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# Core Values in American Life: Living with Contradictions

*Arthur G. Neal, Helen Youngelson-Neal*

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What values do Americans hold dear? What happens when real-world situations cause those values to conflict? To better understand the intellectual map of how American society works, Arthur G. Neal and Helen Youngelson-Neal analyze values prominent in American word and deed. These values appear in our nation's formal documents—rights and privileges prominently emphasized in the US Constitution and inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. They have shaped the historical destiny and, indeed, include those values most extensively propagated by the general population.

Using these criteria, the authors identify individualism, the pursuit of happiness, freedom, consumerism, materialism, equality of opportunity, technology, mastery of the environment, quality of marriage, and national unity as the core American values. Core values provide the raw materials for the construction of contemporary society as a moral community, wherever that community is located. Such values are clusters of ideas that are central to self-identities; they generate a sense of collective belonging and membership. As such, core values define the existing social order and advance a set of ideas for depicting a desirable future. The analysis presented here helps us understand contemporary conflicts inherent in the American value system and the problems confronted by Americans as they try to live within the limitations and contradictions of value systems.

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