

that reflect well on his or her status: a bigger house, a sports car, a boat, a vacation home, and so on.

For decades, three-quarters of incoming university students in the United States have told pollsters that earning “a lot of money” was a “very important” goal for them.

Regardless of income, Americans tend to spend money rather freely on material goods. Items that they once considered luxuries, such as personal electronic devices, large-screen television sets, cellular telephones, and electric garage-door openers are now considered necessities. Credit cards, which are widely available even to teenagers, encourage spending, and of course the scale and scope of the advertising industry is well known. Americans are often criticized for being so “materialistic,” so concerned with acquiring possessions. For Americans, though, this materialistic bent is natural and proper. They have been taught that it is good to achieve, to work hard, and to acquire more material badges of their success and in the process ensure a better future for themselves and their families. And, like people elsewhere, they do what they are taught. No wonder that the high unemployment rate marking a financial recession causes a high incidence of mental health problems among Americans.

## DIRECTNESS AND ASSERTIVENESS

Americans, as we’ve said before, generally consider themselves to be frank, open, and direct in their dealings with other people. “Let’s lay our cards on the table,” they say. Or, “Let’s stop playing games and get to the point.” These and many other common expressions convey the American’s general idea that people should explicitly state what they think and what they want from other people.

Americans usually assume that conflicts or disagreements are best settled by means of forthright discussions among those involved. If I dislike something you are doing, I should tell you about it directly so you will know, clearly and from me personally, how I feel about it. Bringing in other people to mediate a dispute is commonly considered cowardly, the act of a person without enough courage to speak directly to someone else.

The word **assertive** is the adjective Americans commonly use to describe the person who plainly and directly expresses feelings and requests. People who are inadequately assertive can take “assertiveness-training classes.” What many Americans consider assertive is, however, often judged as aggressive by some non-Americans and sometimes by other Americans—particularly if the person referred to is a woman.

**Levels of directness**, like most other aspects of interpersonal relationships, **vary** not just according to cultural background but also according to **personalities and context**. Some people are more blunt than others. Bosses can generally be more direct with subordinates than vice versa. Parents are likely to be more direct with their children than with their own parents.

Americans will often speak openly and directly to others about things they dislike, particularly in a work situation. They will try to do so in a manner they call **“constructive”**—that is, a manner the other person will not find offensive or unacceptable. If they do not speak openly about what is on their minds, they will often convey their reactions through facial expressions, body positions, and gestures. **Americans are not taught, as people in many Asian countries are, that they should mask their emotional responses.** Their words, the tone of their voices, or their facial expressions will usually reveal their feelings: anger, unhappiness and confusion, or happiness and contentment. They do not consider it improper to display these feelings, at least within limits. Many Asians feel embarrassed around Americans who are exhibiting a strong emotional response. On the other hand, as we will see in Part II, Latin Americans and Middle Easterners are generally inclined to display their emotions more openly than Americans do and view Americans as unemotional and “cold.”

U.S. Americans, though, are often less direct and open than they realize. There are in fact many restrictions on their willingness to discuss things openly. It is difficult to categorize those restrictions, which are often not “logical” in the sense of being consistent with each other. Generally, though, Americans are reluctant to speak openly when:

- the topic is in an area they consider excessively personal, such as unpleasant body or mouth odors, sexual functioning, mental illness, or personal inadequacies;

- they want to decline a request that has been made of them but do not want to offend or hurt the feelings of the person who made the request;
- they are not well enough acquainted with the other person to be confident that direct discussion will be accepted in the constructive way that is intended; paradoxically,
- they know the other person very well (it might be a spouse or close friend) and they do not wish to risk giving offense and creating negative feelings by talking about some delicate problem.

A Chinese visitor invited an American couple to his apartment to share a dinner he had prepared. They complimented him warmly about the quality of his meal. "Several Americans have told me they like my cooking," he replied, "but I cannot tell whether they are sincere or are just being polite. Do you think they really like it?" His question reflects a common confusion about when Americans can and cannot be "taken at their word."

All of this is to say that Americans, even though they see themselves as properly assertive and even though they often behave in open and direct ways, have limits on their openness. It is not unusual for them to try to avoid direct confrontations with other people when they are not confident that the interaction can be carried out in a constructive way that will result in an acceptable compromise. (Americans' ideas about the benefits of compromise are discussed later.)

There are regional variations within the United States regarding people's willingness to speak openly and directly with others. Urban Easterners have a reputation for being more blunt than people from other parts of the country, particularly the Midwest and the South, where being "nice" might be considered more important than being "honest."

International visitors often find themselves in situations where they are unsure or even unaware of what the Americans around them are thinking or feeling and are unable to find out because the Americans will not tell them directly what they have on their minds. Two examples:

Sometimes a person from another country will "smell bad" to Americans because he or she does not follow the hygienic practices, including

daily bathing and the use of deodorants, that most Americans consider necessary (see chapter 16). But Americans will rarely tell another person (American or otherwise) that he or she has “body odor” because that topic is considered too sensitive.

A foreigner (or another American, for that matter) may ask a “favor” of an American who considers it inappropriate, such as wanting to borrow some money or a car or asking for help with an undertaking that will require more time than the American thinks she or he has available. The American will want to decline the request but will be reluctant to say no directly.

Americans might feel especially reluctant to refuse someone from another country directly for fear of making the person feel unwelcome or discriminated against. They will often try to convey their unwillingness indirectly by saying such things as “it’s not convenient now” or by repeatedly postponing an agreed-upon time for doing something.

Despite these limitations, Americans are generally more direct and open than people from almost all other countries with the exception of Israel and Australia. They will not try to mask their emotions, as Scandinavians or Japanese tend to do. They are much less concerned with “face” (that is, avoiding embarrassment to themselves or others) than most Asians are. To them, being honest is usually more important than preserving harmony in interpersonal relationships.

Americans use the words *pushy* or *aggressive* to describe a person who is excessively assertive in voicing opinions or making requests. The line between acceptable assertiveness and unacceptable aggressiveness is difficult to draw. Iranians and people from other countries where forceful arguing and negotiating are typical forms of interaction risk being seen as aggressive or pushy when they treat Americans in the way they treat people at home. This topic is elaborated upon in chapter 2.