

# Does Culture Matter in Critical Thinking?

## Reflection Paper #1

July 21, 2003 Summer

---

Douglas F. Brenner and Sandra Parks have written an engaging and provoking article on the cultural influences on critical thinking and problem solving. I will utilize the so-called Western, individualist mode of thinking to present their thesis (claim) in premise/conclusion form:

*Premise 1:* The way we think is influenced by, and occurs within, our own cultural values and practices.

*Premise 2:* American education is based on Western, individualist modes of thinking and decision-making. <sup>1</sup>

*Premise 3:* Collectivist cultures have socially beneficial traits or features not typically found in individualist cultures.

*Conclusion:* Adding collectivist decision-making practices can enrich our classroom communities and enable all students to feel supported. <sup>2</sup>

Brenner and Parks define Individualist cultures as those that value an autonomous self, and emphasize independence, self-reliance, and a communication style that is explicit and direct. <sup>3</sup> They define Collectivist cultures as those that value a self that is interrelated and interdependent with others, and a communication style that is indirect and relies on nonverbal cues. <sup>4</sup> So far, so good. These are generalizations, but they are generally supported by the research they cite as well as common knowledge among those people who travel or read.

It is when the authors extrapolate from these descriptions of cultural and communication styles to what it is to think critically and solve problems that I think the argument becomes muddled. The first point to make is that they do not seem to make a distinction between thinking styles and problem-solving, which are surely two different, although related, activities. They describe in some detail how a person in an individualist culture thinks, but not how a person in a collectivist culture thinks. Instead, they describe how a person in a collectivist culture behaves or communicates with others. When they describe the individualist mode of thought, they are describing a cognitive activity that is characterized by "... asking and answering with evidence

the key questions that thoughtful people make before making certain judgments.”<sup>5</sup> When they describe the collectivist mode of thought, they are describing qualities such as the ability to tolerate ambiguity and indirection, to keep harmony with others, and to respect the wisdom of the group or elders.<sup>6</sup> They make the point that “communal cultures highlight the social dimension of thinking... and that ...thinking is not an entirely solitary activity but is strengthened through communication with others and through assessment and correction,” but surely a person in a collectivist culture has her own thoughts and is not always in a group situation when thinking, cogitating, on an issue?<sup>7</sup> Until there is (hopefully not!) something like the “groupthink” envisaged in science fiction novels, presumably we all have the ability to use our minds independently of others, at least at first! This is not to say that we cannot take into account others’ points of view, frames of reference, or worldviews in our thinking, or that the results of that mental activity cannot be shared with others for assessment and correction.

I was confused by their interchangeable use of terms like “cultural perspectives,” “cultural practices,” and “cognitive perspectives” when, to my mind, all of these terms are different and have separate meanings. To me, a cultural perspective is that set of values, mores, beliefs, etc. in which you grow up. A cultural practice would be a behavior such as not eating meat on Fridays, or not standing too close to a person in conversation. When the authors use the term cognitive perspective as in, “We can enlarge our understanding of the cognitive perspectives that students bring as members of their cultural or ethnic groups in order to adapt our teaching practices...” are they saying that even mental structures and operations are different in different cultures, or are they using cognitive perspective to mean the same thing as cultural perspective?<sup>8</sup> In my view, it matters not whether you are from an individualist or a collectivist culture; the capacity to think critically as Paul defines it, “... is not the substance of one’s views per se that make one a critical thinker but the manner in which one holds those views.”<sup>9</sup>

I took exception to some of the loaded terms in a definition from R.H. Hvolbek quoted by Brenner and Parks. Although I did not find and read Hvolbek’s entire article, I thought his characterization as “utilitarian, focusing on dominating, controlling and computing information while seeking definite, unambiguous, and objective results and knowledge” was only one way in which one might define critical thinking.<sup>10</sup> Brenner and Parks contrasted this with the

observation that in communal cultures, “...accuracy or eliminating errors may enjoy less currency...where maintaining social harmony and respecting the wisdom of the group or elders is valued more highly.”<sup>11</sup> This is only one example of an unstated bias – that collectivist cultures are better or more desirable in some respects than individualist cultures –that runs throughout the article. In the same vein, the authors again quote from Hvolbek with regard to the posing of a problem from a Native American or collectivist approach, describing it as “a meditative type of thinking, developing full awareness of the moment, and avoiding analysis and categorization, while being fully present and passively contemplative rather than actively investigative.”<sup>12</sup> I cannot see this approach being helpful in making public policy decisions, for example, or in looking at controversial issues, and probably neither would the authors. I think that their purpose was not to present the advantages and disadvantages of both kinds of perspectives; it was to favor the collectivist and denigrate (maybe too strong a term!) the individualist. It is instructive to note in the “About the Authors” section of the textbook that among Douglas Brenner’s listed interests are “...the wisdom of indigenous peoples, especially Native Americans.”<sup>13</sup> While this helps to establish his credentials in terms of his knowledge of Native American cultures, it also may mean that he looks at critical thinking through a certain lens or frame of reference.

Turning now to the real focus of the article: that adopting certain values and traits from collectivist cultures will benefit Western education, and more specifically, classroom communities. Here the authors indeed have relevant points to make. If collectivist problem solving and decision making (they seem to use the phrases interchangeably) can foster a more civil atmosphere, where individual students’ ethnic or cultural backgrounds are respected and welcomed, then I would agree totally with their conclusion. Who would argue against a school environment that incorporated the wisdom and experience of the elderly; that fostered humility and respect for another’s point of view; that taught how to listen as well as how to speak thoughtfully? Those are important contributions, but they are not exclusive to collectivist cultures. I can think of a few “Western” proverbs that could equally describe the same or similar concepts: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, “Look before you leap” and I would add “listen before you speak”!

To end this paper in the perspective in which it began: my problem with the authors is that although they make a token nod in the last sentence to "...[honor] Western intellectual standards of accuracy, clarity, and rationality" they are not upfront with explicitly stating their bias. <sup>14</sup> If I were to end this paper in a collectivist perspective, however, I would say that if you disagree with me, that's OK. I can accept that! Perhaps that is how it should be.

---

## References

1. Brenner, Douglas and Sandra Parks. "Cultural Influences on Critical Thinking and Problem Solving." Developing Minds: a Resource Book for Teaching Thinking. Ed. Arthur L. Costa. Alexandria, VA: ACSD, 2001. 219
2. Ibid. p. 216
3. Ibid. p. 217
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid. p. 218
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid. p. 216
9. Paul, Richard W. "Teaching Critical Thinking in the Strong Sense: A Focus on Self-Deception, World Views, and a Dialectical Mode of Analysis." Ed. Kerry S. Walters. Re-Thinking Reason: New Perspectives in Critical Thinking. New York: State University of New York Press, 1994. 196.
10. Brenner & Parks, p. 218
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid. p. 219
13. Ibid. p. 565
14. Ibid, p.220