

## The Role of Cultural Brokers in Community-Based Research

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### ABSTRACT

Cultural brokers play a critical role of helping researchers navigate cultural and language barriers to gain insight into communities. This paper focuses on one cultural broker who helped facilitate community-based research among the refugee community. Her professionalism, expertise and knowledge of the community made her a valuable resource for both the researchers and the community. This work acknowledges the position of power and privilege that cultural brokers hold in community research.

*Keywords:* Community voice, refugees, diverse communities, immigrants, language barriers

### THE ROLE OF CULTURAL BROKERS IN COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

With the ever-increasing global crisis (UNHCR, 2023), the United States continues to provide shelter and resettlement to refugees from all over the world. Service provision for these communities sometimes necessitates the involvement of individuals who serve to bridge the gaps that exist between these diverse communities. The term cultural broker has been used to represent those who often serve in facilitating this process. Divide (2004) notes that the cultural broker concept emerged from the need to provide health services to diverse communities in the 1960s. Furthermore, formal education could not sufficiently provide knowledge and skills that adequately addressed cultural differences and needs (Mortier et al., 2021; Divide, 2004). With the evolving needs, the role of the cultural broker progressed from simply catering to health needs and interpretation to effectively addressing barriers to service

access and provision in other sectors including education (Mortier et al., 2021; Yohani, 2013; Divide, 2004).

With the growing research interest focused on diverse communities (Brar-Josan & Yohani, 2019), scholars successfully carry out research on diverse populations with the help of cultural brokers as intermediaries. Cultural brokering is the term used to describe the act of mediating between individuals of different cultural backgrounds with the purpose of influencing change (Mortier et al., 2021). Kowal et al. (2017) define cultural brokers as those who “speak on behalf of community interests, lending voice to community needs, strengths and ideas so that researchers are better able to prioritize community perspectives and values” (p. 2). Without effective cultural brokers, research initiatives may not be efficiently implemented and the impact on the community may be negligible (Pang et al., 2020).

Yohani (2013) explored the concept of cultural brokers in educational settings,

focusing particularly on their role in working with refugee children and families adapting to school settings and systems and identified six brokering roles. These roles include (1) facilitating adaptation, (2) bridging families and children to community services, (3) cultural interpretation and awareness raising, (4) supportive counseling and prevention, (5) advocacy and mediation, and (6) conflict resolution. Although not in its entirety, it is through the lens of this concept that we discuss the role of cultural brokers in community-based research from the perspective of one cultural broker's involvement in our research with Arabic-speaking refugee families.

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Our project focused on exploring refugee children's literacy development by supporting families in learning strategies for reading books with young children (Boit et al., 2020; Barnes et al., 2021). This work involved making home visits and modelling shared book reading strategies that caregivers can incorporate while reading dual language books with young children at home. Despite having the knowledge, skills, and resources, a barrier was evident as none of the research team members spoke Arabic. It was at this point that we sought the services of an individual who understood the language and culture of the research participants to aid in communication in our interaction with the families.

### Meet Asha

Asha (pseudonym) learned English while growing up in Syria, allowing her to pursue higher education and thereafter gain meaningful employment. However, when Syria went into war in 2013, she sought refuge in a neighboring country where she did volunteer work and later worked in supporting Syrian refugees. She also interacted with refugees from other parts of the world and thus acquired expertise in and became passionate about community outreach. Her desire to

support communities prompted her to take up a leadership role in a women's empowerment group that focused on helping women leverage their skills for financial independence. She supported these families, most of whom had lost family members, through difficult and traumatic experiences. Asha remained in the country of refuge for four years with the hope of returning to Syria, but instead ended up relocating and resettling in a southeastern state of the United States.

When our research team first met Asha, she was enrolled in language classes at a local nonprofit agency learning English and simultaneously serving newly arrived refugees. At the time, she had lived in the United States for two years and was fluent in Arabic and steadily improving her English skills. Our team sought the services of Asha to bridge the language gap between researchers and Syrian refugee families who participated in a community-based literacy project. Our interaction with Asha developed into a three-year-long professional relationship leading to a successful implementation of the research project due to her identity as a member and cultural expert of the Arabic-speaking community.

To ensure a successful partnership we explained the project and discussed project expectations. As Shaw (2014) cautions, failure to relay guidelines and expectations to the cultural broker may overwhelm and result in misdirection or render the cultural broker ineffective despite being a member of the research participants' community (Pang et al., 2020). As the research experts, we did not underestimate Asha's role because she was a trusted and recognized leader in the community. With this significant level of privilege and power she held in the community, Asha provided guidance and feedback on an ongoing basis. Recognizing that the success of this project was not without Asha's pertinent involvement, we decided to hold an informal interview to gain more

insight into her perception of her role in the project.

### **Asha's Role in the Project**

Using her cultural knowledge, Asha helped navigate the cultural practices and norms that were unknown to the researchers, communicating and facilitating discussions both in Arabic and English. Through her participation, Asha not only helped with language facilitation, but she played a bigger role in helping shape the direction and progress of the project by incorporating informed, culturally relevant practices, like ensuring we chose culturally appropriate children's books, communicating with families to schedule meetings, and ensuring we observed cultural norms during home visits. Yohani (2013) identified this role as cultural interpretation and awareness raising. Asha's knowledge of the cultural and social differences positioned her as a source of accurate information and a respected member of the community and research team.

Her background and prior experiences placed Asha in a position of influence. She easily interacted with participants, earning community trust—a crucial ingredient for open communication with the families (Mortier et al., 2017; Shimpuku & Norr, 2012). In effect, Asha was playing the role identified by Yohani (2013) as that of bridging families and children to school and community services. The trust she had built with the community allowed for an environment in which we implemented reading strategies with ease. In our conversation, she noted, "It's not easy for the client when they invite you to come to their home. That means they trust you. This is something I'm proud of." With Asha's influence, the families enthusiastically practiced shared book reading, implementing suggested strategies. She was professional and insightful in the way she shared information with the research team and the families.

Asha believed that she was playing a professional role in our project. For instance, the concept of time was important to her, and while she could have been impatient to get to her other commitments, she understood the importance of punctuality, commitment, and staying with the family for the duration of the scheduled visit. Representative of her professionalism, Asha mentioned:

This is what I, really ... have with you ... respecting the time, the appointment is so amazing ... to be on time. This is good ... you are professional because you do what you have to do, manage the time, stay with the family like an hour ... and when we try to schedule times with the family, it was so good.

Asha worked with the research team to coordinate and schedule meetings with the families. She was cognizant of and observed research protocols. At each meeting, she patiently explained to families what was being presented to them.

Asha also ensured that the research team understood the unique needs of each individual family, working with the team to ensure that each family received adequate support. She did not recoil from advocating (Yohani, 2013) for the families and capitalized on her position as a leader and catalyst for positive change. While participating with us in the project and outside her project responsibilities, Asha's advocacy role was evident when she shared the following:

Even until now I still communicate with this family when they have any question.... When they have anything they just call me to help .... If I can, I will do ... if I know something about the new arrival, I refer them. Just I tell them (*sic*) because I can't do everything for them.

She advocated for the families and sought opportunities to empower and connect families with the right resources as she noted this about our project: "I support the

community because if they don't know about this project that means they will not get any support from you.... Most of the refugees need to find resources."

Consequently, Asha took mentoring and empowering the families earnestly. She used the skills and knowledge acquired during the project to mentor newly arrived families. Specifically, she modelled the book reading strategies she had learned through our literacy project. Occasionally, she brought literacy resources and educational toys when she saw the need and was aware that parents could not easily access them. She shared that,

Because I go to the Walmart ... sometimes I find a lot of things for kids, really. Sometimes very good, helpful for this. She need ... books. For myself, if I found that maybe I can buy for her, ..., maybe it can help other kids too."

Yohani (2013) notes that connecting families to resources and information and easing families into resettlement in the United States is an empowerment strategy. Asha believed in empowering the families, and as researchers we felt empowered in the process. She made us all feel at ease during home visits and advised us on how to best approach and interact with families in a culturally appropriate manner. Yohani (2013) notes that cultural interpretation and awareness raising is a role that cultural brokers play—clarifying the norms and values and deciphering cultural differences that exist in groups. Cultural brokers foster insights that ensure respectful relationships between the researchers and the community while supporting the community through the integration process (Kowal et al., 2017; Shaw, 2014).

Shared experiences and culture give cultural brokers like Asha a vantage point to help the community overcome visible and perceived obstacles. Asha took her cultural broker role as a personal assignment indicating she derived her gratification from witnessing the positive outcomes within her

community. She used a strengths-based approach to support families, specifically those who struggle with limited English language. Asha's involvement was significant in retaining the families throughout the study.

## CONCLUSION

Cultural brokers possess the knowledge, skills, and community expertise that facilitate success in multicultural research. Asha exemplified this role through the cross-cultural position she held, making her a valuable resource to both the researchers and the community. Cultural brokers use both their personal and professional experiences to support families (Yohani et al., 2019) and research initiatives. This calls for researchers working with cultural brokers to trust them in facilitating community interactions. Having Asha in this role helped us grow in our knowledge of community needs, thus leading to a successful book reading project. Additionally, as a research team, we valued and acknowledged Asha's feedback which was useful in improving our relationship with the families as well as informing our practices and progress with the project.

Collaborating with cultural brokers in research entails being mindful of the evolving roles that both the researchers and cultural brokers take. Working as a team required the researchers and cultural broker to mutually understand their roles and responsibilities. Cultural brokers possess the necessary skills and have a mutual comprehension of their roles and responsibilities, permitting efficient management of authority (Shimpuku & Norr, 2012). Asha was cognizant of her culture and community needs while, as the research team, we enjoyed the advantage of resource accessibility. Hence, fostering mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration between cultural brokers and researchers is crucial.

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