Understanding the Experience of Language Brokering for Latino Parents:

A Phenomenological Study

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**Introduction**

**Statement of the Problem**

One of the fastest growing populations in the United States is that of Latino immigrants (Holtrop, McNeil Smith, & Scott, 2015). A large percentage of this population are living in a socioeconomic disadvantage with close to one third of families from Mexico living in low-income households (Barnett, Mortensen, Gonzalez, & Gonzalez, 2016). Many groups from the dominant culture of the United States have not warmly accepted this population for reasons of actual or assumed undocumented status as well as the overwhelming amount of Spanish only speakers represented (Schwartz et al., 2015). One phenomenon that occurs upon immigrating to a new culture is that an acculturation gap develops between the older and younger generations within the family system (Frazer, Rubens, Johnson-Motoyama, DiPierro, & Fite, 2017; Santisteban, Coatsworth, Briones, Kurtines, & Szapocznik, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2016; Schwartz et al., 2015; Telzer, Yuen, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2016; Wagner et al., 2008). Most often, this acculturation gap brings about another phenomenon called language brokering (Antonini, 2010; Corona et al., 2012; Eksner & Orellana, 2012; Guan & Shen, 2015; Kim, Hou, & Gonzalez, 2017; Roche, Lambert, Ghazarian, & Little, 2014; Weisskirch, 2013). Language brokering is when children or other family members translate the English language and culture on almost every occasion for those who have not learned the dominant language or the dominant culture. The impact that language brokering has on Latino immigrant parents and their ability to maintain authority in their homes has not been explored in depth, possibly due to language barriers and poor biases by many in the dominant culture.

The hope for this study is to benefit the Latino Spanish speaking immigrant parents in the United States. The researcher desires to give them a chance to speak about their challenges in maintaining authority in their households while their children are pressured to take on adult responsibilities because of their English language fluency. They will have an opportunity to speak from first hand experiences to help others understand what this experience is like for them. They will also have the opportunity to voice their opinions about how the dominant culture surrounding them can best support them. This study will also benefit mental health professionals and professionals in the area of Social Work who desire to promote healthy family dynamics for the fast-growing Latino population, specifically among the United States’ lower socioeconomic class.

**Latino values and acculturation.** Among the Latino population, parents hold similar cultural values that many hope to pass on to their children. Maintaining family cohesion is one shared value in Latino culture (Aldoney & Cabrera, 2016). Often parents encourage their children to stay in their home well into their 20’s. Other shared values are teaching Latino cultural heritage to their children (Santisteban et al., 2012), and being good role models for their children to follow (Aldoney & Cabrera, 2016). Some Latino parents have shared that being able to maintain discipline and authority in the household becomes increasingly difficult as their children adopt US culture and customs faster than they do (Parra Cardona et al., 2009).

**Deficiencies in the literature.** Much of the literature surrounding this acculturation gap pertains to the negative effect it has on the children, and the resulting delinquent behaviors (Frazer et al., 2017; Santisteban et al., 2012; Wagner et al., 2008). Delinquent behavior serves as evidence for many that parents are not able to maintain proper parental authority (Roche, Lambert, et al., 2014). Based on these findings, many researchers have attempted to create culturally relevant parenting interventions in support of struggling Latino immigrant parents (Holtrop et al., 2015; Parra-Cardona et al., 2016, 2017; Parra Cardona et al., 2009). What is lacking are actual accounts of this struggle from Latino immigrant parents who are experiencing an acculturation gap and language brokering in their household.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to lift-up the voices of Latino immigrant parents in order to gain an understanding of how language brokering from their children affects them and the work they do to keep an authoritative position in their home. The researchers will be interviewing Latino immigrant parents of the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States in their homes. For the purpose of this study, a working definition of language brokering will be the act of unofficially translating the dominant language and culture for close friends and family members (Antonini, 2010).

**Research Questions**

The central research question of this proposal is:

* What is it like for Latino immigrant parents to ask their children to translate for them? Furthermore, the proposal will be guided by several sub-questions:
* How do they feel when their children are doing the translating?
* How are they able to maintain authority in their households while their children are taking on adult responsibilities?
* How does this affect their self-esteem?
* What are other possible influences on parental self-esteem?
* What, if anything, in the community is already helping Latino parents build their self-esteem.

**Literature Review**

**Latino Immigrants**

Spanish speaking Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States and one of the fastest growing populations (Corona et al., 2012; Holtrop et al., 2015; Santisteban et al., 2012). According to estimates from the Unites States Census Bureau, by the year 2020, “almost 30% of US youth will be children of immigrants” (Corona et al., 2012, p. 788). This is an underserved population for many reasons, including a fear of discrimination and not being able to afford the high cost of mental health care (Parra-Cardona et al., 2016). Latino immigrant families have generally lower levels of socioeconomic status as compared to the general population of the United States and tend to have reached lower levels of education, which enhances the struggles and limitations of being an immigrant (Aldoney & Cabrera, 2016; Parra-Cardona et al., 2016). As noted by a Latino mother, “without an education, you cannot grow professionally in this country” (Parra-Cardona et al., 2016, p. 333).

The Latino immigrant population has also been met with prejudice and discrimination (Parra-Cardona et al., 2016; Schwartz et al., 2015). This population has not been well received by many white Americans, mainly because of so many undocumented and non-English speaking immigrants. Many white Americans see this group as a threat to the economy and possibly to the official language of the country (Schwartz et al., 2015).

**Parenting Values Among Latinos**

Latino parents desire that their children adapt to US society and are successful (Aldoney & Cabrera, 2016). Looking into the culture of many Latino immigrants, researchers found two major values they hold onto; family cohesion, or familism, and respect (Aldoney & Cabrera, 2016; Barnett et al., 2016; Parra Cardona et al., 2009). Latino families place a great value on teaching these to their children, as well as helping them gain a good education. Familism has been positively linked to close supportive parenting (Barnett et al., 2016), and one parent expressed how important it is to teach kids the family hierarchy, respecting their parents who are above them (Parra Cardona et al., 2009).

One trait Latino parents do not value is the amount of independence bicultural or US oriented parents give their children (Roche, Caughy, et al., 2014). Many feel this complete independence takes away from their family cohesion (Aldoney & Cabrera, 2016). At the same time, these families also feel that teaching autonomy is very important, because it is vital that children know how to make good decisions as they grow up (Aldoney & Cabrera, 2016).

The primary ways Latino parents teach these values to their children are by giving advice, setting normal daily routines and by modeling or leading by example. Some parents said they would “use the example of their sacrifice and perseverance” (Aldoney & Cabrera, 2016, p. 3615). However, Latino parents are not always able to parent the way they desire. There are several factors that hinder Latino parents in being able to provide the type of upbringing they hope their children can enjoy, like little English-speaking ability, lower levels of education, limited job opportunities, and a lack of confidence and low self-esteem (Aldoney & Cabrera, 2016). Latino parents identified how their parents were often harsh, neglectful and sometimes abusive. This type of violence has been challenging for many to overcome, and has been a prime factor in low self-esteem and low self-confidence (Parra-Cardona et al., 2017). According to Aldoney and Cabrera (2016), Latino parents “felt conflicted” in knowing how to discipline their children in America, because the most common way they knew how to discipline included some type of physical punishment, which they learned during their own upbringing (p. 3611). Though, their study also shows that parents are willing to learn about and incorporate new ways of discipline, like the use of ‘time out’ and taking away privileges.

**Acculturation**

As Latino families immigrate into the Unites States, acculturation begins to take place. Acculturation is the process of integrating one’s home culture with one’s host culture and becoming bicultural (Santisteban et al., 2012; Schwartz et al., 2015). It is a difficult process, and each individual in a family influences the other members of the family as each person will acculturate at his/her own pace (Gassman-Pines & Skinner, 2018).

As Schwartz and colleagues (2015) highlighted, “immigrant and minority adolescents are confronted with the task of developing a sense of identity that balanced their cultural heritage with US culture” (p. 742). Latino parents feel the need to teach their children to integrate their traditions and to take what is good from both cultures to be bicultural (Parra-Cardona et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2008). These parents understand the value in being multicultural in that they have learned to respect the cultures of others by valuing their own.

**The Acculturation Gap**

Research supports that the longer immigrant families are in the United States, the higher the rates of adolescent behavior problems and drug use are found (Santisteban et al., 2012). The reason for this is primarily found in an acculturation gap. Most often, when families immigrate into a new culture with a new language, the children and young people in the home will acculturate faster than the parents or elderly (Telzer et al., 2016). This acculturation gap can “serve as an intergenerational stressor,” and often develops into “increased conflict and maladaptive outcomes” (Frazer, Rubens, Johnson-Motoyama, DiPierro, & Fite, 2017, p. 22).

Parents explained how difficult it is to discipline their kids using traditional Latino ways that include spanking. One parent expressed how his children would threaten to call the police if the father gave them a spanking (Parra Cardona et al., 2009). Not only do Latino parents need to change their discipline strategies, they also notice that the acculturation gap slowly causes their family to divide more, and not stay as close as they would like (Wagner et al., 2008). This hits them in their value of familism, one of their core Latino values.

Children have expressed how difficult it is that their parents have not acculturated as well as they have, so they feel that their parents cannot understand them (Wagner et al., 2008). They have expressed many stressors and trials in acculturating faster than their parents, as will be discussed in more detail below. However, adolescents who were able to maintain more of their Latino traditions and values showed smoother and more positive adjustment in the acculturation process (Telzer et al., 2016), and less behavior problems and substance abuse (Santisteban et al., 2012).

**Language Brokering**

One of the most prevalent ways this gap is seen is in the children’s excelled language abilities over their parents. As the children of immigrants become more confident in their English language fluency, they are often asked to translate for their parents. This is known as language brokering (Corona et al., 2012). Children are language brokers for their parents more often than any other family members or adults, and are translating in health related settings, in the schools, and at home with bills and other important documents (Corona et al., 2012; Weisskirch, 2013). Several females adolescents reported “problems with vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension when they served as language brokers” (Corona et al., 2012, p. 795). Antonini (2010) presented some very important arguments when she wrote about the dangers in translating incorrectly in medical settings and legal documents as well as the ethical issues that are raised when children and family members are unofficially translating.

**How language brokering has affected Latino kids.** There are many studies that show both positive and negative effects of language brokering on Latino young people.Guan and Shen (2015) found that the more children needed to translate for their parents, the lower parental support the children felt, and the lower regard the children felt from their mothers. They also found that from the children’s perspective, the more times they needed to translate, the worse *they* ranked the quality of their parent-child relationship. Though, other studies have shown that it is not the amount of translating a child does, rather it is how the child feels about language brokering that really makes the difference in their mental health (Kam & Lazarevic, 2014; Kim et al., 2017). If children felt that language brokering was easy, that they were good at it, and were contributing to their family’s well-being, then language brokering did not have negative effects on the children or family relationships and children reported a sense of pride (Kam & Lazarevic, 2014; Weisskirch, 2013). On the other hand, Kim and colleagues (2017) found that if adolescents do not feel valued or feel that language brokering is a burden, they feel like they are being alienated from their parents and isolated. These children are at higher risk for long term depressive symptoms and deficient parent-child relationships (Kim et al., 2017). Other common results of feeling burdened and isolated by language brokering are alcohol and marijuana use (Kam & Lazarevic, 2014), and lower self-esteem with lower levels of self-efficacy (Weisskirch, 2013).

In a study conducted by Cordova, Ciofu, and Cervantes (2014), they reported that children expressed how difficult and stressful translating is, and how the family generally does not want them to speak English in the home because of a common fear of the children becoming “more American” (p. 698).

**Attempts made to help parents.** Attempts have been made to create and facilitate culturally appropriate parenting interventions. These came about because of the noticeable amount of immigrant children with externalizing behavioral problems (Holtrop et al., 2015). The interventions primarily focused on typical western parenting topics like parent monitoring, discipline and limit setting, skill encouragement, and family problem solving (Holtrop et al., 2015; Parra Cardona et al., 2009). Parents stressed how important it is for those bringing the interventions to understand their culture and situation. For example, one mother spoke about how she always has someone else in the house who helps her, and that she is never alone in taking care of the house or children (Parra Cardona et al., 2009). This is different from most families in the dominant culture. Other parents complemented this idea by explaining how important it is for parenting interventions to be “culturally relevant as well as delivered to participants in a respectful way” (Parra Cardona et al., 2009, p. 221).

Parents also expressed how difficult it was to break out of the poor parenting strategies they learned from their parents, and that they did not know of any alternative methods. They mentioned several areas of concern including how shocked they are to see elementary school kids in the US with drugs, and want to know how to protect their children from substance abuse (Parra Cardona et al., 2009).

**How are parents affected?** Corona and colleagues (2012) sat down with Latino parents and asked them how they felt when they needed to ask their children to translate for them and heard both positive and negative feelings. Parents felt proud that their children could help serve the family, which is a link to the Latino value of familism. Parents also felt “embarrassed, uncomfortable, and ashamed that they needed to rely on their children in everyday situations” (Corona et al., 2012, p. 795). One mother said it best in a reflection of how it was for her growing up as an immigrant. She said, “It is hard. I think what takes a hit is the pecking order in the family. Because you know that link into the world through language and through knowledge and through understand what’s going on around you suddenly becomes the child’s. That’s how it was for me” (Corona et al., 2012, p. 794).

**Gaps in the Literature**

As it has been discussed, immigrant children are acculturating much faster than their parents and are becoming language brokers. Many studies have shown both the negative and positive consequences to language brokering for the Latino children, but few have focused on the parent’s perspective. Even when researchers have planned and implemented parenting interventions to help the parents, the reasons were based on what they saw in children and adolescent delinquent behaviors (Holtrop et al., 2015). There are too few people talking directly to Latino parents to understand how they feel about language brokering, how language brokering affects their self-esteem, and what they believe is needed to maintain their authority in the home as their children are acculturating to US culture faster than they are. This type of research needs to take place to see if there are any supports already in place to help Latino parents maintain their authoritative positions, and what these parents feel would be most beneficial.

**Methodology**

**Theoretical Perspective**

In performing a phenomenological research study, the researcher will be working through a Critical Theory perspective. Critical Theory was first seen among the philosophers at the Frankfurt School in 1929 and 1930 in a lecture given by Max Horkheimer (Bohman, 2016). Critical theory is based on the idea that “research should empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices” (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998, p. 6). According to Horkheimer’s original definition, critical theorists seek to benefit marginalized groups by bringing about freedom from social oppression and power. Critical theory research “must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation” (Bohman, 2016, p. 1).

Critical theory is the underlying perspective of the feminist’s movement and the social justice reform. It has been seen in LGBTQ research, as well as in the field of social work. It is the motivational lens behind research that hopes to uncover social injustice and find ways to bring about social transformation. The original hypothesis for Horkheimer was that in order to transform a society that is run by the dominant culture, real democracy needed to be sought out (Bohman, 2016). In other words, the voices of all people needed to be heard in order for a true consensus to be reach in how society could be shaped. Qualitative research then became a means of lifting up the voices of the marginalized, uncovering social injustice, and finding practical steps towards reform.

In light of the research, Critical Theory will guide the researcher in lifting up the voices of immigrant Latino parents who have little voice in current society. There is a current trend in society that shows children of immigrant families are acculturating to US culture and customs in faster rates than those of the parents (Schwartz et al., 2016). The research will seek to understand the impact this has on the parent’s authoritative position in the family and seek practical ways in supporting these parents to maintain this position.

**Recruitment**

According to research in recruitment and retention among minority groups, one of the best ways to recruit people from minority populations is by community involvement (Miller & Johnson, 2014; Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006). As this study is focused on how language brokering affects Latino immigrant parents, the researcher will begin by recruiting a convenience sample of participants from a local community, which will then become a snowball sample with a hopeful outcome of 15 participants. Here in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, there exists a large school-based community called Linkages to Learning. This program is found in many elementary schools, middle schools and high schools. A large number of Latino immigrant parents are already involved in the various programs and services Linkages to Learning has to offer.

The recruitment process will begin by speaking with the directors of Linkages to Learning about the research project, explaining the topic of study and how this information has the potential to benefit their Spanish-speaking clients. Then, with permission from the director, the researcher will visit at least five Linkages to Learning sites to discuss the project with the site coordinators. The site coordinators would be the best people to recruit participants for the study as many of them are Spanish speaking and already know the Latino immigrant parents very well. The site coordinators will be asked to inform their Latino immigrant families about the study and to explain the purpose and hopeful outcomes. Since word of mouth is such a strong form of recruitment among the Latino community, it is expected that some families who are not involved with Linkages will want to participate as well (Miller & Johnson, 2014). For each family who agrees to participate, they will be given a $20.00 gift card to a local grocery store upon completion of the interview. Furthermore, an additional $10.00 will be given for each person invited into the study who becomes a participant.

**Sampling**

The ideal number of participants would be three families from 5 sites, totaling 15 families. The criteria that must be met are that parents be primarily Spanish-speaking, their child(ren) attend one of the Linkages schools, and their child has translated for either parent at least one time. The family does not need to be part of the Linkages program to participate.

**Procedures**

**Role of the researcher.** The primary instrument for this study will be the researcher and fellow interviewers. The researcher has worked with many children in a counseling setting whose parents are Spanish speaking only. As many of these students have behavioral problems in school, the researcher desires to understand how the acculturation gap between parent and child affects the parent’s ability to maintain authority in the home. Her hypothesis is that it becomes increasingly difficult over time to maintain this authority. The primary researcher is a Caucasian female who is married with two children. She may be biased in her understanding of authority in the home. She has limited Spanish-language ability, and trusts her Spanish-speaking colleagues to accurately translate the objectives of this study.

**Data collection procedures.** Data will be collected by face-to-face interviews conducted inside the family’s home. After general introductions, the interviewer will remind the family about the purpose of the interview and the hopeful outcome of Latino immigrants speaking out to help the dominant culture understand how to best serve them. The interviewer will then conduct an icebreaker with the whole family in order to get to know everyone and allow the family to be comfortable with the interviewer. Each interview will then begin by asking the parent(s) this central question: “What is it like for you to ask your child(ren) to translate for you? Other follow-up questions are written below. The order of these questions will be based on the logical flow of conversation.

* How do you feel when you ask (name of child) to translate for you?
* How do you feel that you are able to maintain authority in your household while your children are pressured to take on adult responsibilities because of their English language fluency?
* How is having your child translate for you affecting your self-esteem?
* What, if anything, in the community is also affecting your self-esteem?
* What, if anything, in the community is helping you build your self-esteem?
* What community supports are already in place to help you become independent?
* What more do you believe is needed to help you maintain your authoritative role as parents as your children are acculturating faster than you are?

**Data analysis procedures.** With permission from all participants, each interview will be recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Each transcription will then be translated into English, and then back translated into Spanish to check for accuracy (Parra Cardona et al., 2009). Through the translation process, the research team will gain a good understanding of the content of each interview. The transcriptions will then be uploaded to Atlas.ti, a research data analysis tool (Brown, Sorrell, McClaren, & Creswell, 2006). Through Atlas.ti, the researcher will be able to search through all interviews, organize topics, and assign specific codes to uncover common themes. It will be ideal to break down the interviews into 5 and 7 major themes with several sub-themes identified (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The themes will structure the results in the way that best describes the shared experiences of all participants (Todahl, Linville, Chou, & Maher-Cosenza, 2008). After the themes have been identified, accuracy will be validated by member checking (Brown et al., 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher will consult with at least 5 participating families to ensure that the themes accurately represent the essence of the experience. If the themes are found to be lacking, the research team will recode the results in a more accurate fashion and recheck with the participants.

**Anticipated Ethical Considerations**

Throughout the recruitment phase, the researcher must ensure that English topics, questions, and perspectives are translated accurately so that participants do not feel tricked or deceived in any way. It will be important to ensure that participants understand what consent they are giving, how we will be using their information, and what compensations they will be receiving for participating.

**Anticipated Results**

**The Essence of the Experience**

Once the themes have been identified and validated, they will then be “shaped into a general description” showing the essence of the shared experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This will be written in a narrative format that highlights the answer to each research question and includes each major theme. This description will include a general sense of what it feels like for a Latino parent to ask their child to translate for them and how this affects their ability to maintain authority in their household. This description will also explain how the parent’s self-esteem is affected in the home and in the community at large. Finally, the results will inform the reader how the Latino immigrant population would like to be supported in the areas of maintaining a high self-esteem and household authority.

**Benefits and Limitations**

This study will add a great deal to the literature surrounding the lived experiences of Latino immigrants in the United States. As a result of this study, the dominant culture of the United States will have the opportunity to learn about the experiences of Latino immigrant parents and in what ways this population is desiring to be supported. Mental health professionals and social workers will have a better understanding of how to promote healthy family dynamics among the Latino immigrant population, and ideally, social transformation will occur that will enhance self-esteem and confidence for Latino immigrants.

There are some limitations to this study. First, the researcher understands that language is closely connected to culture, and there are some cultural ideas and experiences that are not easy to understand if not directly experienced first-hand. Therefore, some of the meaning intended by the interviewees will not accurately translate into the English language. Also, this research study is designed to gain understanding of the shared experience of language brokering among a larger population. The researcher acknowledges that in the coding process, some of the thoughts and ideas important to individual interviewees will not be included in the final results analysis, and the full experience of each individual will not be conveyed.

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