



Practising kinship care: Children as language brokers in migrant families

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Abstract

Language brokering is an activity whereby children interpret and translate for their migrant parents who have not yet learned the language of the new country. The majority of the studies have been conducted among children and adolescents, primarily exploring the psychological and emotional impact on the child and the development of the parent–child relationship resulting from the activity. These studies report mixed results ranging from negative to positive outcomes. Largely unexplored, however, is the practical contributions children make to their families and to their communities in their activities as language brokers. This article uses data from a UK Economic and Social Research Council Professorial Fellowship programme of work entitled ‘Transforming experiences: Re-conceptualising identities and “non-normative” childhoods’ to explore the retrospective childhood experiences of adults from migrant families who have grown up interpreting and translating for their parents in sometimes complex and sensitive situations where adults are usually in control. It examines some of the consequences of the activity in terms of the benefits and drawbacks. It also highlights how from both practical and cultural perspectives, child language and cultural brokering could be understood as one of the many ways that children of migrants contribute to the settlement and functioning of their families, and in the process, practice and learn about kinship care at an early age. Thus, although there may be some limitations to the activity, there are also significant benefits.

Keywords

Children, kinship care, language brokering, migration, retrospective

Introduction

Many migrants to new countries are assisted by their children, who have learned the language of their new country, in situations that require interpreting (verbal communication) and translating (written work). The literature on this phenomenon defines the activity as

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'language brokering' (Hall and Sham, 2007; Orellana, 2009). The research available indicates that sometimes the experience of language brokering is enjoyable, while sometimes it is stressful and a burden. Some investigators are concerned with the competence and appropriateness of children interpreting and translating complex and sensitive issues – for example, medical and legal issues – (Cohen et al., 1999), and the possible negative consequences of misinterpretation. There is also concern about the emotional impact on children who gain intimate knowledge about their parent's physical and emotional well-being. Very little is known, however, about the benefits such experiences can bring to children, and to their parents and communities, or what the experience means to the children as they grow older. In particular, the link between language brokering and kinship care remains unexplored.

This article draws on a UK study with adults who as children were language brokers, to explore how their multiple mediating activities contributed to the functioning of their migrant families, and so provided kinship care from an early age. This article also draws on more recent paradigms of care outside the nuclear family (Becker, 2007; Daly and Lewis, 2000; Rogers and Weller, 2013; Shakespeare, 2000; Tronto, 1993; Williams, 2001), in order to explore the nature of care among families who are often viewed as 'non-normative', even if leading ordinary lives. The term 'non-normative' is often considered to signal pathology and problems. However, this is not my perspective. 'Non-normative' here denotes a complex social process wherein there are dominant discourses of 'normal/normative' childhood and a social category which some participants implicitly applied to their experiences, precisely because of their awareness of such discourses. Effectively, this article seeks to add some new insights into the shifting conceptualisations of social care and of young carers in particular. Finally, it suggests that in order to gain deeper understanding of the impact of childhood language brokering, more research is needed exploring long-term outcomes as these children become adults.

The study

This study was part of a UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) programme of work titled 'Transforming experiences: Re-conceptualising identities and "non-normative" childhoods'. The research concerned the ways in which adults from different family backgrounds re-evaluate their childhood experiences over time. The aim was to understand the factors that produce adult citizens who lead 'normal' lives (as in growing up to become 'unremarkable' adult citizens, none of whom required social work intervention) despite having childhood experiences that are often viewed as 'non-normative'.

A total of 40 qualitative, in-depth interviews with adults were conducted (23 females, 17 males). The individuals in our sample experienced language brokering between English and 15 other languages, beginning at between 5 and 13 years, and many continue to do so. Their mean age when interviewed was 33. The interviews followed a biographical narrative approach whereby, at the start of each interview, participants were simply asked to tell their life stories. The methodology encourages them to speak freely and to reflect, while enabling the issues of theoretical and practical concern to be addressed (Adams, 2004). Participants were later invited to feedback sessions, which informed the overall analysis. The interviews were thematically analysed, and some

were selected for detailed narrative analysis. In the extracts presented below, participants are given pseudonyms.

Relevant literature

Language brokering

The term ‘language brokering’ was first coined by anthropologists to describe the activities of individuals who connect local and national worlds through ‘cultural brokering’. They suggest that the ‘broker’ makes independent decisions in negotiating action. Thus, children of migrants who interpret and translate play principal roles in constructing versions of the new world for their parents (Hall and Sham, 2007: 4). The literature on language brokering gives mixed views. Some studies show that sometimes the experience is enjoyable (Bauer, 2010; DeMent and Buriel, 1999; Orellana, 2009; Valdés et al., 2003; Valenzuela, 1999); others show that it can be stressful and burdensome for children (Hall and Sham, 2007; Weisskirch and Alva, 2002; Wu and Kim, 2009). The relationship between the activity and academic achievement also shows mixed results (Dorner et al., 2007; Trickett et al., 2010). The main argument against the activity for some is that language brokering may put children at risk of academic failure or may limit the child’s opportunities because their families expect them to continue brokering (Morales and Hanson, 2005: 494).

Another area concerns the impact of the activity on the parent–child relationship, also with controversial views. Some studies report positively that the activity facilitates strong parent–child bonds (Chao, 2006; DeMent and Buriel, 1999) and that children use their position of power in language brokering to protect their parents’ dignity and welfare (Orellana et al., 2003; Valdés et al., 2003). Others contend that the activity negatively affects the normal dynamics of the parent–child relationship (cf. Cohen et al., 1999; Love and Buriel, 2007), leading to unhealthy role reversals in families, with parents becoming dependent on their children (Martinez et al., 2009).

Less positive studies draw primarily on child development perspectives, with the ideal of ‘childhood as a time for play and innocence’, free from worry and adult responsibilities, and knowledge about ‘intimate’ financial and gynaecological matters (Cohen et al., 1999; Crafter et al., 2009; Zelizer, 1985). Some argue that language brokering may accord children too much power, framing the activity in terms of child ‘parentification’ (Weisskirch, 2010) or ‘adultification’ (Trickett and Jones, 2007). In developmental terms, the child/adolescent is seen as prematurely exposed to adult knowledge, assuming *extensive* adult roles and responsibilities within their family (Burton, 2007).

However, based on empirical work with Vietnamese adolescents and their parents in Washington, DC, Trickett and Jones (2007) state that although sometimes ‘children may have additional power that can be used to their advantage, the fundamental role relationship in families is not seen as being altered or interrupted’ (p. 143). Similarly, from their longitudinal work with children/adolescents of Latino/a migrants in the Chicago area, Dorner et al. (2008) argued that language brokering should be viewed from the perspective of an ‘interdependent script’ rather than from an ‘independence script’. They see everyday language brokering ‘as a normal expectation of the child–adult relationship rather than a parent ceding control of family decisions’ (Dorner et al., 2008: 521).

These child development perspectives claim universality. They are, however, based on Western constructions of childhood which contrast with perceptions of child obligations in many non-Western cultures, where children's 'adult-like' tasks are considered normative, and important contribution to family functioning, and also essential in preparing the child for adulthood (Bourdillon et al. 2010; Boyden, 2009; Burton, 2007: 330; Jacquemin, 2004; Lancy, 2012). For this reason, Nsamenang (2008) argues that 'culture should be central to any discourse on child development' (pp. 213, 219). Moreover, within Western societies, these ideas are historically constructed (Ryan, 2008), with global and local variations depending on ethnicity, class, gender and so on (Prout and James, 1997; Waller, 2009). Our own interviews show how migrant families can value their children's informal caring roles and responsibilities.

In general, however, the cultural and social processes of child language brokering are left largely unexplored in the literature. We need to know how the development of children is shaped by their cultural and linguistic practices, and how their activities make significant social and economic contributions to their families and communities (cf. Bauer, 2010, 2013; Dorner et al., 2008; Hall and Sham, 2007; Orellana, 2009). Additionally, little research explores what happens to language brokers when they reach adulthood, and how their perspectives on their experience as family mediators change over time. This article aims to add to the limited body of work on the retrospective experiences of language brokering and to show how through their activities as interpreters and translators, children are making major contributions to their families, and in the process, practising and learning about kinship care.

Children as carers within families

In *The Social Value of Children*, Zelizer (1985) argues that perceptions of the value of children have changed over time, such that in post-industrial societies children have become economically 'worthless' and emotionally 'priceless', with their roles shifting from being family 'contributors' to 'sentimental' objects of affection (cited in Valenzuela, 1999: 724). While some researchers assert that children can learn caring responsibilities within 'successful' development into adulthood (Edwards and Weller, 2011), studies of children as 'young carers' are mostly analysed from the perspective of 'vulnerable children' (see Becker, 2007). This is because most studies about care concern low-income/economically disadvantaged families. Within such families, children typically perform roles of sibling care, care for older or disabled people, serve as emotional confidant to their parents or perform paid work outside the home (Becker, 2007; Burton, 2007). These activities, some researchers claim, could compromise the child's social and academic development (Burton, 2007).

Some earlier researchers did recognise children as active social agents, whose daily activities make valuable contributions in their families' everyday lives (Morrow, 1995; Prout and James, 1997). In their quest for a 'new sociology of childhood', Prout and James (1997), for example, assert that childhood is 'an actively negotiated set of relationships' and is 'constructed and reconstructed both for children and by children' (p. 7).

Cross-national statistical and research evidence from sub-Saharan Africa, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States shows that young carers have much in

common irrespective of where they live or how developed their national welfare systems are (Becker, 2007; Bourdillon et al., 2010). Moreover, although most public discussion about children's work outside the home has been stereotypically/negatively coached in terms of 'child labour', Bourdillon et al. (2010) illustrate how in different parts of the world, children can be found working in a range of situations from 'intolerable to beneficial, compelled to freely chosen, inside and outside the home, paid and unpaid' (p. 23).

In line with this observation, Becker suggests that children's informal caring roles in both developed and developing nations be located along a 'caregiving continuum'. This distinguishes between those children who are involved in 'significant, substantial or regular care' and those children who may be involved in some caring as part of their routine family lives and roles, but at a level which does not have negative outcomes for the children themselves (Becker, 2007: 26). Hence, we need to turn the research focus on young carers away from 'vulnerability' towards 'resilience', in order to explain the *differences* in experiences *between* young carers within and across nations (Becker, 2007: 40). It is within the frameworks of Becker, and Prout and James that I believe the activities that children do as mediators for their families fit best, and I move now to illustrate this.

Language brokering as caring within families

I find Becker's notion of 'caregiving continuum' useful. However, in the literature, language brokering activities are not usually discussed as caregiving activities. Many of our interviewees were involved in sibling care, and a few also helped caring for ill parents. However, looking back they see their language brokering as particular caring activities which were beyond normally expected 'chores'. Their perceptions of language brokering frequently echo Becker's (2007) notion of 'informal caregiving' – that is, care given free of charge, often hidden and part of the private sphere of the family, founded on love, attachment, obligation and reciprocity (Becker, 2007: 24). Terms such as 'caring', 'looking after', 'contribute', 'helping out' and 'support' were among the common terms participants used to explain how they felt about their language brokering. Their perceptions of care also echo Shakespeare's (2000) concept of 'help', with altruism as an underlining feature. As Amorita (Mexican) put it,

As I got older I felt it was a contribution ... I was helping my family help me ... I was helping my grandmother take *care* of me. I took great pride in that, and I always felt honoured that I was the one that got to do that ... It's such a natural order ... That's part of a family, that everybody extends their hand and that's a lovely thing to do and to experience – to be needed in that way and to be helpful in that way.

Children's language brokering also challenges conventional notions of care as primarily gender-focused (with women as primary carers) and hierarchical flows of care from parents to children (Weller, 2013). It is better conceptualised through more recent paradigms of care, including sites of care outside the conventional nuclear family, contexts of care and the influences of class and ethnicity, and shifting strategies around care provision (Becker, 2007; Daly and Lewis, 2000; Rogers and Weller, 2013; Williams, 2001). Let us look, then, at these childhood brokering roles with such perspectives in mind.

Facilitating family settlement and family functioning through language brokering

Immigrant settlement cannot be understood solely as an adult process but as a process which also involves migrants' children (Valenzuela, 1999). Children often learn a new language quicker than their parents so that their parents rely on them for help in interpreting and translating. Through their language brokering activities, children speak for their parents and help them to solve problems, thus facilitating family settlement and family function in their new environment.

Giving voice to their parents

Children 'give voice' to their parents in formal and informal situations where parents are not able to express themselves, or they lack the linguistic tools to do so (Bauer, 2013). Rosa (Mexican) spoke of her role as a 'caring responsibility' and one in which she derived 'a nice feeling to be able to offer that type of support and help to [her parents] who were quite vulnerable, marginalised and don't have a voice'. For Sultana (Asian), it was about teaching her mother to read English and to sign her name so that she could develop and eventually have her own voice. According to her,

My mum didn't speak any English. In fact she doesn't read or write in any other language apart from reading Arabic, but that's a specific type of reading, not the kind of reading that we understand here in this country ... It felt special, that [I] was doing something special [for her] ... something important just like reading.

Helping parents to solve problems

As interpreters and translators, children also help their parents to solve problems. Children interpreted and translated complex legal and financial transactions. Many accompanied parents to housing offices, tax offices and other social service agencies to mediate family issues, and so secured key resources for their family. Others negotiated financial bank transactions ranging from setting up accounts to taking out loans and mortgages. Some spoke of the anxieties they experienced in the process of helping their parents to solve problems, but upon reflection they narrated how 'good' they felt to help their family. Alessandra (Italian) recalled her initial experience of 'fear' as she filled out her father's work timesheet. She was afraid of writing incorrect information which might result in him being underpaid. She felt it was a 'huge responsibility', but a very 'positive' experience:

I didn't know what I was doing, but he was unable to do it. He would just sign it and he'd say, 'Right, put in that I did this and I did that and I did the other'. But I was terrified that my father might get less money if I filled it in wrongly.

For Mahmed, a Somali man who arrived in Britain with his mother in 1989 as a refugee at the age of 9, helping his family to settle involved a 'daunting' legal exercise. Through language brokering, Mahmed negotiated settlement for himself and his mother, mediating

between lawyers and the Home Office. After 5 years, they gained legal status and became settled in Britain. When he was 14 years old, his mother decided to help other extended family members escape the civil war in Somali. Again, Mahmed facilitated their settlement, writing and translating letters to and from lawyers and the Home Office:

I'd been writing paragraphs every day and reworking it ... Four people were allowed to come to this country. It's a big achievement back then. Owing to me at that point, they did come ... Looking back I think I achieved quite a bit for my mother. It wasn't a personal thing for me but it was a good thing, good came out of it.

Effectively, through their interpreting and translating, these migrant children participated in the varied and complex activities required in the process of family settlement and mobility in the new country. Their participation helped to lower the stress and frustration associated with settlement for their parents, thus resulting in more effective family functioning (see Valenzuela, 1999) – which is also about care and caring. Moreover, as well as giving voices to their parents and helping them to solve problems, they also developed strategies to protect their parents' dignity and integrity in contexts threatening humiliation or discrimination.

Contexts and strategies of care

For many migrant families, encounters with dominant institutions often occur in biased contexts in which racial, ethnic, class and linguistic stigmatisation are common. Children become involved in settings where their families negotiate support for income, employment, finance, housing, health care and education. Within these contexts, some participants reported encountering what they perceived as discrimination due to their families' class, ethnic and gender positions, with all three intersecting at times. Athena (Greek), for example, felt that her family's migrant status and lack of formal education placed them in a lower class position in her community, and this restricted their effort to gain access to certain resources. As a consequence, she often felt 'inferior' and sometimes 'embarrassed' during mediation in formal institutional settings. Mat (Italian) spoke of the prejudice which he perceived existed in Australia against migrants when he was growing up – and the prejudice against women migrant farm workers in particular – and how his mother's need for a language mediator marked her off as someone from the 'peasant class'. This, he felt, was particularly evident during situations with general practitioners (GPs). He recalled the typical 'tone of exhaustion and tediousness' which he heard from doctors, 'a kind of condescension towards my mother'. In these situations, children feel impelled to serve as barriers against discrimination, embarrassment and humiliation towards their parents (see also Esquivel, 2012) through various strategies analysed below.

Protect parents from discrimination, embarrassment and humiliation

Many of our participants spoke of paraphrasing (Orellana, 2009), manipulating or censoring information, in an effort to protect their parents from 'discrimination' and

'humiliation', while ensuring that they received adequate services and support (see also Bauer, 2013; Orellana et al., 2003; Valdés et al., 2003). Mahmed (Somali) refused to pass on the correct information from the doctor to his mother about the need for a pap smear, also in an effort to maintain her dignity and integrity. As a Muslim woman, Mahmed knew that she would be humiliated by this information, as it would imply that she is 'unclean'. Tilly (Moroccan) spoke of rephrasing and 'bigging up' her mother's letters so that they appeared 'more diplomatic' and 'intelligent'. 'I was trying to protect my mum. I don't want anybody to think poorly of her'. Maintaining a parent's dignity and integrity was, for them, about caring.

When disagreements occur between parents and the third party during language brokering situations, the child in the middle is expected to convey his or her parents' anger and frustration. Participants spoke of 'gauging', 'toning down' their parents' language or refusing to interpret their parents' messages to protect their reputations and bring calm to otherwise tense situations. Both Athena (Greek) and Mustafa (Cypriot) refused to interpret their fathers' angry and sometimes inflammatory words which they felt were often inappropriate, instead using phrases they felt more 'tactful and diplomatic'.

Participants also spoke of protecting their parents from what they perceived as discrimination during mediation. Mat (Italian) spoke of a shop incident when he intercepted a humiliating situation by sending physical signals as 'a kind of mediation' to his mother, whom he felt was being ignored due to her lack of 'proper English'. He explained,

She'd gone in to repair a watch, and she was certainly the first person there ... The woman behind the counter ignored her for ... quite a long time, serving other people. My mother was holding my hand ... She was squeezing it very hard and I could see that she was just building up the courage or the strength to push herself to be served. So she demanded attention in the kind of English that would make us wince. I remember sending her a message when I realised what was going on. A kind of message through my hand because I knew she was doing something very hard. And she did [calm down] and she did get served.

Mat remembered this incident as 'embarrassing' for him and his mother, such that he ran away as soon as they left the shop.

Protect parents from stress and worry

Participants also spoke of manipulating and censoring information in an effort to protect their parents from stress and worry. Mara (Moroccan) was 'selective' in conveying information from the doctors to her father regarding his imminent death from cancer because she wanted to protect him from additional stress and worry. She said, 'He wouldn't comprehend even if you explained it ... We didn't think it was relevant ... [He] couldn't have handled the truth about his death'. Such strategies illustrate what Tronto (1993) suggests are 'moral' qualities of care. In particular, these are qualities of '*attentiveness*', noticing the needs of their parents; qualities of '*responsibility*', assuming responsibility in these situations to care for their parents; qualities of '*competence*', in facilitating the process of mediation; and qualities of '*responsiveness*', by being aware of the vulnerabilities of their parents (Tronto, 1993: 127–134).

Gender and care in language brokering

While some families migrated for economic reasons, others migrated to flee oppression and inequalities in their own countries. Additionally, while some migrated as a nuclear unit, others migrated as single-parent families (often mother-headed). Which child interpreted and translated in their families depended partly upon these variables. Thus, we found that gender did not impact greatly on language brokering for the participants in our study. Both boys and girls language brokered in the various situations which required mediation. The eldest child was not always chosen to interpret and translate. The choice depended upon which child was available (including children replaced by initial broker who left home or worked away from home), the child's proficiency in both English and their 'mother tongue', the willingness of the child to take on the role and how 'eloquent' and confident the child was in the role. In some families, language brokering was shared among siblings, similar to sharing of other family responsibilities and obligations. Karim's (second of five children) language brokering role modified the division of domestic chores, such that, although he took turns with his older sister, he became the main interpreter/translator because his sister performed more of the household chores.

On the whole, the data suggest that the gender of the child did not dictate their participation in the role. In some families with only sons, boys interpreted for fathers and for mothers, including in very private situations such as those involving intimate medical matters. In some families, boys and girls shared this role, but matters to do with medical issues were sometimes divided such that boys interpreted for their fathers and girls for their mothers. Interestingly, our participants included an equal number of men and women involved in community activities and professions as direct influence from their earlier experiences as child language brokers. Mat, for example, spoke of how his earlier experience as interpreter for his mother influenced his professional career and his interest in language rights and language politics. Consequently, he became an 'advocate' in a public support agency for 'immigrant women' and was instrumental in incorporating/implementing language rights for migrants into national policy.

Care as interdependent relationships

In language brokering situations, the child in the middle wields power (Hall, 2004). What they interpret is what they deem worthy of passing on. This is evident in the ways participants said they 'paraphrased', 'edited', 'diluted' and censored information to their parents. However their emphases were more on interdependency as the key feature in the dynamics of care, being the 'negotiator' on behalf of their parents and their families (Dorner et al., 2008). Essentially, children help to 'make it possible for their family to live, eat, shop and otherwise sustain themselves as workers, citizens and consumers in their host country' (Orellana, 2009: 124). In addition to formal mediation, they explain cultural codes and norms, facilitating social integration for their parents. Marta (Mexican) said that explaining things in the supermarket and at the movies to her grandmother 'was just like subconsciously bringing her into the world with me'.

Participants also spoke about the sense of 'freedom' and 'power' they felt from a young age, being able to 'control the flow of the conversations' and making independent

decisions about how much information to pass on. However, they were very much aware of the interdependent relationship between them, their parents and the third person in these situations. As Asad (Somalian) articulated,

The child does wield a lot of power and I feel I did ... You don't only become a translator, you also become a negotiator on behalf of your parents ... I'm like a *partner* in negotiating whatever my mum wants.

Additionally, because Asad learned Somali from his mother, he felt they were equal in terms of their linguistic abilities. However, ultimately, he was aware that in the overall dynamics of the family, it was his mother who 'wields all the power in the house'. Many participants also felt that they developed closer and more adult-like relationships with their parents compared with their non-language brokering siblings because through their role they learned more about their parents.

Feelings about language brokering

As adults looking back and reflecting, how did participants view their experiences? On the whole, they (men and women equally) normalised them in the context of care and caring for their parents and their families (see also Bucaria and Rossato, 2010; Esquivel, 2012). They spoke about their feelings of frustration and embarrassment at different stages of their lives, and some recalled how as children they found the activity burdensome and stressful. Korina (Greek), for example, recalled how 'intimidating' and 'daunting' her earlier experiences of language brokering were, particularly in formal situations, due to the high expectations she felt her parents had of her. Consequently, for her, 'it became quite a burden'. Amad (Somalian) found it 'difficult', 'stressful' and 'uncomfortable' mediating between his mother and the doctor about his own illness: 'I just wanted to be left alone ... I just wanted to get better'. However, as adults, they realised how much they were contributing to their families through their activities as language brokers. Words such as 'duty', 'obligation' and 'responsibility' were common expressions they used to conceptualise care. Tied into this was the notion of 'giving back'. As Tilly (Moroccan) said,

I did see it as something that's embarrassing for a long time, and now I don't feel embarrassed about it ... A lot of kids do it and I think it's something that's a good thing. I think it's a big responsibility but a good responsibility to have ... a way of giving back.

From their experiences of travelling as young adults, many developed deeper understandings and empathy for their parents' positions as migrants, and some encouraged their younger siblings in a kind of language brokering apprenticeship to contribute to the family. For many, the activity was a form of obligation and responsibility that is consistent with family and kinship values from a cultural perspective. Thus, Mustafa (Cypriot), who migrated with his mother from Cyprus at a very young age, never told her she was offered a professional interpreter, and instead, volunteered to interpret for her. He said,

It felt good to help ... Knowing that I'm doing the best for my family ... makes me proud ... It's a family thing ... That's how it is in our culture, you need to be there for your family ... It was a nice feeling.

For some, how they understood and expressed care was partly shaped by their religious upbringing. Laris (Bengali) said that as a child she did not always want to interpret and translate for her parents. However, she accepted her role as something which was brought into her life by Allah, 'He gave it to us, so it's meant to be like that'. Therefore, she believed that through her role she was meant to care for her family, and although her parents did not always express appreciation, 'Allah sees it', and she would be rewarded in the end.

Participants did not portray themselves as 'vulnerable children who take on adult caregiving roles often to the detriment of their own childhood, education, psychological development, health and economic well-being' (Becker, 2007: 44). Speaking of her experience, Razi (Punjabi) said that her language brokering role meant that she could 'exercise independence of thought. So I think it actually encourages you to be really independent'. She was aware that her role was viewed by 'some people' as unconventional for children, but 'I didn't have it the other way, and I feel I'm alright'.

Some reflected on how in more complex situations such as legal and medical matters, their limited vocabulary and lack of knowledge of technical terms could have resulted in unfortunate consequences for them and their parents. Indeed, there were a few such circumstances. Billy (Chinese), for example, spoke of how his limited interpretation about banking and mortgages resulted in his father choosing the wrong accounts and holding a mortgage years beyond the time that it could have otherwise been paid off, had his father used a professional interpreter who could have interpreted precisely what the options were. Nonetheless, the benefits they highlighted far outweighed the drawbacks – benefits for the child, for their parents and for their wider community.

In short, these child language brokers were learning very early about agency and how to become active citizens – being actively engaged in society. Furthermore, as interpreters and translators, they not only helped their families in terms of settlement and mobility in the new country, but they also contributed to the new country more generally by minimising the costs of professional interpreters and translators (Bauer, 2010, 2013; Orellana, 2009). Taken together, their activities are caring activities, and this was how they themselves conceptualised them.

Summary and conclusion

This article has used data from 40 in-depth biographical interviews with adults who, as children, interpreted and translated for their parents, to understand how, from their retrospective accounts, their language brokering activities can be conceptualised as kinship care. The social care literature is underpinned by notions of 'responsibility', 'obligation' and 'duty' in 'the activities and relations involved in meeting the physical and emotional requirements of dependent adults and children' (Daly and Lewis, 2000: 283). When put together, it could be argued that care in families involves interdependency, reciprocity, and fulfilling obligations and responsibilities for the benefit of all involved. Overall,

‘responsibility’, ‘obligation’ and ‘duty’ were common words our participants used to express care.

Their narratives show that in their unpaid roles as language brokers, children helped their families to settle and function in the new society. In this they demonstrated care – care for their families which they are crafting from an early age. However, their caring activities challenge the dominant conventional paradigms of care as primarily gender-focused (with females providing care) and with a hierarchical care flow from parents to children. For these migrant families, language brokering activities took place within nuclear, single and extended family contexts, with children (boys and girls) giving voice to their parents, helping them to solve problems and transmitting cultural knowledge. In these contexts, we could say that they are caring for their parents by helping them to grow and actualise themselves (Noddings, 2002) in the new country. Additionally, the strategies which they used to protect their parents from discrimination, embarrassment and humiliation demonstrate care.

As children facilitating their parents and their families to achieve the resources required for survival, they can hardly be seen as ‘vulnerable children’. In a wide range of formal institutional spheres (such as health, housing, financial, work, educational, legal) as well as more informal domains (as in shops/markets), they are negotiating both within and between their families and the public, and these negotiations are ‘variously shaped by power relations’ (Orellana et al., 2003: 505). However, although their social positions as children, and as children of migrants, may constrain their ability to access certain institutional goods, as children in the middle they wield power. But their narratives emphasise interdependency as the key feature in the dynamics of the family decision-making process (see also Dorner et al., 2008).

Additionally, their activities as language brokers fit with the new perspectives on child development, which consider the wider political and sociocultural contexts in which children grow and participate. By looking at children’s participation in society, these works emphasise the collaborative (interdependent) nature in which children learn and *their agency* in the construction and co-construction of knowledge (Prout and James, 1997; Waller, 2009).

Taken together, I would argue that instead of focusing primarily on the negative outcomes and developmental processes of child language brokers, more work is needed looking at the social and cultural processes of the activity, in order to gain a fuller understanding of what the activity means to/for the children (with regard to their development), their parents and their families in general. How children learn to become competent, caring members of their families varies across cultures. In some societies children learn in schools, while in others they learn from active involvement in family life and in their communities (Nsamenang, 2008; Spittler and Bourdillon, 2012). Although in Western societies interpreting/translating is seen by some as adult work, for many immigrant families, such activities are seen as an essential contribution to their everyday family life and activity.

Locating language brokering along a ‘caregiving continuum’

To conclude, the work children do as language brokers can reasonably be considered as family care work. Some of our participants later worked in care professions. This reflects

the significance which they have attached to the activity. To gain a fuller understanding of its impact, more research is needed. Instead of framing childhood language brokering in terms of ‘adultification’ and ‘parentification’, we need to locate the activity along a ‘caregiving continuum’. This will bring a shift from ‘vulnerability’ to an analysis which seeks to explain ‘differences’ in experiences and outcomes ‘between’ young carers within and across families and societies/cultures (Becker, 2007: 40). In short, by listening to the experiences and feelings of these grown-up children, we can better understand language brokering from their perspective: as a task which has commonly been regarded as socially problematic, and indeed, at times involved some difficulties for them, but above all was viewed by them as a source of pride.

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