

## “American Values”

Read the article below and be prepared to discuss the issue of cultural borrowing in class.

According to Robin Williams (1970), the following ten values are among the most important ones within American culture.

1. *Equal opportunities*—Americans tend to value providing everyone with the opportunity to get ahead, although everyone is not expected to end up in the same situation. In other words, while Americans do not believe that everyone should have the same amount of wealth or education, we do believe that the opportunity to acquire these things should be available equally to all. Many Americans have traditionally believed that such equality of opportunity does exist in our society, and that personal achievement is limited only by an individual’s abilities and desire.
2. *Achievement and success*—American culture is competitive; that is, the belief is that each person should receive only what is deserved on the basis of individual talent and initiative. Occupation is perhaps the most important area in which Americans measure achievement and success. Thus, many Americans assume that a physician has more innate ability and drive than a nurse.
3. *Activity and work*—American culture encourages action over reflection, and we Americans actively attempt to manipulate and control the environment to serve our interests. For this reason, we often take a dim view of cultures that appear more easygoing.
4. *Efficiency and practicality*—Americans value activity that solves problems and produces the greatest results in the least amount of time. “Building a better mousetrap” is praiseworthy in our culture, especially when done in the most “cost effective” way.
5. *Progress*—Americans are generally optimistic about themselves and their future. We tend to believe that the present is better than the past, that the future is likely to be better still, and that the “very latest” is the “very best.” American supermarkets are full of products that are advertised as “new and improved.” Relatively few items are praised for being “old-fashioned,” although in a society that changes as rapidly as our own, there is always some tendency to cast a nostalgic eye on the “slower and simpler” ways of the past.
6. *Science*—Americans believe that science provides the most effective way to address problems. We expect the work of scientific experts and technologists to improve continually our lives. We like to think of ourselves as rational people and tend to devalue emotions and intuition as sources of knowledge.
7. *Material comfort*—We are a culture of consumers, eager to acquire material things of all kinds. Most Americans define the good life in terms of having many possessions. Celebrations, from birthdays to religious holidays, are occasions to present others with material goods.
8. *Democracy*—Americans believe that each individual has political rights that cannot be overridden by others. Ideally, our political system is based on the participation of all adults through the process of elections. Similarly, our economy is based on providing products and services that meet the needs of a broad range of selective, individual consumers.

9. *Freedom*—Closely related to democracy, this cultural value is based on the belief that each person has the right of free expression. Furthermore, although Americans recognize that everyone has responsibilities and obligations to others, we also believe that individuals should be free to pursue their own goals without unreasonable interference from the government or other people.

10. *Racism and group superiority*—Although expressing a commitment to the values of equality and freedom, Americans often link personal worth to membership in particular social categories based on ethnicity, race, social class, or sex. Thus, while Americans like to think of themselves as equals, some of us are “more equal than others.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Robin Williams, Jr., *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).