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2 Child language brokering as a care practice: a view from critical-developmental psychology

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Abstract

When families migrate to a new country, children often learn the local language very rapidly and, consequently, become translators and interpreters for family, peers, and members of the community; a phenomenon which has become widely known as child language brokering. Using children for language brokering has raised understandable concerns about the impact of taking-on ‘adult-like’ responsibilities. Equally, in the context of migration, child language brokering can be framed as a part of everyday family care practices. Either way, child language brokers may find themselves translating and interpreting in public spaces where they face challenging situations or hostile responses from other adults for their efforts.

Drawing on excerpts from empirical qualitative interviews with young people aged 13–16 years, this chapter discusses how child language brokers manage complex interactions in challenging situations, the strategies they use for managing the adults involved in their interactions, and how these interactions can foreground inequalities relating to migration status and age status.

Keywords

Child Language Brokering; Care Practices; Critical Psychology; Family Migration; Childhoods

Introduction

Children have played a significant role in facilitating their own and their families' settlement into a new country for centuries and transnational family migration remains a central part of our globalised world (Skrbiš 2008). One of the roles that children and young people undertake is being a linguistic and cultural broker for family, peers, or members of the community, because they do not speak the local language (Antonini 2010). In recent decades, children's interpreting and translation activities have increasingly been described as child language brokering in the academic literature, though there have been other related descriptions such as natural translation (Harris 1974), paraphrasing (Orellana, Dorner, and Pulido 2003), and family interpreting (Angelelli 2016). Child language brokering implies that the young person is something akin to a 'cultural broker' because their role may involve the transmission of cultural knowledge between different parties in a conversation or meeting (Jones, Trickett, and Birman 2012). Another noted feature of child language brokering is that the young person may influence the nature of the message or "ultimately affect the perceptions and decisions of the agents for whom they act" (Tse 1995, 180). Importantly, in this chapter, I focus on not just '*for whom* they act' (i.e., often a parent, peer, or member of the community) but also *with whom* they interact (i.e., other adults, peers or institutions), which has been given less attention in the field. For example, in public spheres, there is usually a third member of the interaction who is another adult, sometimes in a position of authority or power (i.e., teacher, doctor, landlord). One other noted feature is that, as this is an activity that is undertaken by children or young people, there is an important developmental dimension embedded in many of the debates about their translation and interpreting activities. Common sites or sectors where child language brokering takes place include the home, shops/retail, healthcare, social care and welfare situations, immigration offices, solicitors/lawyers, police situations, and school (Tse 1996; Valdés 2003). Modes of communication include 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., labels on medicine bottles) (Dorner, Orellana, and Li-Grining 2007).

Over the years, my colleagues and I have sought to understand young people's personal accounts of language brokering (Cline, Crafter, and Prokopiou 2014; Cline et al. 2010, 2011; Crafter and Iqbal 2020; Crafter and Iqbal, online first; Crafter et al. 2009; Crafter, Cline, and Prokopiou 2017b). Our collective work has broadly focused on mid-teenage years to early adulthood (13–26 years of age). Their responses to our inquiries have been quite mixed and sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, when asked about their translating and interpreting activities, we often encounter mystified faces because they could not understand why we were asking about such a 'normal' part

of their everyday lives. When we delved a bit deeper, what they thought of as ‘normal’ within their own community was not discussed or disclosed outside of the community. Others thanked us for giving a name to an activity which they undertook regularly but was rarely openly discussed. A recurring feature of their accounts was a reflection on how they were perceived in terms of their age status and their immigration status. One of the reasons why the topic of child language brokering may have gained traction within academic scholarship, and to some extent wider public discourse, is because of concerns that it is an ‘adult-like’ activity undertaken by a child or young person.

Notwithstanding that language brokering sometimes occurs between peers within settings like school (Crafter, Cline, and Prokopiou 2017b), a key feature of the practice is that it is often undertaken *by* children and young people *for* adults (though many people continue the practice long into adulthood—see Orellana and Phoenix 2016).

This chapter is broadly situated within a sociocultural theoretical approach which views personal experiences as mutually constitutive of the sociohistorical contexts in which the individual is situated (Vygotsky 1978). Also inspired by theorising from critical-developmental psychology (Burman 2008; O’Dell et al. 2018), changing sociohistorical contexts suggest that societal views about childhood shape what we perceive as developmentally appropriate activities (Crafter, Maunder, and Soulsby 2019). I will argue here, as others have done, that constructions of childhood are dominated by global-North/Western ideals about childhood as a time that is unencumbered by adult concerns. In the case of child language brokering, this manifests itself as a disquiet that the practice is burdensome and too ‘adult-like’ (Kaur and Mills 1993; Titzmann 2012) which interferes with our expectations about what a ‘normal’ childhood should look like. However, taking a critical-developmental psychological lens, which accounts for the sociocultural situatedness of language brokering as an everyday family care practice, enables a view of child language brokering as a complex activity that is influenced by a range of social, cultural, contextual, and political factors (Kam and Lazarevic 2014). Following the lead of Weisskirch (2017), I argue that migration to a new country may necessitate the redistribution of responsibilities within the family which frames the contributions that young people make as a form of care (García-Sánchez 2018).

The study

In order to examine the relationship between migration, childhood, and care, this chapter draws on empirical examples from the *Child Language Brokering: Spaces of Identity and Belonging* study which was part of the Arts

and Humanities Research Council programme entitled Translating Cultures (see Crafter and Iqbal 2020). The research was concerned with exploring how child language brokers acted as both cultural and linguistic mediators of knowledge and what impact this had on their sense of identity and belonging. Methodologically, the study used a combination of arts-based methods (drama, podcast, and art workshops) alongside more traditional qualitative social science methods which included vignette interviews. This chapter draws selectively from 29 vignette interviews (23 females and 6 males). Interviewees are aged between 13 and 16 years and were regular child language brokers for family and peers.¹ They responded to short story vignettes about characters who encounter a difficult to conflictual situation. The extracts are used to examine child language brokering as a family care practice that is subject to constraints and facilitators of sociocultural contexts and generalised representations of the social construction of 'childhood'.

Psychological-oriented perspectives on child language brokering

Research that takes a traditional psychological approach has tended to focus on the emotional, relational, and behavioural impacts of child language brokering. Overall, this body of literature presents a mixed picture and a wide array of associated emotions and behaviours (Bauer 2017; Ceccoli 2020). For example, factors associated with negative impacts have looked at links to psychological distress such as anxiety and depression (Jones, Trickett, and Birman 2012) and personal or family stress (Kam 2011; Weisskirch and Alva 2002), which has also been associated with higher levels of brokering activity (Love and Buriel 2007). In one study with language brokers from the former Soviet Union living in Israel, the research found that when young people felt burdened by brokering activity, this had a negative impact on their self-esteem which was made worse by a perceived lack of parental competence (Oznobishin and Kurman 2017). Some studies, which have mostly taken place in the United States, have noted how some young people have felt frustrated or embarrassed during their brokering (Angelelli 2016). Other scholars have examined associations between language brokering and mental health risk factors, such as anxiety (Rainey et al. 2014) and 'risky behaviours' like substance misuse. These behaviours have also been linked with negative feelings about language brokering and family stress (Kam 2011).

Arguably, the academic landscape of child language brokering research has focused more attention on these negative associations than on positive ones. There are exceptions, however, particularly in more recent work in this area. For example, Guan, Greenfield, and Orellana (2014) found that language brokering was associated with

prosocial behaviours, with the suggestion that it enhanced adolescents' transcultural perspective-taking and general feelings of empathetic concern. One young person in this paper described having a greater appreciation for how difficult it was for her parents to navigate the values and norms of life in America compared to life in Korea. Other scholars have focused on the strengthening of the parent-child bond (Dorner, Orellana, and Li-Grining 2007; Morales, Yakushko, and Castro 2012). In one study with Latino adult language brokers in the United States, Morales and Wang (2018) examined the relationship between the amount of language brokering young people engage in alongside links to depression, anxiety, and the parent-child bond. They found very little impact between moderate and low levels of language brokering on depression and anxiety and even with the high language brokering group, there remained a strong bond with parents. Other positive links have also been associated with cognitive, academic, and sociolinguistic outcomes such as increased proficiency in both languages and improved interpersonal skills (Angelelli 2017; Morales and Hanson 2005; Orellana 2003). In light of this mixed picture, it is worth turning to the literature that looks at child language brokering as a socially and contextually complex phenomenon.

On the complexities of language brokering

Overall, the expectations for how child language brokering might be perceived depends on the theoretical perspective taken (Titzmann and Michel 2017). There is a solid body of research that has attempted to move away from an assumption that child language brokering can be framed as either intrinsically good or bad. Young people can experience an array of emotions, feelings, behaviours, and consequences associated with the practice (Antonini 2010; Ceccoli 2020). These are indicative of a complex range of contextually influencing factors that might include the physical setting (e.g., whether brokering occurs in a school or a solicitor's office), the goals of the brokering interaction (e.g., advocating for family rights), the type of task and the complexity of the language (e.g., the doctor's versus a shop), the relational influences (e.g., the relationship between the adults who are being brokered for), and the cultural setting (e.g., the values and norms of a given setting) (Kam and Lazarevic 2014). To this, we can add the impact the activity can have on identity positions of the broker and others involved in the brokering interaction (Crafter et al. 2015; Crafter and Iqbal 2020). For example, in one study based in the school context in the United Kingdom (UK), teachers and young adult language brokers described both advantages and disadvantages to the practice. This included feeling more confident, empowered, mature, and skilled. They also described times when

they felt a weight of responsibility, embarrassment on behalf of themselves or their parents, or highly ‘visible’ to others (Crafter, Cline, and Prokopiou 2017b).

Orellana, Dorner, and Pulido (2003), whose work is based in the United States, make a distinction between engaging in everyday encounters and specialised encounters, suggesting that across a range of different domains (i.e., healthcare, retail, finance, education) young people might find themselves brokering in either form. For example, within the educational domain, everyday encounters for language brokering included translating homework, school letters, report cards, and so on. Their sample also reported specialised encounters, which had a longer-lasting or cumulative impact. One example included influencing the trajectory of a sibling’s educational pathway through subject choices. The *Child Language Brokering in Schools* study, based in the United Kingdom, had similar findings. Their respondents described a range of everyday encounters such as translating school letters and showing a new pupil around school, to specialised encounters such as language brokering about a bullying situation (Cline, Crafter, and Prokopiou 2014; Crafter 2021).

In addition to the complex set of factors discussed above, it is important for any exploration into child language brokering, including within the realm of psychology, to account for factors associated with temporal and socio-political influences (Orellana 2009). While much of the research has focused on children’s experiences during childhood or taken retrospective accounts of childhood experiences (Bauer 2013, 2016; Crafter, Cline, and Prokopiou 2017b), the research suggests that some children continue to language broker long into adulthood (Bevilacqua 2012). Orellana and Phoenix (2016) discuss four interviews with one person, Eva, that took place over a span of 13 years and started when she was 19 years old. Eva migrated from Mexico to Chicago in the early 1980s and had brokered for much of her life. Eva’s own reflections changed over time and intersected with what she was doing within her own life trajectory. Her initial memories were largely positive reflections but later on, there were big events, such as a serious case of identity theft of her father, that led to an emphasis on feelings of stress that weighed heavily on her. By the final interview at age 33, when she had become a mother herself, she could not recall feeling annoyed with her parents in her previous interview (aged 28) and instead felt sad that they mostly called on her sister, who lived with them, which left her feeling usurped and un-needed. In our own research, we have noted similar reflections amongst some of our participants between those in their mid-teens and those in their late teens or early twenties. Some in the latter age couldn’t understand why their younger self had felt irritated with parents when they needed language support. Others, who had struggled with a cumulative weight of difficult

brokering experiences, felt aggrieved by what they endured. The Orellana and Phoenix study suggests their reflections may change again at some point in the future, as they reflect back on the challenges raised by different points in life trajectories.

When taking a socio-political lens, child language brokering does not occur in a vacuum. Within the wider field of translating and interpreting studies, it has been well documented that languages are influenced by the social, historical, political, and cultural mobilities of people (Blommaert and Rampton 2011). Even though bi- or multilingual practices are not unusual, there is a pervasive monolingual norm embedded into some country ideologies, immigration regimes, and institutional practices (Gramling and Wiggin 2018). These norms arguably present challenges for immigrant children and their families whose language status in public spheres marks out their 'otherness' or 'strangeness' (Banerjee 2013) in a situation where their immigrant status may also put them at a disadvantage. For example, in the study with former Soviet Union language brokers in Israel, Oznobishin and Kurman (2017) found that the demands within Israeli society for young people to assimilate into majority society accentuated their negative feelings towards their brokering activities. As the person at the forefront of interactions between the family and the adults who represent cultural norms, the language broker is playing a mediational role between the cultural norms of both the host country and the private world of their families. The wider context within which brokering takes place can have a powerful impact in terms of how brokering activities are experienced.

In the United Kingdom, the context for this chapter, language brokers have undertaken their activities against a range of challenging socio-political issues. One, as already raised above, is that monolingual norms are embedded into the fabric of institutional worlds and practices. Another issue is that long-standing austerity practices, which include cuts to professional and public language support services, exacerbate the challenges for migrant children and their families. Even before the referendum for Britain to leave the European Union, known as 'Brexit', there was a politically driven 'hostile environment' consisting of a package of measures that are made to make life difficult for migrants who seek to enter and stay in England (Yeo 2018). In the United States, research has shown how young language brokers find themselves the subject of racialised judgements and micro-aggressions in so-called 'white public spaces', sometimes resisting or pushing back and sometimes being told they 'had to' translate because no one else would (Nash 2017; Reynolds and Orellana 2009). Similarly in the United Kingdom, young people described some negative encounters which they attributed to racism (Crafter and Iqbal, 2022). Taking all this into account, we now turn our attention towards looking at child language brokering through a critical-psychological lens.

Examining child language brokering through a critical-psychological lens

An attempt to capture the complexities discussed above can be enabled by moving away from cognitive individualism towards a sociocultural and critical-psychological perspective that focuses on the mutual constitution of the individual and the sociohistorical. Sociocultural theorising would broadly conceptualise an activity like language brokering as a practice mediated by social, cultural, and historical changes as they intersect with personal experience (Vygotsky 1978). The role played by the sociocultural can shift our understanding of ourselves and others, including shifting discourses and understandings of the meanings of ‘childhood’ (Burman 2008). Critical-developmental psychology, for example, proposes that ‘childhood’ is a social construct bound up with assumptions about a time of play, formal schooling, and socialisation (Jans 2004). Childhood historians have discussed how our ideas of childhood have changed over time (Ariès 1973, albeit with some controversy) but there are also large variations in everyday practices within families today (Bauer 2016; Rogoff 2003). However, a widely supported concept within psychology, evident in stage-related theories developed by scholars like Piaget, is that childhood should include a steady or ‘normative’ maturational progress towards independence and adulthood, during which time they are protected from the rigours of adult life (Kessen 1962; O’Dell, Brownlow, and Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist 2018; Crafter, Maunder, and Soulsby 2019). The danger lies in making assumptions about what ‘childhood’ looks like, which then becomes the template for a ‘normal’ childhood. This renders a range of aspects of childhood ‘invisible’ or ‘atypical’ (Crafter et al. 2009, 2017a).

Child language brokering transgresses some of these normative assumptions because of the potential for adding roles and responsibilities to children’s lives that families who have resided in the United Kingdom for generations do not have to undertake. Migration to a new country, like many forms of change or adversity, necessitates a change in the family dynamics whereby roles and responsibilities shift and are fluid (Weisskirch 2017). Children have to navigate a way through different cultural norms or contrasting beliefs about childhood, which may sit in contrast or contradiction with those shared by their own family or community (Orellana 2009). This may include a blurred developmental demarcation between childhood and adulthood where children ‘pitch-in’ with many family tasks, which in one community might seem ‘adult-like’ and within another is framed as part of one’s contribution and responsibility to family life (Rogoff, Najafi, and Mejía-Arauz 2014; Henne–Ochoa et al. 2020). Others have argued that such a perspective bears resemblances to debates about children’s domestic work whereby language brokering

may be framed as an extension of the kinds of chores that young people engage in within the home, such as cooking and taking care of young siblings (Crafter et al. 2009; Hall and Guéry 2010).

Recent work in this field, which takes a sociocultural view of language brokering as a situated practice, has drawn on debates within the care literature to recognise the important role young people play in the migration of their families (García-Sánchez 2018; Crafter and Iqbal, online first). Caregiving is usually framed as something that adults do for their children. However, in the context of migration, previous work has recognised that language brokers act as ‘advocates’ (Valdés 2003), ‘intermediaries’ (McQuillan and Tse 1995) or the ‘right hand’ in many families (Orellana 2009), because they can play an integral part in maintaining family well-being following migration (Trickett, Sorani, and Birman 2010). Evidence has also shown how some young people actively use their language brokering skills to fight for the rights of their families or bear the brunt in inequalities or injustices aimed at their parents (Cirillo and Valentini 2010; Gustafsson, Norström, and Höglund 2019). This raises some questions about what ‘care’ might mean in the context of child language brokering.

Feminist theorising of care suggests that ‘care’ involves caring *for* others and being cared for *by* others, as both a moral and ethical responsibility (Tronto 1993) which are bound by our capacities to care (Hollway 2007). The field of geographies has also focused considerable attention on the concept of ‘care’ as the provision of practical as well as emotional support. This field is wide in scope but covers aspects such as embodied spaces of care, how care is shaped by personal experiences, power inequalities, sociocultural and political regimes, as well as temporal dimensions relating to past experiences and future expectations (Milligan and Wiles 2010; Bowlby 2012; Raghuram 2019). This work has been important and influential but has had a tendency to undervalue the contributions that children and young people make in ‘*caring for*’ others, as well as being the ‘*cared-for*’ by others. While caring-for others is not always easy, it is through recognising children’s contribution to family care practices that the full multidimensionality of child language brokering can be fully understood (García-Sánchez 2018). With these notions in mind, let us now turn to some examples from the data.

Examples from the data

As noted above, I draw selectively from vignette interviews with 29 young people aged between 13 and 16 years, drawn from the *Child Language Brokering: Spaces of Identity and Belonging* study. In all four vignette scenarios, there are three characters: the language broker, their parent or another adult for whom they are brokering, and an

‘other’ adult who may be in a position of power or authority (see Table 2.1). In each scenario, the young people were asked to comment on what they thought was happening in the situation, how they would describe the cultural misunderstanding that had occurred, and how they would deal with the situation.

Table 2.1 Four language brokering vignettes

Gabriela’s Vignette
Gabriela and her father are at the council meeting with the housing officer. They have asked many times for problems with the heating to be fixed but nothing has been done. The housing officer explains in an annoyed voice that the job has already been booked in. Gabriela’s father doesn’t understand why someone can’t fix it that day. He gets angry and asks her to say he will not leave the office until something is done. He tells Gabriela to call the housing officer a useless idiot.
Amrit’s Vignette
Amrit and his mother are at the supermarket buying groceries for a special meal—momo dumplings for his grandfather’s birthday. Amrit and his mother have been walking up and down the supermarket looking for a particular ghee (clarified butter) that is very important for frying the momo dumplings which they just can’t find. Amrit’s mother asks Amrit to ask a staff member for the ingredient but Amrit doesn’t know what the right word is in English. He approaches the staff member and begins to describe the ingredient. The staff member answers in an impatient tone of voice. Amrit’s mother asks what is being said.
Jin’s Vignette
Jin wants to invite his English friend to play at his house and have dinner. He gets his mum to talk to his friend’s mum in the playground and Jin translates. His mother tells Jin to say that she plans to cook their usual family food, which is Chinese. Jin knows that most of his friends eat burgers and chips when they go around other people’s houses. His mother looks hurt and slightly cross and tells Jin to say to her friend’s mother that it is polite to eat what you are given when you are a guest and she should try some different food.
Sorraya’s Vignette
Sorraya is translating for her neighbour at the doctors. The woman’s little son is not eating and this is the second visit in four months. After a little discussion, the doctor says that the mother has to stop giving him so

many sweets. The mother cheerfully asks Sorraya to tell the doctor that when he starts screaming she gives him a smack. Sorraya knows that the doctor will not approve of hitting her child.

The extracts in Table 2.1 seek to illustrate the intersectional complexities of understanding child language brokering as a practice influenced by migration, childhood, and care. At times, our interviewees would shift between talking about the vignette character to talking about their own experiences. It is also worth noting that our vignettes deliberately provided our respondents with difficult and conflictual situations, so it is not surprising that their thoughts turned more towards similar events. This does not mean, though, that they only spoke about negative experiences.²

Family care practices and the role of context

Our respondents dealt with complex or difficult brokering situations in a variety of ways. Some reported organising ‘pre-meeting’ discussions with their parents so that they were clear about what issue was being discussed and what they needed to say (Crafter and Iqbal, 2022). More rarely, we had one or two respondents whose parents berated them publicly like Marina who told us “A thousand times my mum shouts at me when I’m translating”. However, we argue that tensions were heightened when young people and their parents are dealing with challenging sociocultural contexts (Crafter and Iqbal 2020). Young people frequently accompanied their parents or family members to appointments where they encountered adults in a position of authority, or at least in a position of power, as a consequence of their relative adult status to the child language broker. In this first quote, Samir^{3,4} describes how his family managed attending his mother’s doctors’ appointments. The researcher begins by asking Samir if he has ever translated for two adults from different cultures and how he manages any misunderstandings when he is explaining:⁵

SAMIR: Yeah, cause sometimes my mum tells me, we go doctors, I don’t go with her all the time, just when its normal problem, not like lady stuff, my sister goes with her. But if normal problem like back ache or leg ache I go with her and my mum sometimes explains it to me and I actually don’t know what it means, I don’t know how to describe it. But the doctor eventually understands it but like he doesn’t get it straight away.

How does the doctor treat you when you go like?

SAMIR: Do you mean like give me importance cause I'm translating and stuff? I don't actually know, I just sit there translating it and he tells me what to say back to her. He never tells me like, you've done a good job for your mum and stuff, I never heard that.

What do you think about the whole thing? Do you, are you proud to do it, happy to do it, is it something you keep quiet, is it something that just happens?

SAMIR: Times I'm happy to do it are my mum, when she really needs help with it but then at times I've got other brothers and sisters, like they can do it at times. It can get boring at times but mostly I wanna help her out.

From Samir's account it appears that language brokering for his mother is a shared endeavour that is negotiated amongst the other siblings within the family. He might undertake routine appointments, but his sister will go with her for "lady stuff" and at other times he relies on his brothers. In line with the research that suggests brokering creates mixed feelings, he describes finding language brokering simultaneously "boring" while also wanting to "help her out", highlighting the psychological complexities of care relationships. It is important to also take note of the way in which he describes the role of the 'other' adult in the situation, namely the doctor. Samir's response to the researcher's question about the doctor's role leads him to reflect on whether the doctor "gives importance" to his efforts. Samir's efforts are not acknowledged, and the young person is something akin to a vessel for translation but no appreciation is shown for the role he plays. Moreover, Samir says he has "never heard" anyone tell him he does a good job for his mum. One of our respondents, Marina, also told us that doctors made her feel particularly nervous because "doctors' reactions are a bit different". Though when this was probed further, Marina suggested that it is her mother's nerves which are passed on to her in this situation.

In their efforts to enable the settlement of their family in a new country, child language brokers often need to go much further than just linguistic translation. Young people also act as the cultural mediators between the private world of their family and the public world of the host country. They broker information about cultural norms, values, institutional systems, and other forms of knowledge such as host culture traditions (Guo 2014; Weisskirch 2017). In the next quote, Dimitar is given the responsibility of explaining to his parents that his little brother had received a detention at school. He told us:

DIMITAR: There was this one time when they sent a letter to my house about my little brother's behaviour. He's 12 years old now. He was doing really badly in school. He was misbehaving, you know how little kids do at 7 or 8, do

these things. They had these, I didn't know at the time what they meant because they didn't have them at my country, interventions and that kind of stuff.

Okay, yeah.

DIMITAR: And detention. They didn't have detentions at my country, so I was like he's done something bad at school and he has to face up what he did. I knew what it meant because I asked my friends after I didn't know what it is. I had to explain to them now [his parents] which was a little hard. I told them he did something bad and he has to face up to what he did so they'll keep him after school. They understood fully. I was happy they understood fully. Because I didn't think they would believe me because they've never heard something like this before.

But they did believe you?

DIMITAR: They did believe me. They believe me for most of this stuff because some of the stuff they didn't know existed and I had to explain to them it's this and that kind of stuff.

In this situation Dimitar attempts to understand a cultural practice which neither he nor his parents are familiar with, namely having a school detention.⁶ First, Dimitar seeks out information about what it means to have a detention from his friends before describing this to his parents. As such, he gathers local cultural knowledge before explaining to his parents what the detention means. His happiness at being 'believed' by his parents perhaps explains why he works hard to ensure he understands the phenomenon. He treats the detention with a seriousness that his British counterparts would likely feel is unnecessary, as he describes his brother needs to "face up to what he did". In this instance, Dimitar benefits psychologically from his language brokering because his intervention is taken seriously and he feels validated by his parents' response.

Social constructions of age and maturity

As discussed above, a key feature of the debate about child language brokering revolves around understandable concerns about the appropriateness of using children for so-called adult-like activities (Kaur and Mills 1993; Titzmann 2012). However, I have argued here that these framings are underpinned by 'normative' understandings of childhood which children who experience diverse childhoods (perhaps as a consequence of migration) do not fit (O'Dell, Brownlow, and Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist 2018). Children, and indeed their families, may be treated negatively as a consequence. Many of our respondents were very conscious of how other adults, outside of their family,

positioned them because of their age. Isabella provides a useful exemplar of the way other people position her during the language brokering situation. Isabella begins by talking about needing to visit the bank or sorting out the family broadband package. On the one hand, she found it difficult because she wasn't always sure what people were talking about but on the other hand, she felt like she was learning skills for when she was older:

ISABELLA: I have to do the things that older people do, like adults, so I know I'm learning how to become independent and also to improve my speaking English

So it gives you life skills that you kind of need as an adult, you're getting them now. *And how do you feel about that? Is that good? Are you happy with that?*

ISABELLA: Yeah, well sometimes I don't like it. I don't like talking about something that I don't know so I have to be asking my mum and it's just a little bit uncomfortable.

Unsurprisingly, Isabella feels most discomfited when engaging in situations where she is uncertain about the knowledge required. Arguably, you could say there are many adults who struggle within financial conversations or discussions with broadband suppliers, even in a native language. However, it is the responses of the 'other' adult that foreground her sense of her age. When asked how people respond to her when she's helping her mother with translation over the phone, Isabella said:

ISABELLA: They say 'oh okay'. Or sometimes they're like 'oh you're young, oh you're translating for your mum'. They say 'you can't be doing this'.

They sometimes say you shouldn't be doing it?

ISABELLA: Yes

And what do you say?

ISABELLA: I just say that I'm 16 and I can do it.

Young people's consciousness about how their age was perceived by others during their language brokering interactions were interlinked with power inequalities brought about by being a 'child' navigating adult spheres. In another example, one young woman we called Talia told us about a situation where there was a problem in the toilet in the flat where her and her mother were living. Talia and her mother lived in social housing and, in the United Kingdom, this meant that they needed to ask their Local Authority or housing association to organise for it to be fixed. Talia said that while explaining the problem, the housing officer said to her "sorry, I don't want to talk to you

because you don't make sense" but Talia felt that he was really implying "I don't want to talk to you because you don't speak English". As the housing officer became increasingly rude, she described how she felt bad because "like sometimes I might be rude to people my age but I'm not rude to adults, no way". She followed up with, "so obviously he was being rude to me thinking he could do anything he want with me". Talia draws attention to their contrasting positions of being an adult to her relative status as a child (aged 14 years at the time of this incidence). Alongside his adult status, he is also in a position of power because Talia and her mother are in need of services that only this institution can provide, and he is the arbiter of that authority, signalling their relative position of power. The vignette of Gabriela, the young woman who visited the housing office with her father, was a stimulus that many of our respondents sympathised with. Although not all young people had this exact experience, they may have experienced something akin to this and even though the age of the vignette character was not stated, they overlaid this as a factor in their opinions about it. When asked what the housing officer would have thought about Gabriela, Ellora said:

ELLORA: He just thinks like, 'she's just under sixteen, she's just a kid, she shouldn't even be there' and he doesn't really get importance.

When she brought in her own personal experiences of child language brokering, Ellora recalled a situation where she tried to call her mother's landlord with a problem and the landlord became annoyed. She said:

ELLORA: I felt like, I'm not a child anymore. I understand this thing, I'm mature enough to like, have an opinion. But people treating kids like us, in this age, like this is, I don't find it right.

At times like these, some of the young people would adjust their role or position in the brokering situation. In a previous paper, we have described how some young people would sometimes avoid conflict by either managing the emotions of those involved in the interaction—sometimes called interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) (Hubscher-Davidson, in press)—or by withdrawing themselves from the brokering situation entirely. At other times, they took on the role of the 'neutral' broker, expressing to the 'other' adult that they were simply the mouthpiece for the parent who was telling them what to say. In tense situations, this could act to dampen any rising conflict and can also be considered a strategy for IER. Equally, young people describe being active brokers where they rephrased conversations or took action to manage the people involved (Crafter and Iqbal 2020). For example, some young people talked about how they would alter the mode of their communication when adults were rude to them by becoming more formal in their mode of speech to assert more authority into the interaction. Overall, the young

people used a variety of communicative strategies to manage difficult situations when faced with a difficult ‘other’ adult.

Summary

In this chapter, I have proposed that child language brokering can be best understood when viewed at the intersection of migration, childhood, and care. Using sociocultural theorising as a base from which to start, child language brokering should be viewed as a sociocultural, psychological, and historically mediated practice. Previous literature on children and family migration has shown that children have been a central part of family settlement to new countries but until relatively recently, have been treated as little more than the luggage that accompanies parents on their migration journeys (Orellana et al. 2001). Statistical data looking at the scale of child migration, whether accompanied by an adult or alone, is scarce and often inaccurate (Heidbrink 2014). This is partly because children are frequently subsumed into the statistics for adults or families—or left out entirely. Perhaps for this reason, research has in the past sometimes treated children as “baggage: ‘brought long,’ ‘sent for,’ or ‘left behind’ by sojourner parents” (Orellana 2009). It was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that there was a change in the level of visibility of migrant children in both academic research and policy. The more recent focus on the role that children play in migration suggests that they can be an important resource for helping their families settle into a new country or in supporting each other when they are travelling without kin.

However, perspectives from critical-developmental psychology help shed light on the way that certain ‘childhoods’ are perceived as different in ways that transgress normative developmental expectations. Immigrant childhoods are not framed in the same way as those who have lived in a place for generations. Not least because they shine a spotlight on how heterogeneous or diverse children’s experiences of growing up may be. Somewhat ironically, children are noticed the most when they step outside the bounds of what is considered appropriate ways of being and behaving. For example, the kinds of family caring responsibilities that we saw someone like Samir and his siblings engage with, could be framed as problematic because a ‘normative’ understanding of childhood might suggest they are ‘robbed’ of a carefree childhood unencumbered by adult responsibilities (see Callaghan et al. 2016). However, scholars who have attempted to deconstruct the assumptions about normative childhoods argue that those in society with social power get to define, shape, and constrain how we think about the lives of children with diverse or

different life experiences (Glaser 2015). For our respondents, this played out through adults explicitly questioning their age, on the one hand, or using them for their translating or interpreting without acknowledging their presence, on the other. That is not to say that young people do not make attempts to “speak for themselves” as Prout and James (2015) describe it. They do so by managing the brokering situation in a variety of ways. They seek out cultural knowledge about how institutions and contexts work, they push back in the face of intimidation by the ‘other’ adult in difficult situations, and they find new ways to communicate in an attempt to resist being positioned in particular ways.

When we include developmental psychology and care in the mix, we can see that in popular perceptions and academic representations of childhood, the kind of care provided *by* children *for* adults is framed as unusual or against the norm, and therefore a danger to them. White et al. (2011) suggest that in the field of family migration there is a tendency to treat children as passive and needy while also emphasising their so-called difference within the context of global-North host societies. These kinds of assumptions and discourses are embedded within the field of psychology in powerful ways through stage-related theories of development which position children as ‘adults in the making’ (James and Prout 2015; Crafter, Maunder, and Soulsby 2019). These assumptions limit whose stories can be told and how children’s contributions to family may be perceived. The contribution to family care work is part of everyday life for many children (O’Dell et al. 2018) and, as others have argued, may be seen as part of the ‘pitching-in’ and wider family care practices of everyday life (Rogoff, Najafi, and Mejía-Arauz 2014; Bauer 2016).

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¹ Ethical Approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education, UCL, where at the time, both authors were based. All names of respondents have been changed.

² For a more detailed methodology, the final project report can be accessed here:
<https://languagebrokeringidentities.wordpress.com/publications-outputs-and-resources/>

³ The respondents in this study tended to use translating and interpreting interchangeably. On the whole, however, most young people discussed oral interpreting, though child language brokering also involves translating written text at times.

⁴ All the names in this chapter are pseudonyms.

⁵ Quotes may contain grammatical errors as all of the young people were interviewed in English, which was either their second or third language.

⁶ In the United Kingdom, children are given 'detention' as a punishment. This might require the child to remain in school at the end of the day for a designated period of time.