

## **The limits of dialogue among teachers from different national contexts**

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### **Abstract**

In this study, the author investigates the dynamics of dialogue among teachers in different national contexts based on their responses to different cultural practices. Employing Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory of practice and his concept of habitus, the author shows that, as the teachers' responses are not entirely context-specific, they are not autonomous either. In the final section, the author discusses the importance of attending to limits and barriers of dialogue across differences. Moreover, she further posits that recognizing the difficulties involved in productive dialogue is essential for achieving the transformative educational goals that promote a less dominating and less hierarchical approach. The assumptions implicit in this work are that the scholars and practitioners from diverse backgrounds bring unique perspectives to teaching and learning; and, therefore, productive dialogues among teachers from various backgrounds can open up a generative space that enables the active co-construction of new perspectives.

**Keywords:** Dialogue, intercultural communication, habitus, transformative educational goals

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## Introduction

The popularity of the concept of dialogue and dialogical method of teaching has increased over time. Burbules (2000) notes that “it is widely assumed that the aim of teaching with and through dialogue serves democracy, promotes communication across difference . . .” (p. 251). Moreover, while the concept of dialogue has become “almost synonymous with critical pedagogy” (p. 251), the assumption that dialogue is inherently emancipatory must be examined and addressed. In this respect, Shor and Freire (1987) noted that the space of dialogue is not free. Thus, as the discourse of dialogue is affected by unequal power relations, merely getting everyone to speak does not promote communication, nor does it challenge existing domination. For the authors, dialogue is “not ping pong of words and gestures” (p. 13).

In an attempt to understand the effect of cultural differences on desire to communicate with others, Jones (2001), and Jones and Jenkins (2004) conducted a study, whereby the classrooms of the Maori (native, minority culture) teachers were separated from those of the Pakeha (European, dominant culture) teachers in New Zealand. The researchers reported that, while the Pakeha teachers were enraged for not having the opportunity to learn about the culture of others, the Maori teachers felt very happy, as for the first time, they were not required to engage in a dialogue with the dominant Pakeha teachers. For these researchers, dialogue that involves different cultures (also known as dialogue across differences) should ensure that all participants have a right to remain silent. In their view, mere verbalism may yet become another form of coercion into the system of domination because, while some may view dialogue as a potential benefit, others may regard it as a threat. Their argument echoes that posed by Burbules and Rice (1991), who contend that dialogue across differences can be counterproductive if it does not take relations of power and domination into consideration. In education, teachers typically focus on what is being said (Schultz, 2010); however, the very value of being able to talk is fundamentally linked to being allowed to be heard (Burbules & Rice, 1991). Indeed, it seems reasonable to conclude that gaining one’s voice does not have much benefit if no one is listening. In a similar vein, what value is the multiplication of discourses if they cannot engage one another? Does it matter if one’s cultural ways of being are respected and celebrated, if those same factors are never truly valued?

While research on dialogue and dialogic pedagogy is largely based on relations between teachers and students, studies that have examined dialogues among teachers seem to be much scarcer. Perhaps this apparent lack of interest stems from the fact that the demographics of teachers remain predominantly homogeneous. Consequently, it may be perceived that investigating the dynamics of dialogue among teachers is not particularly urgent. This paper, however, focuses on the dynamics of dialogue among teachers in different national contexts, using their responses to short stories that deal with intercultural themes. The assumption the analysis is based on is that the scholars and practitioners from diverse backgrounds bring unique perspectives to teaching and learning, and they have made significant contributions to the field of education as the counter-hegemonic voices (Foley, Levinson, & Hurtig, 2000-2001). Therefore, the premise of this work is that productive dialogues among teachers from various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds can open up a generative space, which enables the active co-construction of new perspectives and understandings.

In the following sections, I begin with a discussion of the theoretical framework that informs this study, drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theory and his concept of *habitus*. Next, I outline the methodology and other important aspects of this study, along with a brief description of the larger study on which this work is based. In the findings section, I show the participating teachers’ responses to different cultural practices, such as arranged marriages and FGM (female genital mutilation practice), as they are represented in the short stories they read. In this section, I also discuss how teachers respond (or choose not to) to responses provided by other participants, particularly those that are very different from their own. In the final section, I discuss the importance of attending to the dynamics of dialogue across differences and recognizing the difficulties involved in productive dialogue in order to achieve the educational goals that promote a less-dominating and less-hierarchical approach.

Before moving on, I wish to state that my intention is not to refute the value of dialogue in this study. I am in an agreement with hooks (1994), who noted that dialogue can be used as a way to cross boundaries and to “disrupt the seemingly fixed (yet often unstated) assumptions” (p. 130). My aim is to empirically explore the extent to which mutual dialogue across differences develops (or not) and what that might mean in the context of the working environment incorporating the power relations among these teachers. It is important to note that there was much more similarity across responses to the short stories within than across the different racial groups in the study; thus, the discussion in the final section revolves around these patterns in regards to the difficulty of dialogue. However, I am not discounting the fact that teachers are subjects-in-process and they may learn from working with others and alter their perception based on their ongoing engagement. Indeed, an emphasis on reproduction does not foreclose contrary action, such as resistance and struggle. Moreover, individual *habitus* encompasses both *reproductive* as well as *transformative* characters (Mills, 2008).

### Theoretical Framework

In investigating the responses of the teachers from different national contexts to the short stories and observing the dynamics of their interactions, I employ Bourdieu’s sociological theory of practice and his concept of *habitus*. According to Bourdieu (1977), “interpersonal relations are never, except in appearance, individual-to-individual relationships, and that the truth of the interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction” (p. 81). For Bourdieu, we are not the sole authors of our perceptions, thoughts, and (re)actions, as we are all inescapably participate in a variety of historically constituted social and political discourses. What people say, what they do not say, how they respond to and judge people whose cultural and racial backgrounds differ from their own is not so much a matter of personal choice applied in situated ways, but rather stems from the socially and historically derived dispositions that each individual brings to local activity. Hence, Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990a, 1990b, 1998) argues that to understand the psychological makeup that disposes and motivates people to think, perceive, and (re)act in particular ways, we need to first understand the socialization histories that have shaped this psychology in the first place.

In attending social location of individual’s cognitive structure, Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* is educative for this study. Bourdieu (1984) defines *habitus* as a “system of durable, transposable dispositions, that is ‘progressively inscribed in people’s minds’” (p. 471) through practical interaction with external social structures that include other people. An individual’s *habitus* influences the actions that one takes, as well as the worldview of that person and it is constituted by that person’s individual history and the entire collective history of family, class, race, and ethnicity that the person is member of (Cicourel, 1993; Shim, 2012). Bourdieu argues that the elements of social structures that constitute an individual’s *habitus* are not consciously mastered, but rather deeply internalized through daily practices in ways that seem natural to people. They thus falsely appear to be self-evident and objective facts and can consequently dispose people to take particular actions or make particular choices in ways that are neither entirely conscious nor intentional.

Bourdieu contends that “human action is not an instantaneous reaction to immediate stimuli,” and the slightest “reaction” of an individual to another is pregnant with the entire history of these persons and their relationship (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 124). Thus, it can be inferred from the Bourdieu’s theoretical position that the manner in which the participating teachers respond to the short stories is not simply a reflection of their thought process pertaining to the objective description of the contents of the short stories. Rather, the teachers’ responses are intimately linked to their socialization histories. Such a theoretical perspective at least partially explains the reason why there was much more similarity in the teachers’ responses to the short stories within than across the different racial groups, which will be shown in the following section. In this regard, Bourdieu (1977) suggests that people in the same class do not have entirely the same patterns of thinking and experience because of the complexity of psychological processes and variations in the set of practices engaged in by different people. However, he also suggests that “each member of the same class is more likely than any member of another class to have been confronted with the situation most frequent of the members of that class” (p. 85). I interpret this argument to indicate that members of the same ethno-racial groups

are more likely to respond to different cultural practices similarly. Even though Bourdieu was mostly interested in social analysis of class, his concepts can easily be applied to race, ethnicity, and culture (Cicourel, 1993).

Moreover, Bourdieu's commitment and analyses of social practices were intended to elucidate the workings of social power, rather than simply facilitate a neutral understanding of social life (Mills & Trevor, 2007). Bourdieu assumed that individuals, social groups, and cultures could never develop or exist on an equal power level, because each is constituted in and through discursive and material practices that are invisibly created by complex set of asymmetrical power relations. In this regard, Bourdieu notes that "what goes on in verbal communication . . . remains unintelligible as long as one does not take into account the totality of the structure of power relations that is present, yet invisible, in the exchange" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 143). As will be discussed below, the teachers in this study are from different national contexts, and given that this study was entirely conducted online, the teachers are not implicated in any way with one another professionally or personally. However, within Bourdieu's theoretical framework, in the final section, the implications of the dynamics of the patterns of the teachers' interactions will be drawn in relation to teaching and learning.

## Methods

### Setting and Participants

This study is a part of a larger yearlong study of 14 teachers residing and teaching in Korea, China, and the United States. The three ethno-racial groups in this study were White, African American (who live in the United States), and Asian<sup>1</sup> teachers (who live in China and Korea). Participants of this study were middle and high school English or English as a foreign language teachers, and their teaching experience ranged from one to eleven years. The participants were recruited from an English teachers' listserv, and participation was 100% voluntary. All teachers from China are from Shanghai, and those from Korea reside in Seoul. The context of this study was not an academic course, and the participants did not know each other professionally or personally. The researcher, who taught English as a second language for several years, also participated in the study occasionally. Mainly due to the participants' physical geographical locations, all discussions and interviews were conducted online using PICCLE (Pedagogy for Inter-Cultural Critical Literacy Education available at <http://piccle.ed.psu.edu/moodle/>).

### Data and Data Sources

The larger study employed three data collection strategies, namely on-line discussions of contemporary short stories and films, life history interviews, and discourse-based interviews (of content of on-line discussions). Moreover, this study is grounded in, and makes references to, the data collected from on-line discussions. In the larger study, all participants engaged in on-line discussions of contemporary fiction and film dealing with intercultural relations (including tensions, conflicts, and resolutions), which allowed exploring how they understand and create differences. For the larger study, I chose six short stories and three movies as the subjects for online discussions. The short stories were: (a) "Mother Margaret & the Rhinoceros Café" (Kaiser, 2003), (b) "Incident on 33" (Romanow, 2003), (c) "Crazy" (McCracken, 2003), (d) "Circumcision through Words" (Foss, 2003), (e) "Pancho and Gary" (Eidse, 2003), and (f) "Welcome to Mill Street" (Kennedy, 2003). Each story is a part of an edited collection of award-winning short fiction entitled *Mother Margaret & the Rhinoceros Café: 2003 Canadian cross-cultural stories* (Symons & Sekar, 2003). The three movies I chose were: (a) *Borat* (Cohen, Roach, & Charles, 2006), (b) *Crash* (Danbury et al., 2005), and (c) *Do the Right Thing* (Lee, 1998). We spent about a week discussing each story and film, and all the stories

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<sup>1</sup>My usage of this term is not to essentialize participants from China and South Korea. Because participants from China and South Korea shared many ideological stances with respect to intercultural issues that are represented in the short stories and films, I represented them as one ethno-racial group in this study. There is no doubt that both the Koreans and Chinese are not homogeneous groups.

and movies chosen for the larger study addressed themes that involved tensions and conflicts arising from racial and cultural differences among the protagonists.

For this study, I chose the participants' on-line discussions on the two short stories included in the larger study, namely "Incident on 33" (Romanow, 2003), and "Circumcision through Words" (Foss, 2003). These short stories were chosen for this study because the participating teachers' responses to the cultural practices of Others were most prevalent in these cases when compared to other short stories and movies chosen for the larger study. More specifically, I have chosen to closely look at the participants' responses to (a) arranged marriages, as they are represented in a short story "Incident on 33," and (b) female genital mutilation practice (FGM),<sup>2</sup> as it is represented in a short story "Circumcision through Words." Discussion analysis revealed 23 utterances related to participants' responses to different cultural practices, of which 16 utterances were participants' responses to arranged marriages, and 9 related to FGM. However, the numbers of responses to each cultural practice were not distributed equally across the groups. For instance, of the sixteen utterances in which participants responded to arranged marriages, seven were contributed by White teachers from the US; only one utterance was contributed by African American teachers from the US; and eight utterances were contributed by Asian teachers from China and South Korea. Similarly, of the ten utterances in which participants responded to FGM, five were contributed by white teachers; four were contributed by African American teachers; and only one contribution was made by Asian teachers. The total number of responses made by each ethno-racial group is slightly different from one another; and this difference can be partially attributed to the fact that the numbers of participants in each ethno-racial group varied in this research project.

### Findings

Although not all responses to arranged marriages and FGM are mentioned in this study, in my effort to show the dynamics of the interactions among the teachers, the discussions of the samples of the teachers' responses are presented in a chronological order.

#### Teachers' Response to Arranged Marriages

One of the seven White teachers who commented on the topic of arranged marriages noted:

I completely understand that different cultures do things differently, and I guess it is unfair for me to make judgments about arranged marriages, but I think that it is absolutely crazy to have someone else choose who you are going to love and marry.

This teacher begins by claiming her complete understanding that how people "do things" is culturally shaped and that practices differ among different cultures. She also acknowledges that making judgments about arranged marriages is unfair. However, these comments were immediately followed by a conjunction *but*, which outweighed the importance of her previous claims. What seems implicit in this claim is the presupposition that the truth and morally correct condition underlying love and marriage are such that one should have absolute autonomy in selecting one's spouse or mate. To do otherwise is "absolutely crazy." This presupposition negates this participant's earlier claim about "completely understanding" the social fact that people's notions of what is desirable are often a function of their positions within social and cultural contexts that largely shape how those people think, feel, and act. She previously also noted that she understood that what one person may perceive as undesirable or crazy might seem desirable and/or completely normal to another person (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Here is another example, in which another teacher in this group responded to the same account in a similar manner:

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<sup>2</sup> Hereinafter, I will refer to female genital mutilation practice as FGM.

I respect different cultures, but in this day in age, I find it strange that arranged marriages still happen. The western world is progressing rather quickly yet the part of the world participating in arranged marriages continues to remain so backward.

This teacher similarly notes his respect for different cultures and then immediately tempers this acknowledgement using the conjunction “but.” Against the backdrop of his own normalized perspective, he referred to arranged marriages as strange. Then, he further constructed a binary pair between the “Western world” as progressive and “the part of the world participating in arranged marriages” as backward. Although there is nothing inherently or intrinsically backward or under developed about a cultural practice of arranged marriages, in the process of defining “the Western world” as progressive, “the world participating in arranged marriages” implicitly becomes “backward.” Here are two further examples of responses given in a very similar manner.

I respect different cultures, *but* when it comes to love, that act/feeling *should not* be controlled.

I get *upset* when people tell me what to do and I guess some cultures are different. But, it also *upsets* me because people should be able to love whoever they want. There is nothing wrong with dating as long as you are happy.

All responses by the teachers in this group revealed similar beliefs, i.e., that some human experiences, such as love, are not socially constructed. It was also notable that the teachers made an effort to first express their respect for the cultural practice of arranged marriages. In this regard, Bourdieu’s sociological insights on politeness practices provide a broader lens through which this politeness convention can be understood. According to Bourdieu, “the concessions of politeness are always political concessions” (cited in Fairclough, 1992, p. 162). Drawing on Bourdieu, Fairclough explains that politeness is not always an innocent act and that particular politeness conventions and their use implicitly acknowledge particular social and power relations. That stated, the fact that the politeness practices were more often taken up only by White teachers in this study (who appear to impose their world perspectives as universal, neutral, and even better than those of others) seemed to index their *habitus* and political location in a broader social context—a fact that was probably not directly apparent to the teachers (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1990a, 1990b, 1998).

There was no interaction across different ethno-racial groups within the day in which the topic of arranged marriages was discussed by the White teachers. However, on the fourth day of discussion on “Incident on 33,” a teacher from China commented on arranged marriages in the following way:

Arranged marriages used to be and still are very popular throughout China, even in big cities like Shanghai, because Chinese people believe that the happiness of a marriage has a lot to do with whether both parties of a couple are from similar backgrounds. I think arranged marriages have their own advantages as they can make full use of the financial resources that the two families (I mean the wife's family and the husband's family) possess. Each family can exchange what they have with what they don't have.

Coming from a cultural background in which arranged marriages are valued and practiced, this teacher defines “the happiness of a marriage” in Chinese cultures as something very different from what would be perceived and expressed as such by the White teachers in this study. She also emphasizes the importance of compatibility, not only between the two individuals getting married, but also of their respective families. This emphasis is very different from that of White teachers, i.e., being able to choose whomever one wants to love and marry independently from the concerns of the family members involved on each side.

Here is a longer and more personal response to arranged marriages by a teacher from Korea. The importance of compatibility in terms of socio-economic status seems quite similar to that of the last participant I discussed:

I don't think that arranged marriage is particularly "bad" or "primitive." Maybe one of the reasons why many people believe that this thing is bad is that this kind of marriage lacks emotional interactions or proper exchanges of right "chemistry" between man and woman. However, we all know that infatuation or mad love perishes with the lapse of time eventually and a lot of men and women are struggling to keep their marriage with the vain hope of their fire of love will come back to them. Almost half of the married couples in the USA are getting divorced, and I dare say that the number of divorcees in couples who got married through some kind of arrangements is fewer than the other couples who got married after the "burning love." One major misunderstanding about arranged marriages is that most people think that one is forced to get married to whomever your parents choose for you but this is not at all true nowadays. The parents choose their son or daughter's future spouse, but if either the son or daughter refuses the choice, the parents tend to respect their wishes, and they will find someone else. I met my wife in an arrangement. My parents and my wife's parents thought that we could make good husband and wife considering family backgrounds, ages, and other socioeconomic factors. Both my wife and I agreed, and when we got married, we were not in love with each other. As time passed, we began to find good points and bad points on each other, however, for the next twenty some years, we found that we never thought or talked about divorce. I think we are still trying to find good points on each other by keeping a balance in everything in our way of life and, most importantly, both my wife and I are very happy.

This teacher seems to indirectly respond to people who view arranged marriages as "bad" or "primitive" and counters these ideas with his views on what might underlie those people's perceptions. In other words, this participant perceives that many people oppose arranged marriages because such unions lack emotional intimacy and love between the husband and wife. This perception, indeed, was largely accurate at least with respect to the White teachers' responses to arranged marriages, as discussed earlier, because they *all* claimed that the most important factor to consider when choosing a prospective spouse is love and mutual attraction. Moreover, they claimed that arranged marriages do not allow such affection. However, this teacher, like all other Asian teachers in this study who responded to the issue of arranged marriages, revealed a very different perspective—that compatibility between the two people and among the members of both families is the most important factor in spouse selection. Further, this teacher attempts to clarify what he perceived as a common "misunderstanding" about arranged marriages—the idea that arranged marriages are equivalent to forced marriages. Indeed, this misunderstanding did seem to be held by many of the white teachers I discussed above.

Another aspect that seems notable here is that this teacher provides three analytical arguments to support his positive view of arranged marriages: (a) mad or burning love "perishes with the lapse of time," (b) almost half of the marriages in the US that have supposedly been entered into by choice and out of love end in divorce, and (c) more marriages based on love and attraction end in divorce, compared to arranged marriages. Although this teacher did not seem to be aware of research on this issue (as suggested, for example by "I dare say"), arguments like the ones made by this participant have been commonly discussed and often acknowledged by many scholars who publish in Western academic journals about marriage and family (Larson, & Holman, 1994; Myers, Madathil, & Tingle, 2005; Al-Johar, 2005). Also worth noting here is that some of the studies comparing satisfaction in arranged marriages with satisfaction in marriages of choice have found no significant differences (e.g. Myers et al., 2005). Yet, White teachers, unlike the Asian teachers in this study, absolutely felt that arranged marriages were inherently unfair to the two individuals involved. While whether or not arranged marriages actually lead to marital happiness is not a focus here, the Asian teachers' attitudes toward arranged marriages definitely seem to flow from their *habitus*, and are thus influenced by their socio-cultural backgrounds.

Only one African American teacher responded to the issue of arranged marriages, noting the following:

I think that if I was from a country where this was practiced I would find it acceptable if that was all that I ever knew. But, looking at it from my point of view so far removed from the situation, I am not sure if I will ever understand it.

This teacher seems to acknowledge that the options apparent to individuals may be limited by their socialization histories; hence, she thinks that she would be likely to accept the practice of arranged marriages if “that was all that she ever knew.” This teacher does not impose her beliefs, but rather tries to contextualize her position, which is “so far removed from the situation”—making arranged marriages incommensurable to her but not necessarily morally wrong, bizarre, primitive, and the like. While it is not possible to generalize her comments to the other African American teachers in this study, the pattern appears to be different in that this teacher is not placing any negative judgments on arranged marriages. In addition, the reasons behind the silence of the other African American teachers in regards to arranged marriages are not clear.

### Teachers’ Responses to FGM

There were five responses by White teachers in regards to FGM. There was a clear pattern in these teachers’ response in that they judged FGM as strange, backward, dated, unfortunate, primitive, ignorant, and conservative, which are consistent with the pattern in which these teachers responded to arranged marriages. These attitudes seem to flow from their *habitus* constructed within the system of domination as the members of the dominant group in which they clearly seem to assume their own cultural practices as normal and natural.

Here is one example in which a White teacher responds to FGM, as it was represented in *Circumcision through Words*:

I cannot believe that female genital mutilation still exists today. I simply do not understand the purpose of this uncivilized practice. In this day in age, who is forcing these girls to undergo genital mutilation? Personally, I feel that our job as adults for young children is to empower them to allow them to make their own decisions so that they can be happy. It makes me grateful to be an American in my culture and not have to endure that.

Here again, this participant elevated her sense of the basic conditions of today to the level of basic universal conditions. Then, by defining FGM as uncivilized and purposeless against what she considered civilized and purposeful, this participant belied another assumption that the girls in the cultures that practice FGM are *forced* into having FGM performed. This teacher does not seem to recognize the social fact that an individual’s preferences and choices are strongly delimited by their social contexts and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984). Moreover, she clearly disregards the fact that, in those contexts, certain practices might seem perfectly natural and normal, and individuals may voluntarily want to engage in them, even if they might be seen as dangerous or threatening from other cultural perspectives. Here is another example of a teacher responding in a similar manner:

I understand that there are different cultures and, due to these differences, our levels of normalcy vary greatly. However, FGM is simply a horrific and cruel practice. It is shocking to think that how some cultures still consider a primitive and crazy practice like FGM as a rite of passage.

There were no exchanges across the three ethno-racial groups in any given day. However, on different days, African American teachers posted their responses to FGM. I discuss four particular responses below, whereby the first and the last are similar, while the remaining two differ slightly in their patterns. One dimension that stood out in all responses by African American teachers is that the teachers in this group responded to FGM as a contextualized practice within a particular culture. They also seemed to indirectly speak to other people who may have negative normative judgments about

FGM. One African American teacher posted the following comment, which seems to indirectly speak to others:

I understand that FGM may sound harmful to you, and I understand that you have been raised to think that this kind of practice is unacceptable, but this is what these people know. Within cultures that practice it, FGM is often required for marriage. In such a case, we can think of FGM as an ingredient of marriage.

This teacher does not comment directly on the practice of FGM, and she certainly does not construct FGM as an inherently or universally primitive, horrific, and unjust practice. Instead, this participant seems to have problematized the assumptions and dispositions that incline people to claim that individuals (who belong to cultures that practice FGM) should make a better choice and stand up for themselves and for their children. Furthermore, by clearly separating *you* (White teachers) and *them* (people who practice FGM), and by acknowledging and juxtaposing *your* positions (in which *you* think FGM may be harmful and unacceptable), and *their* position (in which FGM is not a choice but rather “this is what these people knew”), this participant appears to be aware of the social fact that the options open to any given individual are constrained by a particular set of social norms. She also seems to suggest that a statement that presupposes individuals’ autonomy and freedom separately from social and cultural context is judgmental and, implicitly, at least wrong.

In this regard, this participant appears to be directly responding to White teachers that judged a cultural practice from their own cultural perspective, which they assumed to be universal and objective. This teacher also highlights the significance of FGM within cultures that practice it, allowing her to reject the negative judgments made by cultural outsiders. Here is an example in which a teacher appeared to question the sense of entitlement and power that some Americans seem to have:

In this story, Kiddisti an immigrant from Africa is unable to practice her cultural rituals of FGM because the Americans think it is wrong to do. Who are we to say that a cultural ritual is wrong or right?

Although this participant is not directly responding to another teacher’s response to FGM in this study, she poses a question about a position that she found problematic. She does this by underscoring a part the story, *Circumcision through Words*, in which a main character was prohibited to undergo a cultural practice (FGM) that she desired and was a part of her culture because “Americans think it is wrong to do.” She also posed a rhetorical question about whether Americans have the right to “say that a cultural ritual [of Others] is wrong or right.” By doing so, this teacher seems to have cued into an obvious reality—the reality in which Americans do interfere with the Others’ cultural practices—and she denounces this reality. The subtext of this response also seems to expose problems related to Americans’ authority to decide on truth claims about Others and their practices.

The next example takes the claims in the previous example even further and questions the motivations that underlie Americans’ interference with other cultures. One African American posted the following comments:

I think of the name of the organization . . . FRIENDS of AFRICA, and I noticed that the officiator of the meeting describes their goal as finding a solution to the issue of FGM. My question is who is being comforted in the relationship? Is it the people of AFRICA or the ones that want to help (FRIENDS)? The difficulty is that Friends of Africa intervention may MAKE people outsiders, people like Kiddisti who is not circumcised WILL forever be an outsider if she doesn't do what the rest of her kinsmen are doing. And to jump on the "us" and "them" mutilated and non-mutilated bandwagon will not help either. In this story, only I have to wonder why Murray's organization sent him to learn about FGM, when they are going to use it as a theme for THEIR fund raising campaign. I think ultimately when it comes to foreign affairs, there are so many Murray's, people wanting to help, but in the end the PEOPLE (of Africa) themselves are not really benefiting at all.

Using the contents of the story, this teacher seems to have deconstructed what others may view as benevolent in foreign affairs. This teacher raises a rhetorical question about the real beneficiaries in the relationships—between those who want to help and those who are seemingly being helped—cueing the obvious answer that it is not people of Africa who are being “comforted.” Thus, this rhetorical question and its echoing answer seem to implicitly disrupt what has often become the central fact (rather than a matter of dispute), namely that “those who want to help” (FRIENDS) know better about what’s better for *them* (PEOPLE of AFRICA who value and practice FGM) than *they do themselves*. In effect, this participant indicated that the seemingly incontestable maxims of the Friends of Africa intervention that were meant to enable those who practice FGM were, in reality, disabling them. According to her, this is because actions *imposed* by the “ones that want to help,” in reality, are tearing those supposedly being helped away from the fabrics of their own cultural and social contexts, thus making them outsiders forever.

What is particularly notable and becomes obvious here is that, even though this teacher is responding to the issue of FGM, she really seems to be addressing the general issue of foreign affairs/interventions in a contemporary world. In other words, this teacher exposes what she perceives to be an unmistakable self-righteousness that pervades contemporary foreign affairs organizations, like Friends of Africa. More specifically, she is posing a question of *why* are *they* (e.g., FRIENDS) doing *what they* are doing, hinting that there are so many “people wanting to help” when it comes to foreign affairs. Yet, by explicitly stating that, in the end, those who are supposed to benefit do not benefit, this participant clearly seems to respond in a way that provokes serious thoughts about the underlying assumptions, purposes, and outcomes of foreign affairs and interventions, like Friends of Africa, in the short story, *Circumcision through Words*.

Only one Asian teacher provided her response on FGM, which was posted weeks after the week in which the participants discussed *Circumcision through Words*.

I feel that it is not at all appropriate to talk about female genital mutilation, and I would rather remain silent than encourage any kind of conflict.

Clearly, this teacher did not feel comfortable expressing her attitudes about FGM. As was the case in African American teachers’ response to arranged marriages, the factors that might account for Asian teachers’ silence on the issue of FGM are unclear. However, silence and positions not taken can speak more powerfully than presence and positions taken in terms of people’s geographic, cultural, and social locations (e.g., Clark, 2005). Elsewhere in her response to another short story (as a part of the larger study), this teacher talked about the importance of maintaining *harmony* in Korean culture, and remaining silent in order to avoid any conflict. Thus, her views seem to be at least partially influenced by the importance placed on maintaining *harmony* in her culture. Although this is only one participant’s take on her own choice to remain silent on the topic of FGM, it does seem to index the powerful effects one’s social and cultural locations (*habitus*) have on one’s position taking (and not taking) practices.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The findings in this study revealed some significant consistencies within each ethno-racial group, as well as some significant differences across the three groups. This does not mean that the findings can be generalized, or that a subject is determined by certain cultural rules. Moreover, the study is not essentializing any teacher’s thinking and perceptions with respect to any ethnic or racial group. Nonetheless, these findings are telling in some way.

From Bourdieu’s theoretical perspective, the similarities in the responses of the teachers within each ethno-racial group did not emerge because groups were defined by ethnicity-race. Rather, as the members of each ethno-racial group were likely to have shared similar historical, cultural, political, social experiences and similar social, political, and economic contexts, they provided similar responses on the issues raised in this study. Hence, very different sets of life experiences and

socialization histories seemed to have appropriated the teachers across three ethno-racial groups to assume very different dispositions and lenses through which to see the same cultural issues. These experiences and histories unfolded as they did largely because of the greater constitutive social structures and conditions already in place that delimited which positions could be taken and not taken (Bourdieu, 1990a, 1990b, 1996; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The findings pertaining to each group clearly demonstrated that participants' positions are not detached from constitutive political and social structures. Therefore, their positions were never objective and neutral, nor were their interactions, irrespective of the social positions they assumed. What disposes us to act and think largely stems from our individual *habitus*, which is not always visible to us; thus, we often tend to believe that our actions and thoughts are objective, neutral, transparent, and autonomous. In other words, participation in a dialogue, even at the micro-level of the discussions around the short stories in this study that may appear to be personal choice, is not simply a matter of choice. Hence, a dialogue is not simply a momentary engagement between two or more people.

Moreover, as partly shown in this study and was often the case in the larger study, the participating teachers made very little effort to engage in cross-talk across groups, especially when interpretations varied considerably and in contested ways. Instead, the different groups engaged in parallel play, with members of each group posting their responses without attempting to engage with members of other groups. Thus, uncritically assuming that dialogue across differences automatically occurs when opportunities for such conversations are provided seems flawed even when everyone is actively engaged in *talking*. This resonates with the argument proposed by Burbules and Rice (1991) that the very value of the capacity for being able to talk is fundamentally linked to being able to be heard. Throughout this study, even though all teachers were in a position where their different attitudes about arranged marriages and FGM could have criss-crossed, and their thinking, (re)acting, and feeling processes could have been rethought and rearticulated, this is not what happened.

Thus, as a result of this study, a much more difficult question emerged—when different positions that are differently located on different social and political hierarchies come together and interact, and when a conflict emerges between these different positions, *who* will decide whose position counts?

Different social and political conditions disposed the teachers in one group to view arranged marriages as valid, those in another group as primitive, and yet others as incommensurable. However, in the real world, not all cultures and their beliefs are perceived equally valid (Bourdieu, 1984). Re-invoking Burbules and Rice's (1991) view that dialogue across difference can be counterproductive if it does not take relations of power and domination into its consideration, we can ask another question—do individual's positions within broader social and political hierarchies render some opinions about arranged marriages or FGM valid and others not so valid? Moreover, if dialogue is not platonic (Burbules, 2000), do asymmetries of power and status make the stakes in conversation much more risky for some than for others?

This study empirically demonstrated how teachers from three ethno-racial backgrounds responded in profoundly different ways to different cultural practices, as well as analyzed the dynamics of their interactions. Even though some of us might think that it is trivial that people from different cultural and racial backgrounds perceive the world differently, this study prompts us to think about where to begin when racial differences conflict. In particular, in situations where teachers from different racial and cultural backgrounds work together closely and in developing intercultural/multicultural/social justice educational curricula, we must find a common ground in order to have better chance of having some counter-hegemonic effects. In a present educational contexts, in which "hardly anyone has a bad word to say against dialogue" (Burbules, 2000, p. 251), we would do better to attend more closely to the dynamics of inactions among teachers from various ethno-racial backgrounds to question inclusion and expansion of multiple voices within dialogue, as well as recognizing that merely giving voices to everyone in conversation should not be the ultimate goal in

social justice education. In this regard, Bourdieu contends that the structure of speech events is always “predefined by broader racial . . . relations” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 144). The parallel conversations in this study, in which multiple discourses were clearly present without much engagement of one another, reflect limits and barriers of dialogue that we need to attend to in order to fully benefit from the kinds of dialogue that is mutually constructive of new perspectives and understandings.

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