

Appendix C- Althen Readings (Lectures 5 & 6, topic 10)

Introduction

(Excerpt starts from page xiv, through xvii)

On Asking “Why?”

This is not a philosophical or political book. It is more of a practical guide. It barely concerns itself with the question of *why* Americans act as they do. There is a great temptation among people who encounter cultural differences to ask why those differences exist. “Why do they talk so loud?” “Why do men wear those narrow pieces of cloth tied up around their necks?” “Why are they so hard to get to know?” “Why do they smile and act so friendly when they can’t even remember my name?” And countless other such questions, most of them ultimately unanswerable. The fact is that people do what they do. The “whys”—the reasons—are probably not determinable. The general characteristics of American culture have been ascribed by various observers to such factors as its 19th-century history as a large country with an open frontier to the west; its people’s origins among dissenters and the lower classes in Europe; its high level of technological development; the influence of Christianity; the declining influence of Christianity; and its capitalist economic system. No one can say which of these explanations, or others, is “right.” And it is not necessary, in daily dealings with Americans, to understand *why* they act as they do. So this book does not examine that topic in depth.

The assumption underlying this book’s discussion of American and other cultures is that, as one well-known student of cross-cultural matters put it, “People act the way they were taught to act, and they all have different teachers.” There *are* reasons for people’s behaving the way they do, even if it is impossible to be certain what those reasons are. People who have grown up in the United States have been taught, or trained, to act in certain ways and not in others. They share a “culture.” We will begin exploring that culture after a few words about Americans’ conceptions of themselves and their attitudes toward foreigners.

How Americans See Themselves

It is usually helpful, when trying to understand others, to understand how they see themselves. A few comments about Americans’ self-perceptions appear here; others come later.

Americans do not usually see themselves, when they are in the United States, as representatives of their country. They see themselves as individuals (we will stress that point later) who are different from all other individuals, whether those others are Americans or foreigners. Americans may say they have no culture, since they often conceive of culture as an overlay of arbitrary customs to be found only in other countries. Individual Americans may think they chose their own values, rather than having had their values and the assumptions on which they are based imposed on them by the society in which they were born. If you ask them to tell you something about “American culture,” they may be unable to answer and they may even deny that there *is* an “American culture.”

Because they think they are responsible as individuals for having chosen their basic values and their way of life, many Americans resent generalizations others make about them. Generalizations such as the ones in this book disturb many Americans. They may be offended by the notion that they hold certain ideas and behave in certain ways simply because they were born and raised in the United States, and not because they had consciously thought about those ideas and behaviors and chosen the ones they preferred.

At the same time, Americans will readily generalize about various subgroups within their own country. Northerners have stereotypes (that is, generalized, simplified notions) about Southerners, and vice versa. There are stereotypes of people from the country and people from the city; people from the coasts and people from inland; people from the Midwest; minority ethnic groups; minority religious groups; Texans; New Yorkers; Californians; Iowans; and so on. We will comment later on differences among these various groups of Americans. The point here is to realize that Americans see few

generalizations that can safely be made about them, in part because they are “so individualistic” and in part because they think regional and other kinds of differences clearly distinguish Americans of various groups from each other.

How Americans See Foreigners

Like people everywhere else, Americans as they grow up are taught certain attitudes toward other countries and the people who live in them. Parents, teachers, school books, and the media are principal sources of information and attitudes about foreigners and foreign countries.

Americans generally believe that theirs is a superior country, probably the “greatest” country in the world. It is economically and militarily powerful; its influence extends to all parts of the globe. Americans generally believe their “democratic” political system is the best possible one, since it gives all citizens the right and opportunity to try to influence government policy, and since it protects citizens from arbitrary government actions. They also believe the system is superior because it gives them the freedom to complain about anything they consider wrong with it.

Americans generally believe their country’s “free enterprise” economic system has enabled them to enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the history of the world.

If Americans consider their country to be superior, then it cannot be surprising that they often consider other countries to be inferior. The people in those other countries are assumed not to be quite as intelligent or hard-working or sensible as Americans are. Political systems in other countries are often assumed to be inadequately responsive to the public and excessively tolerant of corruption and abuse; other economic systems are regarded as less efficient than the American economic system. Foreigners (with the exception of Canadians and northern Europeans, who are generally viewed with respect) tend to be perceived as “underdeveloped Americans,” prevented by their primitive economic and social systems and by their quaint cultural customs from achieving what they could if they were Americans. Americans tend to suppose that people born in other countries are less fortunate than they are, and that most foreigners would prefer to live in the United States. The fact that millions of foreigners seek to enter or remain in the United States illegally every year supports this view. (The fact that billions of foreigners do not seek entry is ignored or discounted.)

Foreign visitors often find that Americans in general condescend to them, treating them a bit (or very much) like children who have limited experience and perhaps limited intelligence. Foreign visitors are well advised that remember that it is not malice or intentional ignorance that leads so many Americans to treat them like inferior beings. The Americans are, once again, acting the way they have been taught to act. They have been taught that they are superior, and they have learned the lesson.

There are obviously many exceptions to the preceding generalizations. The main exceptions are those Americans who have lived or at least traveled extensively in other countries and those who have in some other way had extensive experience with people from abroad. Many Americans will also make an exception for a foreigner who has demonstrated some skill, personality trait, or intellectual capability that commands respect. British writers, German scientists, Korean martial arts specialists, and Kenyan runners readily have many Americans’ respect.

On Describing Americans

If you ask a Turk (for example) who is visiting the United States whether the Americans she has met think and act the way Turks normally do, she’ll probably say, without any hesitation, “No!” If you then ask her to explain *how* the Americans differ from the Turks, she will not answer so quickly. “Well, that’s hard to say.”

It is indeed difficult to explain how one cultural group differs from another. Anthropologists, sociologists, journalists,

(Introductory text is deleted from this point on.)

Chapter 1: American Values and Assumptions

As people grow up, they learn certain values and assumptions from their parents and other relatives, their teachers, their books, newspapers, and television programs. "Values" are ideas about what is right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, normal and abnormal, proper and improper. In some cultures for example, people are taught that men and women should inhabit separate social worlds, with some activities clearly in the men's domain and others clearly in the women's. In other cultures that value is not taught, or at least not widely. Men and women are considered to have more or less equal access to most roles in the society.

"Assumptions," as the term is used here, are the postulates, the unquestioned givens, about people, life, and "the way things are." (Scholars debate about the definition of such terms as "values," "assumptions," and others that appear in this book. But this book is not for scholars. It is for foreign visitors who want some basic understanding of America. Those visitors who want to read more scholarly works on the issues raised here can refer to the bibliography at the end of the book.) People in some societies assume, for example, that education takes place most efficiently when respectful young people absorb all they can of what older, wiser people already know. The young people do not challenge or even discuss what they are taught. The assumption is that learners are seeking *wisdom*, which comes with age. Young and inexperienced people are not wise enough to know what is worth discussing.

People in other societies assume that education requires learners to question and challenge the older "expert" when the expert's ideas disagree with the learner's. The assumption is that learners are seeking *knowledge*, which a person can obtain regardless of age or social standing.

People who grow up in a particular culture share certain values and assumptions. That does not mean they all share exactly the same values to exactly the same extent; it does mean that most of them, most of the time, agree with each others' ideas about what is right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, and so on. They also agree, mostly with each other's assumptions about human nature, social relationships and so on.

Any list of values and assumptions is arbitrary. Depending on how one defines and categorizes things, one could make a three-item list of a country's major values and assumptions or a 30-item one. The list offered below has eight entries, each covering a set of closely related ideas.

Notice that these values and assumptions overlap with and support each other. In general, they agree with each other. They fit together. A culture can be viewed as a collection of values and assumptions that go together to shape the way a group of people perceive and relate to the world around them.

Individualism and Privacy

The most important thing to understand about Americans is probably their devotion to "individualism." They have been trained since very early in their lives to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life and their own destinies. They have not been trained to see themselves as members of a close-knit, tightly interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or other collectivity.

You can see it in the way Americans treat their children. Even very young children are given opportunities to make their own choices and express their opinions. A parent will ask a one-year-old child what color balloon she wants, which candy bar she would prefer, or whether she wants to sit next to mommy or daddy. The child's preference will normally be accommodated.

Through this process, Americans come to see themselves as separate human beings who have their own opinions and who are responsible for their own decisions.

Indeed, American child-rearing manuals (such as Dr. Benjamin Spock's famous *Child and Baby Care*) state that the parents' objective in raising a child is to create a responsible, self-reliant individual who, by the age of 18 or so, is ready to move out of the parents' house and make his or her own way in life. Americans take this advice very seriously, so much so that a person beyond the age of about 20 who

is still living at home with his or her parents may be thought to be “immature,” “tied to the mother’s apron strings,” or otherwise unable to lead a normal, independent life.

Margaret Wohlenberg was the only American student among about 900 Malays enrolled at Indiana University’s branch campus in Shah Alam, Malaysia, in 1986. She took Psychology 101, an introductory psychology course from the Indiana University curriculum and earned a grade of A+. The other students’ grades were lower. After the experience she reported:

I do not think that Psych 101 is considered a very difficult course for the average freshman on the Bloomington campus (Indiana University’s main location) but it is a great challenge to these (Malay) kids who have very little, if any, exposure to the concepts of Western psychology...The American (while growing up) is surrounded, maybe even bombarded, by the propaganda of self-fulfillment and self-identity. Self-improvement and self-help—doing my own thing—seem at the core of American ideology.

But these are “quite unfamiliar ideas to the Malay students,” Ms. Wohlenberg says. The Malay students’ upbringing emphasizes the importance of family relationships and individual subservience to the family and the community.

Americans are trained to conceive of themselves as separate individuals, and they assume everyone else in the world is too. When they encounter a person from abroad who seems to them excessively concerned with the opinions of parents, with following traditions, or with fulfilling obligations to others, they assume that the person feels trapped or is weak, indecisive, or “overly dependent.” They assume all people must resent being in situations where they are not “free to make up their own minds.” They assume, furthermore, that after living for a time in the United States people will come to feel liberated from constraints arising outside themselves and will be grateful for the opportunity to “do their own thing” and “have it their own way.”

It is this concept of themselves as individual decision-makers that blinds at least some Americans to the fact that they share a culture with each other. They have the idea, as mentioned above, that they have independently made up their own minds about the values and assumptions they hold. The notion that social factors outside themselves have made them “just like everyone else” in important ways offends their sense of dignity.

Americans, then, consider the ideal person to be an individualistic, self-reliant, independent person. They assume, incorrectly, that people from elsewhere share this value and this self-concept. In the degree to which they glorify “the individual” who stands alone and makes his or her own decisions, Americans are quite distinctive.

The individual that Americans idealize prefers an atmosphere of *freedom*, where neither the government nor any other external force or agency dictates what the individual does. For Americans, the idea of individual freedom has strong, positive connotations.

By contrast, people from many cultures regard some of the behavior Americans legitimize by the label “individual freedom” to be self-centered and lacking in consideration for others. Mr. Wilson and his mother are good American individualists, living their own lives and interfering as little as possible with others. Mohammad Abdullah found their behavior almost immoral.

Foreigners who understand the degree to which Americans are imbued with the notion that the free, self-reliant individual is the ideal kind of human being will be able to understand many aspects of American behavior and thinking that otherwise might not make sense. A very few of the many possible examples:

Americans see as heroes those individuals who “stand out from the crowd” by doing something first, longest, most often, or otherwise “best.” Examples are aviators Charles Lindberg and Amelia Earhart.

Americans admire people who have overcome adverse circumstances (for example, poverty or a physical handicap) and “succeeded” in life. Black educator Booker T. Washington is one example; the blind and deaf author and lecturer Helen Keller is another.

Many Americans do not display the degree of respect for their parents that people in more traditional or family-oriented societies commonly display. They have the conception that it was a sort of historical or biological accident that put them in the hands of particular parents that the parents fulfilled their responsibilities to the children while the children were young, and now that the children have reached “the age of independence” the close child-parent tie is loosened, if not broken.

It is not unusual for Americans who are beyond the age of about 22 and who are still living with their parents to pay their parents for room and board. Elderly parents living with their grown children may do likewise. Paying for room and board is a way of showing independence, self-reliance, and responsibility for oneself.

Certain phrases one commonly hears among Americans capture their devotion to individualism: “Do your own thing.” “I did it my way.” “You’ll have to decide that for yourself.” “You made your bed, now lie in it.” “If you don’t look out for yourself, no one else will.” “Look out for number one.”

Closely associated with the value they place on individualism is the importance Americans assume that people “need some time to themselves” or “some time alone” to think about things or recover their spent psychological energy. Americans have great difficulty understanding foreigners who always want to be with another person, who dislike being alone.

If the parents can afford it, each child will have his or her own bedroom. Having one’s own bedroom, even as an infant, inculcates in a person the notion that she is entitled to a place of her own where she can be by herself and—notice—keep her possessions. She will have *her* clothes, *her* toys, *her* books, and so on. These things will be hers and no one else’s.

Americans assume that people have their “private thoughts” that might never be shared with anyone. Doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists, and others have rules governing “confidentiality” that are intended to prevent information about their clients’ personal situations from being known to others.

Americans’ attitudes about privacy can be difficult for foreigners to understand. Americans’ houses, yards, and even their offices can seem open and inviting, yet, in the Americans’ minds, there are boundaries that other people are simply not supposed to cross. When the boundaries are crossed, the Americans’ bodies will visibly stiffen and their manner will become cool and aloof.

Equality

Americans are also distinctive in the degree to which they believe in the ideal, as stated in their Declaration of Independence, that “all men are created equal.” Although they sometimes violate the ideal in their daily lives, particularly in matters of interracial relationships, Americans have a deep faith that in some fundamental way all people (at least all American people) are of equal value, that no one is born superior to anyone else. “One man, one vote,” they say, conveying the idea that any person’s opinion is as valid and worthy of attention as any other person’s opinion.

Americans are generally quite uncomfortable when someone treats them with obvious deference. They dislike being subjects of open displays of respect—being bowed to, being deferred to, being treated as though they could do no wrong or make no unreasonable requests.

It is not just males who are created equal, in the American conception, but females too. While Americans often violate the idea in practice, they do generally assume that women are the equal of men, deserving of the same level of respect. Women, according to the viewpoint of the feminists who since the 1970’s have been struggling to get what they consider a “fair shake” for females in the society, may be different from men, but are in no way inferior to them.

This is not to say that Americans make no distinctions among themselves as a result of such factors as sex, age, wealth, or social position. They do. But the distinctions are acknowledged in subtle ways. Tone of voice, order of speaking, choice of words, seating arrangements—such are the means by

which Americans acknowledge status differences among themselves. People of higher status are more likely to speak first, louder, and longer. They sit at the head of the table, or in the most comfortable chair. They feel free to interrupt other speakers more than others feel free to interrupt them. The higher status person may put a hand on the shoulder of the lower status person; if there is touching between the people involved, the higher status person will touch first.

Foreigners who are accustomed to more obvious displays of respect (such as bowing, averting eyes from the face of the higher status person, or using honorific titles) often overlook the ways in which Americans show respect for people of higher status. They think, incorrectly, that Americans are generally unaware of status differences and disrespectful of other people. What is distinctive about the American outlook on the matter of equality are the underlying assumptions that no matter what his or her initial station in life, any individual has the potential to achieve high standing and that everyone, no matter how unfortunate, deserves some basic level of respectful treatment.

Informality

Their notions of equality lead Americans to be quite *informal* in their general behavior and in their relationships with other people. Store clerks and waiters, for example, may introduce themselves by their first (given) names and treat customers in a casual, friendly manner. American clerks, like other Americans, have been trained to believe that they are as valuable as any other people, even if they happen to be engaged at a given time in an occupation that others might consider lowly. This informal behavior can outrage foreign visitors who hold high stations in countries where it is not assumed that “all men are created equal.”

People from societies where general behavior is more formal than it is in America are struck by the informality of American speech, dress, and postures. Idiomatic speech (commonly called “slang”) is heavily used on most occasions, with formal speech reserved for public events and fairly formal situations. People of almost any station in life can be seen in public wearing jeans, sandals, or other informal attire. People slouch down in chairs or lean on walls or furniture when they talk, rather than maintaining an erect bearing.

A brochure advertising a highly-regarded liberal-arts college contains a photograph showing the college's president, dressed in shorts and an old T-shirt, jogging past one of the classroom buildings on his campus. Americans are likely to find the photograph appealing: “Here is a college president who's just like anyone else. He doesn't think he's too good for us.”

The superficial *friendliness* for which Americans are so well known is related to their informal, egalitarian approach to other people. “Hi!” they will say to just about anyone. “Howya doin?” (That is, “How are you doing?” or “How are you?”) This behavior reflects less a special interest in the person addressed than a concern (not conscious) for showing that one is a “regular guy,” part of a group of normal, pleasant people- like the college president.

More ideas about American notions of friendship will be discussed later.

The Future, Change, and Progress

Americans are generally less concerned about history and traditions than are other people from older societies. “History doesn't matter,” many of them will say. “It's the future that counts.” They look ahead. They have the idea that what happens in the future is within their control, or at least subject to their influence. They believe that the mature, sensible person sets goals for the future and works systematically toward them. They believe that people, as individuals or working cooperatively together, can change most aspects of the physical and social environment if they decide to do so, make appropriate plans, and get to work. Changes will presumably produce improvements. New things are better than old ones.

The long-time slogans of two major American corporations capture the Americans' assumptions about the future and about change. A maker of electrical appliances ended its radio and television

commercials with the slogan, "Progress is our most important product." A huge chemical company that manufactured, among many other things, carious plastics and synthetic fabrics, had this slogan: "Better things for better living through chemistry."

Closely associated with their assumption that they can bring about desirable changes in the future is the American's assumption that their physical and social environments are subject to human domination or control. Early Americans cleared forests, drained swamps, and altered the course of rivers in order to "build" the country. Contemporary Americans have gone to the moon in part just to prove they could do so.

This fundamental American belief in progress and a better future contrasts sharply with the fatalistic (Americans are likely to use that term with a negative or critical connotation) attitude that characterizes people from many other cultures, notably Latin, Asian, and Arab, where there is a pronounced reverence for the past. In those cultures the future is considered to be in the hands of "fate," "God," or at least the few powerful people or families that dominate the society. The idea that they could somehow shape their own futures seems naïve or even arrogant.

Americans are generally impatient with people they see as passively accepting conditions that are less than desirable. "Why don't they do something about it?" Americans will ask. Americans don't realize that a large portion of the world's population sees the world around them as something they cannot change, but rather as something to which they must submit, or at least something with which they must seek to live in harmony.

Goodness of Humanity

The future cannot be better if people in general are not fundamentally good and improvable. Americans assume that human nature is basically good, not basically evil. Foreign visitors will see them doing many things that are based on the assumption that people are good and can make themselves better. Some examples:

Getting more education or training. Formal education is not just for young people, but for everyone. Educational institutions offer "extension classes," night classes, correspondence courses, and television courses so that people who have full-time jobs or who live far from a college or university have the opportunity to get more education. Many post-secondary students are adults who seek to "improve themselves" by learning more.

"Non-formal" educational opportunities in the form of "workshops," seminars, or training programs are widely available. Through them people can learn about a huge array of topics, from being a better parent to investing money more wisely to behaving more assertively.

Rehabilitation. Except in extreme cases where it would clearly be futile, efforts are made to rehabilitate people who have lost some physical capacity as a result of injury or illness. A person who "learned to walk again" after a debilitating accident is widely admired.

Rehabilitation is not just for the physically infirm, but for those who have failed socially as well. Jails, prisons, and detention centers are intended as much to train inmates to be socially useful as they are to punish them. A widespread (but not universally-held) assumption is that people who violate the law do so more because of adverse environmental conditions such as poverty than because they themselves are evil individuals.

Belief in democratic government. We have already discussed some of the assumptions that underlie the American belief that a democratic form of government is best—assumptions about individualism, freedom, and equality. Another assumption is that people can make life better for themselves and others through the actions of governments they choose.

Voluntarism. It is not just through the actions of government or other formal bodies that life can be improved, but through the actions of citizen volunteers as well. Many foreign visitors are awed by the array of activities Americans support on a voluntary basis: parent-teacher organizations in elementary and secondary schools, community “service clubs” that raise money for worthy causes, organizations of families that play host to foreign students, “clean-up, paint-up, fix-up” campaigns to beautify communities, organizations working to preserve wilderness areas, and on and on.

Educational campaigns. When Americans perceive a social problem they are likely (often on a voluntary basis) to establish an “educational campaign” to “make the public aware” of the dangers of something and induce people to take preventative or corrective action. Thus there are campaigns concerning smoking, drugs, alcohol, child abuse, and many specific diseases.

Self-improvement. Americans assume themselves to be improvable. We have already mentioned their participation in various education and training programs. Mention should also be made of the array of “how-to” books Americans buy, and the number of group activities they join in order to make themselves “better.” Through things they read or groups they join Americans can stop smoking, stop using alcohol, lose weight, get into better physical condition, manage their time more effectively, manage their money more effectively, become better at their jobs, and improve themselves in countless other ways.

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” the Americans say. People who want to make things better can do so if only they have a strong enough motivation.

Time

For Americans, time is a “resource” that, like water or coal, can be used well or poorly. “Time is money,” they say. “You only get so much time in this life; you’d best use it wisely.” The future will not be better than the past or the present, as Americans are trained to see things, unless people use their time for constructive, future-oriented activities. Thus, Americans admire a “well-organized” person, one who has a written list of things to do and a schedule for doing them. The ideal person is punctual (that is, arrives at the scheduled time for a meeting or event) and is considerate of other people’s time (that is, does not “waste people’s time” with conversation or other activity that has no visible, beneficial outcome).

The American attitude toward time is not necessarily shared by others, especially non-Europeans. They are more likely to conceive of time as something that is simply there around them, not something they can “use.” One of the more difficult things many foreign businessmen and students must adjust to in the States is the notion that time must be saved whenever possible and used wisely every day.

In their efforts to use their time wisely, Americans are sometimes seen by foreign visitors as automatons, unhuman creatures who are so tied to their clocks and their schedules that they cannot participate in or enjoy the human interactions that are the truly important things in life. “They are like little machines running around,” one foreign visitor said.

The premium Americans place on *efficiency* is closely related to their concepts of the future, change, and time. To do something efficiently is to do it in the way that is quickest and requires the smallest expenditure of resources. American businesses sometimes hire “efficiency experts” to review their operations and suggest ways in which they could accomplish more than they are currently accomplishing with the resources they are investing. Popular periodicals carry suggestions for more efficient ways to shop, cook, clean house, do errands, raise children, tend the yard, and on and on.

In this context the “fast-food industry” can be seen as a clear example of an American cultural product. McDonald’s, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, and other fast-food establishments prosper in a country where many people want to minimize the amount of time they spend preparing and eating

meals. The millions of Americans who take their meals at fast-food restaurants cannot have much interest in lingering over their food while conversing with friends, as millions of Europeans do. As McDonald's restaurants have spread around the world, they have been viewed as symbols of American society and culture, bringing not just hamburgers but an emphasis on speed, efficiency and shiny cleanliness. The typical American food, some observers argue, is fast food.

Achievement, Action, Work, and Materialism

"He's a hard worker," one American might say in praise of another. Or, "She gets the job done." These expressions convey the typical American's admiration for a person who approaches a task conscientiously and persistently, seeing it through to a successful conclusion. More than that, these expressions convey an admiration for *achievers*, people whose lives are centered around efforts to accomplish some physical, measurable thing. Social psychologists use the term "achievement motivation" to describe what appears to be the intention underlying Americans' behavior. "Affiliation" is another kind of motivation, shown by people whose main intent seems to be to establish and retain a set of relationships with other people. The achievement motivation predominates in America.

Foreign visitors commonly remark that "Americans work harder than I expected them to." (Perhaps these visitors have been excessively influenced by American movies and television programs, which are less likely to show people working than to show them driving around in fast cars or pursuing members of the opposite sex.) While the so-called "Protestant work ethic" may have lost some of its hold on Americans, there is still a strong belief that the ideal person is a "hard worker." A hard worker is one who "gets right to work" on a task without delay, works efficiently, and completes the task in a way that meets reasonably high standards of quality.

Hard workers are admired not just on the job, but in other aspects of life as well. Housewives, students, and people volunteering their services to charitable organizations can also be "hard workers" who make "significant achievements."

More generally, Americans like *action*. They do indeed believe it is important to devote significant energy to their jobs or to other daily responsibilities. Beyond that, they tend to believe they should be *doing* something most of the time. They are usually not content, as people from many countries are, to sit for hours and talk with other people. They get restless and impatient. They believe they should be doing something, or at least making plans and arrangements for doing something later.

People without the Americans' action orientation often see Americans as frenzied, always "on the go," never satisfied, compulsively active. They may, beyond that, evaluate Americans negatively for being unable to relax and enjoy life's pleasures. Even recreation, for Americans, is often a matter of acquiring lavish equipment, making elaborate plans, then going somewhere to *do* something.

Americans tend to define people by the jobs they have. ("Who is he?" "He's the vice president in charge of personal loans at the bank.") Their family backgrounds, educational attainments, and other characteristics are considered less important in identifying people than the jobs they have.

There is usually a close relationship between the job a person has and the level of the person's income. Americans tend to measure a person's "success" in life by referring to the amount of money he has acquired. Being a bank vice president is quite respectable, but being a bank president is more so. The president gets a higher salary. So the president can buy more things—a bigger house and car, a boat, more neckties and shoes, and so on.

Americans are often criticized for being so "materialistic," so concerned with acquiring possessions. For Americans, though, this materialism is natural and proper. They have been taught that it is a good thing to achieve—to work hard, acquire more material badges of their success, and in the process assure a better future for themselves and their immediate families. And like people from elsewhere, they do what they are taught.

Directness and Assertiveness

Americans, as has been said before, generally consider themselves to be frank, open and direct in their dealings with other people. "Let's lay our cards on the table," they say. Or, "Let's stop playing games and get to the point." These and many other common phrases convey the Americans' idea that people should explicitly state what they think and what they want from other people.

Americans tend to assume that conflicts or disagreements are best settled by means of forthright discussions among the people involved. If I dislike something you are doing, I should tell you about it directly so you will know, clearly and from me personally, how I feel about it. Bringing in other people to mediate a dispute is considered somewhat cowardly, the act of a person without enough courage to speak directly to someone else.

The word "assertive" is the adjective Americans commonly use to describe the person who plainly and directly expresses feelings or requests. People who are inadequately assertive can take "assertiveness training classes."

Americans will often speak openly and directly to others about things they dislike. They will try to do so in a manner they call "constructive," that is, a manner which the other person will not find offensive or unacceptable. If they do not speak openly about what is on their minds, they will often convey their reactions in nonverbal ways (without words, but through facial expressions, body positions, and gestures). Americans are not taught, as people in many Asian countries are, that they should mask their emotional responses. Their words, the tone of their voices, or their facial expressions will usually reveal when they are feeling angry, unhappy, confused, or happy and content. They do not think it improper to display these feelings, at least within limits. Many Asians feel embarrassed around Americans who are exhibiting a strong emotional response to something. (On the other hand, as we shall see later, Latins and Arabs are generally inclined to display their emotions more openly than Americans do, and to view Americans as unemotional and "cold.")

But Americans are often less direct and open than they realize. There are in fact many restrictions on their willingness to discuss things openly. It is difficult to categorize those restrictions, and the restrictions are often not "logical" in the sense of being consistent with each other. Generally, though, Americans are reluctant to speak openly when:

- * the topic is in an area they consider excessively personal, such as unpleasant body or mouth odors, sexual functioning or personal inadequacies;
- * they want to say "no" to a request that has been made of them but do not want to offend or "hurt the feelings of" the person who made the request;
- * they are not well enough acquainted with the other person to be confident that direct discussion will be accepted in the constructive way that is intended; and paradoxically,
- * they know the other person very well (it might be a spouse or close friend) and they do not wish to risk giving offense and creating negative feelings by talking about some delicate problem.

A Chinese student invited an American couple to his apartment to share a dinner he had prepared. They complimented him warmly about the quality of his meal. "Several Americans have told me they like my cooking," he replied, "but I cannot tell whether they are sincere or just being polite. Do you think they really like it?"

All of this to say that Americans, even though they see themselves as properly assertive and even though they often behave in open and direct ways, have limits on their openness. It is not unusual for them to try to avoid direct confrontation can be carried out in a "constructive" way that will result in an acceptable compromise. (Americans ideas about the benefits of compromise are discussed later.)

Foreigners often find themselves in situations where they are unsure of or even aware of what the Americans around them are thinking or feeling and are unable to find out because the Americans will not tell them directly what they have in mind. Two examples:

Sometimes a person from another country will "smell bad" to Americans because he does not follow the same hygienic practices (daily bathing and use of deodorants) Americans tend to think are

necessary (see Chapter Fifteen). But Americans will rarely tell a person (foreign or otherwise) that he has “body odor” because that topic is considered to be too sensitive.

A foreigner (or another American for that matter) may ask a “favor” that an American considers inappropriate. She might ask to borrow a car, for example, or ask for help with an undertaking that will require more time than the American thinks she has available. The American will want to decline the request, but will fear saying “no” directly.

Americans might feel especially reluctant to say “no” directly to a foreigner, for fear of making the person feel unwelcome or discriminated against. They will often try to convey the “no” indirectly, by saying such things as “it’s not convenient right now” or by repeatedly postponing an agreed-upon time for doing something.

Despite these limitations, Americans are generally more direct and open than people from many other countries. They will not try to mask their emotions, as Scandinavians tend to do. They are much less concerned with “face” (that is, avoiding embarrassment to themselves or others) than most Asians are. To them, being “honest” is usually more important than preserving harmony in interpersonal relationships.

Americans use the words “pushy” or “aggressive” to describe a person who is excessively assertive in expressing opinions or making requests. The line between acceptable assertiveness and unacceptable aggressiveness is difficult to draw. Iranians and people from other countries where forceful arguing and negotiating are common forms of interaction risk being seen as aggressive or pushy when they treat Americans the way they treat people at home. This topic is elaborated upon in Chapter Two.

Chapter 2: The Communicative Style of Americans

Pushy Greeks. Shy Chinese. Opinionated Germans. Emotional Mexicans, Brazilians, and Italians. Cold British. Loud Africans. These are among the stereotypes or general ideas Americans have about some other nationalities. In part, these stereotypes arise from differences in what the communications scholar Dean Barnlund calls “communicative style.”

When people talk to each other, they exhibit a communicative style that is strongly influenced by their culture. Communicative style refers to several characteristics of conversations between individuals, according to Barnlund. Communicative style refers to (1) the topics people prefer to discuss, (2) their favorite forms of interaction in conversation, (3) the depth to which they want to get involved with each other, (4) the communication channels [verbal or nonverbal] on which they rely, and (5) the level of meaning [“factual” vs. “emotional”] to which they are most attuned.

Naturally, people prefer to use their own communicative style. Issues about communicative style rarely arise when two people from the same culture are together because their styles generally agree. Most people—including Americans—are as unaware of their communicative style as they are of their basic values and assumptions. Foreigners who understand something about the Americans’ communicative style will be less likely to misinterpret or misjudge Americans than will foreigners who don’t know the common characteristics of interpersonal communication among Americans. They will also have a better understanding of some of the stereotypes Americans have about other nationality groups.

Preferred Discussion Topics

When they first encounter another person, Americans engage in a kind of conversation they call “small talk.” The most common topic of small talk is the weather; another very common topic is the speakers’ current physical surroundings—the room or building they are in, the sidewalk where they are standing, or whatever is appropriate. Later, after the preliminaries, Americans may talk about past experiences they have both had, such as watching a particular TV program, going to New York, or eating at a particular restaurant.

Beyond these very general topics of small talk, there is variation according to the life situation of the people involved and the setting in which the conversation is taking place. Students are likely to talk about their teachers and classes; if they are of the same sex, they are likely to discuss their social lives. Adults may discuss their jobs, recreations interests, houses or family matters. Men are likely to talk about sports or cars. Housewives, whose numbers are steadily decreasing in American society, are likely to talk about their children, if they have any, or about household matters or personal care (e.g., hairdos).

Americans are explicitly taught not to discuss religion and politics unless they are fairly well acquainted with the people they are talking to. (In public meetings Americans will openly debate about political matters, but we are talking here about communicative style in interpersonal situations.) Politics and religion are thought to be “controversial,” and discussing a controversial topic can lead to an argument. Americans, as we will discuss under “Favorite Forms of Interaction,” are taught to avoid arguments.

Unlike Americans, people from Germany, Iran, and many other countries consider politics, and sometimes religion as well, to be excellent topics for informal discussion and debate. For them, discussing—and arguing about—politics is a favorite way to pass the time.

There are other topics Americans generally avoid because they are “too personal.” Financial matters is one. Inquiries about a person’s earnings or about the amount someone paid for an item are usually beyond the bounds of acceptable topics. So are body and mouth odors (as already mentioned), the functioning of the urogenital organs, sexual behavior and responses and fantasies.

Upon first meeting, people from Spanish-speaking countries may have long interchanges about the health and well-being of each other’s family members. Saudis, by contrast, consider questions about family members inappropriate unless the people talking know each other very well. Americans might inquire briefly about family members (“How’s the wife?” or “How’re the kids?”), but politeness in brief and casual encounters does not require dwelling on the subject.

As was already said, people prefer to use their own communicative styles. That means, among other things, they prefer to abide by their own ideas about conversation topics that are appropriate for any given setting. Foreigners who have different ideas from Americans about what topics are appropriate for a particular setting are very likely to feel uncomfortable when they are talking with Americans. They do not feel like they can participate in the conversation on an equal footing. But the Americans resist (quite unconsciously) their attempts to bring up a different topic.

Listening to American small talk leads some foreigners to the erroneous conclusion that Americans are intellectually incapable of carrying on a discussion about anything significant. Some foreigners believe that topics more complex than weather, sports or social lives are beyond the Americans’ ability to comprehend.

Favorite Forms of Interaction

The typical conversation between Americans takes a form that can be called *repartee*. No one speaks for very long. Speakers take turns frequently, often after only a few sentences have been spoken. “Watching a conversation between two Americans is like watching a table tennis game,” a British observer said. “Your head goes back and forth and aback and forth so fast it almost makes your neck hurt.”

Americans tend to be impatient with people who take long turns. Such people are said to “talk too much.” Many Americans have difficulty paying attention to someone who speaks more than a few sentences at a time, as Nigerians, Arabs, and some others do. Americans admire conciseness, or what they call “getting to the point.”

Americans engage in little *ritual* interaction. Only a few ritual interchanges are common: “How are you?” “I’m fine, thank you,” “Nice to meet you,” and “Hope to see you again.” These things are said under certain circumstances Americans learn to recognize, and, like any ritual interchanges, are concerned more with form than with substance. That is, the questions are supposed to be asked, and the

statements are supposed to be made in particular circumstances, no matter what the people involved are feeling or what they really have in mind. In many Americans' opinions, people who rely heavily on ritual interchanges are "too shy" or "too polite," unwilling to reveal their true natures and ideas.

Americans are generally impatient with long ritual interchanges about family members' health—common among Latin Americans—or invocations of a supreme being's goodwill—common among Arabs—considering them a waste of time.

A third form of interaction, one Americans tend to avoid, is *argument*. Americans seem to suppose that an argument with another person might result in termination of their relationship. They do not conceive of argument as a sport or pleasurable pastime. If Americans are in a discussion in which a difference of opinion is emerging, they are likely to say, "Let's not get into an argument about this." Rather than argue, they will prefer to find areas of agreement, change the topic, or even physically move away from the person they have been talking to. Not surprisingly, people who like to argue are likely to be labeled "pushy," "aggressive," or "opinionated."

If an argument is unavoidable, Americans believe it should be conducted in calm, moderate tones and with a minimum of gesturing. Loud voices, vigorous use of arms, more than one person talking at a time—to most Americans these are signs that a physical fight, or at least an unproductive "shouting match," might develop. They believe people should "stay cool" when presenting their viewpoints.

This is not to say that no Americans argue. Certainly there are those who do, even in interpersonal situations. Generally, though, they prefer not to. One result of their aversion to arguing is that they get little practice in verbally defending their viewpoints. And one result of that, in turn, is that they may appear less intelligent than they actually are.

A fourth and final form of interaction is *self-disclosure*. Conversations with a large amount of small talk (or of ritual interchange) usually produce little self-disclosure. That is, the people involved reveal little if anything about their personal lives or situations. What Americans regard as "personal" in this context is their feelings and their opinions about controversial matters. In most situations Americans reveal little that is personal. Women will disclose more about themselves to other women than they will to men and than men will to anyone. Of course, much more self-revelation takes place in the context of a close friendship.

Americans are probably not extreme with respect to the amount of self-disclosure that takes place in interpersonal encounters. Foreign visitors who are accustomed to more self-revelation may feel frustrated in their efforts to get to know Americans. Those accustomed to less self-disclosure may be embarrassed by some of the things Americans do talk about.

Depth of Involvement Sought

Cultural backgrounds influence the degree to which people want to become closely connected with other people outside their families. People from some cultures are looking for close, interdependent relationships. They value commitment to other people and they want friendships in which there are virtually no limits to what the friends will do for each other.

Americans cause immense frustration for foreigners by their apparent inability to become closely involved with other people in the way the foreigners want and expect them to. "Americans just don't know how to be friends," many foreigners say. "You never feel that you are free to call on them at any time, or that they will help you no matter what."

Many Americans do have what they call close friends, with whom they discuss intimate personal concerns and to whom they feel special attachments and strong obligations. But such friendships are small in number. Much more numerous are relationships with people who might more accurately be called "acquaintances" than "friends." With acquaintances, the degree of intimate involvement and sense of mutual obligation is much lower. Americans are likely to use the term "friend" to cover a wide range of types of relationships, much to the confusion of visitors abroad.

Americans tend to relate to each other as occupants of roles rather than as whole people. Another person might be a roommate, classmate, neighbor, colleague from work, weekend boater, or teacher. Certain behaviors are expected of people in each of those roles. All is well among Americans if people behave according to the generally-accepted notions of what is appropriate for the role in which they find themselves. Other aspects of their behavior are not considered relevant, as they are in a society where attention is paid to the "kind of person" one is dealing with. An accountant may be a chain-smoking, hard-drinking adulterer, but if he is a good accountant I am likely to use his services even if I disapprove of chain-smoking, heavy use of alcohol, and adultery. His personal life is not relevant to his ability as an accountant.

Americans often seem to fear close involvement with other people. They will avoid becoming dependent on others. They do not want others, with the possible exception of immediate family members, to be dependent on them. (Remember, they have been brought up to see the ideal person as independent and self-reliant.) They are likely to be extremely cautious when they meet a new person who seems to want to get closely involved with them. "What does this person want?" they seem to be asking. "How much of my time will it take? Will I be able to withdraw from the relationship if it gets too demanding?"

Foreigners will want to realize that Americans often have difficulty becoming "close friends" with each other, not just with unfamiliar people from other countries.

Channels Preferred

Americans depend more on spoken words than on nonverbal behavior to convey their messages. They think it is important to be able to "speak up" and "say what's on your mind." They admire a person who has a moderately large vocabulary and who can express herself clearly and cleverly. But they distrust people who are, in their view, excessively articulate. A person with a very large vocabulary is likely to be considered "over-educated" or "a snob." A person who is extremely skillful at presenting verbal messages is usually suspect: "Is he trying to sell me something?" "What's he up to? He's a smooth talker, so you'd better watch him."

People from other cultures, notably the Arabs, Iranians, and some (especially Southern) Europeans, prize verbal agility more than Americans do. People from those cultures, when they visit America, are likely to have two different reactions to Americans and their use of language. The first is to wonder why Americans seem suspicious of them. The second is to suppose that Americans, since they cannot carry on discussions (or arguments, as we have seen) very well, must not be very intelligent or well informed. "Americans are not as intelligent as we are," said an Iranian student who had been in the States for several years. "In all the time I've been here I've never heard one of them talk about anything more important than sports and the weather. They just don't know anything about politics and they don't understand it."

It is no doubt the case that the level of knowledge and understanding of political matters is lower in the States than it is in many other so-called advanced countries. It does not necessarily follow, though, that Americans are less intelligent than people elsewhere. To conclude from their relatively limited verbal abilities that they are unintelligent is to misperceive the situation.

Other people come to America from cultures where people generally talk less than Americans do and rely more on nonverbal means of understanding each other. Such people tend to find Americans "too loud," "too talkative," and not sensitive enough to understand other people without putting everything into words. "You Americans!" an exasperated Japanese woman said when she was pressed for details about an unpleasant situation involving a friend of hers. "You have to *say* everything!"

More ideas about the complex subject of nonverbal behavior are discussed in Chapter Twenty-One.

Americans' preference for verbal over nonverbal means of communicating pertains also to the written word. Words are important to Americans, and written words are often more important than ones

that are merely spoken. Formal agreements, contracts, and decisions are normally written down. Official notices and advisories are written. "Put it in writing," the Americans say, if it is important and you want it to receive appropriate attention. Foreign students and businessmen sometimes get themselves into difficulty because they have not paid enough attention (by American standards) to written notices, procedures, or deadlines.

Level of Meaning Emphasized

Americans generally pay more attention to the factual than to the emotional content of messages. They are uncomfortable with displays of more than moderate emotion, and they are taught in school to detect—and dismiss—"emotional appeals" in other people's statements or arguments. They are urged to "look for the facts" and "weigh the evidence" when they are in the process of making a judgment or decision.

While there are of course areas in which Americans are emotional or sentimental, they are generally a bit suspicious of a person whose main message is an emotional one. They generally overlook (unless it is so obvious that they cannot) the mood of the person they are talking to and listen for the "facts" in what the person has to say. Statements or arguments relying heavily on emotional appeals are not likely to be taken seriously.

More ideas on this topic can be found in the next chapter, which is on the closely related subject of "American Patterns of Thinking."

Before going on, however, it is important to emphasize two points that have been raised several times already. The first is that people naturally prefer to use their own communicative style. The second is that differences in communicative style can cause serious problems in intercultural interactions. They produce uneasiness, misjudgments, and misinterpretations whose source is not clear to the people involved. Americans, for example, believe they are acting "naturally" when they engage in small talk with a person they have just met. They do not expect to have their level of intelligence judged on the basis of their small talk. But if the person they just met is from a culture where conversations with new acquaintances "naturally" take some form other than small talk, then the person may well be evaluating the American's intellectual qualities. The result of all this is likely to be negative feelings and judgments on both sides. The stereotypes listed at the opening of this chapter arise at least in part from judgments made on the basis of differences in communicative style.

Foreigners who understand the American communicative style will be far less likely to contribute to these misunderstandings and negative feelings, and their opportunities for constructive interaction will be much greater.

Chapter 3: Ways of Reasoning

To understand how Americans think about things, it is necessary to understand about "the point." Americans mention it often: "Let's get right to the point," they will say. "My point is..." "What's the point of all this?"

The "point" is the idea or piece of information that Americans presume is, or should be, at the center of people's thinking, writings, and spoken comments. Speakers and writers are supposed to "make their points clear," meaning that they are supposed to say or write explicitly the idea or piece of information they wish to convey.

People from many other cultures have different ideas about the point. Africans traditionally recount stories that convey the thoughts they have in mind, rather than stating "the point" explicitly. Japanese traditionally speak indirectly, leaving the listener to figure out what the point is. Thus, while an American might say to a friend, "I don't think that coat goes very well with the rest of your outfit," a Japanese might say, "Maybe this other coat would look even better than the one you have on." Americans value a person who "gets right to the point." Japanese are likely to consider such a person insensitive if not rude.

The Chinese and Japanese languages are characterized by vagueness and ambiguity. The precision, directness, and clarity Americans associate with “the point” cannot be attained, at least not with any grace, in Chinese and Japanese. Speakers of those languages are thus compelled to learn a new way of reasoning and conveying their ideas if they are going to interact satisfactorily with Americans.

As these examples indicate, different cultures teach different ways of thinking about things, of gathering and weighing evidence, of presenting viewpoints and reaching conclusions. These differences are evident in discussions and arguments, public speeches, and written presentations.

It is not enough to make a point, according to the typical American notion. A responsible speaker or writer is also expected to prove that the point is true, accurate or valid. As they grow up, Americans learn what is and is not acceptable as “proof.” The most important element of a proof is “the facts.” A student might state an opinion and the teacher will ask, “What are your facts?” or “What data do you have to support that?” The teacher is telling the student that without facts to support the opinion, the opinion will not be considered legitimate or valid.

Americans assume there are “facts” of life, of nature, and of the universe that can be discovered by trained people (usually called “scientists”) using special techniques, equipment, and ways of thinking. “Scientific facts,” as the Americans call them, are assumed to exist independently of any individual person who studies them or talks about them. This important assumption—that there are facts existing independently of the people who observe them—is not shared throughout the world.

The most reliable facts, in the American view, are those in the form of quantities—specific numbers, percentages, rates, rankings, or amounts. Many foreign visitors in the States are struck—if not stunned—by the quantity of numbers and statistics they encounter in the media and in daily conversations. “McDonald’s has sold 8.7 billion hamburgers,” say signs all over the country. “Nine out of ten doctors recommend this brand of mouthwash,” says a radio announcer or a magazine advertisement. (Doctors are viewed as scientists or appliers of science, and are held in very high esteem.) “The humidity is at 27 percent,” says the television weather reporter. “The barometric pressure is at 29.32 and rising. Yesterday’s high temperature in Juneau, Alaska, was 47 degrees.”

Americans feel secure in the presence of all these numbers. Foreign visitors often wonder what significance the numbers could possibly have.

Citing quantifiable facts is generally considered the best way to prove a point. Facts based on personal experience are also persuasive. Americans accept information and ideas that arise from their own experience or that of others they know and trust. Television advertisers seek to capitalize on this aspect of American reasoning through commercials that portray presumably average people (a woman in a kitchen, for example, or two men in an auto repair shop) testifying that in their experience the product or service being advertised is a good one. Other credible testifiers are people dressed to look like scientists or doctors and celebrities from the worlds of entertainment and athletics.

Of the various ways of having personal experience, Americans regard the sense of *sight* as the most reliable. “I saw it with my own eyes” means that it undoubtedly happened. In a court of law, an “eyewitness” is considered the most reliable source of information. If a speaker has failed to make his purpose in speaking clear, Americans will say, “I don’t see the point.”

Along with their trust in facts goes a distrust of emotions. School children are taught (but do not always learn) to disregard the emotional aspects of an argument as they look for “the facts.” In their suspicion of emotional statements, Americans differ from many others. Iranians, for example, have a tradition of eloquent, emotion-filled speech. They quote revered poets who have captured the feeling they want to convey. They seek to move their audiences to accept them and their viewpoints not because of the facts they have presented but because of the human feelings they share.

A Brazilian graduate student was having difficulty in his English writing class. “It’s not just a matter of verbs and nouns,” he said. “My teacher tells me I’m too subjective. Too emotional. I must learn to write my points more clearly.”

In evaluating the significance of a point or a proof, Americans are most likely to consider its practical usefulness. Americans are famous for their pragmatism, that is, their interest in whether a fact or idea has practical consequences. A good idea is a practical idea. Other adjectives that convey approval of ideas or information are “realistic,” “down-to-earth,” “hard-headed,” and “sensible.”

Americans tend to distrust theory and generalizations, which they might label “impractical,” “unrealistic,” “too abstract,” “a lot of hot air,” or “just theoretical.” A Latin American graduate student, for example, heard himself being criticized (openly and directly) by the American professor in his international organization class. The student had written a paper concerning a particular international organization and had talked about the principles of national sovereignty, self-determination, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. “That’s just pure Latin American bunk,” the professor said to him. “That’s nothing but words and theory. It has nothing to do with what really happens.” The embarrassed student was told to write another paper.

Latin Americans and many Europeans are likely to attach more weight to ideas and theories than Americans are. Rather than compiling facts and statistics on the basis of which to reach conclusions, they are likely to generalize from one theory to another, or from a theory to facts, according to certain rules of logic. A Soviet visitor in Detroit in the 1960s asked his hosts where the masses of unemployed workers were. His hosts said there were no masses of unemployed workers. “There must be,” the visitor insisted. “Marx says the capitalist system produces massive unemployment among the workers. You must be hiding them somewhere.”

For this visitor, “truth” came not from facts he observed, but from a theory he believed. Americans believe in some theories, of course, but in general they are suspicious of theory and generalizations and more at ease with specific facts.

In some Chinese traditions, truth and understanding come neither from accumulating facts nor generalizing from theories, but from silent meditation. In Zen, truths cannot even be expressed in language. Zen masters do not tell their students what the point is.

Another element of ways of reasoning, beyond considerations about facts and theory as ways of reaching or supporting conclusions, is the matter of cause-and-effect relationships. Americans tend to suppose that most events have some knowable, physical cause. “Things don’t just happen.” Very few events are considered to result from “chance” or “luck” or “fate.” Religious Americans will ascribe certain kinds of events (such as the otherwise inexplicable death of a child) to “God’s will.” But these intangible factors are not usually held responsible for what happens to people. As suggested in Chapter One, most Americans have difficulty even comprehending the notion, so prevalent in many other parts of the world, that “fate” determines what happens in people’s lives.

When people with differing ways of reasoning are interacting, the typical feeling they both get is that the other person “just doesn’t understand” and “isn’t making sense.” Each of them tries harder to be more “logical,” not realizing that the problem is their differing conceptions of what is logical. Foreigners in America will need to learn that Americans will consider them “not logical,” “too emotional,” or “fuzzy-minded” if they do not use specific facts to support or illustrate their ideas and opinions, if they speak mainly in terms of abstractions and generalizations, or if they attribute important events to non-material causes.

Foreign students have a particular need to learn how Americans think about things and how they organize their thoughts in speech and writing. Unless they do, they will have trouble writing papers or giving speeches that American audiences (including teachers) will take seriously.