

Reconstructing Moral Identities in Memories of Childhood Language Brokering Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Language brokering is a common phenomenon, whereby children of immigrant parents mediate both verbally and with written documents between their parents and other different language speakers or writers, converting meanings in one language into meanings in another. This paper explores some of the moral identities – the interplay between moral ideals and individuals' personal identities – adults construct from their memories of their activities as child language brokers. Qualitative research on adults who were, and to a large extent still are, language brokers for their parents, found that in the context of parent-teacher meetings, some individuals recast their behaviours in a manner that rendered themselves as good, honest, ethical and well-behaved students. This paper argues that the moral identities individuals construct from memories of their childhood experiences have social and cultural dimensions, and are contingent upon the context and the situation. The paper also has policy implications with regards to the status of the child, and the relationship of that status to cultural context and expectation, given that the circumstances of their lives cannot be removed. Regarding policy, this research could inform practitioners, schools, and the general public about the impact of language brokering experiences on children, and may help in some way to alleviate the stress/burdens associated with language brokering. Additionally, it could bring about increasing understanding of how people establish identities based on their lived experiences.

"Sometimes you just want to come across that you're such a good person and everything, and you don't want to show your mum that you're being naughty" (Sonita)

INTRODUCTION

Language brokering is an ongoing activity in many migrant households and communities, in which the child who has learned the language of the new country mediates between a parent and different language speakers or writers, in situations that require interpreting (verbal communication) and translating (written work), effectively facilitating communication between two linguistically and culturally different parties (Hall and Sham, 1998; Hall and Robinson, 1999: 3). "Language brokering" as a concept was first developed by anthropologists, to describe the activities of individuals who connect local and national worlds as "cultural brokering", thus suggesting that the "broker"

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takes some independent measures in promoting negotiation and initiating action (Paine, 1971, cited in Hall, 2007). Hence, the child who interprets and translates between her/his parents and other interlocutors does not simply transmit information between the individuals involved, but is actively performing, as in the case of a broker, in the process of negotiating and accomplishing required social goals (Hall, 2007).

The literature on language brokering has focused primarily on the impact of the activity in areas of cognitive development and academic performance among language brokers (McQuillan and Tse, 1995; Buriel et al., 1998; Dorner et al., 2007; Love, 2007), acculturation processes (Acoach et al., 2004; Chao, 2006; Weisskirch and Alva, 2002; Weisskirch, 2004), parent-child relationships (Chao, 2006; Greene, 2005; Buriel et al., 2006; Love et al., 2007) and emotional aspects and “stressors” related to the activity (Hall and Sham, 1998; Umaña-Taylor, 2003; Weisskirch, 2006).

In general the results suggest that language brokers possess certain characteristics that render them suitable for their role as family interpreters and translators. These include: the age at which the child begins to language broker, the gender of the child, the interest of the child in the activity, the child’s aptitude for this type of activity and the degree of trust invested in the child by the parent. With regard to cognitive development, studies in this area suggest that because of the complexity of the situations (i.e. medical and legal) and the documents that language brokers interpret and translate, they may develop higher problem-solving abilities and decision-making strategies than their age-related peers (Morales and Hansen, 2005:492). However, results on the impact of language brokering on children’s academic performance and on parent-child relationships give mixed views. Tse (1995) for example, found that many children who interpreted and translated linguistically sophisticated documents for their parents also reported relatively low academic achievement. Buriel et al. (1998) on the other hand show that language brokers reported strong feelings of academic self-efficacy, which predicted a strong academic performance. Dorner et al. (2007) also show that higher levels of language brokering were significantly correlated with better scores on fifth- and sixth-grade standardized reading tests.

There is no clear understanding of how language brokering may help or harm the parent-child relationship, and some researchers suggest that a strong parent-child bond is correlated with lower levels of depression among adolescent language brokers (Love and Buriel, 2007; Buriel et al., 2006). In her study of Chinese, Korean and Mexican adolescents, Chao (2006) investigated the consequence of language brokering on the psychological well-being of these adolescents, and their relationships with their parents. She concluded that language brokering by adolescents “may provide opportunities for communication and contact with parents that may contribute to adolescents feeling trusted and needed by parents” (ibid.: 295). Moreover, language brokering “may also be an important source of support for their parents that may help facilitate parents’ acculturation to the host society” (ibid.).

Finally, with regard to the emotional aspects and “stressors” which can be associated with the activity in complex situations, (Cohen, et al., 1999; Hall and Robinson, 1999; Umaña-Taylor, 2003; Weisskirch, 2006), some doctors are concerned about the “‘emotional’ impact on children of taking on the interpreter role and through that, gaining knowledge about their parent’s health status and embodied sexual activities” (Cohen et al., 1999: 180). These concerns are linked to ideological constructions of a “proper” childhood, or “childhood as a time of innocence” (ibid.: 183) whereby the child is free from worry, and maintains an absence of knowledge about certain “intimate” and “personal” aspects of the world (such as matters related to gynaecological issues (ibid.: 180)). Thus, children in these situations are gaining knowledge of their parents’ personal and intimate issues, and could become emotionally overwhelmed with aspects of adult life that are normally hidden from them. This in effect can result in an “unhealthy” parent-child relationship.

What these findings reveal is the lack of consensus in the extant literature on the impact of language brokering on children and their parents. Moreover, while some research findings indicate that sometimes some children find the activity enjoyable, others suggest that sometimes children find it stressful and a burden. A notable exception is the work of Marjorie Orellana and her colleagues (Orellana, 2009, 2001; Orellana et al., 2003a, 2003b; Dorner et al., 2007, 2008). They used a

mixed-method approach which includes observing Latino children translating for their parents over a period of five years both in their homes and in school, between their migrant parents and their teachers in parent-teacher meetings (see also Hall, 2004). Their aim is to understand how bilingual youths use their knowledge of English and the local cultural and institutional practices to interpret and translate for their parents (Orellana et al., 2003a, 2003b), and to understand the skills required for the activity.

Orllana concludes that:

There are many ways to understand children's work as translators and interpreters for their families. We can focus on the burdens it sometimes places on youth and on how stress affects children's growth and development. Turning this perspective around, we can highlight the cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic benefits these experiences may offer to youth. We can either reject children's involvement as a form of youth exploitation or applaud youths' contributions to homes, schools, communities and society. We can talk about character formation, skills, acquisition, and the pathways that are opened or closed through engagement in these activities, or we can view the practice as just a 'normal' part of everyday life.

But understanding language brokering in all its complexity involves seeing it as all of those things...[and] as many things all at the same time (2009:118).

Orellana's conclusions were strongly supported by one of our adult participants, who told us:

Translating for one's parents is contextual. In some cases it can make the child feel good, skilled, helpful and important. In other cases it can be overwhelming, leaving the child with a sense of hopelessness, of not being good enough, and fearing to make a mistake, jeopardizing important issues, making your parents and other people disappointed. And in some cases it can be a too big of a responsibility for the child (Fifi, daughter of Syrian migrants).

Orellana and her colleagues suggest a more holistic view of the language brokering phenomenon (see also Hall, 2004; Green et al., 2005). They see it as an activity in which adolescents and their parents are negotiating independent and interdependent worlds. Language brokering is a "relational, interdependent activity in which adolescents both help and receive help from family members" (Dorner et al., 2008:515).

This paper is based on narrative interviews with forty adults from migrant families primarily living in Britain who have grown up interpreting and translating for their parents. It is about narrative constructions of moral identities from retrospective accounts of childhood language brokering experiences. The paper draws on the social constructionist framework in order to understand the role of social and cultural influences in the construction of moral identities. It aims to address among other things, how language brokering and identities mutually constitute each other. In particular, it explores some of the ways in which language brokers reconstruct, from their own memories of parent-teacher meetings, their childhood moral identities in relation to their teachers and to their parents.

LANGUAGE BROKERING AND MORAL IDENTITIES VIEWED THROUGH A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST FRAMEWORK

From a social constructionist lens, the ways in which we understand the world are historically and culturally specific, and are dependent upon the particular social and economic arrangements prevailing in that culture at that time (Burr, 2003). According to social constructionists, social construction takes place within everyday discourse between individuals (see Gergen, 1999; Davies and Harré, 2001; Wetherell et al., 2001). Social constructionists are particularly interested in language, for they

believe that knowledge is co-constructed and negotiated through the daily interactions between people (Burr, 2003). Thus, they view language and conversations between individuals as more than simply a way of expressing ourselves, but also the means by which we construct the world. Language becomes a form of social action, which may sometimes bring about certain practical consequences, restrictions and obligations (ibid.: 8).

Constructing identities through memory and narratives

Narratives – or the stories we tell of remembered events and experiences – have been described as a ‘sense-making activity’ that people use to instil lived experience with meaning and coherence (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004; Besson and Olwig, 2005, García Sánchez and Orellana, 2006). Narratives have the potential to bring about new ways of understanding ourselves and the social world, and to effect change (Jackson, 1998).

The strengths and complexities of using oral narratives in qualitative research have been well documented (Finnigan and Drake, 1994; Samuel and Thompson, 1990; Thompson, 2000). Along with the strengths of this approach, there is always the problem of memory. Jackson (1998) reminds us that memories do not already exist in story form: “Rather it is in story form that we construct and reconstruct our memories” (ibid.54). The interview is a dialogue between the past and the present. The process of remembering is also a dialectical process, incorporating current questions and concerns, as well as the act of remembering into memory. This process of remembering is entwined with hopes, dreams, fears and past regrets which are further entangled with current recollections (Chamberlain, 2006:13). Consequently, in telling and retelling family stories, not only do people sometimes forget names, dates, and events, but may also be selective in their accounts, depending on how they want to present – or preserve – their family history, or themselves to the interviewer. The style and content of the narrative will also be influenced by the context of telling and the expectations that go along with particular genre of story-telling, for example, in a pub, or in a seminar, or in a recorded interview (Tonkin, 1993). Additionally, as some researchers have pointed out (Abrahams, 1985; Bornat, 1989; Samuel and Thompson, 1990), people’s memories are in part moulded over time through myths and images, and by the ideologies and conventions within their families and within the wider society. Hence, “our narrative models, drawn from the culture we live in, shape even our own first-hand experience and expression”, and in order “to understand who we are and what we have done we ‘narrate our lives’ following out those models” (Finnegan, 1994:121).

Although there is much debate about the relationship of narrative to identity and experience, individuals often make identity claims as part of their narratives (see Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004; Phoenix, 2008). Thus, through narrative accounts, we construct identities by giving names to “the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall, 1990:225), as well as the narratives of our present and future lives (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004:19). Hence, in the process of constructing and negotiating identities, we are involved in the constant production and positioning of ourselves, as well as in “the positioning of others, revision of identity narratives, and creation of new ones which valorize new modes of being and belonging” (ibid.). In line with Pavlenko and Blackledge, this paper employs a social constructionist framework to analyse the moral identities individuals recast for themselves through their narratives.

Moral identity

Moral identity is defined as the interplay between moral ideals and one’s personal identity, or as the extent to which commitment to moral values is infused into one’s sense of self (Nasir and Kirshner, 2003:138). These values include being a good, ethical, honest, just, honourable, decent and respectable individual. With regard to the construction of moral identities, Burr (2003) notes, it is the active performative function of language that interests discursive psychologists, who see the

goal of such performances as “primarily one of accounting for our conduct within a moral framework, i.e. within the specific system of rules of conduct of one’s local culture” (ibid.: 135). “Local” refers to the context – national or group subculture – in which the individual is currently operating, with particular sets of rules and conventions, and correct behaviour about right and wrong. Hence, individuals’ narratives serve to offer explanations and excuses, apportion blame and make justifications (ibid.: 135).

THE RESEARCH

This paper is based on research with adults who were born in Britain or came to Britain as very small children and grew up interpreting and translating for their migrant parents. Forty qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted with 23 females and 17 males. At the start of each interview, participants were asked to tell their stories. Their stories were then followed up to find out more about their identities and how they came to new understandings of their experiences as language brokers over time.

The individuals in our sample experienced language brokering between English and fifteen other languages: Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese, Croatian, Greek, Gujarati, Italian, Mandarin, Punjabi, Sign language (not ASL or BSL, but self-constructed), Somali, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish and Urdu. Additionally, one participant language brokered from Arabic (Syrian) to Swedish. The age at which the participants reported that they began interpreting and translating ranged from 5 to 13 years, and many continue to do so for their parents and other family members. Their mean age at the time they were interviewed was 33 years old. The funding for this research arose from the Economic and Social Research Council Professorial Fellowship programme of work (ESRC Award No: RES-051-27-0181) called ‘*Transforming Experiences: Re-conceptualising identities and “non-normative” childhoods*’, and was conducted at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Some preliminary findings

Language brokers and moral identities

In their work on language brokering among Mexican children in the US, García Sánchez and Orellana (2006) explore “the construction of moral and social identity” among immigrant children in the context of parent-teacher meetings. They argue that these children, who are often the main intermediaries between parents and teachers, are “positioned in a privileged role as strategic actors in the construction of moral identities (their own, their parents’, and their teachers’), while simultaneously being objects of evaluation and socialization into institutional expectations by their caregivers” (ibid.: 4). In our study, it is primarily from their early experiences as language brokers in situations, such as parent-teacher meetings and mediating in GPs’ surgeries, that individuals narrate themselves as “moral agents” and as “social actors”, while constructing identities (such as good, ethical, honest, just, honourable, right, decent, respectable student, sibling and parent) not only for themselves, but also for their parents and other interlocutors.

In the main, what the accounts from the participants in our study show is that the significance of language in defining identity is not a static, personal, or individual experience. Instead, it has social dimensions, and is contingent upon the context and the situation. While reflecting on their lives and their spoken languages, participants positioned themselves within a variety of hybrid and multi-layered identities as, for example, children, gendered individuals, competent individuals, transnational and bicultural citizens, and bilingual speakers. Central to their narratives overall, are the ways in which their language brokering experiences, and their ability to speak more than one

language, are linked to and have informed their senses of themselves as adults. However, for this paper I will focus on the moral identities they construct specifically from their narrative recollections of their experiences of parent-teacher meetings.

I have chosen to focus on moral identity partly because it is one of the most commonly described experiences from their childhood experiences that raised a range of emotions, and which demonstrates a range of identity positionings, and partly because I have been interested in García Sánchez and Orellana's (2006) work which underlined its significance. This paper engages with their findings, but with participants looking back, rather than being observed contemporaneously.

Parent-teacher meetings/evenings

In the context of parent-teacher meetings, García Sánchez and Orellana (2006) suggest that children occupy three positions simultaneously: the role of interpreter, which gives them some power over how the teacher's narratives are conveyed; the position of being the person talked about, with the supposed right to challenge the teacher's representation of events and actions; and the position of "co-narrator-in-translation", with the opportunity to reconstruct her/his own identity as well as that of others (ibid.:15). Effectively, children *could* reconstruct these identities in a manner that makes them appear superior to their teacher and to their parents, while at the same time they may also be constrained by "implicit ethical responsibilities as translators to ensure that messages are delivered faithfully" (ibid.: 15).

However, García Sánchez and Orellana found that in translation between parents and teachers, the majority of children downgraded the teachers' positive assessment of them. By drawing on grammatical resources, they reduced praise to more general interpretation. For example, instead of repeating the teachers assessment of "She's really doing a great job in fifth grade", they downgraded superlatives, and eliminated intensifiers such as "really" and "great", substituting neutral verbs for affect-laden ones (ibid.:16), interpreting instead, "She says that I am doing well in class". In effect, the moral implication here is one of modesty, but the children have also magnified their own moral responsibility (ibid.: 18).

How have individuals in our study constructed moral identities? In the main, three ways have been identified with regards to their activity in parent-teacher meetings. These are: moral identities through self-characterization, moral identities by censoring information, and moral identities by characterizing others.

The ethical, honest, good, and well-behaved students

Similar to the ways in which most people construct themselves in narratives – though they often give complex accounts – in their descriptions of parent-teacher meetings, some individuals constructed identities that portray them as morally ethical, honest, good, and well-behaved students. When asked whether she always interpreted everything the teacher said exactly to her mother, Nora (a Somali woman) positioned herself as someone who is ethical and honest. She acknowledged that she felt constrained by her ability to interpret all the words verbatim, due to the language differential between her English and her Somali. At the same time she was also constrained by the fear of her "very smart" mother, and this impelled her to interpret as precisely as she possibly could:

I don't think I modified anything but obviously when you're interpreting it doesn't always come out as it should ... My Somali is not as good as my English, so sometimes I do struggle with the words, because there are certain words that I know in English that I may not know how to explain in Somali, so when I'm explaining it in Somali ... it takes me a long time, and instead of using one word I have to use a few words or use a sentence to explain... But ... when I was younger,

I wasn't naughty, I didn't modify anything so that my mum could think I was good... My mum's quite clever. She's a very smart woman. I think she would have seen through that and I was always quite fearful of her so I never did that (Nora).

Jack (a Croatian man) provides another good example of someone whose positioning of himself implies that of the honest person and a "good student" in parent-teacher meetings. According to Jack, although parent-teacher meetings might have been the context where he would have felt "tempted" to "make up stories", he never did, because he was a "good student", and this made it easier for him to be honest and convey a "clear message". Moreover, because he does not see himself as someone who is, "big-headed", it never occurred to him to "make up stories" to his mother.

Along with the moral identities of the "good student" that Nora and Jack constructed, their accounts also illustrate the ongoing and relational aspects of identities. It is possible that they may have been facilitated in this construction of themselves by being positioned that way by others, which would then allow them to take up identities as "honest brokers". As Ochs (2004; Ochs and Capps 2001) point out, identities are being shaped even as individuals interact in moment-to-moment conversations. So while narrating accounts of moral identities that are culturally encouraged, in conversation with me, Jack and Nora have also "authored" themselves by defending against any possible interpretations by the researcher that they lacked moral values. In the process, they have "taken up" moral positions that render them as decent, worthy and acceptable individuals in their interaction with the researcher (see Nasir and Kirshner, 2003). Thus, Nora constructs herself as someone who wasn't "naughty" when she was young, and Jack mentioned that he was never a "big-headed" individual.

Constructing moral identities by censoring information

In her review of the literature on language brokering with a focus on home-school communication, Tse (1996) suggested that a potential reason why parents and teachers do not have good communication might be that the information sent home from school to parents and vice versa may be altered by the children who report selectively, by choosing to convey only the information that they believe to be relevant (Tse, 1996, cited in Morales and Hanson, 2005: 473). Indeed, some of our participants' narratives suggest that they constructed their moral identities by censoring information from their teachers to their parents. Konstance (a Greek woman) recalled "toning down" and "editing" (as in changing her marks) the information sent home to her parents from her teachers. Because her parents couldn't read English, they couldn't discern the discrepancy between the teacher's comments and Konstance's mark. She also spoke of her experience at parent-teacher's evenings when she was often "selective with what you pass on. So you're in control of that flow". She presented herself to her parents as the bright student who did well in school, but to the interviewer, as the empowered individual who had the ability to take control of the language brokering situation.

Sonita (a Bangladeshi woman) also censored comments from the teacher to her mother during parent-teacher meetings by leaving out what she felt was unimportant, and recasted her teacher's narratives of the misbehaving student to that of the well-behaved and "good" student:

Interviewer: *When you were interpreting between your mum and the teachers... did you always interpret everything precisely as it was said?*

Sonita: Sometimes when the teacher use to say bad things about me I never use to mention it (laughing)...She [mother] used to ask me, "What she say? Why has she got that expression?" I was like, "No no she's just saying good things about me". (laughing) ... When I'm interpreting ... I don't always say everything word to word unless it's important. And if it's something good about myself then I say it, but I don't show that I'm happy. But when it's something bad...I didn't use to say it, I'd just be like, "Yeah, she does like me" ... and "she's saying good stuff about me".

Constructing moral identities for others

Mei-Ling is born in Britain of Chinese parents, and her parents did not attend their children's parent-teacher's meetings: "They'd [her parents] always say... 'Just say to your teachers we don't understand so there's [no] point in us coming'". Moreover, Mei-Ling and her siblings wrote their own sick notes to their teachers, an activity which according to her made them feel "like we were adults, quite sort of grown up". Mei-Ling said that she was also the one who most often attended her brother's parent-teacher meetings. The following illustrates the moral identity she constructed for her brother and her mother, but also for herself:

Interviewer: *You said that with your brother, you used to go to his open evenings at school. I'm wondering, would the teachers give you feedback about how he was getting on or wouldn't they do that because you weren't the parents?*

Mei-Ling No, they would tell me and I would translate. And then sometimes I would (laughs) leave out things so that my brother would sound, you know, like he was doing well (laughs). Or phrase it in certain way so... but even so I think my mum would say like, 'That's not good enough'.

By censoring information from her teacher to her mother, Mei-Ling recasts her brother as the good student who is "doing well". At the same time, she positions her mother as a demanding parent who responds, "That's not good enough". What Mei-Ling also does in the process, is to create a moral identity for herself as someone who puts her brother in the best possible light to defend him from being viewed as problematic by their parents.

Another example comes from Sonita, who told me that when she was around thirteen years old her "behaviour" and her "attitude weren't that great", and she received a bad report. At a parent-teacher meeting the teacher appeared "angry". When her mother asked why, Sonita replied, "Oh she's just in a bad mood that's why she's saying it like that... Just leave it. Let's go to the next teacher". Here Sonita becomes the moral agent who decides not to interpret the teacher's criticisms, but also to position the teacher as morally reprehensible at this moment. In other words she constructs herself as the arbiter of what her mother should know, with the power to silence her mother's queries.

Karim (a Moroccan man), similarly often "diluted the truth" about his disruptive behaviour in class, in order to position himself as the good student to his father, who might have otherwise reprimanded him for bad behaviour in class, but also if he was caught lying.

Interviewer: *Did you always interpret exactly word for word what your dad or the teacher would be saying?*

Karim: You couldn't lie to my dad... You just didn't *want* him to be upset with you, because he would let you feel it for quite a while... But with the parent teacher thing, I remember a lot of the time, the teacher'd say, 'He's *very* intelligent and he's got a lot of ability but he's very talkative and sometimes that's very disruptive not just for him but for the rest of the [class]'... And he [Dad] wouldn't quite get the gist, and she'll go, 'He talks too much'. And he'll say to me, 'Like you talk too much?'... 'disruptive' and I'd have to explain. You wouldn't say 'disruptive'. You would translate it in a kind of diluted way... something that he would understand. 'That it spoils it for everybody else'... In Arabic one word in English, you've got three ...different ways of saying the same thing... So I wouldn't say I was disrupting the rest of the class, I'd just say, 'The teacher finds it that she loses her concentration... it disrupts her in terms of her concentration'. I wouldn't go into detail like that if I could get away with it... you would tone down the language slightly. You wouldn't be 100% if you knew it was going to get you into trouble.

Both Sonita and Konstance talked about feelings of “guilt” and “embarrassment” about “lying” to their parents (Sonita), and “editing” school reports (Konstance) in order to make themselves appear as better behaved and brighter students. But while Sonita said that she had done so to protect her mother from worry (thus, effectively constructing her mother as a worrier), Konstance said that she wanted to protect herself from being “smacked and ridiculed” by her parents.

Karim, Sonita and Konstance’s narratives all illustrate that they were social agents whose performances of their moral identities were sometimes constrained because of guilt, fear, and embarrassment. In Gergen’s (2005) terms, they were negotiating their moral status in the narrative contexts of the parent-teacher meeting and the research interview. Thus, Karim and Konstance spoke of the fear of being reprimanded should their parents become aware that the teacher was explaining that they had committed (often minor) misdemeanours in school. Equally, they held themselves accountable in their interview narratives for their interpretive practices in childhood. This arguably allows them to renegotiate their moral status in adulthood.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In sum, the moral identities that some participants retrospectively construct of their childhood experiences in parent-teacher meetings highlight what appears to be the opposite tendency to the evidence reported by García Sánchez and Orellana (2006). While from their observation the children downplayed their good behaviour and academic strengths, by contrast, many individuals in our study recast their behaviours, rendering themselves as good, honest, ethical and well-behaved students.

What then, can we make of this discrepancy between what has been observed with children-in-translation, and the recollections of the individuals in our study? At first glance memory appears to be a major factor, given that memory is different at different times in people’s lives and in different contexts. However I believe that memory only partially explains this, and that social and cultural factors are also significant (Gergen, 2005; Nasir and Kirshner, 2003).

Constructing moral identities: the interplay between memory, culture, and social contexts in the stories people tell

When a researcher approaches individuals and asks them to tell her/him their stories, she/he is requesting a service. Therefore, what individuals recall from memory emerges as a process of supplying the researcher with that service. Furthermore, because the story is told between interviewee and interviewer, remembered details may be selected for their perceived effect. It follows then, that in an interview context, while recalling past events and experiences, individuals may wish to portray themselves in the most favourable manner to the researcher as a form of impression management (Pearson et al., 1994). Thus, we find for example, that in the process of constructing their identities as good students, Jack and Nora defend themselves against being positioned unfavourably by the researcher. Hence, according to Nora, “I wasn’t naughty”, and in Jack’s words, “I wasn’t big-headed”.

In this paper I have argued that the moral identities individuals construct from memories of their childhood experiences have social and cultural dimensions, and are contingent upon the context and the situation. Moreover, as Thompson (2000) points out, stories primarily convey the *symbolic* truth, and not the facts of the incident described (ibid.: 163). Therefore, given that, to a large extent, people do remember reasonably well, and even if their memory may differ at different times in their lives and in different contexts, this can in itself offer clues to how individuals see themselves in relation to others in their families and in the larger society. Thus, the multiplicities, discrepancies and unpredictability of memory could prove effective in analysis, as memories also require interpretation if their full richness is to be exploited (Portelli, 1991; Chamberlain, 2001).

The differences between García Sánchez and Orellana's contemporary observations and our study of recollections of past practice may be explained by the fact that they relate to a school context which differs both in place and in time; that their work is on US schools, and ours focuses on England; that theirs is contemporaneous in childhood and ours is concerned with recollected experiences; and finally, that in both countries educational cultures have changed significantly over the last twenty or more years. Thus, although my interpretations may not fully explain the difference between the findings of García Sánchez and Orellana's (2006) and our study, I believe they indicate that the stories of individuals in our study might represent their *feelings* produced from childhood experiences as language brokers, rather than describing what *actually happened*.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Economic migration is an ongoing feature of modern societies, and many migrants move to societies where they cannot speak the language. Thus, it is inevitable that the children of migrants who were born in the host society will become linguistic and cultural brokers for their parents – who are often uncomfortable dealing with professional interpreters and translators. Given that we cannot remove the circumstances of the lives of these children, without minimizing the concerns about child language brokering, it might also help to highlight the *strengths* associated with the activity. Hence, taking a policy approach to the activity could be helpful to this end.

With regard to the unseen work that immigrant children do as language brokers, not only are they helping their families in terms of settlement and mobility, but they are also contributing to the host society (Orellana, 2009, 2001; Song, 1999). Children's contribution as language brokers has economic value when measured against the cost of paying for professional translators and interpreters in situations where children assist their families, schools and communities. They help to "make it possible for their parents to live, eat, shop and otherwise sustain themselves as workers, citizens and consumers in their host country" (Orellana, 2009:124; see also Hall and Sham, 2007; Song, 1999). By viewing what children do as valued work, we can see it for its strength also, and begin to implement spaces and policies that support language brokers and their skills.

Ultimately we might conclude that policymakers, instead of relying solely on professional translators, should encourage children to continue the key role of language brokering, which they do effectively in so many families, and from which they themselves gain cognitive and other developmental strengths.

Language brokering has policy implications with regards to the status of the child, and the relationship of that status to cultural context and expectations. Although in Western societies language brokering is seen by some as adult work, for many immigrant families such activity is seen as a contribution to their everyday family life and activity. This view is conveyed by many of the participants in our study who indicated that interpreting and translating for their parents is "just a normal practice" as in other household chores, where they are "helping" their family. As one woman put it, "It's giving voice to your parents when they can't express themselves, or when they don't have the tools to express themselves" (Tilly, daughter of Moroccan migrants). Crafter and colleagues (2009) also found that in English society, language brokers articulated a sense of their roles as typical in their own communities, and only when interacting at school and with the mainstream majority culture did they consider such activities atypical (ibid.: 186).

Assumptions about what is "normal" or "typical" in Western societies influence the way in which the children of migrants view their family activities. However, with increased migration and settlement across national boundaries, research such as ours has the potential both for practitioners and schools, to help towards shared cross-cultural understandings about the meanings of childhoods from different cultural perspectives. This in effect could encourage feelings of pride and willingness in children who language broker. After all, it has been suggested that "required helpfulness" and

the need to take on domestic responsibilities in childhood, lead to heightened morale and early problem-solving skills that could predispose the individual to resistance to stressors encountered in later life (Rutter, 1985: 605). To this end, this research has implications for providing deeper understanding to parents, schools, clinical practitioners and the general public alike, by informing them about the impact of language brokering experiences on children.

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