Funds of knowledge for scholars:

Reflections on the translation of theory and its implications

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Abstract

This paper investigates the roots of Funds of Knowledge, looking at how a collection of theories, ideologies and methods were brought together by diverse actors at one historical moment to launch an educational brand with remarkable power. At the same time, I reflect on how my own understanding of funds of knowledge theory has evolved through my training and practice as a teacher and, later, as an educational researcher. Finally, I discuss how this historical and biographical exploration can shed light on the way that theories evolve as they are translated across disciplines, texts, and contexts.

*Keywords*: funds of knowledge, theory, translation, biography, English language learners (ELLs), culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students
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Funds of knowledge for scholars: Reflections on the translation of theory and its implications

Funds of Knowledge\(^1\) is a familiar phrase to almost any teacher of culturally and/or linguistically diverse students. Since the phrase first appeared in educational research almost a quarter century ago, it has gained wide currency with researchers and teachers in anthropology, psychology, and education. According to Google Scholar, in 2014 alone, the phrase appeared in the titles of at least 25 scholarly articles and in the abstracts of over 1,000. A search of YouTube reveals dozens of “Funds of Knowledge” videos, made by students in teacher education programs around the country. In the words of Mary Carol Combs, “Funds of Knowledge is now in the public domain, it has become a part of the public discourse” (Combs, 2011).

But the spread and use of a particular phrase do not necessarily imply that everyone who uses it is employing the same idea. Some recently published reviews of the Funds of Knowledge literature note several ways that the theory has changed over time across various strands of scholarship (Oughton, 2010; Hogg, 2011). For example, Oughton (2010) points out that although the original conceptualization described these funds as labor related skills shared within and across households, some scholarship has shifted the location to individuals, expanding the nature of such funds to include interpersonal, communicative and meta-cognitive skills. In addition, critiques of funds of knowledge theory point to problems with operationalizing the notion of “community” in some contexts (Zipin, 2009), to the inherent contradiction of deploying an (explicitly capitalist) economic metaphor to empower disenfranchised populations (Hinton, 2015; Oughton, 2010), and to the reification of teacher’s privileged position as arbiter of which

\(^{1}\) In the research literature covered in this article, “funds of knowledge” is never capitalized, nor is it referred to in the singular. For these researchers, funds of knowledge are cultural resources that exist in household networks. However, in approaching Funds of Knowledge as a body of literature, as a brand which implicates a range a theoretical constructs and methodological techniques, I have found it useful to treat it as a singular proper noun. As such, the reader will notice that I have chosen to capitalize or not depending on the way the phrase is being used.
student experiences “count” as acceptable cultural capital in the school space (Zi, Sellar & Hattam, 2012; Rodriguez, 2013). And yet, despite these corruptions and limitations, the notion of funds of knowledge retains an undeniable power. In fact, many of the scholars cited above leverage their critiques to stretch the metaphor of funds of knowledge for their own purposes. Does this theoretical flexibility imply a loss of analytic coherence, or is it the inevitable and desirable evolution of theory as it is taken up and applied in new contexts?

In this paper, I set out to unearth the roots of Funds of Knowledge, to look at how a collection of theories, ideologies and methods were brought together by diverse actors at one historical moment to launch an educational brand with remarkable power. At the same time, I explore how my own understanding of funds of knowledge theory evolved through my training and practice as a teacher, and later as an educational researcher. In the process, I hope to shed light on the way that theories evolve as they are translated across disciplines, texts, and contexts. This analysis is particularly relevant in the field of education, where several scholars (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Klette, 2012; Suppes, 1974) have pointed out that the translation of theory into practice can be deeply problematic.

**Planting a seed in the desert**

The genesis of Funds of Knowledge as we know it today lies in the collaboration between three scholars whose paths crossed down on the border of Mexico in the mid 1980’s. “Walk Like an Egyptian” was on the radio, New Hampshire social studies teacher Christa McAuliff had recently been blown up along with six other astronauts on the space shuttle Challenger, and I was starting 5th grade at Lineweaver Elementary School in Tucson, Arizona. Just down the road, Dr. Luis Moll, newly arrived Associate professor in the College of Education at the University of Arizona, was launching a new study in collaboration with Drs. Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez and James
Greenberg, anthropologists working with the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology. Twenty years later I found myself teaching 5th grade bilingual special education in Brooklyn, reading about their groundbreaking work for a course in multicultural education.

The travel of ideas has been described by several scholars using the construct of “translation” (Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevón, 1996; Erlingsdottir & Lindberg, 2005; Latour, 1983; Leander & Lovvorn, 2006). In the words of Erlingsdottir & Lindberg,

Ideas become disembedded, sent away, and then reembedded in a series of translations as they ‘travel’ in time and space. In order for an idea to travel…it must be separated from its institutional surroundings (disembedded) and translated into an object such as a text, a picture or a prototype (packaged). Such an object then travels…to another time and place where it is translated to fit the new context (unpacked)” (Erlingsdottir & Lindberg, 2005, p. 1).

The following section endeavors to trace the translation of Funds of Knowledge, using biography as a primary narrative trope, to draw a line through space-time between the “authors” of a construct and the novice teacher who encountered and reembedded them in a Brooklyn classroom. Before I proceed, however, I want to acknowledge that such a linear model of the travel of an idea is an illusion. Even to talk about “an idea” as if it were a unitary thing is anathema to the metaphor of translation. I have created this “biography of a theory” as my own translation, created for my own local, situated needs. In this way, I am exploring the labor-related activities of more knowledgeable others in the marketplace of ideas, and the production of this text becomes a mediating structure for my own transformation. At the same time, I hold out hope that this text may be taken up, unpacked, challenged, transformed and reembedded in the fertile imagination of other curious scholars or desperate educators.
Luis Moll: translating Vygotsky for bilingual students

Luis Moll earned a doctorate degree in Educational Psychology and Early Childhood Development in 1978 (Moll, 2009), and from the beginning of his career he sought to apply Vygotskian sociocultural theory to the education of minority children. In the preface to his book, *Vygotsky and Education*, Moll describes how much he was influenced by a year he spent writing his dissertation in New York City at the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, headed by Michael Cole (Moll, 2004). He describes this as his unwitting introduction to Vygotsky’s ideas, passed down from teacher to student, from Vygotsky to Luria to Cole. Cole’s work focused on cross-cultural cognitive research, and Moll was “eager to explore the relevance of that work to minority education in this country” (ibid, p. ix). While he was in New York, the book *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky, 1978) was published. This edited compilation of Vygotsky’s writings made his ideas available to the English-speaking world in a way they had not been in the 45 years since his death. As Moll (2004) writes,

> Reading that book helped me understand ‘firsthand’ the relationship between the empirical work I was studying (and was fascinated with), my own research in minority education, and broader theoretical considerations. The great importance of Vygotsky’s ideas to education began to become obvious to me (p. ix).

For the next eight years Moll worked as Lecturer and Assistant Research Psychologist at the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition at UC San Diego. During this time, Moll worked on intervention studies in bilingual classrooms in southern California, primarily in collaboration with Stephen Diaz (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Moll & S. Diaz, 1985; Moll & R. Diaz, 1987; Moll & S. Diaz, 1987). Through this work they developed two major ideas, one
theoretical and one methodological, which were integral to what would eventually become known as funds of knowledge.

Moll and Diaz began by building on Vygotsky’s notions of mediation and the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). They were particularly interested in critiquing the pervasive use of remediated (or ‘watered-down’) instruction for working class Latino students because of their perceived academic deficits. They saw students’ bilingualism as a “cultural resource,” an important strength that was being systematically ignored by the institutional construction of knowledge in schools.

[Vygotsky] stressed how one gets a qualitatively different perspective of children’s abilities by contrasting what they do when working alone to what they can perform when working in collaboration with others. And he suggested that for instruction to be effective it must lead students; in our interpretation, it must be aimed not only at weaknesses in individual assessments, but at strengths that are displayed most readily in collaborative activities (Moll & S. Diaz, 1987, p. 301).

They were able to show that, in a bilingual setting, ELL students were able to demonstrate greater comprehension of English texts than when they were only assessed in English. They also demonstrated that, by focusing on authentic communication on topics relevant to student communities, rather than on rote practice of basic writing mechanics, students were capable of producing much more sophisticated texts in English than was evident from standardized assessments. These findings underlie a simple and powerful critique of contemporary schools:

Although student characteristics certainly matter, when the same children are shown to succeed under modified instructional arrangements it becomes clear that the problems these working-class children face in school must be viewed
primarily as a consequence of institutional arrangements that constrain children and teachers by not capitalizing fully on their talents, resources and skills (Moll & S. Diaz, 1987, p. 302).

Their fundamental assertion was that with fairly simple changes to practice, mediating instruction through students’ cultural resources, it was possible to create zones of proximal development within which ELL students would learn more effectively.

The work that Moll and Diaz did applying sociocultural theories of literacy development to ELL classrooms led naturally to an interventionist methodological approach. “The key point here is that the goal in our studies was to produce instructional change, to manipulate instructional procedures to improve the conditions for learning” (Moll & S. Diaz, 1987, p. 300).

They saw the development of community-based research sites (referred to as “laboratories”) as a necessary outgrowth of their research. This approach to “doing research” would become the basis for funds of knowledge as a practice.

Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg: reinventing culture in the borderlands

At the same time that Luis Moll was thinking about how to capitalize on students’ cultural resources in California, Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez and James Greenberg were in Arizona expanding the thinking about what such cultural resources might be. Vélez-Ibáñez had grown up in Tucson, leaving to get a PhD in Anthropology from UCSD in 1975. In 1982 he left a position at UCLA to become the Director of the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology (BARA) at the University of Arizona, a position he held until 1994 (Vélez-Ibáñez, 2010). In the same year, James Greenberg also made the move to Tucson, taking a position as Assistant Research Professor at BARA. Like Vélez-Ibáñez, Greenberg was trained as an anthropologist (earning a
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PhD from the University of Michigan in 1978), and was interested in political ecology, urban anthropology and border cultures (Greenberg, 2011).

At this time, BARA itself was undergoing a significant transformation. Founded in 1952 as the Bureau of Ethnic Research, its original mission was to monitor the socio-economic welfare of Native American communities in Arizona (BARA, 2011). In 1982 this mission was expanded (and the name changed) to promote “research and intellectual leadership, related courses and training, graduate and undergraduate student involvement, and community outreach” (ibid) through a variety of local, national, and international projects in applied anthropology. These projects include cultural resource studies, as well as environmental and community development studies.

Both Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg were interested in anthropological research in the borderlands of Arizona. They were particularly interested in transnational family networks and the web of social and economic relationships that existed between them. Vélez-Ibáñez had built on the work of Mexican anthropologist Larissa Lomnitz to develop a theoretical framework for understanding border communities, resulting in the 1983 publication of his book, Bonds of mutual trust: The cultural systems of rotating credit associations among urban Mexicans and Chicanos (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1983). His new position with BARA (and his association with Greenberg and, later, with Moll) allowed him to leverage these theories toward projects in community development. Their first NSF funded study, launched in 1984 and known as the “Tucson Project”, looked at non-market systems of exchange in the local Mexican-origin community.

In keeping with contemporary movements in anthropology, what Denzin and Lincoln refer to as the era of “blurred genres” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg
reduced the idea of culture as a bounded and timeless entity, and they borrowed from other social sciences to describe the development of cultural practices. In a series of conference presentations and papers in the early 1980’s, they described the evolution of household practices in border communities as responses to historical political and economic forces (Greenberg, 1989; Vélez-Ibáñez, 1989; Vélez-Ibáñez, Greenberg, & Johnstone, 1984; Vélez-Ibáñez, 1988; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1984). Although they were not specifically focused on education, one of their primary concerns was describing mechanisms of cultural reproduction. To this end they developed several constructs that were integral to the formation of funds of knowledge for teachers.

To begin with, Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg understood culture as a set of practices that are shared by members of a society. They borrowed from practice theory in focusing on the activities that humans carry out on a daily basis as the basis for understanding cultural reproduction (Tapia, 1991). Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of habitus connected these dynamic conceptions of culture to a specific focus on households. “Habitus, or regularized patterns of behavior, is primarily created within the context of the household by the interplay of social and economic forces impinging on family relationships” (Tapia, 1991, p. 24). This framing of cultural reproduction as something that primarily takes place in households gave them their ethnographic unit of measure. This would dovetail nicely with an approach to school reform founded on getting teachers into the households of their students.

But Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, like Bourdieu, were less interested in the interactions between households and schools than in those between households and world capitalism. They wanted to know how households “function as a part of a wider, changing economy, and how they obtain and distribute their material and intellectual resources through strategic social ties or
networks” (Moll, Vélez-Ibáñez, Greenberg, & Rivera, 1990, p. 4). To this end they developed theories around the specific social networks and exchange relations among Mexican households on the border. They looked at the way social ties mediated informal economic assistance in working class communities, and explained the emergence of these practices in terms of the history of industrialization in the border region. They showed how increased demand for labor and a porous border gave rise to cross-border families (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). When the border was hardened in the 1930’s, these families were forced to develop adaptive strategies. Networks of exchange became an important source of economic security in an unstable market, as well as a way of maintaining contact with communities “on the other side.”

Mexican households typically are nested within extensive kinship networks that actively engage them in the lives of relatives on both sides of the border. Because many Mexicans work in highly unstable labor markets, in their struggle to make a living they are not only forced to crisscross national boundaries, but they must also depend on one another to gain access to resources found on each side (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p.317).

Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg did most of their theorizing around the nature of these social networks. They highlighted the importance of reciprocity and confianza, or mutual trust, to their maintenance and propagation. They also paid particular attention to the way close economic ties between households facilitate the training of a new generation in a wide range of skills in a variety of industries. “These networks form social contexts for the transmission of knowledge, skills, information, and assistance, as well as cultural values and norms” (Moll, Vélez-Ibáñez, Greenberg, and Rivera, 1990, p. 4). Within these networks, knowledge becomes a currency of
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exchange, “not only between generations but also between households, and so forms the ‘cultural glue’ that maintains exchange relations between kin” (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 318).

Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg proposed the phrase “funds of knowledge” to describe the way people’s knowledge and skills functioned within this informal economy of networked households. They took the term from Wolf (1966), who had proposed five funds which people need to balance in order to survive.

Primary are caloric funds needed to maintain life; funds of rent are a charge on the households production resulting from a superior claim on the land or housing; replacement funds are the amount needed to repair or maintain equipment for production and consumption; ceremonial funds sustain symbolic aspects of social relationships; social funds are those resources used to maintain those relationships. People’s practices and activities derived from each fund result in the acquisition of certain bodies of knowledge and skills (Tapia, 1991, p. 48).

Thus, funds of knowledge is a material metaphor for specific kinds of household practices. As such they could be traded, inherited, transformed and valued (or undervalued). The utility of this construct as an analytical tool helped Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg establish a hybrid conception of culture and economics. Its semiotic resonance, highlighting the resource value of household practices in minority communities, made Funds of Knowledge a salable brand for applied anthropologists and educational reformers alike.

**Germination**

In 1986 Luis Moll took a position at the College of Education at the University of Arizona in the Department of Language, Reading and Culture. That year he began working with Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, launching a project through BARA called “Community
Their approach defined a new method for combining the fields of anthropology and education. They conceived of the study as having three parts (Moll, Vélez-Ibáñez, Greenberg, and Rivera, 1990). The first involved recruiting teachers (and administrators) to begin investigating the lives of the families of their students using ethnographic interviews. The cultural theories explicated by Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, framing households as “repositories of knowledge”, informed the kind of data that teachers collected. In their later publications, the authors highlight the utility of teachers as participant-observers in the lives of families, noting that families were generally very interested in sharing their stories with someone they viewed as integral to the lives of their children (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992).

The second part of their study involved the creation of after-school “lab” settings. This was not an after-school program for students, but rather a weekly discussion group of up to 10 teachers (and an occasional administrator), where they could collaboratively reflect on how to integrate information about families into their instruction. “We see the after-school lab as an activity setting where teachers and researchers get together to study teaching (how teachers teach and why they teach the way they do), to learn about the households, about each other, and to develop instructional innovations” (Moll, Vélez-Ibáñez, Greenberg, and Rivera, 1990, p. 7).

Fundamental to this approach was the belief that classroom innovation had to be rooted in local contexts, and that therefore “replication” was a problematic term in education research.

A better choice of terms than replication would be “reinvention.” It implies that one can borrow ideas from elsewhere but that one must apply those ideas anew by taking into account the specifics of local settings. Participants in each setting must reinvent the innovations to fit specific local concerns and contexts (ibid, p. 3).
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The third part of their study involved their own observations of classrooms before and during implementation of the instruction which had been developed in the labs. This data became the basis for their research findings. These findings highlighted the differences between the social worlds of schools and communities, and the capacity for the funds of knowledge approach to bridge these differences.

**Dissemination**

Beginning in 1990, Moll, Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (along with several research assistants, some of whom were the teacher-researcher subjects of the study) began publishing their findings in a variety of venues. Through the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA) who had funded the study, they published a handbook for teachers, administrators and parents who might be interested in implementing similar projects. In the same year Luis Moll published *Vygotsky in Education*, collecting original articles by both new and established “Vygotskian” scholars working on sociocultural approaches to education. Prior to the publication of this work there had been very little literature applying Vygotsky’s ideas to educational contexts, despite the fact that learning was a major focus of Vygotsky’s work. According to Moll (2004, p. x), this was because few educational professionals were yet familiar with Vygotsky, and those scholars who were familiar with his work (primarily though not exclusively in psychology) were not familiar with the field of education.

In this book, Moll included a piece he coauthored with James Greenberg describing how they had used Vygotsky’s theories of mediation and the zone of proximal development to build a theory of funds of knowledge. They begin by referencing Vygotsky’s notion that human thinking must be understood in its concrete social and historical circumstances, justifying their focus on
labor-related activities in households. They posit that each household is “an educational setting in which the major function is to transmit knowledge that enhances the survival of its dependents. The content and manner of this transmission, the households’ zones of proximal development…are the central feature of the ethnographic study” (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 320). They lay out their three-part model of research, positioning the after school labs as ‘mediating structures’ that “facilitate strategic connections, multiple paths, between classrooms and households” (ibid).

The authors go on to describe two case studies that are used to map the way that various social networks were activated for instruction, and to demonstrate how internalization and mediation contributed to positive outcomes. “Our claim is that by developing social networks that connect classrooms to outside resources, by mobilizing funds of knowledge, we can transform classrooms into more advanced contexts for teaching and learning” (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 344). Finally, they end the chapter by returning to Vygotsky’s work to defend the interventionist nature of their project. They quote Bakhurst in asserting that “For Vygotsky, the identity of psychology as a science depended on the degree to which it could contribute to the transformation of the object it investigates. Its task was not simply to mirror but to harness reality” (Bakhurst, 1986, pp. 122-123, italics in original).

In 1992, Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg published a more anthropologically oriented description of funds of knowledge in the journal, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). In this paper they describe in greater detail the historical and economic frame on which the theory was built. They use several case studies to expand on specific aspects of funds of knowledge, including the assertion that the change from Spanish to English dominance across generations can disrupt, or “fracture” the transmission of Spanish
literacy skills (ibid, p. 327). This linguistic argument adds to an implicit critique of deficit conceptions of the role of culture in cognition. They conclude the article with policy recommendations urging critical examination of the cultural basis of assessment and instruction in schools.

Also in 1992, Moll published a short piece in the journal *Theory into Practice* entitled, “Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms” (Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992). This ten page paper, coauthored with a group of graduate student assistants and one teacher-researcher, became the cornerstone of Funds of Knowledge literature, cited more than any other published work on the topic. In the brief description of the theory and methods of the study the authors note several contrasts between learning in homes and schools in this community. Following Vélez-Ibáñez, they characterize household social networks as “thick” and “multi-stranded,” in that adults play various roles in the lives of students and understand who they are in multiple contexts. They also focus on the reciprocal nature of household relationships and the active role that children play in a broad range of activities. The heart of the piece is the edited transcript of a presentation by one of the teachers (Cathy Amanti) and one of the anthropologists (Deborah Neff) who participated in the study. They describe the experience of doing ethnography with parents, what kinds of things they learned, and how they brought their new understandings into classroom practice. On the whole, this article is a strangely hybrid document, presenting less detailed information about what funds of knowledge are than any of the other significant works on the subject. However, what it presents is a clear, practitioner oriented description with a compelling success story told in a conversational voice.
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Since 1992, many many more articles have described, extended and critiqued funds of knowledge. Luis Moll continues to research, speak and write about funds of knowledge, as do several of the graduate students who worked on the original study, including Joel Dworin (2006) and Norma González (2005). Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, though still deeply involved in applied anthropology in the borderlands, have moved away from educational research. Although they were instrumental in articulating a theory of households as repositories of knowledge, and they gave it the name that helped it travel beyond academia into the common parlance of classroom teachers, few teachers or scholars who learn about the theory today ever know their names.

Succession

A full exploration of how funds of knowledge theory has been applied, extended, transformed or otherwise used by successive generations of researchers, teacher educators, and practitioners is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the biography of this theory would not be complete without taking a look at the book, *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms* (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). With this book another scholar, Norma González, stepped definitively forward as a primary figure in the development of the theory.² González earned her PhD in Cultural Anthropology shortly after appearing as fourth author on the *Theory into Practice* piece, and subsequently took a job with BARA as an Assistant Research Anthropologist (González, 2011). Since that time she has been publishing with Luis Moll and others on their ongoing work with Funds of Knowledge research, usually as first author. The book is organized in three sections: Theoretical Underpinnings,

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² Cathy Amanti, a teacher in the original study and coauthor of the 1992 *Theory Into Practice* article, was also one of the editors of this book, as was Luis Moll. However, as Dr. Amanti is not a major contributor to the theoretical literature on Funds of Knowledge I have not included her biography in this narrative.
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Teachers As Researchers, and Translocations: New Contexts, New Directions. As the thrust of this paper is the development of funds of knowledge theory, I focus my analysis on the first section, and specifically on the two original chapters written by González.

“Beyond culture: The hybridity of funds of knowledge” (González, 2005) begins the section with a broad critique of the concept of culture in anthropology and education. In the introduction to *Funds of Knowledge* the authors had explained their interest in replacing a static notion of culture with one focused on practice. “The term presumes coherence within groups, which may not exist. Instead, we focused on practice…In this way, we opened up a panorama of the interculturality of households, that is, how households draw from multiple cultural systems and use these systems as strategic resources” (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005, p. 10). González expands this argument by describing the historical evolution of the meaning of “culture,” showing it to be a continuously evolving and contested term. She goes on to explore how culture has been used in educational theory, in particular the assertion that student culture (whether conceived as “cultural deficit” or “cultural difference”) is responsible for school failure. Citing Ogbu (1978) and Willis (1977), González asserts that these conceptions of culture “masked the underlying issues of economic and power relations between dominant and minoritized populations and sought answers through “fixing” teachers’ interactional patterns” (González, 2005, p. 35).

In the second half of the chapter, González presents some recent theoretical alternatives to a bounded idea of culture. She advocates the processual approach (Rosaldo, 1989) as a way to show how “ideas, events, and institutions interact and change through time” (González, 2005, p. 37). She explores the notion of cultural hybridity, citing Gupta & Ferguson (1992) and Homi Bhabha (1995) arguing for the examination of borderlands. She also takes up Foucault’s
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care. Foucault’s approach also serves to justify once again the qualitative and hybrid methods used in the Funds of Knowledge studies. “Discussions of culture gave way to the exploration of discourses that have the capacity to construct, rather than reflect, our reality. In this perspective, a ‘scientific’ study of culture is not only impossible, but unworkable” (González, 2005, p. 38).

In the final part of “Beyond Culture” González lays out funds of knowledge as a processual approach to understanding hybrid cultural practices and interrogating the way culture is used to maintain entrenched power dynamics. She also looks to Giroux (1992) in justifying the examination of student experience, and to Friere (1973) for a critical understanding of the dialog between parents and teachers.

As parents responded with personal narratives concerning their own unique and singular life courses, a heightened historical consciousness began to emerge. The articulation of the trajectory that brought parents to be where they are now engendered an awareness of the historical character of their experiences. In this way, the Freireian notion of dialogue as an emancipatory educational process can be developed in the households (González, 2005, p. 42).

With this introduction to funds of knowledge González puts a postmodern twist on the theory and forges ties with several major movements in the field of social science research.

“Funds of Knowledge for Teaching in Latino Households” (González, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales & Amanti, 2005/1995), which ends the theory section of Funds of Knowledge, takes a closer look at the way teachers experienced the funds of knowledge research. It was the first Funds of Knowledge paper published in a peer reviewed journal (Urban Education, 1995, Vol. 29, pp. 444-471) for which Norma González was the first author. Other
authors included Luis Moll and the five teacher-researchers who had participated in this iteration of the study. The paper begins by acknowledging that household visits by teachers are nothing new, but asserts that their conception of household visits is fundamentally different from those usually practiced by teachers. The authors seek to show the transformative capacities of their approach, and do so through the personal narratives of the participating teachers. In highlighting the teachers voice as authoritative (rather than subjectified by the researchers’ interpretation), they attempt to overturn the traditional relationship between teachers and educational researchers. Thus, the after-school study group becomes a place where teachers experience many transformations; in their relationship to households, to academia, and to their own teaching practice.

One interesting way the authors explore this process is by using the constructs that Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg developed for talking about cultural reproduction in order to look at the learning process of educators. Reciprocity and confianza become important to the way teachers in the study forge relationships with parents, as well as researchers and each other. “Reciprocity as a theoretical construct has formed the basis for the exchange between households and schools, and this construct has been paralleled to incorporate the relationships between teachers and researchers” (González et al., 2005/1995, p. 95). They describe how the original design of the study involved the anthropologists doing the interviews and reporting back to teachers what they learned. “Although a participatory model of learning was advocated in work with children, the original teacher labs relied on a transmission model...worthwhile information about the forms and functions of the households was being transmitted…(but) true ownership of the data was not taking place” (ibid, p. 93). When they redesigned the study to have teachers taking on the role of
ethnographers, those teachers were able to connect with households and forge relationships built on trust and reciprocity.

In addition to anthropological constructs, the authors also turn to Vygotskian ideas to describe how teachers experienced the funds of knowledge study. In a return to Vygotsky and Education they position the after-school study group as a “mediating structure,” through which teachers make connections between the stories they are hearing and their classroom practice. Through the study group they begin to internalize an “anthropological imagination,” in addition to learning specific ethnographic techniques. “Through the mediating structure of the after-school study groups, teachers were provided with the forum to engage in reflexive thought. Although specific techniques…were presented, the focus was continuously on the discourse, on the joint construction of knowledge” (González et al., 2005/1995, p. 95). The teacher-researcher narratives that form the heart of the paper attest to the transformative personal and professional insights they gained through their participation. Thus, this chapter rounds out our understanding of funds of knowledge theory by foregrounding teachers as agents of social change, restating its relevance in the context of critical social theory.

**Implications**

This paper has attempted to trace the genesis and evolution of one influential theory in the teacher-training and educational research fields. One insight that can be drawn from the historical formation of Funds of Knowledge is the process by which ideas generated in local contexts are translated through time and space and come to take on new meanings and new uses. There are many examples of this in the narrative above, including the trajectory of Vygotsky’s ideas across almost 100 years of scholarship, or the ways that critical perspectives were laminated onto funds of knowledge theory over time. But this is not just a story about the way
that one person’s scholarship is recontextualized in the production of new theory. Central constructs within the funds of knowledge framework have themselves been reappropriated to do new kinds of work in later conceptualizations of the theory. *Confianza*, as well as reciprocity, were constructs put forward by Vélez-Ibáñez in order to describe one specific aspect of the social networks of Mexican American families living on the Arizona border. Over time they came to describe ideal outcomes of the funds of knowledge approach. In the process, these constructs shifted in meaning as they came to characterize a dialogical relationship between teachers and parents rather than the “social glue” of extended networks. *Confianza* moved from a purely descriptive category for local phenomenon to an idealized goal for transformative social science research globally.

These examples of semantic drift, as well as the transformations in focus and scope across the Funds of Knowledge literature that have been noted by its critics (e.g. Oughton, 2010 and Hogg, 2011), reveal the powerful influence of local, situated translation processes on the dissemination of educational theory and practice. However, they also call into question whether Funds of Knowledge should be thought of as a theory at all. It has been claimed that, for any system of concepts and claims to be called a theory it ought to be stable, coherent, and consistent (Klette, 2012). Funds of Knowledge, for all that it is well cited, has in many instances become a convenient shorthand for a broadly conceived resource orientation toward students’ cultural knowledge. But few of the studies that reference funds of knowledge replicate the parent-teacher interviews or the after school labs, and it is an open question how much of the rich interdisciplinary scholarship I have described in this essay is routinely left behind when these ideas are “disembedded” from their original context through processes of translation.
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On the other hand, it has long been recognized that, in educational research, the whole notion of what theory is and what it should do is a subject of some debate (e.g. Suppes, 1974). Theory serves a range of functions in educational research that are not necessarily analogous to the role of theory in the natural sciences. According to Suppes, “a powerful theory changes our perspective on what is important and what is superficial…[and shows] that what appear on the surface to be simple matters of empirical investigation, on a deeper view, prove to be complex and subtle” (ibid, p. 4-5). Funds of Knowledge, in its role as a counter-narrative to deficit explanations of minority student underachievement, aims to reorganize our perception of diverse students’ life experiences, validating skills and knowledges (and the processes by which they are transmitted to succeeding generations) that do not look like the skills and knowledges traditionally valued in schools. From this perspective, this translation of a locally situated theory of cultural reproduction into a universal theory of subaltern ways of knowing may be viewed as progress toward more unified, and therefore more useful, educational theory.

For me as a teacher, funds of knowledge was a productive notion that helped me find new ways to reach my students in inner city Brooklyn. As a bilingual special education teacher, I often faced students who had been failed by educational approaches grounded in traditional school-based literacies and practices. The professional development I received amounted to a full court press on phonics practice – remedial instruction that was neither targeted to specific student needs nor adapted for their language backgrounds. When I learned about funds of knowledge in a multicultural education course at Brooklyn College, it spoke to me on a personal level, as a Spanish-speaking Anglo who had grown up in the very borderland they described. It gave me the confidence to put relationship-building at the center of my practice, and build curriculum from the life experiences of my students. I walked with them around their neighborhood, mapping and
translating graffiti murals, collecting oral histories of community events from the 1977 blackout riot to the 2001 terrorist attack, and tracking down the traces of past waves of immigration inscribed in public art and architecture. These were unschooled, unsupported, and perhaps only partially successful attempts to uncover and leverage community funds of knowledge in my teaching. But in the process, their neighborhood became my neighborhood, and together we began to figure out how these experiences might connect to the world of canonical knowledge and help all of us become better mathematicians and scientists, more proficient readers and writers, and more socially conscious human beings.

Today, the scholars profiled here are starting to retire, even as I begin my first job as an Assistant Professor, and the fight for educational equity for linguistic and cultural minorities continues. As powerful as Funds of Knowledge has been for teachers like me, the dominance of standardized assessment and monolingual bias in education policy and research funding (August, Shanahan, & Escamilla, 2009) continues to create significant barriers to putting these theories into practice in a robust way. But the stories of our elders contain the tools to overcome new obstacles, not just in the form of research theories and practices, but also in the form of models of collaboration across disciplines and commitment to conducting research that empowers local stakeholders and improves local conditions. Such understandings should be part of the “professional fund of knowledge” (Moll, 2005) of any researcher hoping to have real impact on teachers and schools.
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