

‘We were our parents’ ears and mouths’: Reflecting on the language brokering experiences of hearing children born to deaf parents

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Background. Hearing children born to deaf parents, or children of deaf adults (CODAs), are often bicultural and bilingual members of the deaf and hearing communities. They are often expected to fulfil very adult roles, especially as the communication link between their deaf parents and the hearing society. Assuming adult roles may place CODAs in difficult situations, potentially affecting their wellbeing and development. In SA, little is known about CODAs and the dynamics of growing up hearing in deaf-parented homes.

Objective. To reflect on the childhood experiences of language brokering in deaf-parented families.

Methods. Two male and eight female participants (21 - 40 years), identified through purposive and snowball sampling, participated in this study. A phenomenological, qualitative approach was employed using semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Thematic analysis revealed inductive themes.

Results. The findings indicate that the interviewed CODAs acted as language brokers and interpreters between their families and the hearing community from a very young age. As children, they were placed in demanding situations, for which they were not developmentally ready. CODAs found balancing the demands from both communities emotionally draining, especially at a young age.

Conclusion. A multidisciplinary approach is suggested to address the mental health, wellbeing and development of young CODAs.

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Hearing children born to deaf adults are often considered bilingual and bicultural in that they potentially share the language and culture of their deaf parents, but are inevitably also members of the hearing community and acquire the spoken language that is dominant in their environment.^[1] Consequently, they often assume the role of language brokering between their deaf parents and the hearing community. Language brokering is a role assumed by bilingual children or adolescents in interpreting, translating and advocating for their parents, members of the family, teachers, neighbours and other adults,^[2,3] without any formal training.^[4] Hearing children of deaf parents, internationally referred to as CODAs (children of deaf adults), assume the language brokering role owing to communication demands and differences between the hearing world and the deaf community. Therefore, CODAs ‘straddle the deaf and the hearing worlds’^[5] and are a ‘critical link [interpreters and cultural mediators] to the alien hearing culture, a source of information for making decisions, and a spokesperson for the family.’^[6] The ‘constant balancing act’ of these two cultures sometimes results in CODAs harbouring unpredictable ambivalence towards both cultures.^[7-9]

Some authors, such as Acoach and Webb^[10] and Weisskirch and Alva^[11] have commented that language brokering places children in complex situations, which, under normal circumstances, should be handled by adults. Singleton and Tittle^[1] commented that language brokering exposes CODAs to inappropriate situations, resulting in unwanted pressure and burden, as CODAs may be too young to resist or negotiate the boundaries. Morales and Hanson^[12] expressed that CODAs often find themselves in situations where they have to protect their parents from negative comments or embarrassment while interpreting. The attempt to protect their parents may inherently lead to generational boundary dissolution - a process in which the role of the child and that of the parent become blurred, resulting in a child taking on parental responsibilities such as decision-making in the family.^[13] However, role reversal and parentification can be avoided if

language brokers who communicate on behalf of their parents do so in collaboration and consultation with them and within appropriate and well-defined boundaries.^[14] CODAs may therefore experience pressure in being the communication bridge between a hearing community and a deaf community.

In contrast, authors such as Weisskirch^[15] and McQuillan and Tse^[16] believe that language brokering may help develop positive qualities in children, such as confidence, independence, maturity and unselfish and cordial characteristics. Furthermore, CODAs may gain valuable information about the adult world, thereby enhancing their own growth and creating opportunities to develop a close relationship with their parents.^[17] Preston^[9] also stated that most CODAs are inherently sympathetic towards other people because of their family experiences. In addition, CODAs ‘enjoy a command of the languages and the cultural knowledge of two worlds’^[6] and they benefit from that experience. Singleton and Tittle^[1] also assert that language brokering may ‘develop positive attributes such as adaptiveness, resourcefulness, curiosity and “worldliness”’.

The literature reviewed for this study is based on international studies because the information on the prevalence of deafness in South Africa (SA) is scant. However, Magongwa^[18] cites that the Deaf Federation of South Africa (DeafSA) estimates only 500 000 deaf people use SA sign language. In addition, there are limited data or information on the experiences of CODAs in SA. Research generally tends to focus more on deafness and deaf people than on CODAs. This holds also for the SA case, as many studies have been conducted with regard to children or adults with deafness, while a search for studies on CODAs yielded no results. The dearth of information on CODAs suggests that researchers have neglected this population. Our study therefore sought to add to the literature on CODAs by giving them an opportunity to speak and reflect on how language brokering shaped their childhood.

Methods

A phenomenological, qualitative, non-experimental research design was used in this study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) (ref. no. H110922). Post ethical clearance, 10 CODAs were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling to reflect on their lived childhood experiences of being language brokers between their families and the hearing community. The sample comprised 2 men and 8 women between the ages of 21 and 40, of whom 6 were white and 4 were black. Snowball sampling was used as CODAs are not easily reached. The researcher therefore approached known CODAs and requested them to act as gatekeepers. These gatekeepers were then requested to approach other potentially interested CODAs to participate in this study. Upon CODAs agreeing to participate, the gatekeepers provided the researcher with the relevant contact details. The researcher subsequently contacted the CODAs to confirm their indicated interest in participating in the study.

Individual open-ended interviews were conducted at locations suggested by the participants. Prior to commencing with the interviews, participants received information letters and were asked to sign consent forms. Permission to record the interviews was also requested. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted in English. As snowball sampling was used, anonymity was not guaranteed; however, confidentiality was maintained. All the participants were assigned pseudonyms in reporting on this study. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences.

The interviews were analysed according to thematic analysis as recommended by Creswell.^[19] Language brokering was identified deductively as a theme from the international literature. Subsequently, four subthemes inductively emerged from the interview data. The subthemes were: language broker role delegation; role reversal and protection; effects on wellbeing, and preparation for adulthood.

Results

The findings revealed that CODAs experienced very challenging situations during their childhoods. Their experiences had profound effects, lasting well into adulthood and which became intrinsic to their lives.

Language broker role delegation

The findings suggested that the onerous role of language brokering was often assumed by the lastborn child in a family or by girls. Nomonde's and Bronwyn's responses are two examples:

'I'm the lastborn at home and I have no idea how I ended up being an interpreter at home. But for some reason, with the CODAs I know, it's usually the babies that tend to sign... not the firstborn. One would assume that the firstborn will take the responsibility.' (Nomonde)

'My sister interpreted up to a certain age and then she just didn't do it, so I took up on that role. My brother was never interested. So he just never did it and it was never... it just became the females' job.' (Bronwyn)

Experiences of frustration due to language brokering

All the participants reflected on occasions when it had not been appropriate for them (as children) to act as language brokers, which led to feelings of frustration. Thandiswa reflected on a situation during which she not only felt psychosocially and emotionally unprepared but also was not familiar with the sensitive, adult vocabulary that was used. Her response, especially the latter part, highlights the long-lasting impact of this experience on her development into adulthood.

'I have pictures of my mother having a hysterectomy and I had to interpret when the doctor came in afterwards. I mean those words...'

*'I was 6 years old. I had no clue what they meant. All the time it was a mission to interpret as a small child... As you get older you realise that, you know, I'm actually messed up. I'm seriously f****d up and I need help, you know. I had to go through all this cr*p.'*

In addition, respondents recalled experiencing frustration with having to prevent or mitigate communication breakdowns, which placed them under great strain during their childhood. Shelly noted:

'If things do not work out, you get blamed and it becomes your fault.'

Being perceived as disrespectful when interpreting the exchange word for word also caused frustration. Marissa reflected on an occasion that made her feel compromised as a language broker:

'Once we were on our way to Durban and we got involved in an accident. The tow truck man wanted to tow the car but my dad refused, as he had his own cover for the car. So I was interpreting back and forth and my dad was truly getting upset, and the tow truck person thought I was the one saying all these things to him. Meanwhile I was just interpreting what my father was saying.'

Role reversal and protection

All the participants reminisced on occasions during which they felt that they were taking on their parents' duties. Their reflections revealed that they had to fulfil very adult roles as children. Rochelle reflected on having had to find medical care for her injured brother, which can be considered an example of role reversal:

'When my other brother was three, he was in an accident. He was hit by a car and I had to... My father was working night shifts. My mother was coming late also. So then I had to take him to the clinic with another friend of mine and I had to tell my parents that their son has [sic] been involved in a car accident, you know, and it was such a ... But for me, at [that] point, it wasn't a shock. I was just happy that he was alive. But later on, as I got older, I had my own child and I realised that the responsibility put on me was high, very, very high, you know.'

Participants reported that they had the difficult and taxing responsibility of protecting their parents from insensitive comments from the hearing community. Nomonde shared that she felt conflicted when having to decide whether to protect her father's feelings or make him aware of an offensive comment:

'Now, going to a public place, with people saying: "Ooh, shame, this deaf person. What are they saying anyway?" It sort of make [sic] me feel small and worse off. He cannot hear them, and you [are] thinking: Should I tell him? Should I not tell him? Should I tell him or protect his feelings? So you never know, you know. He might just tell them off and you don't want that embarrassment as a kid. You know, ja.'

Bronwyn rationalised that their parents had no choice but to rely on their children as language brokers:

'What else were they expected to do?'

Preparation for adulthood

Although language brokering introduced challenges, participants also commented on how their interpreting responsibilities taught them to be responsible and independent from a young age:

'I think, you know, having sold my parents' house at the age of six [...] made me a very responsible child, because I was responsible for the family[s] wellbeing. So, yes, I think that you take responsibility much earlier in life. Therefore I think you are much more a responsible adult.' (Bronwyn)

Bronwyn further reflected on the independence CODAs acquire at a young age:

I think one thing that was truly amazing was that - I don't know if you noticed - but a lot of CODAs are intelligent. You know, we [are] very much visual. Our perception is quite broader than non-interpreter children who come from deaf families. And I also think that we, as CODAs, we became independent at a very young age.'

Discussion

The findings suggest that lastborn children, and often female CODAs, assumed the language brokering role in their families from a very young age already. These findings echo observations by Tse^[4] and Tilghman-Osborne *et al.*,^[20] who reported that female children are more likely to assume the role of language broker than male children. Tilghman-Osborne *et al.*^[20] speculated that this could be due to language brokering being seen as more of a female-specific gender role; men tend to develop negative feelings towards language brokering, as this role is perceived to negatively impact on young men's social freedom.

Furthermore, lastborn female children tended to assume the language role more often than their older siblings. A study by Tilghman-Osborne *et al.*^[20] indicated that firstborn children were most likely to be the primary language brokers in a family, possibly because their parents and younger siblings expected them to fulfil this role. They further argue that younger siblings mostly assumed this role because they were closest to home and were able to maintain their bilingualism, which seems to resonate with the findings of our study.

Literature reviewed for this study indicates that feelings of frustration are common among children who act as language brokers. Our findings support those by authors such as Morales and Hanson,^[12] Weisskirch,^[21] Umaña-Taylor^[22] and Peris *et al.*,^[23] who have reported that most language brokers find the task stressful and burdensome. Expanding on these studies, our study confirmed that children of hearing adults need to be shielded from situations that are not psychosocially and emotionally appropriate and that the responsibilities placed on hearing CODAs need to be reduced.

CODAs in this study also indicated that they felt responsible for preventing or minimising communication breakdowns. Tse^[4] confirms that language brokering places CODAs in difficult situations, as language brokers have to not only convey information but also facilitate communication between two linguistically or culturally different communities. According to Tse,^[4] not being qualified or formally trained as interpreters contributes to the frustrations experienced by CODAs.

Several authors have expressed concerns that language brokering potentially leads to role reversal. Singleton and Tittle^[1] noted that CODAs may occasionally take on certain tasks in the family because the parents are regarded as requiring assistance in decision-making. The children consequently become 'parentified', taking on parental duties. Our findings did not suggest that CODAs made decisions on behalf of their parents or acted in any way that undermined their parents; in fact, CODAs often appeared to have had to shield or protect their parents from harsh treatment by the hearing community. Some people perceive such protection of the parents as role reversal. However, as one of the participants asked: 'What else were they expected to do?'

Filer and Filer^[17] noted that a child might not interpret statements in full in the case of a confrontation, whether from the parent or the hearing person, to prevent the situation from escalating. The need for CODAs to protect their parents was evident in this study. This finding highlighted the conflicted situations CODAs experienced, being torn between informing and shielding their parents from hurtful comments. These conflicted feelings attest to the weight of the language brokering role assumed by children who are not developmentally or psychosocially prepared.

Finally, CODAs in this study commented that interpreting for their parents taught them to be responsible and independent from a young

age, and shaped them into responsible adults. Some participants experienced a sense of pride for being responsible for their family's wellbeing. Weisskirch^[15] commented on CODAs and language brokers acquiring positive qualities because of their involvement in family affairs. Findings have suggested that CODAs and language brokers generally have increased confidence, independence and maturity, among other qualities. Filer and Filer^[17] reported that CODAs gain valuable information through their experience as interpreters, which might contribute both to their own development and in developing close relationships with their parents. Furthermore, Singleton and Tittle^[1] reported that children who learn to navigate and explore the different worlds independently develop positive qualities, such as the ability to adapt in both worlds and being resourceful.

Conclusion

This study reflected on the childhood experiences of language brokering in deaf-parented families, thereby highlighting the vulnerability of CODAs as a minority community. The impact of the role as language broker on the participants' wellbeing and development into adulthood was evident.

Our findings also show that CODAs may be an overlooked group, who on the surface may not seem to need any particular support because of their being able to hear and speak, when, in fact, they do need support to safeguard their wellbeing in childhood. Health professionals such as audiologists, who are often involved in the dynamics of deafness in families, therefore need to make appropriate referrals to other professionals such as psychologists, teachers and social workers. The support from health professionals is necessary as it may assist in alleviating psychoemotional challenges encountered by CODAs when performing their language brokering role. In addition, the findings indicate that participants' childhood experiences as language brokers had long-lasting effects, which cannot be overlooked, minimised or undermined, as these experiences are deep rooted and have influenced their wellbeing and outlook on life. This study suggests that more ubiquitous, affordable and structured availability of interpreting services for deaf parents could help to alleviate the challenges experienced by CODAs, as they would not be expected to fulfil this demanding role. Such support mechanisms could help with recognising CODAs' right to less-challenging experiences during childhood.

In addition to giving insight into the lived experiences of CODAs, an area in which there is a dearth of research in SA, the study also highlighted the need for further inquiry. The current study did not stratify participants according to race or socioeconomic status and to expand on this research project, it is recommended that future studies explore the role of race and socioeconomic status in this population.

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