

**Accessing Assets:  
Immigrant Youth's Work as Family Translators or "Para-phrasers"**

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**Accessing Assets:****Immigrant Youth's Work as Family Translators or "Para-phrasers"**

Drawing on a mixed-method program of research including the survey responses of 236 Spanish-speaking children as well as extensive interviews, participant observation and audiotaped data gathered in four different communities, we unpack the ways in which bilingual youth use their knowledge of English and U.S. cultural/institutional practices to speak, listen, read, write and do things for their immigrant parents, mostly from Mexico. We demonstrate how immigrant children's work as translators and interpreters opens families' access to resources, knowledge and information in a wide range of domains: educational, medical/health, commercial, legal/state, financial/employment, housing/residential, and cultural/entertainment. In discussing the realm of each domain, we consider how negotiations both within the family and between the family and the public sphere are variously shaped by power relations. We consider how youth's social positions as children, and as children of immigrants, may constrain their ability to access certain institutional goods, at the same time as we demonstrate their active and powerful involvement in family decision-making processes both inside and outside the home.

We begin with Lucila's words as she shares her perspective as a member of our research group as well as the daughter of immigrants from Mexico to Chicago:

*As we're writing this article I look back and remember that before I became involved in this project, I didn't think of translating as something special. To me it was just an everyday part of life. As a kid I translated phone calls, TV shows, bills, letters from the welfare department, visits to the doctor, visits with social workers, interviews; and I filled out applications for health care, welfare and social security benefits. I did this because I was the only one who could do it. I was the only one in my family who could communicate in both English and Spanish. I became the key to accessing the resources my family needed. As we learn more about the translating experiences of our case study children I realize how many are similar to mine. I've come to see what an important and necessary role these children play in the well-being of their families. Whether it'd be filling out an application to receive welfare benefits or telling the doctor what was wrong with my mom, today I realize how my help as a child translator significantly contributed to the survival of my family.*

Researchers of immigrant communities recognize the importance of household, family, and community-based networks for settlement processes (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Kibria 1993; Menjivar 2000; Velez-Ibañez and Greenberg 1992). They have examined how immigrant households function internally as well as how they link up with resources outside of the home. But few have considered children's place within these households or the work that children do to create, sustain, and utilize networks to benefit their families.

In this article we draw on a program of mixed-method research in several different immigrant communities to examine how the children of immigrants<sup>1</sup> use their bilingual and bicultural skills to access resources for their families. We also problematize the processes of achieving that access, and consider how the youth and their families

experience these encounters. Influenced by sociologists of childhoods (e.g., Aries 1962; James and Prout 1997; Thorne 1993), who remind us that children are social actors in their own right, we aim to bring new perspectives to the following issues: How do immigrants deal with the challenges of daily life in a new country? How do their children help them access resources, knowledge and information from the social world outside their homes, and what is the nature of this help?

### <1<sup>st</sup>> Immigrant Networks and Households: Where are the Children?

Early sociological studies of immigration mapped reasons for migrating, patterns of migration, and immigrants' participation in the labor economy (e.g., Cardoso 1980; Chávez 1992; Chávez, Flores and López-Garza 1989; Cornelius 1982, 1988; Daniels 1990; Piore 1979; Rouse 1992). Such work typically focused on the activities, experiences, and perspectives of adult men. Over the last few decades, however, some immigration scholars have shifted their attention to households as units of analysis (Chávez 1985; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999; Pessar 1982). At times this literature frames these spaces as cooperative units; other times they are viewed as more conflictive, internally-differentiated spaces. Nazli Kibria (1993:19), for example, calls the immigrant household a “strategic arena, a social site within which members collectively construct strategies that will help them to survive and realize collective goals.” At the same time, she notes internal divisions of labor and the particular price that Vietnamese immigrant women pay as they walk on the “tightropes” of shifting gender experiences and ideologies. Kibria and other feminist scholars (e.g., Donato 1993; Hirsch 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 1999, forthcoming; Menjivar 2000; Tienda and Booth 1991) have examined these internal divisions of labor, highlighting the invisible work that women do to support and sustain households (Daniels 1987), as well as the gendered particularities of immigration processes. Many of these feminist researchers have worked in the tradition of ethnography, and in so doing have illuminated the grounded processes and practices of daily life.

Still, in ethnographic research on immigrant households and families, children are mostly invisible.<sup>ii</sup> Kibria (1993) defines a process she calls “patchworking,” in which different members of a household contribute to the health and survival of its members. She describes the Vietnamese immigrant women of her study as key figures in this patchworking process, serving as bridges between households and institutions outside the home. Simply through their membership in the household children sometimes enable women to access social services such as welfare or food supplements, but in these depictions, children are rarely highlighted as mediators or facilitators of such transactions. Even in Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo’s (1999) careful study of women’s work in Mexican immigrant settlement processes, there are only passing references to children, as contributors to household tasks and as “complications” for family settlement processes. Hondagneu-Sotelo recognizes this as an oversight and calls for future research to pay explicit attention to children’s participation in household functioning. As she notes, “Including children and adolescents in a research agenda may alter long-established beliefs about immigration” (1999:192). Jennifer Hirsch (1999) also calls for attention to both generational and geographic trajectories of change in her study of shifting gender ideologies, but does not examine generational or age-based relations *per se*. Instead, she highlights the shifting ideologies about marriage (as companionate versus more traditional, hierarchical relationships) for Mexican immigrants to the United States, making no mention of children in these relationships.

Cecilia Menjívar (2000) explicitly takes an “adult-centered” perspective in her study of Salvadorian immigrants to San Francisco, noting that the immigrants she studied often felt “caught in the middle” between their own children and their aging parents. Unlike the prior research, however, she does note children’s participation in households, especially as translators or language brokers, albeit from an adult point-of-view. She contemplates how such practices might change intergenerational relations in the new culture. In doing this, she focuses on the tension and intergenerational conflict that may occur when parents have to confide in or depend on children, as well as when children

“take the liberty of making decisions for the older immigrants” or when they manipulate information (Menjivar 2000:214-15).

Key exceptions to our general argument are the work of Abel Valenzuela Jr. (1999) and Lisa Sun-Hee Park (2002), who focus centrally on immigrant youth in their work as language and culture brokers. Park (2002) examines how the children of Asian immigrants assist their families in entrepreneurial work, negotiating between their family businesses, family, and community, and in the process shaping their own ethnic identity formation. Valenzuela (1999) reveals how Mexican immigrant youth aid in household settlement, focusing in particular on the gendered nature of settlement activities such as translating. He finds that mostly girls take on what he terms the roles of *tutors* (serving as translators, interpreters, and teachers for parents and siblings), and *advocates* (mediating or intervening for parents or household members), while the eldest in families often serve as *surrogate parents* (caring for younger siblings or helping parents themselves make decisions regarding childrearing).

We build on this work, as well as other socio-linguistic and educational research focusing specifically on children’s work as translators, interpreters, language brokers, or para-phrasers (Chu 1999; Orellana 2001; Orellana, et al. 2003; Song 1999; Tse 1995, 1996; Valdés 2002; Vásquez, Pease-Alvarez and Shannon 1994) to explore in more depth the array of institutions that children help their households access and the power dimensions of this access. Before moving into our analyses, however, some discussion of the various terms for this work is in order, especially for our considerations of the power relations that shape this social practice.

## <2<sup>nd</sup>> Translating and Interpreting

Brian Harris and Bianca Sherwood (1978:155) were the first to give a name to the practice of non-professional translating. They referred to “translating done in everyday circumstances by people who have no special training in it” as “Natural Translation.” They examined case studies of children growing up in relatively privileged bilingual homes – not the children of the average immigrant -- and they primarily focused on

spontaneous translations offered for family members in the course of daily household talk. As such, their analyses highlighted the common understanding of the word “translation,” not the social practices at work or relationships involved, and not the power-infused, survival-motivated phenomenon we highlight here.

More recently, Guadalupe Valdés (2002) used the term “family interpreters” to describe the phenomena we examine in this manuscript. This term highlights the relationships between the translator and those for whom s/he speaks; it also suggests the purposeful nature of the activities (to take action *for the family*). However, by suggesting that parents and children work as “performance teams,” Valdés may obscure power differentials within the family, or between the “performers” and their various audiences.

<2<sup>nd</sup>> Language brokering.

Lucy Tse (1996:226) used the term “language brokers” for children who “interpret and translate between culturally and linguistically different people and mediate interactions in a variety of situations including those found at home and school.” This term has been picked up by psychologists as well (Buriel, et al. 1998; Weisskirch and Alva 2002). Like Valenzuela’s term “advocates” and Chu’s term “immigrant children mediators” (1999), language brokering captures an important aspect of the work that immigrant children do; they often mediate between mono-lingual speakers, advocating for or supporting their families in some manner. However, this term also obscures the power imbalance between participants, for example, between a store-owner and a child, or between a school teacher and an immigrant parent. Youth “brokers” or “advocates” are not neutral, nor are they invested with great societal power: they are children speaking for adults and immigrants interfacing with “mainstream” institutions and authority figures.

<2<sup>nd</sup>> Para-phrasing

Invoking a play on the Spanish word “para,” we have coined the term “para-phrasing” to signify the various ways in which children use their knowledge of the

English language and of U.S. cultural traditions to speak *for* others and *in order to* accomplish social goals (Orellana, et al. 2003). We believe this term emphasizes that what children do is purposeful; they are taking action in the world, not simply moving words and ideas or explicating concepts. At the same time, as with the term “para-professional,” para-phrasers may act in capacities for which they have no formal preparation and in which their qualifications are open to question and critique. “Para-phrasing” is also useful for signaling the parallels between cross-language translating and the within-language paraphrasing that teachers often ask children to do in school, which is an important aspect of our research though not the focus of this manuscript. In this article, we use “para-phrasing” interchangeably with translating, interpreting and language brokering, because each speaks to particular aspects of this phenomenon, even as each has its limitations, and we examine how such para-phrasing by youth helps immigrant families access knowledge, information, and resources that aid in their settlement.

#### <1<sup>st</sup>> Methods

This exploration of children’s contributions to immigrant households is one part of a larger, multi-method program of research on immigrant childhoods developed in four different communities over the past five years. Our work started with an ethnographic study of families’ daily language practices in central **Los Angeles**, California (see Orellana 2001), a “first-stop” community for immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Our second community is an ethnic enclave with a long history of Mexican immigration on the southwest side of **Chicago**, Illinois. The next community currently under study is a more settled one, also in Chicago. In this “second-stop” neighborhood that we call **Regan**, we have been working with case study families who have lived in the United States from ten to over twenty years. The large public elementary school in the area is approximately 75 percent Latino (mostly Mexican, from the states of Guanajuato and Michoacán) and 25 percent Polish. Finally, we draw from another on-going ethnographic study of immigrant children and families in **Engleville**, Illinois, an urban/suburban, mixed-ethnic, mixed-income community near Chicago that has a small,



but growing population of more recent Mexican immigrants, mostly from the state of Guanajuato.

Gathering data in these various receiving contexts for immigrants has helped us to consider how community institutions shape the needs and opportunities for children to assist their families in connecting to resources outside the home. Through interviews and focus groups with children, parents, and teachers from these neighborhoods, as well as participant observation in the homes and classrooms of eighteen case study children, we have been exploring the social processes involved when the children of immigrants act as language and cultural brokers. What follows is more detail on the type of data collected and analyzed from these communities.

## <2<sup>nd</sup>>The Survey

Informed by the prior ethnographic research in California, we designed a survey to inquire into young bilinguals' language uses, translating/interpreting experiences, and daily life activities. We administered the survey, in students' preferred language of Spanish or English, to all fifth- and sixth-grade mainstream and Spanish bilingual classrooms at Regan elementary school in Chicago in 2000, with a response rate of 280/313 children (89 percent). Of these respondents, 236 said that they spoke Spanish at home; all spoke some level of English at school. Because our field data is based on work with Spanish-speaking youth mostly from Mexico, we restrict our reports of the survey data to these 236 Spanish-speaking, mostly Mexican, respondents. We use the survey data to sketch the broad contours of youths' para-phrasing experiences in this community, patterns that we explore further through the ethnographic work described below.

## <2<sup>nd</sup>> The Case Studies

We invited twelve youth from Regan who indicated that they translate for their families (based on their responses to the survey as well as follow-up interviews) to participate in a "case study" approach to studying this phenomenon. From ethnographic

work and community connections in the other two Chicago sites, we invited six additional youth who are active family interpreters to also take part in the case study research, because we wanted to examine how para-phrasing plays out in different kinds of community contexts. Thus, for more than two years we have conducted participant observation in the communities, schools, and homes of eighteen adolescents in the Chicago area, documented in over 2500 pages of field notes.

Twelve of the eighteen participants are girls, a gender skew that reflects our initial assumption, informed by prior research by Valenzuela (1999), that more girls than boys translate and interpret at home.<sup>iii</sup> All of the twelve participants from Regan were in the fifth or sixth grade at the start of the study; two of the additional six were younger (in third grade), and two older (in eighth and ninth grades). We primarily selected pre-adolescents because other research (Buriel, et al. 1998; McQuillan and Tse 1995; Tse 1996) and our own ethnographic work suggests that this is the age in which bilingual children are beginning to take on increased responsibilities as para-phrasers. Also, selecting the twelve Regan children based on established selection criteria from our questionnaire has allowed us to map variations in the practice across households in one community, and to check and further illuminate our survey results.

Our field work included observing in the children's homes and classrooms and audiotaping translation episodes in a variety of places, such as doctors' offices, stores, and at home. Over a period of months, our Chicago-area research team (described below) built rapport with each family in order to gain access to such situations. Because we realized that we could not be present to observe the wide variety of experiences para-phrasers have, we also gave the children tape recorders to record themselves, and journals to write about their translations.<sup>iv</sup> We modeled journal writing for the participants, asking them to describe the context of these translations, the people involved, how they felt about the episodes, and any problems that arose; but we also encouraged them to deploy their own narrative styles. Our data corpus includes 140 journal entries from study participants.

The work with these case study families in Chicago and Englewood was done by a team of women researchers that includes three adult daughters of Latino immigrants who translate for their own families; three monolingual speakers of English, whose experiences as recipients of translations lend insight into the perspectives of parents, and whose lack of Spanish fluency at times made it possible to collect more natural examples of translations than was possible when bilinguals were observing; and two others who are not Latina, but speak Spanish and have extensive experience in immigrant communities. Our different ages, experiences, and life span positions both facilitated and constrained our abilities to connect with particular children or parents. We shared our varying perspectives and compared data collected across the cases and communities at weekly team meetings, allowing access to a wider set of viewpoints on each child's experiences (Dorner, et al. 2002).

## <2<sup>nd</sup>>Interviews

We supplemented the intensive case studies with individual and small group interviews of 66 children of immigrants between the ages of 8-13. Twenty-four were from the Chicago site; 42 were from Los Angeles. For each recorded session, we invited participants to speak in Spanish, English, or both languages, and we tried to follow their lead in language choices. We sometimes switched codes to repeat, clarify, or extend the ideas, and to create space for them to do so as well.

In these semi-structured interviews, we asked children to tell us about times they translate, following up on their responses with questions that probed for details. We also asked how they feel in their positions as translators and what they do when they encounter problems. Most of the interviews were done as small groups to shift the balance of power between the interviewer and interviewee; this proved to be particularly useful for eliciting discussion and triggering participants' memories. We also attempted to uncover kids' perspectives by asking them to act out imagined translation incidents and to re-enact actual incidents; the different social situations they portrayed lend insight into the significance particular para-phrasing experiences have for them.

Finally, we recognize the importance of triangulating children's perspectives with those of others in their lives as well as adults who have lived through the immigrant family experience. Thus, we conducted and have transcribed semi-structured interviews with: (a) four young adult children of immigrants from the Chicago area (ages 19-20) about their experiences translating when they were young; (b) ten teachers of Chicago study participants; and (c) ten parents of case study participants. The parent interviews were conducted jointly by a native Spanish speaker and a non-native speaker of Spanish (in most cases, the second and third authors), in Spanish; the teacher interviews were conducted by a variety of members of the larger research team mentioned above. Through these more formal, audio-taped discussions with adults, we probed for adults' views of children's interpreting efforts.

Finally, our own experiences as translators and/or the recipients of translation in a variety of contexts (especially the third author's direct experiences as the child of immigrants from Mexico to Chicago), inform our thinking. We invited the bilingual research assistants who worked on transcribing audiotapes of interviews and translation situations to proffer their opinions and incipient analyses, by inserting into the transcripts points of reflection and/or commentary. In many cases, these undergraduate students reflected on memories of their own translating experiences that were triggered for them by listening to the tapes.

## <2<sup>nd</sup>> Data Analysis

We began our analyses of the journal entries, recorded translations, field notes, and interviews by mapping the various domains in which immigrant children provide their parents with access to social institutions. To do this, we first identified the institutional domains named by other researchers: religious, commercial, state/legal, educational, and family/recreational (Farr 1994); employment/labor market, public/private assistance, and community (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994); and schools, financial resources/complex transactions, labor markets and legal/political institutions, and health services (Valenzuela 1999). Then, after examining our own data, we

constructed the following categories that seemed to best capture the kinds of resources that our participants help their families to access: educational, medical/health, commercial, legal/state, financial/employment, housing/residential, and cultural/entertainment. There is overlap among these functional domain categories, and some activities were more easily classified than others, but this categorization scheme provides a useful starting point to understand the diversity of children's para-phrasing experiences, and to expand/explore the categories already named by other researchers.

We continued through a process of inductive analysis. Interrogating the corpus of data described above, we theorized how children's work facilitates immigrant families' access to resources and the nature of these different kinds of para-phrasing encounters. These include both "specialized" encounters (unusual events that may be emotionally heightened or marked in families' experiences) and a wide variety of quotidian activities.

To explore the power dimensions of these practices, we apply and extend Bonnie Urciuoli's (1996) distinction of "inner" and "outer" spheres, detailed in her exploration of Puerto Ricans' experiences of linguistic difference as shaped by power relations within U.S. society. Urciuoli contends that the inner sphere consists of "relations with people most equal to one," such as within families or people of similar socio-economic backgrounds. The outer sphere, on the other hand, is made of "relations with people who have structural advantages over one" (Urciuoli 1996:77). The key distinction between these spheres is the "polarity of equality," especially in regard to linguistic skills (Urciuoli 1996:77). Outer sphere interactions generally involve unequal power relations, for example, when children and families talk with landlords, teachers, doctors, and social workers. Many outer sphere interactions require knowledge of English and of U.S. cultural and institutional practices, whereas in the inner sphere, parents and children typically share the same language and experiences.

We extend Urciuoli's framework by contemplating the power relations that exist *within* the "inner sphere." Urciuoli focuses on the *shared* linguistic repertoires of families, in contrast with outer sphere encounters. She notes: "In inner-sphere relations, people share the same indexes and it is unlikely that anyone has the kind of unanswerable

authority that outer-sphere figures do” (1996:9). Parents and children do not always share the same linguistic capabilities, however, and these differences may be heightened in moments of brokering, interpreting, and para-phrasing.

### <1<sup>st</sup>> Accessing Assets

We begin by presenting results from our domain analyses of the observational, interview, and journal data. These reveal the wide range of ways in which children para-phrase for their families, as well as the varied societal and institutional domains with which they contend. Table 1 gives an overview of some of the specific ways in which children’s work helps families to access educational, medical/health, commercial, legal/state, financial/employment, housing/residential, and cultural/entertainment resources, knowledge and information.

- Table 1 about here –

The survey data offers another take on the range as well as the frequency of para-phrasing experiences of the Spanish-speaking students in our Regan community (n=236). (See Tables 2, 3, and 4.) Sixty percent of these students are either first- or second-generation immigrants, 56 students (24 percent) are third-generation, and three (1.3 percent) are fourth-generation.<sup>v</sup> Like Tse (1995), we found that generally all immigrant children report brokering, most often for families and friends, at home and “on the street.” Even in this more “settled” immigrant community, first-, second-, and even third-generation students all marked that they have translated something for someone.<sup>vi</sup> Most often, the youth translate for their mothers (73 percent sometimes, once/week, or everyday) or fathers (55 percent).

Tables 3 and 4 demonstrate the range of places and things that these youth reported translating. The majority of para-phrasing happens in everyday ways, that is, translations of words (62 percent of students), phone calls (51 percent), at home (69 percent), at stores (57 percent), or on the street (41percent). Again similar to Tse (1995), we found that somewhat fewer students claimed to have experience translating more difficult items such as legal documents, bank statements, or report cards (14 percent, 20

percent, and 29 percent respectively), or in more specialized situations, such as at doctor's offices (40 percent) or parent-teacher conferences (30 percent).

-Tables 2, 3, and 4 about here –

## <2<sup>nd</sup>> Specialized encounters and everyday ways

When we have presented our work to audiences of teachers, parents and researchers, people often voice concern about the burdens and responsibilities that youth assume through this work. Heightened, marked, dramatic, or “specialized encounters” that may indeed be experienced as burdensome – for example, translating for a parent during a medical exam or at the INS office -- have received considerable attention in the popular press (e.g., Associated Press 1991; Flores 1993; Gold 1999; Hedges 2000; Wallace 2002). Certainly, these encounters with medical, legal, and other institutions make especially visible the role that children play in connecting their families to crucial resources and services. But through our inductive analyses and exploration of survey results, we came to understand that children open up access to resources in multiple, quotidian ways, and that they experience much of their translating work as “just normal.” Only 9 percent of Tse's sample of 35 students reported that brokering was a “burden” and only 9 percent felt “embarrassed” by it; in fact, more than half liked it and 46 percent were “proud to broker” (Tse 1995: 188). This is an important corrective to popular understandings of the translation work that immigrant youth do. The following excerpts from participants' journals illustrate this juxtaposition of more or less specialized encounters and the more common, everyday para-phrasing efforts of immigrant youth in several domains:

(Everyday; educational/entertainment)

*Today, my dad, my mom and I were watching a movie about babies and how to help them be healthy kids. They mentioned something about 2 twins that each drew a picture. One drew the picture nice and the other*

*one drew the picture sloppy. The twin that drew the picture nice didn't have any difficulties at birth but in the other hand the other baby who drew the sloppy picture did have difficulties. My mom didn't understand what they meant. So I translated for her. (Jessica)*

(Specialized, legal/state)

*In June 16, 2002, I translated for my mom to the Police. Someone stole(d) her necklaces in the street. So I called the police and describe(d) the man and told my mom what they said. I felt nervous and I was crying; it was very hard to translate in such a moment. (Amanda)*

(Everyday, financial)

*Well, I translate to my mom of bills because she do(es)n't understand English that much. We take like an hour. But (it) is worth it cause she learns a lot of stuff.*

(Monique)

(Specialized, medical)

*When I was about 8-9 years old we went to the doctor because my baby brother was 1 month or so. He had to go for a check up and a doctor told (asked) my mom if she was going to give my baby brother milk from he(r) breast, but I did not know what breast meant. So I told the doctor if she could explain what breast meant. She was nice and kind and said yes of course. She touched her breast and (I) told my mom what the doctor was saying. As far as I can remember this was the scariest translating thing I (had) ever done. I did not translate things that much this week but I did work (a) long time ago translating stuff. Well, I felt so nervous to translate for the doctor because I thought I would not be able to understand the big words doctors use. (Jasmine)*

(Specialized, employment; Everyday, commercial)



*Today I went to my mom's work. I helped her with her boss because she didn't know what he was saying; she does know, but not that well, so I helped my mom in her work. Then later my dad took me to Home Depot, and he told me to tell the cashier that she marked a thing wrong and I told her. Then she told us I am sorry and my dad told me to tell her that's okay. (Jacqueline)*

We use this distinction between specialized encounters and everyday ways as we unpack the specific experiences that our participants named and/or that we observed across domains. As with the domain categorizations, however, we recognize that there is slippage between categories, and we intend the distinction as only a loose organizing frame. We have aimed to classify these things according to how they are experienced by participants, following an “emic” rather than an “etic” logic.

### <3<sup>rd</sup>> Educational Domain

The greatest number of observed and reported para-phrasing encounters involve interactions with schools, teachers, or school materials (as also reported by McQuillan and Tse 1995 and Tse 1996). Many of these are “everyday” encounters, including a barrage of written texts that are sent home from school in children’s backpacks. The youth in our study help their siblings with homework; assist their parents with ESL homework and to study for citizenship classes; and interpret school materials, report cards, and other informational materials.

Across sites, when children are officially enrolled in a bilingual program, they receive school information in Spanish. But when they exit these bilingual programs, much school information goes home in English only – an institutional practice that seems to confuse the abilities of *families* with those of students, or which simply relies on children’s ability to provide the translations. In some cases teachers offer kids a choice of Spanish or English; some of the youth we talked with indicated that if they are given a choice, they will take papers in English, perhaps because of the social stigma attached to “needing” Spanish. In these cases, children have the power to *choose* a linguistic identity,

yet their choices (which are influenced by the social prestige value of each language) may leave parents with only indirect access to information about their child's school.

More specialized incidents include translating during parent-teacher conferences, their own as well as those of their siblings. How these transpire varies across schools, classrooms, and grade levels, but in all audiotaped cases (15 conferences), children play pivotal roles not simply in translating *words*, but in interpreting school practices. Children also help their families make decisions about school activities, such as whether siblings should be allowed on specific field trips or to join particular activities, and whether or how teachers should be contacted about particular concerns. Eleven-year-old Jasmine, for example, accompanied her mother as she checked out various pre-schools for Jasmine's brother; she was on hand to translate as well as to weigh in on the school selection decisions.

There was variation across teachers and schools in the tenor of these family-school encounters, but most were non-confrontational and did not appear to be highly charged with power dynamics. Families have numerous opportunities to engage with teachers and schools (though not, perhaps, as much as some educators would recommend), such that any single encounter may not have great consequences for participants. However, the cumulative effect of translator-mediated interactions between immigrant families and schools may be highly consequential for shaping the pathways that the youth and their siblings are able to access. Two of the four adult para-phrasers that were interviewed remembered feeling responsible for shaping their siblings' educational trajectories based on how they had translated during parent-teacher conferences. In one case, the girl's sister was held back a grade. Like Jasmine helping to choose preschools, these youth may have felt empowered *within* the family while taking part in family decision-making, but the families' relationship with school officials may remain unbalanced, and that imbalance may leave children feeling *responsible* for decisions that adults make. Marina remembers:

*When I came home, I cried because I felt really bad that they were holding my sister back. I felt bad that I couldn't understand why, that I couldn't*

*explain to the teacher to tell me that my mom wanted to know why. And 'til this day, we really don't know what happened. Because, my sister was not a horrible student, so my mom's convinced that we misunderstood something in the process. Because I'm sure summer school would've been an option for her. And I feel really guilty about it. I do, because I feel like I'm, either I missed something that I didn't articulate to my mom that this nun said. Or, I just didn't get my mom's point across very clearly to her. Because, I mean, I know summer school would've been an option. I knew kids in my class who were going to summer school.*

### <3<sup>rd</sup>> Medical/Health

The encounters with medical/health domains that we have listed in Table 4 similarly include an array of everyday translations, done as part of everyday life at home (e.g. translating medical labels, instructions for hair care products, and television health programs). More specialized encounters include scheduling and attending routine and non-routine doctor, dentist, and hospital visits, and accompanying family members on trips to the emergency room or for preparations for surgery. Amanda wrote about going with her mother to the hospital when her brother cut himself with a knife: *"I was so so nervous. I could almost (not) talk, but I did it."* Sammy took charge for himself and his mother during his own hand surgery, including researching information about the surgery on the Internet beforehand. This made him an active participant in his own medical care.

We observed several more routine visits to doctors, and saw as with the school translations, children do much more than move words and ideas between speakers; they are active participants in the presentation of health information and in families' health-related decisions, asking and answering questions, not simply animating their parents' words. Lucila remembers: *"I used to have to translate for my mom at the doctor's office so much that it came to the point where the doctor would only talk to me. He wouldn't even look at my mom. Instead he would ask me for updates and symptoms. Afterwards he would give me his recommendations and had me choose what the best options would*

be for my mom. Often I had to interrupt him to explain what had been going on with my mom and to ask her what she thought, but I must admit that sometimes I made choices for her without asking her first.” At the same time, our observations reveal that even when parents do not participate directly in conversational exchanges, they generally track conversations; sometimes their input into medical decisions is made in private conversations with their children, not in the interpretation moments.

### <3<sup>rd</sup>> Commercial

Many items that families need for daily life are located outside the home, and so parents often enlist their children’s help when they go shopping. As Beatríz noted “my mother has never gone anywhere alone.” This is especially true in mixed-ethnic communities, such as Englewood, in contrast with our other sites, where basic items can be secured without interacting with English-speakers. But even in ethnic enclaves, some goods and services cannot be secured from local Spanish-speaking vendors or service providers. Children’s interpretation efforts may make a difference in families’ willingness to seek out specialized goods and services, such as when Carmen helped her uncle to buy a car, when Estela tried to help her father rent a musical instrument to play in a band, or when Nova helped his family to purchase a computer.

Purchasing and using technology seems to be a domain where children – immigrants and non-immigrants – exercise power within the family. Yet, the power dynamics within the household are complicated, probably shaped by both gender and age relations. Nova’s parents bought the computer principally *for* him and *at his insistence*. While he has helped his family to access the Internet and make use of such technology, he has also constrained their access; the computer is set up in Nova’s room, and his eight-year-old sister told us that she rarely gets to use it. We saw this in several other case study families as well, where children’s work as interpreters overlapped with their roles as “technology experts,” experts who may both facilitate and constrain different family members’ use of their computers.

In everyday kinds of commercial transactions, children sometimes serve as animators of their parents' words, but more often, they are sent by parents to make inquiries or complete sales transactions on their own. They also assist parents by reading labels and signs, filling out credit applications, checking receipts, cross-checking sales advertisements with prices, and registering complaints about merchandise. At home, they read sales circulars, compare the prices of different products, deal with telemarketers, and help families make decisions about the purchase of items and services, such as long distance phone service.

In commercial transactions in the public sphere, families are consumers, presumably with the rights, power, and privileges of the same. It might seem that such situations would not be particularly burdensome, emotionally laden, or infused with power dynamics. However, several participants in our study recalled shopping expeditions with their parents as moments of embarrassment, humiliation, or shame. Seemingly this is because their identities as poor, working-class or immigrant families were made salient and exposed for public judgment; we see hints of this in Miguel's journal, after he accompanied his father back to the store to obtain a missing part to their newly purchased bunk bed and they were told to "wake up a little:" *"Today me and my dad went to buy a bunk bed; we got the bunk bed but it was missing a part. We went back to the place again and they told my dad that if top was ready, it isn't fixed. My dad got angry at him because he told us to wake up a little."*

Further hints are evident in Beatríz' recollection of embarrassment when her mother asked many questions while shopping for gloves at a department store: "I thought she was being a nuisance, and I thought, 'I don't want this lady to think this way about my mom.' I saw it as protecting her image." Beatríz also talked about a time when she was sent by her mother to buy cheese at a local supermarket. There, she interpreted a grocer's question about her cheese selections as an interrogation of her ethnicity:

*My mother has never gone to Jewels or Dominicks by herself. She has always gone with someone who can translate for her. I often and still order her cheese and ham from the deli. I recall a miscommunication situation*

*that made my mother upset and made me feel very embarrassed. I was about seven years old. My mother and I were at Jewels. My mother told me to stand in line while she shopped for other items and order a pound of American cheese from the deli. After about fifteen minutes of waiting my turn, the woman behind the counter asked for my order and I told her that I wanted a pound of cheese. The woman then said, "American, Italian, Swiss..." I thought she was asking for my nationality. I responded by saying, "Mexican." In a frustrated tone of voice, she told me that they did not have any Mexican cheese.*

### <3<sup>rd</sup>> Legal/State

In encounters with state and legal institutions, immigrant and social class status may be even more marked. And while some encounters that we have categorized in this domain take place in everyday sorts of ways when societal institutions enter into the home (e.g. translating letters from state officials or election materials), most are deliberate, heightened encounters with authority figures, with very real consequences for families. They include negotiations for citizenship and legal residence, welfare, Women, Infant and Children (WIC) and social security benefits. The bureaucrats who manage these institutions may view their clients in condescending, paternalistic, and/or confrontational ways, and place the burden of communicating their needs on the clients. Lucila described helping her mother apply for welfare benefits: "It's like ten different things, and they check which ones you need to bring. It would be utility bills and this and this and that, and then your social security card, your birth record, and all these things...."

Through their translations, children partly construct their parents' images vis-à-vis these authority figures. As well, during these interactions, they are potentially witnesses to their parents' humiliation, infantilization, and mistreatment. [The searing nature of such moments is evident in Cisneros' (1991), Steedman's (1987), and Walkerdine's (1997) recollections of their working class childhoods.] Lucila recalls the treatment her

mother received from a social worker, and the complaint that she registered on behalf of her mother. In this outer sphere encounter, Lucila finds she lacks the power to speak and be heard as an adult, in order to fully express the frustration that she and her mother felt:

*I remember that day and I remember the tension I felt as I listened to my mom angrily complain about the lady, and the pressure I felt to translate “properly.” I didn’t know what to say. I wanted the complaint to sound like it came from a grown-up, my mother, but I also wanted to stress how rude (the lady) was, writing that she was very impatient with our situation and that my mom felt very uncomfortable with her and that it was really hard for her to express herself and to understand the lady.*

Despite the inadequacies that Lucila *felt* in this situation, however, her willingness to step into the “adult” role and voice this complaint paid off; her mother was assigned a new case worker.

In interactions with institutions that have great power over families’ well-being, especially state/legal institutions, children sometimes help their families not by *accessing* information as much as by *withholding* access from others. Elisa reveals this type of discretion, vis-à-vis the research team, when she writes: “Today I translated for my sister a paper but I can’t say what was on the paper because it was private;” and more than one student responded to questions about their family on the survey with “I don’t want to give you this information.” This points to the power inherent in the researcher-researched relationship, but also to children’s skills at asserting their own power to resist scrutiny of their families by those who have more societal power than they. When Marjorie asked a group of children if they are ever put in situations where they have to answer questions they don’t want to answer, Jocelyn recalled the kinds of questions she has had to answer for her mother, presumably (unstated) to legal/state institutions: “O, ¿cómo (a) cuantos años tuvo a los niños? Por que mi mamá me tuvo bien joven...como mi mamá dejo la escuela... van a decir que, que para tener un hijo, mejor que se espere más por que va a dejar la escuela.” (*“Oh, like how old she was when she had kids? Because my mom had me when she was young. Because, since my mom left school... they’re going to say what,*

*like to have a baby, it would have been better if she had stayed in school.*”) By not answering such questions, Jocelyn asserts her power in the outer sphere and protects her mother from critique of her personal life; and in describing this to the researcher, she displays her awareness of the judgments that others may make of her mother’s choices.

An interesting example that we classified in this category is one that involved Miguel and Nova’s mothers, working with a group of neighbors to present a letter of support to firefighters at the local fire station as a response to the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001. Certainly, interactions with state services do not have to be heightened, emotional incidents, nor ones where children feel they must shield their families from intrusive institutions. In this case, the youth did not so much access a particular resource in the community for their families, as help to make a personal connection with the fire department, something that may enhance their sense of their own power to access help from such resources in the future.

### <3<sup>rd</sup>> Financial/Employment

Our decision to combine financial transactions with those specifically related to families’ employment in the paid labor force serves to highlight the involvement of our participants in their household economies. Indeed, many of the children we worked with seemed both aware of and well-versed in their family finances. They acquire this knowledge by interpreting bills, helping families decide which bills to pay each month when money is tight, writing checks, reviewing receipts and statements, and mediating transactions in banks.

Most of the examples that we have classified in the “employment” side of this category may seem like relatively specialized encounters to readers, perhaps because in modern U.S. society children’s activities are centered in and around schools, not the workplace, but the children who reported these experiences did not necessarily talk about them as unusual. (See Orellana 2001 and Zelizer 1985 for discussion of children’s involvement in remunerated work.) Reported and observed examples include accompanying parents to work where they interpret their parents’ words for their bosses



and/or co-workers (especially when parents work as domestic laborers or gardeners in private homes), helping parents fill out job applications, making phone inquiries regarding employment possibilities, and assisting with home businesses. In two households, this involves sending and receiving faxed orders, and making phone calls. Two children also talked about calling in to their parents' work to report absences, an interesting reversal of traditional parent-child authority relations vis-à-vis outside institutions. Lucila remembers the complex financial matters she took on:

*I helped my parents fill out job, credit card, and social security applications and income tax forms. I also helped them look for subsidized resources, make major purchases such as domestic appliances, and manage their bank accounts. Not only did I do this for my parents, but I also helped out their friends and other family members in applying for credit or employment.*

### <3<sup>rd</sup>> Housing/Residential

Most of the examples that we have classified as “housing/residential” involve interactions between tenants and landlords or apartment building managers. In one case, a girl whose family owns their own home reported translating for a neighbor who pointed out that their gutter was leaking onto his property. (The girl inquired into the matter and learned “how expensive” gutters are.) In another case, Sammy translates on a regular basis for his mother, who *is* the apartment manager who needs to communicate to tenants who do not speak Spanish. Undoubtedly, families' class positions as tenants, landlords or homeowners color these translation experiences. It is difficult to discern how children understand social class relations in these reported encounters, and none were directly observed. However, in a journal entry about an interaction with his landlord Miguel first claims he felt “really good” (a seemingly formulaic response to our request to describe how he felt in translation situations), but then adds a sentence: “And upset because we really don't use (too much) water.” He aligns himself with his family,

as “we,” in their dealings with the “guy who owns the building,” who has the power of surveillance over the family’s consumption patterns:

*Today a guy who owns the building came to check the bathroom. Because the water bill came too high, he came to check if there were any leaks. I translated what was happening. I translated to my mom. I felt really good. And upset because we really don’t use water.*

### <3<sup>rd</sup>> Cultural/entertainment

Many of the recorded/observed translations that we have classified as cultural/entertainment took place in the privacy of families’ homes, involving only “inner-sphere” participants in the interactions. These were translations of movies, television shows, and radio broadcasts. In these situations, the “outer sphere” enters the home only in the third person, in voices that can be turned on or off at will, and which require no direct response. Through their translations, however, children help their families go beneath the surface of these programs and access deeper understandings. As Miguel describes in his journal:

*Today I translated a part that a guy said in a movie to my dad. It was Independence Day. A black guy told the president that he could ride the spaceship because he knows how to ride almost anything. I felt kind of good because my dad was really paying attention, not just watching the killing.*

A few of the events that we have classified as “entertainment” take place outside the home, however, and some do involve interactions with non-intimates (e.g., purchasing tickets for movies and other events). But this work of translating generally took place within the context of fun, in the spirit of group outings, and in situations in which families’ working-class, immigrant positions were not particularly marked. For the most part, kids seemed to take their translating work in these situations in stride. Katrina wrote about a family trip to an amusement park: “I was translating and helping people and it was fun.”

### <1<sup>st</sup>> Summary and conclusions

In this article, we have mapped the domains of immigrant children's para-phrasing experiences in order to demonstrate the wide range of ways in which they help their families to access resources in their new society. We have illustrated how children's everyday and "specialized" para-phrasing helps their families with educational, medical, commercial, state/legal, financial/employment, housing/residential, and cultural institutions. Their efforts have both immediate and long-term effects; and they help their families to access specific resources, knowledge and information even as they also play a role in *protecting* families from incursions of the outer sphere into their homes and personal lives.

Our analyses make clear that children are active participants in their households and in immigrant settlement processes. They do not simply animate their parents' words; they are not merely "peripheral participants" (Lave and Wenger 1991), operating, like apprentices, on the edges of adult activities; and they are not passive objects of adults' socialization efforts. As Tse (1995:190) points out, "brokers act not only as conduits of information, but also as socializing agents," who provide access to opportunities in their communities. Their expertise really matters for families' health, survival, and social advancement.

At the same time, we do not believe that the fact that children are key players in their households should be taken to mean that they have inordinate power either within the family or in the public sphere. As demonstrated in each of the domains above, many of the activities that we observed and recorded take place within the framework of everyday activities and are experienced by children as "just normal." Youth (of the age we observed) participate in family decisions but do not generally *make* these decisions themselves. The power to draw children into translation activities also generally remains in adults' hands, as evidenced by the many journal entries in which children wrote that they "had to" translate, as well as by the resistance that we sometimes witnessed. Indeed,

parents talked about using translations as an important arena in which to facilitate their children's bilingual and bicultural development.

The power that children have to access assets for their families is also constrained by the fact that they are children operating in situations that are usually the domain of adults. Further, they are the children of immigrants, generally distanced from the native-born, representatives of U.S. institutions by language, culture and social class. These things may affect how they and their families are viewed and treated, as well as how entitled they feel to ask questions, make demands, or speak on behalf of their families. We must understand children's actions within the power relations of their everyday lives.

Our research suggests how important it is for researchers of immigrant communities to correct past oversights and more carefully attend to the activities and contributions of young people. As Rogoff (2003) capsulizes, children in many communities around the world are active participants in household and community processes, and immigrants often bring such normative practices with them as they adapt to new circumstances, needs and demands. But mainstream viewpoints often miss children entirely, or overcompensate and see children's participation as evidence of their inordinate power. By listening to children and their families, and situating our analyses within an understanding of local power relations, we can better understand and appreciate children's contributions to households -- without exaggerating their power -- and to see them properly as integral *parts* of their communities.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The term “immigrant” glosses over wide variation in circumstances and experiences, including length of time in the United States, legal status, and social class background. The case study families we have worked with are mostly of rural Mexican origin; some of the children were born in the United States while others immigrated with their families. Legal status varies both within and across households.

<sup>ii</sup> In other forms of research, young people are more visible, though generally not as actors and agents in larger social processes. Sociologists such as Rubén Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes have mapped such large-scale social patterns as the educational progress of the “new second generation” (e.g., Portes 1996; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Developmentalists and psychologists have focused on individual children’s assimilation, acculturation, and identity development (e.g., Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). Linguistic anthropologists have explored the processes of language socialization in immigrant families (e.g., Baquedano-López 1998; Zentella 1997), and there are ethnographic studies of immigrant children’s educational experiences in the U.S. (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan 1992; Valdés 1996).

<sup>iii</sup> Statistical analyses of our survey data have not provided clear evidence that there are significant differences between girls’ and boys’ overall experiences with translating (Dorner, Orellana and Li-Grining under review). However, like Valenzuela (1999), our data show that the nature of specific translating *relationships* and *activities* may have gendered dimensions; e.g., girls were more likely than boys to report translating for grandparents and siblings and at visits to the doctor or dentist. Further, the gendered nature of this practice may have developmental dimensions, with girls taking increasing responsibility as they move through adolescence.

<sup>iv</sup> We secured permission beforehand from the people for whom they regularly translate (e.g. parents, other family members, doctors, teachers), and we paid the children \$5 for

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each taped episode that they turned in to us. It is beyond the scope of this article to detail the lengthy deliberations our research group held to discuss the ethical and practical considerations of this payment plan, but we were able to work out a plan that satisfied both our Internal Review Board and our team members.

<sup>v</sup> We combine the first- and second-generation students, as most of the foreign-born children immigrated with their families soon after their birth. Thus, they constitute part of the “1.5 generation” and share many characteristics with their second-generation peers. We are missing the generational status of 37 students.

<sup>vi</sup> The fact that third-generation immigrants (24 per cent of survey respondents) say they translate is noteworthy, but not surprising. Our third-generation respondents indicated that they translate fewer items for fewer people in fewer circumstances than do first- and second-generation immigrants, but translation is still a part of their daily lives, most likely because these children live in a multilingual community where there is considerable contact among speakers of English, Spanish and Polish. Other factors may also shape demands for translation in the third generation (e.g. families may be transnational, with frequent movement between their home countries and the U.S.; and households may comprise a mix of generations, including new immigrants.)