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Capstone Project

Dos mundos, un solo hogar Support Paper

I chose to write a children's book for my Capstone project. The 20 chapters, collectively entitled *Dos mundos, un solo hogar* (Meaning, "Two Worlds, A Single Home" in Spanish), is a narrative story that follows Marta, a young Latina girl and the daughter of Mexican immigrants, as she engages in the practice of "language brokering" for her mother, who does not speak English. I gained inspiration for this work from a number of print and online sources, as well as interviews I conducted with American-born Latinos who are the children of first-generation immigrants. The content of this poetry collection explores the emphases of communication, psychology, and marriage and family therapy, while providing an emotional framework that individualizes the struggles and experiences of people who are experiencing life in the United States as a part of an immigrant family from Latin America.

Language Brokering as a Communicative Act

While the emphases explored in this paper are intricately tied together, almost to the point of being inseparable, the basis for the discussed aspects of psychology and marriage and family therapy is communication. For this reason, the paper will begin by discussing the importance of language brokering as a communicative act.

Language brokering is defined as a practice in which children, "facilitate communication between two linguistically and/or culturally different parties. Unlike

formal interpreters and translators, brokers mediate, rather than merely transmit, information” (Tse, p.485). This definition indicates that there are two distinct parts to language brokering. The first is translating language. That is, translating words from one language to another. The second part of language brokering is perhaps slightly more nuanced, but no less important. This is the act of mediating between two people, or, more specifically, translating cultural meanings between parties that have dissimilar lived experiences.

About 90 percent of children from immigrant and language-minority families serve as language brokers for their parents (Dorner, Orellana, et al.). The widespread adoption of this practice brings up several questions, one of which is why children of immigrant families must be the ones to facilitate and figure out so many things for the family, rather than having that responsibility fall upon the shoulders of the parents. While immigrant parents do many things in order to provide for their families, such as working jobs to earn money, children play an important role in communication within the family and between adult family members and other parties. This is because children are more capable of learning languages at a quicker rate than their adult counterparts.

The linguist Noam Chomsky notes that a child’s brain is particularly capable of developing language because it is in such an important developmental stage. He says, “the child acquires [language] knowledge on the basis of a very rich biological endowment that determines, quite precisely, the kinds of systems that can develop in language growth” (Putnam & Chomsky, 330). Children of immigrants are constantly immersed in both the home culture of their parents as well as the dominant culture of the United States of America, the place in which they currently live. They learn English in

school, and listen to their family members speak Spanish while in the home. This rich exposure to two different languages provides an input into the “kinds of systems that can develop in language growth.” Their ability becomes versatile.

One of the interview subjects with whom I spoke reinforced this idea with his personal experience. For the purposes of this paper, I will withhold his real name to respect for privacy, and I will refer to him as Josué. Josué is 25 years old, lives in Orem, UT, and was born in the United States only weeks after his parents arrived in the country from the Mexican State of Sonora. When asked about his language ability early in life, he noted that he remembers clearly that he spoke English much better than his parents did, even from a young age. Eventually, his parents became more fluent in their new language, but he was able to speak it as well as his classmates at school who were not from recent immigrant families. He said that often he would translate language for his parents. He noted, “I even translated *the Simpsons* for them, but the way I would interpret the jokes were never as funny as they were in English.”

While the translation of spoken or written words is an important part of the communicative aspects of language brokering, there is also a great value to the importance of understanding communication from a lens of being able to translate not just words, but cultural contexts as well. There are many forms of communication that differ between cultures. These include physical gestures as well as customs and social understandings.

The culturally communicative aspect of Language Brokering depends heavily on the concept of acculturation. Acculturation is defined as “a sociological process in which cultural change resulted from contact between two autonomous and independent

cultural groups” (Smokowski, Rose, et al. 295). Smokowski, Rose, et al. state that acculturation is a process “flowing from contact between dominant and non-dominant groups to conflict or crises between those groups that eventually resulted in adaptations by one or both of the groups. Usually the non-dominant group has been strongly influenced to take on the norms, values, and behaviors espoused by the dominant group” (295). Like they are able to do with language, children are more able to quickly adapt to cultural surroundings than their parents are. Greenberg notes, “Children usually acculturate faster than their parents. Their original culture is not as ingrained, and children tend to be more malleable in general. When children become “Americanized” and their parents adjust more slowly, clashes often occur within families” (301). This means that children gain an understanding and find their place in the customs of the dominant group faster than their parents are able to, leading them to be conversant in two distinct cultural frameworks. Thus, they not only translate words back and forth, but translate concepts from the two cultures back and forth as well.

I asked Josué if he could remember any experiences in which he understood something about American culture that his parents did not, and he had to explain it to them as he was translating. He answered, saying that one time his family ordered pizza delivery. When the food came, his dad paid the bill, but did not tip the delivery person. Josué saw that this happened, but waited until his dad closed the door to say anything because he did not want to embarrass his dad. Once his dad remembered that he was supposed to tip the pizza delivery person, he took money out of his wallet and gave it to Josué, telling him to run out and catch the delivery person before they were gone. Josué did this, and the delivery person was happy. In my interview with him, Josué explained

that his father had not wanted to rip off the delivery person, nor had he been so unhappy with the service that he would have refused to tip. Rather, Josué's father had just forgotten that tipping was customary. Back home in Sonora, the delivery person would not have been tipped.

I used Josué's story about his father and the pizza delivery person as a major part of the inspiration for *Dos mundos, un solo hogar*. In the book, Marta goes with her mother to the beauty salon. Not only does she have to explain what her mom wants her hair cut to look like, but, when her mom is leaving the salon, the narrator has to remind her that she is supposed to tip the hair stylist.

Josué's anecdote and the ninth poem in *Dos mundos, un solo hogar* both serve to illustrate how a small difference between an immigrant family's home culture and the dominant culture in which they currently live can lead to misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication. This story also illustrates how a difference in acculturation can occur between parents and children in immigrant families. This difference in acculturation results in the necessitation of the act of language brokering on the part of the child.

The Psychological Implications of Language Brokering

Acculturation differences, as well as other communicative aspects of language brokering, can have important psychological implications for the child who is acting as a language broker. Language brokering can be an intense, immersive experience that has both positive and negative psychological impacts on the children who are engaged in the practice. This practice, as mentioned earlier, requires children to take on adultlike

responsibilities that many other children are never required to experience. These might include filling out forms or applications, and talking to bankers, doctors, taxi drivers, etc (Jiménez, 577). This can cause stress for children. On the other hand, this practice can also result in rapid and successful child development.

The stress of these adultlike responsibilities can cause pressure or embarrassment for some children involved in language brokering. In fact, Dorner, Orellana, et al. report that about 90 percent of children feel embarrassed for having to broker for their parents. Also, many children feel fear, worry, or concern that they might be translating something wrong or misunderstanding something that will later have large consequences (458). Adultlike responsibilities can occasionally put children in difficult circumstances that expose them to the seriousness or harshness of the world. An example of this is that during language brokering, children may become exposed to people's perceptions of class or race differences while they are translating for their parents (Candappa & Igbini, 55). The act of having to translate, or the act of asking a child to translate is something that is noticeable to people, especially those who identify as part of the dominant culture, and will set an immigrant family apart as "outsiders." Another thing that may be difficult for children is that, because language brokering is not just translation but is also mediation, sometime during the act of language brokering, they may find themselves in the middle of some sort of conflict . When this occurs, they will have two adults expressing all of their anger through them, a child. The child must be responsible for delivering the news of what was said, however they must recognize that the people they are talking to have power and authority over them, which adds a dimension of hardship (Candappa & Igbini, 60).

The stress that results from these experiences is known as “acculturative stress” (Greenberg, 301). Weisskirch and Alva state that the levels of brokering and acculturative stress differ between genders. Girls tend to be more Spanish dominant and have lower levels of stress associated with acculturation, while boys are more English dominant and have higher levels of stress associated with acculturation. Language brokering can be negatively related to youths of immigrant families because of “internalization,” meaning the resulting depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, and social withdrawal that comes from acculturative stress (Leidy, et al., 836).

In *Dos mundos, un solo hogar*, I wanted to explore the negative consequences of language brokering. This occurs when the narrator describes how she doesn't like talking at school. Although the narrator does not know it, this social withdrawal is a result of depression and anxiety from acculturative stress. Also, because of this withdrawal, she prefers to play games at recess where she mostly just can be by herself and not have to talk to anyone. She pretends to be a horse, which is not required to speak any language or do anything other than run and eat grass. Again, an indication of the anxiety that the narrator feels comes up when she describes her dreams. She dreams that she does not know how to properly translate words, and that her mom doesn't want to pay for repairs done in an automotive shop. This is an example of the narrator fearing that she will be thrust into the middle of a conflict. Eventually, the narrator has a nightmare that she has forgotten Spanish and can no longer talk to her mother at all. This too is a sign of her anxiety that comes as a result of the acculturative stress from language brokering.

However, despite these potentially negative psychological effects that come as a result of language brokering, there are also significant benefits. Dorner, Orellana, et al., found that higher levels of language brokering were “significantly linked” to higher scores on 5th and 6th grade standardized reading tests (451). This improved development may be the result of the concepts outlined in Vygotskian theory (Dorner, Orellana, et al., 468). Because children who are engaging in language brokering begin to take the lead in translation encounters, they must answer questions posed by adults, or act as teachers or tutors. This action leads to cognitive benefits for children who act as language brokers for their families.

In another interview I conducted with a woman, named Dahiana, who is the child of immigrants from Mexico, I asked her if she thought that she became smarter or starting achieving better results in schooling because of her language brokering experiences as a child. She said, “I don’t know if I became smarter, necessarily, because I have no way of knowing how well I was doing compared to the other kids in school or anything like that. But I do remember that I had to figure a lot of stuff out. I’m sure I had to deal with stuff that other kids never even considered to be a part of the world that they lived in. That kind of experience shapes who you are. It shaped who I am and the way I view the world.” It seems obvious that the experiences and findings described in Dorner, Orellana, et al.’s investigation would result in the thoughts and feelings that Dahiana expressed in her interview.

I worked hard to incorporate the positive aspects of language brokering into *Dos mundos, un solo hogar*. There are two major examples. The first of these is when Marta and her mother go to the school for the parent teacher conferences. In this setting, the

teacher says that Marta is doing very well academically in school. This is supposed to be an indication of Marta's positive cognitive development in relation to the other children in her class as a result of her experiences acting as a language broker. The other example of the positive psychological effects of language brokering comes when the narrator mentions that she likes school, and specifically that she likes math. Finding pleasure in education, in the case of Marta in *Dos mundos, un solo hogar*, is supposed to be an indicator of her level of development and intelligence.

Language Brokering as it relates to Marriage and Family Therapy

Acculturative stress and other psychological effects as a result of Language Brokering are important for marriage and family therapists to understand and recognize. A key part of finding success when working in the field of marriage and family therapy is to be able to identify with the clients with whom you are working, and be able to approach a successful understanding of their struggles and lived experiences. For this reason, achieving an understanding of the practice of language brokering is very important for all marriage and family therapists who may ever work with immigrant families or couples, just as it is important to understand broader Latino cultural concepts. Language brokering is a key part of the concepts of *familismo* and the effect of acculturative stress on Latino families.

Familismo (familism) is an important concept to comprehend for marriage and family therapists working within Latino communities of any size. *Familismo* is defined as "mutual support and obligation between family members" (Calzada, Huang, et al., 156). However, the concept is slightly more complicated than that. Calzado, Huang, et al. say

that “familismo comprises four core tenets: (a) belief that family comes before the individual, (b) familial interconnectedness, (c) belief in family reciprocity, and (d) belief in familial honor, as well as its behavioral manifestations including financial support, shared living, shared daily activities, shared child rearing, and support for immigration. Language brokering is directly related to *familismo* in that the child recognizes a sense of duty in translating and helping the family.

In both of the interviews I conducted, I asked the interviewees if they felt like their experience as language brokers for their parents in any way related to a sense of *familismo*. They both replied in the affirmative.

Josué mentioned that he didn't realize how much language brokering applied to his concept of family loyalty until he was older. He said, “When I was a kid, it was just what I did. I didn't think about it really. I knew that I spoke English better than my parents did, and I was happy to help them with it.” Later, when he became an adult and reflected on his experience, he realized that this act in which he had consistently engaged was in fact motivated by *familismo*. “It was just how our family did things. I didn't even realize it, but I knew deep down that they would do anything for me, so when they asked me to do something for them, I didn't really question it. Now I realize how important it was, and how important family is. We were all watching out for each other.”

Dahiana noted that the act of language brokering actually shaped her perception of *familismo*. She said, “By translating for my parents, I felt like I was doing something good for them. I felt like I was pulling my weight in a way. It made me happy to help out because I knew that they were good people and needed me. The more I helped, the better I

felt about helping. I was happy that there was something that I could do.” Thus, in this way, language brokering actually tied Dahiana to her parents and to the cultural values of their native home by helping her develop an identity that was rooted specifically in this cultural value.

In the children’s book, there are examples of *familismo* as well. One example of this is in the first poem, when Marta says that she is happy to help. I took inspiration for this from the interviews with Josué and Dahiana. Another example of this occurs in the third poem, when Marta comforts her mother who is afraid of needles and blood. This is an example of both adultlike responsibilities and their occasional role in *familismo*. When working with Latino families it is important to understand the cultural significance behind the concept of *familismo*, and gaining an understanding of language-brokering assists in that.

This project also addresses the impact that acculturative stress can have on Latino families. As a marriage and family therapist working with marital relationships of Latino couples, it is important to recognize each individual’s level of acculturation and the differences in levels of acculturation that might occur between different members of the family. Individuals and families as a whole should not necessarily be expected to adopt majority position views because they might be coming from a more traditional framework. Greenberg notes the following:

As has been shown, entering a new culture often requires a great deal of adaptation, which often results in stress and ill health. That may explain the higher blood pressure, mental illness, and higher rates of attempted suicide among immigrants when compared with the population in their country of origin. One of these adaptations relates to language. Language barriers can interfere with obtaining employment, or result in menial jobs with low salaries. This is in spite of many immigrants having been highly educated and respected

professionals in their original countries. The resulting low self-esteem is only one of the effects of this situation (301).

By being conscious of the dynamics present in families that can be indicated by the presence of language brokering, marriage and family therapists can help Latino families cope with the stress that comes inherent to acculturation.

Acculturative stress makes up a large theme of the poetry collection.

Acculturative stress surrounds the mother's interaction in the world around her. This is represented in the poems by the mother's relationship with her purse. Her purse represents Mexican culture, and she clings tightly to it, afraid to lose her culture and her heritage. Yet, in this fearful state, she is unable to acculturate to her new home. I included this symbolism and theme to reflect on how language brokering can represent different levels of acculturation within a family, and how that can cause stress.

This brings up another application for marriage and family therapists. Therapists working with Latino families should be very conscious of the way they are talking to a child who is language brokering for a family. This means working as hard as possible to make the job simple for the child, and explaining things in a way that they can be translated effectively. Otherwise, it is important to make sure that Latino families with which therapists are working have access to a translator, if they need one. In both of these ways it is important to recognize the needs of the parents as potentially separate from the needs of the child and to give due respect and care to both parties. One way to do this, even if there are language barriers, is to pay close attention to the body language of the family members in order to make sure that they feel comfortable, respected, and understood.

I tried to make a note of this in the story as well. The teacher, Mrs. Bailey is a bad example of working with Latino families. Although she knows that Marta's mother does not speak English, she makes no effort to find a translator, and instead just relies on Marta, her student, to communicate all the points that need to be made.

Individualizing the Experience

My other intention with this children's book was to individualize the experience of Latino families. There are many immigrant families, and it is important to understand the values of Latino culture in order to provide support for them, but all of these families cannot be treated as one homogenous unit. This is because each family is unique, and furthermore, each family is built out of individual people with individual needs.

In *Dos mundos, un solo hogar*, I attempted to individualize the experience of Latino immigrants and children of immigrants in two distinct ways. The first was through the form of the story, and the second was through the narrative that is told in the collection. Formally, the story is constructed from the narrated voice of Marta, a young girl in the third grade. This voice is meant to give a human face to these otherwise academic concepts. The narrative story is supposed to do the same thing. When the mother gets sick, this is meant to show that other struggles and challenges happening. I don't want my readers to assume that acculturative stress is the only stress that Latino immigrant families experience. Rather, all the other stresses of life (such as money, illness, et cetera) continue, and acculturative stress remains as a difficult addition.

Conclusion

This project is intended to serve as an impetus for educators and marriage and family therapists to work to provide better support for children who act as language brokers and for the parents who need them to do so. One way that educators can provide better support is to recognize the different uses of language that a child might employ in their life, and how that relates to schoolwork. Jiménez states, “Educators can learn more by asking students to keep a journal of their language brokering activities. Many students see income-tax forms, credit applications, and rental agreements outside of the classroom, but seldom see such texts as part of their literary curriculum” (577). By asking students more about their experiences with language-brokering, educators can better work to integrate outside language experience with classroom learning.

Another way that educators and social workers can help is to have translation services available during meetings or conferences with parents. This serves three purposes. The first is to take the pressure off of the child who must otherwise act as the language broker. The second purpose is that providing a translator will allow the parents or parents to feel more comfortable and able to communicate freely. Lastly, providing a translator allows educators or marriage and family therapists to avoid making assumptions about a child’s ability in English or Spanish (Jiménez, 576). Implementing such changes will have positive effects on communication and psychological impact.

Language brokering is an important part of the family life of Latino immigrant families in the United States. Because the act encompasses communicative and psychological aspects, as well as providing insight for marriage and family therapists

working with Latino children or families, it is important to understand. My children's book, *Dos mundos, un solo hogar*, explores these themes, while providing an individualized look at how language brokering, acculturative stress, and child cognitive development have a deep impact on the day-to-day lives of Latino families in the United States.

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