

Is the American Ugly?

When evaluating the characteristics of any culture, it must be pointed out that even an anthropologist is bound by his/her own culture. Hsu, an anthropologist who spent half his life in China found that Americans are obsessed with privacy. However, we don't seem very private to the French with our unfenced yards, open office doors and the windows of our homes facing the street . It all depends, therefore, on who's looking.

Write "True" next to the items you think are general traits of American culture.

- _____ 1. The past plays a limited role in American culture. It is the foreseeable future that counts.
- _____ 2. There is an obsession and segmentation of time.
- _____ 3. Americans believe that sitting around "doing nothing" is productive.
- _____ 4. Group solidarity is more important than self-interest or self-expression.
- _____ 5. Privacy of the individual is not important.
- _____ 6. Bigger and more is better.
- _____ 7. Americans do not tolerate mistakes.
- _____ 8. A person is defined by their work.
- _____ 9. Religion is not important.
- _____ 10. Americans are patient toward actions perceived as "slow".
- _____ 11. America is a "non-contact" culture.
- _____ 12. Promptness is not highly valued.
- _____ 13. Americans value speaking to the point.

Adapted from F. Hsu's The Study of Literate Civilizations by Judie Haynes, 2002

Answers to “Is the American Ugly?”

1. **True.** Tradition and the past play a limited role. It is the foreseeable future (5, 10 or 15 years) that counts. In older cultures, the past plays a much greater role.
2. **True.** Americans are the most time-obsessed culture in the world. Time is sequential, monochronic in the U.S. and divided into tight compartments. In many other cultures people tend to do several things at the same time. They are polychronic.
3. **False.** Americans stress competition in both school and play. Group harmony plays a secondary role. In some Asian cultures, individualism is interpreted as selfishness.
4. **False.** In both school and play, Americans stress “doing.” In other cultures, you can be “doing” when you are sitting around doing nothing.
5. **False.** The privacy of the individual is an inalienable right. The privacy of a person’s body and property should not be violated. In order to have privacy, Americans need to be left alone physically. In other cultures, privacy can be a mental withdrawal.
6. **True.** Americans are obsessed with being number one. They will take this to extreme measures.
7. **False.** We are not motivated by a desire for perfection. Making mistakes is how we learn. We value fixing things more than doing it right the first time. Once something is fixed we are free to move on to something else and moving on is a major American preoccupation.
8. **True.** People are defined in terms of work and achievements.
9. **False.** Religion is important. An individual should believe in or acknowledge God and should belong to an organized church. Any religion is better than no religion.
10. **False.** Americans are impatient toward actions seen as “slow.”
11. **True.** Touching people is discouraged. Same sex touching is discouraged even among children. In other cultures same sex touching is not prohibited.
13. **False.** Promptness is a sign of being a responsible person. It is considered rude if people are not prompt. In many other cultures promptness is seen as “apple polishing.”
14. **True.** Being forthright is perceived as a desirable trait. In other cultures, speaking directly to the point can be considered very rude. It is polite to talk around and around a point and some things are not said at all.