

# Values and Beliefs

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will explore the concepts of values and beliefs, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Values and Beliefs
2. Ten Core American Values

## 1. VALUES AND BELIEFS

**Values** are cultural guidelines that delineate what is good and bad, and provide instruction for social living.

**Beliefs**, on the other hand, are convictions, understandings, and ideas that people hold as truth.

It's important to understand the relationship between values and beliefs, because they are distinct. Beliefs flow from values. Values come first and structure our beliefs.

### IN CONTEXT

Many Americans value hard work and industriousness. It is believed, then, that someone who works hard will be successful, and someone who is lazy and idle will be unsuccessful.

Americans also value equality of opportunity. Therefore, many Americans believe that black and white people can be equally qualified for jobs and that no one should be discriminated against based upon their race.



### BIG IDEA

Values can be understood as broad, transcended cultural standards that guide our thinking. Beliefs are specific matters that flow from values about which we have true and false opinions.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Values

Cultural guidelines that delineate what is good and bad and provide instruction for social living.

#### Beliefs

Convictions, understandings, and ideas that people hold as truth.

## 2. TEN CORE AMERICAN VALUES

Robin Williams Jr. was a sociologist and a student of culture who made his career studying American culture. Williams wrote a book in the 1970s which outlined the **ten core values of American life**:

- **Equal opportunity.** Fairness in life chances leads Americans to believe that they can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and get ahead.
- **Achievement and success.** As a very competitive society, Americans place emphasis on accomplishments, whether they be academic or economic. Often, success is measured by dollar earnings--this culture puts a premium on personal achievement and success
- **Material comfort.** People want to be comfortable, safe, and secure, so they strive for comfort. They enjoy leisure, vacations, and consumption for the same reasons that they strive for material comfort.
- **Activity and work.** America is the geographical and spiritual seed of capitalism, so Americans value hard work and industriousness over leisure, laziness, and idleness. This value dictates that you must work before play.
- **Practicality and efficiency.** Americans value efficiency in getting things done quickly and cost-effectively with immediate results.



### THINK ABOUT IT

What if you wanted to study Spanish, but your parents want you to study Chinese? When you say that you'd rather study Spanish, they say it's not practical or efficient. Why would they say this?

For your parents, studying Chinese will more favorably impact your future, so it is therefore a more practical and efficient use of your time. In American culture, if something is not practical or efficient--in this case, studying Spanish--then it's not valued.

- **Progress.** We value the new over the old, the present over the past. Historical ways of living are looked down on and laughed at.



**EXAMPLE** The value of progress is why a new version of your computer, iPad, and the phone comes out every year. Americans always want the newest and latest version. Stephen Colbert once joked about how his day was going great until Steve Jobs made him hate his Christmas present because the new model had just been released.

- **Science and rational thinking.** Americans are imbued with strong rationality, and we often rely on reason over emotion in our decision-making and social life. Science is believed to help discover and deliver truth and advance progress, industry, and society.



### DID YOU KNOW

The band Coldplay has a song lyric that talks about how 'science and progress do not speak as loud as his heart'. Even though Coldplay is British, a reference to core American values has made its way into their music.

- **Democracy:** Americans have democracy and free enterprise. We cherish democratic elections and abhor anything that seems to be entitled privilege-- monarchs, queens, etc. Democracy is one of America's founding values.
- **Freedom:** Americans value the freedom to pursue one's dreams. Being held down by obligations, duties, or roles is to be avoided because it may hamper us from pursuing our personal goals.
- **Group superiority:** This may seem like an anti-value, but many Americans still judge others based on race, class, or gender. These issues tend to be amplified in American society relative to European societies. Americans tend to privilege certain groups over others: men over women, whites over people of color, English, French, and German ancestry over Polish and Eastern European heritage.

This is not an exhaustive list. For example, religion and religious freedom is also a hallmark American value. America is more religious as a nation than most countries of similar economic standing. Also, not every value on this list is held by each and every individual in this country.

Robin Williams Jr. was attempting to determine the social values that describe American society as a whole. Americans are free to disagree with any of these values if they choose, but socially, these are the ten central American values he identified.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Ten Values Central to American Life

Devised by Robin Williams Jr. these values are: 1) Equal Opportunity; 2) Achievement and Success; 3) Material Comfort; 4) Activity and Work; 5) Practicality and Efficiency; 6) Progress; 7) Science and Rational Thinking; 8) Democracy; 9) Freedom; 10) Group Superiority.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### Robin Williams Jr.

American sociologist who made a career out of studying American cultural life and gave us the Ten Values Central to American Life.



#### SUMMARY

Today you learned about **values** and **beliefs**, and their importance in culture. You also learned about sociologist **Robin Williams, Jr.**, and his ten core values of American life.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Beliefs

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### **Values**

Cultural guidelines that delineate what is good and bad and provide instruction for social living.



## **PEOPLE TO KNOW**

### **Robin Williams Jr.**

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