



Effects of cultural brokering on individual wellbeing and family dynamics among immigrant youth



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ABSTRACT

Over 90% of immigrant youth help their parents navigate the mainstream US culture, a process known as cultural brokering. Past research has indicated that brokering can often have negative effects on development of immigrant youth and their families. The current study builds on the past literature by examining how various aspects of brokering may impact individual wellbeing and family dynamics among first generation immigrant and refugee youth from Eastern Europe ($N = 197$, Mage = 22.93 ($SD = 2.89$), 63.5% female) currently residing in the United States. The results show that family conflict mediates the relationship between brokering and youth psychological wellbeing. The findings suggest that there are distinct patterns of association between frequency of brokering and feelings toward brokering, pointing to the need to further understand the ways in which we can capitalize on positive aspects and minimize negative aspects of cultural brokering among immigrants.

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1. Introduction

Youth from immigrant families often adapt to the US society at a much faster pace than their parents (Birman, 2006; Chao, 2006; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). As a result, immigrant children serve a crucial role for their families by helping their parents navigate the nuances of the mainstream US culture. The ability to assimilate quickly allows young immigrants to serve as cultural brokers – individuals with very little formal training who mediate the culture between two or more parties (Kam & Lazarevic, 2013). Recent studies indicate that cultural brokering can have both positive and negative effects on the well-being and psychological health of immigrant youth, as well as on the dynamics of immigrant families. Many recent studies, however, focus on the effects of frequency of language brokering on youth-related outcomes. The current study expands on the previous literature by examining the relationships between language and non-linguistic brokering (procedural brokering) and psychological health of first-generation immigrant young adults from Eastern Europe, as well as the impact of brokering on the relationships between young adults and their immigrant parents. In addition to examining the effects of frequency of brokering, the current study assesses the effects of both positive and negative feelings associated with brokering.

Examining the effects of brokering on immigrant youth is extremely important. Brokering is an omnipresent phenomenon in immigrant families, with potential to have detrimental effects on the psychological health and development of immigrant

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youth and the parent-child relationships in immigrant families. Therefore, understanding the ways in which brokering operates to affect individual and family development is essential in helping us maximize the positive outcomes, and minimize the negative outcomes of brokering.

1.1. Cultural brokering, psychological health, and family relations

Studies indicate that over 90% of immigrant children broker for their parents (Buriel, Perez, DeMent, Chavez, & Moran, 1998; Jones & Trickett, 2005; Orellana, 2003; Trickett & Jones, 2007), with many beginning to broker at a very early age, when they are 8 or 9 years old (Morales & Hanson, 2005; Tse, 1995). Children in immigrant families are often asked to translate various documents, answer the phone for their parents, and speak on behalf of their parents in a store or doctor's office (Orellana, Doner, & Pulido, 2003; Trickett & Jones, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). Research has shown that brokering can impact the well-being of immigrant youth who participate in this activity. In addition, studies have also found that brokering can have an effect on the overall family dynamics, specifically impacting the relationship between immigrant children and their parents. However, little is known about how immigrant youth *feel* about their work as cultural brokers. Even less is known about how that perception of brokering relates to the psychological well-being and family dynamics. In addition, while several studies have focused on different aspects of language brokering, other forms of brokering, such as procedural brokering, have not been examined in detail.

1.1.1. Brokering and psychological health

Findings are inconsistent when it comes to the effects of frequency of brokering on the psychological health and well-being of immigrant young individuals. While some studies indicate positive relations between brokering and psychological health, other studies find negative link between these two concepts. For example, some studies indicate that individuals who broker for their parents or other adults report positive experiences, such as increased maturity and independence (Tse, 1995), positive self-esteem (Weisskirch, 2007), and sense of efficacy (Wu & Kim, 2009). On the other hand, some studies have found negative effects of language brokering, such as feeling uncomfortable (Weisskirch & Alatorre-Alva, 2002), frustrated (DeMent, Buriel, & Villanueva, 2005), stressed (Jones & Trickett, 2005), embarrassed, and guilty (Weisskirch, 2007). A large study with Mexican American adolescents found that some boys reported feeling depressed due to their role in brokering (Love & Buriel, 2007), and a study with college students found that language brokering was related to lower self-efficacy (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009).

Recognizing that brokering is a complex experience, more recent studies have started examining other aspects of brokering, such as how young individuals feel about their brokering experiences. For example, researchers have found that positive emotions while brokering (e.g., feeling proud, useful) were positively related to self-esteem, while negative emotions (e.g., feeling nervous, uncomfortable) were negatively related to self-esteem (Weisskirch, 2007). A study with Mexican American young adults found that lack of burden when brokering was positively associated with self-esteem and self-efficacy (Weisskirch, 2013).

In general, brokering is a very complex activity with many factors coming into play (Jones, Trickett, & Birman, 2012), and research about relations of culture brokering to psychological health has yielded mixed results. While some studies have found that brokering is just a normal activity that young immigrants do (Orellana et al., 2003), affecting the youth in a positive way, other studies have found negative associations between brokering and well-being. The majority of the studies explored the relationship between the amount of language brokering and well-being (Jones & Trickett, 2005; Martinez, McClure, & Eddy, 2009; Trickett & Jones, 2007; Weisskirch & Alatorre-Alva, 2002). Overall, however, there is not enough evidence to show that brokering can impact well-being one way or another, and more studies need to be conducted to further identify the factors that account for the association between the two concepts. Further, while studies have examined impact of culture brokering on family relations, they have not examined family system as a context for brokering activities. Furthermore, given that immigrant youth may begin to broker at a very early age, and given the potential negative effects of this work, immigrant youth may be at risk for negative psychological development. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the relationship between culture brokering and family relations in order to yield potential explanation for different effects of brokering on well-being, and to help in devising family-oriented practices that would aid immigrant families as they navigate their new environment.

1.1.2. Brokering and family relations

As with findings related to individual well-being, findings regarding language brokering and relationship with parents have been mixed (Morales & Hanson, 2005). Some studies found that language brokering is related to conflict in immigrant families (Trickett & Jones, 2007), and that culture brokering negatively contributes to family relations (Martinez et al., 2009; Titzmann, Gniewosz, & Michel, 2013; Umaña-Taylor, 2003). A study with Cuban refugee families found that parents felt their children were in control and that their brokering led to lack of trust and cooperation within the family (Puig, 2002). Similar findings emerged in a study of immigrant college students from the Former Soviet Union who immigrated with their families to Israel (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009). The findings showed that immigrant youth frequently brokered for their parents, and had a higher tendency of role reversal than their native-born counterparts. Findings among Mexican American young adults indicate that participants who have unsupportive parents reported greater burden when brokering (Weisskirch, 2013). Youth from immigrant families from the Former Soviet Union who brokered reported conflict with their parents, while the youth's

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