Like any other society, American society includes people who are friendly and people who are not, people who are intelligent and people who are not, and so on. American culture is unique, for various diverse ethnic groups of the world have come and settled here, resulting in America being called a “melting pot” or a “tossed salad” of different cultures. You may hold many stereotypes about Americans, given the way the human mind seeks to categorize and classify information, so it is not realistic to suppose you can forget your stereotypes. But you can work to become more aware of your stereotypes, and be ready to find exceptions to them.

Characteristics of Americans

Individualism

Americans generally believe that the ideal person is an independent, self-reliant individual. Most Americans see themselves first as separate individuals, and only secondly as representatives of a family, community or other group. Some people from other countries view this attitude as selfishness, based on their own upbringing and cultural values.

Equality and Informality

Americans are taught that “all men are created equal,” but they often violate that idea in some respect or the other. They tend to treat each other in very informal ways, even their elders. From the point of view of some people from other cultures, this kind of behavior reflects “lack of respect” but from the point of view of others, it reflects a healthy lack of concern for social rituals.

Time Consciousness

Americans place considerable value in punctuality. They tend to organize their activities by means of schedules. As a result, they may sometimes seem harried, running from one appointment or event to the next, and not able to relax and enjoy themselves.

Materialism

“Success” in American society is often marked by the amount of money or the quantity of material goods a person is able to accumulate. A person accumulates money and goods by means of such valued qualities as hard work, cleverness, and persistence.

The Communicative Style of Americans

Preferred Topics

In casual conversation, Americans prefer to talk about the weather, sports, jobs, people they both know, or past experiences, especially ones they have in common. As they grow up, most Americans are warned not to discuss politics or religion, at least not with people they do not know well, because politics and religion are considered controversial topics. Sex, bodily functions, and perceived personal
inadequacies are considered very personal topics, and are likely to be discussed only between people who know each other very well. (Younger people generally discuss sex more freely than older people do.) By contrast, people in many other cultures are taught to believe that politics and/or religion are good conversation topics and they may have different ideas about what topics are too “personal” to discuss with others.

**Favorite Form of Verbal Interaction**

In the typical conversation between Americans, no one talks for very long at a time. Participants in conversation “take turns” frequently, usually after the speaker has spoken only a few sentences. Americans prefer to avoid arguments and are generally impatient with “ritual conversational” exchanges. Only a very few of them are common: “How are you?” “Fine, thank you; how are you?” This is very different from other countries with many ritualistic conversations that require a lot of listening and speaking. Also, some international students come from countries where they enjoy arguing, but some Americans might feel uncomfortable in this setting.

**Depth of Involvement Preferred**

Americans do not generally expect very much personal involvement from conversational partners. “Small talk” - without long silences, which provoke uneasiness—is enough to keep matters going smoothly. It is only with close friends that Americans generally expect to discuss personal topics.

This could be much different than your culture.

**Nonverbal Communication**

When we think about communicating with people from another country, we think first about their spoken language. But much communication between people is nonverbal, involving dress, ornaments, facial expressions, gestures, postures, and body positioning. These nonverbal aspects of communication differ widely across cultures.

**Eye Contact**

When they are talking to someone, Americans generally alternate between looking briefly into the listener’s eyes and looking slightly away. When they are listening to another person, they look almost constantly at the speaker’s eyes. Americans tend to distrust people who do not look into their eyes when talking to them.

**Touching**

People in some countries touch their conversation partners far more frequently than Americans do; American men rarely touch each other except when shaking hands. Women touch each other during conversations more often, and sometimes walk hand in hand or arm in arm like women in many other countries.
Hygiene

As you can tell from television commercials, Americans have been taught that the natural smells of their body and breath are unpleasant. Most Americans bathe daily, use an underarm deodorant to counteract the odor of perspiration, and brush their teeth with toothpaste at least once daily and usually more than that. In addition, they may rinse their mouths with mouthwash and chew mints in order to be sure that their breath is free of food odors. It is very common for women to shave their legs and underarms and to use perfume every day; many men use cologne or aftershave to impart what they believe is a pleasant smell.

Some foreign students and scholars come from places where the human body’s natural odors are considered quite acceptable, and where efforts to overcome those odors are considered unnatural. Still other students and scholars come from places where personal cleanliness is considered more important than Americans consider it to be, and they may view Americans as dirty.

Other Guidelines

In a thoughtful and concise introduction to American society and culture, Cornelius Grove of AFS International/Intercultural Programs offers these points:

- Americans have no taboo of any kind associated with the left or right hand.
- Americans have no negative association with the soles of their feet or with the bottom of their shoes.
- A common way to greet young children in the U.S. is to pat them on the head.
- People in the U.S. often point with their index finger and wave it around in the air as they make especially important points in conversation.
- Americans show respect and deference for another person by looking him/her in the eyes, not by looking down.
- Americans are generally uncomfortable with silence; they expect to engage in conversation when in the presence of others.
- Punctuality-being on time-is important to many U.S. people; they are likely to become annoyed if forced to wait more than 10 minutes beyond the scheduled time for a meeting or appointment.
Relationships with Americans

Assumptions and values about relationships, whether they are friendships or romantic relationships, differ markedly from culture to culture, therefore misunderstandings can easily occur. Misunderstandings arise because people from different cultures often have different answers to such questions as these: Under what circumstance can one appropriately initiate interaction with someone else? What interactions are socially acceptable, considering such variables as age, sex, marital status, differences in social status, and the setting where the encounter takes place? How much is appropriate to let the other person know about you?

A particular area in which the assumptions and values differ between cultures is that of friendship. Friendships amongst Americans tend to be shorter and less intense than those among people from many other cultures, because Americans are taught to be self reliant, because they live in a very mobile society. Furthermore, Americans compartmentalize their friendships, having their work friends or school friends and so on. The result of these attitudes and behaviors is sometimes viewed by foreigners as an “inability to be friends.”

Role of Women

There is a strong feminist movement, or women’s liberation movement, in the U.S. which aims to ensure that women have equal responsibilities and opportunities to those of men. Although there are still many aspects of society in which women have not achieved this equality, women play a much more public and visible role in the country and have much more responsibility and authority than in many other countries. You may also find that the dress and behavior of women in social situations here are quite different from those in your own country. Some international students have difficulty adjusting to situations in which a woman is in a position of authority because their experiences have not prepared them for that. They need to be sensitive to this difference in the role of women.