "I like to see him painting and coloring, which he really likes doing, too. It's fun to see him creating, and I like that he learns hand skills and control while he's doing it." While the catalogs in Pugh's study highlighted traditional academic skills, participants valued creative toys just as much as those that explicitly foster skills.

In addition to expanding on how toys are understood by mothers to foster development and skills, my findings suggest a variance from the class differences Lareau discovered in her study. Like Lareau's findings, I expected to find that middle-class moms value the educational aspect of toys most of all, and that working-class moms value the entertainment aspect. Instead, I found that both groups value both of these qualities in toys. All participants valued the advantages gained through playing with toys, including exercising imagination and creativity, as well as more traditional types of learning. However, because they all understood toys as social, and used their own experiences with their kids to select and purchase a toy, fun was an important element in talking about and thinking about toys with the participants. Mothers across class lines said the child's interest was important in determining a good toy. If a toy was not fun for the child, it was not a good toy.

While class differences did not show up when talking about educational toys versus fun toys, class did show up in when talking about *buying* toys. Every single participant said she preferred not to buy toys with batteries, and many said this was because these toys tended to be loud and annoying. Of the eight middle-class mothers interviewed, six said toys that used batteries were often cheaply-made, plastic toys. This fits into Seiter's findings of middle-class mothers liking "high-quality" toys, usually made of wood instead of plastic. Of the three working-class mothers interviewed, two said buying batteries became expensive over time, and none mentioned the cheap, plastic nature of the toy. When asked about their criteria for selecting a toy to purchase, all three of the working-class moms talked about money as a factor. However, instead of saying things I predicted, such as they bought toys that cost less or were on sale, these mothers

talked about how they were willing to spend money on worth-while toys. Clara said, “I don’t care about cost so much when it comes to buying toys. I mean, it’s not the first thing I think about. I really don’t mind paying more for something I know they’re going to like and play with.” Similarly, Erica said, “Cost plays a role. It has to be worth it, and I have to be sure they’re going to play with it.” Kathy said,

I tend to build on things he likes and already has, like the Papo [brand] knight figurines. They’re easy to get because they’re not very expensive, only a few dollars for each one. Eventually, I guess I got him something bigger -- I got him the big castle that goes with them. That did cost a lot, but I knew he would use it for years.”

All three working-class moms brought up cost as a seemingly *non-issue*. On the other hand, not one of the eight middle-class mothers mentioned the price of toys in any way.

Girlie Toys and Go-Machines: The Issue of Gender

Overall, moms don’t seem to understand toys as being appropriate for only one gender. While previous literature has focused on the gendered nature of toys, my results show mothers seem to think most toys are acceptable for both boys and girls. Although most mothers talked about their boys typically playing with toys that were stereotyped for boys and girls typically playing with toys stereotyped for girls, most gave specific examples of their kids playing with toys “outside” their gender. For example, Jane talked about her son and daughter and how they play with all kinds of toys across gender boundaries:

They like to play together, and sometimes they'll play "baby," where one of them is the mother and the other one's the baby ... While they have some stuff that might be historically defined as being more gender specific, Katie will play with trucks, and Ryan has a stuffed bunny he sleeps with every night.

Ellie also discussed how her children, Maria, 6 ½, and Marcus, 3 ½, often defy gender norms when it comes to toys:

Maria never went through a "pink" phase, and in preschool her favorite color was black. Marcus is going through more of a pink phase than she ever did. He likes stuffed animals and dolls, and he likes dressing them, but Maria doesn't really get into them. Right now, all the dolls are in his room, and all the Thomas train tracks are in hers, but the toys move pretty freely between rooms.

During the interview, Marcus entered the room and asked if he could show me his Halloween costume. He came back a few minutes later wearing what he called his "shark tooth ballerina dolphin" outfit, which consisted of pink tights, a pink tutu, pink dance slippers, a pink headband with sequins attached, pink fairy wings, and a pink fin on his back. Ellie said the parts of this costume used to be Maria's, but that Marcus enjoys wearing them much more than she did. Ellie watched me take notes about her son's outfit, and added,

As you can probably see, my husband and I are very open about "boy/girl" toys in general. Both kids express interest in toys outside their [pause] gender boundaries, and we're happy to let them explore what they like and play with what they enjoy.

When buying toys for their kids, mothers said they are not very concerned with the stereotyped gender associated with the toy. Sarah, mother of a four-year-old girl, said,

I don't go looking for "girl" toys, or toys that are "girlie," but those are the toys we seem to end up with most of the time. I don't look at a toy and say, "Is this ok for a girl?" but I do usually buy those kinds of toys, because those are the kinds she's interested in.

While Sarah says she doesn't do it on purpose, she does buy "girlie" toys for her daughter. In a similar vein, Clara, mother of two boys, said, "The boys like active toys; the same kinds of stuff I think most little boys like. They like any kind of go-machines: trucks, vehicles, trains, stuff like that. They play rough-and-tumble and are always going-going-going." Clara makes it seem natural that her boys like "go-machines," even though she later talks about how her boys love to have tea parties, which are far less masculine than the "rough-and-tumble" toys. These statements seem to hint that gendered toys are inescapable, and even when participants claim to have the best of open-minded intentions, they still end up gender-stereotyping toys.

Pugh found toy catalogs to be severely divided between boy toys and girl toys in just about every way possible: by toy colors, by active versus passive words to describe the product, and even by the active versus passive pose of the male and female models promoting the product. Overall, the participants in my study expressed a fluid understanding of gendered toys, and did not seem to restrict toys based on gender appropriateness. While they still recognized some toys as masculine or feminine, they

allowed their children of either gender to use these toys. Most mothers seemed to think if the child enjoyed a toy associated with the opposite gender, it was fine, as long as the child enjoyed it. This may suggest the gendered nature of toys has been over-emphasized in past sociological studies. However, it is important to keep in mind that participants often stated their open-mindedness about toys and gender, but that these statements may differ from their actual practices.

The Larger Picture: A Dual Understanding

After examining these findings of mothers' understandings of toys in light of four areas of past research, we see how mothers understand toys in two seemingly conflicting ways. First, they understand toys and play in very social terms, and view toys as fun learning tools for their children that they can be a part of. But second, they value toys that require a limited initial time investment on their part, and that are "open-ended," allowing them to be as involved in or absent from their children's play as they want. Participants made it clear they understand toys as social objects. This was evident through the way they described their children's play, where the play occurred, how they decided which toys to buy, and how they understood their roles as mediating toys the children have access to. They also view toys as learning opportunities, and say creative, open-ended toys are valuable and most played with. These toys often offer mothers the opportunity to play with the child, and are evidence that mothers don't think toys are meant to keep a child busy in isolation. Across class lines, fun was valued as the most important part of a toy, and mothers described having a flexible understanding of gender appropriate toys (though perhaps this is not the case in practice). Despite their social

understanding of toys, mothers often buy toys they don't have invest a lot of time in initially, either through assembling or learning the rules. They use creative toys as a way to be only limitedly involved in the play, and like that these toys allow for fast and easy clean-up. As Pugh (2005) suggests, this may be a reflection of the time constraints on the modern mother, who is involved more and more outside the home. However, Pugh's findings are unable to draw conclusions about the interactive, interpersonal aspect of toys, which mothers certainly recognize. Modern mothers *are* involved in their children's play and understand toys as social, and while they don't use toys as a stand-in for their maternal duties, they still end up using toys in a way that won't take up all of their time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found mothers have dual and seemingly conflicting concerns about toys: they recognize and understand play very much in social terms, yet like and buy toys for their children that require a low time and energy investment on their part. In the first of these roles, moms value open-ended toys that inspire creativity and teach children on many different levels. They know children learn from everything, and stay away from toys they think aren't fun, relying on their own experiences with their children when buying new toys. On the other hand, they like toys that don't require too much of their time in setting up or playing with. These findings show toys in relation to modern motherhood is a more complex picture than suggested by Pugh's study (2005). Moms do not use toys as a complete stand in for their responsibilities, as toy catalogs seem to suggest. While Pugh's findings about moms choosing toys in relation to their own time

(and as a means for teaching) hold true in my study, moms do not understand toys as solitary objects to completely replace their maternal duties. Instead, moms understand toys as a means for social interaction with their children, even if it's in their own terms. Additionally, mothers seemed to understand gender appropriate toys as a more fluid category than past research suggested. Perhaps the issue of gender was downplayed by participants, but it seemed to reflect their general understanding of toys. They prioritize what the child likes to play with: mothers said they were accepting of their children liking toys associated with the opposite gender, since fun is the most important part of a toy.

My study is limited in that I only interviewed a small number of people and don't have a representative sample, so I cannot apply my conclusions to the entire population of mothers. Additionally, I was unable to obtain information across a wide range of backgrounds, such as mothers from different races/ethnicities, geographical locations, marital statuses, or sexual orientations, so my conclusions may represent a very limited portion of the larger population of mothers. Further research could be done with a more diverse sample to see how toys function and are understood by different types of mothers. Further research could also extend my findings to see how mothers' dual understanding of toys compares directly with toy advertisements, since the views of mothers and advertisers do merge at some point, and are not totally exclusive.

While further research needs to be done to fully realize the relationship between mothers and toys, and how mothers understand this relationship, my study has found that

mothers seem to understand toys as a means for social interaction, but still use toys in a way that limits the time they have to spend with the child and toy. This suggests toys do function in relation to a modern mother's limited amount of time in the home, but also disproves notions suggested by toy marketing and advertisements that mothers use toys to stand in for their maternal duties. In further work, these findings could be extended to look specifically at the dynamic role of the modern mother, to address her parenting power, how her role as mother is changing, and how she deals with those changes. For now, I offer insight into how mothers understand toys themselves.

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