US Culture and Values

“It is difficult to define what an American is because there are so many kinds of Americans.” — Korean student at Yale University

The U.S. is a vast and diverse nation, with many regions and subcultures that account for a wide spectrum of cultural norms. While there is no simple answer to what makes an American tick, some generalizations about U.S. culture are possible, and this can be helpful along the path to deeper understanding and assimilation. A bit of advice though: as with all generalizations – apply this information carefully. Sometimes it will work and sometimes it won’t.

Individualism

One of the most pervasive values in U.S. American culture is individualism, and understanding its effects can help illuminate many aspects of the culture. The lone cowboy on the endless prairie, riding strong and silent with his horse as his only companion, epitomizes the American ideal of self-fulfillment and self-reliance. In American culture, in order to succeed and achieve your personal best, one must be strong and independent.

In more collective cultures, accomplishments and successes may be viewed foremost as an honor to the group, for example, how it reflects upon one’s family or hometown community. In the US, a person’s success is more likely to be attributed primarily to the hard work and perseverance of the individual.

In an individualistic culture, decisions made to benefit the self, such as moving far from one’s parents to go to your preferred choice for college would not be as likely to be considered selfish, but would be supported. In fact, children’s independence is encouraged in American culture. Teenagers of all socioeconomic classes might be expected by their parents to have an after school job to promote autonomy and responsibility. After graduation from high school a child is considered a ‘young adult’ and could be asked to pay rent, or move out from the family home.

Time

Efficiency is a virtue in the U.S. Americans are apt to become impatient with slow moving lines particularly when they are trying to conduct business, and expect rapid and efficient customer service. Chatting with the customers at the expense of efficient service is not well tolerated. To Americans time is money. It should be valued, saved, and used wisely.

Americans also place considerable value on punctuality. Different types of activities have different conventions. You should arrive at the exact time specified for meals or appointment with professors, doctors, and other professionals. You can arrive anytime between the hours specified for informal parties, receptions, and cocktail parties. Plan to arrive a few minutes before the specified time for public meetings, plays, concerts, movies, sports events, classes, church services, and weddings. If you’re unable to keep an appointment, you should always call to advise them that you will be late or unable to arrive. For professional appointments,
latecomers risk being turned away, and no shows who do not give adequate notice may be billed for the missed appointment – no matter what the excuse. Don’t be surprised if, when you run into an American acquaintance who is late for an appointment, that individual doesn’t stop to say hello, but instead just rushes by. The need for punctuality is respected.

Privacy

The right to privacy is a notion that runs deep in American culture. It’s something to be both respected and defended, and is considered fundamental to a free society. Americans carry this right like a shield, and while often very warm and welcoming hosts, the home is considered a bastion of privacy. “Alone time” is considered important for balancing mental and physical health. It is inappropriate to visit even close friends without calling ahead, and although Americans often tell a guest, “Make yourself at home,” it is a friendly statement that must be carefully interpreted.

Because U.S. culture is rather informal, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain the boundaries. Three questions that seem to violate the privacy rule are: How old are you?, How much money do you make?, and How much do you weigh? Generally, Americans may even hesitate to ask these questions to close friends. Stiff, uncomfortable body language is one way to tell when privacy boundaries have been crossed.

Directness/Openness

Although it may seem contradictory to the American sense of privacy, Americans are raised to be open and direct. While defending the right to privacy, an American may assert that you must have something to hide if you aren’t willing to be open and honest. Overall, they may be quite uncomfortable when faced with a more reserved, and less direct approach. Directness equals trustworthiness in American culture. One comforting aspect of the straightforwardness of Americans is that, unlike other cultures where what is said can be quite different from what is meant, in the U.S., no usually means no and yes usually means yes.

Americans, however, are not as open as they might like to believe in some areas, such as when they are compelled to criticize. Constructive criticism is a term for delivering criticism in a way the other person will not find offensive or unacceptable. When not speaking openly, Americans will often convey their reactions in nonverbal ways like facial expressions, body position, and gestures. Honesty is highly valued though, and it is expected that in close relationships, or with subjects that are perceived as very important, truth is more likely to be chosen over harmony.

Social Mobility

At the heart of the American dream lies the lure of ‘rags to riches’ – the belief that if one works hard enough, no matter what the circumstances, there are no limits to achievement. In other words, success is based on personal effort and merit, and the harder you work and the more deserving you are will lead to a commensurate rise in achievement. Indeed many come to the United States each year to seek prosperity and advancement, and there are those who do manage
to thrive in the competitive economy. Exceptional success stories such as high paid executives who grow up in poverty or college drop outs who become famous billionaires help to underscore this notion. Statistically, however, socio-economic status, race, gender, and other factors can affect one’s chances for betterment. In spite of antidiscrimination laws and other social policy tools designed to level opportunities, social mobility is not as fluid as the ‘Dream’ may suggest.

Equality/Informality

“All men are created equal” is one of the most famous quotations from the Declaration of Independence, and the value of equality is considered fundamental to the American spirit. This belief is more likely to lead to informality in general behavior than to fluidity between socio-economic classes. The informality of American speech, especially the common use of first name, casual dress, and relaxed posture can be quite shocking to some international students and scholars. Be careful not to confuse informal behavior with lack of hierarchy, respect or absolute informality. The signs of respect, while often subtle, are important, and it is better to be too formal than too informal. Wait to be asked to be on a first name basis with your professors, or supervisors for example.

Competition/Achievement

Because of the emphasis on the individual, Americans can be competitive, and to be called a high achiever in the U.S. is quite a compliment.

While it is not always easy to transcend one’s circumstances, there is a more fluid class system in the U.S. than in some other more traditional cultures. Hard work, when coupled with greater earnings, may be rewarded with a rise in social class. This also feeds the perception that it is possible to work one’s way to the top in America, and with the exception of entrance into the upper crust of society (also referred to as old money), it may be.

Americans value action, and will generally keep a very busy schedule. As the saying goes, “work is a virtue, and idleness is a sin”. To not be busy could be considered strange. Even routine, social or recreational activities are likely to be scheduled. As a result, Americans may seem hurried, running from one thing to the next — unable to relax and enjoy themselves. To a newcomer, the pace of life may seem very rushed at first.

The emphasis on achievement can lead to not only an over-scheduled life, but also not-so-friendly competition. One of the good things about these high achieving Americans is that they can have a good sense of teamwork when cooperating with others toward a common goal. In the school setting, this team spirit is perhaps best exemplified by the popularity of study groups where students work together on a project or exam preparation.

Taboos

Social protocols are quite relaxed in the U.S. so there are very few taboos. Here are some things that are unacceptable in American culture:
• Cover your mouth when you yawn, sneeze or cough. Americans are careful not to spread germs. It is considered unsanitary to not cover one’s mouth.
• Americans are offended by strong odors, and normally bathe daily (sometimes twice daily in hot weather), and use underarm deodorant. Strong smelling perfumes or colognes are applied sparingly because they may not be pleasant to others.
• Do not belch loudly in public. Flatulence should be controlled as discreetly as possible.
• Do not spit. You may see people spitting on the streets, but it is considered very rude.
• Do not pick your teeth or nose in public.
• Do not stare (gaze continuously) at someone you are talking to.
• Do not whistle at women.

Culture Shock

Culture shock is a period of ups and downs typically experienced when moving to a new culture. The process is different for each individual and can vary in onset, length, sequence and severity. It helps to be familiar with the stages of culture shock since knowing about it can ease the process.

Typical symptoms may include physical and emotional changes such as:

• Homesickness
• Feeling like a child
• Disliking the new culture
• Stress
• Frequent crying, or feeling like crying
• Changes in appetite or energy levels
• Sleeplessness
• Lasting feeling of sadness
• Headaches or stomachaches