

# Youth grapple with interpreting the unspoken for their immigrant families

April 5 2024, by Jody Murray

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UC Merced is pursuing novel research into emotion brokering: moments when young people tasked with interpreting for family members encounter nonverbal miscommunication. Credit: UC Merced

UC Merced researchers are shedding light on a little-explored aspect of cross-cultural communication that involves no spoken words but sometimes can cause confusion and anguish for children acting as interpreters for older family members.

The moments are common in California's Central Valley, where English isn't the primary language in nearly 45% of households—and Spanish is the main language in about half of those. This leads to situations where children serve as language go-betweens for parents who aren't fluent in English and for service providers who can't speak Spanish, Hmong, Hindi, etc. The youngsters step in as interpreters at medical appointments, at the hardware store, at the tax preparer's office—wherever the answer to "What are they saying?" is important.

Countless studies have dived into the dynamics of these interactions. Researchers refer to them broadly as cultural brokering—a nod to the child's role as a vocal intermediary with the grown-ups filtering words through them.

But Sivenesi Subramoney, a UC Merced developmental psychology graduate student, wondered about a powerful subset of these interactions—unspoken moments when body language or facial expressions between adults are misinterpreted, leaving the child to fill a gap they didn't expect or may misunderstand themselves.

Subramoney and her fellow researchers gave it a name:

Emotion brokering.

"I searched the literature and couldn't find anything quite like it," she said.

Subramoney and a group of UC Merced researchers initiated a project to survey Latinx students at the university about being caught between hit-and-miss emotions. The results were [published](#) in "*Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*."

UC Merced developmental psychology Professor Eric Walle, who has

worked for years with Subramoney, is a report co-author, along with two colleagues—developmental psychology professor Alexandra Main and Spanish linguistics professor Dalia Magaña.

The report concludes emotion brokering is a common occurrence in [parent-child relationships](#) and that "further research is warranted" to study its existence among younger intermediaries and other cultures. Most of all, the report pointed to its effect on the young brokers.

"This collaboration highlights the remarkable capabilities of young Latinx bilinguals who navigate cultural differences and language gaps, as well as interpreting emotions," Magaña said. "Yet we are increasingly recognizing the [negative impacts](#) on their [mental health](#) and well-being."

The report presented the results of two surveys. The first looked for instances of intercultural misunderstandings that involved UC Merced students' close family members. The second zeroed in on emotion brokering, seeking context and more details about each incident, such as whether the emotion was perceived as positive or negative.

"One time I went with my mom to return some jeans and the cashier had a serious face the entire time," one student respondent wrote. "My mom thought that was completely disrespectful, but I'm used to it. I see it everywhere. I did tell my mom it's normal to see that and it's not a sign of disrespect. It could be that the cashier was shy."

"My mom got into an argument with a neighbor," another wrote. "My mother corrected him. This led to his face turning red. But it wasn't because he was mad. He was embarrassed that my mom was correct. After the neighbor left, I explained that to her."

"So what we've done here is like a proof of concept," Walle said. "The students were saying, 'Yes, this is the thing I do all the time with my

family, and it's distinct from language."

Ongoing research indicates that interpreting language for their elders is often an accepted family role. It's what the young bilinguals grew up doing; they are often proud of the responsibility. But they aren't nearly as prepared to interpret the unspoken. Emotion brokering catches them off guard and can lead to escalation, frustration or embarrassment.

"It's like they know in advance about one type of brokering, but the other is more spur of the moment," Main said. Some respondents didn't think to characterize such non-verbal, emotional interactions until the survey asked about it.

Walle said a next step in their research was to ask students how they feel about navigating these cross-cultural tasks; how are they faring emotionally?

"They could view this labor as a lot of work but could still feel good about helping their parent and working through a difficult experience together," he said. The results of that research are under review.

Main noted that emotions are an important overlay of everyday social interaction. They give words context and significance. But one culture's emotional signals can vary wildly from another's. She said young emotion brokers need support to help them navigate these differences.

On one level, counselors or clinicians could be trained to help young family members be better prepared for linguistic and emotion brokering and to strengthen positive feelings about their roles. More broadly, [health care providers](#) need more cultural training to help avoid disconnections and misunderstandings, Main said.

"I think of it as an intervention on both a family level and societal level,"

she said.

**More information:** Sivenesi Subramoney et al, Navigating intercultural misunderstandings: An examination of emotion brokering, *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* (2024). DOI: [10.1037/cdp0000652](https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000652)

Provided by University of California

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