

Patrick L. Schmidt



# THE PSYCHOLOGY

OF  
**GERMANS**

A Historical  
Cultural  
Perspective



AND **AMERICANS**

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GERMANS AND AMERICANS

A Historical Cultural Perspective

Patrick L. Schmidt

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Introduction	5
<hr/>	
The historical origins of the German character	6
<hr/>	
Historical analysis of the American character	7
<hr/>	
Psychological characteristics of Germans and Americans	9
<hr/>	
The German need to be “ernsthaft” (serious) and “ordentlich” (orderly) versus American self-confidence and the “sunny boy” image	10
<hr/>	
The German need for an enclosed “Heim” (home) versus the American “open spaces”	14
<hr/>	
The German concept of formal politeness versus the casual American attitude towards etiquette	17
<hr/>	
The German precise scheduling of time versus the American obsession that “time is money”	20
<hr/>	
The German notion of “Freund” versus the American idea that everyone is a friend	22
<hr/>	
The German doing something “gründlich” and effectively versus the American doing something efficiently with an instant solution	23
<hr/>	
The German emphasis on “detailed-thinking” versus the American	

penchant for “non-conventional thinking”	25
--	----

---

The German “höchste Leistung bringen” versus the American “high need to achieve”	27
--	----

---

German penchant for modesty versus the continual American search for status	30
---	----

---

German concept of “solide Ausbildung” versus American preference to “learn by doing”	31
--	----

---

Summary of psychological characteristics	34
--	----

---

Discussion questions	35
----------------------	----

---

Bibliography	36
--------------	----

---

Copyright	39
-----------	----

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# Introduction

*The Germans make everything difficult, both for themselves and for everyone else.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832)

*The American dream is often a very private dream of being the star, the uniquely successful and admirable one, the one who stands out from the crowd of ordinary folk who don't know how.*

From the collection *Habits of the Heart*, 1986

When describing a culture, we also refer to the *psychology of a people*, i.e. their mental and emotional processes. This leads to an interesting question: why have groups chosen different values and norms, leading to different cultures? The answer can be found by going into that innate part of thoughts, known as “basic assumptions”. The strongest basic assumption of any group is to survive, which means fighting every day against nature. The Dutch against the mounting sea, the Swiss against the Alps and avalanches, the Eskimos against intense cold. Today, in post-industrial societies, it is the struggle to obtain a proper education and suitable employment. Every group tries its best to deal with its environment according to its means.

Over the centuries, permanent problems have found solutions wherein our actions are automatic, unconscious. Accepting the fact that much of our behavior is subconscious, the meeting of two cultures can lead to a lot of confusion. To understand subtle differences in a new culture, one needs to study their historic origins.

This chapter attempts to describe historical factors and the psychological make-up of Germans and Americans which have made these two nations the way they are. The comparative method will be used so that the reader can immediately grasp where the differences are.

A note to the reader: Every culture has a close balance between positive and negative characteristics. Some of the national traits of the Americans and Germans presented in this book may appear harsh, rousing strong feelings. The author wishes to emphasize that they aren't pointed out in order to criticize. Rather, they allow us to see ourselves from a cross-cultural perspective, which can provide a strikingly original view of one's reality.

To accept one's own culture, warts and all, can be difficult. Hopefully, the reader will understand these contrasts as a manner of viewing his or her culture in its full dimension. To know ourselves better is to grow.

# The historical origins of the German character

Much of what we now call “typically German”, i.e. perfection and need for order, can be attributed in large part to a relatively dreadful past. As any psychiatrist or psychologist will tell you, a child who has been traumatized will often take the route of perfectionism as an adult to avoid feeling worthless. The same could be extrapolated to the nation of Germany.

American historian Gordon A. Craig, in his book *The Germans*, points out that the country has suffered more than its share of wartime horror, beginning with the Thirty Years War (1618 – 1648). This religious conflict was a gigantic duel between Austria and Spain, on the one hand, and France, Sweden, Holland and Denmark on the other. The majority of the battlefields, in which their struggle for mastery was played out, were in Germany. The German people had the misfortune of being *das Land der Mitte*, the country in the middle.

The consequences were horrendous. By 1641, the population of Württemberg had been reduced from 400,000 to 48,000 and its northern neighbor, the Palatinate, had lost 80% of its people. Likewise, physical property was ruthlessly destroyed. Swedish troops alone demolished 18,000 villages in the last years of the war, along with 1,500 towns and 200 castles.



Both German and international historians agree that the Thirty Years War was turning point in Germany history, generating profound changes in the German character (Etching by Hans Ulrich Franck, 1643).

Despite the fact that northern and eastern Germany — Upper and Lower Saxony, Holstein, Oldenburg, Hamburg and Prussia — were relatively untouched by the war, the country as a whole lost about 35% of its population, falling from 21

million people to about 13.5 million (along with immense destruction of property). The terrible psychological and social toll the Germans suffered could only have a profound impact on the generations to come.

And other tragic conflicts were to follow: the Napoleonic Wars, the Austro-Prussian War, then two World Wars. In the last of these, the Holocaust, brought disgrace and shame upon the German people as a whole.

Not only was there mass destruction and death, but also massive financial losses. Runaway inflation wiped out the middle class in the 1920s. The currency reform of 1948 meant the Reichsmark lost 90% of its value in just one day.

Given Germany's tragic and violent past, it's not surprising that wars and their consequences have played a large role in the German *Angst* towards uncertainty and the need for order.

## Historical analysis of the American character

Studying the social and historical background of America, you will find that what has made the country unique from previous civilizations is the profound belief that it is the "land of the free". Free to be and to do what one wants.

This idea has attracted millions of immigrants from all parts of the world, resulting in a rich culture of European, African, Latin American, Asian and Arab influences. However, the country derives its roots from Anglo-Saxon culture.

The U.S. was founded by northern European settlers, mostly from Great Britain, fleeing religious persecution. They brought a rejection of traditions, skepticism toward the Old World, and enthusiasm for new ideas. One in particular was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy that if man decided to believe in the good of others, society would become highly efficient and dynamic. Mutual trust would eliminate the heavy, time-consuming process of doubting and judging. It was exactly what America needed to develop itself. When building a nation, decisions have to be made quickly. "Yes or no" became the norm. "Time is money".

This simplistic notion of life — which ignored the complexities and nuances that existence continually presents — created the American traits of being unsentimental and without traditional standards of behavior. It was part of breaking away from the past and marching into the unknown with confidence and hope.

Perhaps what makes the Americans seem so nonchalant and happy-go-lucky is that the country hasn't experienced the massive losses of life that have so marked Europe throughout history. The United States suffered only one real tragedy, the American Civil War. In that four-year conflict, 600,000 soldiers were killed. Out of a



population of 30 million at the time, that was a relatively high toll: two percent of the nation. World War II casualties were nothing like the nightmare of 1861 – 1865. The number of American soldiers killed between 1941 – 1945 (300,000 in a population of 150 million) represented only two tenths of one percent.



*The USA has suffered only one real tragedy in its brief history — the American Civil War (Print by Currier and Ives, after 1862).*

German losses during WW II were much higher. Over 3.5 million soldiers and 780,000 civilians were killed, a total of almost 4.3 million people. Of a population of 70 million, 6.5% lost their lives. Human tragedy strikes closer to the German soul than that of the American.

With rich natural resources, “Yankee ingenuity” for being shrewd and productive while conquering new challenges, and the lack of any real historical tragedy, the U.S. flourished. Thus, an oversimplified trust in humanity blended with a belief in the “pursuit of happiness”. It’s no wonder that America transformed itself into the most powerful country in the world. Anyone could evolve from “rags to riches”, it was said, and millions of poor immigrants moved up the social ladder. All these elements were the seeds that gave birth to the myth of the “happy ending”.

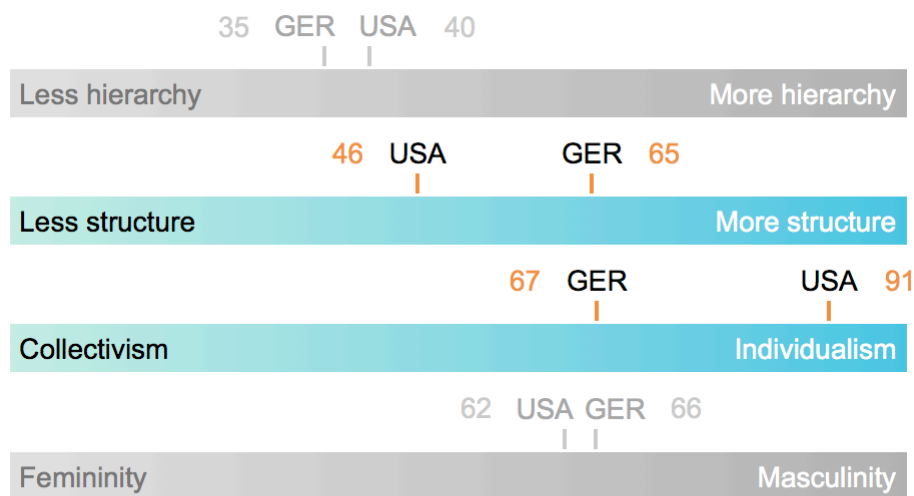
This is reflected in many American movies, which convey the simplistic message “the good guys win and the bad guys lose”. When a complicated human problem presents itself, Americans often refuse to see it, the result of their traditional belief in the superficial good of everything.

Consequently, an oversimplified attitude towards life forms the present character. Americans, as a whole, don’t radiate a healthy human skepticism and deep thinking which give the elements of a full-rounded person. It’s no surprise that so many people perceive Americans as somewhat naive and superficial, too light-hearted to be earnest.



# Psychological characteristics of Germans and Americans

After reading the brief historical analysis of German and the USA, we can now examine and contrast more closely the behaviors of the two nations. As mentioned in the first chapter, comparing Hofstede's dimensions (see below) allow us to have a more enlightened and subtle understanding of different mental processes.



*German and American cultures as they appear on Hofstede's scale of cultural dimensions. The biggest differences between the two nations are the need for Structure and Individualism / Collectivism.*

In the following section, we will compare values and attitudes of the two countries.

## The German need to be “ernsthaft” (serious) and “ordentlich” (orderly) versus American self-confidence and the “sunny boy” image

A desire for security lies at the core of German culture, expressed so well by the axiom *Ordnung muß sein* (there must be order). The Germans, simply put, have an extremely low threshold for uncertainty. To counteract this unconscious feeling, they strive to be serious and extremely well-organized.



This *Ordnung* behavior manifests itself everywhere. Foreigners who arrive in Germany for the first time are surprised by the German need to do everything perfectly and correctly. Almost nothing is improvised. Listening to the German news on the radio is an example. The announcer speaks in a steady monotone, appearing to display absolutely no emotion. No matter what may be happening in the world, order remains.

*Ordnung* best expresses itself in the excessive number of rules and regulations in the country. Almost every aspect of daily life is controlled and much is verboten (forbidden). “Quiet time” laws state that no noise of any kind is allowed between 1:30 and 3:30 in the afternoon, as well as all day long on Sunday. (The author, living in Stuttgart, once attempted to mow the lawn late one Sunday morning. Within ten minutes the police arrived to say that two laws were being broken: the one barring manual labor on Sunday and the one prohibiting noise.)

However, this extreme sense of order leads Germans to be rational, disciplined and industrious. As *Time Magazine* once noted, they are brilliant organizers and planners who like complexity and are good at integrating things, including people, into a big system. All these combined traits have contributed in making Germany a much respected and rich nation.

Germans don’t spend too much time on foolishness or jokes. The French writer Stendhal summed this up in 1820: “It seems to me that more jokes are said in Paris in one evening than in all of Germany in one month.” Germans have a sense of

humor, but generally prefer to express it in their private life. They don't mix business and humor until they're sure their counterparts will be able to take them seriously. And they don't go in for self-deprecating humor, i.e. making fun about their own weaknesses.

Their seriousness explains why Germany is not known as a "smiling nation" — life and work are strict business. This soberness can be experienced in German films such as *The White Rose*, *Stalingrad*, *Das Boot*, *The Tin Drum* and *The Lives of Others*. This doesn't mean Germans are unfriendly; they're simply more reserved, keeping their emotions to themselves. For example, at a social gathering, Germans often have difficulty in making "small talk".

Another important German trait is their desire to be fair and above all decent (*brav*) at all times and all cost. "If you want the world to be orderly, you need to be fair." Germans in any form of contest — whether it be in business, sports or personal relationships — generally don't cheat. This is not to say they never foul. They will resort to unfair play only after they have repeatedly been fouled against.

The common expression *Durchsetzungsvermögen* (power to assert oneself) helps explain German persistence in striving for perfection, sometimes seen as arrogance by foreigners. When Germans decide upon a certain course of action, they apply themselves 100% and won't stop until they've attained their goal. This has resulted in phenomenal success in business, especially in export-oriented industries. Despite a severe lack of natural resources, Germany exports approximately \$ 17,000 per capita, as compare to \$ 4,800 for the U.S. (from the *CIA World Factbook*, 2011).

Closely related to the need for order is their vision of what is right and wrong. When they come across a situation that inadvertently violates habits or social customs, Germans — especially the older generation — will not hesitate to lecture people. Non respect for the order of things makes them anxious and uneasy. Often, this striving for perfection tends to make them feel they "know better" than non-Germans, leading foreigners to perceive them sometimes as haughty.



*The German poet Heinrich Heine described Germans as longing for an ideal world.*

Although Germans appear highly disciplined, they possess a childlike romanticism within themselves. The language mirrors this in the common expression: *Ich habe mich gefreut wie ein Kind*. (I was as delighted as a child). Longing for an ideal world allows them to escape into what the poet Heinrich Heine (1797 – 1856) called “the airy realm of dreams”. And romanticism explains, in part, why Germans are such relentless tourists. Being perfectionists and idealists, they are searching for an ideal country. From a psychological point of view, *Schwärmerei* (daydreaming) and *Wanderlust* (a longing to travel) are reactions against societal demands that Germans must always be serious and orderly!

The Americans are just the opposite in how they project themselves. Despite the fact that Americans share the same cultural values as Germans (predominantly monochronic, low-context), the former exhibit a “sunny-boy outlook”: that combination of openness, friendliness, optimism, vitality and spontaneity. These characteristics are so unique you can usually pick out an American anywhere in the world. Americans are raised with the idea that everyone has the right to express their individuality (“individual freedom”). They are taught not to recognize their places in the social order and to constantly assert themselves. Americans consider themselves as individuals first, and only secondarily as members of a family, organization or religion. This baffles people from cultures in which one’s identity is, for the most part, an extension of his or her family.



*John Wayne, the classic American hero of strong individualism.*

Alan Roland, in his book *In Search of Self in India and Japan*, psychoanalyzed Americans, Indians and Japanese. He found that the two Asian cultures had absolutely no notion of the “inner separation” from others that is so typical of

Americans. The author concluded that Americans displayed “a militant individualism, combined with enormous social mobility”, permitting very little group identity.

Paradoxically, although individualism plays an important part in their psyche, there is strong pressure in American culture to conform and be liked. In 1835 the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville observed this need for conformity in his brilliant classic *Democracy in America*. He noted that, while Americans cherished the ideals of freedom and individualism, their highest ideal was the democratic principle of majority rule, which he referred to as the “tyranny of the majority”. He wrote “I know of no country where there is so little independence of the mind and so little freedom of discussion.”

This has had far-reaching consequences on the American psyche. According to cultural analyst David Riesman, author of the renowned study *The Lonely Crowd*, the Americans have become outer-directed people, guided not by their own inner values, but by the opinions of others. Not at all the case for people in “status societies”, such as Germany, who feel secure in their niches. Ironically, they accept more eccentric behavior and independent thinking than do Americans, who rely heavily on the approval of the people who surround them.

As the United States is so competitive, the average citizen feels one can only rely on oneself. Such little responsibility to the group has allowed the American to become *homo economicus*, a person directed almost purely by profit-motive, who is supremely mobile and feels almost no family or community obligation.



*The French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville brilliantly described the American character in his classic work “Democracy in America”.*

All this has created a core belief that economic success or misfortune is the individual’s responsibility, which, in turn, helps sustain the free-market ideology so popular in the U.S. Supporters of the free-market economy call it “determinist”, meaning there are no institutional choices; the market alone decides. Consequently, most Americans believe the destiny of everyone is controlled by profit margins, the

global economy, the stock market. Government intervention is frowned upon. Americans believe that people should be “self-starters”, pro-active, not subject to the “herd mentality”. One should get things done without any need for external or social pressure. Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft and the richest man in America, symbolizes the image.

The orientation towards results makes people want to excel and be recognized for their accomplishments. The highest aspiration is self-fulfillment and it's only the independent person who can “become” his or her true self. The best indication of how seriously Americans take doing things on their own is the over-use of words like “self-confidence”, “self-control”, “self-improvement”, “self-reliance”.

Americans are direct, systematic, action-oriented, and goal-driven. Time is effectively used and saved, not wasted. Americans don't want to wait; they want immediate rewards. It's no accident that fast-food restaurants, like McDonald's, originated in a society that places such emphasis on efficiency.

A phrase one hears frequently in the U.S. is “there's no such thing as a free lunch”. Someone who has been born into a rich family and attains success with minimum effort is seen as having had an unfair advantage. High achievement with low effort does not feel right, or make sense, to Americans. Hard work is the key to everything.

The archetypal American is one who starts out as an underdog and becomes a winner, a strong theme in American books and films. The Walt Disney movie *Champions* is one of countless examples. It's the story of a children's hockey team, the Mighty Ducks, which is depicted as hopeless but, through hard work, finishes first in a tournament, the famous “happy ending”.

## The German need for an enclosed “Heim” (home) versus the American “open spaces”

The manner in which a culture deals with space provides us with clues in understanding the psychology of its people. It would be harder to find a greater contrast between Germans and Americans than in their outlook towards room.

Psychologically, Germans feel cramped in their country. Viewed from geographical and demographic perspectives, they are! Germany encompasses 355,744 sq. km, making it slightly larger than the state of New Mexico. Its population is 82 million, or 228 inhabitants per sq. km. In comparison, the United States has 30 inhabitants per sq. km. Because space is scarce, the Germans have developed a strong attachment to their land and are highly territorial. Heavy population-density



means people must conform to more rules, both formal and informal. An example is trying to park a car in a German city. You can be fined 100 Euros should the police (or a passer-by) see you touch another car even if there is no scratch at all as a result.



*"Heim" for Germans has a strong romantic element as this famous painting from Carl Spitzweg portrays (Painting "The Garret" by Carl Spitzweg, ca. 1865).*

In Germany, the closed door is the quintessence of order and privacy. It's not because Germans want to do everything in secret, or be left alone and undisturbed. Rather, an open door symbolizes sloppiness and disorganization, provides no protective boundary between people.

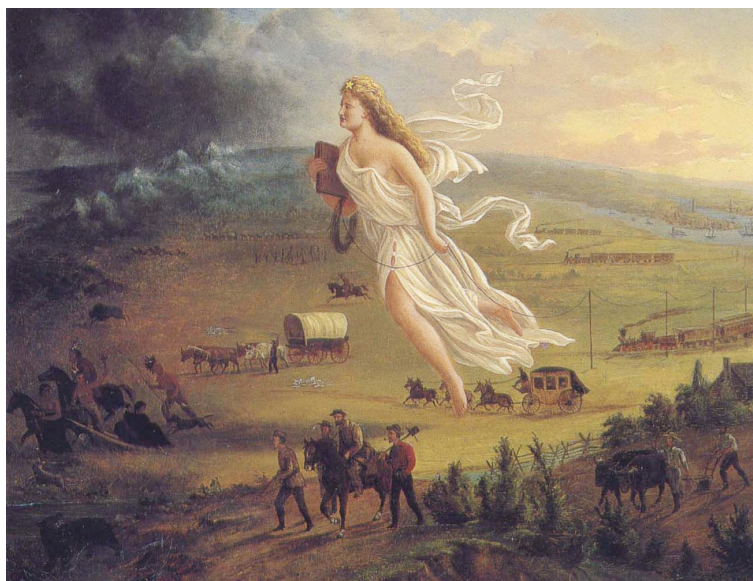
It comes as no surprise that Germans place a high value on their homes, which can seem more like vaults than castles. There is a preponderance of fences, walls, hedges and massive doorways; drawn shades keep nosey outsiders from looking in. Sunbathing or talking with friends is always confined to the back yard or balcony. During World War II, German prisoners of war in the United States displayed their sense of "private sphere". American military authorities housed them in small huts, four to each one. To the astonishment of the Americans, as soon as the prisoners had access to materials, they built partitions. From the American point of view, the scarce materials should have been pooled together to create a larger, more efficient space for the group.

As the home is a refuge from the outside, an invitation to someone's home is something of an honor. Germans compartmentalize their feelings into "public" and "private" selves and don't like to mix the two because it produces a confusion of roles.

In public, a German rarely smiles and may seem stiff, overly-rational, even obstinate. In private, the very same person may open up and be extremely friendly and helpful. If an outsider is invited into the private sphere of a German family, it's usually a signal of the possibility of real friendship. In a certain manner, it's a ritual. As everything is regulated in Germany, there are unspoken rules to respect, which include how one chooses one's friends.

Americans are just the opposite when it comes to space. Many observers have remarked that the expansiveness and infinite optimism of the American character are closely linked to geography. Compared to the majority of nations, the size of the United States is overpowering. The distance between Los Angeles and New York is the equivalent of Paris to Moscow, round trip!

Historically, the U.S. has had an excessive amount of land at its disposal: the open frontier. From the 19th until the beginning of the 20th century, Americans were inspired by the motto "Manifest Destiny", which meant they saw themselves as a "chosen people" (justified in expanding their national boundaries all the way to the Pacific). Anyone who felt cramped could pick up stakes and move west. This feeling of open space has had a profound effect on the American perspective. Out on the frontier, you could do almost anything you wanted. There were few people and fewer laws. The result was boundless freedom and universal informality.



*In the 19th century Americans firmly believed in their "Manifest Destiny" (Painting "American Progress" by John Gast, ca. 1872).*

The ability to do what one wants is, ironically, governed by a strict code of rules (known as the "rule of law"). Germans, who feel that their country has too many rules and ordinances, are surprised to discover that Americans are obsessive legalists, something confirmed by the excessive number of lawyers and lawsuits in the U.S. In fact, there are four times as many lawyers per capita as there are in Germany. When

even a small misunderstanding occurs, the first reaction by an American is often to ask “Do you have a good lawyer?”

In the U.S., houses and apartments are larger, and also cars and roads. Space has not been put to the best of use, at least from a European perspective. Street design in America is treated with incredible casualness. Most left lanes are conceived to be used for turning as well as for through traffic, which causes traffic backups. In Germany — even in the medieval towns where streets are small — planners carefully use all available space and carve out left-turn lanes to ensure a smoother flow of traffic.

Having guests doesn't invade the sense of privacy of Americans, rather it's an extension of their expansiveness. And, as Americans traditionally have a disregard for customs and rules, invitations are of lesser significance than in Germany. They're made more as a convention of conversation (small talk) than as a sincere gesture, something Germans can find quite dismaying. When somebody is actually invited for dinner, the invitation is seldom formal and usually made on short notice (“Are you free tonight?”). Guests are often perceived as temporary members of the family and the host will often tell a hungry guest “just help yourself to the fridge”.

## The German concept of formal politeness versus the casual American attitude towards etiquette

As mentioned earlier, a leitmotiv that runs through German culture is one of controlling uncertainty. Germans try to avoid mistakes, which explains their conservative dress and proper, often rigid, behavior. This translates into formal politeness, a kind of built-in respect for others.

Their restrained “correctness” doesn't mean, however, that they're tender with words when criticism must be given. Germans frequently come straight to the point if something is bothering them, even if it means speaking “tactlessly”. An example is the pediatric doctor who tells a mother that if she doesn't discipline her over-active, two year-old, the child may well become a juvenile delinquent. The frankness Germans can display shocks people who are used to weighing their words.

Again, this is related to a subconscious fear of uncertainty and a strong desire for clarity. When something goes wrong, they want to get all the facts — good or bad — so that it won't happen again. One sees the same tendency in German journalism. Interviews in *Der Spiegel* or *Stern* get right to the point. If an answer is evasive, the interviewer has no compunction against saying so, often to the surprise and dismay of the interviewee.



*In the 18th century, author Adolph Knigge wrote about proper behavior. His rules for etiquette are still followed to this day.*

Related to the German need to be direct is the way Americans and Germans differ in how they wish to be perceived by others. Americans, for the most part, wish to be liked. Germans want to be seen as credible, to be appreciated as being truthful (*wahrgenommen werden*), especially in working life. Germans tend not to “chit-chat” at cocktail parties. Conversation is made to discuss matters seriously, whether they be important or trivial. If you’re not able to do so, you’ll be dismissed as a lightweight personality. Germans place more importance on being respected than liked.

Another concept to consider is how politeness in Germany is influenced by the need to compartmentalize. As opposed to the American style of informality, rushing to get on a first-name basis with a German is an absolute taboo. Being too familiar with a person you hardly know is “just not done”. Germans want to establish the nature of a relationship before they commit themselves to first names. Private and public / working spheres, as mentioned before, must remain separate.

The language reflects this as well. There are two forms of address for “you”, the familiar *du* and the formal *Sie*. *Du* is for family and close friends. *Sie* is always used unless one is invited to do otherwise. It is a code, which establishes, yet again, a sense of order. A person can be fined up to 750 Euros for not respecting this rule with civil servants (such as addressing a police officer with the *du* form).

Finally, one shouldn’t forget that Germans, as well as most other Europeans, have historically looked to the upper class or old aristocracy as role models in terms of etiquette. Remnants of the class system still emphasize proper manners for anybody who wishes to appear cultured and educated.

America has had a completely different experience when it comes to etiquette. Founded by religious dissenters, peopled by economic refugees, the New World wanted to break away from the constraints of European society. The last thing the various immigrants had on their minds was formality. More urgent things had to be done, namely to build a new existence in a new nation.

This doesn't mean Americans are impolite. They possess a natural courtesy, saying "please" and "thank you" when the circumstances call for it, and are generally respectful towards strangers. Elaborate protocol and formality simply goes against the grain of American democracy. Anybody who acts in a superior or condescending manner is rejected as being a snob. The nation has a strong belief that "all men are created equal". The non-existence of class structure explains why Americans, when writing a letter of complaint, are more likely to address it to the very top, to the president of the company, not the department responsible for the product in question.

American parents raise their children with the notion that constraints or harsh discipline might hurt them psychologically. It is strongly related to their need for upward mobility, which relies heavily on the instruments of praise and / or material rewards. As a result, Americans are generous with flattery and positive feedback. De Tocqueville noted this in his observations: "In dealing with strangers Americans seem to be impatient with the slightest criticism and insatiable for praise."



*Americans love to receive and give compliments.*

Having been brought up with few constraints, Americans tend to be direct in an unexacting, casual manner. In fact, they are likely to thoughtlessly "spill the truth" or "let it all hang out". Children may tell their parents "I hate you!" or "you hurt my feelings!" without thinking of the consequences. Later on, as adults, they may tell dinner guests that it's "getting late", an obvious signal for ending an evening. Even if foreigners are taken aback by such directness, Americans don't mean to be rude.



What has transpired over the years is a national attitude of accepting others as they are, and likewise, being oneself. Americans don't usually have set routines for particular situations, thus don't know their limits. Behavior is usually improvised, an easygoing attitude that's characteristic of a low-context culture. Yet it has its negative side; Americans are sometimes uncertain as to how to behave respectfully towards others.

Recently there has been a movement to define what good manners are, as Americans prominent in business, politics and the professions are aware that they haven't acquired the etiquette tools normally expected. Whether this will change the easy-going attitude towards manners in a land that fiercely protects its individualism remains a question.

## The German precise scheduling of time versus the American obsession that "time is money"

Both Germany and the United States are monochronic cultures; they operate according to schedules, one thing at a time. However both cultures conceive of time differently.

The Germans don't think of time in terms of money. Rather, time is to be used to execute activities precisely when they should occur. As many Germans will tell you, the best way to have anarchy is to allow various areas of life to mix. Again, this remark reflects German uneasiness towards uncertainty and ambiguity.



*Germans are world champions when it comes to exact time management.*

When a decision has to be made, Germans will spend a lot of time and energy to clear things with all parties concerned. Once there is consensus as to a plan,

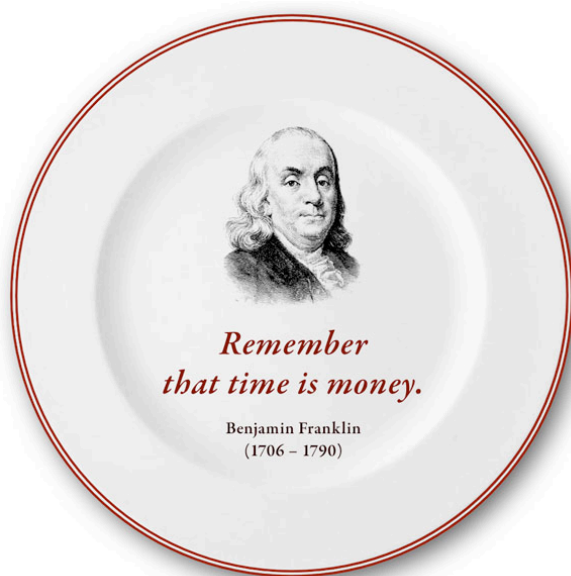


operations will be carried out according to schedule. It is for this reason that the German business pace seems much slower than that in America.

Germans organize time according to work schedules and appointments. In airports and train stations, one always hears *planmäßige Abfahrt* (departure according to plan) over the loudspeakers, a term that emphasizes the planned outcome. They become irritated if something goes awry. This rigid attitude extends to other aspects of life.

Interestingly enough, university professors are allowed to be up to 15 minutes late — *das akademische Viertel* — before a lecture is cancelled. Germans use this concept to establish how late is “late” for a business appointment. If a person doesn’t call to say he’ll be late, the meeting will be called off after the same 15-minute wait. When invited for dinner, one is expected to arrive on time. This is not to say the Germans are inflexible when it comes to unannounced changes but, in general, being a few minutes late for a dinner engagement or business appointment will be perceived as being inefficient or lacking interest.

The American concept of time finds its roots in Puritan heritage. Useful activities are valuable, meaningful and moral. If one is not actively engaged in meaningful acts, one becomes useless and *immoral*. The American colonist and statesman Benjamin Franklin said: “Do not waste time, it’s the stuff life’s made of.” His thoughts on time have had a profound influence on the American psyche.



*Benjamin Franklin coined the famous American phrase “time is money”.*

To “waste” time is very un-American; to make the hours pass by in idle conversation is considered almost shameful. “He’s wasting my time”, an often-heard phrase, expresses irritation, if not anger. The only path to success is hard work and, as always, “time is money”. Time, like money, can be spent, lost or well invested.

The idea that the present can always be improved upon explains in large part why Americans are always in such a hurry. They want results *now*. Nobody wants to waste time; everything is done as quickly as possible (whether it be negotiations or socializing). This leads to a business culture that features quick decisions, rapid implementation and expectations of completion with minimum delays. The popularity of books such as *The One-Minute Manager* demonstrates how seriously time is treated in the U.S. One constantly looks for ways of doing tasks more efficiently. Finishing sooner saves money and allows more time for leisure activities.

However the American obsession with not wasting time has spilled over into those same leisure activities. If an American sits around the swimming pool too much, he or she gets nervous and feels obliged to do something productive. The famous quotation of an American on holiday, "If it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium," reflects the absurdity of expecting to see seven European countries in a week. In the same vein, quick assembly-line cooking and easy-to-read standard menus, exemplified best by McDonald's, found its roots first in the United States. Everything must be done efficiently and fast, even activities such as traveling and eating.

## The German notion of "Freund" versus the American idea that everyone is a friend

The Germans are not, by nature, a very outgoing people. Though their daily routine brings them into close contact with many individuals, they are close only to a few. The clear compartmentalization of German social life creates a strong nuance between *Freund* and *Bekannte*. The word *Freund* signifies something deep and special, the nearest English equivalent would be "close friend". What Americans refer to as "friends" would be, in German, *gute Bekannte* (close acquaintances).

Germans take friendship seriously. It means permanence, a protection from the unstable outside world. One often hears the expression *die Freundschaft pflegen* (caring for friendship). German friendship tends to be highly selective and profound. It entails long-term commitment and a depth of (unspoken) feeling. Discussions about feelings and the deeper meaning of life are not uncommon. Germans scrupulously separate work and private life to maintain a semblance of order. The same applies to friends and acquaintances.

Friendship is not such a clearly defined notion in the U.S. Visitors are pleasantly surprised by the friendliness Americans display, but many make the mistake of equating friendliness with friendship (and think that they have many new friends). When relationships don't turn out to be what they thought, the complaint is that Americans are superficial and shallow.

What foreigners often fail to understand is that Americans are guided by values of egalitarianism. At the outset, nobody is considered better or worse than anybody else. The all-purpose “Hi” denotes this belief in equality, the message being “I am approachable.” It doesn’t at all denote a commitment to someone.

# Hi

*The all-purpose American “Hi” does not denote friendship, what many foreigners mistakenly think it is. Rather, it expresses the belief in equality.*

As a whole, the term “friend” is less profound than in other cultures. American friendships are marked more by nostalgia and sentimentality than by dependence and obligation. As Americans are always on the move — geographically, socially, economically, they’ve developed strategies to interact superficially with many people. Also, *real* friendship means responsibility and strict bonds of convention (which is diametrically opposed to the American belief in freedom and independence). This may explain why Americans go to psychoanalysts (the actor Woody Allen personifies this in his films) more frequently than Germans. Americans do, however, form sincere, long-term relationships when the situation allows for it.

## The German doing something “gründlich” and effectively versus the American doing something efficiently with an instant solution

Before discussing these differences, it is important to understand the meaning of the words “effective” and “efficient”.

*Effective means to produce a definite or desired **result**.*

*Efficient means to produce a desired **effect** with little effort, expense or waste.*

The difference between effectiveness and efficiency can be seen through the interaction of an American-German couple. The German wife mentions one morning that it would be nice to have a shelf in the hallway to store her hats and boxes on. She assumes her American husband will think out the solution thoroughly. The husband, wanting to impress her by getting things done without wasting time, builds the shelf

while his wife is out shopping. When she comes back, she's pleasantly surprised by his quick work. She begins putting boxes on it, only to see the shelf come crashing down. Her husband may have been "efficient" but he was far from "effective".

## QUALITÄT MADE IN GERMANY

*A major reason what German products do so well on the world markets is because Germans are very detailed-oriented in their work.*

One could say that Germans, as a whole, are driven to be thorough (*gründlich*) and effective, whereas Americans tend to always think about being efficient and fast. In their book *Taken for a Ride: How Daimler-Benz drove off with Chrysler*, authors Vlasic and Stertz document clearly how Daimler managers effectively outmaneuvered the Chrysler managers. The Germans would think out everything thoroughly with thick binders of data and careful planning, contrasting sharply with the fast, intuitive management style of the Americans. In the end, the exhaustive planning of the Germans led to their domination of all joint meetings (to the great chagrin of the Americans).

Americans, on the whole, find Germans spend too much time looking for the perfect solution. Americans are ruled by the desire to find a quick fix. They don't feel they have time to doubt. When a problem presents itself, the solution should require minimum effort and expense.



*Historically, Americans have always been on the go (Watercolor by William Henry Jackson, 1937).*

Americans have historically been on the go; they can't stand being held up. They live in the present and future and don't want to be bothered by the past. Time is to be not wasted by asking too many questions or trying to perfect a solution. "Let's get the job done", they say.

When Mercedes-Benz started up its first American car plant in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the company recruited two top American experts from Ford and General Motors to advise on production. A ferocious dispute occurred when the German management accused the Americans, in their haste to start production, of wanting to make tin boxes. The Americans responded that the Germans wouldn't ever get anything done if more attention wasn't directed toward production. A classic case of a cultural clash between old craftsmen, who value quality, and production people, who think in terms of results according to a "bottom line".

## The German emphasis on "detailed-thinking" versus the American penchant for "non-conventional thinking"

Regardless of the size of a German company, almost everything is directed towards detailed scheduling, consensus-building, and conformity. The probability of failure is reduced to a minimum. German culture is like that of a symphony orchestra, an organization that reflects the dynamics of German society. As in all symphony orchestras, conformity is valued, order is important and the rules are many. Each person is expected to contribute his or her talents for the good of the whole. Essentially, the German sees himself as an integral part of society, and values combined effort.

In German business, management always plans for the long term and in great detail. The following story epitomizes this:

*Once upon a time, three journalists — a Frenchman, an American and a German — were asked to write a fictional story about the elephant. The Frenchman wrote "L'éléphant et l'amour". The American wrote "Thirty-six Miracle Diets for the Modern Working Elephant". And the German wrote "The Psychological Nature and Fundamental Dynamics of the Socialization of the Elephant: Volume 1, The Symbolic Importance of the Elephant, Chapter 1: From Julius Caesar to the Present".*

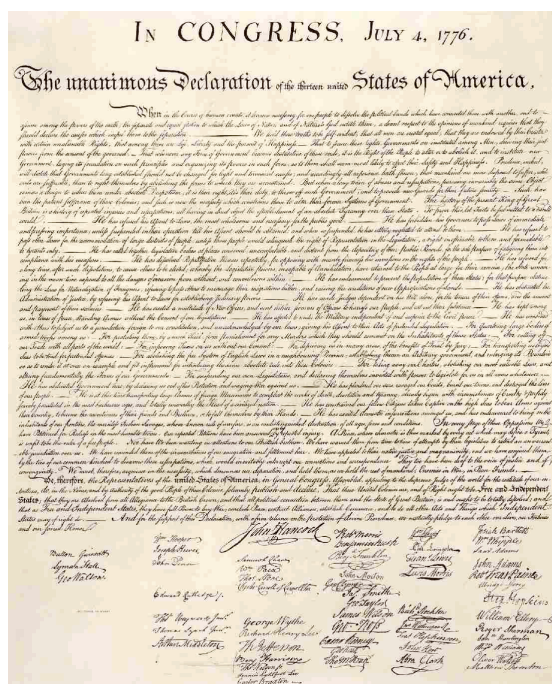
This attentiveness, however, usually pays off in higher productivity. An example in contrasts. When the city of Denver opened its new airport in 1995, it had spent 15 months installing the computer-run luggage-handler. On the opening day, the system didn't work. The American company needed another six months to get it running

correctly. A similar control-system was installed in a modern shipping center near Leipzig by a German company. It was built in half the time and it functioned perfectly on its first day of operation.

As opposed to the United States, venture capital was practically nonexistent in Germany until the late 1990s. Generally, Germans are more reactive than proactive and risk-taking tends to be unpopular. This is not to say that Germans don't take risks, they do. And despite their thoroughness, mistakes can be made.

One example is a German's attempt to set up an automobile factory in Pennsylvania in the early 1980s. Not having done their intercultural homework, management falsely assumed an American factory worker would possess the same kind of basic training and be as quality-conscious as a German. This was not the case; the quality of manufacturing was poor. In the end, American consumers didn't want to buy the American-made version anymore. The factory was closed, a spectacular failure, costing the company over 500 million Euros.

Americans, by nature, have a "frontier mentality" and continuously seek new challenges. They like and seek people who don't accept conventional thinking and aren't satisfied with the status quo. They can be compared to an American football team, where aggressiveness and individuality are important. The game consists of breaking through through lines successively by tactics and force until the goal has been reached, in some ways an extension of the conquering of the Wild West. The players are individualistic but there is also the huddling of the team. Americans are good at getting together to face a problem, working intensely and then scattering.



*The Declaration of Independence is an example of American non-conventional thinking: it questioned the arbitrary rule of King George III of Great Britain, a very provocative act in its time.*



They value individual creativity very highly. How strongly this runs through the culture is revealed in one of the worst insults an American can give, telling a person he or she is a “total bore”.

Another factor explaining why Americans like non-conventional thinking is their suspicion of authority. The U.S. was founded by disregarding and overthrowing the arbitrary rule of King George III of England. This mistrust of authority has remained in the American mindset and laid the foundation for an innovative culture.

After the oil crisis of the early 1970s, a group of California cyclists decided to create a safe, easy-riding bike. The American “anything goes” spirit led to the use of exotic materials from the aerospace industry and the creation of a new type of frame combining stability and ruggedness. The “mountain bike” was born, a striking contrast to the racing bikes of classic European design.

## The German “höchste Leistung bringen” versus the American “high need to achieve”

This is a difficult contrast to articulate because the differences are subtle, but they are important in how they motivate Germans and Americans. Germans still mostly believe work defines their existence, whereas Americans feel that work determines how well they move up the social ladder, what sort of consumer lifestyle they can have. To understand this, one needs to go deeper by examining the use of the above expressions.

The German expression *höchste Leistung bringen* has no real equivalent in English. Literally, it means “to bring about the highest output or performance”, but it is often translated as “to work very intensively”. The *Autobahn*, where driving at top speeds is often the norm, is a metaphor of this German need for high performance and passionate intensity.

The glorification of toil and working intensively originates in the Protestant teachings of Martin Luther. He wrote, in the 16th century, that to obtain God’s salvation, each individual had a *Berufung* (calling) in life. One’s love for God was expressed by performing tasks as well as one could. The frequently-used phrase *Ich muß meine Pflicht tun* (I must do my duty) expresses this value. Wasting one’s time, taking breaks, doing nothing or enjoying the profit of labor, were all considered sinful. German sociologist Max Weber later called this the “Protestant work ethic”.



*The German glorification of working intensively originates in the Protestant teachings of Martin Luther (Portrait by Luca Cranach the Elder, 1529).*

It continues to influence the working style of Germans (even in the Catholic regions) and is reflected in German expressions such as *Arbeitswut* (work rage). The older generation would fondly say “they lived to work”, but this has changed in the last fifteen years. Ironically, of all the nations in Europe, the Germans now work one of the shortest number of hours per year — 1,444 hours per year (ILO 2002), approximately 20% less than Americans. But they still produce the most per capita due to their high intensity.

Many in Germany now complain that Teutonic thoroughness is letting up. This gradual shifting of values, known as *Wertewandel*, was predictable; working hard was the only way out of their collective disaster of 1945. By the early 1980s, the country had one of the highest standards of living in the world and Germans began learning how to relax. Despite this change, the German work ethic is still comparatively high.

Many Americans are influenced by the same Protestant work ethic the earlier colonists brought with them. Their intellectual luggage, however, was the system of John Calvin rather than of Martin Luther. In it, individuals were predestined to be either chosen for salvation or doomed to condemnation. This led to an existential insecurity among Puritans and their solution to this dilemma was to seek refuge in the idea that God’s permission to become successful was a sign for being chosen.



*The American “need to achieve” can be traced back to the theological teachings of John Calvin (Engraving by de Busch, ca. 1550).*

This explains largely the roots of the American value the “need to achieve”. In a country founded on democratic principles without class distinctions, Americans differentiate themselves through individual material success. Destiny is determined by initiative (being pro-active). The culture demands achievement and once this is demonstrated, a person can participate in the “pursuit of happiness”.

This restless “need to achieve” was already described by de Tocqueville:

*An American will build a house in which to pass his old age and sell it before the roof is on; he will plant a garden and rent it just as the trees are coming into bearing; he will clear a field and leave others to reap the harvest; he will take up a profession and leave it; settle in one place and soon go off.*

Americans are happiest when achievements and success can be documented, measured specifically via scoreboards, bestseller lists, TV ratings, statistics, I.Q.s and, lastly, by their salary. They have an inherent belief in being able to improve just about any aspect of their lives, which explains why they always want to be more efficient, ultimately leading to prosperity. American bookstores mirror this with numerous self-help books (which range from Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, a book on the techniques of becoming popular, to *The Joy of Sex*, a how-to-book on the art of making love). All of them carry the inherent message that one can achieve “happiness” by changing strategies or adopting certain techniques.

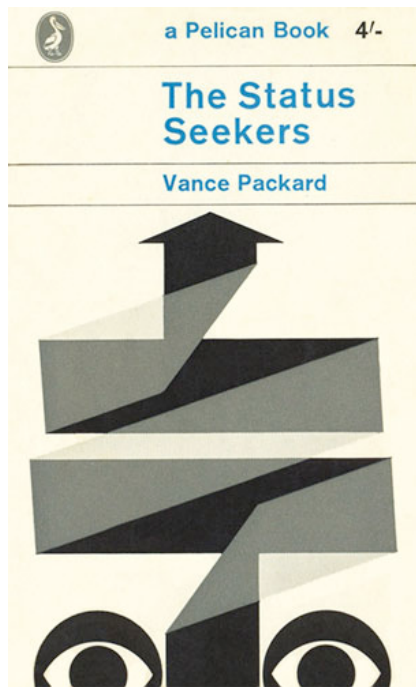
## German penchant for modesty versus the continual American search for status

German culture has a long tradition of mutual respect among its population. Implicit in this “respect” was that people remained attached to their social class. Life in a “status society” meant a certain modesty and dignity, in that the carpenter was a proud craftsman, the butcher was a skilled meat-cutter, etc. In the last 30 years, however, Germany has gradually changed into a modern consumer society where there is a strong will to improve one’s standing. Yet the values of modesty and respect for others have basically remained.

Another point to consider is the envy (*Neid*) factor, which is an essential part of the German psyche. Germany’s history — marked by wars, famine and poverty — made it a country where it was often difficult to make a living. When one became rich, it was considered wise and religiously decent (from Luther’s teachings of piousness and simplicity) not to show off or provoke envy. Even today, should one become highly successful, people over 40 consider it inappropriate to show off one’s wealth. For instance, when affluent Germans buy a Mercedes or BMW, they often ask the dealer to remove the numbers (which refer to the engine size) from the body so that no one can tell how much they paid for the vehicle.

Over the past 150 years, America became home for millions of poor immigrants, mostly from Europe; they came to the New World to start a new existence. The U.S. was created on the ideology of an egalitarian, classless society. This didn’t mean people were all the same. Rather, it expressed the idea that everyone had the same right as everyone else to try their luck at a better destiny. On the whole, Americans care less about inequality — the gap between the rich and the poor — than about opportunity and achievement.

As there was no overt class system, the only criterion Americans had to define their standing was what they had measurably accomplished. Status symbols became the visible expression of success. “Keeping up with the Jones ” (or “I want what my neighbor has”) expresses the American ideal of telling the world what one has achieved. Americans commonly talk about their salary, how big their house is or the type of car they drive because they are proud of “making it”. Appearance and status, not inner fulfillment or envy, are the basic driving forces of Americans.



*Back in 1959, Vance Packard wrote the bestseller “The Status Seekers”, describing how image was often more important than substance in American society.*

The upshot of all this is that *image* in U.S. culture has become more important than substance. Americans frequently feel they’ve achieved something when others see them as “successful”. Appearing prosperous is usually enough to convince people that you’re an important person.

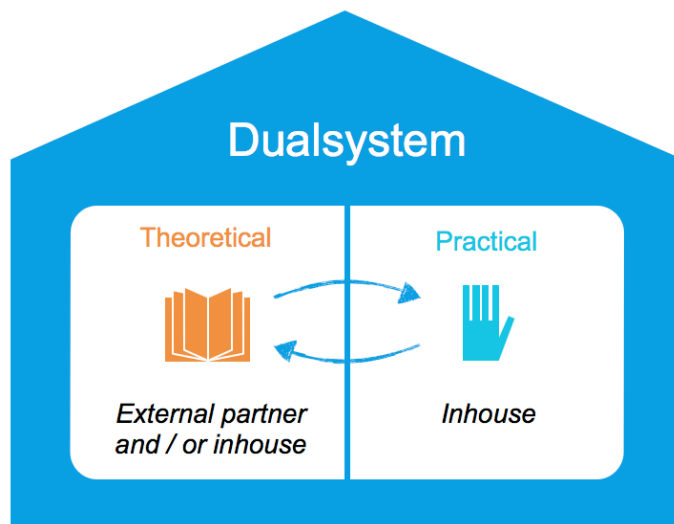
It can reach absurd levels. A top German consultant — himself commands \$ 800 an hour — says the most important thing for his clients when visiting America is to impress their counterparts. He suggests simply renting a chauffeured limousine at \$ 900 for a day. Americans are convinced your image reflects the quality of your products and ideas.

## German concept of “solide Ausbildung” versus American preference to “learn by doing”

Back in 1992, the editors of *Newsweek* magazine, in a reaction to the relatively poor educational standards in the United States, undertook a study on which countries did the best job in teaching their young. The editors concluded that the best overall school system to emulate was the German one.

Why? Traditionally, German society has always cherished education. The importance of a *solide Ausbildung* (respectable education and training) is undisputed. In the term *solide Ausbildung*, the word *solide* has a deeper meaning than in American English. It implies reliability and character. Schooling that is thorough and dependable is *solide*.

This thorough education can be seen in the students who go on to learn a trade at vocational schools. They have much higher academic skills than the counterparts in the U.S. The world-famous *Dualsystem* (working and learning alternatively) is the result of this mentality. Apprentices become excellent and thoroughly-trained workers, the backbone of Germany's economic success. This is often overlooked by American business people and economists. The strong commitment to education and training was demonstrated in 2004 when Daimler put over 6,000 workers and managers through a one-year retraining program before they even began to manufacture their new S-class model.



*The German Dualsystem of working and learning alternatively as visualized by a major German corporation for worldwide implementation.*

However, the technological computer revolution, along with the global demand for greater cost efficiencies have forced many companies to cut back training, leading one U.S. journalist to write, "The fight for profit is replacing skill and humanity."

Americans, on the other hand, have always been pragmatic people. To become "cultivated" has never been important and is, in fact, considered elitist. The Declaration of Independence of 1776 states unequivocally that "all men are created equal", which excluded any form of elitism. Americans are fond of saying "If you're so smart, why aren't you rich?"

The U.S. schooling system operates on the theories of the educationalist John Dewey (1859 – 1952), who stressed that the school's job was to emphasize the



natural development of the child rather than force memorization of facts. The child becomes the active agent in his or her own education (rather than the passive receiver of information).

American schools firmly believe in teaching “life skills” — logical thinking, analysis, creative problem-solving. The contents of a given subject are secondary to the actual process. This is the basis of the concept “learn by doing”. Learning facts by heart is considered a block to creativity and individuality.



*Americans take a more pragmatic outlook on training, believing that “learn by doing” will lead the way to “life skills”.*

Although there are definite advantages to being an active agent, there is a downside. E. D. Hirsch, in his best-selling book *Cultural Literacy*, points out that students who have not acquired a solid base in facts and background information will have difficulty expressing themselves, be it in writing or verbally. The book had a profound effect on the U.S. educational system in the mid-1990s. Schools have now begun returning to methods of rote memorization and giving more homework.

As everything is geared to the short and practical, training is done quickly in the U.S., the “learn by doing” approach. “Jack-of-all-trades” is a popular term, reflecting the strong belief that a person can do anything and everything.

One area where American education excels is at the university and graduate school level. Here, intelligent inquiry and a tradition of “non-conventional” thinking pays off in producing original ideas and innovative products.

# Summary of psychological characteristics

## **Germans tend to be**

serious  
afraid of uncertainty  
neat and orderly  
perfectionists  
conservative in manner  
formal  
loath to take risks  
meticulous about schedules  
selective in friendship  
group oriented  
effective & thorough in work  
detail-oriented  
intense about their work  
modest  
generally well-trained

## **Americans tend to be**

overly self-confident  
optimistic  
overly familiar and casual  
improvisers  
expansive  
informal  
risk takers  
driven by “time is money”  
friendly to everyone  
individualists  
efficient & fast in work  
non-conventional-oriented  
obsessed with a need to achieve  
image-oriented  
sometimes lacking in basic training

## Discussion questions

1. Do you think there are other factors, apart from war, that have influenced the Germans to be orderly and serious?
2. What are the long-term consequences of the American “inner separation” from others (as pointed by Alan Roland) on their behavior in business?
3. Do you believe that Germans can adopt the American philosophy “the pursuit of happiness”?
4. With one of the highest standards of living in the world, do you think Germans might become less concerned about perfection and the need for order?

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