

A Qualitative Analysis of What Latino Parents and Adolescents Think and Feel About Language Brokering

Rosalie Corona · Lillian F. Stevens ·
Raquel W. Halfond · Carla M. Shaffer ·
Kathryn Reid-Quinones · Tanya Gonzalez

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Abstract As the population of children living in immigrant and non-English speaking households continues to increase, children may be placed in the position to serve as an interpreter for their parents (i.e., a language broker). Relatively few studies, however, have obtained fathers' reactions to their children serving as language brokers or explored the reasons why language brokering is linked to positive and negative youth outcomes. We interviewed 25 Latino adolescents (14 girls, 11 boys) and their parents (18 mothers, 11 fathers) using a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed, and themes were coded from the transcripts. When describing positive feelings associated with language brokering, parents and youth talked about children helping the family and the benefit of speaking two languages. When youth shared negative feelings, they talked about difficulties when words were complex and beyond their own English/Spanish language abilities. Children seemed to find language brokering experiences in health-related settings particularly difficult. Our findings begin to shed light on a relatively unexplored area of language brokering thereby highlighting a need for more studies examining youth's understanding about the material being translated. Moreover, the relational aspect of language brokering within the family also merits further study given

that for some families language brokering is a “shared” parent–child experience.

Keywords Language brokering · Immigrant children · Family relationship · Adolescents

Introduction

The population of youth from immigrant families is growing rapidly. In 2000, 20% of youth living in the US had at least one foreign-born parent (Hernandez 2004; Shields and Behrman 2004) and it has been estimated that by 2020 almost 30% of US youth will be children of immigrants (Capps et al. 2004). Children of immigrants, in comparison to children of US-born parents, are more likely to live in poverty, reside in over-crowded housing, have parents with lower levels of education, and have parents with limited-English speaking ability (Hernandez 2004). Also, children of immigrant parents often acculturate to the US more quickly than their parents and as a result, may become more proficient in speaking English than their parents (Ramirez 1989; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). As a result, children of immigrant parents are often asked to translate or interpret for their parents or other family members—an informal process of translating that has been termed “language brokering” (Tse 1995).

Though children of immigrants have served as language brokers for many years, researchers are just beginning to examine the process of language brokering and how it affects children and families. In their review of the literature, Morales and Hanson (2005) found only 24 documents on the topic of language brokering and of those, only 57% were published in peer-reviewed journals. Despite the paucity of published literature in this area, some useful

R. Corona (✉) · L. F. Stevens · R. W. Halfond ·
C. M. Shaffer · K. Reid-Quinones
Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University,
Richmond, VA 23284, USA
e-mail: racorona@vcu.edu

T. Gonzalez
City of Richmond, Hispanic Liaison Office, Richmond,
VA 23224, USA

information about language brokers has emerged. First, language brokering is a common occurrence among children of immigrant parents, and children serve as language brokers more frequently for their parents and other family members (Buriel et al. 1998; Orellana et al. 2003; Tse 1995, 1996; Weisskirch and Alva 2002). In a sample of 236 Spanish-speaking youth (predominately from Mexico), Orellana et al. (2003) found that 73 and 55% of youth reported translating for their mothers and fathers, respectively. In addition, Trickett and Jones (2007) found that 97% of 147 Vietnamese adolescents reported engaging in “cultural brokering” behaviors such as answering the telephone or translating for their parents.

Second, children of immigrants translate in a variety of settings (e.g., schools, stores, restaurants), in face-to-face interactions, and they often translate and interpret notes or documents (Kaur and Mills 1993; Tse 1995, 1996). For example, in a sample of 36 Latino fifth graders, Weisskirch and Alva (2002) found that 53% of youth reported translating notes from school, 39% translated household bills, and 28% translated medical forms/bills. Third, research has found an association between language brokering and positive and negative outcomes for the language broker and his/her relationship with parents (e.g., Acoach and Webb 2004; Halgunseth 2003; Umaña-Taylor 2003; Weisskirch 2005, 2006; Wu and Kim 2009). For example, positive feelings about language brokering are associated with higher self esteem (Weisskirch 2006), academic self efficacy and performance (Acoach and Webb 2004; Buriel et al. 1998; Dorner et al. 2007), ethnic identity development (Weisskirch 2005), and a strong parent–child bond (Love and Buriel 2007). Other studies have reported negative associations between language brokering and youth outcomes and parent–child relationships. For example, Weisskirch (2006) reported that youth reporting negative feelings about language brokering were also likely to report problematic family relationships. In a sample of 246 seventh-and eighth-grade Mexican–American youth, Love and Buriel (2007) found that serving as a language broker for multiple individuals was positively related to youth depression. Weisskirch and Alva (2002) found that fifth-graders who served as language brokers reported feeling uncomfortable translating for their parents and other family members. They also found that the more youth reported translating, the more discomfort they experienced. Thus, even though some youth experience positive outcomes associated with language brokering, the process can be stressful and uncomfortable for other youth.

In sum, studies to date have provided a description of the process and outcome of language brokering, primarily from the perspective of youth. Less attention has been focused on parental reactions to youth language brokering, especially the experiences of fathers (see Kaur and Mills

1993; Martinez et al. 2009; Valdes, 2003 for exceptions). Obtaining a parent’s perspective on youth language brokering experiences is important since how a parent feels about asking his/her child for help may affect the parent–child relationship, and the parents’ own feelings about parenting efficacy and stress. In a recent study, Martinez et al. (2009) found that Latino parents and their middle school aged adolescents who were conceptualized as living in a high language brokering (i.e., bilingual child with two monolingual parents) context reported more family stress, decreased parenting effectiveness and poorer adolescent adjustment than families in low language brokering contexts. They also found that fathers reported more negative outcomes associated with child language brokering and that this may have been associated with how the process affects fathers’ gender role to support the family. Thus, the current study builds on prior work by including the perspective of parents, especially fathers whose perspective is not typically obtained. Interviewing both parents also allows us to examine whether there are similarities or differences in reactions between mothers and fathers.

A second gap addressed in the current study is an exploration of why language brokering may be related to positive and negative experiences. For example, relatively little work has explored whether youth understand what they are being asked to translate. Yet exploring parent and youth perceptions of youth’s understanding of the material they are asked to translate may shed light as to why language brokering is perceived as a positive and negative experience by language brokers. It is possible that a language broker’s competence in the process differs depending on contextual factors such as where he/she is asked to translate (e.g., medical office vs. store), a parents’ English-ability, and the child’s English and Spanish language fluency. Using qualitative methodology, Villanueva and Buriel (2010) examined this issue in a sample of nine female, first-and second-generation Latina adolescents (13–15 years of age) who served as language brokers primarily in school-related contexts. Although participants did not report any Spanish–English differences in verbal fluency, the majority noted that when they did experience difficulty with either language, it was predominantly due to problems with vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension. Given these contextual differences, some language brokering experiences may be perceived positively whereas there may be more stress when brokering in other situations or when a youth’s language fluency is less developed. Our study builds on the work by Villanueva and Buriel by including mother and father perspectives regarding the child broker’s understanding of the material they were being asked to translate, adolescent males, and a larger sample of Latino adolescents.

Using qualitative methodology also allows us to examine whether cultural factors are associated with positive

and negative reactions to language brokering. Researchers often hypothesize that the impact of language brokering on youth outcomes may be associated with the Latino cultural value of *familismo*. Studies of Latino families living in the US and Mexico suggest that the strong devotion to “la familia” is reflected in the great importance placed on family values, reciprocity, and the strong emotional ties between family members, which is maintained even after extended contact with the dominant culture (Freeberg and Stein 1996; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995; Vega et al. 1983; Zayas et al. 1987). The centrality and importance of the family in the Latino culture is evident in the attitudes and behaviors of both parents and children (Chia et al. 1994; Hampson et al. 1990). Latino adolescents report more respect for their parents’ view, greater satisfaction with the family, feeling especially close to their mothers, more support and closeness, and are influenced more by their parents than other adolescents (Becerra and de Anda 1984; Coombs et al. 1991; Gonzales and Kim 1997). Thus, this cultural value may partly explain why language brokering is perceived as a “normal” activity for some youth and why it may be associated with positive outcomes for other adolescents. Despite this hypothesis set forth by researchers, relatively few studies have actually examined whether language brokering and *familismo* are associated with one another.

Finally, this study is unique in that it focuses on the experiences of Latino families who live in an emerging Latino community. Although Latinos are the largest minority group in the US, their presence in Virginia is a relatively new phenomenon. Within the last decade the US has experienced a geographical shift in the Latino population in which Latinos are migrating away from traditional settlement areas and settling in non-traditional states. In Virginia, for example, the Latino population tripled between 1990 and 2006 (Cai 2008). Moreover, the growth of the Latino population in the City of Richmond, Virginia and surrounding areas (e.g., Chesterfield County, Henrico County) exceeded 150% between 1990 and 2000.

This geographical shift brings with it the need for more research in these communities since there is emerging evidence that the profile of Latinos living in areas with a less dense Latino population differs from those who live in communities with a greater density of Latinos (Cavalcanti and Schlee 2001; Fischer 2010; Martinez et al. 2009; Perreira et al. 2010). For example, Fischer (2010) found that Latino youth living in an area with an emerging Latino community were more likely to be high school drop outs than adolescents living in established communities. Moreover, Perreira, et al. (2010) reported that Latino adolescents living in North Carolina (an emerging Latino community) were more academically motivated and worried about discrimination than adolescents living in

Los Angeles (an established community). Although community context may affect language brokering experiences, much of the prior literature on language brokering among Latino adolescents focuses on youth living in areas with an established Latino community. Martinez et al. (2009) argue that serving as a language broker in an emerging Latino community may be more stressful for youth than language brokering in a more established Latino community. Thus, considering the social context in which events or behaviors occur is important in understanding the frequency and impact of behaviors on youth and family adjustment.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing literature on language brokering by obtaining the perspective of fathers, and identifying factors (e.g., youth understanding, *familismo*) that further our understanding of why language brokering is associated with positive and negative outcomes. The study is also unique in that it draws on a sample of Latino families living in an area with an emerging Latino community where bilingual resources are less prevalent. We conducted qualitative interviews with Latino adolescents and their mothers and fathers about their experiences with children serving as translators. Qualitative interviews have the potential to generate rich data that allow us to examine important issues not naturally amenable to survey research. We were particularly interested in identifying factors associated with positive and negative language brokering experiences. We hypothesized that parents and youth would use positive (e.g., pride) and negative (e.g., hard) terms to describe the language brokering experience, and that fluency-related factors (e.g., word finding difficulties) and cultural factors (*familismo*) would be linked to positive and negative feelings.

Methods

Procedures

Families were recruited through flyers posted at local community organizations and apartment complexes that served large numbers of Latinos. Research staff also visited local churches with large Latino congregations to distribute information and flyers. Families were invited to participate in interviews focused on the context and nature of problems faced by Latino youth. Parents were eligible to participate if they were of Latino descent and had a child between 10 and 16 years of age. Children were eligible to participate if they were Latino, between the ages of 10 and 16, agreed to be interviewed, and their parent’s consented to their participation. The study was approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board.

Interested participants were contacted by a bilingual research assistant who described the study in more detail

and set an interview date. On the day of the interview, bilingual research staff described the study and reviewed the consent and assent forms. Parents consented to participate and also provided consent for their children's participation. Youth assented to participate in the study. Once participants provided consent and assent, family members were interviewed separately by bilingual research assistants. Five of the research assistants were doctoral students in the clinical and counseling psychology programs at the university and one was an undergraduate. With the exception of one research assistant, all were of Latino descent (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban) and were unpaid for their work on the project.

Interviews were conducted in English and/or Spanish based on participant preferences. Research assistants used a semi-structured protocol to conduct the interviews (see "Appendix"). For example, parents were asked "Tell me about a time when your child had to translate for you." Additional probes were used to elicit what participants felt about the experience, participants' perceptions of the child's understanding of the material being translated, and additional contexts and people for whom children served as language brokers. If participants did not indicate that the child served as a language broker for the parents then no additional language brokering questions were asked unless participants spontaneously mentioned that they served as language brokers when they were children or the child served as a language broker for other people. In those instances, the same probes that were asked regarding language brokering for parents were asked. Interviews lasted approximately 90 min and were digitally recorded. The interview protocol also covered the following topics: inter-ethnic tensions, family communication about sensitive issues, possible selves, academic achievement, and youth likes and dislikes about their race/ethnicity. This paper focuses only on the narrative concerning language brokering experiences. Each participant received a \$20 gift certificate.

Participants

Twenty-five Latino adolescents (14 girls, 11 boys) and their mothers (18) and fathers (11) were interviewed as part of a study that focused on parent–child relationships (see Table 1). Youth ranged in age from 10 to 15 years, with a mean age of 12.4 ($SD = 1.78$). Fourteen adolescents were immigrants: 10 were from Mexico, 1 from Ecuador, 1 from the Dominican Republic, 1 from Venezuela, and 1 from Colombia. The amount of time immigrant children lived in the US ranged from less than a year to 14 years. Eleven adolescents were born in the US and had parents who were born in Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. One US born child had two

Table 1 Family composition

Family ID #	Family members interviewed
Family 1	Mother, son
Family 2	Mother, father, son
Family 3	Mother, father, daughter
Family 4	Mother, father, daughter
Family 5	Mother, daughter
Family 6	Mother, father, son
Family 7	Mother, daughter
Family 8	Mother, father, daughter, son
Family 9	Mother, daughter
Family 10	Mother, daughter, son
Family 11	Mother, father, son
Family 12	Mother, father, daughter, daughter, daughter
Family 13	Mother, father, son, daughter
Family 14	Mother, son, daughter
Family 15	Mother, father, son
Family 16	Mother, son
Family 17	Mother, father, son
Family 18	Mother, father, daughter, daughter

parents who were also born in the US. Fifty-six percent of children spoke English only during the interview, 40% spoke Spanish only, and 4% spoke both Spanish and English. The majority of parents were immigrants (83%) who had spent an average of 10 years in the US. Most parents (72%) completed the interviews in Spanish. Because reporting a language brokering experience was not the main focus of the study, a language brokering experience was not described in all families interviewed. The current manuscript focuses on the responses from the 15 families in which at least one family member shared a language brokering experience. This includes families in which children were currently serving as language brokers and three parents who recalled what it was like for them to serve as language brokers for their own parents (though their children do not serve as language brokers now).

Data Analysis

Bilingual and bicultural research assistants transcribed the audiotaped interviews into the language spoken by participants. Each transcription was checked by an independent bilingual and bicultural research assistant for accuracy of transcription. Transcripts were uploaded and managed with a qualitative data analysis program (QSR NVivo7, 2006), which allowed us to link the themes to the text. Following Bernard's (2002) protocol for content analysis, we created a set of exhaustive and mutually exclusive codes, applied the codes systematically to the narratives, and then tested the reliability between coders. Specifically, the data

analytic plan consisted of three steps: (a) identifying themes; (b) building and applying the codebook; and (c) describing themes and identifying patterns.

Step 1: Identifying themes: Two bilingual and bicultural coders were given a basic, operational definition of language brokering that was derived from prior literature (Tse 1995) to help them identify all language brokering-related text in the narratives. The first author then read through the language brokering-related text that was identified, and resolved any discrepancies between coders and began to take note on the types of themes that emerged from the data in an effort to build a code-book. Themes are abstract (and often unclear) constructs that researchers identify before, during, and after data collection. They can come from literature reviews, researchers' subjective experiences, and the text itself (Padgett, 2008). *Step 2: Building and applying a codebook:* The first author then trained the coders to identify the themes of helping the family, bilingualism is good, speaking two languages is not always easy, team effort, and relying on children is not always easy. To increase inter-coder reliability a codebook was developed. Once the codebook was complete, the two coders met to become familiar with a set of standardized procedures for marking chunks of text that pertained to each theme and then independently coded 20% of the interviews. The two coders marked the body of quotations based on similarities, representing the themes and related sub-themes (Bernard 2002; Lincoln and Guba 1985). The coders then examined the codes and suggested revisions and disagreements between the coders were discussed and resolved. Cohen's Kappa (Cohen 1960) was used to check consistency between the two coders, which was excellent (>0.80) for all themes (Bakeman and Gottman 1986; Landis and Koch 1977). *Step 3: Describing themes.* Once coding was completed, themes were retrieved using the qualitative software program. Below, we describe themes by presenting segments of text—paraphrases of cases and verbatim quotes from informants—as typical and atypical examples of concepts. Finally, inductive methods were used to derive a better understanding of the shared experiences of language brokering within the family, specifically between parents and children and mothers and fathers.

Results

Children served as language brokers for their parents, extended family members (e.g., aunt, grandparent), friends, teachers, and friend's parents. The two most frequently named settings in which children served as informal translators included health-related settings and schools. For example, one mother said, "Mi hijo fue interprete conmigo porque a mi niña le dieron ataques epilépticos y yo llame a

la policía, a la ambulancia, al nueve once, pero no supe, no supe exactamente lo que yo estaba hablando en el momento. No entonces yo no entendía nada del idioma inglés, y él era que me sirvió de traductor." ("My son was an interpreter for me because my daughter had epileptic attacks and I called the police, the ambulance, 911, but, I didn't know, I didn't know exactly what I was saying at the moment. No, back then I didn't understand anything in English and he [son] was the one that served as a translator.") Other settings included retail stores (e.g., grocery stores), parent workplaces, rental offices, and restaurants. Youth also translated in face-to-face interactions (e.g., during medical visits) and in reading/responding to written communications (e.g., notices from school). Finally, one mother noted that she needed her child to serve as a language broker now that she lived in an area with an emerging community: "En New Jersey todo el mundo, no todo el mundo pero mucha gente habla español. Y no había ninguna necesidad pero cuando llegamos acá en Virginia sí todo el mundo habla inglés, entonces es muy difícil y hay palabras que no entendemos ... Pero sí nos ayudan en esas cosas." ("In New Jersey everyone, not everyone but a lot of people speak Spanish. And there was no need [for children to serve as translators] but when we arrived here in Virginia everybody speaks English, so it is very hard and there are words we don't understand. But, yes they [our children] help us with those things.")

Factors Associated with Positive and Negative Feelings

Prior work has established an association between positive (e.g., pride) and negative (e.g., depression) outcomes and language brokering. Consistent with that prior work, language brokering in this study was described by parents and adolescents as a positive and negative experience. This study moved beyond that association by identifying the reasons why these associations may exist. Themes that emerged include: (a) helping the family; (b) bilingualism is good; (c) speaking two languages is not easy; (d) team effort; and, (e) relying on children is not always easy. Each theme is described below, including exemplar quotes from participants.

Helping the Family

When asked about their language brokering experiences, youth mentioned feeling "great", "bien" (good), or that they liked helping their family. For example, a 10-year-old boy said, "I felt great ... because I mean I could do something for my mom." A 14-year-old girl said, "Me gustó mucho ayudarla ... porque bueno, me hizo sentir útil." ("I really liked helping her [her mother] ... because it made me feel useful."). Parents described feeling proud of their

children because their children were able to help the family and as a result, they did not have to seek help outside the family. For example, a mother said, “Me sentí bien sabiendo no pedir por allí. Ya lo tengo con ellos y está bien.” (“I felt good knowing not to ask around there. Now I have it [help] with them and it’s good.”). A father said, “Pues, fué bonito. ¿No? Porque, pues él me ayudó ... porque hay veces que hay que llevar alguien quien le traduzca para el doctor.” (“Well, it was nice. Wasn’t it? Because, well he helped me ... because there are times that you have to take someone who will translate to the doctor.”)

Bilingualism is Good

Some youth and parents also talked about feeling proud that the child could speak a language that for some was not their native language. For example, a 13-year-old girl said, “It [language brokering] makes me feel good that I can like actually learn the language since I didn’t know it before.” One mother said, “Y pues me da orgullo que supo aprender otro idioma y eso es bueno para él.” (“Well it gives me pride that he was able to learn another language and it’s good for him.”)

Speaking Two Languages is not Always Easy

Some youth reported that language brokering was difficult, and that they felt uncomfortable and nervous. When youth talked about these negative feelings they were often discussed in the context of language brokering experiences that occurred in health-related contexts, when people spoke rapidly, or when they had word-finding difficulties in English and Spanish. For example, a 12-year-old girl said, “Me pongo nerviosa porque siento que no le entiendo al doctor ... me confundo con las palabras.” (“I get nervous because I feel like I don’t understand the doctor ... I get confused with the words.”) This child went on to say that she felt worried that she would tell her mom something wrong that may harm her younger sibling, “Y que tal si le dicen que no puede tomar medicina al bebe y le digo lo opuesto a mi mama. Y se lo da y le hace daño.” (“And what if they say the baby can’t have medicine and I tell my mom the opposite. And she gives it [the medicine] to the baby it harms him/her”). Other children also said the experience was difficult because they were just learning English or they didn’t know the right words to use in Spanish or English. An 11-year-old girl said, “Era difícil [language brokering] ... porque apenas estaba aprendiendo inglés, y yo tampoco sabia hablar” (“It [translating for her mother] was hard because I was just learning English and I didn’t know how to speak in English either”). A 13-year-old girl further noted that sometimes she had trouble knowing how to translate an English word/phrase into

Spanish or vice versa. Youth also described unfamiliarity with some words that sometimes made it difficult for them to fully understand what they were being asked to translate or for other people to understand their translation. For example, an 11-year-old girl said that translating for her mother and the doctor was hard “cuando a mi me dicen palabras largas y yo no sé y le trato de explicar y no me entendían” (“when they said long words to me and I don’t know and I try to explain but they didn’t understand me.”) This child went on to describe that she had to ask the doctor for clarification so that she could continue translating for her mother. Another 13-year-old girl said that translating at the doctor’s office was harder than at school because “they, like, use harder words.”

Similarly, some parents noted that their children likely did not translate word-for-word, and that there were things the child did not understand. For example, one mother said, “Yo sé que mi hija entiende bastante más que yo inglés. Pero hay cosas que tambien ella no, no entiende.” (“I know that my daughter understands more English than I do. But, there are things that she also does not understand.”) A father said, “Muchas veces él no entiende porque como que decía, hay muchas palabras en español cuando se las trato de mostrar para que se las diga a otra persona no entiende esas palabras ... son palabras adultos.” (“Many times he doesn’t understand because as I was saying, there are many words in Spanish that when I try to show him so that he says them to someone else he doesn’t understand those words ... they are adult words.”) Despite these difficulties, parents reported that they believed their children understood what they were being asked to translate and that other parties understood what the child translated based on the outcome of the conversation. For example, a father noted, “creo que si porque vienen con todas las compras, salen de compras por ejemplo y sí consiguen todo lo que necesitan.” (“I think so because they return with all the shopping, they go shopping for example and get everything they need.”)

Team Effort

Some parents and children described the language brokering experience more as a “team” effort when a parent understood English but did not speak English or did not feel comfortable speaking English. For example, one mother and daughter both reported that although the child understood some of what she was being asked to translate there were times when she didn’t understand a word but the mother did. A 14 year old girl said, “A veces yo no entendí algo pero mi mami si entendió.” (“Sometimes I did not understand something but my mom did understand.”) A 13 year old girl said, “like if she [mother] didn’t know words she would ask me what it was” and that she felt that it was “easy” helping her mother. In contrast, the mother

of this girl shared that her child sometimes did not like to help her understand words: “Le da pena porque le digo que conteste, que no entendí, que no puedo decir tal palabra ... ella decía ‘no, no, no me da pena.’” (“It embarrasses her because I tell her to answer, that I didn’t understand, that I can’t say that word ... she said, ‘no, no, it embarrasses me.’”) Finally, one mother noted that currently people understood what her daughter translated but that was not necessarily the case when her daughter was younger and did not know English as well.

Relying on Children is Not Always Easy

Parents reported feeling uncomfortable, ashamed, and embarrassed that their children had to translate for them and these feelings were often associated with their desire to do things on their own. For example, one mother said, “Me dió vergüenza. Fue cómodo pero me dió vergüenza.” (“I felt ashamed. It was comfortable but I felt ashamed.”) Another mother noted, “Ah, bueno un poco ¿cual es la palabra? incomodo para mi porque en realidad pues me gustaría en ese sentido poder desenvolverme yo sola.” (“Ah, well a little, what’s the word, uncomfortable for me because in reality I would like to in that sense be able to do it alone.”) A few parents also reported that their children did not like to serve as language brokers describing them as intimidated and that language brokering gave them grief. Finally, one parent who remembered serving as a language broker for her parents said, “It is hard. I think what takes a hit is the pecking order in the family. Because you know that link into the world through language and through knowledge and through understand what’s going on around you suddenly becomes this child’s. That’s how it was for me anyway. And um it’s a little hard when you’re little you want your parents to guide you but that’s sort of flips around and you find yourself guiding your parents.”

Parent–Child and Gender Differences

There were no differences between father and mother reports on themes. Both mothers and fathers reported that their children served as language brokers in a variety of settings, that they felt both positive and negative emotions, and that they thought their children understood what they were being asked to translate but that there were sometimes words in English and Spanish that the children did not understand. For example, the mother and father of a 15-year-old boy both said that when their son served as a language broker it was a positive experience because their son was helping them and they did not have to seek help outside the family. Boys and girls also reported similar themes in the transcripts. However, when we examined sibling transcripts, we found that younger siblings typically

only served as language brokers when their older siblings were unavailable. As a result, they tended to have less experience with the language brokering process.

In sum, positive feelings were often described within the context of helping the family and bilingualism. Parents and children also shared negative feelings associated with language brokering. For children, these negative emotions were often linked to word finding difficulties in English and/or Spanish, and the use of more complex words or ideas in some contexts. For parents, the negative feelings were often associated with their own English level fluency and their desire to do things on their own. Some youth and parents described the language brokering experience as “normal,” which may suggest that it was neither a positive nor negative experience but rather just something that is a part of their daily lives. Finally, some youth and parents mentioned that language brokering was a shared experience that was associated with positive and negative feelings.

Discussion

In immigrant families the “role of the intermediary with the outside world” (Levine et al. 2004) often falls on children whose English language skills may exceed their parents. One aspect of this role is that children serve as language brokers for their parents and other individuals in a variety of settings (Tse 1995). In this qualitative study the majority of families living in an area with an emerging Latino community described a language brokering experience. Specifically, Latino youth and their parents reported that youth translated for their parents, other adults, and peers; and, that language brokering experiences commonly occurred in medical and school contexts. These results, although consistent with prior work in this area, highlight that youth serving as language brokers is a common phenomenon and may continue to occur given the rapid growth of the Latino population in the US, especially in emerging Latino communities where bilingual services are less available (Corona et al. 2009; Martinez et al. 2009). Given the geographical shift of the Latino population to areas with less established Latino communities (Hernandez 2004), youth serving as language brokers may be a new experience for families that have lived in other US areas where bilingual services were more readily available. Moreover, this new experience can be associated with negative outcomes for youth and parents (Martinez et al. 2009).

Our findings also expand the literature on language brokering by obtaining parents’ perceptions of the language brokering experience (especially fathers), and factors associated with positive and negative feelings about language brokering. Although the literature on language brokers is increasing, few studies have focused on parental experiences

with language brokering. In contrast, the majority of work has focused on the effect of language brokering on the language brokers themselves (Acoach and Webb 2004; Buriel et al. 1998; Dorner et al. 2007; Weisskirch 2006). Yet, given the centrality of the family in the Latino culture (Parke and Buriel 1998), understanding parental feelings and thoughts when their children translate for them may shed some light on how youth cope with the stress and negative feelings associated with language brokering.

We found that parents reported mixed emotions regarding the language brokering experience, a finding that is consistent with work that has demonstrated that youth who serve as language brokers describe positive and negative feelings (Acoach and Webb 2004; Buriel et al. 1998; Dorner et al. 2007; Halgunseth 2003; Umaña-Taylor 2003; Weisskirch 2006). Our findings expand on the current literature by identifying *why* language brokering is perceived positively and negatively. We found that parents reported feeling happy and full of pride when their children served as language brokers and this was linked with the perception that children were helping the family. This concept of helping the family is consistent with the Latino cultural value of *familismo*. In prior research, it has been hypothesized that the positive feelings associated with language brokering may be related to *familismo* yet few studies have actually explored this hypothesis. Some youth also described the language brokering process as “normal” which may be attributed to Latino cultural values of *familismo*. It is possible that youth did not perceive the experience as positive or negative but rather a part of their family values and everyday life. We also found that bilingualism was associated with positive feelings about language brokering. Youth and parents were pleased that the child had learned a new language.

On the other hand, some Latino parents also described feeling embarrassed, uncomfortable, and ashamed that they needed to rely on their children in everyday situations suggesting that this process may negatively affect their own sense of self. In fact, one parent recalled that her own childhood experiences of language brokering likely affected the parent and child roles in her family. Given that language brokering is a relational process between the parent, child, and a third party (Valdés et al. 2003) more attention needs to be paid to how different members experience the language brokering activity. For example, work is needed on how parental experiences and reactions to language brokering may affect parental report of family and child functioning, and also the child’s own adjustment. It is also important to note that for some families in the study, language brokering was a “shared” experience with the parent and child both contributing to the language brokering process. A qualitative study, conducted by Dorner et al. (2008) reported a similar finding. The authors note

that language brokering is not a solitary activity; it is a social and relational activity in which parents and children are both actively involved, engaging together and with society, that has implications on adolescent development (Dorner et al. 2008). Parents and children can be viewed as a “performance team” where both members are actively involved in impression management, that is, both members are trying to present the parent in the most favorable light in order to accomplish specific goals (Valdés et al. 2003). It has been suggested that language brokering does not result in role reversals or disruptions in family functioning, as parents retain their role of directing the language brokering transaction; however much more research needs to be conducted to fully understand the impact language brokering has on family functioning (Valdés et al. 2003). Thus, how parents and children sharing this experience affects their relationship is an important area of study.

Few studies have examined the child’s understanding of the material he/she is being asked to translate yet it is likely that youth feel more competent as translators in some settings than others. In a lab-based examination of the accuracy of language brokers, Valdés et al. (2003) found that young adolescent interpreters exhibited great skill in interpreting with accurate reproduction of the meanings behind the original utterances. They were able to anticipate and resolve conflict, to sort essential from nonessential information, and to monitor and evaluate their production. Other work, however, has documented that language brokers do experience some difficulties while translating or interpreting for others. We found that negative experiences with language brokering were often associated with children’s understanding of the material being translated (comprehension), and word findings difficulties, especially in health-related settings. This finding is consistent with a recent study with 9 Latina adolescent girls who reported problems with vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension when they served as language brokers (Villanueva and Buriel 2010). These findings are concerning given that children serving as interpreters in medical settings is not uncommon (Lee et al. 2006) and that the use of “ad hoc” interpreters (including children) is associated with compromised quality of care (Flores 2005; Flores et al. 2003). When informally translating for a family member in a medical setting, the translator juggles three tasks: translating the context of what the other (e.g., a doctor) is saying, serving as the bearer of bad or uncomfortable news to one’s family, and coping with one’s own reactions (Levine et al. 2004). Children in this sample who shared difficulties translating in medical settings talked about problems with not knowing how to translate medical terms or even what those terms may mean. As a result, youth reported feeling worried that they might not translate something correctly and potentially affect a family member’s

health. Thus, for some youth this experience was stressful yet relatively little research has focused on how they cope with this stress or the negative feelings associated with language brokering during and after the language brokering process. Moreover, more work is needed that examines and compares the language brokering experiences of youth in different settings since the results of this study suggest that some experiences are possibly more stressful and difficult than others.

Limitations

This qualitative study has some limitations. Although the sample size is consistent with other qualitative (Tse 1995) and quantitative (Weisskirch and Alva 2002) work in this area, these findings are based on the experiences of 15 Latino families living in an area with an emerging community and may not be representative of language brokering of Latino families living in a more established Latino community. For example, some researchers have found that the experiences of Latinos in new immigrant communities may differ from those in communities with a more established Latino community (Cavalcanti and Schleef 2001; Perreira et al. 2010). Moreover, these findings are based on the experiences of a diverse group of Latino families who have ties to different Latin American countries. There is great heterogeneity within the Latino culture including individuals with ties to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Though they share many aspects of a common heritage (e.g., language), Latino cultures vary significantly by country of origin, reasons for migration, incidence of poverty, and other demographic variables (Department of Health and Human Services 2001). These within-group differences may affect post-migration experiences, including language brokering and the receiving community's reactions to the immigrant families. No data was collected regarding contextual factors (e.g., acculturation, socio-economic status, youth language fluency) that could affect the language brokering experience for these families. Finally, linking parent and child responses was not conducted since parents and children typically provided different language brokering examples. For example, when asked to describe a time her child served as a language broker a mother shared a story about having to call 911 because her other child was having an epileptic attack. Whereas the child interviewed talked about a time when he served as a language broker in the school setting. Moreover, in some families the parent may have described a language brokering experience but the child did not or vice versa. Future work should use a methodology that allows for a comparison between parents and children regarding the language brokering experiences recalled.

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Appendix

Parent Language Brokering Questions

“Have your children ever had to translate for you?”

- “Tell me about a time when your child had to translate for you.”
- “What was it like for you when your child translated for you? How did you feel?”
- “Did you feel you understood everything your child translated for you?”
- “Do you think your child understood everything he/she was being asked to translate for you?”
- “Do you think the other person understood everything your child translated?”
- “What other types of places or situations has your child had to translate for you? At school? At the doctor's office? Any other places?”

Child Language Brokering Questions

“Have you ever had to translate for your parents?”

- “Tell me about a time when you had to translate for your parents.”
- “What was it like for you when you translated for your parents? How did you feel?”
- “Did you feel you understood everything you were being asked to translate for your parents?”
- “Do you think your parents understood everything you translated for them?”
- “Do you think the other person understood everything you translated?”
- “What other types of places or situations have you had to translate for your parents? At school? At the doctor's office? Any other places?”

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