Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Silence: An Analysis of Talking as a Cultural Practice

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Be a craftsman in speech that thou mayest be strong, for the strength of one is the tongue, and speech is mightier than all fighting.

—Maxims of Ptahhotep, 3400 B.C.E.

Speech is civilization itself. The word, even the most contradictory word, preserves contact—it is silence which isolates.

—Thomas Mann, The Magic Mountain

He who knows does not speak. He who speaks does not know.

—Lao Tzu, The Way of Lao Tzu

Misfortune stems from the mouth.

—Chinese proverb

A long article (Lubman 1998) appearing recently in the San Jose Mercury News described a problem that California educators are struggling to solve. According to the report, colleges and universities with large numbers of East Asian and East Asian American students are concerned that although many of these students earn very high grades, they do not participate actively in the academic community. The problem, in the eyes of some faculty and administrators, is that East Asian students often do not talk in class and this is a pressing concern because students “need to express themselves” to become “independent thinkers.” The article focuses on a variety of interventions to increase the talking of East Asian students in the hope of making them “better” thinkers.

The problem here is one of difference—in this case, a difference among students in their willingness and ability to talk in classes and seminars. A careful analysis of the “talking problem” is useful in its own right, but it also is signifi-
cant because America's diverse and multicultural communities are increasingly likely to encounter issues and debates that have a structure very similar to this one. These problems will result from a clash in cultural practices, and those involved often may assume that their own practices are natural while those of others in their schools and workplaces are somehow unnatural. Or they may believe that their practices are good, proper, moral, or advanced, while the other practices are bad, deficient, immoral, or backward. What typically will be obscured in these clashes is that the so-called deficient or unsophisticated practices in question often are aspects of complex cultural systems that have their own histories, philosophies, institutions, and ways of life. Moreover, at first sight what will be even less visible is that one's own practices are not natural or inevitable but are in fact the particular results of cultural commitments and ways of life that are not universally held and practiced. For the California educators, silence connotes passivity, slowness, confusion, mental inactivity, or perhaps a type of social loafing, while talking is the very signature of engagement and mental life or power. From some non-Western perspectives, however, silence can connote truthfulness, attentiveness, and sincerity, while talking can connote a lack of respect or lack of thoughtfulness.

Speech, verbal expression, and debate occupy vitally important places in much of Western and particularly European American education as valued practices in themselves and also as tools to enhance thinking. The widely observed silence of many East Asian students—including many who have grown up in America—is a problem for educators who want to teach their students what they believe to be the right things in the right way and would like students to gain the most from their classroom experiences. With nothing but good intentions, American teachers actively urge these students to participate more, to contribute more, and to talk more. Yet is talking always good, and does it necessarily promote better thinking? Is the fact that many East Asian students are quiet in the classroom setting a problem that needs to be fixed?

Humans talk. Being able to use language distinguishes humans from other living creatures, and the ability to talk is the unique and universal nature of human animals. Talking is undeniably one of the most important forms of communication, one of the best avenues to thinking, and one of the most common forms of expression. Yet talking is not an automatic response to the sound of another voice or to the internal pressure of an unexpressed thought. Talking, like many seemingly mundane social acts, is a culturally saturated activity. The ways in which people talk are socially shaped and shared and entail the incorporation of culture-specific models (Bruner 1996; D'Andrade 1990, 1995; Fiske et al. 1998; Quinn and Holland 1987; Shore 1996; Shweder 1991). These cultural models are bundles of ideas and practices, many of them tacit, about why to talk, how to talk, when to talk, to whom to talk, and toward what end. Striking variation in these cultural models among Americans—associated with socially significant categories such as ethnic group, region of the country, class, and gender—poses further challenges to the effective functioning of diverse groups in schools and workplaces. Moreover, the example of cultural diversity in the meanings and
practices of talking can illuminate how much of the cultural specificity of everyday action—including the most simple and seemingly straightforward of actions—goes unseen, and how acknowledgment of this diversity can be an important step in mutual engaging and accommodating cultural differences.

TALK—CHEAP OR DEAR, Plain or Fancy, Necessary or Risky?

Cultural contexts vary in their prevalent models of talking and silence and how they are woven into the practice of everyday life. How people make sense of each other’s habits of talking depends on these models, which include the reasons for speaking and the value of speaking. As Austin (1962) has established, utterances have various functions besides conveying information, and these functions depend on the context. Talking in some cultural contexts has a generally positive meaning and is thought to be a sign of power and control (as in the chapter epigraphs) and an art that requires skill and practice. In other contexts, not talking or silence carries positive connotations and is regarded as a sign of respect and attentiveness or as a way of controlling what goes on (Giles, Coupland, and Wiemann 1992; Marsella 1993). Even a cursory review of the literature on the practices of talking and not talking reveals a surprising diversity of views and underscores the necessity of understanding the meanings of talking and silence that are common in a given sociocultural context. A given act of talking or remaining silent can be constructed and responded to in any number of ways.

In many American contexts, speaking one’s mind often is synonymous with being a person. One of the most obvious roots of this understanding is the Cartesian notion of the person, which emphasizes thinking as the very core of human existence. As Descartes (1993 [1637]) declared, “I am a substance the whole nature or essence of which is to think.” Thinking with regard to talking has been a Western preoccupation at least since the time of the ancient Greeks. Homer repeatedly emphasizes debate as a necessary skill (Nakamura 1964–85; Nisbett et al. 2001). Not everyone communicates their thoughts easily, and how much Americans talk varies tremendously among individuals, groups, and regions. Yet along with the freedom to choose one’s government and religion, in America the right to speak one’s mind, should one so desire, is protected as an absolute birthright. Speech is part and parcel of America’s democratic traditions, and speakers have a responsibility to exercise their rights to communicate what is on their mind. Moreover, owing to the importance of speech in representing and mediating personhood and the world, speech often is assumed to be a reflection of true knowledge and true underlying meanings, thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Thus, in many American contexts, the assumption is that words can be taken at face value, and that lying, or saying something other than what one means, is widely regarded as hypocritical or immoral. Further, those who do not speak their minds are at fault if they are misunderstood or ignored. In American contexts, talking becomes interwoven with speaking the truth, with the mean-
ings and practices of freedom, with individual rights, and with expression and personhood; it becomes cemented as a foundational and uncontested good.

The act of talking also can have significant artistic, social, and entertainment functions. Carroll (1988), for example, contends that for many French speakers, talking, especially in conversation with another, is taken very seriously. The ideal conversation, she writes, would “resemble a perfect spider’s web: delicate, elegant, brilliant, of harmonious proportions, a work of art” (Carroll 1988, 25). Talking also is an important aspect of personhood in many Arab contexts and is said to require mubalaqha, which Almaney and Ahwan (cited in Smith and Bond 1999) translate as “exaggeration.” According to this practice, if statements are not made in an exaggerated form, they will not be believed, and listening may even infer the opposite. Smith and Bond (1999) note that misunderstanding the role of exaggeration in impression management figures prominently in conflicts between America and countries of the Middle East. Still other analyses reveal that a great emphasis is placed on the spoken word in some African and African American contexts as well. According to the African concept of nommo, for example, the word is the life force, and once something is put into words it is believed to be binding and to have a creative power. Smitherman (1994, 8) contends that in many African American contexts, highly verbal talkers are respected and valued, as is the “skillful use of rappin’, lyin’, signifyin’, testifyin’, playin’, and dozens of other verbal rituals.”

While talking is essential and natural in some contexts and situations, in others talking is tied to a different repertoire of cultural models in which verbal reserve and silence are virtuous and good. Smith and Bond (1999) report that in Finland, for example, silence is the valued skill. Silence conveys attentiveness and encouragement to the speaker and is a highly valued response. In Japanese communication practices, instead of assuming that the speaker has the responsibility to speak directly and convey what is on his or her mind, the major responsibility is placed on the listener, who should be as empathic as possible, precisely so that the speaker does not have to communicate ideas and opinions too explicitly. Being a person in many Japanese contexts is tied more to cultivating omoiyari, or sympathy, than to speaking one’s mind. Listening and not talking are highly valued as ways of demonstrating sympathy and trying to understand what others are feeling. When these types of ideas about talking prevail, words are less likely to be taken at face value and meaning is to be inferred rather than conveyed. While straight talking is a good way to convey one’s meanings in many Western contexts, indirectness is a powerful theme of Japanese life, and silence facilitates this indirectness.

When silence is appreciated and valued with this perspective on talking, other forms of communication become important. The Japanese term ishin denshin, for example, marks the culturally significant idea of “an immediate communication between two minds which does not need words” (Morsbach 1987, 202). Indeed, the closer individuals are assumed to be, the more they are thought to rely on nonverbal communication that relies on inferences from cues of gesture and tone (Azuma 1986; Clancy 1986). Yan (1987), in characterizing
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Chinese communication, says that communication is viewed as a process in which people first try to understand others, then try in turn to be understood by them. Gao, Ting-Toomey, and Gudykunst (1996) claim that in China, only a privileged few are believed to be skillful in talking and that as a consequence talking is not a primary path to self-identity or achieving individual needs and goals.

While the source, nature, and distribution of these differences in approaches to talking is a fascinating set of problems currently being addressed and investigated by linguists and anthropologists, here we are interested in the wide-ranging psychological implications of these differences. Talking is a perfect example of a human action that is full of meaning and cannot be understood without regard to particular and intertwined sets of local cultural, historical, and institutional representations and practices. In the course of tracing the meaning of talking in a given cultural context, one finds an intricate knot of meanings and practices, all of which recruit and implicate each other. In one cultural tradition, talking is powerfully associated with notions of individuality, freedom, equality, democracy, reason, intelligence, and honesty. In yet other cultural traditions, the act of talking is intricately bound with notions of relationship, hierarchy, status, face, empathy, and with conceptions of immaturity and carelessness as well. As will become apparent, for nontalkers to become talkers as the sole solution to what is perceived to be a problem is not always a simple matter.

CULTURAL MEANINGS OF TALKING

Talking serves various functions. Two of the most commonly discussed functions of talking are the expression of thoughts and ideas and communication with others. As talking makes up an important part of people’s social lives, however, its functions are more than just expression and communication, and its meaning expands because talking always implicates the self and the other. The meaning of talking should be affected by the concept of the self, because the act of talking involves projecting one’s thoughts and ideas into the world. The meaning of talking also should be affected by the concept of the relationship, because talking functions as a tool of connecting and maintaining connectedness among people. Thus, to the extent that the concepts of self and relationship vary from one society to another, what the act of talking means also should differ across cultures.

Models of Self and Relationship

A cultural analysis takes into account the core cultural ideas, social representations, and background understandings relevant to talking, as well as those practices and institutions—from the official and formal to the local and everyday—within which talking takes place. One of the most important tacit understandings within this net of ideas and practices is what it means to be a “good”
or "proper" person (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Markus, Mullally, and Kitayama 1997). In many cultural contexts of the United States, the individual is understood and practiced as a separate or distinct entity whose behavior is determined by some amalgam of internal attributes. The cultural model of the independent person is one of the most prevalent models in North America, reflected in the rational actor of game theory, the reasonable person of the legal system, and the authentic self of most psychological theorizing. This model of a person holds that: the person is a stable, autonomous, "free" entity; he or she possesses a set of characteristic, identifying, and self-defining attributes—preferences, motives, goals, attitudes, beliefs, and abilities—that are the primary forces that enable, guide, or constrain behavior; individuals take action oriented toward the expression of their opinions and beliefs, realization of their rights, and achievement of their goals; and finally, that the individual often regards relationships as competing with personal needs and considers the expectations of others and obligations to others as interfering with personal goals (for full discussion of these and other cultural commitments of individualism see Fiske et al. 1998). Talking clearly is important in cultural contexts where this model of the person prevails. Talking is an act that defines and affirms the American self because it is one way in which internal thoughts and feelings can be most directly and clearly expressed.

In many cultural contexts, however, the person commonly is understood not as an independent entity but primarily a relational entity. In models of the self that are prevalent in many East Asian contexts, including China, Japan, Korea, and South Asia, the relationship has a type of moral primacy and the person is viewed as connected with others (Triandis 1989; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Shweder and Bourne 1984). These cultural models of the person place greater stress than individualist models on social and relational concepts such as empathy, reciprocity, belonging, kinship, hierarchy, loyalty, honor, respect, politeness, and social obligation. Typically in these contexts, social relationships, roles, norms, and group solidarity are more fundamental to social behavior than self-expression. This model holds that a person is a flexible, connected entity who is bound to others; participates in a set of relationships, groups, and institutions that are the primary forces that enable, guide, and constrain actions; conforms to relational norms and responds to group goals by seeking consensus and compromise; often regards personal beliefs and needs as secondary to norms and relationships (Fiske et al. 1998). Interdependent theories of the person and interdependent constructions and models of the world associated with them have powerful consequences for the analysis and practice of talking and silence. When others and relations with others are focal, words perhaps are more easily constructed as weapons and their potentially harmful consequences more evident. The expressive function of talking will be more salient in places and situations where the self is viewed primarily as independent. In cultural contexts where it is important to construct the self as interdependent, the communicative or relational function of talking will be emphasized.

In an initial explanation of these hypothesized differences in the cultural
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meanings of talking, a survey that included the open-ended question, "Why do you think the ability to speak is important/unimportant?" was administered to comparable college student samples from a Korean cultural context (where the self is represented to be more interdependent), and to an American cultural context (where the self is represented to be more independent).

Participants overall generated a fairly similar list of responses in that the majority of both groups thought the ability to speak is important because it "allows us to communicate" and "allows us to express." Yet the survey showed large cross-cultural differences in which of these two responses were emphasized, and even larger differences in how participants focused on subtle aspects of these responses.

Fifty-two percent of Korean participants and 62 percent of American participants thought that the ability to speak is important because of communication. Similarly, 48 percent of Korean participants and 42 percent of American participants thought that the ability to speak is important because of expression. Yet these groups differed a great deal in what they thought was the content of expression or communication. The majority of Korean participants (61 percent) indicated that to speak because of expression or communication with others is important (for example, "to communicate in order to maintain and improve relationships with other people"); "communications to influence and convince other people"); "to let my thoughts be communicated to others and to learn about other people's thoughts"), whereas only 25 percent of American participants mentioned others in their responses. Moreover, Korean participants also listed more relational responses more often than their American counterparts. Korean participants thought it was important to speak because it helps us "to understand other people" (21 percent vs. 4 percent), "to ease relationships" (14 percent vs. 0 percent), or "to cooperate with others" (7 percent vs. 0 percent).

In contrast, the majority of American participants (51 percent) thought the communication or expression functions are important because they convey personal ideas, thoughts, and feelings (for example, "language serves to give us signifiers for our abstract ideas. It is a tool, and can be used by nearly anybody to express thoughts, ideas, and values"); "a medium of thought. It is a way to express ideas and feelings within the mind"); and "we can express our innermost ideas and desires in a way that is unique to our species"), whereas only 21 percent of Korean participants mentioned such themes. In addition, American participants (8 percent) also mentioned "help learning" significantly more than did Korean participants (0 percent). American participants (19 percent) tend to mention "to express oneself" somewhat more than Korean participants (9 percent), although this cultural difference was not statistically significant.

These results support the idea that people engaged in cultural contexts or situations where the focus primarily is on the individual may invoke different models of talking. People may view the purpose of talking as the expression of one's ideas and thoughts. Yet people engaging in cultural contexts or situations where the emphasis is more on the person as relational or interdependent may tend to see the purpose of talking as connecting the self with others.

When people are relatively more concerned about the recipients of talking
and cast talking as a relational activity, they may be relatively more aware of the impact talking can have on others. Talking has many more negative connotations in East Asian cultural contexts than in American cultural contexts (Kim 2000b). A popular Korean proverb echoing Lao Tzu’s maxim (quoted in the chapter epigraph) and referring to people who are big talkers says, “The empty carriage makes a lot of noise.” The act of talking thus is associated with a lack of wisdom and immaturity and not with intelligence and better thinking, as it is in American cultural contexts (Kim 2000b; Markus, Kitayama, and Heiman 1996).

Some historians argue that America has its roots in ideas and in documents that reflect these ideas and can be viewed predominantly as a culture of ideas and the expression of these ideas (Angell 1999). Talking occupies a special position among other human actions in these cultural contexts because talking defines a person and is a culturally resonant and significant action. Freedom of speech is the first and foremost right a person should be able to enjoy in the American cultural context. Forty-seven different talk shows currently are on television, and talking—expressing one’s ideas and opinions—perhaps has become the predominant American cultural activity.

In contrast, individuals from cultural contexts where interdependent models of the self are more prevalent will tend to define themselves with their social positions and roles (Ip and Bond 1995; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Markus, Mullally, and Kitayama 1997). According to Confucian thinking (fostered in many Chinese policies, practices, and institutions), one’s actions should be guided by the person’s place in social order. Since people need to position themselves in a hierarchy and perform their roles, talking thus is determined by the nature of one’s relationship and position in the hierarchy. In public conversation or in conversation with those outside one’s family and friends, the expression of one’s own ideas, opinions, and feelings is expected to attend to these status differences and reveal a concern with protecting the face of the conversation partner (Bond and Lee 1981; Gao, Ting-Toomey, and Gudykusen 1996). By remaining silent, one refrains from imposing one’s thoughts and feelings on others and thereby constraining the nature of the relationship.

Not everyone is allowed to talk in many East Asian settings; people need to be recognized to voice their opinions. Typically, recognition is a consequence of experience, education, or power position. According to Gao, Ting-Toomey, and Gudykusen (1996), a “spoken” voice is synonymous with seniority, authority, experience, knowledge, and expertise. Given that one of the functions of talking is the expression of an individual’s thoughts and ideas, this act of distinguishing and asserting one’s own ideas can be seen as an act of independence and self-promotion. By talking, the talker claims power and demands the right to be heard. Thus, the right to talk means the person is in a social position in which the person can demand the right. Historically, in many cultures, the right or standing to talk has been given to people who are higher up on the hierarchy through age, class, or merit. A king could initiate talking, but his subject could not unless the right to talk is given by the king. A master had the standing to talk, but not an apprentice who had not yet acquired the wisdom to share.
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Thus, talking represents individuals' power, and equal opportunity to talk in a group represents the egalitarian nature of the group dynamic. Talking also is an act that can attenuate hierarchy. When and where this type of egalitarian ideology is shared and valued, talking and the right to talk, regardless of any potential differences in hierarchy, will be cherished. In American cultural contexts where the core ideology includes social equality, for example, the right to talk is highly valued: it is simultaneously a manifestation and an instrument of freedom. Where the ideology of social equality is not such a dominant cultural theme, or is emphasized to a lesser degree, freedom of expression will not be a particularly significant activity. Indeed, in many East Asian cultural contexts, talking is merely one of many social actions and different types of communication and may not occupy any special place in practical and intellectual tradition.

Some analyses of East Asian communication processes argue that because of the central importance of maintaining harmonious relations and honoring hierarchy, the processes of face saving and face negotiating are recognized in some situations to be more important than honest or truthful negotiation (for example, Gao, Ting-Toomey, and Gudykunst 1996). Being open, straightforward, or assertive in public East Asian situations rarely have any of the positive connotations of honesty, power, confidence, or competence they have in many American contexts. Instead, actions of this type can threaten the cohesion of relationships and even signal the bad character of the individuals involved (Tseng 1973). What appears as passivity or critical lack of assertiveness from an American viewpoint carries with it in many East Asian contexts a whole palette of highly positive associations, including intelligence, flexibility, managing face, cooperativeness, caring, and maturity.

Talking and Intelligence

Is talking a sign of intelligence or a sign of ignorance? The answer depends on how one defines intelligent thinking. As with the meanings of talking, the models of intelligent thinking also vary across cultures. In Western cultural traditions, for example, intelligent thinking often is defined as a linear and analytical reasoning relying on formal logic and explicit rules (Lebra 1993; Markus, Kitayama, and Heiman 1996; Nisbett et al. 2001). In East Asian cultural traditions, intelligent thinking often involves holistic thinking attending to relations among objects as well as relational thinking, in which listening to and talking on another's viewpoint are emphasized (Azuma 1994).

Different models of intelligent thinking implicate difference in the degree of importance of talking in thought processes. Psychological research has shown that the nature of the effect of verbalization largely depends on the type of task (see Ericsson and Simon 1993; Wilson 1994). Thought processes involved with linear and analytical reasoning are found to be easy to verbalize (Ericsson and Simon 1993; Schooler, Ohlsson, and Brooks 1993), and talking while thinking indeed can help to clarify the thought process (Hafner 1957; Ericsson and Simon...
1993; Loftus and Bell 1975). In other words, talking is quite compatible with analytical reasoning. Yet thought processes involved with insight (Schooler, Ohlsson, and Brooks 1993) or holistic thinking (Penney 1975) are found to be difficult to verbalize, and talking while thinking can hinder the thought processes (Schooler, Ohlsson, and Brooks 1993; Kim 2000a).

Another cultural difference with regard to intelligence is what different people may infer about someone from both the content and context of his or her speech. How well a person can reason in speech often gives good clues about how intelligent the speaker is. At the same time, how thoughtful and sensitive the speaker is regarding social surroundings and context also gives good hints about how intelligent he or she is. Sometimes, clues about the speaker gathered from both sources are compatible, but other times, these different sources may provide incompatible information about the speaker. When such incompatibility occurs, cross-cultural differences arise in which source is taken as more important in making inferences about the speaker's intelligence.

According to the classification proposed by Hall (1976) regarding language use, some cultures—such as American cultural contexts—tend to focus more on the content of a speech (called low-context culture). Other cultures—such as East Asian cultural contexts—tend to focus more on the context of a speech, such as who the speaker is and the particular setting of the speech (called high-context culture). In other words, a person probably should talk more and better in low-context cultures, but a person should talk more cautiously, paying attention to oneself and others, in high-context cultures to appear intelligent.

CULTURAL PRACTICES OF TALKING

Cultural meanings and collective representations about talking are embodied in common social practices through which collective beliefs implicitly are transmitted to people in the cultural contexts where the beliefs commonly are shared (Bruner 1990; Farr 1998). In social interactions and institutions, such as parenting and education practices, and interactions in workplaces, are core beliefs that guide which behaviors should be encouraged and which behaviors should be discouraged in order to maintain the integrity of the society. These principal beliefs and sentiments are products of collective consciousness (Moscovici 1993). Moreover, to the extent that differences in beliefs will occur from one community to another, differences in the social practices that implicate these beliefs also will occur. Thus, divergent cultural beliefs about talking also should be reflected in divergent social practices and interactions where talking is either encouraged or discouraged.

Talking in Parenting and Education

The purpose of parental and formal education is to cultivate beliefs, skills, and feelings to support particular cultural ways of understanding the world (Bruner
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If a worldview endorses talking as a positive act, and people believe that talking means assertiveness and intelligence, parents and teachers will encourage their children to practice their verbal skills to foster them to be expressive and articulate. If a worldview endorses silence and listening, however, and people think that silence means thoughtfulness and being considerate, parents and teachers will discourage their children from talking too much to make them serene and attentive to others.

A growing body of empirical evidence supports the idea that cultural patterns in parenting and educational practices related to talking generally are consistent with cultural meanings of talking. The importance of parenting is that through parenting and child-parent interactions, children learn such basic things as how to eat, how to sleep, and how to talk. Caudhill and Weinstein (1969) showed that Japanese middle-class mothers speak much less frequently to their young children than do their American counterparts. Also, Chinese preschool teachers see quietness as a means of control rather than passivity, and appreciate silence more than do American teachers (Iobin, Wu, and Davidson 1989). Comparisons of narratives by Minami and McCabe (1995) between Japanese and North American children showed that Japanese mothers asked their children to further describe their comments less than did American mothers. As a consequence of the less emphasized verbal interactions in East Asian cultural contexts as compared to European American cultural contexts, East Asian children are not as verbally active as their European American counterparts, even as early as at age seven months (Kagan, Kearsley, and Zelazo 1977; McCabe 1998; Minami 1994).

Given the cultural difference in parenting and in verbal behaviors of children even at a very young age, the often attempted changes in East Asian American students' ways of learning and participating in class might not be very effective when their ways of doing already are habitual. Cultural meanings often are "conventionalized" so that cultural ways of doing things reflect "implicit forms of affiliating with a culture that often go beyond what we know in an explicit form" (Bruner 1996, 153). These habitual ways of doing replete with cultural meanings are resilient to changes, and through institutionalized cultural habits provide consistency to a culture (Bruner 1996). Thus, once conventionalized, implicit meanings instilled through ways of doing do not cease their influence easily. By implicating acts of people rather than explicit beliefs of people, cultural influence therefore can be more stable and profound.

This cultural pattern of talking practices continues in more formal education. European and American educational practices regarding speech are founded on the idea that discussion and verbal activities have beneficial effects. Training for discussion is thought to be beneficial for developing students' social skills, logical thinking, confidence, and even citizenship (Backlund 1990; Thonssen and Gilmixon 1955; Peer 1936). Thus, verbal participation in class is an integral aspect of education in American cultural contexts, and in higher education, verbal participation often constitutes part of the student's grade.

In contrast, in East Asian cultural contexts, verbal participation of students during learning is not very important. Class is intended to be a time and place to
listen to what a teacher has to say, and good students are supposed to listen and absorb as much as they can. Talking in class often is frowned on by both instructors and other students, as it can disrupt the flow of the teaching and waste others' learning time by one's idiosyncratic viewpoint. The culturally good student is one who shows good listening, who takes in what the teacher says and who does not voice one's own opinions too hastily. If something is not clear, the student should listen more attentively, and the assumption is that it will become clear. The idea is that students are in class to hear what the expert—the teacher—has to say. In most East Asian cultural contexts, very little importance is attached to speaking skills, and instead the curriculum emphasizes listening skills, writing skills, and reading skills (Gao, Ting-Toomey, and Gudykunst 1996). As expressed by a Japanese graduate student, "before I can ask a question I have to ask myself, one, does this question need to be asked? and two, am I the right person to ask it?" The presumption here is that if someone more senior has not asked such a question, there is probably no need to ask it.

Owing to this difference in teaching and learning styles, students from East Asian cultural contexts who are being educated in an American system are thought to be somewhat "problematic," in spite of their generally successful performance in school (see Lubman 1998). How these students construe being a good student is apparently different from how American education expects a good student to be, and without engaging in the culturally important aspect of education—talking—East Asian students are sometimes called passive and seen as incapable of thinking for themselves rather than as thoughtful and mature. Thus, these students frequently are expected to alter their actions to conform to the American cultural ideal. This expectation of assimilation often exists without the recognition that what these students need to do is not as simple as just talking more, but actually changing their deeper cultural values and beliefs about how to be a good student and a good person.

Talking and Workplaces

The positive meaning of talking in America continues to be reinforced in work settings. In middle-class American workplaces, both bosses and employees are advised directly to communicate what is on one's mind. In addition to being direct and explicit, American speakers are schooled to be redundant, especially in formal presentations (tell them what you are going to say, tell them, and then tell them what you said). In sharp contrast, in many East Asian cultural contexts, the best communication is that which is contained, reserved, implicit, and indirect (Gao, Ting-Toomey, and Gudykunst 1996). Not to spell out everything and to leave a sufficient amount unspoken so that listeners can fill in and make inferences is crucial. Listening, however, should be active and done with full attentiveness. Leaving things unsaid leaves for "free advance and retreat" (Gao, Ting-Toomey, and Gudykunst 1996) and is the key to flexibility and harmonious intergroup relations.
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Many Americans complain that doing business with their East Asian counterparts is difficult because their intentions and goals are not expressed directly. Yet in the workplace, many Asians consider talk to be less important than other forms of communication. In one study of Chinese managers, for example, oral communication skills were seen as least important for prospective employees (Hildenbrandt 1988). Compared to American settings, feedback, challenging, questioning, and interrupting others are reduced or absent in managerial meetings (Lindsay and Dempsey 1985). Being assertive and outgoing are considered to be among the most positive and essential features to be a leader or to succeed in American business contexts (Peters 1987). In many work settings, being vocal is a trait necessary to leadership, and thus is an important factor in both hiring and promotion decisions. Expressing one’s ideas is listed in many American business books as one of the key traits.

Thus, even titles of many American business advice books, such as Talk Your Way to Success (Wilder 1986), Talk Your Way to the Top (Flaherty 1999), Everything You Need to Know to Talk Your Way to Success (Kaplan 1995), or I Wish I’d Said That: How to Talk Your Way Out of Trouble and into Success (McCallister 1994), emphasize the importance of talking in business success. One book suggests, “Don’t be afraid of the sound of your own voice, show off your expertise, offer your insight” (White 1995, 156).

This public advice is indeed taken in actual business practices. For example, in an incident that happened to an acquaintance of one of the authors, an applicant for a fashion designer job was not hired after an interview with the potential employer, and the explanation given by the interviewer was that the applicant appeared to be too shy. While the applicant, who is a Korean American, thought she was being appropriate and respectful in the situation, the interviewer thought her shy and passive, and hence, the cultural misunderstanding of the meaning of talking cost the applicant a job.

Another striking aspect of the incident was that even for those jobs for which verbal skill is not an essential ability, employers still want people who are outgoing and assertive. Being able to express one’s thoughts is a matter not only of ability but also personality, as an outgoing person is a “good” and likable person in American cultural contexts (Kim 2000b). As a consequence, individuals who do not share the tendency to express themselves are disadvantaged in decisions of hiring and promotion that make a difference in occupational success.

One of the most common complaints from Asian Americans is that they are notably absent at the higher levels of administration and managerial occupations, and that despite their relatively high education, there is a clear glass ceiling. Statistics regarding the numbers of Asian Americans in leadership indeed support this perception. One of the reasons for the glass-ceiling phenomenon seems to be that Asian Americans often are seen as passive and reserved, and hence lacking leadership (Takaki 1990). The perceived problem is that Asian Americans do not talk enough to make themselves stand out and show that they can lead—an effort that goes against their cultural ideals of thoughtful silence.
TALKING AND THINKING

The collectively represented meanings of talking shape social practices in a given cultural context, and through these practices also influence the psychology of individuals who participate in the cultural context. The cultural practices reinforce and foster certain psychological tendencies over others (Bruner 1996; Shweder 1991), and thus to develop those tendencies that are culturally reinforced is likely. If talking is important in a cultural context and encouraged in practices, talking is more likely to play an important role in the psychology of people. If talking is unimportant, and is not particularly encouraged or even discouraged, talking will play a less significant role in people’s psychology.

Thinking often has been studied in relation to talking in psychology, as thinking and language are considered to be closely connected with each other (for example, Ericsson and Simon 1993; Wierzbicka 1992). Yet the assumption behind studies that automatically bind talking and thinking as related aspects of psychology may be reflecting Western cultural assumptions regarding talking, rather than reflecting a universal psychological reality. Cultural differences in the meanings of the act of talking should lead to differences in how people think and how talking and thinking interact with each other. These differences also should be reflected in how much people rely on language when they are thinking, and the effect of talking should differ for people from different cultural contexts.

Talking has been closely related to thinking in Western cultural contexts (Whorf 1956; Wierzbicka 1992). Thought is believed to be internalized speech (Plato as shown in Miller 1981; Watson 1920). Since Ancient Greek civilization, as exemplified by the Socratic method, eloquence has been highly regarded, and the skill of debate was considered one of the most important skills for a man to have (Nisbett et al. 2001).

The connection between thinking and talking is weaker in many East Asian cultural traditions. Since ancient Chinese civilization, East Asians have believed that talking impairs higher-level thinking. Using the metaphor of water for mind, East Asians believe that only in its very serene state, or contemplative state, can mind clearly reflect the truth. In these contexts, talking is considered to be a disturbance that hinders people from understanding the truth (Markus, Kitayama, and Heiman 1996; Nakamura 1964–85; Needham 1962).

To examine the influence of cultural beliefs about talking and the actual effect of talking on thinking, the cultural variation of the effect of talking on thinking was examined (Kim 2000a). The research utilized the think-aloud method often used to gain access to people’s thought processes in psychology. In the procedure of thinking aloud, people are instructed to vocalize their internal thinking process as they occur. For example, as a person is working on a problem, 2 × 5 = ?, the procedure of thinking aloud would have the person say, “two times five equals ten” out loud concurrently as these thoughts enter his or her mind.
Engaging Cultural Differences

Obviously, this methodology is founded on the assumption that internal thinking processes are conscious, accessible, and easy to verbalize. Questioning the universality of this assumption, the research examined the effect of talking (that is, thinking aloud) on thinking, focusing on whether talking enhances, impairs, or does not affect cognitive problem solving. In the studies, East Asian American and European American participants were asked to think aloud as they were working on a standardized reasoning test, and their performance was measured as an indication of how talking affected their thinking.

The first study examined the basic question of whether or not cultural differences in beliefs about the effect of talking on thinking in East Asian and American cultural contexts are reflected in actual difference in cognitive performance of people from the respective cultural contexts. The results showed that while the overall performance did not differ between the two groups of participants, the impact of talking on each group’s performance differed greatly. Verbalization of the thought process significantly impaired the performance of East Asian Americans, whereas the same verbalization did not affect the performance of European Americans. These results demonstrated that psychological tendencies in how talking affects thinking indeed are consistent with the cultural assumptions about how talking and thinking are related.

The second study was conducted to understand the reasons for this cultural difference in the effect of talking on thinking. The study suggested and tested a possibility that the cultural difference in the effect of talking on thinking partly can be explained by the difference in the relative reliance on language in thinking for people from different cultural contexts. That is, different cultures could differ in their relative use of verbal versus nonverbal thinking. Verbal thinking is easier to talk aloud than nonverbal thinking because verbalization of thought requires only simple vocalization of the process that is already verbal. Yet with nonverbal thinking, talking aloud is a lot more taxing because verbalization of thought requires conversion of the thought into a verbal form before vocalization is possible. Building on this point, it was predicted that talking would hinder the thinking of East Asians because they are more likely to engage in nonverbal thinking, but that talking would not affect the thinking of European Americans because they are more likely to engage in verbal thinking. The second study tested this possibility by examining the effect of an articulatory suppression task—designed to suppress internal speech—in combination with the effect of thinking aloud on the thinking of people from different cultural contexts. The results showed that the degree to which people from the different cultural contexts use verbal thinking differs: European Americans were more likely to use verbal thinking, whereas East Asian Americans were less likely to use verbal thinking. In other words, talking was less likely to affect European Americans’ performance as much because they tended to use more verbal thinking that is easier to verbalize, but talking was more likely to impair East Asian Americans’ performance because they tended to use more nonverbal thinking that is more difficult to verbalize.

The findings from the studies illustrate two points that we would like to under-
score. First, cultural beliefs regarding the relationship between talking and thinking reflect the cultural realities in East Asian and European American contexts. The cultural beliefs are not only abstract beliefs, but also a reflection of the cultural realities. How people process information is not free or independent from the social and cultural contexts in which the processes take place, and therefore, can have quite divergent behavioral and social consequences. The results from this research support the idea of the social construction of even basic psychological processes. Second, a notable aspect of the findings is that the performance outcome of both verbal and nonverbal modes of thinking did not differ, showing that one mode of thinking is not necessarily superior to the other. Yet the effect of talking on thinking differed, countering the common American assumption that talking is good for thinking, and that encouraging someone to talk will make the person engage in better thinking. Even an identical act that is thought to lead to the same experience for everyone in fact may not be experienced as the same act by different actors. The act can have different meanings and effects on individuals depending on whether or not they are from cultural contexts where the cultural assumptions behind the act are represented and practiced.

The assumptions of how talking is related to thinking is culturally specific. The task of thinking aloud feels natural for people from cultural contexts where assumptions are shared, but feels unnatural and debilitating for people from cultural contexts where assumptions are not shared. Without recognizing the important and fundamental influence of cultural experiences on shaping people's psychology, one may easily overlook the deeper implications of the expectation of behavioral assimilation—such as that of active verbal participation in class—that sometimes can lead to negative and unforeseen consequences.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DIVERSITY

Talking as a Cultural Practice

As much as talking is a tool universally used for communication and expression in every culture, and language is one of the most distinctive aspects of human nature, the act of talking is a social and cultural act, and the meanings and practices of talking are as culturally diverse as any human acts. Psychological phenomena, such as the effect of talking on psychology, often are reflections of cultural values and beliefs, and hence, psychology cannot be separated meaningfully from practices or beliefs. Once society recognizes this interdependence between culture and psychology, to understand how closely related the issue of assimilation of psychology is to the issue of assimilation of cultural creed becomes easier. The act of talking is a practice replete with cultural meanings. Not unlike many other cultural practices, the practice of talking is intricately integrated with relevant cultural systems. Isolating talking from its appropriate cultural context limits a full appreciation of what talking means to people and how talking affects the minds of these individuals.
Engaging Cultural Differences

The cultural misunderstanding that talking is positive, desirable, and useful for everyone comes from the assumption of psychic unity (Bruner 1990; Shweder 1995) that considers talking as a universal and uniform phenomenon of humans, independent of sociality. By assuming the universality of the meaning and psychological effect of talking that might be only true in a particular cultural context, one also assumes the rightness of the particular meaning and the truthfulness of the effect, and hence the wrongness of other meanings and effects that deviate from such meaning. This assumption of psychic unity could lead not only to a theoretically limited understanding of psychology, but also to unfortunate practical implications in a multicultural world.

Psychology in a Multicultural World

The issue of talking and Asian American students dramatizes a crucial point concerning diversity in the growing multicultural world, especially in higher education settings. Without fully recognizing the cultural meanings of the act of talking, educators may problematize a tendency of students who do not hold the common cultural model, thereby creating and perpetuating the stereotype that Asian students are passive and uncreative thinkers. This example highlights the fact that developing a truly diverse university may involve incorporating diversity even with respect to pedagogical assumptions, such as the link between talking and thinking.

Even very common and basic acts and tasks imply culturally specific beliefs and assumptions. This idea leads to challenging questions about acculturation and one-way assimilation. Should East Asian students be encouraged to take debate or theater classes so as to become more comfortable with standing out and expressing oneself, or should mainstream educational principles be encouraged to reflect diversity in styles and conditions of thinking?

By assuming one way as the only way, society can privilege one meaning system against people who do not share the same meanings. The implications of this should be extended beyond the case of East Asian Americans and the issue of talking. We suggest that before the merit of a person is discussed, the first question to ask is how merit is judged. To what extent do the so-called objective criteria that constitute merit reflect culturally specific values and assumptions, and to what degree do the criteria systematically favor groups who share the dominant values and assumptions of the particular cultural context?

A society needs unifying assumptions and values to function as a unit, and to enforce a particular set of assumptions and values over others to some extent is necessary. If the enforcement of assumptions creates systematic privileging of certain groups over others, however, a multicultural society that values individual rights should raise the difficult question of whether individuals should assimilate to the existing assumptions, or whether the assumptions need to be questioned and modified to reflect the diverse needs and realities of individuals. If educators in California are concerned that East Asian and East Asian Ameri-
can students do not actively participate in the academic community, they should begin to question whether talking in class is necessarily beneficial for these students, and whether the students should be encouraged to talk more or be allowed the freedom to pursue learning in alternative ways.

One answer to this question might be that America is a place where the positive meaning of talking is assumed, and students who are learning in America should learn the American way of doing things, because this is ultimately beneficial for anyone who wants to excel in America. Another answer might be that whereas the lesson of talking is important, the lesson of silence and listening also is valuable, and hence, American educators should emphasize the positives from both sets of cultural beliefs and revise the unifying set of educational assumptions and values. Yet another answer might be that American educators should provide enough freedom for students to speak up and think and to stay silent and think as they see fit, and this value of freedom should be the unifying assumption of America.

This is a difficult question, and we are yet to figure out which answer is right or best. One thing to bear in mind is that considering these answers requires one to understand that the act of talking is a cultural practice, and that freedom of speech should not be pressure to speak. Freedom of silence might be no less fundamental a cultural right.

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