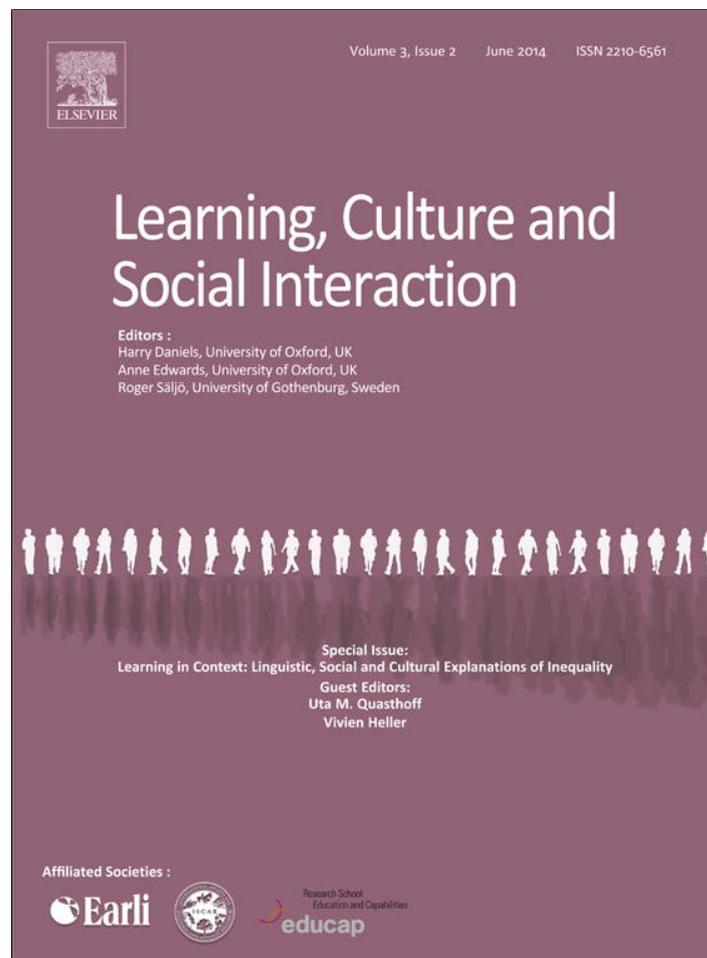


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# Cultural brokers: How immigrant youth in multicultural societies navigate and negotiate their pathways to college identities

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## ABSTRACT

A crucial indicator of immigrant youth's incorporation in their receiving countries is their educational success, which can open pathways to economic mobility and civic participation. So we are especially concerned about the *academic pipeline problem*, when disproportionate numbers of immigrant, ethnic minority, and low-income youth leave school prematurely. Scholars trace the roots and remedies of these inequalities with theories of *capital*, *alienation*, and *challenge*. *Social capital* theories point to cultural reproduction, seen when youth with college-educated parents are the most likely to develop college identities. *Alienation* theories propose that immigrant parents dream of their children's school success, but poverty and discrimination dim these hopes, while their children develop marginalized identities. Finally, such *challenges* can motivate youth to succeed on behalf of their families and build college identities by navigating among their cultural worlds. This paper reports two longitudinal studies with U.S.-Mexican immigrant youth and traces parallels and contrasts across nations as well as research–practice–policy linkages, with special attention to how cultural brokers can be resources for opening academic pipelines.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The academic pipeline problem: local and global dilemmas

A crucial indicator of immigrant youth's incorporation and participation is their success in the educational systems of their receiving countries. The credentials that youth obtain through education can open pathways to their economic mobility and civic participation. So we are especially concerned about what is called *the academic pipeline problem*, such as a disproportionate number of immigrant, ethnic minority, and low-income youth leaving prematurely and emergence of troubling gender differences (Cooper, 2011; Gándara, Larson, Mehan, & Rumberger, 1998). This problem makes students who graduate from universities and go on to college-based careers unrepresentative of their broader communities. This pattern has been intensifying in many nations as immigrant, refugee, and ethnic minority youth make up growing segments of school enrollments.

Of course, a college education is not the only definition of success, and academic pipelines extend only to primary schools in some regions and to universities in others. But in each cultural group and in each region worldwide, education is strongly linked to youth's life opportunities and choices. (In some countries, rising unemployment among highly qualified youth is motivating their immigration.) Still, youth who are alienated from education and its opportunities are at higher risk for marginalized life pathways that are costly for them and their communities.

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1.2. Capital, alienation, and challenge on pathways of immigrant youth

Interdisciplinary theories of the roots and remedies of the academic pipeline problem point to *capital, alienation, and challenge* (Cooper, 2011). *Social capital* theories proposed by sociologists point to the *cultural reproduction* of social class hierarchies across generations that fuels the global education gap between the rich and poor. This can be seen when college-educated parents use their financial resources, social ties, and knowledge of how institutions work to help their children succeed in school and go on to college and college-based careers (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1986; Coleman, 1988).

Theories of youth *alienation and belonging* proposed by anthropologists suggest that immigrant, low-income, and ethnic minority parents often hold high hopes for their children's school success and moving up to a better life, but poverty and discrimination can dim their hopes while their children may disengage from school to defend against failure while slipping onto marginalized identity pathways (Ogbu, 1991; Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Vigil, 2004). Scholars have mapped when students are more likely to develop feelings of alienation or belonging (Cooper, 2011).

Finally, the *challenge* perspective has emerged from interdisciplinary evidence that under some conditions, the hardships of immigration, poverty, and discrimination can motivate youth to succeed on behalf of their families and cultural communities, "prove the gatekeeper wrong", and foster positive identity formation (Cooper, 2011; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998). It is the relatively unusual conditions in which the challenge model operates that my colleagues and I have worked to understand.

The challenge pattern can be seen in immigrant parents' values and communication with their children. In a longitudinal study, Mexican immigrant parents were interviewed in their homes about their values and aspirations for their children's future (e.g., Azmitia, Cooper, & Brown, 2009). Parents expressed their values in terms of the good moral path of life (in Spanish, *el buen camino de la vida*) and guided their children to stay on the good path or return to it if they had slipped away. Most mothers were employed in low-status jobs, picking strawberries and cleaning hotels, but these same mothers' aspirations for their children were to attain careers as doctors, lawyers, and other professionals as part of staying on the good moral path.

The capital, alienation, and challenge models are each valid for capturing part of the process by which youth navigate the academic pipeline. Each model describes subgroups of students, with those following "capital pathways" predicted by their parents' social class, "alienation pathways" enacted by youth encountering barriers of immigration, racism, and poverty that drive them out of school, and "challenge pathways" of students who encounter these same barriers but draw on internal and external resources to build pathways through school.

1.3. Bridging multiple worlds theory

One challenge model, Bridging Multiple Worlds Theory, maps how culturally diverse youth navigate across resources and challenges in their worlds of families, peers, schools, and communities on their pathways through school to adult careers and family roles (Cooper, 2011). As shown in Fig. 1, this multi-level model traces the interplay of five related dimensions over time: demographics of culturally diverse youth and families navigating through school; their aspirations for college and career identities; their math and language academic pathways through school; challenges and resources navigating among their cultural worlds; and

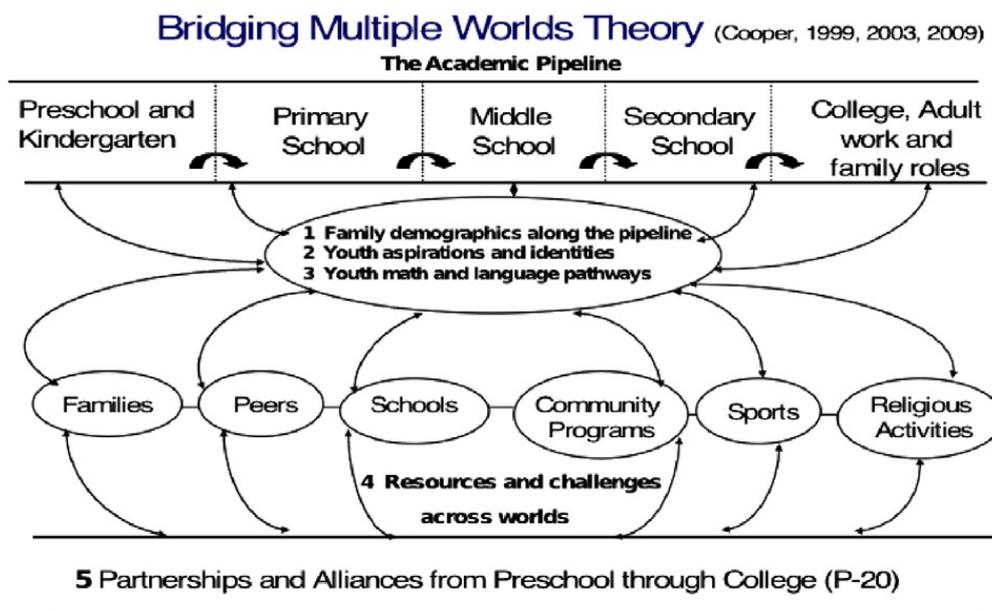


Fig. 1. The Bridging Multiple Worlds Theory models how youth develop their identities as they navigate pathways from childhood through school. This theory traces five dimensions over time to ask how ethnically diverse youth build their pathways to college and careers without giving up their ties to their families and cultural communities.

*university–community partnerships* that boost resources which youth can draw from their worlds along their pathways through school.

Empirical work with this theory has revealed surprising findings that are sparking further research as well as applications in educational practice and policy investments. In addition, university–community partnerships among researchers, policymakers, and educators as well as youth and families have used its tools for measuring and monitoring the five dimensions of the model (Cooper, 2011).

The interplay of these dimensions can be illustrated with findings from a long-standing university–community partnership with a pre-college program in California that serves over 500 youth (Cooper, 2011; Cooper, Dominguez, & Rosas, 2005). It offers scholarships and support to help students from low-income, mostly Mexican immigrant families stay on track from the 6th grade (age 12) to college.

To understand *demographics* along the academic pipeline, the partnership gathers data on students' national origin, age, and gender and monitors who comes and who is missing at program activities. Attendance rosters at program events revealed that fewer boys than girls and fewer older than younger students were participating, so the program director made changes in activities that increased the participation of boys and high school students.

When students applied to the program at age 12, they described their *aspirations* for their ideal careers in the same way as the Mexican immigrant parents interviewed by Azmitia et al. (2009). In their essays, written in English and Spanish, most students expressed aspirations for careers as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and technically skilled workers (as well as soccer and football heroes), with most based on college preparation.

To trace students' *math and language academic pathways*, the partnership team graphed trajectories of classes and grades of each student over time, often with students in their program activities. Students' pathways formed five prototypic patterns: consistently *high* (most likely to lead directly to four-year universities), *declining* (the most common among youth as they encounter progressively more difficult classes), *increasing* (seen among immigrant youth as they learn English), *back on track* (declining then increasing), and *persisting* or consistently low.

To map students' *challenges and resources across their worlds*, we asked, “who helps you?” and “who causes you difficulties?” across a range of topics. *Cultural brokers* provide resources for youth in bridging across their cultural worlds in ways that reduce educational inequities, such as when a teacher links immigrant parents' skills in sewing in teaching geometry to their adolescents (Civil & Bernier, 2006), or when a religious leader supports immigrant students developing both college and cultural identities by keeping their home language (Su, 2008). *Gatekeepers* create obstacles along students' pathways, such as when a teacher tells a student “no one from your community goes to college”. Students report both gatekeeping and brokering from each of their worlds. However, students in this pre-college program, which holds year-round activities linking families, peers, and schools, increasingly listed their immigrant mothers as helping them go to college and their peers as helping them with schoolwork from middle to secondary school.

Funders of this *university–community partnership*, who donate scholarships for participating students to attend college, monitor success by the numbers of program alumni who graduate from high school and attend two- and four-year colleges. Cycles of research, practice, and policy have strengthened the program. Youth interpreted findings and suggest improvements, and alumni reported inspiring others to attend college and participating as tutors, mentors, and even funders.

#### 1.4. Two longitudinal studies of cultural brokering

This paper reports two recent longitudinal studies, both conducted in this university–community partnership, that examine cultural brokering across the worlds of immigrant students' families, schools, peers, and the pre-college program. The first is a prospective longitudinal study of students in their early years in the program (Cooper et al., 2013), and the second, a retrospective study of program alumni (Cooper, Domínguez, Cooper, Lopez, & Beristain-Barajas, 2012). They build on the growing research literature on cultural brokering and students' academic pathways, which has focused on children of immigrants as language brokers for their parents (e.g., Dorner, Orellana, & Jiménez, 2008; Weisskirch et al., 2011). These issues are relevant to immigrant students in multicultural societies who live with restricted access to educational resources or who do not know how to access such resources.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

#### 2.1.1. Demographics

Among students in the pre-college program, parents' formal education, usually in rural Mexico, was typically less than high school and for many, elementary level or less. Parents worked picking strawberries, mushrooms, or lettuce, on cannery or factory assembly lines, or cleaning houses and hotels.

The prospective longitudinal study included responses of 18 middle and high school students for whom data were available from the 2010 and 2012 program summer institutes (average ages when responding, 14 and 16 years, respectively, 66% females); the retrospective alumni study included responses of 52 program alumni (average age = 25, 59% females).

## 2.2. Measures

The partnership collects long-term data from students' entry into the program at age 12 through high school graduation at age 18, with follow-up at age 25. Data sources include students' application essays, interviews with students and parents, school transcripts, annual student surveys, and a web-based alumni survey.

In the prospective longitudinal study, we asked current program participants, "Who of the following people helps you think about going to college? Check all that apply" (among teachers, parents, school counselor, friends, brothers or sisters, other family, program tutors, program counselors, others, and "no one"), and "Is there someone you help think about college?"

In the retrospective alumni study, we asked young adult alumni respondents, "for each time period you were in school (elementary, middle school, high school, college, graduate school), check all the people who talked with you or is now talking with you about college."

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Prospective longitudinal study

Over two years, students reported continuing high levels of resources from families (parents, siblings) and increasing resources from schools,  $t(17) = 3.12, p < .01$ ; the program,  $t(17) = 2.65, p < .02$ ; and peers,  $t(17) = 2.56, p < .05$ . Over time, they reported increasingly differentiated resources within their school and program worlds: they first listed only their teachers, then both teachers and school counselors,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.77, p < .02$ . Similarly, they first listed only the program director, then both the director and program tutors,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.77, p < .02$ .

Notably, 11 of 18 students reported helping others think about college, including siblings, friends, cousins, and parents, indicating emerging *diffusion effects* as program benefits extended beyond participating students (Seitz & Apfel, 1994).

### 3.2. Retrospective alumni study

When they were contacted at age 25, program alumni reported that their parents had provided important resources from childhood into college, despite—or perhaps because of—their parents' modest formal education. In fact, parents were students' greatest resources in middle school, peers and teachers rose as resources in high school, and parents again were the greatest resources as youth navigated from community college to universities. Overall, alumni named parents and peers as their top resources, as well as their teachers, school guidance counselors, the pre-college program director, and program tutors. Students considered the program as most useful in the 8th and 12th grades—transition points to middle and secondary school in the U.S.—along their academic pathways.

Students' academic pathways diverged early: compared to students making lower grades, 6th graders with higher math grades had passed Algebra by the 9th grade. Doing so predicted entering universities directly from secondary school. However, students completing Algebra in later grades had graduated from universities by age 25. Ultimately, the two groups succeeded at similar rates, with 35% holding university baccalaureate degrees. This study revealed more than one pathway to college, including those interrupted by military service, early parenthood, work, or incarceration. By age 25, almost all had some post-secondary education and most, college-based work.

With regard to language pathways, we found no difference between alumni who had been English learners compared to English proficient students in distributions across pathways during middle and secondary school, nor in their educational attainment at age 25 (Behrens, 2008). Notably, English learners named their teachers of English as a second language as having helped them go to college, thus serving as cultural and college brokers. This important finding may reflect these teachers' roles as partners in the pre-college program and may be atypical, so it will benefit from replication and further study.

## 4. Discussion

One of the most important findings of these two longitudinal studies is that students continued to report, from childhood into young adulthood, that their Mexican immigrant parents remained central to their staying on track to and through college, not in spite of their modest education but because of it. This finding challenges widely-held myths that Mexican immigrant parents hold low aspirations for their children's education and that interventions are needed to raise their aspirations (Valencia, 2002). Over time, families remained students' greatest resource (see Quasthoff & Wild, *in press*), while students drew from increasingly differentiated networks of cultural brokers across their families, schools, peer, and program worlds. They also became cultural and college brokers themselves by guiding their siblings, cousins, friends, and even their parents toward college. We need greater understanding of the negotiation and other discourse skills (see Domenech & Krahn, 2014; Heller, 2014; Morek, 2014) that facilitate such cultural and college brokering.

Further longitudinal studies in this partnership are underway to trace how students reconcile their early career aspirations with later realities of their academic preparation and life challenges. For example, students' high college and career aspirations were not always matched by their mastering math and language skills required for these aspirations, but some students moved up "career ladders" by taking jobs in their field of interest that required less education while they earned credentials towards higher-level careers in this field.

We are also tracing *second chances* pathways of youth who left school because of early parenthood, prison, military service, or to earn money to support their families and then returned to school. In the U.S. and Europe, educational systems that offer second chances to re-enter the secondary and tertiary levels are an important policy option for immigrant youth (Crul & Schneider, 2010).

#### 4.1. Parallels and differences across immigrant communities and nations

These findings parallel interviews with immigrant Muslim parents that document their high aspirations for their children's education, while keeping their Islamic values and cultural practices (Ross-Seriff, Taqi Tirmazi, & Walsh, 2007). The findings also parallel work on mentoring and tutoring by Turkish and Moroccan immigrant college students of their younger siblings (Crul, 2002; Thompson & Crul, 2007; see also Seginer, 1992, on Arab Israeli older sisters mentoring their younger sisters). Sibling brokering appears especially important when parents have not had opportunities to attend college.

Crul and Schneider (2009) traced the greater number of Turkish immigrants in higher education in the Netherlands than in Germany to Dutch early childhood education programs (that allow earlier school entry for immigrant children) and both “long route” and “second chances” programs that allow immigrant students to enter higher education from vocational programs (De Bresser, 2009). In addition, universities in the Netherlands and the U.S. have collaborated to develop retention programs for immigrant students (Tupan-Wenno, 2009). However, German vocational systems offer Turkish immigrant youth a smoother transition into the workplace, with dropout rates lower than in the Netherlands.

Taken together, these findings suggest the importance of aligning resources along immigrant students' pathways through school. In many nations, programs serving immigrant youth target specific transitions through the academic pipeline. These programs are often disconnected from one another and offer only short-term support. However, private and public sector leaders across the political spectrum increasingly want to align and connect institutions and interventions into “seamless” educational systems.

#### 4.2. Next steps

We have much more to learn about cultural brokering in families, schools, and communities, and how students' constellations of brokers and gatekeepers evolve over time.

Although demographic data on immigration and youth identity are not available in all nations, some partnerships use demographic data to monitor participation and inclusiveness by asking *who came* and *who was missing*? Youth leaders can reflect on these data to improve the inclusiveness of programs. Partnerships are also moving beyond demographic categories—whether national origin, social class, or gender—to map ways to open academic pipelines.

Immigrant youth can serve as cultural brokers and as researchers while they develop their own cultural identities. For example, Bernal, Alemán, and Garavito (2009) found that Latino undergraduate students were constructing their own social, political, and academic identities and navigating across cultural borders while they were also mentoring Latino schoolchildren about their identities and navigating skills.

The next steps in advancing cycles of science, policy, and practice can build on *intergenerational* partnerships in which immigrant youth and their families are valued as participants and researchers; *interdisciplinary* work that maps conditions for success by aligning theories, and *international* teams who link local and systemic levels by mapping parallels and variation across cultural communities.

An example of intergenerational parallels and variation took place when Cambodian and Mexican immigrant college students served as cultural brokers in their respective communities. The Cambodian immigrant college students served as cultural brokers at a Cambodian New Year celebration at their Buddhist temple by providing materials about college in English and Khmer, the Cambodian language; Mexican immigrant college students served as cultural brokers at *Guelagetza*, a Mexican indigenous celebration, by providing materials about college in English and Spanish. The students call such activities “looking up and giving back”, as they move toward their own cultural, educational, and career goals while serving youth in their communities.

The Bridging Multiple Worlds Alliance (BMWA, [www.bridgingworlds.org](http://www.bridgingworlds.org)) provides resources to support low-income, immigrant, and ethnic minority youth building pathways to college and careers without losing ties to their families and cultural communities. A growing network of international partners, the Alliance seeks to advance knowledge and improve practice, in collaboration with alliance partners and youth themselves. Tools for aligning models, with qualitative and quantitative measures, activities for schools and programs, and templates for graphs, longitudinal case studies, and logic models, are available at no cost.

## 5. Conclusions

Interventions along the academic pipeline often address individual transition points, such as starting school or transitions to college, but private and public sector leaders are increasingly working to connect and align interventions across entire educational systems from childhood to college, working with schools, postsecondary institutions, community organizations, immigrant families, and youth.

For researchers mapping challenges and resources for immigrant youth pathways, including cultural brokering and gatekeeping, evolving models of capital, alienation, and challenge offer complementary—and increasingly intersecting—ways to understand the academic pipeline problem. Integrating cultural, structural, social, and personal levels is a useful way to affirm immigrant and ethnic minority youth and families as social actors and thus potential assets, not simply as outcomes who are deficient or incomplete in their assimilation (Cooper, Brown, Azmitia, & Chavira, 2005; Crul & Mollenkopf, 2012; Schneider, Chávez, DeSipio, & Waters, 2012). Understanding more about cultural brokers and gatekeepers along students' pathways through school is advancing research with capital, alienation, and challenge theories, which each focus in different ways on brokering and gatekeeping.

For practitioners, intergenerational networks can be created by immigrant youth and college students. Successful immigrant youth bridge the values and discourse practices of home and mainstream cultures. Materials in immigrant families' home languages can support intergenerational bridging of cultural, college, and career identities. A survey in six U.S. states revealed 150 languages spoken, with surprising similarities across states (Trinh, Tsai, & Cooper, 2007). Materials about pathways to college in 19 languages besides English are available at [www.bridgingworlds.org](http://www.bridgingworlds.org). These materials are assisting immigrant youth in navigating multiple identities across their cultural worlds and are resources for cultural brokers of any age.

With policy investments, private foundations and private–public partnerships are key in work on the academic pipeline problem because of their autonomy and nimbleness (Cooper, 2008). They are taking on new roles by helping build the knowledge base for research and practice as well as guiding further investments. Foundations are supporting learning communities to consider sensitive issues such as undocumented youth and building sustainable innovations (Cooper & Burciaga, 2011). The incorporation of immigrant youth in the educational, occupational, and civic systems of their receiving countries has been the focus of foundation investments that address discrimination and equal opportunity. The work of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations youth programs as well as the European Foundation Network in supporting such investments is especially notable.

Finally, comparative international research and projects such as TIES (The Integration of the European Second Generation; [www.tiesproject.eu](http://www.tiesproject.eu)) are proving valuable in guiding public–private investments to support the incorporation and upward mobility of immigrant, low-income, and ethnic minority youth (Crul & Mollenkopf, 2012; Crul & Schneider, 2010). Given current global economic challenges, our next steps for research, practice, and policy are to improve designs and support for the fragile bridges through multicultural nations' academic pipelines. Strengthening cultural brokering along students' pathways, both within cultural communities and across them—what Putnam (2000) has called *bonding* and *bridging* capital—will be crucial.

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