Towards an ecology of the culture broker role: Past work and future directions

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1. Introduction

The ongoing wave of migration to the United States of both children and adults has resulted in considerable research covering multiple aspects of the adaptation process for children adults, elderly, and families (Birman et al. 2002; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). One area of considerable interest involves what is called the “language broker” or “culture broker” role played by children in helping adults negotiate demands of the new culture which, because of their lack of linguistic skills and/or cultural knowledge, the parents cannot or do not feel comfortable doing for themselves. Such tasks range widely from answering the telephone to participating in parents’ visits to doctors, to filling out income tax forms, to translating in school conferences between teachers and parents. While culture brokering may also occur outside the home with strangers, the emphasis in this paper is on activities involving the family that children engage in, such as helping parents, siblings, and other relatives in matters related to carrying out various tasks related to running of the household and wellbeing of family members.

The purpose of the present paper is to review extant literature on culture brokering among immigrant and refugee groups in the United States and to consider this literature from an ecological perspective (Kelly 2006; Trickett 2009). Based on this analysis we will describe a series of potential next steps in the furthering of
research on the culture broker role. We begin with a brief discussion of the difference in viewing the role as one of “language brokering” versus “culture brokering”, a distinction that makes a difference in terms of how it is conceptualized and researched. We then describe the contours of an ecological perspective as a framework for viewing the culture broker role. Here, we locate that role in the context of the family as a system rather than as a freestanding set of activities. We further describe how extra-familial influences such as school and neighborhood ethnic composition may influence the nature, meaning, and effects of culture brokering for children. Finally, we address the “culture” in culture brokering, exploring whether and how the culture of origin and its relationship to the new culture may affect such issues as: who in the family is selected as culture broker; what asking a child to serve in that role might mean to parents; and how culture may influence the degree to which the culture broker role is viewed as an example of role reversal between parents and children. Here the emphasis is on the kinds of questions asked about the role; the kinds of effects it is seen as having on child and/or family development; and the degree to which the ecological influences described in the previous section are present or absent in this literature. We conclude with recommendations for future research that locates the culture broker role in family, school, neighborhood, and cultural contexts.

2. Language brokering and culture brokering as descriptors

In the literature from the United States, the range of activities in which children translate and interpret, usually for their parents, is referred to as both “language brokering” (e.g., Buriel et al. 1998; Morales and Hanson 2005; Tse 1995, Weisskirch 2002) and “culture brokering” (Jones and Trickett 2005; Trickett and Jones 2007). While translation refers to a literal rendering of written text or speech in a different language, interpreting involves explanation of the meaning of what is being communicated in cultural context. For example, a child’s reading of a school memorandum to parents about parent involvement in their child’s school requires, in the United States, is not only a translation of words but also an interpretation of
their meaning and an appreciation of what parent involvement means in the U.S. context.

Our preference for the “culture broker” terminology thus flows from our belief that the broad range of functions covered by this general term includes both translation and interpretation in various combinations. Studies suggest that brokering occurs in a number of different settings and for different reasons. The most differentiated measure of brokering was developed by Tse (1995) and involved an assessment of where brokering occurred (e.g., home, school doctor’s office), what it occurred around (e.g., forms, bills, answering the door or phone), and how the broker felt about brokering. McQuillan and Tse (1995) suggest that the varied situations in which culture brokering occurs differ in terms of the complexity of language necessary to negotiate them (e.g., answering the phone versus brokering in the doctor’s office) (McQuillan and Tse 1995). Further, the languages of the varied cultures involved in brokering may provide distinctive challenges for the broker. Acoach and Webb (2004) distinguished between high and low context cultures, indicating that “high context cultures derive meaning primarily from actual words. Low context cultures rely more heavily on nonverbal communication to convey subtle and derived meaning […] Many language brokers translate in interactions where both high and low context cultures intersect” (Acoach and Webb 2004: 5). Both these studies highlight the importance of cultural knowledge and interpretation of cultural cues as part of the brokering role that go beyond translation per se. Thus, because so much of the broker’s role involves some understanding of “how things are done here”, we prefer to frame the culture broker role as cultural interpreter. In so doing, we highlight a somewhat broader range of potential activities, including those involving “interpretation” of the new culture to parents or other adults, which may or may not involve linguistic translation.
3. Ecology and culture brokering: A brief overview

The authors of this paper operate from an ecological perspective developed in community psychology over the past several decades (Kelly 1966, 2006; Trickett and Birman 1990; Trickett et al. 1972). This perspective focuses on the ecology of lives and the influence of multiple factors and levels of the ecological context on individual resources and constraints influencing adaptive options. The emphasis on the ecology of lives is intended to place individuals in social and cultural context, with the context not only consisting of different levels of influence over individual behavior (Bronfenbrenner 1979) but also of social norms, intergroup relations, and social networks. Consistent with systems theory, the ecological perspective focuses on the interdependence of individuals and their contexts, such that individual behavior reflects an effort to navigate the varied contexts of importance to the individual, each of which may have differing demand characteristics for adaptive behavior. Finally, the perspective is appreciative of cultural history as a framework for understanding current behavior.

The majority of scholarship on culture brokering has focused on the family context, both the extent to which family characteristics have an impact on brokering, and what kind of impact brokering has had on family functioning. From an ecological perspective, the nature, meaning, and effects of culture brokering are less contingent on the specific brokering acts themselves than on how they augment, disrupt, or otherwise affect the totality of child and family life. However, the ecological perspective also calls attention to other levels of analysis that may influence culture brokering such as school or neighborhood characteristics. For example, the presence of adult interpreters in the school or ethnic community organizations in the neighborhoods may provide needed resources to parents and relieve the pressure placed on the children to broker. However, relatively little research has examined the impact of such larger levels of the ecology. Our aim in this paper is to examine what is known about culture brokering in the context of these multiple layers of the environment. Specifically, we emphasize three aspects of this perspective central to a contextual appreciation of the culture broker role and its effects on children: (A) culture brokering and the ecology of individual and
family life; (B) school and neighborhood influences over the culture broker role; and 
(C) the role of culture of origin in the culture broker role.

4. An ecological look at current literature

The current literature on child and adolescent culture brokering from the United 
States is relatively sparse. Altogether, 17 published and one unpublished paper 
were found and reviewed. The purpose of this section is to review that literature 
briefly in terms of what is emphasized, using an ecological perspective to highlight 
its findings and opportunities for future research. While studies differed in using the 
terms “language brokering” and “culture brokering”, the majority defined brokers as 
we did above: namely, children and adolescents who act as “intermediaries 
between linguistically and culturally different parties. People who broker, unlike 
formal translators, influence the content and nature of the message they convey, 
and ultimately affect the perceptions and decisions of the agents for whom they 
act” (Tse 1995: 180).

4.1. Individual and family ecology and the culture broker role

The first ecological issue raised above draws attention to how the ecology of 
everyday child/adolescent and family life affects and is affected by the culture 
broker role. A basic question here involves information on what we know about 
characteristics of the family that shape an immigrant child’s brokering experience. 
A second question involves the impact of brokering on the ecology of family life. 
Several studies suggest that family characteristics affect the amount and type of 
brokering done by children or adolescents. In particular, low English language 
fluency of a parent may be related to greater reliance on children as brokers. For 
example, Martinez et al. (2009) found a high demand for brokering in families with 
monolingual Spanish-speaking parents and low demand for brokering in families 
with at least one bilingual parent. Jones and Trickett (2005) and Jones (2008) also
found a greater demand for culture brokering in former Soviet families where the mothers had low levels of English competence. In addition, Jones (2008) found that parental unemployment and lower parental job status were also related to increased adolescent culture brokering, suggesting that parents with less social capital and fewer resources are more likely to rely on their children to broker.

With respect to how the culture broker role affects the ecology of family life, several studies provide relevant data. One kind of effect is indirect, resulting in potential family changes as the culture broker role affects the life of the child doing the brokering. For example, Orellana et al. (2003) found that the culture broker role affected the lives of Latino/a adolescents in both negative and positive ways. On the one hand, culture brokering allowed adolescents to stay connected to their culture of origin by having to speak the language and understand the cultural norms and values. On the other, it interfered with their efforts to gain autonomy from their parents and to control their own time. Sy (2006) surveyed female college students of predominantly Mexican origin about their transition to college, their family obligations, and other work commitments. The participants reported that those who had more family obligations, such as culture brokering, experienced higher levels of school stress and lower academic achievement (Sy 2006). While the specific implications of these findings for family functioning were not pursued in these papers, it seems reasonable to assume that such changes in the child or adolescent brokers must inevitably spill over into family life more generally. Exploring the family level implications of such individual changes represents a potentially useful direction for future work.

Perhaps the greatest emphasis in family ecology found in the culture broker literature involves its implications for power dynamics in the family. Varying words have been used for this phenomenon, including, role reversal (Martinez et al., 2009), parentification (Weisskirch 2007), or adultification (Trickett and Jones 2007). All refer to the possibility that the culture broker role places the child or adolescent in a position of increased responsibility and, perhaps, decision-making authority which may, under certain circumstances, result in a role reversal between parents and their children.
Importantly, authors differed in the degree to which they thought that culture brokering resulted in role reversal. Several asserted that the broker essentially took on the role of the parents and had added responsibility and decision-making authority (Buriel et al. 1998; Tse 1995). Martinez et al. (2009: 73) suggested that “language brokering” (their term) may be disempowering for parents who may become “less influential in their role with their children”. This feeling of disempowerment may in turn lead to family strain and conflict and possibly negative outcomes for all family members (Martinez et al. 2009). In addition, Weisskirch (2007) argued that the authority of parents may be suppressed when the language broker makes decisions on behalf of the family that are typically made by the parents.

However, many other studies argued that translating and brokering did not lead to role reversal (Buriel et al. 1998; Jones and Trickett 2005; Orellana et al. 2003; Sy 2006; Trickett and Jones 2007; Wu and Kim 2009). For example, Dorner and colleagues (2008) argued that current theories asserting a role reversal are viewing culture brokering from an “independence script” rather than an “interdependent script”, in which “everyday language brokering may be seen as a normal expectation of the child-adult relationship rather than a parent ceding control of family decisions”, (Dorner et al. 2008: 521). From this latter perspective, brokering is simply another way in which children and adolescents contribute to their families, similar to doing household chores. While culture brokering was sometimes a cause of stress for the brokers, it was not because of role reversal but rather because brokering interfered with such normative activities as watching television or hanging out with their friends (Dorner et al. 2003). As Trickett and Jones (2007) state, even though there are certain situations where “children may have additional power that can be used to their advantage, the fundamental role relationship in families is not seen as being altered or interrupted” (143). Indeed, some argue that culture brokering is so embedded in and integral to the daily lives that culture brokers themselves do not consider their responsibilities as role reversal (Orellana et al. 2003).
Thus, while considerable work has been reported with respect to brokering and the family context, many issues remain for further development of how brokering fits into the ecology of family life. The circumstances under which brokering may or may not lead to role reversal represents one such area. Here the assertion is that culture brokering itself occurs within a context of family dynamics that shape its meaning and effects on family life. For example, the challenges facing families coping with diverse stressors, such as finding employment or being undocumented, must certainly affect the nature and meaning of brokering for both children and adults. Overall, the studies reviewed provide little information about the family circumstances of the families whose children are culture brokers. Descriptive information, such as whether the family is a single-parent household, or the number and ages of children who are available to broker, would allow a richer investigation of how brokering is intertwined with and affects family ecology and child and adolescent functioning.

4.2. School and neighborhood influences over the culture broker role

The second ecological issue involves the degree to which culture brokering is located within a community context. In general, the role of extra-individual and extra-familial influences on family dynamics and individual behavior is a well-documented tenet of ecological thinking (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Trickett 2009). The particular aspects of community most relevant to brokering may be school and neighborhood. For example, schools providing a safe and supportive environment may serve as a resource to buffer the influence of culture brokering on family conflict; bilingual adults in schools may be available to help child culture brokers prepare for particularly stressful upcoming brokering tasks. With respect to neighborhoods, factors such as the ethnic density of co-cultural neighborhoods may provide families with a host of non-familial individuals who have the requisite social and linguistic capital to aid families and take some of the brokering pressure off children.
Descriptively, research on the culture broker role is quite general in its descriptions of the communities where the participants live and the schools the children attend. With respect to the neighborhoods in which the participants reside, the most specific descriptions include reference to the general location and ethnic composition of the geographical area. Perhaps the most elaborate community description was provided by Orellana et al.

One community, located on the northwest side of Chicago, Illinois, USA, is composed mostly of immigrants from Mexico and Poland [...]. The second is a mixed-ethnic, mixed-income and suburban community near Chicago that is home to a small but growing number of immigrants from Mexico. (Orellana et al. 2003: 18)

Often, potentially relevant information about neighborhoods, such as the availability of multilingual services and providers, employment opportunities, and socioeconomic status is not provided but may plausibly be related to the culture broker role. With respect to schools, information is also quite limited, such as “two predominantly Latino junior high schools in southeastern Los Angeles County, California” (Love and Buriel 2007: 477-478). Thus, the schools attended by the brokers usually lack information about size, ethnic composition of staff, and school climate with respect to diversity. However, some research on these topics does exist. With respect to larger community/neighborhood influences, Martinez and colleagues (2009) noted the importance of ethnic enclaves and the culture-brokering phenomenon. Their study took place in Oregon during a time of rapid demographic changes and an increase in Latino immigrants. The relative lack of Latino social, cultural, and political settings in the community was seen as limiting access to organizations and businesses that support the maintenance of the culture of origin.

In this community context, Martinez and colleagues (2009) argue that the Latino parents relied on their children to serve as culture brokers and navigate the acculturation process. A similar argument was made by Wu and Kim (2009) in their study of Chinese American adolescent culture brokers. Finally, Jones (2008) found that among families from the former Soviet Union, adolescents who lived in more
economically depressed neighborhoods and those with a greater percentage of Russian-speaking families brokered more. Jones (2008) posits that this increased reliance in neighborhoods with more Russian speakers may be because the need to learn and to speak English is less in these neighborhoods, and so culture brokers are needed for longer periods of time.

With respect to culture brokering and the school, studies have assessed the relationship between brokering and individual school factors such as academic achievement (Acoach and Webb 2004), but very few studies have explored the relationship between adolescents who broker and other aspects of the school experience. Only one study, for example, assessed the relationship between brokering and peer relationships occurring primarily in the school context. Here, Jones and Trickett (2005) concluded that the more the Russian adolescents engaged in culture brokering, the less sense of school membership they reported and the more they experienced daily hassles with peers. Sy (2006) found that female college students from Mexican origins reported that brokering was seen as a family obligation that interfered with their academic commitments. Thus, brokering seems to have some spillover effects to school-related domains as well as the family issues mentioned earlier.

Overall, however, there is sparse literature on the relationship of culture brokering to these or any other extra-familial contexts of importance to the culture brokers. Specifically, the potentially supportive role of school adults and neighborhood resources remains to be explored fully. We know little, for example, about the culture-brokering role of ethnic community organizations or bilingual adults in the school context, and whether such organizations or individuals provide a resource that impacts the extent and effects of brokering on children and adolescents.

4.3. Keeping “culture” in the culture broker role

The final question involves the degree to which studies on the culture broker role reflect an appreciation of whether and how the specific culture of the groups
studied is reflected in the questions asked and in the interpretation of results. The range of immigrant and refugee groups in the United States is vast, as is the variety of community contexts in which they resettle. Both the nature of the cultural community of resettlement, as suggested above, and the expression of the culture of origin in the new country, may plausibly affect the nature of the culture broker role, who in the family context is nominated to play that role, and the effects of the culture-brokering role on the child and family. While studies show that culture brokering occurs frequently across all immigrant groups thus far studied, the question here involves how and where is culture represented in the literature? For example, are there cultural similarities and/or differences between the groups studied that ground the results in a cultural context? Is culture brokering experienced similarly across children and adolescents from diverse cultural groups or within similar cultural groups living in different cultural contexts? Does brokering have the same outcomes or correlates for kids from different cultures? Do cultural norms affect how frequently children are asked to broker and are gender norms invoked as explanations for which children are selected to broker in a family and why?

Descriptively, the majority of research in the United States on the culture broker role has focused on male and female immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries, primarily Mexico. However, some studies were also conducted on brokers from different cultural backgrounds, including Chinese (Wu and Kim 2009), Vietnamese (Trickett and Jones 2007), and Russian (Jones and Trickett 2005). Across all cultural groups, the domains in which culture brokering occurs seem to be similar: medical, school, financial, or legal contexts.

On the other hand, some aspects of brokering may be linked to particular cultural practices or values. One example of this involves who is chosen for the culture broker role. According to Buriel and colleagues (1998), language brokering is a gendered activity among Latinos, which may be due to gender role socialization. More specifically, Mexican females may be expected to broker for their families more than their male counterparts possibly because of “threats to male pride” (Buriel et al. 1998: 295). Similarly, Weisskirch (2005: 296) found that Mexican
American adolescent females brokered more than their male counterparts, attributing this finding to “prescribed cultural roles” (see also Sy 2006). However, Love and Buriel (2007) did not find gender differentiation in brokering in their study of Mexican American adolescents, even though adolescent girls assumed more family responsibilities more generally.

Cultural discussions of the potential effects of these gender differences and where they occur are also found. For example, Love and Buriel (2007: 486) point out, “Valenzuela (1999) suggests that girls in Latino immigrant families may gain a greater degree of freedom, status and authority by virtue of their roles as translators, mediators, and surrogate parents”. They further suggest, “Brokering may provide girls with an excellent opportunity to assert their autonomy, while still conforming to traditional gender role expectations” (ibid.). Thus, the meaning of brokering may differ for male and females adolescents in Latino families.

However, gender differences were not evident in studies of Vietnamese, Chinese, or Russian culture brokers, perhaps because gender roles and expectations may be different or not as pronounced in these cultural groups. More specifically, Trickett and Jones (2007) found no gender differences in their study on adolescent culture brokers from the former Soviet Union, and argued that this difference in findings from studies on Latino culture brokers signifies the need for “culture specificity” in terms of gender roles and culture brokering activities. In addition, for Chinese immigrant families, the importance of gender as it relates to culture brokering was more relevant for the parents than the adolescent (Wu and Kim 2009). That is, mothers and fathers from Chinese immigrant families had different roles, such that the mothers are nurturing and caring and the fathers are authoritarian and disciplinarian. As a result, the culture brokering experiences and approaches may be different for the adolescent when having to broker for the mother than when having to broker for the father (ibid.).

Thus, research suggests that culture influences gender roles with respect to brokering. However, other possible influences of cultural beliefs and practices on brokering have not been explored. For example, “role reversal” or the shifting of
power in the family structure in favor of children may be less likely in families from collectivistic cultures where children are already likely to be asked to contribute in numerous ways to ongoing family functioning. As was suggested earlier, in this context the culture broker role may indeed be viewed not as a role reversal but as another instance of family contribution. Further, immigrant and refugee groups differ in the degree of cultural distance between the culture of origin and the new culture. For example, immigrant and refugee groups who have similar language, values and cultural norms as those of the United States, might not need the assistance of a culture broker to the same degree as immigrant or refugee groups who have very little in common with the United States in terms of language, values, and cultural norms. However, besides gender roles, little attention has been devoted in the literature about the particular aspects of the culture of origin of the culture brokers and its impact on brokering. Cultural comparisons can shed light on many other aspects of the brokering role, such as whether adults prefer to keep children out of specific kinds of issues needing brokering because of embarrassment or privacy; whether cultures of origin make a difference in the kinds of tasks requiring brokering; and whether the effects of brokering relate to cultural differences in the overall role of children in the family.

5. Conclusion

The present paper adopts an ecological perspective on the culture broker role served by immigrant and refugee children and adolescents. We have recommended the term “culture brokering” to “language brokering” to highlight that the role includes not only translating but also explaining the new culture to parents. An ecological perspective emphasizes the importance of context and culture as influences over the nature and extent of the culture broker role. Thus, the role is embedded in a family and local ecology that can affect both its nature and its effects. We have nominated several aspects of this ecology that deserve further research attention: family dynamics, local ecology, peer, school, and neighborhood influences, as well as the acculturation process of both parents and children. With
respect to family dynamics, we have suggested that an ecological perspective can help differentiate the conditions under which child or adolescent culture brokering may or may not result in role reversal. With respect to school and neighborhood influences on the culture broker role, we have called for additional descriptive information about the specific nature of the school and neighborhood contexts that plausibly affect the role, including the ethnic density of neighborhoods and the availability of school adults to immigrant and refugee children in their culture brokering activities. Additionally, we have suggested that more attention should be given to the specific cultural norms, values, and histories of families as influences on how culture brokering is defined and carried out. The acculturative status of both parents and children also modifies the demand for culture brokering. Each of these topics furthers an appreciation of this complex and critical role that children and adolescents play for their parents.

Works Cited


