Playing with Dolls

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Jacobs, Margaret D., "Playing with Dolls" (2008). Faculty Publications, Department of History. 103.
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Dolls seem to be a ubiquitous feature of American girlhood, cherished objects played with by girls from many different cultures over many centuries. These three photos show American Indian girls playing with dolls in the early twentieth century. Figure 1 was originally captioned “Both love their dollies but handle them somewhat differently—Mary May and a little Hopi girl down at the Hopi Village [northeastern Arizona], January 1926.” Two little girls of about the same age are posing with their dolls in front of an adobe building. “Mary May”—wearing a dress, stockings, and boots—sits erect on a stone bench, gently holding her “dollie” in her left hand, and smiles at the camera. The unidentified “Hopi girl” slouches next to Mary May, her bare legs and feet thrust out in front of her, her “dollie” tied nonchalantly onto her back with a blanket. She stares sullenly at the camera.

Figure 2 is an undated and uncaptioned photograph showing several Mescalero Apache girls in southeastern New Mexico sitting on the ground, making miniature tepees and wickiups (brush shelters). One girl, on the far left, has propped her baby doll up in a cradleboard, a traditional infant carrier used by Indian mothers in many different Indian groups. These girls all wear white dresses with the same kinds of stockings and boots worn by Mary May. Their uniforms suggest that they are all attendees at a federal Indian school, probably the wood frame building in the background.

Figure 3 shows a group of American Indian girls at the Santa Fe Indian School—a federal Indian boarding school—in northern New Mexico around 1904. Like the Mescalero girls in the previous photo, they all wear uniforms but instead of playing on the bare ground, they all stand or sit on wooden chairs or on a blanket. They hold their dolls on their laps or rock them in miniature cradles. They also have other accessories for their dolls—tiny chairs and tables.

Since many of us—no matter what our cultural background—played with dolls, perhaps it is easy to feel a sense of kinship with these girls. Maybe we feel a fond nostalgia for our own childhood. Conversely, these photographs
might bring back less fond memories of pressures to conform to proper notions of womanhood.

These photographs invite us to consider two things:

- the gendered and racialized messages the makers and distributors of the dolls intended for these girls to experience and learn through playing with dolls.
- the meanings that the girls gave to their playing with dolls.
On the surface, we might think of dolls as innocent items meant to entertain children, typically (in our own era) girls. Don’t parents give dolls to children simply to amuse them? And don’t dollmakers construct dolls merely to fulfill a demand (and in the case of mass production, to turn a profit)? For many decades now, feminist scholars have read more into the purpose of dolls. Some have critiqued doll culture for instilling restrictive gender roles or promoting unhealthy body images for girls. In these scholarly works, dolls lose their innocence; they become a primary way that parents socialize girls into expected
gender roles and even discipline female bodies. As one scholar puts it, many “feminist scholars have interpreted dolls as agents of a hegemonic patriarchal culture in which girls were passive consumers.” The Barbie doll and its mass marketing in the post-WWII era has particularly caught the attention of feminist researchers (and activists).1

Yet, more recently, other feminist scholars have argued that “if media advertising invades homes and shapes consumers by pushing products such as Barbies, consumers respond by reshaping mass-produced goods.”2 Having charted the ways in which doll play and its meaning have changed in the U.S. from 1830–1930, historian Miriam Formanek-Brunell remarks that “while some girls played house in the ways their parents hoped they would, many others . . . challenged adult prescriptions for play as they determined the meaning of dolls in their own lives.”3

Seen from these scholarly perspectives, how can we situate these photographs in time and place to gain a greater understanding of what this doll play meant among these Indian girls in the first decades of the twentieth century? Where did the American Indian girls in each of these photos get their dolls? Did their mothers or other relatives make them? Or did missionaries
or teachers distribute them? What did these girls’ educators—whether family members or missionaries and teachers—hope that the girls would learn from playing with dolls? What did the girls themselves take away from the experience?

In this time period—the Progressive era—historian Miriam Formanek-Brunell finds that for many middle-class white women, dolls had a didactic purpose. American mothers “preferred cloth dolls that taught virtue and understanding” rather than “elegantly dressed china dolls” from Europe. Several women designed, developed, and marketed dolls in the late nineteenth century that—in contrast to male doll producers—claimed in their patents that “children needed safe, portable, and durable dolls to teach them about relationships.” Many reform organizations, settlement houses, and professional associations of nurses and doctors endorsed this kind of doll as helpful to instilling proper values among working-class children. Formanek-Brunell asserts that “Progressive Era dolls encapsulated the values of ‘scientific motherhood’ espoused by urban and middle-class professionals,” a belief that “motherhood now required the development of expertise and techniques, not the blossoming of instinct.”

Thus, white, middle-class mothers (and teachers and missionaries) believed that dolls could help little girls develop improved maternal skills and domestic standards.

Formanek-Brunell’s insights might help us to place these images in time, but the cultural background of most of the girls in the photographs—Hopi, Mescalero Apache, and other southwestern Indian tribes—complicates this story of gender socialization in the Progressive Era. Why, for example, did it matter to the person who wrote a caption on Figure 1 that “both [girls] love their dollies but handle them somewhat differently”? And why, indeed, do the Mescalero girls handle their dolls differently than the Indian girls at Santa Fe Indian School? What can these photos tell us not only about the socialization of girls into their proper gender roles, but also the racial socialization of Indian girls in the early twentieth century?

In all three photos, the girls appear to be learning through play how to be mothers and keepers of the home. The Hopi girl and the Mescalero girls have learned from watching older women how to properly care for an infant. For the first year of her life, an infant is to be wrapped in a blanket or a cradleboard, and carried on her mother’s back. Sometimes the cradleboard might be leaned against a tree or hung from one of its boughs. The Mescalero girls are not just playing with dolls, but they are playing house, except their houses are tepees and wickiups, temporary shelters that Mescalero women could move from place to place or make on the spot as they followed the seasonal supply of food.
throughout the southwestern borderlands. Women, in fact, were in charge of moving homes and erecting them in each location. By contrast, Hopi women were in charge of caring for the more permanent adobe homes, much like the one behind the Hopi girl and the white girl.

To our eyes, perhaps, these first two photos, which show Indian girls learning to be Indian women, seem endearing. From today’s perspective—one in which many Americans admire and often romanticize American Indian culture—the images of these girls slinging their dolls over their backs or playing with tepee and wickiup dollhouses is downright cute. However, at the turn of the twentieth century, many white women missionaries and social reformers regarded common Indian ways of mothering and keeping house as savage and uncivilized. For example, many such white women particularly condemned the use of cradleboards. One missionary, Miss Howard, believed it was necessary to “get the babies off the board,” and that she and other like-minded white women “would do a good work if we accomplished only [the cradleboard’s] abolition.” She hoped to teach each American Indian woman “to hold her baby in her arms, and to put him upon a bed to sleep, ‘as white squaws do.’”

Many white women reformers and missionaries also regarded Indian ways of making and keeping house as deficient. Without permanent dwellings with all the modern and middle-class trappings—furniture, decorations, curtains, tablecloths—Indian tepees and wickiups, even Hopi adobes, fell short of white women reformers’ standards. White American women went so far as to charge that North American Indian groups had no word for “home” in their languages. Mrs. Egerton Young asserted that “in their wild pagan state, the condition of [Indian] women was most deplorable, and the fact that there was no word for ‘home’ among them shows their degradation.” (American Indian groups certainly had words for the dwellings they created and used. Their shelters, however, might not have shared the same connotation and significance as white middle-class women’s conception of “home” during this period.)

Today, we may look back on such attitudes and comments as simple ethnocentrism, an inability to empathize with people who have had different life experiences and cultural backgrounds. We may be tempted to excuse the reformers and missionaries who held such notions as “women of their times.” To some extent, white middle-class women’s concerns regarding Indian motherhood and domesticity were part of a broader Progressive-era campaign to promote scientific motherhood and housekeeping. For many reformers, dolls could help to teach children the “importance of health and hygiene in the home.” For one reform-minded dollmaker, “dolls became a vehicle for teaching middle-class
values to the poor who lived in communities without sewers, garbage removal, or running water.”

Yet white women’s concerns with Indian modes of mothering went beyond concerns with safety and health. They believed that only through assimilation—requiring that Indian people live and behave as white, middle-class Americans in all aspects of their lives—would the so-called “Indian problem” be solved. Unfortunately, such attitudes led to draconian policies. Many white women missionaries and reformers believed that transforming Indian girls’ methods of raising children and keeping house were central to the assimilation and civilization of Indian people, and they lobbied for new government policies to remove Indian children from what they perceived as their pathological home environments. For example, Estelle Reel, the Superintendent of Indian Education from 1898 to 1910, declared that “The homes of the camp Indians are to be reached mostly through our school girls, who are to be the future wives and mothers of the race, and on their advancement will depend largely the future condition of the Indian. All history has proven that as the mother is, so is the home, and that a race will not rise above the home standard.” In practice, this meant that Indian children were to be taken from their homes and communities and institutionalized in distant boarding schools where they would be re-educated and re-socialized. Thus, seen in this context, the third photograph of a group of unidentified Indian girls playing with their dolls and accessories on the grounds of the Santa Fe Indian School takes on new meaning. What messages did the Indian school intend for these girls to learn?

Yet, this raises another set of questions. Even if the dolls provided to the girls at Santa Fe Indian School were meant to prescribe a new type of white, middle-class domesticity and motherhood, did the girls passively absorb and mimic such instruction? By holding and rocking these dolls in their arms rather than placing them in cradleboards, did these girls truly imbibe the lessons that many white women reformers, missionaries, and teachers intended? It may be that the Hopi and Mescalero girls in the first two photos were given their dolls with the intent that they, too, would carry them in their arms and rock them in cradles. Yet these girls played with their dolls in their own culturally prescribed ways. Away from school grounds and the eyes of their teachers, these girls may have felt free to carry their dolls in more familiar ways and house them in more comfortable dwellings. There is much evidence that few girls of any cultural background conformed to the intended lesson of doll play. Formanek-Brunell suggests that girls “resisted rote prescriptions of play rituals” and “often preferred active ‘physical culture’ to passive doll culture.” As she writes,
"Whatever its meaning for adults, . . . playing house meant something entirely different to children."10

With this in mind, look at the photographs again. What do they tell you about how these Indian girls are figuring out their identities in the early twentieth century? How could playing with dolls be at once a way of affirming their cultural backgrounds and adapting to new pressures and possibilities?

NOTES


2. Thomas, Naked Barbies, 6.


4. Formanek-Brunell, Made to Play House, 3, 4, 86. Significantly, she finds that women doll-makers also designed dolls for boys (5) and that it was not at all uncommon for boys to play with dolls in the late 19th century (28).


6. Young, “The Transformed Indian Woman,” The Indian’s Friend 10, no. 6 (February 1898), 9.

7. Formanek-Brunell, Made to Play House, 5.

8. Formanek-Brunell, Made to Play House, 86.


10. Formanek-Brunell, Made to Play House, 34, 5.