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Values I What Are Values? What Do They Do? What are the Major American Values?

Michigan State University

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Home and Family Series

Margaret Jacobson, Extension Specialist in Family Life

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American Values?

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Michigan State University — Cooperative Extension Service

by Margaret Jacobson,
Extension Specialist in Family Life, MSU.

THE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD have developed varying patterns of living to meet fundamental problems of human existence. They have created ways of coping and living with the physical environment — with heat, cold, storms, and distance. Likewise, they have found and learned ways to deal with the biological environment of animals and plants and with their own biological needs. To cope with these problems and in order to live with themselves and each other, they have created language and other means of communication, systems of knowledge, customs such as marriage and manners, groups such as families, work and play, and other social organizations. Man has also created a host of other non-material and material things including art, music, buildings, tools, toys, clothes, cars, and books. He has also created ideas about what is right, desirable, and proper — what we call values. All of these patterns of behavior, material things, and ideas make up the *culture* of a people — their way of life.

What Are Values?

Values, the ideas of what is right, good, or best, are a significant part of culture. They represent the qualities, situations, and things we hold dear, prize, and cherish — what we strive for, the things we reward. Values are concerned with all of life. For instance, values can be concerned with:

1. **What is good and right behavior?** We call some values — such as respect for life, for truth, for justice — moral values.

2. **What is beautiful?** These are our aesthetic values.

3. **What is profitable?** Our economic values.
4. **What is useful?** Pragmatic values.
5. **What makes us feel good?** Sensual values.
6. **What is in fashion?** Prestige values.
7. **What is beyond man?** Spiritual values.

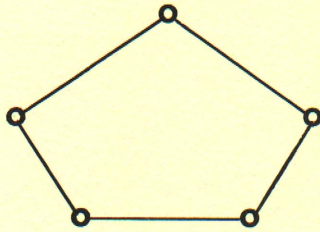
Obviously, these areas are related and sometimes they are the same, as for instance, when we say that beauty is truth.

Values have varying degrees of strength. Some are high on our list, and are musts. Others are lower — preferred, but not essential. To some values we give lip service, but they do not really influence behavior, while some are considered ideals — things to strive for, but not considered reachable.

Some values are *basic*, or *terminal* or “end” values. They can be thought of as the ultimate things we believe in. Other values are means to reaching basic values; they can be thought of as *instrumental* values. Basic values probably change more slowly than instrumental values.

Why Do We Need Values?

For the individual, values help provide direction and meaning to life. They influence behavior in the sense that they help give a basis by which to make decisions, to choose goals for which to work, to make choices among possible paths to a goal. Values can also help provide a sense of inner security and integrity. They give one a sense of believing in something, or even “being something,” which gives meaning to his life. When one has some values which he holds higher than others, he is able to resolve many conflicts about what to do in his life.



Members of a group hold some values in common. A person who does not share important values of a group may find himself "on the outside."

Groups need values, too. Shared values serve as a bond among members of a group. They help provide the group with a common direction, some common goals, some acceptable ways of behaving, and some reason for being. If the members of a group do not share some values in common, they find it difficult to resolve conflicts or even to stay together as a group. Generally, values also help preserve traditional ways of behaving and doing things and slow down change.

Group Values Vary

Each of the many different cultural groups throughout the world (for example — Western European, Far Eastern, etc.) has a somewhat characteristic and distinct set of values which differentiate it from other groups. Because of differences in physical environment, natural and other resources, and differences in historical and social development, different systems of values have evolved among the peoples of the world to help them deal with fundamental problems of life. The people who grow up and live in these different cultures share the values of their group. However, because of fundamental biological similarities and the fact that everywhere man has to live with other human beings, all groups share some values in common. It is in this sense that we say that all people of the world are alike, but they are also all different.

What Are American Values?*

To better understand ourselves, it is necessary to look at the major values of American culture. Within America, composed of people from many different ethnic and national backgrounds, of diverse religious systems, of varying social and economic groups, of different geographical regions, and differing occupational groups, there are many value systems. There are differences in the amount of importance attached to such things as wealth, education, and spiritual matters. However, our country has developed some ideas of what is best and right which we call major American *social values*. These have been described as:

* This outline is based on work by Robin Williams Jr., and is described in *American Society*, (New York: A Knopf, 1960). It includes major social value orientations, and does not include specific values of religious, educational, or other institutions.

1. **Achievement and success.** — We prize getting ahead in the world. We look at Abraham Lincoln, who rose from log splitter to President, as a symbol of American virtues. We don't like to admit failure. We think everyone should make the most of themselves and their opportunities.

2. **Activity and work.** — We like to be busy, to be "where the action is." Some of us find it difficult to see meaning in leisure. Sometimes, work is seen as a means of salvation with a moral, as well as an economic, value.

3. **Moral orientation.** — We tend to judge things in terms of right and wrong, good and bad, ethical or unethical. We aspire to something higher than our actual life — perhaps to be better than we really can be.

4. **Humanitarian ways.** — We believe in giving aid and comfort to the distressed and the underdog. On the other hand, we know that we have also been unjust and have not always acted in humanitarian ways toward some peoples, such as minority groups.

5. **Efficiency and Practicality.** — We prize getting things done, being useful, finding the easiest way to accomplish something without waste. This has helped us create innumerable inventions, gadgets, and assembly line methods, and has led to automation.

6. **Progress.** — We tend to look forward rather than backward. We want to be up-to-date, to equate newness with goodness. We tend to believe in continuing improvement, that things will, or at least should, get better.

7. **Material comfort.** — We want a "high standard of living," which to most of us means good food and clothing, high quality housing and equipment, good transportation, high standards of cleanliness. Most of us expect these as a matter of course, and almost feel we have a moral claim to them.

8. **Equality and justice.** — Equality of opportunity, rights and rewards, freedom from a rigid hierarchy, and the belief that "I am as good as the next one," have been proclaimed as basic American precepts since our founding days. However, these values, too, have been violated, particularly in the case of minority groups such as the American Negro. In fact, equality sometimes conflicts with our value on achievement.

9. **Freedom.** — Freedom in general or in some specific situation, such as religion or speech, is also said to be one of the most important and deeply held American values. We want to create our own destiny, to be free from restraint and from control by any one central authority. This concept holds not only for our political life, but carries over into our social and family relations. We realize, however, that freedom does not mean a license for any and every kind of

behavior; the very fact of living with others puts limits upon external freedom.

10. **External conformity.** — Everywhere men tend to conform to the groups with which they are most deeply identified. In fact, in order to survive, groups must have some conformity. In our society because of our stress on equality and because of our mass methods of production and communication, we place great emphasis upon being outwardly alike in what we buy and use — houses, cars, clothing, as well as in the way we act and speak, and in the opinions we hold. While we profess that we want to be different, we tend to punish openly or subtly those who dare to be too different.

11. **Science and secular rationality.** — We value scientific ways of approaching problems and seeking knowledge through the application of disciplined reason and observation. We also value the products of scientific research — verifiable, systemized, logical knowledge. Further, we value the use and application of this knowledge to achieve desired goals.

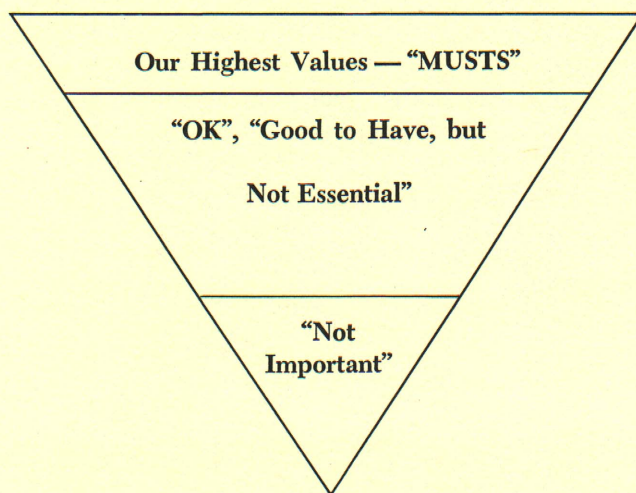
12. **Nationalism, patriotism.** — We value devotion to national interests; we place emphasis on Americanism, and censure actions and values which are considered to be unAmerican. Sometimes this emphasis is carried to the degree that we think our way of life is best and should be extended to all mankind.

13. **Democracy.** — The distribution of power and authority and the rule and control by the people directly or through representative government has also been upheld as one of our dominant American values. We carry our political ideas of democracy into our family and social relations and generally do not look with great favor upon authority vested in one supreme head.

14. **Individual personality.** — We value the individual, his integrity and independence, his right to respect as an end in himself and not as a means to an end. However, we do not believe this means the individual is free from all social controls. He also must be responsible.

These, then, in broad outline, are some of the major values of American culture — what we call *our social values*. Some are closely related to each other and compatible, while others are contradictory. Not all of these values are held in the same degree of intensity by all people and groups. Neither are all practiced in behavior even though they may be proclaimed in words and writing. For instance, such values as equality, political freedom, humanitarianism, or respect for the individual have been denied to some ethnic, religious, social, economic, or sex groups because of the assumption of their biological or social inferiority by some other groups. This dilemma is currently arous-

ing much action in our country and we can see signs that some of the inequalities and injustices are being resolved.



We strive to place our values in a hierarchy from the highest and deepest, to those of lesser consequence, to those of little or no importance. We may or may not succeed — and we may change.

Some of these values which we hold as Americans are shared by people of other cultures, while others are not held as strongly as in ours. Ours are not necessarily better or worse than those of other groups. Some of ours are more helpful to us than others might be in enabling us to live as we do. To illustrate: such values as self-discipline and work, initiative, individualism, and competition are helpful, perhaps necessary, to our kind of economic system. Other cultural groups do not value these characteristics as highly. For instance, the people of India have placed a higher emphasis upon mystical or other-worldly values than we have.

Individual Values

Because most of us have been born in the United States, we have been born into the American system of values. We think of our values as "a natural part of life" and are not always aware that they are, in fact, values we have learned.

While we share in these dominant American social values, we also have our own individual values. Each of us tends to have our own individual "pyramid of values" with some things higher in importance than others.

However, some of our values are so deeply and commonly held that we are not even aware of them. They may first come to conscious awareness when we are faced with a conflict. For example, suppose we are in a situation where we feel uncertain about what we

should do. Should we tell the whole truth or should we not? Why, or why not?

It is in these situations that we begin to be aware of our values and possible conflicts between them. We also become aware of these conflicts when we must make decisions about such matters as marriage, going to school, taking a job, making a purchase, selecting housing, taking sides on a community issue, choosing or perhaps severing relations with a friend, choosing leisure time activities, or similar matters. When we consider various possibilities and experience conflict, our values are operating.

One way we can learn to know ourselves and our own values better is to think about what we have done in the past, how we have lived, and how we are living. What did we do in situations where we had to choose? Were we satisfied with our choice? Through this kind of analysis, we may begin to know what we value.* We may decide that we are not living by what we value as much as we thought, or would like.

Sometimes it is relatively easy to resolve conflicts in our values, by consciously deciding to value one thing over another or by finding another value still higher than the values in conflict. We may decide to change what we are doing so our behavior "fits" our values more closely. We might decide that the particular value or values will apply to only selected aspects of life; that is, we compartmentalize our values. For example, we may decide that we will be "absolutely frank" in situations within the family, but not in the outside world. However, it is not always easy to resolve the conflict, and in the case of intense value conflicts, help may be needed.

The Values of Others

We can learn about the values of other people by observing what they do and say, although what people say does not always coincide with what they do. We can also learn about values by observing: What things make the headlines in news stories; what values are expressed in editorials, in articles, or in fiction;

* Another way that may help some people to become more aware of values is through a questionnaire which forces one to make choices about hypothetical situations. See "Values II — What's Important to You." Extension Bulletin E-648.

what kinds of behavior are rewarded; what gets punished; and what kinds of values are expressed in television series, in movies, in advertising, in children's books.

Sometimes values in what we see, read, and listen to are not stated explicitly as "this is what is important," but are implied in what is described, what is emphasized, what is gossiped about, what people say is good, or what people say should be done. What people do, or do not do, gives us some clues to the values that seem to be operating.

As we begin to understand our own values more clearly, we become more aware that we do not always share the same values with others. Value differences between people can lead to problems in understanding and communicating with each other, and can lead to conflicts.

The way in which many people avoid value conflicts with others is to associate most closely with groups which have relatively similar values and standards. While this helps reduce confusion over how to act and also reduces strong clashes, it tends to keep people unaware of the values of groups other than their own.

Because of our values for individual personality and for freedom, we feel that, in general, people have a right to their own values. Their values give meaning to their lives, just as ours do for us. However, it is very difficult to entirely escape judging the values of others, but we should do so on the basis of principles rather than on prejudice. We can ask such questions as these:

1. Do the values of other individuals or groups help them to survive in terms of their conditions of life?
2. Do the values provide the motivations and satisfactions that help them to achieve their goals?
3. Are the values attainable, or are the individuals frustrated in their attainments?
4. Do the values help lead to peaceful personal and/or world relationships?
5. Do the values contribute to the dignity and integrity of the individual?

We can ask these questions also of our own values.