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Child language brokering as a family care practice: Reframing the 'parentified child' debate

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Abstract

This paper explores the perspectives of 29 child language brokers living in the UK who interpret for their family following migration. They were presented with vignette stories depicting a potentially conflictual situation between a language broker, a parent and an adult 'other' in a position of power or authority. Drawing on debates about language brokering as a family care practice, the 'parentified child' and discussions about non-normative childhoods, the analysis highlights how the role played by the adult 'other', coupled with a sometimes-hostile sociocultural context, can exaggerate tensions or facilitate interactions in the parent–child relationship. The young people's views and experiences illuminate how they navigate these complexities.

KEYWORDS

care, child language brokering, non-normative childhoods, parentified child

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we focus on the dynamics of family relationships within the arena of child language brokering, which is an area of research concerned with young people from migrant backgrounds who translate and interpret for family, community and peers who do not speak the local language. We do this by presenting the perspectives of active child language brokers living in the UK (aged 13–16 years old) and their reflections on the social relationships and the types of activities of those involved in

the brokering interaction. Child language brokering occurs in a range of sites including home, retail, the doctors, restaurants, dentists, housing offices, welfare and immigration offices, police situations and school (see Tse, 1996; Valdés, 2003). Moreover, it involves different forms of communication, including face-to-face interactions, answering the phone, answering the door, arranging appointments, filling out application forms, interpreting television programmes and translating a range of texts (e.g. medicine bottles, Dorner et al., 2007).

An important debate within the child language brokering literature focuses on the types of 'adult-like' work that young people undertake, which can lead to concerns about the impact this has on the parent–child relationship and children's wellbeing (Kim et al., 2017; Tomasi & Narchal, 2020). The increased responsibility taken-on by child language brokers has been likened to the concept of 'parentification', 'adultification' or 'role reversal', which suggests parents' authority is suppressed within the family dynamics because child language brokers find themselves in situations where they are assigned roles usually reserved for parents (Titzmann, 2012; Weisskirch, 2007). Opponents of this idea argue against the notion of a role reversal during language brokering, reframing the activity as a family care practice that bears resemblances to other forms of caring responsibilities such as contributing to household chores (Crafter et al., 2009; Hall & Sham, 2007; Orellana, 2009). Critics of the parentification or role reversal concept have further argued that they are based on Western concepts of childhood, concerned with protecting children from 'adult-like' activities (Crafter et al., 2009; O'Dell et al., 2018). As Bauer (2016) and others have argued, in non-Western cultures, 'adult-like' activities may be viewed as a normal part of 'pitching-in' tasks that help prepare children for adulthood (Bauer, 2016; García-Sánchez, 2014; García-Sánchez, 2018; Orellana, 2009; Rogoff et al., 2014).

In addition to these important debates, this paper argues that these issues need to be considered against context-specific concerns when, for example, language brokering takes place in a hostile socio-political landscape, where young people and their families might be subject to racialised micro-aggressions (Nash, 2017; Reynolds & Orellana, 2009) or be living in difficult circumstances (Kwon, 2014). In these situations, the language broker may be mediating between their family members and an adult 'other' who is in a position of authority or power (Ceccoli, 2020; García-Sánchez, 2018). The type of task young people are asked to language broker for may also carry different levels of responsibility. These nuances are not necessarily accounted for by proponents of the parentified child debates within child language brokering. Our paper draws on vignette interviews with 29 young language brokers in England to explore their perspectives on the relationship between a parent, an adult who may be in a position of authority, and their own language brokering activity, when faced with a brokering situation of potential conflict or misunderstanding.

CHILD LANGUAGE BROKERING AS A FAMILY PRACTICE

Views about the impact of child language brokering on the dynamics of family relationships demonstrate a mixed picture. Some studies suggest a stronger bond between parents and children (Chao, 2006; Orellana, 2009) especially when accompanied with a strong sense of family togetherness and community connection, alongside praise or appreciation for their activities (Cline et al., 2017; Tomasi & Narchal, 2020). Other scholars have documented associations with negative feelings such as stress, burden and depression, especially when associated with poor parenting relationships (Kim et al., 2017; Tomasi & Narchal, 2020; Wu & Kim, 2009). One framing of the family dynamic in the field, is that it destabilises the family system, creating a 'role reversal' in the hierarchical order of family life, where children take on roles and responsibilities that are perceived to be associated with adults (Kaur & Mills, 1993; Titzmann, 2012). This has been linked to the wider construct of 'adultification'

or 'parentification' (see also Jurkovic, 2014; Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009; Trickett & Jones, 2007), whereby parents may rely on children for both emotional support and instrumental support (Arellano et al., 2018; Jurkovic, 2014).

Other studies have argued against the notion of the parentified child, viewing language brokering as a family practice that is a normal part of everyday life for those who migrate to new countries (Dorner et al., 2008). Under these circumstances, family may need to work as a performance team, with young people acting as intermediaries or the 'right hand' for family members and the local community (Orellana, 2009; Valdés, 2003). Migration to a new country can present not previously experienced challenges that require new role distribution within families (Weisskirch, 2017). These challenges can bring parents and children closer together or heighten already existing tensions (Shen et al., 2017). Equally, families may come from cultures where children 'pitching-in' with tasks such as domestic chores, sibling care or financial decision-making is the norm, with language brokering acting as one extension of these activities (Crafter et al., 2009; Rogoff et al., 2014). Even when language brokers are aware of enacting some power in their position as linguistic mediator, this does not necessarily mean that the wider dynamic of the family is disrupted, as parents may ultimately wield 'all the power in the house' (Bauer, 2016, p. 10). Weisskirch (2017) goes a step further, arguing that there is a presumption of negativity of the parentified child debate that points to a deficit-based viewpoint that does not acknowledge the necessary contribution of all the family members to respond and adapt to the challenges of migrating to a new country (see also Mier-Chairez et al., 2019).

CONTEXT MATTERS—LANGUAGE BROKERING IN A HOSTILE WORLD

Language brokering is a complex activity that is socially situated and tied to a range of contextually influenced issues (Kam & Lazarevic, 2014). Young people do find themselves brokering in potentially difficult or conflictual situations, but we argue that these circumstances are often a reflection of the socio-political histories, cultures and institutional inequalities of the context (Crafter & Iqbal, 2020). This study took place in England in the middle of the 'Brexit' referendum, a political vote for the UK to leave the European Union, and towards the end of many years of harsh austerity measures. The former led to a wave of anti-immigration sentiment within political, media and public discourse (Hobolt, 2016). The latter has resulted in significant cuts to public services, including professional and public linguistic translating and interpreting services and adult language education provision. Given this lack of support for migrant families in public spaces, parents and carers may have little option but to draw support from their children for help with interpreting.

Child language brokers may find themselves in a very public interaction in a potentially hostile context, with an outcome that is dependent on a dialogue between themselves, their families and another adult who is usually in a position of power and authority. The young person's negative feelings towards brokering may be enhanced by brokering within a society that reacts negatively towards their parents, which in turn, can also lead to feelings of marginalisation (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2017). One study exploring the experiences of child language brokers in Swedish public services highlights the anger that young people can feel towards society because they bear witness to the obvious evidence that their 'family was not treated properly' (Gustafsson et al., 2019, p. 15). Evidence suggests that in public spaces, language brokers are aware of the burdens and responsibilities they carry, but these are not necessarily directed towards parents. They could equally be associated with the racialised slurs or micro-aggressions they experienced from others in the public sphere, which in turn shaped the communication with their parents (Nash, 2017). These kinds of tensions and challenges are rarely

taken into account in research on the parentified child within language brokering literature, though it is raised within the field more generally (Guan et al., 2016). For example, in one exchange in a music shop in Chicago, a father and a daughter attempted to rent a musical instrument (Reynolds & Orellana, 2009). The salesperson began detailing information about the instrument but when the daughter began language brokering for her father, the talk shifted to information about the cost, with an implied assumption that the family might not be able to afford the instrument. Reynolds and Orellana (2009) argue that this is a form of racialisation through linguistic profiling.

LANGUAGE BROKERING AS A CARING PRACTICE IN 'NON-NORMATIVE' CHILDHOODS

The concern that young people are burdened with 'adult-like' activities that lead to a role reversal have been linked to discourses of childhood that are socio-historically traceable to Western notions of childhood (Bauer, 2016; Burman, 2008). Normative developmental models of childhood invariably position family relationships in narrow form; adults as carers and children as being cared for. In turn, activities that are considered premature, or lead to an accelerated transition to adulthood that transgresses normative developmental expectations, are also imbued with a sense that they 'rob' children of a 'normative' childhood and in turn, position children with caring responsibilities as problematic (Callaghan et al., 2016; Crafter et al., 2019; O'Dell et al., 2018). Yet when language brokering is viewed as part of the role distribution of family responsibilities, this activity can be framed as a care practice (García-Sánchez, 2018) that is part of the everyday support a young person might provide for family (Dorner et al., 2008). In the context of migrant family households and the wider community, it may be framed as part of the 'caregiving continuum', subject to shifts and changes as brokers grow up and life circumstances change (Bauer, 2016).

Equally, it is important to recognise that care responsibilities and relationships such as those experienced by child language brokers can be challenging and difficult to navigate (Nash, 2017; Reynolds & Orellana, 2009). Caring *for* others and being cared for *by* others involves emotional labour and entanglements (Milligan & Wiles, 2010; Tronto, 1993) that may be associated with strains, stressors, and conflicts; pride, accomplishment and self-worth. Responsibility for these emotions should not be placed solely at the door of parents though, as suggested within the parentification perspective. What the scholarship mentioned above argues is that we need to take into account young people's perspectives on their family caring responsibilities because there is a danger that they can be both invisible and go unrecognised (García-Sánchez, 2018). Nor is language brokering a static activity across context and over time. The family may make ongoing readjustments to who might language broker within the family and for what purpose (Orellana & Phoenix, 2016; Shen et al., 2017). With these viewpoints in mind let us turn to look at child language brokers perspectives on the practice.

THE RESEARCH STUDY: CONTEXT AND METHODS

The research study from which the data in this paper is drawn, sought to investigate child language broker's own understandings of how cultural knowledge is mediated during translating encounters and to gather data on their feelings towards the practice. A range of methods was used to do this, including qualitative vignette-based interviews, observations, surveys and art-based approaches. Data from the 29 vignette interviews (23 female, 6 male) with young people aged between 13 and 16 years old from three schools in Greater London, UK will form the focus of this paper. We targeted schools with

highly diverse populations as well as evidence of recently arrived migrant families.[1] Within these schools, the English as Additional Language Coordinators provided a key point of contact with our child language brokering sample.

We ensured our sample were regular language brokers by inviting pupils to take part in a survey. Those pupils who reported brokering more than once a week were invited to be interviewed. Our sample comprised young people who had made direct migration journeys from their home countries including Hong Kong, Afghanistan, Turkey and Romania as well as those who had made more trans-national journeys from countries such as Bangladesh, Colombia, Nigeria and Sri Lanka, via another country such as Italy or Spain before they eventually settled in Greater London. One of our young people described arriving in the UK between the ages of 2 and 3 years. Five described arriving between the ages of 6 and 9 years of age, four of our sample did not give us this information and 19 arrived in the UK between the ages of 11 and 16 years of age.

The vignette interviews

Vignettes, in the form of short story scenarios, were used as a stimulus for semi-structure interview questions. This interview technique has shown to be useful in past work with young language brokers and other young people in our target age group because the vignette provides stimulus around which they can centre their talk (Crafter et al., 2015; O'Dell et al., 2012). Often cited as an ethically sensitive approach, the vignette allows the young person to reflect on their own experiences as well as the character in the story, leaving the participant to decide how much they would like to share (Barter & Renold, 2000; Kandemir & Budd, 2018).

Four vignettes were developed through adapting real instances of child language brokering from past studies in the field (see García-Sánchez, 2014; Guo, 2014; Kwon, 2014). We sought to present a challenging or conflictual situation involving two adults and the language broker. Here is a summary of each vignette[2]:

- Gabriela's vignette: Gabriela and her father have a problem with their heating. They go to the local housing office where there is a tense exchange. Gabriela's father gets angry and asks Gabriela to call the housing officer a useless idiot.
- Amrit's vignette: Amrit and his mother are at the supermarket looking for ghee (clarified butter). Amrit asks a staff member for the ingredient but doesn't know the word in English. The staff member answers in an impatient tone of voice.
- Jin's vignette: Jin wants to invite his English friend to play and have dinner. Both parents talk in the playground. Jin's mother wishes to cook Chinese food but Jin knows most of his friends eat burgers and chips at other houses. Jin's mother is hurt and asks Jin to say to the friend's mother that it is polite to eat what you are given when you are a guest.
- Sorraya's vignette: Sorraya is translating for her neighbour at the doctor's. During the exchange the neighbour mentions to Sorraya that when her son starts screaming she gives him a smack. Sorraya knows that the doctor will not approve of the neighbour hitting her child.

Each respondent was then asked for their thoughts on what was happening in this situation, how they would describe the cultural misunderstanding that had occurred and how the child in the story would deal with it.

Ethical Approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee from the institution where at the time both authors were based. All names of respondents have been changed.

Analysing the data

Following transcription, the interviews were coded using a system of theoretically informed categories (Flick, 2014). This process was started by taking three interviews, which were independently analysed by the two team members (the authors) and a third colleague not previously involved in the project. Coding categories were developed, cross-checked and kept where a high consensus was reached. In situations where there was disagreement, the team compared them with other codes for similarities and either kept or omitted them. Through this process a broad system of themes and codes were developed. Following the first wave of analysis, a second round of analysis occurred, this time exploring instances where participants mentioned incidences involving parents or family members. Specifically, this paper focuses on the categories of 'language brokering as a family practice' and 'positioning the parent'. We do not treat the young people's responses as a reflection of their real lives (O'Dell et al., 2012) but as a mechanism to explore multiple positions and that reflect their thoughts about the vignette character or their own personal experience. The quotes are presented verbatim, and since all of our respondents have English as a new language, some words may not be correctly or grammatically written.

ANALYSIS

In this study we deliberately provided our respondents with a vignette depicting a challenging situation that also included emotive language and in turn, some of our young people also told us their own views and experiences of challenging situations. We had examples of situations showing tensions between parents and children as well as examples of when young people and their parents worked as a 'performance team' (Valdés, 2003). Importantly in this analysis, we argue that other significant aspects should be taken into account to view language brokering interactions in nuanced ways. First, we discuss the emotional entanglements these situations can throw up. Then we discuss the important role of context, particularly when brokering takes place is public spheres. Finally, we explore the complex decisions young people take to manage, not just their parent, but the other adult in the situation, who is often in a position of authority.

Emotions and care in language brokering

Emotions can run strongly in challenging language brokering situations in the public sphere. We wish to stress though, that some, but by no means all, of the emotional entanglements can be laid at the door of parents, as often implied within the parentified child concept. Language brokering in public spaces is often a tripartite situation, involving the broker, their family member and the adult 'other'.

Our young respondents expressed everything from pride to annoyance at giving their personal time and effort to broker for their family members. Simultaneously, most of our brokers expressed empathy towards their parents, recognising the frustration that some parents felt when they were unable to communicate themselves. The Gabriela vignette, at the housing office with her father, seemed to spark resonances with our young people. Tereza, aged 16 states:

> They [parents] felt a bit angry at the fact that you're not listening to them as well… So I feel, most of all he [the father in the story] feels angry and frustrated because also he cannot talk, he cannot speak for himself.

Tereza's assertion that Gabriela's father is frustrated because he '*cannot speak for himself*', points towards a sense of parental powerlessness, associated with the parentified child concept. Equally though, we found in many situations, parents were very involved in the process of communication and were far from passive bystanders. For example, a number of our respondents discussed what needed to be said in the home, before heading out into the public sphere, thus making the situation less emotionally stressful. Anca told us:

> We made like a kind of technique like, before we enter the place 'you tell me what I have to do and then you know when we come out, you know I have, this is all I said, and I said it. Because if you talk on top of me then I won't understand'

However, on the face of it, this strategy could make Anca's mother seem passive because the joint conversation took place in private, rather than in public.

Samir, from Afghanistan, reflected on the feelings of the mother in the supermarket vignette, where a shop person speaks with an impatient tone of voice to her son, Amrit. Samir talks about how the mother in the vignette might feel out of place in this space and disconnected from her home country:

> I think she feels more, I don't know how to describe it; not lonely but like, she feels a bit lonely cause she's like in another country with different kind of people that she's never met before, of [a] different kind of place. Like if you go to Afghanistan, the supermarket and the service you get here, you won't get there. So, she might be liking it, but she might not be liking it as well. So, she's upset cause of like the place she's in, but she's also angry at the thingy [the shop person] if the son tells her.

Samir's discussion invokes a depth of care and empathy for the mother in the vignette that takes into account broader feelings about migrating to new and unfamiliar settings. The vignettes that we gave our respondents all contained some kind of emotionally charged element, such as a father who said something rude in frustration, or an impatient shop keeper. In response, our respondents talked about how either the vignette character, or the young people themselves, should manage emotion-laden situations. Daria is asked to comment on how the housing officer might feel about Gabriela's father's anger:

> How do you think the housing officer feels about her dad?

> Probably they will feel he's an angry person, we can't do nothing with him. Because I know from me that if you're angry, and you're talking and you sound like that, they can't do nothing for you, they can't help you. You need to stay calm to talk with them, like how you are now, because if you're angry, you can't do nothing anymore….

> So sometimes you feel inside..?

> Yeah, that it's too much. Yeah but it's okay, I will be calm and then I can translate.

Daria was not the only respondent in our sample to engage in a form of care labour, by ensuring all parties had a calm level of communication. For Daria, this maximised the potential for achieving what the family needs otherwise '*you can't do nothing anymore*'. Equally, in the face of an extremely difficult adult 'other', it was not always possible to stay calm. Eztera described a discussion for her mother to set

up a phone contract. She started by being exceptionally polite but recognising the lack of support at the other end, changed her tone:

> I mean at the beginning I was really, really nice to him. I've never seen myself being that kind of nice to anyone. I was extremely nice to him and he was just like ignoring me as much as he could. It was annoying so I started to kind of ignore him too, just you know short sentences and stuff like this.

As the conversation progresses, Eztera begins to mirror the conversational style of the adult 'other' in this situation, thereby shifting being '*really nice*' to using '*short sentences'*.

Context matters: Language brokering in public spheres

The dynamics of parent–child relationships cannot be properly understood without also taking into account of the context in which language brokering occurs. For our respondents, language brokering, as an audibly visible marker of cultural difference, could amplify tensions, inequalities and racialised micro-aggressions (e.g. subtly prejudiced questions or implications) received from other adults in the context, particularly in public spaces. In this first quote, Janina responds to the vignette of Amrit, who encounters an impatient shop person. She describes a similar experience in the supermarket when she asked for help finding a product:

> Yeah, they try to get rid of me because when I try to describe, I describe it very detailed things so it's hard for them to understand.
>
> And how do they treat you in this situation?
>
> They look at me like I just fell from the moon. And like I'm speaking in [an] alien language and it's really awkward for me. And then my mother starts applying the pressure like 'What did you say? What did you do? Tell me, tell me'.

Like Amrit, Janina's own experience in the supermarket leaves her feeling like an '*alien*' who '*just fell from the moon*' within a very public space, leaving her feeling '*awkward*'. Her mother's intervention, perhaps resulting from her sense that the shop keeper is not being nice, adds to the pressure felt by Janina in the situation. Being interrupted during language brokering was cited as stressful by a number of our respondents. However, some of our young people and their parents renegotiated how they managed brokering in public spaces. Anca described going to the doctor about a broken eardrum and her mother berates her in front of the doctor for whatever caused the injury, but Anca suggests they pick up the conversation at home, replying '*okay okay, let's go home and talk about that*'. To manage potential tensions that could arise in the public sphere, some brokers and parents would discuss what needed to be said in the private sphere, before entering into a public space.

Like the respondents in Gustafsson's (2019) study, some of our young people and their parents were treated negatively by the adult 'other' in the brokering interaction. Rabiatou describes going to the police station to report her laptop stolen:

> Because I went once with my mum because my laptop got stolen and I went there and they were like 'Oh'. I think it had something to do with race. They were like 'Oh'. Because it

was a brand new, you know, the brand-new laptop that just came out. It was one of them and it got stolen and I even went there with a receipt. And they were like 'Oh no', that they didn't care. They said they don't care and that it's probably not even my laptop that I probably stole it, the box and the thing.

And did you tell your mum they said that?

Yes

And what did she say?

She said, she actually cursed them out and called them racist bastards and stuff like that and then she left….

How did you feel during that whole thing?

Annoyed, because I was like 'where is my laptop?' Like I actually got it for my birthday so I didn't even get why they were disrespectful

Like many young people from minority backgrounds, our language brokers experienced racialised micro-aggressions from which they are afforded little protection, in part because they are the channel through which the language of racism is communicated. Notably, Rabiatou's mother is not a passive actor in this situation, nor does Rabiatou protect her mother from the message, as sometimes evidenced in our own work and other studies with language brokers (Guan & Shen, 2015; Nash, 2017; Orellana, 2009).

Child language brokers and their families constantly navigate institutional rules, regulations and regimes that are different from their previous home countries. The vignette about Gabriela, who had to go to the housing office to report a problem in the home, was very recognisable to those families in our sample who rely on state support in terms of housing and welfare. They are more likely to reside in stressful living conditions and interact with officials in authoritative positions. These situations heightened public displays of anger, as Marina recalled when she visited the housing office to repeatedly ask for a leak in the flat to be fixed:

…my mum was like, but she kept on like shouting, she wasn't shouting at me but she was angry with me because she was like 'tell this to the man, tell this that this happened'.

Equally, Yana's parent developed a strategy of researching online how English systems work in the private space, before heading into the public arena, as Yana told us *'my mum, she is really interested in England, so she knows about the rules. She knows about everything, but she just has some language problems'*. Such practices can remain invisible within the 'parentified child' framing of this activity, because they may not directly relate to the interaction, but could mitigate against the worst effects of confrontation in public spaces.

Who to manage—How to manage

In the previous section, we have argued that interactions in public spaces can be contentious, with significant power differentials—with the family needing something (e.g. to have something in their

house fixed) and where the language broker is in a less powerful position. The power differentials are augmented by the role of the authoritative 'other', the family's immigrant status, the language brokers age and their own, and others perception of their competence (Katz, 2014; Kwon, 2014). Again, we do not wish to down-play the difficult and challenging situations that young people find themselves in when language brokering. In fact, we deliberately sought out conflictual situations through our vignette dilemmas. We wish to highlight that language brokers are aware of these dynamics, and in thinking about the dilemmas faced by our vignette characters and their own experiences, talked with some depth about who they needed to manage, and how they would manage these situations, in order to get the best outcome for their family.

On the whole, our respondents placed ultimate authority with their family member to sort out any challenging situations, although the roles they played to facilitate the conversation varied (Crafter & Iqbal, 2020). Vasil placed ultimate responsibility and trust with his father when discussing some of the challenging incidences that he brokered for. For example, his father went ahead and fixed their broken fridge because the landlord was taking too long to sort it out. The landlord was not pleased, but Vasil defended his father's actions, both through his brokering and as a morally acceptable decision, '*my dad told me to translate to him that he's not right in this situation*, *my dad is right cause we can't stay without the fridge*'. For Dimitar though, the role of the 'other' played an important part in how he would manage a situation. When discussing Gabriela's vignette, Sarah begins by asking Dimitar if he ever feels 'caught in the middle' when language brokering—either in his own experience or thinking on behalf of Gabriela, the vignette character:

> I mean Gabriela sounds like a foreign name so she's from a different country. And they probably have different views on how work should be done than the people who gave them the house. And she probably just has to listen to her dad because she's used to the ways they do it in their country. And she still has to listen to the professional because that's what he does for a living.

> So what does she do in the end? How does she manage that?

> I mean if I was her I would listen to the professional because that's what he does for a living. My dad doesn't know what he knows, so I would just listen to him and tell my dad 'Dad we can't do this. We have to listen to the guy. He knows more stuff than us'.

> If that's ever happened to you, do you tend to do that whilst you're in the situation or do you tend to go away and have, kind of, fill-in conversations?

> I mean if I know my parents are doing the wrong thing and they don't know any better then I'll listen to the professional who knows what to do at this moment in time. If they're wrong and the other guy's right, I'll just listen to the other guy and tell them this is like this.

> And if you feel that the professional is wrong? Has that ever happened?

> No, no that's never happened to me at least. It could happen to someone else.

Through the lens of the parentified child, Dimitar's thinking could be interpreted as a role reversal, where he plays an overly powerful role (see Kaur & Mills, 1993). Clearly, Dimitar holds some power or

sway over this situation by making a judgement about whether his parents are '*doing the wrong thing*'. When reflecting on the vignette about Gabriela, his thought processes shift between Gabriela's responsibilities to her family and the role of the 'more' knowledgeable authoritative other.

Young people drew on a range of strategies to manage the difficult and challenging situations their families faced when attempting to get support from institutions. In this next example, Kokumo chose to diffuse the situation with the kind of humour that could be identified as a coping mechanism:

> Basically, we had the same problem with heaters, but my mum was at work and my father was at home. And my father called the gas people…and the woman was talking so fast, very fast…And we reached there [to the phone together] and I start talking. My father say 'Oh is she stupid. We are saying we feel very cold in this house and she's saying we need to call your landlord'. My father was so pissed off that he started insulting her in Igbo. And I was there laughing. The woman talked like if you were insulted and she cut the phone. And then I was in this situation like 'what can I do?' Yeah my father's started getting angry with me because I was laughing at the phone but what can I do? [Kokumo said to her father] 'You were insulting her in Igbo'. It was funny because I was talking to her in English and my father was insulting her in Igbo. After I called back again, another one, a man this time, and then finished.

The role of the 'other' in this situation is difficult for Kokumo to manage because she is talking '*very fast*'. Her father needs a serious problem to be fixed, leaving Kokumo caught between two challenging dilemmas. Kokumo's use of laughter both ignites and diffuses an intense situation, or at least gives her a mechanism for managing both her father and the person on the phone. To some extent the strategy backfires because the person cuts the phone call. Equally, the strategy allows the situation to be reset, with a more successful and less emotionally charged phone call.

IN SUMMARY

This article reports on the analysis of vignette interviews with 29 young people to explore child language brokering as a family care practice, paying attention to how the practice may be influenced by a hostile immigration context, the role of the 'other' adult in a position of authority and the young people's perceptions of the relationships between a language broker and their parent. When these complexities are taken into account, our analysis showed these dynamics can exaggerate tensions in the parent–child relationship and have an impact on how language brokering interactions play out. Debates about the family dynamics in child language brokering have led to concerns about a destabilisation of the family, sometimes described as the 'parentified child' or 'adultification' that takes the child into an adult world 'from which there is no return to the world of a child, and leads to hierarchy reversal in the family' (Gustafsson et al., 2019, p. 22). Another framing of the debate suggests that it is part of normal family care practices (Bauer, 2016) and that it is important to recognise that children are not just passive recipients of care, but also have a part to play in caring for others (García-Sánchez, 2018). Caring is a multidimensional practice, involving both physical/material needs alongside moral, emotional and social entanglements that also bring to bear power inequalities. In this article some of the young language brokers described difficult situations that put a strain on the relationship with their parents. However, we argue that the parentified child concept provides little to account for the complexities arising from the sociocultural context of brokering practices and the role played by the adult 'other'.

Our respondents told us about positive experiences of language brokering, including situations where the adult 'other' in authority had been nice or treated them respectfully. Unsurprisingly though, negative encounters, when imbued with racial slurs or micro-aggressions, stood out. That parents' expressed stress or anger, or that children managed all parties to achieve the best outcome for their family is not surprising given the stimulus of our vignette stories. One potential limitation of our study is that we deliberately sought out negative or conflictual situations. The key point though, is that parentification leaves little room for acknowledging features of parent–child interactions such as strategising about what needed to be said before entering into a conversation in the public sphere. Sometimes this was driven by the language broker, especially if they perceived the conversation to be awkward or embarrassing in a public setting. At other points, it was described as a joint endeavour, arranged by mutual consent between the young person and their parent. For Anca and Yana, this strategizing took place in private sphere of the home, which makes it less visible in the public sphere.

When viewed through the lens of a family care practice, child language brokering can be framed as dynamic, adaptive and context-specific (Weisskirch, 2017). The parentified child has a framing that makes a clear demarcation between the world of children and the world of adults. A young person caring for a parent transgresses some of the normative expectations about who cares for whom but might equally be perceived as part of the relational care work that is part of the 'interdependent script' that provides young people with an apprenticeship to the adult world (Dorner et al., 2008). Even when frustrated with their language brokering, young people endeavour to get the best outcome for their parents, and they take into account the best route to get there. Managing the parent or appeasing the authority figure is less risky than being confrontational because there is more at stake if they fail (e.g. being removed from their accommodation). However, it is these kinds of dynamics that, absent of a discussion about context, amplifies the sense of the parentified child. Overall, we suggest that future research should view child language brokering as a care practice (see also García-Sánchez, 2018), taking into account the nuances of shifting family dynamics that consider the importance of the socio-cultural context and include the impactful role of the adult 'other' in the interaction.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

At the time of submission, Crafter had been accepted as an incoming Editor for the journal Children & Society and is currently an Editorial Board member.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

[1] All schools in England are inspected by the Government agency Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Ofsted reports for all three schools confirmed they contained a higher than national average for the number of minority ethnic pupils and pupils with English as an Additional Language.

[2] A full example of the vignette stories can be found at Crafter, S., & Iqbal, H. (2020). Drawing on the notion of the contact zone to explore the dialogical positionalities in 'non-normative' childhoods: How children who language broker manage conflict. *Review of General Psychology*, 24(1), 31–42.

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