Beyond Silenced Voices

Class, Race, and Gender in United States Schools

REVISED EDITION

edited by
Lois Weis and Michelle Fine
Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction xi

Michelle Fine and Lois Weis

SECTION ONE
STRUCTURING EXCLUSIONS:
EDUCATIONAL POLICIES, POLITICS, AND PRACTICES

1 Segregation 50 Years after Brown: A Metropolitan Change
Gary Orfield and Changmai Lee 3

2 The Education Pipeline in the United States, 1970–2000:
Trends in Attrition, Retention, and Graduation Rates
Walter Haney, Lisa Abramit, George Madaus, Anne Wheelock,
Jing Miao, and Ilane M. Gruia 21

3 Reform as Redefining the Spaces of Schools:
An Examination of Detracking by Choice
Susan Yonezawa and Amy Stuart Wells 47

4 Hollowing the Promise of Higher Education:
Inside the Political Economy of Access to College
Janice L. Bloom 63

5 Subtractive Schooling, Caring Relations, and Social Capital
in the Schooling of U.S.-Mexican Youth
Angela Valenzuela 83
DIVERSITY—in gender, race, culture, social class, and sexuality—is increasingly the fact of life and at the same time, an important goal of schools in the United States. Many schools devote their resources to increase and accommodate diversity as they recognize the political and pedagogical virtue of diversity. Yet, diversity in classrooms does not always function well, as is the case with understanding how to accommodate diversity beyond representing different faces and experiences in the classroom. This chapter addresses an example of the challenges of diversity frequently found in classrooms in the United States.

In ethnically and racially diverse classrooms in the United States, teachers often note the silence of East Asian students. A newspaper article entitled “Some Students Must Learn to Question” (Lubman, 1998) describes this commonly perceived problem. The article claims that East Asian and East Asian American students do not participate verbally in class as much as instructors want them to, and this relative lack of verbal participation is a concern for educators. The problem, in the eyes of some faculty and administrators, is that East Asian students’ reluctance to speak up in class is a hurdle for them to become “independent thinkers” who can express themselves.

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 East Asian students who have grown up in America, is a problem for educators who, obviously, want to teach their students 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 drawing on their own implicit models of intelligence and education 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? In this chapter, we will step back a bit and consider various perspectives and some research on the purpose, function, and practices of talking in a variety of sociocultural contexts. Further, we will suggest that educators, supervisors, and managers engaged in systems that value and encourage talking might want to acknowledge and reflect on the fact that in other cultural systems, good thinking and good performance can be associated with verbal reserve.

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, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Quinn & 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, whom to talk to, and toward what end. Striking variation in these cultural models exists among Americans, variation that is associated with socially significant categories such as ethnic group, region of the country, social class, and gender. Such variation poses significant challenges to the effective functioning of diverse groups in schools and workplaces.

Talking is a perfect example of a human action that 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 some cultural traditions, 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, and empathy and also with conceptions of immaturity and carelessness. In the following sections of the chapter, we will compare two divergent perspectives on talking and examine their implications. More specifically, and more practically, it will become apparent why it is not always a simple matter for “nontalkers” to become “talkers” and why this solution to the “problem” is only one of several that might be endorsed.

CULTURAL MEANINGS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF TALKING

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 that 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. 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.

As talking makes up an important part of the social lives of people, it 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 own thoughts and ideas into the world. The meaning of talking should also 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 the self and of relationship vary from one society to another, what the act of talking means should also differ across cultures.

TALKING, THE SELF, AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

A cultural analysis takes into account the core cultural ideas, the social representations, and the background understandings relevant to talking, as well as those practices and institutions within which talking takes place. One of the most important tacit understandings within this net of ideas and practices is what it means to a "good" or "proper" person (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus, Mullally, & 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. This model of a person holds (1) that the person is a stable, autonomous, "free" entity; (2) that 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; (3) that individuals take action that is oriented toward the expression of their opinions and beliefs, the realization of their rights, and the achievement of their goals; and (4) 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). In many middle-class cultural contexts, talking is an act that defines and affirms the American self because it is one of the ways in which internal attributes can be most directly and clearly expressed.

In these cultural contexts, speaking one's mind is often synonymous with being a person. Thinking and talking have been Western preoccupations at least since the time of the ancient Greeks (Nakamura, 1964/1985; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Of course not everyone communicates their thoughts easily, and even within the U.S. cultural context, there is tremendous individual, group, and regional variation. For instance, women in the United States who generally pay more attention to relational aspects of themselves and are less concerned about asserting independence are also less verbally expressive in public settings than men. Yet along with the freedom to choose one's government and one's religion, 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. In American contexts, talking becomes interwoven with speaking the truth, with the meanings and practices of freedom, with individual rights, and with expression and personhood. It becomes enshrined as a foundational and uncontested good.

There are, however, other models of a person, and with different models, the act of talking takes on different meanings. In many cultural contexts, the person is commonly 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 & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). These cultural models of the person place greater stress than individualist models on social and relational concepts such as 'empathy,' 'reciprocity,' 'belongingness,' 'kinship,' 'hierarchy,' 'loyalty,' 'honors,' '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 of the person holds the idea that a person is (1) a flexible, connected entity who is bound to others; (2) participates in a set of relationships, groups, and institutions that are the primary forces that enable, guide, or constrain actions; (3) conforms to the relational norms and responds to group goals by seeking consensus and compromise; and (4) often regards personal beliefs and needs as secondary to norms and relationships (Fiske, et al., 1998). Interdependent models of the person have powerful consequences for the analysis and practice of talking and silence. When others and relations with others are focal, words are perhaps more easily constructed as weapons and their potentially harmful consequences more evident. It is likely, for example, that in places and situations where it is important to view the self as primarily independent, the expressive function of talking will be more salient, whereas in the cultural contexts where it is important to construct the self as interdependent, the relational function of talking will be emphasized.

In communication practices in East Asian cultural contexts, for example, instead of assuming that the speaker has the responsibility to speak directly and to convey what is on one's 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 (Gudykunst, Gao, & Franklyn-Stokes, 1996). Listening and not hastily talking are highly valued as ways of demonstrating sympathy and trying to understand what others are feeling. When these kinds 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, it is indirectness that is a powerful theme of East Asian life (Gudykunst, et al., 1996; Hall, 1976), 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 "ihibi denshin, for example, marks the culturally significant idea of "an immediate communication between two minds which does not need words" (Morsbach, 1987, p. 202). And 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 (Clancy, 1986). Yan (1987) in characterizing 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 skilful in talking and that, as a consequence, talking is not a primary path to self-identity or achieving an individual goal.

Some analyses of East Asian communication processes argue that because of the central importance of maintaining harmonious relations and honoring the hierarchy, the processes of face saving and face negotiating are explicitly recognized in some situations to be more important than honest or truthful negotiation (e.g., Gao, et al., 1996). Being open, straightforward, or assertive in public East Asian situations rarely has 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 can 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, power, and maturity (Gao, et al., 1996; Giles, Coupland, & Wiemann, 1992).

In an initial explanation of these hypothesized differences in the cultural meanings of talking, a survey (Kim & Markus, 2002) 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 of participants thought the ability to speak is important because it “allows us to communicate” and “allows us to express.” There were, however, large cross-cultural differences in which of these two responses was emphasized, and even larger differences in how participants focused on subtle aspect 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. However, 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 it is important to speak because of expression or communication with others (e.g., “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 response. 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% vs. 4%),” “to case relationships (14% vs. 0%)” or “to cooperate with others (7% vs. 0%).”

In contrast, the majority (51 percent) of American participants thought the communication or the expression functions are important because they convey personal ideas, thoughts, and feelings (e.g., “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 Korean participants did (0 percent). American participants (19 percent) responded, “to express oneself” somewhat more than Korean participants (9 percent) did, although the difference was not significant.

The results supported the idea that people engaged in cultural contexts or situations where the focus is primarily on the individual may invoke different models of talking. They may view the purpose of talking as the expression of one’s ideas and thoughts. However, 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.

Talking and Intelligence

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

One cultural difference in what the act of talking means in relation to intelligence might exist in what kind of inference people from different cultural contexts make about a person from both the content and the context of the person’s talking. How well a person can reason as reflected in the content of a speech can often give good clues about how intelligent the speaker is. At the same time, how thoughtful and sensitive the person is about social surroundings as reflected in the context in which the speaker is engaged in talking can also give good hints about how intelligent the speaker is. Sometimes, the clues about the person gathered from both sources are compatible, but other times, these different sources can give out incompatible information about the person. When this incompatibility occurs, there seems to be cross-cultural difference in which source is taken as the more important one over the other in making inference about the speaker’s intelligence. People in U.S. cultural contexts often evaluate those who are quick and enthusiastic in their verbal responses more favorably than those who are quieter. For example, Swann and Rentfrow (2001) found that those who score higher on the BLIRT (the Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Responsiveness Test)—who are verbally quick and responsive—are also rated as more intelligent and interesting than are those who are not as verbally responsive. Swann and Rentfrow (2001) also show that European American students have the general tendency to score higher on the BLIRT than East Asian American students. While these
researchers did not look at any cultural differences in links between talking and intelligence, it seems plausible that the evaluation of a person's intelligence based on verbal responsiveness would differ as well cross-culturally.

Moreover, according to the classification proposed by Hall (1976) regarding language use, some cultures, such as American, tend to focus more on the context of a speech (called "low-context" culture). Other cultures, such as East Asian, tend to focus more on the context of the speech, such as who the speaker is and the particular setting of the speech (called "high-context" culture). Thus to appear intelligent in a low-context culture, a person should talk more and better than others, while in a more high-context culture, the appearance of intelligence is contingent on talking more cautiously and paying attention to the relation between oneself and others to appear "intelligent."

**Cultural Practices of Talking**

Cultural meanings and social representations about talking are embodied in common social practices, and through the practices, the collective beliefs are implicitly transmitted to people in the cultural contexts where the beliefs are commonly shared (Bruner, 1990). In social interactions and institutions, such as parenting and education practices, and interactions in work places, there 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 there are differences in beliefs from one community to another, there will be differences in the social practices that implicate these beliefs. Thus, the divergent cultural beliefs about talking should also be reflected in divergent social practices and interactions where talking is either encouraged or discouraged.

**Talking in Education**

Differences in cultural patterns of talking are also evident in more formal education. For example, many Western cultural contexts are grounded in Socratic traditions, and thus the private and public questioning of widely accepted knowledge and generating of one's own ideas are highly valued (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). European and American educational practices regarding speech reflect the idea that discussion and verbal activities will facilitate the achievement of these goals. Training for discussion is thought to be beneficial for developing students' social skills, logical thinking, confidence, and even citizenship (Backlund, 1990; Thonssen & Gildinson, 1995). Consequently, verbal participation in class is an integral aspect of education in middle-class American cultural contexts, and in higher education, verbal participation often constitutes part of the students' grade.

In contrast, in East Asian cultural contexts, verbal participation of students during learning is often 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 the essential knowledge (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Often, verbal participation of a student in class is frowned upon by both instructors and other students as it can disrupt the flow of the teaching and "waste" others' learning time by one's idiosyncratic point of view. 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, et al., 1996). As expressed by a 
Japanese graduate student, "Before I can ask a question I have to ask myself, (1) 
does this question need to be asked? and (2) 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.

Because of this difference in teaching and learning styles in East Asian 
cultural contexts, students from East Asian cultural contexts who are being 
educated in an American education system are thought to be somewhat 
"problematic," in spite of their generally successful performance in school 
(e.g., 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 seen as passive and incapable of thinking 
for themselves, rather than as thoughtful and mature. Thus, these students 
are frequently 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 have to do is not as simple as "just talking more" but 
actually changing a dense network of cultural values and beliefs about how to 
be a good person.

Talking in 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 to directly 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, et al., 1996). It is crucial not to spell out 
everything and to leave a sufficient amount unspoken so that the listener can 
infer. Listening, however, should be active and done with full attentiveness. 
Leaving things unsaid makes possible "free advance and retreat" (Gao, et al., 
1996) and is the key to flexibility and harmonious interpersonal relations.

Many Americans complain that when doing business with their East 
Asian counterparts, it is difficult to know their intentions and goals because 
they are not expressed directly. Yet in the workplace, many Asians consider 
almost 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 oth-
ers are reduced or absent in managerial meetings (Lindsay & 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 deci-
sions. Expressing one's ideas is listed in many American business books as a 
key trait.

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 Said That: How to Talk Your Way out of Trouble and into Success (McCal-
lister, 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, p. 156).

This public advice is indeed taken in actual business practices. For exam-
ple, in an incident that happened to an acquaintance of one of the authors, a 
job applicant for a position to be a fashion designer 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 applic-
ant, who is Korean American, thought she was being appropriate and 
respectful in the situation, the interviewer thought the applicant was shy and 
passive. Hence, the cultural misunderstanding of the meaning of talking cost 
the applicant a job.

Another striking aspect of the incident was that even for the 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 not only a 
matter of ability but also a matter of personality, as an outgoing person is a 
"good" and likable person in American cultural contexts (Kim & Markus, 
2002). As a consequence, individuals who do not share the tendency to express 
themselves are disadvantaged in decisions of hiring and promotion that mat-
ter 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 are often seen as 
passive and reserved and hence lacking leadership (Takaki, 1989). In other 
words, the "problem" is that Asian Americans do not talk enough to make 
themselves stand out and to show that they can lead. In order to succeed in 
America, Asian Americans often need to act in a way that goes against their 
cultural ideals of thoughtful silence. This effort to assimilate to the Ameri-
can cultural value by talking more, not only makes them feel uncomfortable 
but also might be a disturbance to the thoughtfulness that their cultural 
beliefs dictate.
CULTURE AND THE EFFECT OF TALKING ON THINKING

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

Thinking often has been studied in relation to talking in psychology, as thinking and language are considered to be closely connected (e.g., Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Wierzbicka, 1992). However, the assumption behind the studies that "naturally" bind talking and thinking as related aspects of psychology may be reflecting Western cultural assumptions rather than reflecting a universal psychological reality. Cultural differences in the meanings and practices of the act of talking should lead to differences in how talking and thinking are related in psychological processes. These differences should also 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.

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, 2002). The research utilized the method of "think aloud" that is 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 processes as those occur. For example, as a person is working on a problem, 2 x 5 = 10, 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. Obviously, this methodology is founded on the assumption that the internal thinking processes are conscious, accessible, and easily verbalized. Questioning the universality of this assumption, the research examined the effect of talking (i.e., 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 on the test was measured as an indication of how talking affected their thinking.

One study (Kim, 2002) examined the basic issue of whether or not cultural differences in the 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 there are indeed psychological tendencies in how talking affects thinking that are consistent with the cultural assumptions about how talking and thinking are related.

A follow-up study (Kim, 2002) was conducted to understand the source of this cultural difference in the effect of talking on thinking. The study tested the possibility that the cultural difference in the effect of talking on thinking can be explained, at least in part, by the difference in the relative reliance on language in thinking for people from different cultural contexts. Psychological research has shown that the nature of the effect of verbalization largely depends on the type of task. Thought processes involved with a linear and analytical reasoning are found to be easy to verbalize (Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Schooler, Ohlsson, & Brooks, 1993), and talking while thinking can in fact help clarify the thought process (Hafner, 1957; Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Loftus & Bell, 1975). However, thought processes involved with insight (Schooler et al., 1993) or holistic thinking (Penney, 1975) are found to be difficult to verbalize, and talking while thinking can hinder the thought processes (Schooler et al., 1993; Kim, 2002). These findings suggest that different cultures that tend to differ in the most typically used mode of thinking (Nisbett et al., 2001) probably differ in their relative use of verbal versus nonverbal thinking. A final study 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. This study tested this possibility by examining the effect of an articulatory suppression task—a 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 because they tended to use verbal thinking that is easier to verbalize. In contrast, talking was more likely to impair East Asian Americans’ performance because they tended to use more nonverbal thinking that is more difficult to verbalize.

Together the findings from these studies illustrate two broad points. First, cultural beliefs regarding the relationship between talking and thinking reflect the cultural realities in East Asian and European American contexts. The cultural beliefs not only are abstract beliefs but also are 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 the mode of thinking is not necessarily superior to the other. However, the effect of talking on thinking differed countering the common American assumption that talking is good for 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 effects on individuals depending on the cultural assumptions and practices regarding the act.

The assumptions of how talking is related to thinking are culture specific. Thus, even the same task of thinking aloud can differ dramatically depending on the cultural models that are used to make sense of it or to give it meaning. Such a task feels natural to people from cultural contexts where the assumptions about the importance and value of expressing oneself are widely shared but feels unnatural and debilitating for people engaging in cultural contexts where these assumptions are not shared. Without recognizing the important and fundamental influence of cultural meanings and practices on the shaping of psychology, it is easy to overlook the negative and unforeseen consequences that may accompany a push toward behavioral assimilation, such as the expectation of active verbal participation in class.

**Talking in a Multicultural World**

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 also a social and cultural act, and the meanings and practices of talking are culturally diverse as any human acts. Psychological phenomena, such as the effect of talking on psychology, are often reflections of cultural values and beliefs; therefore, psychology cannot be meaningfully separated from practices or beliefs. Once society recognizes this interdependence between culture and psychology, it becomes easier to understand how closely related the issue of assimilation of psychology is to the issue of assimilation of cultural creed. The act of talking is a practice that is replete with cultural meanings. Like many other cultural practices, the practice of talking is intricately integrated with relevant cultural systems. Isolating the issue of 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.

The issue of talking and Asian American students dramatizes a crucial point concerning diversity in the growing multicultural world, especially in the higher educational settings. The problem results from a clash in cultural practices. People sometimes assume that their own practices are “natural” and “good” and the practices of “others” in their schools and workplaces are somehow “unnatural” and “bad.” What is typically obscured in these clashes is that the “deficient” or “unsophisticated” practices in question are often aspects of complex cultural systems that have their own histories, philosophies, institutions and ways of life. What is even less visible is that one’s own practices are not natural or inevitable ones but are in fact the particular results of mainstream American cultural commitments and ways of life. Without fully recognizing the cultural meanings of the act of talking, educators may problematize a tendency of students who do not hold the mainstream cultural view, thereby stigmatizing those students as passive and uncritical. This example highlights that developing an educational setting where diversity can function positively involves incorporating diversity even with respect to pedagogical assumptions, such as the value of talking.

The implications of the cultural observations made in this chapter should not be limited to the situations of East Asian Americans. Indeed, many groups in the United States that do not epitomize the mainstream American culture, such as women, ethnic minorities, and underprivileged social classes, often do not fit the American cultural ideals. Sometimes, they do not talk as much as they should, they do not think in the way they should, and they do not act as they should, according to the American ideal. These differences are intricately related to the differences in the cultural values, practices, and worldviews of each group.

A society needs unifying assumptions and values to function as a coherent unit, and it is often necessary to inscribe or enforce one particular set of assumptions and values over others. If, however, the enforcement of these assumptions creates a systematic privileging of certain groups over others, perhaps the society should collectively raise the difficult question of whether
individuals should assimilate to the existing assumptions or whether the assumptions need to be questioned and modified in order to reflect the diverse needs and realities of individuals. If educators in California are concerned that East Asian and East Asian American 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 whether they should be allowed the freedom to pursue learning in alternative ways.

In answering this question, one could assert that America is a place where the positive meaning of talking is assumed and that all students who are learning in America should learn the American way of doing things, because this is ultimately beneficial for the students in order to excel in America. Another answer might be that whereas the lesson of talking is important, the lesson of silence and listening is also valuable, and hence, American education should emphasize positives from both cultural beliefs and revise the unifying set of educational assumptions and values. Still 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 want, and this value of freedom should be the unifying assumption of America.

Whether or not to emphasize talking in the classroom is a difficult question to answer, and we are yet to figure out which answer is the right or the best answer. Yet considering the potential answers requires the realization that the act of talking is a cultural practice and that "freedom of speech" should not become a "pressure to speak." A "freedom of silence" may be no less a fundamental cultural right than is a "freedom of speech."