

ARTICLE

Cultural Brokering in Immigrant Families

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ABSTRACT

Cultural brokering refers to the process of youth (i.e., children, adolescents, and emerging adults) from immigrant families interpreting cultural norms for others. Cultural brokering is not an acontextual, individual, or passive experience but varies by context (e.g., situational demands), is interpersonal (e.g., involves the broker and a social partner), and involves the cultural broker serving as a socializing agent. While researchers have sought to understand how cultural brokering affects the broker (i.e., the individual interpreting for others), findings vary. In this article, we advance the understanding of cultural brokering across development by drawing attention to pertinent aspects of this experience that have been largely overlooked. First, we review distinct forms of cultural brokering. Next, we consider how cultural brokering affects the psychological adjustment and well-being of immigrant youth. Finally, we suggest research to deepen the understanding of cultural brokering across development.

Children and youth from immigrant families have remarkable abilities to adapt to multiple cultural pressures. However, the experiences of immigrant children and families are often obscured by both society and science. Such oversight makes it imperative to illuminate the experiences and developmental processes of youth from immigrant families. One such process is cultural brokering: interpreting cultural norms for others (Kam and Lazarevic 2014a). Although immigration and adaptation are hallmarks of the current socio-historical context, the experiences and psychological impact of cultural brokering are poorly understood. Nuanced, scientifically grounded research on cultural brokering is a high priority given rising rates of global migration. Such research not only reveals the flexibility, adaptiveness, and resilience present during development but also recognizes the vital contributions made by children, adolescents, and emerging adults from immigrant families.

In this article, we describe distinct forms of cultural brokering experienced by these individuals across development, including forms that have been relatively more well-researched (e.g., language brokering) and those that have been identified recently (e.g., emotion brokering). We then highlight how perceptions of

cultural brokering shape the consequences of such brokering for adolescents' and emerging adults' psychological adjustment and well-being. Finally, we identify avenues for research aimed at advancing our understanding of cultural brokering and its impact on both early (i.e., childhood) and later (i.e., adolescence, emerging adulthood) periods of development.

1 | Definitions and Forms of Cultural Brokering

Cultural brokering can take different forms depending on the type of information communicated. For instance, cultural brokering may involve interpreting language (i.e., language brokering), procedural norms (i.e., procedural brokering), media content (i.e., media brokering), and emotions (i.e., emotion brokering). While these types of cultural brokering differ in terms of the information brokered, all cultural brokering is a form of communication that serves to facilitate social interactions (Kam and Lazarevic 2014a).

Although cultural brokering can occur outside immigrant contexts (see Bayraktar-Özer 2024; DiMeo et al. 2023) and with

various social partners (e.g., peers), it frequently occurs among immigrant families where children and youth interpret cultural norms for family members, primarily their caregivers (e.g., parents, grandparents). Although most studies on cultural brokering have been conducted with early adolescent (12- to 13-year-olds) and emerging adult language brokers, cultural brokering occurs across development, with youth reporting engaging in some forms (i.e., language brokering) as young as age 5 (see Tse 1995). While each form is typically studied separately, it is essential to consider the additive burden placed on youth of engaging in various and concurring forms of cultural brokering. Next, we describe four distinct forms of cultural brokering in which youth engage. (For the sociodemographic characteristics of the studies reviewed herein, please see Table S1 in online materials).

1.1 | Language Brokering

Although research in this area is limited, a commonly studied form of cultural brokering is language brokering: the process of interpreting language to facilitate linguistic communication (Tse 1995). Language brokers help their relatives navigate a variety of interactions, including translating at restaurants, post offices, stores, banks, and in other public settings (Tse 1995). For example, an adolescent may interpret a teacher's feedback on the youth's academic progress at a parent-teacher conference or a parent's diagnosis from a physician during a medical visit.

Language brokering occurs during early childhood (Tse 1995), adolescence (Hua and Costigan 2012), and emerging adulthood (Shen and Dennis 2019). This type of brokering is a complex activity requiring linguistic expertise (e.g., knowledge of grammar, vocabulary), the ability to maintain social norms (e.g., maintaining politeness, avoiding interrupting others; López 2020), and the ability to achieve multiple goals (e.g., ordering a meal on behalf of the caregiver while also maintaining respect for the caregiver). Furthermore, language brokers carry the burden of multiple individuals' goals, perspectives, and communicative intent (Guntzviller 2017). Thus, language brokering is a demanding and emotionally intensive task that can also be rewarding for the broker and their family member.

1.2 | Procedural Brokering

Beyond simply translating words, cultural brokers may also help others navigate the social and procedural conventions of everyday interactions. Procedural brokering refers to the process by which an individual helps a family member navigate procedures and institutional systems in mainstream society (Lazarevic 2017). Consider the myriad complex and opaque differences that exist across cultures, from those involved in the mundane task of picking up the check at a restaurant to what is required in the very complex job of filing an insurance claim. Procedural brokers must rely on knowledge of institutional procedures to serve as educators when explaining procedures.

Procedural brokering has been documented in immigrant emerging adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 23$ years old) in the service of helping their families. This type of brokering occurs in various contexts, such as helping a caregiver navigate the school system,

open a bank account, or apply for medical insurance (Lazarevic, Raffaelli, and Wiley 2014). These examples demonstrate the high-stakes scenarios and important outcomes associated with procedural brokering. Although tasks related to this type of brokering are often unrecognized, they demonstrate the critical role procedural brokers play in facilitating relatives' access to resources and institutions in mainstream society.

1.3 | Media Brokering

Media brokering involves interpreting media-based information (Kam and Lazarevic 2014a). This type of brokering can involve a range of activities, including showing caregivers how to contact a relative on social media and demonstrating how to stream a television show. Similar to language brokering, media brokering involves multiple skills, such as navigating two or more languages, while also relying on digital/media literacy and cultural knowledge (Katz 2010).

Media brokering has been reported across adolescence (in youth ranging from 11 to 17 years). Although media brokering may occur in both immigrant and non-immigrant households (see Correa et al. 2015; McKenzie et al. 2019), the act of brokering media may be uniquely meaningful for immigrant families. For example, evidence of media brokering among families who have migrated for humanitarian reasons demonstrates how this type of brokering provides enriching opportunities (e.g., re-establishing communication with other family members; Worrell 2021). Thus, this often-underestimated form of cultural brokering can have a significant impact on the lives of immigrant and displaced families.

1.4 | Emotion Brokering

A more recently studied form of cultural brokering is emotion brokering, which involves helping others navigate interactions between social partners who hold different norms in the expression or experience of emotions (Subramoney et al. 2024). For example, an adolescent may explain to their caregiver that their friend's smile signals warmth and friendliness, contrary to the caregiver's perception of arrogance. Emotions are communicative signals (Shariff and Tracy 2011) that inform social partners of an individual's evaluation of their environment (Frijda 1986), including their beliefs and behavioral intentions (Kashima et al. 2020; Keltner and Haidt 1999). Thus, misperceiving another's emotions may have significant social consequences for ongoing interactions (e.g., Bencharit et al. 2019; Krys et al. 2016).

Initial evidence of emotion brokering has been documented through retrospective reports in emerging adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 20$ years old) from immigrant families. Most participants reported initial experiences of emotion brokering during childhood (24% of 7- to 9-year-olds) and early adolescence (24% of 10- to 13-year-olds). Emotion brokers have reported helping family members decipher another person's emotion expressivity (e.g., discerning an expression of sadness from anger), the elicitor of another's emotion (e.g., understanding why a person feels sad), and the norms regarding emotion expression (e.g., acknowledging overt displays of sadness as culturally appropriate; Subramoney

et al. 2024). Research on emotion brokering highlights how cultural brokers help others navigate both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, often in high-stakes situations.

2 | Cultural Brokering and Psychological Adjustment and Well-Being

Cultural brokering is adaptive for allowing immigrant and minority families to cope with social norms and pressures (Garcia Coll et al. 1996). However, the various forms and contexts of cultural brokering we have reviewed make clear the time-consuming and burdensome nature of this obligation. Thus, it is imperative to consider how cultural brokering affects the broker's psychological adjustment. Next, we review findings on the relation between cultural brokering (most often studied in the form of language brokering) and youth's (i.e., adolescents' and emergent adults') psychological adjustment and well-being.

2.1 | Outcomes Associated With Cultural Brokering

While cultural brokering may benefit the cultural broker and their family (Dorner, Orellana, and Jiménez 2008; Weisskirch, Guan, and Lazarevic 2021), it can also have developmental costs (White, Nair, and Bradley 2018). For example, the cognitive and linguistic challenges of language brokering during early adolescence may increase youth's vulnerability to internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety; Rainey et al. 2014). In addition, language brokering in emerging adulthood can impede the development of autonomy, thereby increasing the likelihood of family conflict (Shen and Dennis 2019). Moreover, the costs and benefits of language brokering may shift across development, carrying more negative impacts in early adolescence but greater benefits in emerging adulthood (see White, Nair, and Bradley 2018). However, due to the lack of research on cultural brokering at earlier points in development, including early and late childhood, we know little about the impact of this type of brokering across development (Shen et al. 2022).

Correspondingly, cultural brokering predicts a range of outcomes related to youth's psychological adjustment and well-being. Youth who frequently engage in language brokering are vulnerable to anxiety and symptoms of depression (Love and Buriel 2007; Rainey et al. 2014). For instance, emerging adults who said they began brokering language at 9–13 years had more symptoms of anxiety than youth who said they began this type of brokering earlier (i.e., at 4–8 years) and later (i.e., at 14–18 years; Rainey et al. 2014). Moreover, in another study, frequent engagement in high-stakes language brokering contexts (e.g., translating in medical settings) predicted lower academic achievement among early adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 14$ years old; Anguiano 2018).

Language brokering is associated with complex family dynamics, including more frequent conflicts and higher levels of family-based stress (Hua and Costigan 2012; Kam 2011), but also more caregiver-child bonding (Morales and Wang 2018) and closeness (Tilghman-Osborne et al. 2016) among adolescent and emerging adult language brokers. Studies note extensive interindividual variability in whether language brokering predicts

these detrimental outcomes (Shen et al. 2022). Such mixed findings suggest that the frequency of cultural brokering in and of itself does not sufficiently predict lower levels of psychological adjustment among those who broker. Furthermore, while language brokering has been investigated extensively, we know less about the psychological impact of other forms of cultural brokering. Thus, not all youth may experience cultural brokering in the same way, and distinct forms of cultural brokering may affect psychological adjustment and well-being differentially.

2.2 | Conceptualizations of Cultural Brokering and Psychological Adjustment and Well-Being

How an individual perceives the process of cultural brokering may be a more important predictor of psychological adjustment than the act of cultural brokering itself. Research on language brokering has captured youth's general subjective perceptions of brokering (often called brokering feelings; see Shen et al. 2022) by examining the broker's overall valence of the process (e.g., feeling good), their general emotions (e.g., feeling proud), and their overall attitudes (e.g., feeling useful) about brokering. Findings on the relation between feelings about language brokering and psychological adjustment, rather than language brokering frequency, are more consistent and more significant (see Shen et al. 2022).

Additionally, negative perceptions of cultural brokering strongly predict negative socioemotional outcomes in children and poorer family relationships. For example, negative perceptions of language brokering (e.g., nervousness, perceiving language brokering as a burden) predicted symptoms of depression and acculturative stress among early adolescent language brokers (Kam and Lazarevic 2014b). In contrast, positive perceptions of cultural brokering can buffer against negative psychological adjustment. Specifically, positive experiences when brokering language (e.g., feeling confident) were positively associated with self-esteem (Weisskirch 2007) and negatively associated with cigarette use (Kam 2011) among early adolescents. These findings highlight the importance of the overall subjective experience of the cultural brokering process on the psychological impact for the developing individual.

2.3 | Emotions Experienced When Cultural Brokering and Psychological Adjustment and Well-Being

A crucial and more specific aspect of the cultural brokering experience is the emotions experienced when brokering. Emotions are adaptive responses to significant events in an individual's environment (Consedine and Moskowitz 2007; Frijda 1986). Thus, while examinations of subjective perceptions of cultural brokering may capture global positive and negative experiences, the experience of discrete emotions is tied to specific events occurring during cultural brokering. Discrete emotions play a critical role in understanding health (Consedine and Moskowitz 2007) and psychological adjustment (e.g., Rothenberg et al. 2019), and thus can provide unique insight into the cultural brokering experience. For example, when cultural brokering, experiencing two different emotions—anger (e.g., in response to a violation

of autonomy) and embarrassment (e.g., in response to shortcomings)—might signify distinct experiences of the broker's sense of agency and thus have distinct implications. Moreover, frequent experiences of these emotions over time may affect psychological adjustment differentially.

Whereas prior studies on language brokering have typically considered emotions as part of brokering perceptions, recent studies on the topic have distinguished between perceptions (e.g., feeling independent when language brokering) and emotions (e.g., feeling enthusiastic when language brokering; see Kim et al. 2018, 2024). Such studies of emotions during cultural brokering reveal the intricacies of the cultural brokering experience and psychological adjustment. For example, one study used a person-centered approach to identify groups of adolescent language brokers with varying levels of risk for poor psychological adjustment (i.e., symptoms of depression and anxiety; Kim et al. 2024). Researchers identified different patterns of positive and negative emotions among language brokers, emphasizing that experiences of positive and negative emotions are not mutually exclusive. Adolescents at the greatest risk for poor psychological adjustment reported the highest levels of negative emotions (e.g., anger), but also reported relatively high levels of positive emotions (e.g., enthusiasm) when language brokering.

Thus, emotions experienced when cultural brokering may uniquely predict psychological adjustment. From a developmental perspective, discrete emotions may be bound to the experiences and challenges associated with specific developmental periods (Considine and Moskowitz 2007). For example, emerging adults who experience anger when cultural brokering in medical settings may feel motivated to help a parent find alternate service providers. However, these experiences may differ for early adolescents, who are less equipped in terms of their social and cognitive skills to navigate the health care system bureaucracy. Recognizing the discrete emotions experienced during cultural brokering can capture nuance in the subjective experiences of this process and demonstrate sources of resilience and empowerment among cultural brokers.

3 | Advancing the Study of Cultural Brokering

Researchers have made considerable strides in clarifying the array of activities encompassed by cultural brokering and recognizing its developmental impact. However, our understanding of the heterogeneity in cultural brokering experiences across development (particularly in childhood) remains limited. Here, we aim to move the field forward by proposing avenues for research that explore the contexts in which youth engage in cultural brokering, deepen understanding of the interpersonal nature of this process, and consider the cultural broker as a socializing agent.

3.1 | Capturing Contextual Variability When Cultural Brokering

Capturing contextual variability within cultural brokering experiences remains a challenge for studies seeking to understand the diverse dynamics at play. Given the different demands of distinct cultural brokering contexts, such as linguistic complexity

(Kam and Lazarevic 2014a; López 2020), the power dynamics involved (Iqbal and Crafter 2023), and the form of the brokering, youth's experiences of cultural brokering likely vary significantly across contexts. Studies using daily diaries and ecological momentary assessment (EMA) offer promising ways to identify daily variability in cultural brokering experiences among adolescent and emerging adult brokers (see Kim et al. 2022).

Assessments of individuals' emotions shortly after experiences of cultural brokering would provide a clearer understanding of the variable and complex emotions elicited during such activities, and permit the examination of day-to-day fluctuations in cultural brokering experiences and psychological adjustment (see Shen et al. 2024, for a study on language brokering among emerging adults). Furthermore, EMA could establish directionality in the relation between cultural brokering experiences and psychological adjustment. For example, while youth and family members who report negative emotions during cultural brokering may have lower levels of relationship quality, youth and families with poorer relationship quality may also be more likely to experience negative emotions when cultural brokering.

More broadly, we lack knowledge on how cultural brokering may differ across macro-level contexts and developmental periods. Cultural brokering contexts vary by distal, macro contextual factors, including developmental norms (e.g., cultural expectations for children; Frankenhuis and Amir 2022; Lansford et al. 2016) and the sociopolitical climate (e.g., enforcement of immigration policies; Delgado 2020). However, the lack of representation in research from societal structures outside North America limits our understanding of how macro contextual factors affect cultural brokering. The largest proportion of international migrant populations currently lives in Europe (30.9%) and Asia (30.5%; McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). Considering the social and political diversity of these regions and their lack of representation in studies on cultural brokering makes it evident that further research is warranted. Such research may be especially important as global migration increases and cultural brokering becomes normalized.

Furthermore, we do not understand how brokers' experiences differ from their psychological adjustment at various times in development. We need multiwave longitudinal studies that include younger participants (e.g., 6- to 10-year-olds) to understand how cultural brokers' experiences and their relation to psychological adjustment vary across development. These methods could capture how children's underlying skills (e.g., perspective-taking, social competence, linguistic knowledge) influence their perceptions and emotions when brokering. Such research would be valuable for identifying which groups are most resilient or at risk across developmental periods (e.g., Yan et al. 2024). In addition, such studies may capture how unique demands of specific developmental periods affect brokers' experiences, psychological adjustment, and well-being.

3.2 | Conceptualizing Cultural Brokering as Interpersonal and Emotional

Cultural brokering is a social experience shared by the broker and their family member (typically a caregiver). While studies

have primarily considered the broker's experience, researchers often overlook the caregiver's experience and the dynamic interplay of the dyad. Having an interpersonal perspective on the emotions experienced is essential for capturing such emotion dynamics (Campos et al. 2011) because the emotions experienced by one member of the brokering dyad communicate meaning to the other member (Lougheed, Main, and Helm 2020). For example, a language broker who feels frustration after making an error communicates the need for patience from the caregiver.

Additionally, emotions experienced by one member of the brokering dyad can elicit an emotional response in the other member. For instance, a caregiver expressing their pride in the cultural broker through praise may lead the cultural broker to also experience pride. Efforts to incorporate into research both members of a cultural brokering dyad correspond with recent advances in developmental science that capture the shared experiences of dyads across time and space (e.g., through use of EMA and GPS technology; Witherspoon et al. 2023). These insights could capture cultural brokering in the context of a relationship (e.g., see Lougheed and Keskin 2021), where the dyad may experience similar social stressors (e.g., discrimination; see Bámaca et al. 2022).

Indeed, recent evidence on the influence of the caregiver-child relationship during language brokering illustrates the potential of exploring such emotion dynamics. Researchers have uncovered partner effects within the caregiver-child dyad, indicating that one member's experiences of caregiver-child alienation (i.e., emotional distance and disconnection from the relationship) influenced the experiences of the other member (Song et al. 2022). Mothers' negative language brokering experiences predicted a greater sense of caregiver-child alienation in their adolescents, whereas adolescents' positive language brokering experiences predicted a lesser sense of caregiver-child alienation in their mothers (Song et al. 2022). These findings demonstrate that the dyad's cultural brokering experiences can be associated with their perceptions of their relationship, and thus may affect the quality of their relationship. Expanding on such work by examining emotions during discussions about cultural brokering experiences (Lougheed, Main, and Helm 2020) can provide a more nuanced understanding of how dyads influence each other's emotions during the brokering process. Furthermore, caregivers' reports of their own and their child's emotions may provide a means to tap into the emotional experiences of younger brokers whose experiences are poorly understood.

3.3 | The Role of Cultural Brokers as Agents of Socialization

Finally, cultural brokering illuminates the pivotal role of youth as socializing agents. This challenges traditional views of caregivers as the dominant socializing agent and highlights how youth actively contribute to others' learning. In fact, cultural brokers may be essential in the acculturation process by helping family members adapt to the norms of mainstream culture (Aumann and Titzmann 2022). For example, youth help caregivers navigate linguistic (i.e., language brokering), procedural

(i.e., procedural brokering), and emotion-related (i.e., emotion brokering) norms. While each act in isolation serves to overcome communication barriers, together, they are essential in helping socialize family members to new social norms. However, despite theoretical interest in this area, the concept of the cultural broker as an agent of socialization has not been empirically investigated.

Using social relational theory as a framework to capture the agency of both the child and the caregiver (Kuczynski and Mol 2015) provides one avenue to explore the broker's influence on their caregiver. Some evidence suggests that children and adolescents influence caregivers' values (Knafo and Galansky 2008), attitudes (Peters 1985), and understanding of social norms (Göckeritz, Schmidt, and Tomasello 2014). Although sparse, such evidence indicates the specific ways in which cultural brokers may socialize their caregivers, offering numerous avenues for research in this domain. For example, researchers could investigate changes in cultural brokering across development as the caregiver-child relationship develops. Young children may broker language through more direct translation and explanations, whereas adolescents may interpret intent and subtext. Research in these areas will elucidate the intricate dynamics of cultural brokering and its implications for caregiver-child relationships and socialization processes.

4 | Conclusions and Implications

Developmental science is gradually shedding light on the experiences of immigrant youth and families. In this article, we have focused on cultural brokering, an often-overlooked form of labor that showcases the resilience and adaptability of youth. Despite recent advances in the literature, the impact of different forms of cultural brokering on psychological adjustment across development remains inconclusive. Advancing knowledge of cultural brokering can clarify the psychological impact of these experiences on children and youth across the globe. Research on cultural brokering can help create culturally sensitive interventions for cultural brokers and their families, and facilitate the development of policy and institutional support that alleviate the burden placed on cultural brokers (e.g., by providing interpreters and training stakeholders who serve immigrant families). Such research is critical given the current socio-historical climate and considerable growth in migration over the past five decades that has made immigration a key policy issue. The study and awareness of cultural brokering will advance scientific understanding of developmental adaptability and enrich our appreciation of the diverse ways in which youth contribute to the fabric of our multicultural societies.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.