

Robert Kohls view on understanding american values



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In order to help immigrants and visitors to the US assimilate and understand the American attitude toward life, Robert Kohls a cultural anthropologist with The Washington International Center wrote an article that summarizes thirteen basic values that drive Americans. His research was published as “The Values Americans Live By” in 1984 as an effort to go beyond listing basic differences, but more as an educational piece that would promote acceptance and community. Values are not synonymous with culture, but can help define various cultural differences.

In America, there is not one standard culture, yet Kohls (1984) has found that the values presented “describe most (but not all) Americans.” (p. 1) A main focus point that Kohls emphasizes is that the visitor/immigrant should not look at these values with “negative or derogatory connotation” (p. 1) but rather with an understanding that Americans in general see these ideas as positive and are the values that have created America today. The more people understand one another, the more they are able to thrive together.

Even though Americans pride themselves on their self-perceived individualism (Kohls, 1984); they share common values of which a picture of their collective nature can be painted. In defining each of his thirteen values Kohls lists the value and then explains what it means to American ideology and then how an outsider can spot this value through specific behavior. Mr. Kohls explores the thirteen separately, yet in order to summarize them efficiently they can be sub grouped into two categories: inner and outer beliefs.

The inner beliefs dictate how a person views themselves and some of the values include the idea that Americans believe they can control their own fate, that each person is equal to each other, that we have the right to privacy, and change is good and brings about personal growth. The outer beliefs dictate the relationship structure with others and include the values of being open and honest with each other, that being informal is a sign of respect, competition produces results, and we are not reliant on our birthright to get ahead.

To further understand the inner values the value of self or " Self-Help" is very important to comprehend. In the average American-English dictionary there are over 100 words that begin with the prefix of " self"(Kohls, 1984, p. 4) while in other languages the equivalent prefix is often not found. As he lists many words that start with self, such as self-esteem, self-respect, and self-control it is apparent that in America, being a " self-made" person is very important (Kohls, 1984, p. 4).

As individuals, Americans believe we are all created equal and this egalitarian view of self is what allows the belief of control over destiny. Americans believe that because their own destiny is determined by their actions, then the actions they take, or the effort they put forth will determine their level of success which in turn allows them to own and acquire material items. When someone knows or believes that certain actions will produce probable results, the ability to be motivated and work hard is increased. Actions are rewarded and no dependent on fate.

If someone feels their work will result in a benefit to them and will amount to something then their long-term goals will be changed. Kohls makes note that it does not really matter if these values are actually true (Kohls, 184, p. 2) but since the person holding the value believes it is true their actions will follow the belief and they will then effect the change to happen. As Americans follow the values that can be considered inner values or beliefs they are able to shape their own view of the world and its possibilities.

Since Americans possess a different personal world view than some others, naturally how they value social interactions, or their outer values are also affected. The US values place a larger emphasis on personal achievement over personal relationships, often this might be seen as rude rather than as a value to be admired. Time is seen as a precious commodity and should not be wasted; time is usually more appreciated than relationships. By always striving to get as much done as efficiently as possible, practices and methods are placed with a higher priority over people and feelings.

Since Americans value time they often feel like they do not want to waste time with unnecessary formalities, niceties, or banter. If an idea needs to be expressed the fastest way to get it presented is often the route taken in order to maximize efficiency. This can lead to people with a different value that is based more on people rather than maximizing time views Americans as rude or inconsiderate (Kohls, 1984, p. 3). Instead of demonizing competition as a source of strife, Americans embrace it and see it as a valuable tool to increase productivity among competing businesses and people.

Because of the focus on competition and the idea that change is good, Americans are future looking, thus giving more respect to what could be rather than to what is or was. In cultures steeped in tradition this value could be a source of disrespect. As foreign visitors and immigrants come to America some of the values they possess might be different than many of the American values. Kohls suggests that these differences do not have to be seen as a stumbling block, but rather as a point of learning and acceptance (Kohls, 1984, p. 1).

Most Americans will not be able to comprehend and verbalize as succinctly as Kohls did the reasons why they act a certain way; and these values also might not apply to all Americans. His generalizations are made in order to give advice as well as create unity. Instead of analyzing the values in the terms of right or wrong, Kohls asks his audience to embrace the values and the people who apply them. In efforts to study and learn about each other, we will find that there are more similarities than disparities if we can just get past the initial differences.