

Friday, May 09, 2008

Core American Values Handout

Sociology Class Notes
Professor Henry Schissler

Core American Values

The United States, a pluralistic society, is made up of many different groups. They represent different political and social ideologies, religions and racial-ethnic groups, as well as countless thousands of interest groups that center around such divergent activities as collecting Barbie dolls and hunting quail.

But we do share core values (macro-level non-material culture). These values are generally assumed to be “the American way” and are taught to school children as morality and signs of good character. We are all socialized to believe in them through media presentations, political speeches, and in the workplace. Sociologist Robin Williams (no, not him) first identified these values in 1965.

1. Individualism (“Consistent Persistence”) Americans have traditionally prized success that comes from individual effort and initiative. They cherish the ideal that an individual can rise from the bottom of society to its very top. If someone fails to “get ahead,” Americans generally find fault with that individual, rather than with the social system for placing roadblocks in his or her path.
2. Achievement and Success (“Success Emphasis”) Americans place a high value on personal achievement, especially outdoing others. This value includes getting ahead at work and school, and attaining wealth, power, and prestige.
3. Activity and Work (“Work for Work’s Sake”) Americans expect people to work hard and to be busily engaged in some activity even when not at work.
4. Efficiency and Practicality Americans award high marks for getting things done efficiently. Even in everyday life, Americans consider it important to do things fast, and they constantly seek ways to increase efficiency.
5. Science and Technology Americans have a passion for applied science, for using science to control nature – to tame rivers and harness wind – and to develop new technology, from motorized scooters to talking computers.
6. Progress Americans expect rapid technological change. They believe that they should constantly build “more and better” gadgets

that will help them move toward that vague goal called “progress.”

7. Material Comfort Americans expect a high level of material comfort. This comfort includes not only good nutrition, medical care, and housing, but also late-model cars and recreational playthings – from boats to computer games.

8. Humanitarianism Americans emphasize helpfulness, personal kindness, aid in mass disasters, and organized philanthropy.

9. Freedom This core value pervades U.S. life. It underscored the American Revolution, and Americans pride themselves on their personal freedom.

10. Democracy By this term, Americans refer to majority rule, to the right of everyone to express an opinion, and to representative government.

11. Equality It is impossible to understand Americans without being aware of the central role that the value of equality plays in their lives. Equality of opportunity has significantly influenced U.S. history and continues to mark relations between groups that make up U.S. society.

12. Racism and Group Superiority Although it contradicts freedom, democracy, and equality, Americans value some groups more than others and have done so throughout their history. The slaughter of Native Americans and the enslaving of Africans are the most notorious examples.

In 1975, Sociologist James Henslin updated Williams’ analysis by adding three values.

1. Education Americans are expected to go as far in school as their abilities and finances allow. Over the years, the definition of an “adequate” education has changed, and today a college education is considered an appropriate goal for most Americans. Those who have an opportunity for higher education and do not take it are sometimes viewed as doing something “wrong” – not merely as making a bad choice, but as somehow being involved in an immoral act.

2. Religiosity There is a feeling that “every true American ought to be religious.” This does not mean that everyone is expected to join a church, synagogue, or mosque, but that everyone ought to acknowledge a belief in a Supreme Being and follow some set of matching precepts. This value is so pervasive that Americans stamp “In God We Trust” on their money and declare in their national pledge of allegiance that they are “one nation under God.”

3. Romantic Love Americans feel that the only proper basis for marriage is romantic love. Songs, literature, mass media, and “folk beliefs” all stress this value. They especially love the theme that “love conquers all.”

Ideal Culture – the ideal values and norms of a people; the goals held out for them

Real Culture – the norms and values that people actually follow

Posted by Henry at 9:08 AM
