

Cultural Brokering and Bicultural Identity: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Cultural brokering refers to a process whereby individuals mediate between two parties that are experiencing some type of cultural misunderstanding. This study explored the prevalence, types, and process of cultural brokering in a sample of young adults from a multicultural university in Toronto. Interviews provided in-depth information about a cultural brokering experience, while a questionnaire assessed various psychological variables of interest. Results indicated that cultural brokering is a diverse experience that spans the boundaries of one's family and includes various norms, values and traditions. Higher family connectedness (allocentrism) was associated with more frequent brokering, which in turn seemed to foster feelings of independence, maturity, and a better understanding of the Canadian culture. Cultural brokering is generally associated with positive emotions (e.g., pride). Negative emotions (e.g., embarrassment, shame, or guilt) are more common when family conflict is high, or when the broker cannot achieve the desired outcome of resolving cultural misunderstandings.

Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed an increasing amount of research on language brokering, or the process by which children of immigrants translate for their parents and other individuals (see Morales & Hanson, 2005). Such translation requires a certain mastery of the English language, and often knowledge of the host culture (Weisskirch et al., 2011). In fact, whereas some instances of brokering are necessitated because of language barriers, others are rooted in cultural differences. Children of immigrants, who have knowledge of both their heritage and mainstream cultures, often act as cultural brokers, trying to mediate between two parties who fail to understand each other because of cultural differences.

Most research on brokering has focused on children and teens (e.g., Buriel et al., 1998; Tse, 1995, 1996; for an exception see Weisskirch et al., 2011), and has largely looked at instances of brokering in an educational or medical context (see Morales & Hansen, 2005). The present study examined brokering in a university-age sample. Further, we examined instances of cultural brokering only, distinguishing it from the, perhaps more common, language brokering. Given the exploratory nature of this study, there were no specific hypotheses. The purpose of the study was to examine the prevalence, types, and process of cultural brokering, as well as how these might relate to cultural identification and acculturation. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that has looked into cultural brokering in a Canadian context.

Method

Participants: Forty bicultural students (27 women; age $M = 21.0$), all children of immigrants to Canada, participated in this study.

Procedure: The first part of the study was an in-depth interview to explore the most significant cultural brokering experience reported by a participant; the second part used a number of measures aimed at quantifying cultural brokering experiences.

Table 1. Descriptives for brokers by place of birth and race

	In %
Born in Canada	42.5
<i>Race</i>	
White	30
Black	5
East Asian	17.5
South Asian	32.5
Other (Middle Eastern, etc.)	15

Measures

Cultural identification (Cameron, 2004)

- Identification with Canadian (12 items, $\alpha = .86$) and heritage identities (12 items, $\alpha = .87$)
- "I feel strong ties to other *Canadians*"

Family Allocentrism (Lay et al., 1998)

- Degree of connectedness to one's family (21 items, $\alpha = .84$)
- "I respect my parents' wishes even if they are not my own"

Attitudes Toward Brokering (Tse, 1996)

- Three factors emerged from factor analysis:
 - Canadian Maturity (4 items, $\alpha = .74$; "Brokering helped me mature")
 - Brokering Pride (4 items, $\alpha = .81$; "I am proud to have been a broker")
 - Heritage Promotion (2 items, $r = .63$; "I understand my heritage culture better because I brokered")

Social Emotions of Pride, Shame, and Guilt (Tangney & Dearing, 2002)

- Pride (5 items, $\alpha = .85$; "After this event I felt good about myself")
- Shame (5 items, $\alpha = .86$; "After this event I felt small")
- Guilt (5 items, $\alpha = .89$; "After this event I felt remorse, regret")

The Asian American Family Conflicts Scale (Lee et al., 2000)

- Frequency of parent-child conflict situations (10 items; $\alpha = .92$)
- "Your parents tell you what to do with your life, but you want to make your own decisions"

Results

- Cultural brokering happens at home, at doctor's or government offices, shops and restaurants; and it may involve family members, relatives, friends, neighbours, and even strangers.
- Romantic relationships, interracial/interethnic ceremonies, parent-child relationships, gender roles, food and eating, dressing, and money issues are the most common themes that illicit some kind of cultural misunderstanding, and which require some form of cultural brokering.

- When brokering, biculturals tend to use various strategies, like summarizing and paraphrasing, providing analogies, and sometimes even purposefully omitting information, all the while trying to remain calm and objective.
- The poorer the English proficiency of the parents, the higher the amount of brokering performed by the child ($r_{\text{mother}} = -.457$, $r_{\text{father}} = -.474$, $ps = .003$).
- Older siblings tend to engage more frequently in cultural brokering compared to younger siblings.

Table 2. Zero-order correlations between the measures

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Amount of brokering	.33*	-.11	-.05	-.17	-.16	.09	.10	.32*	.09	.13
2. Family allocentrism		-.33*	.47**	.04	.03	-.25	-.30	.32*	.38*	.26
3. Family conflict			-.49**	-.12	-.30	.56**	.48**	-.06	-.54**	-.15
4. Heritage identity				.20	.18	-.39*	-.33*	.06	.37*	.09
5. Canadian identity					.23	-.24	-.09	.07	.31	.17
6. Pride						-.49**	-.32*	.11	.42**	.13
7. Shame							.92**	.04	-.74**	.00
8. Guilt								.08	-.65**	.04
9. Canadian maturity									.21	.33*
10. Brokering pride										.18
11. Heritage promotion										

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

- Higher brokering frequency was associated with higher levels of family connectedness; but not with heritage or mainstream cultural identification.
- More frequent brokering was associated with higher levels of independence, maturity, and enhanced knowledge of the Canadian culture.
- Overall, participants reported significantly more pride compared to guilt or shame following a brokering experience ($t(39) = 9.1$, $p < .001$; $t(39) = 9.6$, $p < .001$, respectively).
- Emotions of shame and guilt after brokering were more prevalent when family conflict was high. Also, higher identification with the heritage culture predicted less shame ($\beta = -.36$, $p = .03$) and less guilt ($\beta = -.33$, $p = .05$).
- Embarrassment was mainly experienced following an unsuccessful brokering event.

Conclusions

- Young bicultural adults are frequently involved in cultural brokering, a rich and diverse process that spans the boundaries of one's family and tackles various social phenomena.
- Cultural brokering is a process which requires some knowledge of both heritage and mainstream languages and cultures. In turn, through brokering bicultural individuals learn more about both ethnic and Canadian cultures. Consequently, brokering may facilitate the acculturation process.
- Although pride is the most common emotion that follows a cultural brokering episode, the exact emotion experienced by the broker will depend on both the outcome of the brokering process and the broker's identification with the heritage culture.

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