

Vikki S. Katz, **Kids in the Middle: How Children of Immigrants Negotiate Community Interactions for Their Families**, New Brunswick, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2014, 224 pp., \$83.00 (hardcover), \$29.44 (paperback).

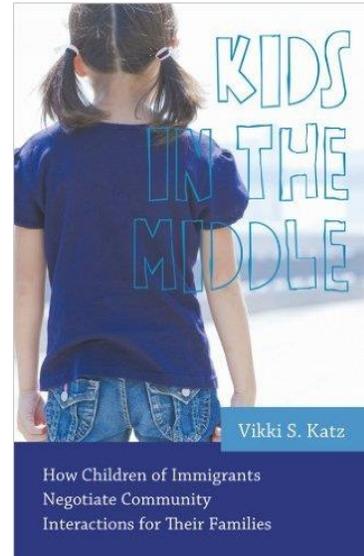
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Engaging like a novel but solid as a major academic work, the book Vikki S. Katz has produced delves into the lives of the many immigrant families that face the challenge of settling in a country with a different language and different cultural codes. ***Kids in the Middle: How Children of Immigrants Negotiate Community Interactions for Their Families*** focuses on how children of immigrants, by being the primary English-language speaker in the family, act as “brokers” or intermediaries of their parents, facilitating their understanding and communication with a new community and its social, health-care, and educational institutions.

The book focuses on Latino immigrants in greater Crenshaw, an urban community of South Los Angeles, California, but this study can be applied to the experiences of any immigrant group. Although not developed very explicitly in theoretical terms, Katz’s perspective challenges the typical top-down socialization process from parents to children. Instead, the author proposes that children influence their parents’ introduction into a new environment, an idea that could be applied to other phenomena, such as children’s influence on technology adoption and understanding in any family.

Children’s brokering activities is a relevant and rising phenomenon among immigrant families and an everyday experience in the institutions with which they interact. As Katz describes in her book, more than 60% of immigrant children in the U.S. have at least one parent who needs help navigating in an English-speaking environment. Thus, this compelling book—written in a friendly and engaging language for the general public—is a must-read not only for academics in various fields of the social sciences but also for policy makers, teachers, health-care providers, social service workers, and any professional who interacts with these families and needs to understand the complexities of their experiences and requirements.

By relying on a four-year ethnographic study, this book integrates interviews with parents, children, and professionals who interacted with them, observations of exchanges that took place in institutional sites (e.g., clinics, WIC, and schools), and a randomized telephone survey of 600 residents of the community. The depth of this research allowed taking a nuanced and cautious approach that delves into the opportunities but also the problems and challenges of children’s brokering activities, which is one of the main contributions and strengths of this book.



Organized in seven chapters, the book begins with an overview of the children's brokering phenomenon and its complexities and relevance, and sets out the arguments that are developed throughout the book. The next chapters are hierarchically organized. Chapter 2 describes the context in which these families develop their interactions. Greater Crenshaw is a community that has experienced several demographic transitions in the past decades and is currently populated by African Americans and Latinos who have to share the space and the public service institutions that serve the area. The chapter describes the racial tensions and the struggles for access to the limited health-care and social services in the community.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the family-system level. Chapter 3 introduces significant cases of child brokers and their families, such as the case of Luis, an 11-year-old boy who has a severely epileptic younger brother and helps his parents who migrated from Mexico 15 years ago to connect and communicate with social and health-care services to treat his brother's medical condition. By presenting different cases, Katz explains which children are more likely to become brokers and why. For instance, girls and the eldest child are usually more likely to assume that role. Chapter 4 shows how interactions among family members shape children's brokering activities and strategies. For example, proactive parents who asked for help among other Latino neighbors when needed molded more confident children who developed strategies for their interactions, including the use of approaches learned at school to understand new words by context or relying on media to compensate for their lack of knowledge.

This chapter also suggests that child brokers potentially provide access to social networks or "bridges" to local institutions, other parents in the school, or members in the community. However, the results showed that children's brokering was more likely to fortify strong ties among extended family members or help build social trust among the Latino community rather than develop connections to weaker ties such as nonimmigrant neighbors, which could help them navigate the community and the U.S. system.

Chapters 5 and 6 describe the challenging interactions with health-care institutions, social services, and schools. Although, in theory, families' connections to these institutions would provide access to information and opportunities, the study shows that these benefits were hard to obtain because resources were scarce and professionals were overstrained, particularly in the health-care and social service areas. In addition, the interviews revealed that children's brokering posed great challenges for these professionals. Although they were grateful that they could rely on children's assistance in the absence of formal interpreters, they were also concerned about the quality of the service because the children had to manage complex and sometimes serious information, and some meaning might get lost through their interpretation. The relationship with schools was also challenging. Although schools are powerful socialization agents that provide knowledge about U.S. language and cultural codes, Katz found that many times children's effort as helpers in their families was at the expense of their own success at school, and teachers were not aware of the extra burdens these children had at home. The final chapter summarizes the results of the research project and suggests policy initiatives to provide effective resources that address the needs of these immigrant families.

In summary, the main argument of the book proposes that these children are useful resources for introducing their families into American life. However, this process is challenging, and sometimes children's brokering efforts may be at the expense of their own options and possibilities. Although the book does not include a fully developed theoretical approach to study children's brokering processes, previous literature and theory are consistently intertwined in the analyses to shed light on the empirical findings. In addition, previous studies have explored this phenomenon in school settings and health-care settings or in relation to media, technology, or politics, but this study focuses on the family as a system and shows the interconnection among different spheres by observing and interviewing other members of the household, school teachers, and providers in social and health-care institutions. Finally, Katz has the ability to present theory, case studies, and findings in an engaging way that makes this topic relevant and comprehensible not only for academics but also for people who interact with immigrant families and child brokers on a daily basis.