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**Using vignette methodology as a tool for exploring cultural identity positions of language  
brokers**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines how vignette methodology can aid understanding of cultural identity. This is demonstrated through a study of child language brokers where a child is engaged in the cultural contexts of both the host culture and the home culture and must therefore negotiate new cultural identities. Participants were young people aged 15-18 years – some of whom were brokers while others were not. Drawing on notions of adequacy and inadequacy, visibility and invisibility, theoretical ideas around cultural identity theory and dialogical self theory can provide an understanding of how the young people moved through different (often conflicting) identity positions.

In this paper we use sociocultural theorizing (Vygotsky, 1978) and dialogical self theory (Hermans, 2001) to explore the relationships between the socio-cultural level of development (dominant representations of childhood) and the ontogenetic level (impact on cultural identities). The concept of dialogicality is central to our theoretical perspective in that it is assumed that there are “multiple ways of representing reality” (Wertsch, 1991, p.13), which at the individual level can involve dialogues between the different positions an individual may adopt. In psychological research it is valuable to identify these multiple positions, and how they dialogue with each other, as an attempt to understand how particular positions might take precedence depending on the setting (Wertsch, 1987; 1991).

We use the dialogical approach to analyze interview data in which young participants respond to a short vignette about language brokering. Language brokers are defined as children or young people who engage in activities where they mediate between two (or more) different languages. Usually this mediation take place between family members and officialdom, such as doctors (Cohen et al. 1999), teachers (Abreu et al. 2011) and social services, or in retail settings (Kaur & Mills, 1993). As language brokers are often needed to negotiate complex sociocultural contexts requiring them to take multiple perspectives, dialogical self theory is well-placed for this kind of analysis. We argue in this paper that vignette methodology offers cultural theorists an approach that can document complex sociocultural data and multiple positions of this kind. The topic of language brokering is the mechanism by which we attempt to demonstrate this.

### **A theoretical framework for the use of vignette methodology in research**

When using vignette methodology, participants are presented with a short story/scenario about a fictional character engaging in some form of activity or experience relevant to the topic

under study. The story places the behavior of the character in a concrete context and allows the researcher to explore participants' views on the issues arising from the situation. Vignette methodology allows researchers to systematically explore issues that could, potentially, be sensitive to research participants as it allows participants to control whether they disclose personal information or not (Barter & Reynold, 2004), and to discuss issues from a "non-personal and therefore less threatening perspective" (Hughes, 1998, p.383).

Debates amongst researchers who have used vignette methodology have often centred around the correspondence between the participants' responses to the vignettes and what they would actually do in real-life (Parkinson & Manstead, 1993, p.296). For example, can nurses' professional conduct in a hospital ward be predicted from their responses to a vignette about nursing in a research study? Thus, there has been a focus on making the vignettes as meaningful and realistic as possible. Those who critique the method question whether a written narrative is ever able to capture contextual reality or extract real-world reactions to the stories (Sleed, 2002). Others have argued that the methodology can capture links between statements participants make about behavior in vignette research and their actual behavior in real life contexts. For example, Rahman (1996) argued that in her work on female carers of older people their responses were very similar to what their real life responses would be. Similarly, McKeganey et al (1996) found that intravenous drug injectors were more likely to talk about sharing needles in the vignette study than in a self report study, therefore apparently giving truthful information and not responding to the vignettes in a socially desirable way.

We suggest an alternative way of framing a researcher's interpretation of participants' responses to vignette material through a sociocultural lens. This enables an exploration of

dominant shared representations/understandings of practice that reflect the social and cultural milieu where the research takes place and less dominant ones that may emerge due to the personal trajectories and specific experiences of a participant (e.g. having had a similar experience). The researchers' focus when analyzing vignette responses would not then be on what participants would actually do in a specific situation, but on their subjective perceptions, feelings and experiences. We argue that the method, framed in this particular way, offers a significant contribution to understanding empirically shifting sociocultural identity positions. In this paper we illustrate this through reporting on a study of language brokers.

### **Language brokering and cultural identity**

Language brokers mediate between two (or more) different languages. Children commonly translate for their parents in a variety of contexts but may also be asked to translate for extended family or other members of the broader community. Language brokering involves not just the translation of words but is a sophisticated cultural activity whereby children are required to negotiate and translate complex culturally embedded material. It is clear that language brokering is part of the everyday lives of many families, especially migrating families. Therefore the activity and the way it takes place within families and the wider community can provide an insight into the development of cultural identities. Though reliable incidence data are not available, there are indications in the literature and from our own research (O'Dell et al. 2006), that the activities are more prevalent in some communities than might be expected from their low profile in the research literature (Dorner, Orellana & Li-Grining, 2007; Hall & Sham, 2007; Weisskirsch, 2006;). The broader context is that by 2001 it was estimated that at least three million people living in the United Kingdom were born in countries where English is not the

national language and that 1 - 1.5 million adults lacked the English language skills required to function in society and employment (Schellekens 2001). Looking at a wider context, in 2010 there were 47.3 million foreign-born residents in European Union countries, of these, 31.4 million were born outside the EU (Vasileva, 2011). Data from the 2007 American Community Survey showed 55.4 million people aged over the age of 5 years spoke a language other than in English at home (Shin & Kominski, 2010).

From a sociocultural perspective language brokering is an activity that takes place within specific sociocultural locations that position the child language brokers in a mediating role between their family and wider society. Young people are most likely to engage in language brokering following migration to a new country when, because they learn the host language faster than their parents, they are needed to translate in formal settings like school, the doctors, welfare services etc (Abreu & Hale, 2011). We argue that this places these young people in fairly adult roles that do not match western dominant assumptions that the move to adulthood is based on a very gradual increase in engagement in more adult style responsibilities (Crafter et al 2009; Hobbs & McKechnie, 1997). Language brokering involves not just the deployment of knowledge of two languages but also an active engagement in social exchanges that are normally seen as exclusively adult territory such as discussions between teachers and parents or between landlords and tenants.

### **Vignette methodology as a tool for exploring cultural identity positions in children's language brokering**

'Cultural identity' refers to our understanding of who we are in relation to the shared cultural communities that we belong to. From this position "cultural identities reflect the

common historical experiences and shared cultural codes that provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (Hall, 1990, p. 223). Cultural identity is made up of our past, present and future as well as the role of the extended other as internalized in our self-identity (Crafter & Abreu, 2010, O’Sullivan-Lago & Abreu, 2010b). It is the movement between self and other that vignette methodology is particularly able to capture when viewed as a dialogical process.

In the past many researchers using vignette methodology have taken a monologic view - looking purely at the words said—of respondents’ answers to vignette stories. Bakhtin (1973) argued that utterances are not just the creation of the self but also relate to positions and opinions given by others in relation to the self. Therefore, singular or monologic approaches to understanding dialogue produced from a well-constructed vignette cannot tell the whole story because they fail to recognize the interactional positioning that is constantly in the process of being re-created in internal mental dialogue. Instead, followers of Bakhtin, like Hermans (2002), argue that the self-other relationship is dynamic and dialogic.

The dialogical self is made up of I-positions (Hermans, 2001) whereby multiple internal positions (such as “I as a school child” and “I as my mother’s language broker”) are negotiated in relation to external positions (people in the external environment relevant to the internal world of the individual e.g. my parents, my friends). Then there is the outside world – that which exists outside our own sphere of experience. Hermans’ use of space as a metaphor for understanding different positions is important in that, where people in talk move between I-positions they also



move between ‘me and mine’ and ‘I and you’, illustrating the potential for many possible internal dialogues.

The ability to move positions is an important aspect of cultural identity. In the research reported in this paper our aim was to explore the representations of language brokering amongst young people, including those who have language brokering experience as well as those who do not. Our aim here is to show how vignette methodology can help researchers to understand ways in which young people in particular situations talk about their identity positions.

### **The research study**

The findings analyzed in this paper draw on a larger research project sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council (O’Dell, Abreu, Cline & Crafter, 2006). The overarching aim of the research was to understand how typical and atypical roles in childhood impact upon development and identity of young people. The project interrogated constructions of childhood through an empirical study of young people’s engagement in work activities. We took a broad and inclusive definition of ‘work’ to include paid work that takes place outside the home and other forms of work activity that are less visible, including language brokering. The project was in two stages. In the first stage participants from six schools and colleges in the South East and South Coast of England completed a questionnaire survey about their work activities. These schools were selected to represent a diverse range of types of institution, location and ethnic makeup. On the basis of their responses to the survey 46 young people aged between 15-18 years old were selected for interview in the second stage. The sample included students with experiences of work activities that could be considered ‘atypical’ such as acting as a young carer or language broker and students who had engaged in working activities that could be considered

‘typical’ such as delivering newspapers or serving in a shop on Saturdays. Of those 46 interviewed 12 had engaged in language brokering activities. Nine interviewees were young carers (findings from the young carer data are reported elsewhere). The remaining interviewees had not engaged in either of these ‘atypical’ activities.

The design of vignette material is a key consideration for researchers utilizing the methodology. The vignettes were written by the research team, drawing on key issues and factors identified from the existing research into language brokers. The vignettes used in the study concerned a series of 4 fictitious characters who were 14 years old, slightly younger than the participants, to allow them to identify with the characters and feel that they were familiar (a point confirmed by the pilot participants). The vignette that is the focus of this paper is about a Portuguese young person who brokers for his mother (see Table 1).

Table 1. Vignette: Child language broker

Eduardo is 14 years old. He speaks English and Portuguese. Eduardo’s mum can’t speak English, so she often asks him to help her. Eduardo is proud and pleased to help his mum but is embarrassed when he translates for her at the doctors. Eduardo misses school some days because his mum needs him to help translate for her.

**Individual character questions**

What do you think about what Eduardo is doing?

What would their teacher/parent/friends think?

What do you think about Eduardo's mum?

Would you change anything about Eduardo's life?

What advice would you give if Eduardo were your friend?

What do you think will happen when Eduardo grows up?

**Overall questions**

1. Do you know anyone like these young people?
2. Which one has the hardest/easiest job?
3. Which character is most/least like you?
4. What do you want to do when you leave school?
5. We've been talking about work. What work do members of your family do?

Interviews were conducted by two members of the research team in the students' schools. A number of students were interviewed from each institution. Information about the kinds of work activities reported by the participants was kept strictly confidential.

Once transcribed the data were analyzed with the aid of analysis package NVivo. The data were systematically analyzed using theoretical coding (Flick, 2002) to produce a series of theoretically informed codes. The team looked for moments in the data when the interviewees took different positions in the relation to the vignette character. Therefore the focus was on extracts that reflected cultural identity positioning. The research team were all involved in the process of analysis.

### Analyzing 'I' positions in relation to vignette scenarios

#### **"I as me" – Identifying with Eduardo**

When the participants relate their own experiences to that of the vignette character they adopt a cultural identity position that links the 'I' with the 'me'. In other words the '*I-as-knower*' links their own personal experiences with the '*me-as-known*' through the character Eduardo. The voice of the individual comes through in relation to the vignette character. Here Bana, whose family originate from Albania, discusses her own experiences and how those might link with Eduardo's. The interviewer asks her:

I: What do you think his parents feel about it [Eduardo translating for his mother]?

P: Well, they feel proud for him. Well for my parents, my parents felt quite frustrated because we never had to - they feel the pressure because they couldn't speak themselves but all the time they learn.

I: Did they feel bad?

P: Yeah, yeah, they did 'cause sometimes they needed for an hour [off school] and then I came back but I don't need to take the whole day off...

I: What do you think about Eduardo's mum?

P: I suppose she might be quite frustrated that she had to take her son out of school sometimes.

I: Do you think she would learn English or do you think she would carry on using him as a translator?

P: Well, um, speaking from my own experience, my parents only done it for a little while because my parents, my mum goes to college, and my dad, so, they both, it is just for a while until they learn English...everyone wants to learn English and everyone wants to get involved so it depends on how quick they pick it up or what sort of things they do. I mean, my parents go to college and they try to, trying to learn English and trying to get it, you know.

Having first hand experiences of the language brokering activity Bana is able to impute a range of identity positions on behalf of Eduardo, and in this instance, Eduardo's parents. While she echoes the position of the vignette character by reasserting that Eduardo's parents would feel proud of their son, she adds to that a voice from her own experience – one of frustration. Bana's parents wanted to learn English as soon as they could and were proactive in doing so.

For Elena, a language broker whose family moved to the UK from Ecuador, the internal and external world of her identity positions is synchronized because she lives in a cultural context where language brokering is commonplace or 'normal'. When asked to comment on the thoughts of Eduardo's friends she relates that back to her own experiences:

I: What would their friends think?

P: Um, they're like, they're Portuguese so they'll understand because at some stage they'll have to do the same. But like someone, if someone only speaks one language and they don't have to do the same as he does then they'll laugh at him and say, "Ah, your mum doesn't speak English" and all that.

I: So he might be teased for it. What's your experience of that?

P: Well, my friends all speak Spanish. It's normal for us because everyone has to do the same thing and for others. No, they think it's alright. But sometimes they're like, "Why do you have to miss school to translate for your mum? Can't she get someone else?" So, sometimes I'm like, "Yeah, whatever" innit<sup>1</sup>? I don't really pay attention.

Interestingly, Elena assumes that Eduardo's friends will be Portuguese even though there is nothing in the vignette to suggest this is the case. The link with her own 'I' position – whereby her own friends all speak Spanish, is read into the vignette. She then assumes that monolingual speakers would make fun of Eduardo's mother because they can't relate to a language broker's identity position. The potential value of analyzing such responses in terms of dialogical self theory is illustrated by an intriguing further shift in positioning at the end of this extract from Elena's comments. She implicitly positions herself with Eduardo when she notes that her friends express surprise that she sometimes has to miss school in order to translate for her mother. She rejects their criticism ("I don't really pay attention") and shows, in this, an implicit alignment with Eduardo's position.

Aida, whose family come from the Sudan draws on her experience as a language broker to interpret the vignette. Like Elena, Aida's friends all engage in language brokering activities as well:

I: What would their friends think?

P: Er, what about, what?

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'innit' is slang for 'isn't it?' and it is always used with the inflection of a question. It is invariably a rhetorical question, so the speaker, not requiring a response from the respondent, immediately continues talking.

I: His translating, or?

P: His mum?

I: Um

P: Maybe a bit embarrassing in that sense, about his friends, maybe. But, my friends understand because they have the same situation, their mum can't speak well and stuff.

I: So you tend to socialize with people who...

P Yeah.

I: Do similar things...

P: Not really, but it just happened that my friends had the same situation. But I won't tell them all my personal life anyway, I won't tell them blah, blah, blah, that's, no, I won't tell them that. I would probably lie and say she was sick or I'm sick or something.

Aida is able to engage in an *I-as-knower* identity position through her own language brokering experiences in the sense that she translates and so do her friends - this supposedly negates the kind of embarrassment that Eduardo feels. However, Aida goes on to say that she does not discuss language brokering with her friends even though they all engage in the activity.

Even when the participants could position themselves in the same way as the vignette character Eduardo (because of the shared activity – *I-as-knower*) they sometimes presented contextual circumstances that also set them apart from Eduardo. This is where you can see the move between their internal world (the *I* position) and the external world (*I-as-known* – by my friends, parents etc...) becomes salient. For example, Bana was a broker for her parents but they quickly learnt English so she can identify with Eduardo but her experiences depart when it

comes to the external world of her parents. Like Elena she offers a nuanced account of how her I-position and external positions resemble and differ from those of others.

***“I as you:” Positioning Eduardo’s mother***

Through the person-world interactions Hermans (2001) discusses the role of internal and external positions of the self. While internal positions relate to the self part of identity, external positions acknowledge the role of the external ‘other’ that are part of the environment or context (such as family or teachers). The transactional nature of these internal/external positions are illustrated in the following quotes. The first quote comes from Ama, whose family originated from Ghana. When asked what advice she would give Eduardo if he were her friend, she addressed the external other in his life – namely his mother:

I: What advice would you give if they were your friends?

P: I’d just tell him ‘cause sometimes you can’t choose circumstances, you must, I’m sure there’s a reason why his Mum has to be here and not speak English, so you shouldn’t be embarrassed because at the end of the day she knows her home language, it’s not like she’s illiterate, she just doesn’t know another language so perhaps he should, if he feels embarrassed about it, he should help her to speak it, do you see what I mean?

While Ama herself is a broker she does not position herself alongside him in her opinions of the brokering activity. She positions his mother as competent in her own language, even if she does not know English. As she says, “It’s not like she’s illiterate.” This next quote is also from Ama. Here she uses a number of different identity positions, which she places on the external other. In this case there are two external others, ‘friends’ and ‘mother,’ and she examines the



positions of her friends in relation to their own mothers. Towards the end of the extract below she takes up the position of Eduardo himself:

I: What do you think will happen when he grows up?

P: The thing about languages, I mean, when I speak to my friends sometimes, because they can speak English better, they feel, sometimes children feel a little bit better than their parents. When they can speak they feel like they know more so he could either become like a little bit disrespectful in the sense that, for example, if he taught her English it would be like “I taught you what you know” some of them do that, and if you didn’t it would be like “I’m better than you because...”, do you understand and some of them do that...it could either be that or it could either be that he is more comfortable with the fact that she like, I mean, he will be proud of himself ‘cause he was able to help his Mum but she will find it difficult to communicate.

Ama undergoes a number of dialogical shifts in her positioning. She starts with the self ‘when I speak to my friends’, to the position of taking account of other children, ‘sometimes children feel.’ Ama then touches briefly on the position that could be taken by the mother in the vignette before returning to the vignette character himself, Eduardo. In the end she positions Eduardo as ‘proud of himself’ but maintains that life remains challenging for his mother because she is not able to communicate.

In the following extract Elena begins by talking with an ‘*I-as-you*’ identity by positioning Eduardo’s mother in a variety of contextual ways. Elena perceives the mother as wrong for removing her son from school but recognizes that there appears to be no one else to help her when she is sick. At the end of the extract she draws on an ‘*I-as-me*’ identity position, although it

is worth noting that this was in response to direct questioning from the researcher about her mother. We asked Elena:

I: What do you think about Eduardo's mum?

P: In some cases I think his mum's wrong 'cause one of the most important things is like school 'cause it can help in the future but on the other hand if the mother is sick then of course she needs help and the only one who can help is her son. So in some ways you might think that it's wrong but in some ways it's sensible.

I: Do you think Eduardo's mum understands that he's not meant to miss school or does she not realize he's not meant to do it?

P: I don't think she even realizes, I don't think she realizes that he shouldn't miss school.

I: Because you mentioned earlier that your mum doesn't always understand the implications for missing school.

P: Yeah, she'll think that if you miss school it's like normal, fine, nothing is gonna happen. Maybe she might think the same as my mum.

At the end of this extract there is a shift from looking at the external position of Eduardo's mother to the external position of her own mother. The fictional mother and the real mother are positioned as having a similar perspective and it is interesting that this requires that missing school for this purpose is reconstructed as 'normal'.

This section has focused on the external other, depicted in the vignette story through the role of Eduardo's mother. Asking interviewees to talk about Eduardo's mother allowed us to see some insightful shifts in cultural identity positions. These young people who had acted as

language brokers often took ‘self-as-knower’ positions by empathizing at some points with the mother and at alternative points with Eduardo. Both Ama and Elena shifted between their self in ‘real life’ to the characters within the vignettes.

***‘I-as- other’: I as inside and outside--“I don’t broker but....”***

As the extracts above have shown, those who engage in language brokering are often highly familiar or good friends with others who do the activity. This is particularly the case if they live in a community where many young people act as language brokers. They articulate a number of potential identity positions either through their own brokering or by positioning the role of friends or parents. They often did this by shifting between themselves and the vignette character.

In this section we examine the experiences of participants who may not broker but through experiences or interactions with other people who *have* engaged with the activity, they have a sense of what it is like – linking internal and outside positions of identity. When this happens the activity is afforded a heightened level of visibility. Some of the non-language brokers had no direct experience of the activity themselves but through their relationships with an external other (friends or parents of friends) were able to draw on knowledge to identify with the vignette character. This next quote comes from Louise (non-language broker, White British) who is a young carer. Although the activities are not the same, she uses her experience of school as the mechanism to relate her own ‘*I*’ position with the vignette character ‘other’:

I: What do you think about what Eduardo is doing?

P: On the one hand I think it’s a good thing but at the same time I think he’s putting himself, and like, his own future prospects in jeopardy if he misses school because, yeah being proud of family is a good thing but when it comes down to it, and I’m just cynical about this, but

when it comes down to it, if it puts you at risk of failure then you have to be a bit more selfish than that. I mean, 'cause my mum's disabled I have to do the same thing so at times its like, 'Oh please stay at home and help me do this,' and I'm like, 'Why should I, I really physically can't do this,' and at other times I'm like, 'Yeah ok, no problem'.

Louise perceives that her own young caring responsibilities create similar dilemmas to those experienced by Eduardo. The key area of similarity is the common experience of feeling outside of the normal expectations of an 'appropriate' childhood. This leads her to view an identity position embodying her view of the character in the vignette as related to an aspect of her own internal positioning. The dialogical process this involves leads to her nuanced judgment: "I think it's a good thing, but...."

### ***I as the outside other***

In this section we draw on participants who have no direct experience of brokering and consequently must position the vignette character as an outside other – far removed from their own level of experience. Even though there was no sense of sharing identities as with internal/external positions, a number of participants tried to connect with the outside other through the vignette:

I: Which one [of the vignette characters] has the hardest job?

P: Probably the translator. It would be harder 'cause Eduardo's got to translate everything his Mum says to whoever she is talking to and he has got to be with her all the time—anytime she goes out. So it's quite a demanding thing to have to do.

I: Do you think it would harder than Mary's job [young carer].

P: Yes 'cause they all know his job's hard, Eduardo's, 'cause he has to go everyplace with his Mum. (Amy, non-language broker, White British)

Having no knowledge of brokering herself, or knowing anyone else who might, Amy presupposes the task to be very onerous. She assumes that the demands on Eduardo to be with his mother would be constant. Since she has no internal/external identity position to use she is not aware that in some communities so many people speak two languages that the activity can become normalized.

Viewing the language broker as an 'outside other' means that it is harder for young people to articulate an identity position for the character in the vignette. This is a quote from Edward (non-language broker, White British):

I: What would their friends think?

P: I don't know, if they were my friends they would probably be understanding, but it depends again on what their views are and whether they understand or not or whether they've been told. It may be that they think Eduardo is missing school because he's ill all the time or he's just missing it because he's trying to.

Initially, Edward tries to use his own experiences as a guide by analyzing the potential reactions that his own friends might have. In light of the lack of internal knowledge about brokering Edward can only theorize about a number of possibilities.

When the participants perceive they have no connection with the vignette character they used broad or dominant representations of relationships and activities to make sense of the vignette scenario. Even in these cases the participants can be seen to have drawn on the external

positions, available to them through their own friendship relationships, for example, in order to understand Eduardo. The participants therefore draw on conventional and often stereotypical and negative representations applied to situations that they have little knowledge of, as in assuming language brokers would be outsiders or lonely.

### **Discussion**

In this paper we have argued that using vignette methodology through the theoretical lens of the dialogical self, alongside sociocultural theorizing, can help make sense of the data in a complex way that enables shifting identity positions by a participant to be documented. We have drawn on data from young people who either do, or do not engage in language brokering activities. In particular, we have analyzed their answers to questions about the vignette character Eduardo, who translates for his mother. By drawing on dialogical self theory in the analysis of the data, we were able to show that our participants moved between differing internal characterizations, drawing on their own position and an internalized position of the character in the vignette. Some were also able to draw on external positions in identifying the role of peers, parents and teachers. In doing so, even some of those who had no brokering experience, but knew of people who did, were able to give a nuanced account of the positions of the vignette character. Other participants occupied an identity position that was outside of any personal experience of the phenomenon. These participants used generalized knowledge and dominant representations to make sense of an activity that was so far removed from them.

The purpose of using the vignette is that it provides space for the participants to explore corresponding identity positions whilst at the same time presenting diversity within their own range of experience. At times these identity positions moved away from the vignette character

and were contradictory – for example, Aida did not align herself with Eduardo because all her friends did brokering, rendering the activity as “normal”. On the other hand, she said that she does not necessarily tell her friends about her activities and may even lie about why she is off school. Thus the methodology captured the complex ways in which brokers and non-brokers positioned the vignette character Eduardo. This indicates the potential of the approach for the development of a psychologically meaningful research design in a complex multicultural society.

From a methodological point of view, the key issue for researchers is to design the materials with appropriately structured questions that enable and facilitate the exploration of participants’ identity positions. Applications of vignette methodology need to ensure that the approach to data collection and the social context of the research support that process. In the research presented in this paper we examined perceptions of language brokers in a school setting. Thus the interview was designed to stimulate talk about key characters in this setting—the teacher, school friends, and as we wished to capture issues related to roles that conflict with demands from the family, the parent.

Documenting shifts in the positions that respondents’ express is only one step in the analysis. It is essential to examine possible clues to the personal meaning of these shifts. They might reflect some combination of tension, conflict, disagreement, ambivalence and agreement. Conflicting representations in society and institutions can lock the self in certain types of dialogues. O’Sullivan-Lago and Abreu (2010a) argue that these positions are not random and that the sociocultural context may constrain the set of possibilities the self perceives as available and in this way influence pathways. This is well illustrated in the interview extracts where participants such as Elena and Aida re-position language brokering as something normal because

they live in communities where it is a regular cultural practice. The findings of this study support approaches to understanding young people who act as language brokers in terms of both the (perhaps mainly multilingual or mainly monolingual) neighborhood in which they live and the possibly complex internal personal dialogue that characterizes their perception of their language brokering. This has implications not only for researchers but also for professionals working with them.

Hermans argues strongly that positioning does not mean that participants do not have a stable sense of self or do not know their own minds. Rather it demonstrates the move between various legitimate social and personal positions that become relevant at different points to make sense of the topic in question. Grossen and Salazar-Orvig (2006) argue that the self is fundamentally heterogeneous (made through different positions) and also through systems of activity. Thus determining “who speaks” is not as self evident as it might seem (Grossen and Salazar-Orvig 2006). As dialogical self theory begins to take fuller account of the wider social context (O’Sullivan-Lago & Abreu, 2010a, 2010b), the use of vignette methodology has considerable potential as a research tool that can facilitate the research designs and analysis that are required.

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