

What is the Basis of American Culture?

What is it that intercultural communication students cannot afford to miss about the American Culture?

By

M. Gene Aldridge

Professor of Intercultural Communication, University College, Troy State University
President/CEO, New Mexico Independence Research Institute, Inc.

Abstract

Culture is about survival of the human species. Central values and human capital formation drive cultures. This paper discusses intercultural communication theory from a historical-developmental perspective across the history of humankind, thus defining the uniqueness of the human cultural experience, namely, speech communication. Linking this unique empirical-based human cultural experience to specific cultures and their core values is the topic of this paper. Through a study of the empirical historical-developmental experience of the United States, this paper identifies a core value from the American culture. This paper posits the idea of a core United States cultural value that has implications for studies in intercultural communication leading to an understanding of the difference between first order change and second order cultural changes and research.

The paper suggests that intercultural communication between human groups is not a new phenomenon and may well hold key values to survival for humankind. Studies in intercultural communication research and theory building might do well to apply this anthropological and historical-developmental approach to the study of culture across the span of human time and evaluate those elements of different cultures which seem to be core values that promote survivability of humankind using human cultural capital.

keywords: historical development, anthropology of cultures, speech communication, core values, human cultural capital, survival of mankind.

Introduction and Purpose

Culture is about survival of the human species. Without culture, human beings cannot survive. For example, the Neanderthal human, it is hypothesized, did not survive because of the inability to speak clearly and transmit culture (Ape Man, 1994).¹⁹ Homo sapiens survive, it is hypothesized, because of culture and the ability to speak, therefore, they symbolize and create culture (art and play, tool making, economic organization, social organization, world view, political organization, language, social control and material culture). It is both a physiological-genetic issue (zoosemiotic) of the changing structure of the mouth and tongue which allowed the homo sapien to do what its relative, the Neanderthal, could not do, namely, to speak with clarity and

advance the culture via symbols (anthroposemiotic). Unlike all other animals humankind is composed of both zoosemiotic and anthroposemiotic sign systems . Animals, by contrast, are singularly zoosemiotic. (Sebeok, 1968).¹⁸ Human culture is, therefore, unique from Orangutang culture because of speech communication.¹⁴ Speech communication, as defined by Larson and Dance is as follows: **"Uniquely human. The process or the product of the process of the fusion of genetically determined speech with culturally determined language."**¹

Culture, it would seem, provides certain contributions to the survival of humankind that makes survival of the species, homo sapien possible. Cultures die out because they did not provide sufficient vitality for the culture to survive and/or they met with catastrophic conditions that allowed their culture to be overtaken by other cultures. This process, it would seem, is a kind of evolutionary sorting process between cultures that collide with one another.³ Those principles that lend vitality to one culture can often be inculcated into the values of the next culture. Therefore, to study the value roots or the basis of various cultures via intercultural communication disciplines, might lend predictability to either the survival of a particular culture and/or understanding of its predictable elemental roots. It is theorized here that the cultures that remain most open to change in a way that brings to bear these core values for survivability, are the cultures that have the most to gain with respect to survivability, not only for the particular culture, but maybe for human civilizations as a whole. This produces a seemingly interesting paradox. How can culture both preserve values (resist change) while using change to enhance the species? This is possible as described by Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch because of first order changes and second order changes that occur in groups.¹⁵ Human culture is a problem formation and problem resolution process and uses higher order abstractions via speech communication to provide for change. Some cultures can produce superficial change, but do not have the core values which allow them to produce second order change that could advance the culture into survivability. The Cold War produced such a condition for two camps. Osgood is quoted as follows on this issue:

*"Our political and military leaders have been virtually unanimous in public assertions that we must go ahead and stay ahead in the armament race; they have been equally unanimous in saying nothing about what happens then. Suppose we achieve the state of ideal mutual deterrence...what then? Surely no sane man can envisage our planet spinning on into eternity, divided into two armed camps poised to destroy each other, and call it peace and security! The point is that the policy of mutual deterrence includes no provisions for its own resolution."*²⁰

Cultures are afflicted similarly. That is, they appear to be making all sorts of changes as measured by cultural traits, but in fact, the core values remain in tact that prevent or enhance the survivability of the culture. Teaching intercultural communication via trait studies alone may be a good measure of first order change, but it may miss the underlying values of the culture that can enhance or limit second order change leading to survivability. It is possible, for example, to have a highly individualistic culture, as defined by Hofstede, but miss the variations in individualistic cultures around the globe which have differing core values that may enhance or limit second order change. This same condition can prevail in collectivistic cultures as well. Asians, like Lee Kuan Yew, promote and posit Confucian value traits for all of Asia that simply do

not exist in other cultures like Malaysia (Muslim and Chinese cultures), Thailand, Indonesia (primarily Muslim culture), Japan, or even the Philippines.²²

His assertion in support of Asian traits and values simply are hollow assertions and do not apply to all of Asia, for example. Lee has been severely criticized by Chris Patton, former Governor of Hong Kong, in the 1999 book *East and West*, for trying to superimpose Confucian value traits on all of Asia as if there was a cultural "systems fit" for countries like India and China, for example.²¹ Lee's approach is hollow and will not succeed as a mechanism for uniting all of Asia because the underlying value and traits are primarily Chinese, i.e., Confucian values and do not represent the values in many other Asian cultures. These issues are relevant to a discussion of American values precisely because assertions of this nature about traits confuse the cultural dialogue East to West and do not lead us to a better understanding of Asian values or American values.

Lee, as a Chinese Singaporean Asian has asserted that American values are different from Asian collective values via Confucian philosophical roots. (Lee Kuan Yu, 2000).²² There are Confucian values that are different from other cultures, but to assert that there is a single set of Asian values begs the question; name them? This kind of trait analysis by Lee is weak because it lacks cultural developmental historical data in support of his assertions. Hong Kong's existence is proof positive that a Chinese city-state can be created that does not have the social engineering and/or the iron fist of leadership associated with it that is the norm for Singapore. Recent visits in Asia and speeches by Mr. Lee clearly demonstrate that he may not want a democratic, free, and stable city-state of Chinese origin in Asia to compete with his own cultural ideologies about how Chinese or Asians need to be governed.²¹ These cultural trait clashes, East to West, miss the underlying values that a developmental approach might bring to understanding the core values of many cultures in each region. For this reason, Lee's musings are instructive for scholars in intercultural communication.

Much discussion is also underway in European cultures about the American culture and its preoccupation with certain values that seem antithetical or at least disruptive to intercultural communication between nations and peoples.²⁷ Diplomats are discussing the role that both diplomacy and culture (sharing of the performance and visual arts between nations) plays in humanizing the political processes between nations as yet another way to enhance intercultural communication (White House Conference on Diplomacy and Culture, November 28, 2000). Many cultures see the U.S. culture as a menace. There are many who believe, according to opinion polls, that America is out to impose its values and culture on others. (CSA poll, September, 1998).²⁷ In fact, many believe that globalization has an American face and this is a danger somehow to other cultures and societies in this process.

This paper examines a key elemental value of the American cultural system and suggests that this value is what attracts people to the culture worldwide. Further, it is hypothesized that this core value is instrumental in assuring second order change for the United States, thus promoting survivability culturally.

Defining the Difference of Humankind and the Difference it makes to Culture

What is human culture? Human culture is the shared learned symbolic knowledge derived from speech communication. The basis and uniqueness of human culture is

speech communication as defined herein. That is to say, animal communication is distinguishable from human communication in that humans are symbolic anthroposemiotic sign communicators whereas animals are sign limited by zoosemiotic communication. (Sebeok, 1968).¹⁸ Using Sebeok's study of animal communication, Dance and Larson (1972) made a persuasive argument for the idea that speech communication, thus human symbolic communication is the difference of man and the difference it makes. They said, "Symbolic communication is man's alone." (Dance and Larson, 1972, p.41).¹ How, then, do we define culture?

Culture as defined here is as follows:

Culture is the shared system of symbolic knowledge and patterns of behavior derived from speech communication, that human individuals carry to provide predictable internal and external psychological stability so as to prevent chaos among human individuals. We learn cultural codes for social life, role expectations, common definitions of situations, and social norms in order to provide predictability and survival of the human species. Human language (spoken and written) is the symbolic glue for human culture. (Aldridge, 1997).²⁹

What is uniquely human is our symbolic knowledge that we carry and act upon in our varied cultural settings. Speech communication makes culture possible because it is uniquely human. Gudykunst discusses how the reduction of uncertainty is important to intercultural communication.¹⁶ We want to know the cultural rules or codes so that we can predict mutual group behaviors and reduce the chaos in our lives as we move from culture to culture or even within sub-cultural settings. This allows the human being to share specialized knowledge in group settings and makes it possible for the species to survive without having to carry out all the necessary acts for living and survival because we can communicate the rules symbolically and learn them over time. Sharks have survived a long time because they have built in genetic codes that make it a stealthy hunter, but they are not symbolic animals in the human sense. Pavlov defined human communication as the "second signal system" by using a single vocal/verbal signal.³⁰ Humans rely on this second signal system, through culture, for survival. Animals do not.

Human beings progressed over time from non or low-symbolic animals to highly symbolic ones. It is the gift that keeps humanity from becoming extinct. In this sense, the function of human speech communication is to provide, by logical necessity, for the vase in which the flowers of culture are grown. Culture's function is to reduce uncertainty by developing, with the use of speech communication, order out of chaos. Culture is predicable social glue. Think about it for a moment. Culture preserves values for future generations to embrace. It provides education which is shared so that the species might become more understanding of the environment, create higher mental processes, and regulate behavior.¹ The newborn infant has the ability to speak, but the child must be taught the language of choice and the rules for the culture in which it resides.

Where those values become irrelevant, culture demonstrates to us that new and better functional ways of survival can be born. Human beings advanced from caves to

houses for a reason. Political ideological cultures have emerged as well. What seems functional for societies can also become dysfunctional for humanity too. Hitler's 3rd Reich was not acceptable as a cultural political ideology for the majority of cultures, it was destroyed by other cultures. Locke says, "For I have reason to conclude that he who would get me into his power without my consent would use me as he please when he had fancy to do it; for nobody can desire to have me in his absolute power unless it be to compel me by force to that which is against the right of my freedom, i.e., to make me a slave."⁴⁰ That is, cultures can begin to promulgate ideas and values which they believe will lead to the survival of the species, but which in fact do not and further, when they impinge on the freedom of others in doing so makes it impossible because it violates the natural liberty of humankind. Human cultures come and go in this process; a process that is both biological and culturally induced. This is best demonstrated by trying to seek out a Neanderthal and ask him why he is not around any more. Through the strange mix of biology, genetics and language, culture is developed, shared and passed on to new generations of people for the sole purpose of survival.

Intercultural communication is the mechanism (the mixing of cultures and languages via speech communication) by which human beings have compared ways of living, economic order, social order, and values from other cultures.

These ideas are compared between, within and among cultural groups. Thus, the American and the European cultures do not always agree on the same values. For example, when it comes to cultural comparisons, like the death penalty, Europeans are astonished that 38 states allow the death penalty in the United States. Europeans see this as American barbarism.²⁷ In April of 2000, only 30 percent of the French felt that there was anything to admire in the United States. Nonetheless, aside from the political posturing imbedded in these arguments superficial assessments of other cultures can lead to a false understanding of the other culture. Even Americans promote a lack of cultural understanding about Europeans when people, like Steve Forbes, declare Charlemagne a unifier of Europe, when, in fact, Europeans view Charlemagne as a conqueror of cultures.²⁷

French bookstores are full of this kind of diatribe about the U.S. culture and its failings as viewed from the Eiffel Tower. The titles are amusing. "No Thanks Uncle Sam", "The World is not Merchandise", "Who is killing France, the American Strategy", "American Totalitarianism" and many more. (Daley, 2000).²⁷ Poking fun at the American culture has been part of the French pastime for many years. Mr. Clinton did not help matters any by declaring through his foreign relations communications that the U.S. is the "indispensable" nation now. But all of this intercultural banter misses the underlying core value of the U.S. culture.

Just what is the basis for the culture of the United States? What is the core value of the culture? What are the fundamental assumptions around which the U.S. culture spins on its axis? What does the U.S. uniquely contribute by way of their cultural heritage that is so appealing to those that migrate to its shores? Is this core cultural value worth some consideration with respect to the advancement of the species, homo sapien? To fully understand these questions a short diversion with respect to human intercultural communication is necessary. First, the case for speech communication as the basis of human culture.

The Physiological and Biological Basis for Speech Communication

Without speech communication human beings do not have a culture. Language provides us, through our unique biology of created speech via the larynx, the opportunity to share symbolic ideas like no other creature on earth. We are, therefore, fragile species compared to our other animal friends with whom we share this planet.

Most other species survive exclusively on the basis of built-in instincts that are biological pre-determined. The sounds a cricket makes, for example. The flight patterns of birds and their migrations are evidence of built-in genetic codes and learned behavior in other species. The long life of the shark as a species is another example. Only the human being communicates, via higher order abstractions, symbolically and then creates cultures (predictability) to increase the probability for survival. While monkeys and some apes, it has been demonstrated, can communicate via sign language, the development of this language falls far short of the capabilities of the human being in terms of symbolic communication. As noted by Linden (1999), Animals use of tools does not necessarily imply insight into their purpose.¹⁴ Imitation is the behavior, but not intentionality as in the case of human communication.

Animal research demonstrates clearly that human communication is distinguishable from animal communication. Dance and Larson (1972) have provided adequate defense on the uniqueness of speech communication behavior.¹ To use Mortimer Adler's phrase, "the difference of man and the difference it makes," is speech communication, our ability to speak and create symbolic language that leads to thought.² While we cannot know precisely in time when humankind became "truly human" via speech communication, we can attest to the fact that the moment in time was a radical change (a second order change) and the beginning of human culture. Primitive groups had to find a way in which to educate all members about the rules and values for existence. Culture was that mechanism for human tribes and ethnic groups. An exploration of the anthropology of cultures can provide some understanding here.

The Developmental Anthropology of Cultures

Cultures were born because humankind moved from the original African homeland and began migrating around the world. With recent DNA discoveries in Australia that are 40,000 to 60,000 years old, the migration of humans out of Africa becomes much more complicated.²⁶ This new DNA analysis posits that homo erectus left Africa and homo sapiens developed, most likely in regions of the world. Nonetheless, these peoples moved, first, north to what is now Europe, but then to Asia and on to the North American continent. It is an amazing 2.5 million year story of the survival of a species.

In order to survive, various cultures and species were born and reborn, that is, they learned different ways in which to gather food, hunt and maintain life. Each of the new cultures were adapted and interwoven into humankind's early cultural developments such as language, religion, art, science, and even government or social organization.

Conquests were won and lost between cultures as Thomas Sowell has demonstrated in his work *Conquests and Cultures*.³ Conquests have produced cultural evolution. What seems quite clear from Sowell's work is that "cultural capital" not genes or race, per se, lead us to cultural evolution. This is important because buried in the cultural

capital are cultural values. Eventually the vanquished adapted and adopted many new cultural behaviors and values that led to their own survival. The cultural capital is the result of historical, geographic, and social innovations says Sowell.

*"Cultural resistance is both spontaneous and artificial. The desire to cling to the familiar, or to remain loyal to traditions and to the people in whom those traditions are embodied, are all readily understandable. In addition, however, concerted campaigns to resist new cultures or to retrieve ancestral cultures already abandoned have also been promoted to both political and intellectual leaders."*³

Ideas, because of technology and cultural diffusion, spread around the world. Ideas, (cultural capital) about liberty and freedom, ideas about scientific knowledge and cultural ways of innovating move like lightning around the world because of language. Music, fast food, and even ways of governing sweep around the world with great speed in the information age. Does this mean that we have a common world culture? Do we want to have, for example, a singular world civilization, with many cultural tribes, as Braudel and Sowell have outlined?^{3,4} What humankind does with intercultural communication opportunities may determine the historical, biological and cultural outcomes for humankind. Cultures can both simultaneously deliver first and second order change that leads to survival. In this respect, we are sealers of our own fate and we do not seem to be doing well with respect to advancing these opportunities through our intercultural experiences as we move into the new millennium. We do not seem to be able to get tribes in the Middle East, for example, to manage their cultural clashes. Asian Muslims and Chinese Asians are, yet, another example. The cultural clashes identified by Huntington in 1993 seem to be living out the prediction or at least moving in the direction he proposed.⁴¹

Culture, Language and Change

Culture provides predictability for humankind. Because human life can be quite inefficient, culture offers us the predictable patterns of behavior that lead to cooperative expectancies. How do we eat food properly? How do we create common measurements upon which we can rely? How do we introduce, greet and sustain relationships with others? In what manner shall we conduct commerce and under what government conditions? Inside international business, rules for conducting business are becoming quite homogenous, e.g., banking, finance methods, marketing strategies and management of intercultural groups. Each culture provides predictability, thus changing culture can be quite difficult unless the cultural value being changed has been demonstrated to be of less value or no longer useful to a particular group.

Cultures also test new ideas and introduce potential change. The introduction of English, for example, on a worldwide basis for use in business and international trade is threatening to some cultures. **Language, too, provides the social bonding and predictability because humans have rules for language and these rules lead us to communicate more efficiently and effectively. It has often been said prescriptively, if you want to learn the heart of the people, you must learn the language. We say this because language helps us understand how to "think" in a particular culture.**

Cultures borrow from each other language in order to provide more precision for their language. English, for example, quite readily adapts words from other cultures like the French *laisse faire* (hands off) or *perestroika* (restructuring) from the Russians.²³ On the other hand, the French have people who watch for new words, particularly in the high technology arena, so that they can quickly create French words that can be used instead of English words.

Sometimes, the word as it is found in the original language really communicates the word more effectively and is more easily understood and adopted. Language, Whorf (1956) pointed out is directly related to the thoughts and actions which cultures develop.³¹ Yet, through the study of linguistics we understand that cultural diversity is based upon universal human foundations, i.e, universal human experiences (Sapir-Whorf (1921/1956), Lucy (1992), Silverstein (1976), Langacker (1987)).^{23, 24, 31,32, 34} Boas (1911/1966) has demonstrated how language structure, via the Native Americans, provides researchers with the insight to understand culture via "other mentalities" of meaning.²⁵ Goffman (1974) suggests that culture frames our experience and organizes data.³⁶ Harrison (1985) is convinced that culture and the organizing language of culture can explain "Underdevelopment as a State of Mind".²⁴

Language is, therefore, extremely important to the understanding of what I like to call "core meanings" in each culture. In each culture there are "novices" and "knowing" generations. Only that which is communicated between the "knowing" and the "novices" in each culture has the chance for survival of important core meanings that make up the culture. To understand the core meaning of a culture is a dive into the pool of consistent thought and actions of a people (Benedict, 1934).³⁷ Important and lasting core meanings and values become a part of civilizations because they have endured...they have added to the survival of the human species. These values produce a patterning that is predictable in order to create the "mindfulness" which Gudykunst (1984) understands to be a key element in producing effective intercultural communication.¹⁶ So what happens when we apply these developmental-historical principles and ideas to a specific culture? The following is an analysis of the origins of American cultural values which are often discussed in the developmental history of the United States. Predictability in understanding intercultural communication rests on our ability as researchers to sort these values much like sorting the wheat from the chaff.

American Culture and the Idea of Self-Government

Edward T. Hall (1966) has said that the "hidden dimensions" of language and culture provide interesting insights into understanding the cultural behavior of other groups with whom we may not be familiar.⁷ For example, Thomas Woods, Jr. (2000) points out that the seeds of liberty are found in the behavior of the colonies.⁵ The practical nature of the colonies and its commitment to self-government were driving cultural forces that eventually produced the Constitution of the United States of America. Fischer (1989) provides an analysis of the English immigration to the colonies by insisting that the differences between the Virginians and the Puritans of New England were huge and each was very suspicious of the other.³⁸

From the beginning, American culture was defining itself against confederations of big government in favor of self-government. The *Dominion of New England* included Massachusetts, Maine and New Hampshire with a single governor. Andros, in 1686, became Governor and raised taxes, jailed persons who did not abide by his autocratic rule, and by 1688 the colonists had had enough. They revolted and threw the system out. Colonists also threw out Ben Franklin's *Albany Plan of Union* in 1754. This plan was rejected by all the colonies (Wood, 2000).⁵ There is much more evidence to indicate that the early period (1600s), before the American revolution, was filled with cultural emphasis about self-government. The people were quick to rise up against any condition which prevented self-government from dominating their lives, even taxation.

Self-government, then, is one of the cultural dimensions that, when carefully analyzed, appears early in cultural colonial American assumptions. The colonists were suspicious of monarchies, theocracies, and anything that smacked of big government that could usurp the rights of individuals and their liberty. But if we carefully analyze the development of the Constitution of the United States, we find that the underlying value for self-government was the commitment to rights of the individual...what we now call "liberty". Liberty is *the freedom from despotic or arbitrary government or any other rule of law that is not grounded in self-government*. Using John Locke's own words, "The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth...The liberty of man in society is to be under no other legislative power but that established by consent..."⁴⁰ But what is the underlying cultural value behind self-government? What are the *a priori* hidden dimensions (values) of the American culture that require Americans to be committed to self-government?

The analysis, leading to the answers for these questions, is interesting. I often have my graduate students in intercultural communication write down answers to the following questions:

1. What is the basis for American cultural principles, values and issues?
2. What is unique, if anything, about the American culture?

What would you list here? My students write about religious freedom, freedom from the tyranny of the state as the American dream, covenantal freedom associated with humility and equality at its core, and national values that allow for immigration of all people to our shores. Many immigrants discuss the ideas about economic freedom to choose their life and their work in a manner that is of their own choosing. But under closer analysis, are these issues really the cultural glue that holds Americans together?

Because my research and travel take me to many cultures, over 100 now, I have often been asked by outsiders to the American culture, what is it that really drives the culture of the United States? They ask, "What would you say is the core value of your culture?" At first, I was stunned by these questions. It wasn't that I did not think they were good questions, but I found that the answer to them was not quickly forthcoming. I told them of our immigration and that our diversity has helped us. I spoke, too, about the creativity and freedom which go hand in hand with the culture in North America. The interesting structure of the English language was also mentioned, but somehow I was very uneasy with all these answers. I knew these were not the answers which really persuaded the United States to Revolution and Re-Revolution every four years. Here, then, is a descriptive exploration and analysis of a core value

within the American culture as explicated by others. Their views are important because in intercultural discussions about the United States we hear these various arguments all the time. The arguments presented are not meant to be exhaustive, rather illustrative of the ideas often presented inside and outside the American culture. The research approach here is historical-developmental as it relates to the analysis. Just what are the various historical-developmental arguments for the basis of the American culture?

Covenantal Freedom as the Basis for American Culture

Richard Parker of the Kennedy School in Boston (1995) maintains that American culture is neither cultural or a civilization.⁶ Rather, that **America is the dream born out of the Protestant Reformation that individuals can find God on their own terms, and without intervention by the church. He believes that America's core is born out of the need to free oneself from both the tyranny of the state and the church. He maintains that it was the community of belief around these ideas that the American culture and state were born.** Land availability made all this possible as immigrants flocked to the continent to begin again on new land that was their own. Remember, in Europe the land was owned by the few and these were usually controlled by the monarchies, directly or indirectly, in the 1600s and 1700s. Parker maintains that it was the value of a *covenantal freedom* which drove the Pilgrims to the Massachusetts shores. Further, he believes our own Civil War was based upon upholding the covenantal freedom couched in the Constitution of the United States.

The Basis for American Values as Religious Commitment

Maier (1995) suggests another view of American culture.⁸ He is concerned about Americans believing that religion is the basis of American culture because the root word is "cult" (as defined here he means a particular system of religious worship) or a small group of religions that formed the basis for American values. To be sure, the role of religion in America is an interesting one. Maier understands it this way; the foundation for America cannot be religion because the United States could not account for Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists and the other many diverse groups that have come to the nation. His point is that religion cannot, therefore, be the basis for the American culture because it is too limiting, Maier would argue. He asks, what is the concord of love for things held in common (his definition from St. Augustine for civilization) which binds Americans? **Americans, he states, are one civilization held together by many cultures....Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists and other ethnic groups.**

St. Augustine said, "a people is a multitudinous assemblage of rational beings united by concord regarding love of things held in common"...thus, we need to investigate what a people's concord is in order to get at the heart of a civilization.⁹ America, according to Maier, is a multi-cultural group with many ethnic groups, bound by a market economy and representing many cultures.

This approach does not help the analysis because it still does not articulate a core value presupposed by some scholars that religion alone was the basis for foundational America.

America's Identity as a Configuration of Values and Themes

Eisenach (1995) approaches the central idea for the basis of "being American" within the framework of underlying values which link all Americans to an identity.¹⁰ According to Ruth Benedict, identity is a whole or gestalt or configuration which leads to a national identity. This identity is shared by many cultures within American society. We derive who we are by our holistic underlying values. The problem is that when a nation is in trouble it looks for national identity....something upon which all people in the society can share. WWII, for example, pulled everyone together around the idea that Japanese theo-militarism and German Nazi despotism would not stand. American identity was bound around the idea that you went to war to represent and do battle against those that did not support freedom and liberty. That was, for the moment, our national identity. We didn't care where you came from or what culture you represented, if you cared and identified with America's commitment against despotism, then you were one of us.

The difficulty with national identity is that this feeling of national identity is short-lived. It is fleeting. National identities shift as politics and social conditions may dictate. Eisenach also notes that we should look not to culture, but rather causal relationships inside culture to find national identity and core values. He raises interesting questions.

He is right that America is always on the verge of chaos and anarchy because we are consistently revolutionary in the approach to culture; a theme that many in Asia and elsewhere do not often understand clearly. He says that the United States is a configuration of causal ideas that leads to a national identity and suggests that more research is needed to sustain and understand these themes and patterns in history.

While these "identity themes" may contribute to America's national identity, they do not, in and of themselves, provide us with the core cultural principles that remain as the necessary and sufficient cause for American cultural value roots. These are candidate ideas which require further research. By form, then, they leave us in a stew of abstraction in understanding American cultural values.

American Prosperity as a Cultural Root

In an analysis of "Tocqueville Revisited", Handy (2001), suggests that **earned wealth not inherited wealth is a value that was immediately embraced by American cultural values.**¹⁷ He also suggests that by "codifying and legalizing the emerging property" it was possible to move capital and grow into a wealthy culture. Without the legal means, cultures cannot move capital freely or accumulate wealth. Without the legal means, underdeveloped economic cultures fail. The wealthy in the United States are encouraged to display their wealth by helping others. By giving back to the community and to the cultural at large, Americans demonstrate that their life meant something and that wealth was earned legally and respectfully. The ability of Americans to **believe in a bright future** is another value embraced by Handy which he believes fuels America's self-confidence.

While material goods alone do not drive the new forms of cultural capitalism that we see emerging in the United States and in the new global economy, it is clear that services and information now become the new vehicle for the growth of capitalism. For economic growth to occur economists like Romer (1994) believe that capital accumulation and less spending by governments eventually reaches a cultural dead-end of diminishing returns. Cultures that can promote, via human capital formation,

an "institutional environment that supports technological change" will be the masters of growth.¹⁷ He believes that the United States leads the way on this front culturally. Cultures, then, that can master both economic progress while sustaining substantial second order change will be those cultures that move quickly past the competition in the new global economy. These values, inside the American psyche, associated with human capital and knowledge, create a United States that is pivotal in the global economy. But even these sustained economic conditions for amassing human cultural capital cannot occur without another primary value that is even more fundamental to the American culture.

The Natural Rights of Man as a Central Cultural Value

All of these candidate value notions raise interesting questions about culture, civilization, national identity, prosperity, economics, and religion. By themselves, however, they do not make the case for a necessary and sufficient cause for a cultural value around which American society spins.

It is the thesis of this paper that John Locke and Thomas Jefferson left America with the enduring value that does sustain the culture and glues people together.^{40,11} That core value of America rests on the assertion for the "natural rights" of humankind. The shared feeling of belonging hovers always around individual and natural rights of man as outlined in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Regardless of America's sub-cultural heritage, this is what draws people to America, not religion, not economics by itself nor even national identity. Even the Puritans wanted to keep everyone out after they came to America. Left unfettered, they could have been as despotic as the European system from which they came seeking religious freedom. So it would seem that the enduring value of United States culture is not religion, but the individual rights, the natural rights of all humankind. How might this be the case?

National identity and the idea that America is a "civilization" with higher order values in art, science and government seems a bit ethnocentric after only 225 years. On the issue of "civilization" value around technology and science, it is true that America holds a strong advantage, but that advantage is short-lived without the enduring value of natural rights is it not? Besides many other cultures have a strong tradition of science and technology as well. China, for example, can boast a cultural line that extends over 3000 years. It is also true that the Protestant Reformation may have sparked interest in immigrating to North American continent (free land and free religion), but it certainly was but one issue among many historical events that triggered the colonization of America and not a core value as some would like to believe. What good is free land without legal means to hold onto it or the liberty to protect it?

The Civil War, many other scholars have noted, was a defining moment in the history of the American culture. Why was this so? Because the Civil War was a fight over the individual rights of a segment of society, that if left as is, would have negated the core value associated with natural rights. The United States citizens took up arms against each other because this culture could not let stand the evil of slavery. The idea that slavery must go, or else we would be hypocrites in the eyes of other nations and cultures, was understood by President Lincoln. The ideas about slavery and what it meant to be a slave were well documented by John Locke (1690) in his second essay

on "Concerning Civil Government". Slavery in the United States created the state of war which Locke argues about in his Chapter IV on Slavery....."the natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth."

Other people flock to American shores because the American culture is trying to perfect the American shared value of "natural rights". American institutional life is reflective of this struggle. The cultural debates about schools, the role of family, the role of religion, and the debates that center on collectivism vs. individualism as a goal for government permeate the American cultural life. On the issue of government's role or the form of social organization that the Americans require, no election in the history of the United States was closer than the one in the year 2000. It is clear that the debate about individualism and collectivism as an emphasis for government will continue, but few debate the issue of natural rights. Rather, the debate is about how human cultural capital can best be mobilized around the value of natural rights; how it will be implemented by the American culture and what role should government play in this development? To understand the United States, then, is to understand how deeply imbedded into the cultural experience is the value of natural rights.

To other cultures in Europe, Asia, Africa and even Latin America, many of these American elections and their debates can be confounding. It looks, superficially, to outsiders like so much chaos. But the core value of natural rights sustains the debate and the culture moves on to debate again in four years. The *a priori* reason that the debate can continue is imbedded in the core value of natural rights.

When viewed from the perspective of "natural rights" as a core cultural value, ethnic diversity and special rights for special groups becomes a pagan ignorant exercise that only leads to the altar of humility as a error of judgment by political leaders and social philosophers. Like the Europeans, Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans, the United States is a multi-racial and hybrid group. No group today in the world can claim racial purity as did the Nazis. To make natural rights work, means that there can be no "special groups" and any exercise which moves toward creating special needs of special groups, *prima facie*, defies the root value of natural rights.

Recent studies by some African-American intellectuals in the United States explores the ideas that reflect again, on natural rights, not special rights, as creating the underlying value for all members of the American culture (McWhorter, 2000 and Sowell, 1998).^{12,3} Other cultures may wish to take heed in what McWhorter is saying, namely, that special considerations only create less, not more, self-actualization among African Americans in the United States because victimology (studying to be a victim) only continues to drive the insecurity. Competition is the way to build confidence in sub-cultures, not special programs that create the very anti-intellectualism which prevents African Americans from achievement by their own hand. Often academic discussions are held, not with rigorous academic debate, but with "folk tales" that simply are not supportable by rigorous debate. This perpetuates the "cult of separatism" by their own choosing. Based upon liberty, and to ensure that African Americans were not discriminated against, the United States embarked upon a legal overhaul of the culture in the 1960s to ensure that African Americans were not segregated, separated, or discriminated against. This codification of the law was a phenomenal commitment on the part of the American culture to ensure that African Americans had legal redress around the idea of individual liberty. The recent film with Sean Connery entitled "Finding Forrester" demonstrates the anti-intellectualism point most effectively. Here is a white professor and writer, developing a relationship with

an African American young person who suddenly discovers that it is "ok" to "be smart"...to be a nerd and to develop self-confidence as an intellectual. Sub-cultures must be very careful in the United States to not allow the cults and cultural folk tales to overshadow the real value of liberty that drives the culture. Outsiders to the American culture often miss these subtle, but important issues that are at the heart of the liberty-natural rights value. Time does not allow for a full discussion of all these issues, but ***Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America, (McWhorter, 2000)*** is a must read for students of intercultural communication because he peels away core value issues for clear debate. Again, this is an example of human capital formation within the American culture that provides second order change around sub-cultural issues. The American experiment continues in earnest debate.

Thomas Jefferson (1826) in his last message before he died on the 50th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence said it best... "the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition (religion) had persuaded them to bind themselves and to assume the blessings and security of self government...the form which we have substituted restores the faith in unbounded reason and freedom of opinion...and all eyes are open or are opening to the rights of man..."¹¹

To be "mindful", as Gudykunst puts it, then, of the American culture is to remember the idea of "natural rights" in the developmental history of the American culture.¹⁶ This, in turn, has produced the reason for self-government. Further research is needed to explore the ideas around historical-developmental research as a tool for intercultural communication researchers, but **the mining of the American culture produces a rich ore called natural rights that has value for the study of intercultural communication.** Students of intercultural communication would do well to advance this method and apply it to other cultures, for comparative purposes while remembering that it is human capital formation, not race or ethnicity, which drives cultures.

References

1. **Dance, Frank E.X. and Larson, Carl E., (1972) *Speech Communication, Holt Rinehardt and Winston, Inc., New York.***
2. Adler, Mortimer, (1973) *The Difference of Man and the Difference it Makes*, Fordam University Press, New York.
3. Sowell, Thomas, (1998) *Conquests and Cultures*, Basic Books, New York.
4. Braudel, Fernand, (1994) *A History of Civilizations*, The Penguin Group, New York.
5. Woods, Thomas E. Jr. (2000) "The Colonial Origins of American Liberty", in *Ideas on Liberty*, September, Vol 50, No. 9, The Economic Foundation for Economic Education, Hudson, New York.
6. Parker, Richard, (1995) "Does America Have a Civilizational or Cultural Identity?" from a speech presented at Tulsa University, 4th International Conference - Global Paradigms: The Impact of Cultures and Trade on Diplomacy, Tulsa, OK.
7. **Hall, Edward T. (1966) *Hidden Dimension, Doubleday, New York.***
8. Maier, Charles, (1995) "The Changing Bases of National Identity" from a speech present at Tulsa University, 4th International Conference – Global Paradigms: The Impact of Cultures and Trade on Diplomacy, Tulsa, OK.

9. St. Augustine, "The City of God" in the *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 18, Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952.
10. Eisenach, Eldon, (1995) "Does America Have a Civilizational or Cultural Identity?" from a speech presented at Tulsa University, 4th International Conference – Global Paradigms: The Impact of Cultures and Trade on Diplomacy, Tulsa, OK.
11. Jefferson, Thomas,(1826) "Last Letter: Apotheosis of Liberty – To Roger Weightman", Monticello, in *Thomas Jefferson*, Library of America, 1984, New York, pp. 1516-1517.
12. **McWhorter, John H.,(2000) *Losing the Race, Self Sabotage in Black America*, The Free Press, New York, NY.**
13. Stewart, Edward C. and Bennett, Milton J.,(1991) *American Cultural Patterns*, Revised Edition, Intercultural Press, Inc., Yarmouth, Maine.
14. Linden, Eugene, (1999) *The Parrot's Lament, and other tales of animal intrigue, intelligence, and ingenuity*, Plume – Penguin Group, New York.
15. Watzlawick, Paul and Weakland, John,(1974) *Change*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York.
16. Gudykunst, William B. and Young Yun Kim,(1984) *Communicating with Strangers*, 3rd Ed., McGraw Hill, Boston, MA.
17. Handy, Charles, (2001) Tocqueville Revisited: The Meaning of American Prosperity, Harvard Business Review, January, p. 57.
18. Sebeok, Thomas A. (1968) "Goals and Limitations of the Study of Animal Communication," ed. T.A Sebeok, University Press, Bloomington, IN, p. 8.
19. *Ape Man*, (1994) Hosted by Walter Cronkite, a television series, 4 color videocassettes, 50 minutes each, A & E Television Networks, Hearst ABC/NBC, New York.
20. Osgood, Charles E., (1962) Reciprocal Initiative in The Liberal Papers, ed. James Roosevelt, Quadrangle Books, Chicago, p. 172.
21. **Patton, Chris, (1999) *East and West*, Macmillan – Pan Books, London, p. 146-172.**
22. Cheung, Jimmy, (2000) "SAR must prove it can thrive without Western 'meddling' if it want democracy, says Singaporean statesman," *China Morning Post*, December 9.
23. Gorbachev, Mikhail, (1987) *Perestroika: New Thinking for our Country and the World*, Harper and Row, New York.
24. Harrison, Lawrence E., (1985) *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind*, Madison Books, Lanham, MD.
25. Boas, F. (1966), Introduction, in F. Boas and J.W. Powell, eds., *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska (original work published in 1911).
26. CNN, "Australian fossil finder disputes age, backs evolution claim", January 10, 2001, Website: CNN.com/2001/Nature/01/10/Australia.evolution.reut/index.html.
27. Daley, Suzanne(2000), "Europe's Dim View of U.S. Is Evolving Into Frank Hostility", New York Times, April 9, Sunday, Foreign Desk.
28. Aldridge, M. Gene, (1997) Lectures on Intercultural Communication, Troy State University, Troy, AL..
29. Palov, I.P.,(1960) Conditioned Reflexes: An Investigation of the Physiology Activity of the Cerebral Cortex, trans. Anrep.ed., Dover Publications, Inc. p. 14.
30. Whorf, B.L., (1956) *Language, thought and reality*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1956.

31. Sapir, E., (1921), *Language*, New York: Harcourt Brace.
32. Lucy, J., (1992), *Language diversity and thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
33. Silverstein, M., (1976), "Shifters, linguistic categories and cultural description" in K. Basso & H Selby (eds), *Meaning in anthropology*, Albuquerque: University of NM Press.
34. **Langlacker, R. W., (1987), *Foundations of cognitive grammar: Vol 1, Theoretical prerequisites*, Stanford, CA: Sanford University Press.**
35. **Goffman, E.F., (1974), *Frame analysis*. New York: Harper & Row.**
36. **Benedict, R.,(1934), *Patterns of Culture*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.**
37. Fischer, David H.,(1989), *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, New York: Oxford University Press.
38. Reisman, David, (1961), *The Lonely Crowd*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
39. Locke, John, (1690), "Concerning Civil Government, Second Essay" in *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol 35, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Chicago: Encycopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952, pp. 1-85.
40. Huntington, Samuel, (1993) "The Clash of Civilizations", *Foreign Affairs*, Summer, New York.

About the author: M. Gene Aldridge is President/CEO of the New Mexico Independence Research Institute, Inc., a public policy think tank dedicated to educating the citizens of New Mexico about public policy issues. He holds the rank of Associate Professor and continues to teach for Troy State University, University College, Troy, Alabama, USA. Aldridge has his own international marketing and investment firm, World Marketing, Inc, which has taken him to over 100 countries for lecturing, business and study in the past 28 years. He has authored numerous articles on intercultural communication, international marketing, and developed case studies for project management, finance, marketing and information technology. He is a specialist on the role of taxation in the New Mexico economy. He lectures throughout the world on issues associated with intercultural communication, brand equity, international marketing, and project management in high technology.

Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, 2002, issue 5.

Editor: Prof. Jens Allwood

URL: <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/>.

