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Mentor: doc.dr.sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

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Abstract

Since the core American values have been present from the beginning of American history and have played a crucial part in the shaping of America, they present an extremely important topic of research. Considering the numerous changes that happened from the time of America's founding until the present, the primary goal of this paper is to establish the extent to which the core values are still present in the modern society with their representations in the media and the social context of family and the immediate environment of people. The contribution of Benjamin Franklin and Alexis de Tocqueville to the development of American values is listed along with their origin, after which the opinions and attitudes about the values of adults and youth in America are analyzed. The influence of American values is further examined through their representation on television and movies, and their depiction in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. After the analysis from the aforementioned aspects, it can be concluded that core values are nowadays present in various forms, the changing American family being the prime example, and the role of media is not simply to mirror them, but also to shape them with the help of fictional characters and events.

Keywords: core values, media, America, family

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Introduction

The goal of this paper is to examine the perseverance of traditional American values and beliefs in present day USA and their impact on modern day life. In order to show that the original American values and their variations are still widely present in the society, mainly through their various representations in the media and the social context of family and immediate environment, it is necessary to analyze them from those aspects. Therefore, the present study highlights the values which defined the people of America in the past, and to which extent they are still apparent in the aforementioned aspects of modern society. The first chapter presents the background and origins of the most important core American values along with the role of Benjamin Franklin and Alexis de Tocqueville in their development. The second chapter concerns the adults and youth of America, and their opinions about the core values, based on recent surveys about American society, family, children and teenagers. The third chapter deals with the way values are represented on television and in the movies, with a focus on how they are both reflected and shaped by these media. Lastly, the significance of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* will be discussed with a focus on its significance for contemporary America.

1. Background and Origins of American Values

In order to gain insight and a better understanding of the American culture, it's necessary to look at the various influences that have shaped it throughout history. Undoubtedly, one of the most important aspects of culture are its values. They are, by all means, a topic of great relevance because they carry not only the idea of what is right and what is wrong, but the ideals of the people who contributed the most to get the culture on its feet.

Back in the 18th century, one of the most famous American icons, Benjamin Franklin, wasn't particularly satisfied with his life, so he decided to make a list of twelve things he called "virtues," with which he tried to improve. Of course, mastering all of them was not an easy feat, so he devised a system for doing so one at a time: "I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues" (Franklin 146). The virtues Franklin listed were temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, and chastity (146). He told his friend about the list and his desire to change his life, so his friend suggested that he should add a 13th value to the list, called "humility," because at the time Ben was anything but humble. Little by little, week by week, Franklin worked hard to perfect every single one of those values, and managed to incorporate them into his daily life and routine as well as into society in general. The hard work eventually paid off, and he became one of the most successful and versatile men of America, and earned the widely known status of the "First American."

Along with Franklin's perspective on the American culture, it is also important to consider Alexis de Tocqueville's influential analysis of American society and character. During the era of the small farmer in the early 1830's, Alexis De Tocqueville, a young Frenchman, came to the United States to see why the Americans were so successful in their ways of governing the state. First and foremost, he noted how he had seen people who were extremely passionate about their equality, and treasured it even more than liberty itself: "It is more difficult to imagine the political activity that reigns in the United States than the liberty or equality that is found there" (Tocqueville 395). To them, equality largely meant freedom, and the ability to control their own fate without any outside interference, which would also make them self-reliant. This desire, he attributed mostly to the initial rank equality of the immigrants from Europe, and, especially, the ownership of the land, which made citizens of America see themselves as equals in the eyes of one another. That being said, they also developed great

materialistic values and delighted in all the pleasures that come from enjoying the consumer goods which permeated just about every aspect of society and stimulated the people to strive for more: "You must go to America to understand what power material well-being exercises over political actions and even opinions of themselves, which should be subject only to reason" (463). All that comfort did not come without a price, so if people wanted to achieve something for themselves, they needed to work hard, which represents a value in itself. Idleness and slacking were condemned, whereas hard work and effort were praised, and ushered the way into a better life overall. What Tocqueville actually wanted to emphasize was not the fact that everyone should be equal in the sense of possessing an abundant amount of money or power, or even in individual capabilities, but that everyone should have an equal opportunity to work hard, compete with others, and make something of their lives. Although Tocqueville was initially impressed with the high emphasis Americans put on equality, he had also foreseen that one day the liberty of the people may come in conflict with their passion for equality and with that, unfortunately, some people would prosper and become more "equal" than others.

From these historical examples, it is obvious that the core values played an integral part in the lives of the American people, and that they deemed them highly important. When values are rooted in people's lives, not only do they provide a certain consistency, but they can also serve as stimulation for people to strive towards improvement, as in Franklin's case. However, even though the core values were an essential part of the American nation in the past, it is questionable to which extent those values are able to see the light of day in modern society, and what may be even more important, how much significance they have for people today. Therefore, the following chapter deals with the opinions of American youth and adults, based on surveys, in order to establish what roles the American values play in their lives.

2. American Values in the USA

2.1. Values of Adults in America

In order to gain better insight into the values which adult citizens of America prioritize and deem important, it is best to analyze research and polls conducted in recent years.

Primarily, it is safe to say that family is one of the most important values and presents a central social unit in America, as most of the people tend to start their own family at a certain point in life. According to Natalie Angier's *The Changing American Family*, the American family originated in "the raggedness of the Colonial era," and home was actually a place of business and industry, where all "able" family members were expected to work for the family economy. But, of course, as times change and lifestyles modernize, one's notions of what "family" is and what it actually consists of also change and modernize. Nowadays, for instance, the majority of the researchers who study the evolution and development of the American family are astonished at how much the family has changed in recent years, and how those changes often exceed those same experts' predictions of just a few journal articles ago (Angier 2013). According to Angier's research, the words "I wear the pants in the family" are uttered more often nowadays by women, and phrases such as "family of one," coined by people living alone, are becoming quite common. What is interesting to mention, is that the majority of Americans see this deviation from the traditional family as negative, but believe that raising children in a "dual wage-earning household" should become the new norm for families in general (Penn 2012). Despite the wide array of different types of families, however, the very idea of family still represents an extremely important, if not the most important, aspect of people's lives. When a sample of 52 Americans of different ages were asked about the first thought on hearing the word "family," the answers hardly differed, and they consisted of statements such as "It is the backbone of how we live" and "It means everything" (Angier 2013). From these examples, it can be inferred that family ties definitely play a pivotal role in people's lives, and, as further proof, according to Harris Interactive's research, even eight of ten Americans declared that having close family relationships is a key to happiness (7).

However, people's disillusionment with the values and the direction in which they are headed nowadays is also clearly evident, since the real state of affairs in the world rarely matches one's internal picture of it. To exemplify, according to a poll of around 2,000

Americans, conducted by Berland in 2012, more than two thirds of the respondents believe that American values have declined, and they associate those values with increased materialism, political corruption, and a nation which is obsessed with celebrity culture (Penn 2012). Furthermore, Americans believe that their values are "weathering," every generation is becoming worse and worse because they are too focused on the "material," and believe that Wall Street is "more like a cancer than an engine for economic growth" (Penn 2012). In addition, while religious freedom also represents one of the core values, according to Penn (2012), fewer people are actually "embracing" any kind of religion and they usually become religious only after they have children and start a family of their own, which can be seen as a good example of the dynamic nature of American society, where a person's values may change drastically over the course of his or her life. This partial dissatisfaction of Americans with their society is important to mention because remaining true to the core values and beliefs is not easy if there is a discrepancy between the mere idea of their inclusion in people's lives and people's actual behavior.

Fortunately, the situation in America is not entirely hopeless. Looking from the intercultural perspective, the majority of Americans still agree that when it comes to the values of freedom and personal liberty, America is in a much stronger position than other countries in the world (Penn 2012). Also, while they are aware that the situation in the government and the economy is far from perfect, Americans still believe in the future that is based on "pulling themselves up," and 70 percent of them are confident that they can achieve anything they want in America through hard work alone (Penn 2012), which serves as evidence that their beliefs in self-reliance and hard work have not yet vanished. Since, in most cases, the change in society starts from a single person, their self-belief can be viewed as one of the most important values, and the best motivation for both moral self-improvement and the improvement of the country in general. It is also important to note that the change that comes with time may not necessarily be negative, as people usually tend to become more broadminded: "The rise in overall acceptance in homosexuality is probably the single biggest change in social values in the last 30 years. Fifty-three percent say homosexuality is now morally acceptable, up from 38 percent in 2002" (Penn 2012). What is interesting to mention, according to Penn, is that people today are "diverging from their fathers and grandfathers with new attitudes that revolve less around competition and more around equality" (Penn 2012).

Overall, based on various research from recent years, it is clear that the core values are still ingrained in the lives of Americans. Even though there is an evident change in their

opinions about traditional values, and material values are more prominent in the society than ever before, Americans are still conscious of the most important things. They still believe in themselves and value family, freedom, hard work and personal liberty above all. Therefore, the "decay" of certain values in society should be perceived as a mere obstacle, which one can easily overcome, but only if one tries to incorporate the right values in one's life and actions, just as Tocqueville once wrote, "the passions of the people cannot encounter any lasting obstacles that can prevent them from appearing in the daily leadership of society" (278).

2.2. Values of Youth in America

Since the future is always left in the hands of the young, the task of instilling them with proper values is of the utmost importance. Contrary to adults, young people don't yet have firmly established personalities or attitudes, so they need to be guided on their road to maturing and developing the right values.

According to the research of Meg Bostrom, teenagers are an especially criticized age group because their parents are unable to be adequately involved with them and teach them the right values, so they become extremely vulnerable to all sorts of negative influences, such as drugs, violence, sex, alcohol, and the media (Bostrom 2). Those negative influences are the main reason why thinking about teenagers often conjures up a negative image in the heads of adults. Moreover, in research which was conducted in 2001, only 16 percent of Americans said that "young people under the age of 30 share most of their moral and ethical values," and they believe that "not learning values like honesty, respect, and responsibility" is a problem more serious than the abuse of substances (Bostrom 4). Of course, it is difficult to dismiss such widespread opinions and beliefs, since the teenage years present a transitional period of life in which it is not easy to distinguish right from wrong. In addition, even one in five children who were only up to ten years old said that they "just want to be rich" when they were asked in a survey what they would like to be when they grow up, and the majority of them also expressed a wish to be famous (Perry 2014). This kind of thinking, even during those tender years, clearly represents the enormous influence that media and lives of celebrities have on forming the values of youth, and points to many possible mistakes which parents can make while instilling core values in their children during their early years.

However, while the popular opinion about teenagers is not without foundation, as lots of teenagers between the ages of 15-17 have had sex and tried alcohol and drugs (Bostrom 2), it is also very important to hear out their opinions and attitudes, since there are always two sides to every story. According to Bostrom, American teenagers consider education and planning their future extremely important, and the things which cause the greatest stress for them are doing well in school and getting into college (2-6). Also, when asked what values they consider most important, they listed "being honest," "working hard," "being a good student," and "giving time to help others" as the best choices (Bostrom 6). In the research conducted by Harris Interactive, the things which best define a person as "being a good American" from the youth's

perspective, are relations with family and neighbors (30). These examples show that the younger generations indeed have a pretty good notion of the important values in life, but if they are not properly educated and guided in the right direction, it is easy for them to go astray. What is interesting to mention, is that even though most youth feel comfortable within their immediate environment, such as school and neighborhood, they are not satisfied with the state of the world today and don't think that it's a safe place (Harris Interactive 21), which clearly shows that even young generations can somewhat perceive the discrepancies between values in their personal environment, and those in the outside world.

Conclusively, the general opinion of adults about the younger generations is much worse than the actual state of affairs. It is only natural that throughout their process of maturing, young people go through many changes which cannot be controlled as effectively as their parents would want. However, since the majority of youth in America actually show the willingness and the initiative to do well in school, as well as some general knowledge about the important values, it is necessary to push them in the right direction, especially during their early development, so the negative opinions of their seniors can be reduced to a minimum.

3. Representation of Traditional Values in the Media

3.1. American Values and Trends on Television and in the Movies

Television and movies present ideal types of media for the portrayal of the American values to the viewers, not only because of the vividness they enable with their audio-visual presentation, but because of their all-pervasive nature in the modern society. Since their influence is so great, the viewers are definitely more likely to identify with the fictional characters and adopt many trends that are popular on television and in the movies.

When pondering about the influential power of television, it is sometimes extremely difficult to ascertain whether it is reflecting the values and attitudes of the people or it is actually shaping them, but it is very important to touch upon the subject of both. In the 1950's, for instance, television mostly ignored current political issues, concentrating instead on creating shows oriented on family matters such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Donna Reed Show*, which presented the idealized American families where mothers were always at home, fathers worked at the office and there was always a "strong moral lesson" at the end (Lule 344). As time went by, Americans also wanted to see shows in which a family does not have to "operate smoothly all the time" (Merritt 2013) and *Married With Children* and *The Simpsons* enabled people to do just that, and to identify themselves with other not-so-perfect families. Nowadays, however, religious conservatives have long since declared that the traditional nuclear family is gone, which is not an unfounded statement since the number of "stay-at-home" dads in America has increased enormously and employed mothers are the main income earners in about 15% of households (Merritt 2013). Consequently, the TV shows that are popular nowadays differ greatly from the ones in the 1950's, as can be seen from the example of the characters in the series *Modern Family*. Jay and Gloria present a couple of divorcees and a type of "blended family," Mitchell and Cameron are a gay couple, while Claire and Phil provide an example of a strong woman and a husband who is submissive, and in most cases, dominated by his female counterpart (Merritt 2013). The couples from the show can serve as further evidence of the changing American family mentioned in the previous chapter, but they also influence the audience by showing that there are many ways and forms in which a family can function, therefore reaffirming and broadening the scope of family values. According to Merritt, however, it is important to mention that *Modern Family* is also conservative in its own way as

the characters are highly relatable even to traditionalists and "like many before it, *Modern Family* is a sitcom about a non-traditional family that really values family" (Merritt 2013).

Just like television, movies have an enormous power of influencing people and representing core values and beliefs, especially because they often do it in a way that is interesting and appealing to the audience. According to Jack Lule's *Understanding Media and Culture,* American identity in society is "built around certain commonly held beliefs, or myths about shared experiences, and these American myths are often disseminated through or reinforced by film" (314). For example, one of the most popular American myths is the core value of individualism, which became extremely appealing with the rise of mass culture because it enabled people to feel more autonomous and special in the "face of an increasingly homogenized culture" (Lule 314). According to Lule, individualism found the best embodiment in the movie genre of Westerns, especially popular in the 1960's, in which the character of the "lone cowboy" often faced many dangers and perils on the frontier, but usually managed to prevail in the end (314). Similar examples from more recent films are Indiana Jones, Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars,* and Neo from *The Matrix* (Lule 314). What is common to all of these characters is that they represent very special individuals who prove that one man can indeed make a difference in the world if he is willing to try, which, naturally, prompts the audience to start exhibiting more independence and individuality themselves and to change their opinions and attitudes. Furthermore, the movie *Bonnie and Clyde* presents a great example of the influential power of movies because, at the time of its release, it was "testing the limits of permissible on-screen material," and movies like *Midnight Cowboy* and *Easy Rider* contained drugs, violence, and sex (Lule 312), which enabled some topics that were tabooed at the time to emerge and become more prominent in the society. By introducing those controversial topics, the movie industry shows that it can go beyond the limits of the conventional norms of society, and prompts the audience to, in a way, adopt or at least imitate the lifestyles presented on the screen. However, Lule also notes:

> In one sense, movies could be characterized as America's storytellers. Not only do Hollywood films reflect certain commonly held attitudes and beliefs about what it means to be American, but they also portray contemporary trends, issues, and events, serving as records of the eras in which they were produced. Consider, for example, films about the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks: *Fahrenheit 9/11, World Trade Center, United 93,* and others. These films grew out of a seminal event of the time, one that preoccupied the consciousness of Americans for years after it occurred. (308)

This serves to prove that the relationship between media and people is extremely complicated. While it is true that television and movies tend to depict popular trends and values in society, they do not simply mirror them. Jack Lule notes: "Mass-communication messages are created by individuals, and each individual has his or her own set of values, assumptions, and priorities" (42). Therefore, every individual who works for a certain television house or produces a movie has his own unique style of presenting the actual trends and values in the media, be it with the help of distinctive fictional characters, events which are similar to the current conditions in the society, or some other tool for bringing the contents closer to the audience, they show that it is possible to keep the values alive in their own specific way.

3.2. The Significance of American Values in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Francis Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* undoubtedly presents one of the most popular American literary works, as it deals with many important topics such as the American Dream, materialistic values in the form of excessive wealth, and the road from rags to riches. Therefore, in the light of this paper's topic, it is important to establish the significance of the novel in contemporary society.

To begin, in the novel, the reader is introduced to the theme of a seemingly "accomplished" American Dream. It presents the fancy and luxurious life of wealthy people in New York, and the main character, Jay Gatsby, serves as an example of a man who has gone from rags to riches. However, when the aforementioned reader scratches the surface of the novel, it is unmistakable how the Dream has become corrupted and false, as all of the characters are obsessed by wealth and opulence that money offers. By being fixated on the importance of maintaining their praiseworthy social image, they lose track of things that are truly important, such as morals, values, and basic human decency. For instance, Tom Buchannan presents a character who is extremely morally depraved, and the fact that all the money he has was actually inherited, renders him the complete antithesis of the self-made man (Lena 42), the quality on which Americans put great emphasis, especially in the pursuit of the American Dream. In contrast, in Fitzgerald's central character, Jay Gatsby, the reader can see a true self-made man. Even from a young age, in order to make something of himself, he starts writing his very own self-improvement diary, just like Benjamin Franklin did, and during his large and flamboyant

parties, Gatsby always takes time to take care of any business he is occupied with and politely excuses himself to settle important matters at hand. It is also important to note that Jay's humble beginnings were probably one of the main initiators for his desire for wealth, a fact which certainly highlights his path from rags to riches: "the most fit sons in the race for material success were sired by fathers who had failed in that race" (Lena 41).

Furthermore, it's necessary to look at Gatsby from the perspective of the contemporary reader. According to Philip Norman, Gatsby is a "very modern figment of the consumer society and its tawdry values, with his vast, yellow, open-topped limousine and the gorgeous shirts he pulls out of his wardrobe in his attempts to impress Daisy" (2012). Even though the ideal picture of Gatsby's American Dream is somewhat tarnished by the fact that he was motivated by solely materialistic reasons to impress his beloved Daisy, David Dowling claims: "It does speak to contemporary America… especially that so-called American Dream, that stereotype that everyone can succeed if you try hard enough" (Geoghegan 2011). In that respect, *The Great Gatsby* offers invaluable knowledge to the modern reader, not only because it shows that it is possible to achieve great things by working hard and persevering in life, but also because it points to mistakes that can be made in the process, and that knowledge can be used to avoid making them in the future. In addition, Dowling points out how the book actually presents us with a very important question: "how much we want money to play a role in our lives and what is really important to us. The novel asks that basic question. Hopefully, reading it (today) can reshape the American Dream for this century" (Geoghegan 2011). It is also important to note that the novel is heavily oriented towards the past, which can be seen mainly through Gatsby's desire to reunite with his love from the past, Daisy. However, since the modern lifestyles of Americans tend to become more and more hectic, and people can easily lose sight of what is important, sometimes it is wise to look back to one's origins and past in order to improve that same lifestyle, which Nick ultimately did: "He turns his back on stockbroking and returns to his family, to the homespun values of yesteryear" (Geoghegan 2011).

To conclude, *The Great Gatsby* nowadays presents a beacon of hope for all those who are starting from scratch and want to achieve their dream of wealth and success. While it depicts the decay of the American Dream, which is obvious through overindulgence in money and social power, Jay Gatsby also presents a symbol of the man who can really succeed if he tries hard enough, and that sends both a positive and motivational message to the contemporary reader. Finally, the narrator of the story, Nick Carraway, shows us through his perspective that one must not lose the important moral values on the way to success, but leaves open the

possibilities of the American Dream: “What’s wonderful about the novel, about Nick’s fiction, is his ability to see not only the limitations of Gatsby’s dream but the possibilities of it” (Geoghegan 2011)

Conclusion

As already mentioned, values play an enormous role in the lives of the American people. It is not only because they serve as a support for people, but because they direct them towards their personal growth, and the growth of society in general, which is precisely what makes them a topic worthy of research. Even though values, as everything else, tend to change over the course of time, they can still present an invaluable guidance in people's lives, and help them to remember their own heritage, and the heritage of their ancestors.

Firstly, adults and younger generations in America still believe that the core values are very important in their lives. Even though the American family has changed greatly throughout history, and nowadays it can exist in many forms, Americans still think that it plays the most important role in their life, and family relations mean everything. However, Americans are aware, that their values are not as strong as they used to be, and that over time, they have become more obsessed with materialism than they used to be. Staying true to beliefs and values can be hard when the social environment provides a bad example, but fortunately, they still firmly believe that by relying on themselves and working hard, they can achieve almost anything. In addition, teenagers in America break many prejudices about their age group by showing that they value hard work and good grades at school, and by showing genuine concern about their future.

Television and movies, as two very powerful media, provide an excellent example of the complexity of relations between them and their viewers. Not only do they present a reflection of the current trends and values in society, but with many of their audio-visual effects, fictional characters and stories, they actually shape those values and trends, and show that values can be found in forms quite different from the ones in the past. The influential power they have is used to present their audience with alternative lifestyles and to encourage them to even adopt and imitate some of them. Also, many of the characters from the movies serve as an example to the people, by showing them that almost anything is possible if they believe in themselves.

Similarly, *The Great Gatsby* can be seen as a literary work that highly emphasizes the values of hard work, self-reliance, and the pursuit of the American Dream, and from the perspective of the contemporary reader, shows that anyone who is willing to try hard enough

can succeed. By presenting Gatsby's untimely end, it can serve as a warning that misfortune can befall a person who strays from the moral values, and it encourages the reader to think about what is truly important to achieve in the course of one's life.

To conclude, the analysis of the American values in modern society can be viewed in a positive, as well as a negative light. While there are signs that the values are not going in an entirely desirable direction, the research of American values proved to be very interesting because it showed that today, they can exist in forms which differ from the ones in the past, and that alternative lifestyles can also follow the basic values. However, the most important thing inferred from the paper is that Americas still deem the core values important, especially family, freedom, hard work and self-reliance, and include them in many aspects of their lives.

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