



The Impact of the Traditional American Values and Beliefs on Family Relationships

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Abstract

It is said that the United States probably has a greater diversity of racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups than any other nations on earth. That's because it has been viewed as "the land of opportunity" attracting immigrants from all over the world. How could a nation of such enormous diversity produce a recognizable national identity? However, there are still certain values and beliefs, rooted in the country's history, which many Americans share. These values and beliefs have much impact on family relationships. This paper aims to discuss (1) some basic concepts about tradition, traditional American values and beliefs; (2) the impact of the traditional American values and beliefs on family relationships, and (3) the family values.

Keywords: traditional American values and beliefs, family values.

Introduction

The United States probably has a greater diversity of racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups than any other nations on earth. That's because it has been viewed as "the land of opportunity" attracting immigrants from all over the world. How could a nation of such enormous diversity produce a recognizable national identity? However, there are still certain values and beliefs, rooted in the country's history, which many Americans share. These values and beliefs have much impact on family relationships. This paper aims to discuss (1) some basic concepts about tradition,

traditional American values and beliefs; (2) the impact of the traditional American values and beliefs on family relationships, and (3) the family values.

Literature review

Some basic concepts about tradition, traditional American values and beliefs

In recent years we have begun to hear a lot of talks about something called traditional values. In reality, traditional values refer to the standards and values which were embraced by

most Americans from its earliest beginnings and throughout the majority of its history¹.

Traditions serve to preserve a wide range of culturally significant ideas, specific practices and the various methods used by distinct cultures. The word **tradition** means the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way. (*Resource from Oxford Languages*).

Traditional American values and beliefs

America is a nation with regional and cultural diversity, which gives it national character and enables its citizens to affirm their common identity as Americans. It is clear that having a particular race or creed or lifestyle does not identify one as American. However, there are certain values and beliefs, rooted in the country's history, which many Americans share. (Datesman, Crandall and Edward, 1997)

(1) Individual freedom and self-reliance

It seems that the word "freedom" is one of the most respected popular words in the United States today. According to Americans, "freedom" means the desire and the ability of all individuals to control their own destiny without outside interference from the government, a ruling noble class, the church, or any other organized authority. The desire to be free of controls was a basic value of the new nation in 1776, and it has continued to attract immigrants to this country.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (The Declaration of Independence)

There is, however, a price to be paid for this individual freedom is "self-reliance".

Individuals must learn to rely on themselves or risk losing freedom. This means achieving both financial and emotional independence from their parents, usually by the age 18 or 21. It means that Americans believe they should take care of themselves, solve their own problems, and "stand on their two feet".

(2) Equality of opportunity and competition

Americans believe that everyone has a chance to succeed here. They have felt that because individuals are free from excessive political, religious, and social controls, they have a better chance for personal success. Equality of opportunity may be thought of as an ethical rule. It helps ensure that the race for success is a fair one and that a person does not win just because he or she was born into a wealthy family, or lose because of race or religion.

There is, however, a price to be paid for this individual freedom is "competition". If much of life is seen as a race, then a person must run the race in order to succeed; a person must compete with others. (Datesman, Crandall and Edward, 1997)

(3) Idealizing what is practical

It is the fact that American tends to idealize whatever is practical. They believe that "what works is what counts". It can be concluded that this "can-do" spirit is something Americans are proud of today. They like to think they are natural-born do-it-yourselfers.

(4) Volunteerism

The do-it-yourself spirit is known as volunteerism in American community and practical life. Volunteerism means people helping people through privately initiated, rather than government-sponsored, agencies. Volunteers, usually unpaid, are highly motivated workers who organize themselves and other to solve a particular community

¹ (Dr. Dale A. Robbins,
<http://www.victorious.org/tradvalu.htm>)

problem or meet an immediate social need, rather than waiting for someone else – usually the government – to do it. This kind of value reflects American's optimistic pride in their ability to work out practical solutions themselves. (Cited from An Introduction to American Studies course book – VNU – Hanoi)

(5) Psychology of abundance

Historically, Americans have regarded their country as a land of limitless wealth. They believed that the nation resources will be never exhausted and run out. However, their attitudes toward wastefulness are changing because they recognize that the era of cheap and plentiful resources is over. Thus, they must adopt new value to cope with a shrinking world. (Cited from An Introduction to American Studies course book – VNU – Hanoi)

(6) Mobility

Mobility in America is not a sign of aimlessness but optimism. They move from place to place with the same sense of optimism, hoping to secure a better job or enjoy a warmer climate. The American habit of mobility has been important in contributing a degree of homogeneity to a society of such extreme cultural diversity and spaciousness. Cultural differences still exist from region to region, but they are becoming increasingly less distinct as mutual exchange occurs. (Cited from An Introduction to American Studies course book – VNU – Hanoi)

(7) Patriotism

A further consequence of American mobility is that they relatively little attach to one place. It seems that national pride has become generally stronger than regional pride. Their patriotism is expressed quite clearly by flying flags in suburban neighborhoods, bumper stickers announce "I'm proud to be American", the national anthem is played at every sporting events. It is clear that patriotism in America is in some ways distinct from one in other countries. In short, American patriotism is concentrated

instead upon the particular historic event of the nation's creation as a new start and upon the idea of freedom which inspired the nation's beginnings. (Cited from An Introduction to American Studies course book – VNU – Hanoi)

The impact of the traditional American values and beliefs on family relationships.

Traditionally, the American family has been a nuclear family, consisting of a husband, wife and their children, living in a house or apartment. Grandparents rarely live in the same home with their married sons and daughters, and uncles and aunts almost never do. In the 1950s, most of the American households were the "classic" American family. The father was the "breadwinner" (the one who earn the money to support the family), the mother was a "home maker" (the one who took care of the children and did not work outside the home), and they had two children under the age of 18. (Datesman, Crandall and Edward, 1997)

The emphasis on individual freedom

Americans view the family as a group whose primary purpose is to advance the happiness of individual members. As a result, the needs of each individual take priority in the life of the family.

It is the fact that the American desire for freedom from outside control clearly extends to the family. They do not like to have controls placed on them by other family members. Young Americans are encouraged by their families to make independent career decisions. In a nutshell, what would be best for the family is not considered to be as important as what would be best for the individual. (Datesman, Crandall and Edward, 1997)

Equality in the family

The belief in equality has had a strong effect on the family.

(1) The father's relationship to his children

Traditionally, the father is accepted as ruler and master. The children's relations with

him are very formal, and love for him is always combined with fear. Today, there is much more social equality between parents and children. The evidence is that arguments between parents and children are so popular, and in the considerable independence granted to teenagers. On the other hand, Americans give their young people a lot of freedom because they want to teach their children to be independent and self-reliant.

(2) Equality's effect on marriage relationships

It is the fact that the family structures do not change considerably, but the role of the husband and wife change a lot. Actually, the idea of equality affects the relationship between husbands and wives. Women have witnessed steady progress toward equal status for themselves in the family and in society at large.

According to Letha and John Scanzoni, the institution of marriage in the United States has experienced four stages of development. In each new stage, wives have increased the degree of equality with their husbands and have gained more power within the family.

Stage 1: Wife as servant to husband

Stage 2: Husband-head, wife-helper

Stage 3: Husband-senior partner, wife-junior partner

Stage 4: Husband-wife equal partner

The reality of life in the United States is that although most American women now have an equal say in decision affecting the family, they generally earn less than men for the same work. Also, most women are still spending more time taking care of the children, cooking and cleaning house than their husbands are. Thus, they feel like they have two full-time jobs – the one at work and the one at home. As for these women, they feel exhausted and unrewarding.

Nowadays, young couples strive to achieve equality in their career, their marriages, and their parenting, and society at large still lacks many of the structures that are needed to

support them. (Datesman, Crandall and Edward, 1997)

The family values

Surveys on family values showed that there are 11 points that a majority of Americans agree upon as "family values". Six of them are "clearly traditional": (1) Respecting one's parents; (2) Being responsible for one's actions; (3) Having faith in God; (4) Respecting authority; (5) Married to the same person for life; (6) Leaving the world in better shape.

The other five are "a blend of traditional and newer, more expressive values": (1) Giving emotional support to other members of the family; (2) Respecting people for themselves; (3) Developing greater skill in communicating one's feelings; (4) Respecting one's children; (5) Living up to one's potential as an individual. (Yankelovich, Daniel, 1981, 1994)

The idea of the American family is group cooperation to help achieve the fulfillment of each individual member, and shared affection to renew each member's emotional strength.

Recommendation and Conclusion

In conclusion, the American traditional values and beliefs have much impact on family relationships. They have effects not only on family relationships but also family structures. In which, individual freedom and equality values have the most effects on members of the family, the relationship between father and children, the relationship between husband and wife...

It is also very important for English learner to understand the native speakers' culture in general and American culture in particular. It will be very useful for students who study overseas in this country to grasp American culture and life style. Thus, teachers should be in charge of providing useful information and knowledge about culture of the native speakers so that their students will have

a right view on American culture and American family.

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