

# Fifteen U.S. Values According to Sociologist ROBIN WILLIAMS

If someone asked you to list the values of people in today's society, what would you include? Famous sociologist Robin Williams (*not the comedian*) suggests there are fifteen dominant values in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

**1 Achievement and Success.** What do you want to accomplish with your life? Each of us has our own definition of success. For some it means having a high income, for others a college degree, still others simply want a better life than their parents had. Since success is an abstract concept, we often look at our achievements to determine whether or not we've been successful.

**2 Activity and Work.** It's what you might call the American dream: With enough hard work, anyone can pave a path to success. Thanks in part to this widely held belief, work has become a strong cultural value in the United States. We don't like when others call us "lazy" or "idle," and we fill free time with hobbies and activities. In fact, we spend more time on the job than most people in the industrialized world.<sup>10</sup>

**3 Moral Orientation.** U.S. citizens have a tendency toward absolute ethical judgments regarding what is good, bad, right, or wrong. For example, when President George W. Bush suggested in 2003 that North Korea, Iran, and Iraq formed an "axis of evil," he was using an absolute moral orientation.

**4 Humanitarianism.** In the United States, many people are generous and value philanthropy. In times of crisis, we are willing to help. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, people all over the country assisted the residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast area. Organizations raised more than \$2.7 billion, including about \$1 billion in the first three weeks.<sup>11</sup>

**5 Efficiency and Practicality.** People in the United States seek the most benefit for the least effort. We believe that efficiency helps us achieve goals quickly and easily.

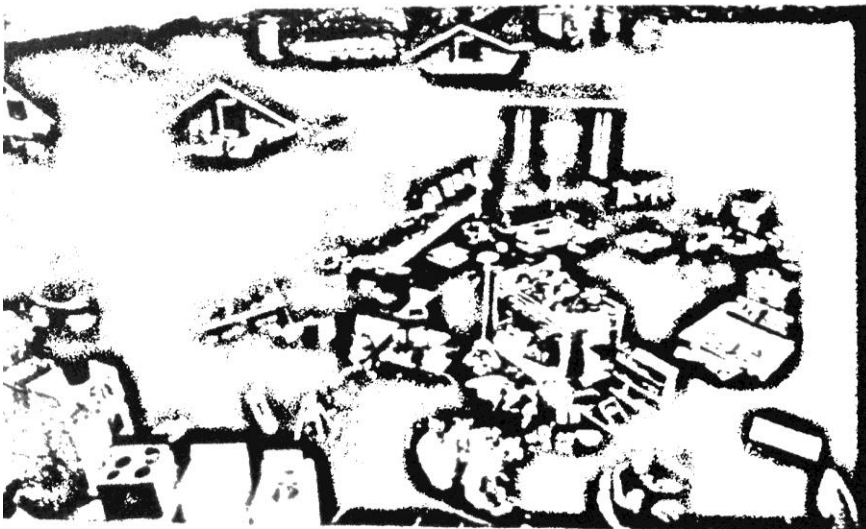
**6 Progress.** People who value progress believe in "moving forward" by making changes and proposing ideas designed to improve society. For example, you (and most of the people you know) probably believe that, to some extent at least, new technology improves life. This belief is one motivator behind the One Laptop Per Child program, which sends kid-friendly, wireless-enabled laptops to developing countries in an attempt to increase children's educational opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

**7 Material Comfort.** If you've ever felt like you have too much "stuff"—and yet you still want more—you're far from alone. The desire for material comfort drives many of us to buy bigger homes and fill them with things that make our lives easier, like wireless Internet. There are more Wi-Fi hotspots in the United States than in the United Kingdom, the Russian Federation, and Taiwan combined.

**8 Equality.** Since the Declaration of Independence was penned, people in the United States have embraced the notion that all people should be treated equally regardless of race, gender, social class, or religious background. However, we don't always put our egalitarian values into practice. For example, female CEOs ran only 12 Fortune 500 companies in 2007. This gender disparity reflects women's struggle to achieve equality in the workplace.

**9 Freedom.** Generally, U.S. citizens place high value on civil liberties and the rights of the individual. Civil liberties limit the power of the government in our daily lives. We value our freedom to speak our minds, hold independent beliefs, and follow the religious practices of our choice.

**10 External Conformity.** Don't underestimate the power of a group to influence your choices. If you value external conformity, you're probably eager to fit in with those around you. When you were in high school, for example, other students probably influenced your desire to have the latest and greatest clothes, shoes, or haircut.



<<< Judging from the quantity of belongings strewn across the lawn, it's safe to say that this family places a high value on material comfort.

√ It's customary for players and fans alike to remove their hat, place their right hand on their hearts, and sing the national anthem before sporting events. Why do so at an event that has nothing to do with politics, patriotism, or war?



**11 Science and Secular Rationality.** In the United States, scientific proof and rational thought aren't concepts to be sneezed at. The essence of the scientific method is to use logic, order, and rational thought to attain knowledge. Many of us believe that logic and science can solve any problem that arises, including complex issues such as a cure for cancer or a solution to global warming.

**12 Nationalism and Patriotism.** We use the term *civil religion* to describe national pride and patriotism when it takes on an almost religious context.<sup>13</sup> In our everyday lives, you and I might engage in ritualistic patriotism without much thought. For example:

- What does singing the national anthem before sporting events have to do with sports?
- What does starting the school day with the pledge of allegiance have to do with learning?

**13 Democracy.** As any politician running for elected office would be happy to tell you, voting is a valuable aspect of civic engagement in our democracy. For a significant number of U.S. citizens, inspiring democratic systems of government in other nations is valuable, too. In the past 18 years, the number of electoral democracies in the world has doubled. Although more than half of the countries in the world have democracies, not all of those countries give their residents the freedoms U.S. citizens take for granted. In 2006, Freedom House reported that only 89 of the 122 electoral democracies are "free" in the same sense as the United States is.<sup>14</sup>

**14 Individual Personality.** When Williams discusses "individual personality," he's talking about individualism, or the tendency to look at the world through the lens of the individual rather than the lens of family or community. If you have an individualist worldview, you believe that people are autonomous—in other words, people's choices and actions are not predetermined by their positions in society. Because individualists tend to place personal goals ahead of group goals, tension often develops in groups of individualists.<sup>15</sup>

**15 Racism and Related Group Superiority.** According to Williams, racism is a value in the United States, though not a positive one. Historical examples of racism toward non-Caucasian citizens abound, but racism is very much a contemporary issue. The town of Jena, Louisiana, made national headlines when, in 2006, nooses were hung from a tree and six African-American students were charged with attempted murder for beating up a white student. The case of the "Jena Six" makes it painfully clear that the United States continues to struggle with issues of race.<sup>16</sup>

## GO GLOBAL

### Individualistic and Collectivistic Views

Individualism, while it may be a core U.S. value, is hardly universal across the globe; people in countries such as Japan are more apt to see things through the lens of collectivism.<sup>17</sup> In a collectivist culture, interdependence is valued over independence, group goals valued over individual wants and needs.<sup>18</sup>

How do our individualist or collectivist views affect us in practical terms? For starters, let's consider how we respond to questions. Research has shown that people from more collective societies, such as China and Japan,

are less likely to answer with extremes on surveys. On a survey that allows participants to strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree, U.S. citizens are more likely to choose "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree," whereas Chinese and Japanese participants tend to choose the less extreme responses.<sup>19</sup>

Important cultural differences like these can inform business situations. For example, research has found that a culture's orientation, whether individualistic or collectivist, does influence economic development, and vice versa. When individualist U.S. businesses enter collectivist countries without well-established legal codes, regulations, and court systems, these

U.S. companies are likely to find that their business strategies don't succeed as well. Collectivist nations' business styles often differ from those of U.S. companies: In China, for example, businesspeople greatly value *guanxi*, or relationship development. While people working in the United States might not be used to building strong interpersonal relationships with potential business partners before even starting to work on a project, this type of in-depth relationship cultivation is critical in China. U.S. companies must be sensitive to cultural differences and adapt their business practices accordingly to be successful.<sup>20</sup>

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