

## **AMERICAN CULTURAL TRAITS, VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS**

### **Individualism**

Americans are devoted to individualism. They are trained from childhood to make their own decisions in life and to have their own opinions. They are not trained to see themselves as members of a close-knit, tightly interdependent family, religious group or tribe.

A person beyond the age of twenty or so, still living with his or her parents is said to be 'tied to mother's apron strings' and looked upon as immature or abnormal. Americans assume others to conceive of themselves as individuals too, and have difficulty understanding those of other cultures who seem excessively concerned with tradition, the opinions of their parents, or fulfilling obligations to others. They assume such people are 'weak' not having the opportunity to 'do their own thing'.

Americans consider the ideal person to be individualistic, self-reliant, and independent. They assume, incorrectly, that other people share this value and self-concept. Heroes are those individuals who stand out from the crowd by doing something first or best, or who have overcome adverse circumstances to succeed in life. They avoid becoming dependent on others.

### **Privacy**

Americans place high value on privacy. They assume that people need time alone and have difficulty understanding someone who always wants to be with other people.

If possible, each American child will have his or her own bedroom - a place to be alone.

Americans assume that people have private thoughts they never share with anyone. Confidentiality rules abound for doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists, and others to prevent personal situations becoming known.

American houses, yards and offices can be seen as open and inviting, yet in the American mind there are boundaries other people are not supposed to cross.

### **Equality**

Americans believe in the ideal of equality. Even though the ideal is often violated in daily life, especially in interracial or male/female relationships, Americans have a deep faith that in some way all people (at least all American people!) are of equal value - no one is born superior. This causes Americans to be uncomfortable with being the object of open displays of respect, being deferred to, or treated as if they could do no wrong. Higher status is recognised by Americans, but in subtle ways: those who speak first, louder, longer; sit at the head of the table or in the most comfortable chair; feel free to interrupt other speakers, etc. Those accustomed to obvious displays of respect like bowing, or averting eyes, or using titles rather than first-names may think that Americans are unaware of status and are disrespectful of others.

This faith in equality leads Americans to be informal in behaviour and relationships. Store clerks or waiters may introduce themselves by their first names in a casual, friendly manner. Slang is heavily used in most conversations. Americans of nearly any station in life appear in public in jeans, sandals, or other informal attire; they slouch in chairs or lean on walls and furniture. For instance, an advertising brochure for a highly regarded college includes a photograph of the college's president in shorts and an old T-shirt, jogging on the campus. Americans feel comfortable with a college president

who is just like everyone else, who doesn't think he's too good for others.

### **Future-Oriented**

Americans are generally less concerned about history and traditions than people from other cultures; they believe the future is what counts. Americans believe in setting goals and working toward them; that people can change the social environment if they just get to work. New things are better than old ones.

Americans assume that human nature is basically good and that more education and training or rehabilitation can make people better. Many spend much time in volunteer work in schools, raising money for worthy causes, cleaning up the environment, preserving wilderness areas, or perhaps playing host to foreign students.

Americans assume that they are improvable. Self-help books and groups to help Americans stop smoking, stop drinking, lose weight, get into better physical condition, manage time more efficiently, or manage money more effectively, are popular. 'Where there's a will, there's a way.'

For Americans, time is a resource that can be used well or poorly. 'Time is money' is a well-known saying. The well-organised person has a list of things to do and a schedule for doing them. The ideal person is punctual and does not waste other people's time. Time must be saved whenever possible. Americans place a premium on efficiency. The 'fast-food' industry is a good example of this.

Americans admire achievers: those who accomplish some physical, measurable thing. The ideal person is a hard worker. A hard worker works efficiently and meets reasonably high standards of quality. Americans believe they should be doing something most of the time. They are usually not content to sit for hours and talk with other people. Even recreation involves doing something.

### **Openness**

Americans consider themselves to be open and direct in dealings with other people. They assume that disagreements are best settled by means of forthright discussion. Feelings and requests ought to be plainly expressed. There are areas where Americans are reluctant to discuss things openly (e.g. when the topic is in an area they consider excessively personal or sensitive, or when they want to say 'No' to a request but do not want to 'hurt the feelings' of the person who made the request).

Americans are not taught to mask their emotional responses and think it proper to display feelings, within limits. Being 'honest' is usually more important than preserving harmony in interpersonal relationships.

Americans engage in 'small talk' on first acquaintance and may inquire briefly about family matters. They are explicitly taught not to discuss religion and politics unless they are fairly well acquainted with the people they are talking to. They do not consider religion and politics to be appropriate topics for informal discussion and debate. Financial matters are considered personal and usually outside the bounds of acceptable topics for discussion. In a conversation, speakers take turns frequently. Americans tend to be impatient with people who take long turns; they admire conciseness, or 'getting to the point'.

Americans from the West and East Coast have their cultural differences. Those from the West are often outspoken, open and accepting of new ideas. Those from Mid-West or the East are more reserved by nature and unwilling to yield to change quickly.

## **SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF AMERICAN LIFE**

### **Politics**

Americans are quite proud of their political system, even though most are not well informed about politics. At the same time, most Americans have a negative view of politics and politicians. The system may be very good, but the people who operate within it may not be. Politicians and government employees are seen as somewhat suspect. Americans see politics as separate from other areas of life and would generally rather not 'talk politics'.

The American system was originally established in such a way as to prevent quick, concerted action – to prevent it becoming too strong and endangering citizens' freedoms.

### **Family Life**

To Americans, 'family' means a father, a mother, and their children (though this is changing with the growing number of single-parent households, 'blended families', etc.). Others (grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.) are 'relatives'. Statistically, the average American family has 3.1 children. Children are central to the family unit and often receive the highest priority. They are given much 'power' by their parents. Children are expected to contribute to maintaining the home by doing 'chores'. Parents provide lessons of many kinds (dance, music, sport) for their children and buy things their children want. Many American teenagers have jobs, seen as good training for managing time and money.

American parents generally expect that their children's lives will be at least as comfortable materially as their own.

The elderly fight to live on their own as long as possible before moving to a nursing home or the home of their children.

### **Education**

America's educational system is based on the ideal that as many people as possible should have access to as much education as possible. Other ideals include producing a 100 per cent literate society; providing comparable educational programmes for everyone, regardless of race, handicap, or social standing; local control; parental involvement; and the assumption that there is always more to learn and be discovered.

The American system seeks to turn out 'well-rounded' people and good citizens with a general familiarity with many topics; specialisation comes later than in other systems.

Teachers are not particularly well paid or held in high regard.

### **Religion**

Americans tend to separate religion from other parts of their personal lives. The doctrine of separation of church and state is one of the foundation stones of the American system of government. Americans generally take pride in their religious freedom. The most common understanding of 'being religious' means belonging to a church and attending regularly. However, many people who attend church only on special holidays like Christmas and Easter consider themselves Christians. Most Americans are likely to turn to a religious official to perform ceremonies associated with marriage and death.

American coins bear the words, 'In God we trust'. In the pledge of allegiance, Americans refer to the United States as a nation 'under God'. Each session of the United States Congress, the Supreme Court, and other official bodies opens with a prayer for divine guidance. Candidates for public office make their religious views and affiliations public.

### **Social Ways**

**Courtesy** - This means acknowledging another person's presence or arrival. Either verbally ('Hi', 'Hello', 'Good morning') or non-verbally with a smile. Not 'talking down' to others or giving commands in an officious way. Saying 'Please' when making requests and 'Thank you' when requests are granted or services performed (even to such people as waitresses, taxi drivers, and hotel clerks). Saying 'You're welcome' in response to a thank you. Taking a place at the end of the line and waiting patiently.

**Schedules** - Considerate people will be mindful of other people's schedules and will not telephone too early, too late, or during meals.

**Gifts** - Comparatively speaking, Americans give gifts on a relatively small number of occasions (Christmas, birthdays, graduations, weddings, birth of a child) and to a relatively small circle of people (relatives and close friends). Giving gifts to people who are in a position to grant or withhold favours can be construed as improper.

**Sex Roles and Friendship** - Americans value friendships of the opposite sex and do not generally assume that a male and female will participate in sexual activity if they are alone together. They believe people are capable of showing restraint and maturity as business colleagues, etc.

**Sports and Recreation** - Such activities absorb a huge amount of Americans' emotion, as well as time and money. Professional athletes are national heroes and earn salaries in the millions of dollars. Special athletic ability can provide participants with a free college education. Many Americans jog every day, or play tennis, handball, racquet-ball. They go on ski trips and hunting expeditions. There are clubs for astronomy, bird-watching, cooking, dancing, ecology, fencing, gardening, hiking, and on and on. Americans own approximately 4,000,000 recreational vehicles and the manufacture of recreational clothing and equipment are major industries.

**Personal Hygiene** - Americans are taught that the odours a human body naturally produces (from perspiration, oily hair, and breath) are unpleasant and/or offensive. Body odours are controlled by bathing, shampooing, and using deodorants and perfumes; mouth odours are controlled by brushing teeth with toothpaste and using mouthwash. The ideal person does not use too much of a scented product (i.e. the scent is not discernible more than three or four feet away from the person). A person is expected to change their clothes every day.

**Non-verbal Communication** - Americans associate smiling with happiness, cheerfulness and amusement. Americans are trained to distrust people who do not 'look them in the eye' when talking to them. Space and distance during conversation varies from culture to culture. An American will keep backing away from a Latin or an Arab; an American will keep moving toward a Japanese. Touching can be a sign of acceptance, friendship, appreciation or forgiveness. Opposite sexes can touch under these circumstances without arousing suspicion in onlookers. Touching also varies. For instance, a comparison would show that while Americans touch each other more than the Japanese typically do, Americans touch less often than Latin Americans or Arabs.

(Adapted from "United We Serve", WEC International, 2002.)