INDIVIDUALISM, FREEDOM, COMPETITIVENESS, AND PRIVACY

Individualism

The most important thing to understand about Americans is probably their devotion to individualism. They are trained from very early in their lives to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life and their own destinies. They are not trained to see themselves as members of a close-knit, interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or any other collective.

You can see it in the way Americans treat their children. One day I was at a local shopping mall, waiting in line to buy an Orange Julius (a cool drink made in a blender with orange juice, ice, and some other ingredients). Behind me in the line was a woman with two children, a boy who was about three years old and a girl who was about five. The boy had his hand in a pocket of his blue jeans, and I could hear that he had some coins in there.

The boy asked his mother, "Can I get an Orange Julius?"

"No," she said to him. "You don't have enough money left for an Orange Julius. Remember you bought that cookie a while ago. You do have enough money for a hot dog. So you could get a hot dog now if you want to. Or, you could save your money, and sometime later when you have enough money, we could come back here and you could get an Orange Julius."

When I tell this story to people from other countries, they usually react with disbelief. The idea that a child so young would even have his own money to spend, let alone be expected to decide how to spend it, seems beyond their comprehension. Here is a young boy whose own mother is forcing him to make a decision that affects not just his situation at the moment—whether or not to get a hot dog—but will also affect him at some unspecified time in the future, when he will have more money.

But when Americans hear this story, they usually understand it perfectly well. This mother is helping her son learn to make his own decisions and to be accountable for his own money. Some American parents might not expect a three-year-old to make a decision about how to spend money, but they certainly understand what the mother is doing. She is getting her son ready for a world in which he will be responsible for his choices and

their consequences. Even his own mother won't be helping him later in life, and he needs to be prepared.

This particular mother may or may not have owned a copy of Dr. Benjamin Spock's famous book, *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*, to which millions of American parents have long turned for information and advice on raising their children. A recent version of the book makes this observation:

> In the United States . . . very few children are raised to believe that their principal destiny is to serve their family, their country, or their God [as is the practice in some other countries]. Generally children [in the United States] are given the feeling that they can set their own aims and occupation in life, according to their inclinations. We are raising them to be rugged individualists . . . (1998, 7)

The ideal U.S. American rugged individualist moves out of his or her parents' home after completing secondary school, either to go to college or take on a job. A major consequence of the early-2000s economic depression was the large number of young people who were compelled by financial difficulties to remain in, or move back into, their parents' home. Most Americans consider such situations deeply unfortunate.

Research by social scientists indicates that the culture of the United States is among the most individualistic in the world. From the viewpoint of many international visitors, American individualism is well exemplified by the phenomenon of the "vanity" license plate. Instead of settling for a license plate that contains whatever random letters and numbers their state sends them, automobile owners can pay an extra fee and get a license plate that conveys a message of their own choosing. The plate might convey something about their outlook on life (such as O2 BE ME), political opinion (BUSHLIES), religious views (ATHIEST), hobby (DANCR), or self-image, (STUDLY). Vanity plates enable a person to stand out from the crowd.

Americans are trained to conceive of themselves as separate individuals, and they assume everyone else in the world is too. When they encounter a person from abroad who seems to them excessively concerned with the opinions of parents, with following traditions, or with fulfilling obligations to others, they assume that the person feels trapped or is weak, indecisive, or "overly dependent." They assume all people must resent being in situations where they are not "free to make up their own minds." They assume,

furthermore, that after living for a time in the United States, people will come to feel "liberated" from constraints arising from outside themselves and will be grateful for the opportunity to "do their own thing" and "have it their own way." As indeed, many are.

Margaret Wohlenberg was the only American student among about nine hundred Malays enrolled at the branch campus of Indiana University in Shah Alam, Malaysia. She took Psychology 101, an introductory psychology course from the Indiana University curriculum and earned a grade of A+. The other students' grades were lower. In her assessment of the class, she wrote,

> I do not think that Psych 101 is considered a very difficult course for the average freshman on the Bloomington campus [Indiana University's main location], but it is a great challenge to these [Malay] kids who have very little, if any, exposure to the concepts of Western psychology. . . . The American [while growing up] is surrounded, maybe even bombarded, by the propaganda of self-fulfillment and self-identity. Self-improvement and self-help—doing my own thing—seem at the core of American ideology.

But these are "quite unfamiliar ideas to the Malay students," Ms. Wohlenberg said. The Malay students' upbringing emphasizes the importance of family relationships and individual subservience to the family and the community.

It is this concept of themselves as individual decision makers that blinds at least some Americans to the fact that they share a culture with each other. They often have the idea, as mentioned above, that they have independently made up their own minds about the values and assumptions they hold. The notion that social factors outside themselves have made them "just like everyone else" in important ways offends their sense of dignity.

Americans, then, consider the ideal person to be an individualistic, self-reliant, independent person. They assume, incorrectly, that people from elsewhere share this value and this self-concept. In the degree to which they glorify "the individual" who stands alone and makes his or her own decisions, Americans are quite distinctive.

The individual that Americans idealize prefers an atmosphere of freedom, where neither the government nor any other external force or agency

dictates what the individual does. For Americans, the idea of individual freedom has strong, positive connotations.

By contrast, people from many other cultures regard some of the behavior Americans legitimize with the label "individual freedom" to be self-centered and lacking in consideration for others. Mr. Wilson (see pages xx) and his mother are good American individualists, living their own lives and interfering as little as possible with others. Tariq Nassar found their behavior almost immoral.

Foreign visitors who understand the degree to which Americans are imbued with the notion that the free, self-reliant individual is the ideal kind of human being will be able to understand many aspects of American behavior and thinking that otherwise might not make sense. A very few of many possible examples:

- Americans see as heroes those individuals who "stand out from the crowd" by doing something first, longest, most often, or otherwise "best." Real-life examples are President Abraham Lincoln, aviators Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart, civil-rights leader Martin Luther King, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, Apple founder Steve Jobs, and football player Tom Brady. Perhaps the best example from the world of fiction is the American cowboy as portrayed by such motion-picture actors as John Wayne and Clint Eastwood.
- Americans admire people who have overcome adverse circumstances (for example, poverty or a physical handicap) and "succeeded" in life. Barack Obama is one example (although not everyone agrees with his ideas). Media mogul Oprah Winfrey is another.
- Many Americans do not display the degree of respect for their parents that people in more traditional or family-oriented societies commonly do. From their point of view, being born to particular parents is a sort of historical or biological accident. The parents fulfill their responsibilities to their children while the children are young, but when the children reach "the age of independence," the close child-parent tie is loosened, occasionally even broken.
- It is not unusual for Americans who are beyond the age of about twenty-two (and sometimes younger) and who are still living with their parents to pay their parents for room and board. Elderly parents living with their

grown children may do likewise. Paying for room and board is a way of showing independence, self-reliance, and responsibility for oneself.

- Americans buy huge numbers of self-help and how-to books, reflecting their inclination to do things for themselves rather than seek help from others. Foreign visitors are often struck by the frequency with which their requests for help are greeted not with offers of the desired help but with instructions for helping themselves.

Certain phrases common among Americans capture their devotion to individualism: "You'll have to decide that for yourself." "If you don't look out for yourself, no one else will." "Look out for Number One" (or, reflecting the growing influence of Hispanics in the country, "Look out for *Numero Uno*"). "Be your own best friend."

In the late 1900s, social scientists who studied cultural differences published extensively about differences between individualistic and collectivistic societies. Some of their articles offered observations that can be quite helpful to collectivists and others trying to understand American culture. Two examples follow; both mention ideas that are addressed elsewhere in this book. The first passage is from Richard Brislin:

> To transcend the distance between self and others, people in individualistic societies have to develop a certain set of social skills. These include public speaking, meeting others quickly and putting them at ease . . . , making a good first impression, and being well mannered, cordial, and verbally fluent during initial encounters with others. These skills are not as necessary for collectivists. When it comes time for a person to meet unknown others in the larger society, members of the collective act as go-betweens and make introductions, describe the person's accomplishments and abilities, and so forth. . . . In short, individualists have to rely on themselves and to develop skills that allow them to branch out in society. Collectivists have a supportive group that assists in this same goal. (1990, 21–22)

Collectivists will want to understand that individualists are, according to Harry Triandis, Richard Brislin, and C. H. Hui, likely to:

- pay relatively little attention to groups (including families) they belong to

- be proud of their accomplishments and expect others to feel proud of their own accomplishments
- be more involved with their peers and less involved with people who are older or more senior in an organization, and be more comfortable in social relationships with those who are their equals and less comfortable in relationships with people of higher or lower status than themselves
- act competitively
- define status in terms of accomplishments (what they have achieved through their own efforts) rather than relationships or affiliations (the family or other group to which they belong)
- seem relatively unconcerned about being cooperative or having smooth interpersonal relations
- seem satisfied with relationships that appear superficial and short-term
- be ready to "do business" very soon after meeting, without much time spent on preliminary getting-acquainted conversation
- place great importance on written rules, procedures, and deadlines, such as leases, contracts, and appointments
- be suspicious of, rather than automatically respectful toward, people in authority
- assume that people in general need to be alone some of the time and prefer to take care of problems by themselves. (1988, 271)

Let's elaborate for a moment on just one of these ideas: act competitively. Individualistic Americans naturally see themselves as being in competition with others. Competitiveness pervades U.S. society. It is obvious in the attention given to athletic events and to star athletes, who are praised for being "real competitors." It is also obvious in schools and co-curricular activities for children, where games and contests are assumed to be desirable and beneficial. Competitiveness is less obvious when it is in the minds of people who are persistently comparing themselves with others: who is faster, smarter, richer, better-looking; whose children are the most successful; whose husband is the best provider or the best cook or the best lover; which salesperson sold the most during the past quarter; who earned his first million dollars at the earliest age; and so on. People who are competing

with others are essentially alone, trying to maintain their superiority and, implicitly, their separateness from others.

Closely associated with the idea of the self-sufficient individual is the typical U.S. American assumption that each individual has a fundamental identity: a core of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors that make up the "self." Along with that comes the assumption that people everywhere have a similar view of themselves and their "personal identities."

But that is not the case. "One of the things I've learned to love about Japan," wrote an American visiting professor in that country,

> is its freedom from the classic Western notion that a person is a stable, unchanging, continuous entity, some essential self. In Japan, behavior and even personality depend partly on context, on the rules of a given situation. (Davidson, 101–102)

Privacy

Also closely associated with the value they place on individualism is the importance Americans assign to privacy. U.S. Americans tend to assume that most people "need some time to themselves" or "some time alone" to think about things or recover their spent psychological energy. Most Americans have great difficulty understanding people who always want to be with another person, who dislike being alone. Americans tend to regard such people as weak or dependent.

If the parents can afford it, each child will have his or her own bedroom. Having one's own bedroom, even as an infant, inculcates in a person the notion that she is entitled to a place of her own where she can be by herself and—notice—keep her possessions. She will have her clothes, her toys, her books, and so on. These things will be hers and no one else's.

Americans assume that people have their "private thoughts" that might never be shared with anyone. Doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists, and others have rules governing "confidentiality" that are intended to prevent information about their clients' personal situations from becoming known to others. Corporations and other organizations have "privacy policies" intended to assure that information they obtain about individual clients or members will not be made known to others. "Hacking" into computer systems to obtain information about other people is illegal.

Americans' attitudes about privacy can be difficult for people from other countries to understand. For example, Americans will often give visitors a tour of their house, including the bedrooms, which people from many other places consider private. They may speak quite openly, even to strangers, about personal or family problems that would be kept confidential elsewhere. Yet, in Americans' minds, there are boundaries that other people are simply not supposed to cross. When such boundaries are crossed, the Americans' bodies will visibly stiffen and their manner will become cool and aloof.

On the other hand, users of the social-networking site Facebook will often reveal information about themselves that, outside the environment of a computer network, they would probably keep to themselves.

EQUALITY

Americans are also distinctive in the degree to which they believe in the ideal, as stated in their Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal." Although they sometimes violate the ideal in their daily lives, particularly in matters of interracial relationships and sometimes relationships among people from different social classes, U.S. Americans have a deep faith that in some fundamental way all people (at least all American people) are of equal value, that no one is born superior to anyone else. "One person, one vote," they say, conveying the idea that any person's opinion is as valid and worthy of attention as any other person's opinion. U.S. Americans generally admire a higher-status person who acts "down to earth" or does not "put on airs." By wearing blue jeans in his public appearances, for example, multimillionaire Apple founder Steve Jobs can appear to be a "regular guy."

Americans are usually uncomfortable when someone treats them with obvious deference. They dislike being the subjects of open displays of respect—being bowed to, deferred to, or treated as though they could do no wrong or make no unreasonable requests. They may even be offended at the suggestion that there are social classes in the United States, so strong is their belief in the ideal of equality.