AMERICAN VALUES IN THE 1980's: IS THERE ANYTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN?

Boris W. Becker, Professor of Marketing, Oregon State University
Patrick E. Connor, Professor of Management, Willamette University

Numerous commentaries recently have appeared in the business and popular press suggesting that the fundamental values held by Americans are in turmoil. We are, reports allege, in a critical time of dramatic transition in values. Are such conclusions justified? Are values really undergoing a profound change -- a change that may affect numerous aspects of business and organizational life? Or, are we in an essentially normal period -- one in which values oscillate about a basically stable historical trend?

It is impossible to discuss all the arguments supporting the thesis of rapid value change. Still, a sampling can present the general flavor of that position. First, are the arguments of serious scholars who decry the decline of "value-forming institutions." Urie and Rolf Bronfenbrenner suggest the family has changed in ways that have "calamitous" implications for society. Second, we are continually exposed to public opinion surveys, of which Yankelovitch's are typical. The basic thread running through these surveys is the decline of the Protestant work ethic, combined with an unwillingness to make sacrifices. Americans are becoming more hedonistic and materialistic while paradoxically becoming less willing to save money to support their materialistic life styles. The third, perhaps preeminent, reason for the perception of changing values is an atavistic yearning for the "good old days," days that probably never were.

A number of serious thinkers are arrayed on the other side of the argument. Robin M. Williams, a student of values for over 30 years, argues that during the entire 20th century no new value orientations appeared, nor did any significant ones disappear. Williams characterizes us as rational, egalitarian, and individualistic -- an active rather than passive or introspective people. At the risk of oversimplifying Williams' sophisticated discussion, his answer to the question might be: "Yes, there has been change, but of a graduaal sort." Largely caused by the success of the scientific enterprise, "scientific" values have grown more important, paralleled by continuing secularization of our culture. Williams suggests a slight decline in the emphasis on achievement, efficiency and practicality, coupled with some skepticism about the notion of inevitable progress.

Milton Rokeach has also looked at changing values, for the time period 1968 to 1971. Rokeach points out, "The significant value changes between 1968 and 1971 . . . are reflections of selective rather than ubiquitous changes that had taken place in . . . American society." "Equality" became a more important value to white Americans, as did "a world of beauty;" but for blacks, "equality" declined and "a world of beauty" was unchanged.

If cultural values are changing, they are changing very slowly. How then can one explain the apparent values changes cited by many observers? First, the values of some highly visible segments may indeed be undergoing some change, thereby marginally affecting overall cultural values. The Yankelovitch

surveys qualify their results by finding a rise in hedonism among a "fascinating group of Americans." Indeed, the present authors have demonstrated that value differences may be useful in segmenting consumer markets. The key point, however, is that there is no evidence of a sudden, pronounced shift in aggregate cultural values. Second, outside forces shape attitudes in ways that lead the casual observer to believe that more fundamental values are changing - when they are not. Are the affluent young really discarding the Protestant Ethic? Or, in the face of a decade of rampant inflation, are they merely behaving "rationally" by saving less and spending more on durable goods - cars and even homes? Has the enlarged female labor force been the result of dramatic values change? We think not. It resulted from improved contraceptive technology that allowed women to behave in ways (i.e. work) already congruent with the dominant value system. It also resulted from necessity in the face of economic forces having little to do with changed values. One could argue that increased female participation in the labor force is entirely consistent with a "traditional" American value - family security and related economic well-being. Third, apparent value shifts may reflect only transient changes in attitudes and behaviors of particularly visible individuals and groups. College students are exactly such a group. What has become of the "counter-culture" figures of the 1960's who were leading the youth of America to new value systems? Jerry Rubin is alive and well on Wall Street, endorsing Volkswagens. Who recalls what the letters SDS stand for? More to the moment what of the "Moral Majority?" Are Americans, en masse moving to that "Old Time Religion?" We doubt it. What has become of the TV boycott plan? Surveys indicate that Moral Majoritarians regularly watch the shows their leaders excoriate. There will be no boycott because any such boycott would fail.

Within our dominant value system, which has shown little change through America's history, there is room for great subcultural diversity. But radical change in a nation such as ours, that has proven capable of absorbing divergent value systems for many decades, does not seem to be in the cards. The principal threat to a stable value system is posed by the vast number of recent immigrants - both legal and illegal. An immense burden is being placed, largely upon our public schools, to "indoctrinate" these newcomers to the dominant value system.

The problem is this: To combine stability in values with adaptability to exogenous change -- that is, how to transmit and inculcate the key values of Western civilization, while simultaneously adjusting to change. Ben Wattenberg, a public opinion specialist, believes that people's responses make it clear that they still have a "great core of moderation, stability, and common sense." We see little value change to contradict that belief.

(References are available from authors upon request.)