



# 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).

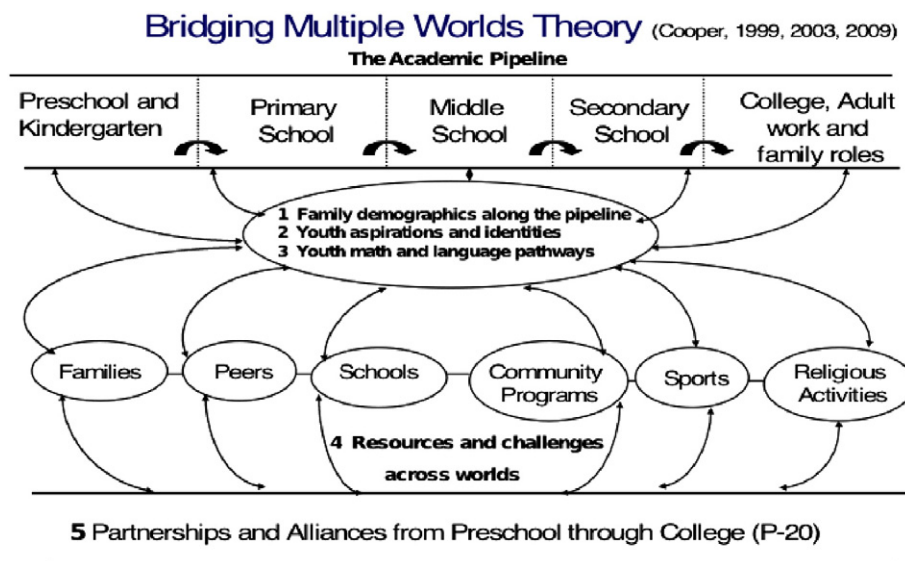
Finally, the *challenge* perspective has emerged from interdisciplinary evidence that under some conditions, the hardships of immigration, poverty, and discrimination can motivate youth to succeed on behalf of their families and cultural communities, “prove the gatekeeper wrong”, and foster positive 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.

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