Sociological Forum, Vol. 23, No. 2, June 2008 (© 2008)
DOI: 10.1111/j.1573-7861.2008.00066.x

Paradoxes of American Individualism[1]

Claude S. Fischer[2]

I point to contradictions in American individualism not unlike those suggested by Robin M. Williams Jr. I go on to suggest how twenty-first-century sociologists might better understand this aspect of American exceptionalism: not as an egoistic, asocial individualism, but as a covenantal, social voluntarism.

KEY WORDS: American society; culture; exceptionalism; individualism; Robin M. Williams Jr.; voluntarism.

INTRODUCTION

In his notable textbook, *American Society*, Robin M. Williams Jr. addresses the distinctiveness of American individualism in an unusually nuanced way. He lists an emphasis on "*individual personality* rather than group identity and responsibility" as one of the eight key "value orientations" distinctive to American culture, by which he means the insistence that "the individual [is] an integral agent, relatively autonomous and morally responsible" (Williams, 1970:502, 482). In the same discussion, however, Williams rejects the notion that American individualism entails a "lone cowboy" culture of individual estrangement from social groups; instead, he argues, "American 'individualism,' taken in broadest terms, has consisted mainly of a rejection of the state and impatience with restraints upon economic activity; it has not tended to set the autonomous individual in rebellion against his social group" (Williams, 1970:485).

[1] This essay benefited from comments by Ann Swidler.
[2] Department of Sociology, 410 Barrows Hall, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, California 94720-1980; e-mail: fischer1@berkeley.edu.

Sociologists for the most part no longer employ the model of culture Williams and his generation did, one in which implanted values drive action as a rider directs a horse (Williams, 1967:26). Nonetheless, Williams recognized the contradictions in American individualism. In particular, William provides a more complex assessment of it than do analysts who simply gloss de Tocqueville's (1969:506–508) argument that equality eventually generates an egoism such that Americans "look after their own needs. [They] owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. …" In this essay, I point to contradictions in American individualism not unlike those suggested by Williams and then float suggestions for how twenty-first-century sociologists might better understand this form of American exceptionalism.

CONTRADICTIONS

In American culture, as Williams suggests, *the ultimate source of action, meaning, and responsibility is the individual* rather than the group. We Americans hold individuals personally responsible for their crimes and do not exact revenge on their kin; we frown on nepotism; we find suicide attacks unfathomable. Such a culture describes the individual "self" as unique and asocial. Underneath the "cake" of social custom, fashion, and social influence encasing the person is a "real self" that is distinct and prior to social life. (And that real self is the better self.) An individualistic culture attributes what happens in the world to individual interests and will—not to fate, God, circumstances, or social pressure. And such a culture expects the individual to be self-reliant materially and, in the Emersonian sense, morally.

What evidence is there that American culture is more imbued with such individualism than others? Williams points to the emphasis in American law on individual rights—at least in the twentieth century (see also Friedman, 1990; Glendon, 1991; Siegel, 1998). Social psychologists have conducted pencil-and-paper tests and experiments that show that European Americans tend to understand the world and themselves in terms of an independent self, while others—typically, Asians or Asian Americans—more often respond in terms of the dependent self. For example, when asked to choose an item out of a set of items, European Americans are likelier to prefer the atypical, anomalous item rather than the common one.[3] In studies of how people explain vignettes, Americans are likelier to attribute the outcome—say, a traffic accident—to individual will or traits, while Indians

[3] In one experiment, for example, participants can choose a pen out of a set of pens as a prize for having helped the experimenter. European Americans tend to pick the one with the atypical color more often than Asians do.

and Saudi Arabians more often attribute them to social demands.[4] Such studies, however, usually contrast Westerners and non-Westerners rather than Americans and Europeans; it is the contrast with Europeans upon which rests the notion of American individualism. For some data on that comparison, we can turn to international survey research.

Cross-national polling suggests that Americans are likelier than other Westerners to understand the world in terms of independent, self-reliant individuals. For example, circa 2000, the World Values Survey (WVS) asked respondents in many nations to estimate from 1, none at all, to 10, a great deal, "how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out" (Q. A173).[5] Americans were far likelier, at 44%, to rate their freedom and control at 9 or 10 on the scale than were residents of any of 10 other large, industrial, Western democracies.[6] In an international Pew survey conducted in the early 2000s, Americans and Canadians disagreed much more often than did Germans, Italians, the French, or the British with the proposition that "success in life is determined by forces outside our control."[7] Such worldviews feed quite logically into a well-known feature of Americans' exceptionalism: Americans are considerably more likely than other Westerners to attribute poverty to poor people's own traits or will and are considerably less likely to endorse government intervention in economic inequality. (For example, Americans are at least twice as likely as Europeans to say that laziness explains poverty—WVS V172; see also, e.g., Haller *et al.*, 1990; Hochschild, 1981; Lipset, 1996; Smith, 1990).[8]

So far, the picture of American individualism is a familiar one. But now the contradictions. The World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)[9] posed many questions over many years that asked respondents to weigh individual interests against group interests. One

[4] See, for example, Iyengar and Lepper (2002) and Kim and Markus (1999) for experimental studies. For overviews of the relevant literature, see, for example, Markus and Kitayama (1991, 2003), Mezulis *et al.* (2004), Oyserman *et al.* (2002), Shweder and Bourne (1984), and Triandis (1995).

[5] World Values Survey, http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org.

[6] For this question, the nations are Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden. For other items, the national list shifts a bit depending on which questions the local researchers chose to ask. In this case, for example, the German survey did not ask the question.

[7] Americans at 65%, Canadians at 63%, and the average of the others at 38% (Kohut and Stokes, 2006).

[8] I can only briefly acknowledge two important objections scholars make to explaining America's exceptionally high economic inequality by America's exceptionally individualistic culture. One attributes the inequality and Americans' passivity about it to structural or political forces. The other describes Americans' individualistic claims as camouflage—conscious or not—for antiblack attitudes. See, e.g., Alesina and Glaser (2004), Jackman and Jackman (1983), and Osberg and Smeeding (2006).

[9] See http://www.issp.org/.

would expect American respondents again to stand out as more individualistic than respondents from other large Western nations. To the contrary; sometimes their answers put them at about the average, but more often Americans are the *least* or among the least likely to side with the individual.[10] For example, Americans are least likely among citizens of large Western nations to agree that "right or wrong is a matter of personal conscience" (ISSP V63) or to endorse breaking the law to follow one's conscience (ISSP V6). They are least likely to put the individual's goals over the family's interests; for example, they are least likely by far to say that having an extramarital affair could ever be justified (WVS V304; ISSP V47) and among the least likely to agree that "divorce is best when a couple cannot work out their problems" (ISSP V27). Americans are least likely to distance themselves from the church; for example, they are among most likely to agree that the church provides answers to moral problems (WVS V152) and the most likely to go to church (WVS V147). Americans are least likely to resist the authority of the employer; for example, Americans are least likely to say that an employee should disobey if he or she disagrees with the boss (WVS V127). And Americans were least likely to defend the individual against national interests; for example, they were among the lowest in endorsing the idea that the individuals should refuse to support their countries when the nation was in the wrong (ISSP V26) and to say they would be willing to leave the country for better conditions (ISSP V12).

The cross-national comparisons are more complex than this brief summary indicates (see Fischer, 2004). Nonetheless, American respondents resolve the tradeoff between individual and group interests much more often in favor of the *group* than other Westerners. Moreover, we can see evidence of Americans' relatively high level of group commitment in quite different sorts of evidence as well. Americans are more involved with friends than most Europeans (Hollinger and Haller, 1990); they belong to more organizations (Curtis *et al.*, 1992); they belong far more often to churches (Caplow, 1985; Curtis *et al.*, 1992; Norris and Englehart, 2004); they marry at the highest rates (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007:Table 1312)[11] and have the most children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007: Table 1310); and they probably disrupt the workplace less.[12]

[10] The following discussion of survey results draws on Fischer (2004) and more recent results from the two survey programs.

[11] Americans also have more divorces per capita, but an average rate of divorces per marriage among predominantly Protestant countries (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007:Table 1312).

[12] Comparing national rates of workplace conflict is difficult (Bamber *et al.*, 2004; Perry and Wilson, 2004). A rough estimate is that American strike activity is roughly average for comparable countries. However, since organized labor in the United States is more excluded from workplace or government power than in comparable countries, an average rate is noteworthily low.

EXPLAINING THE CONTRADICTIONS

The contradictions between Americans' construction of the autonomous self and Americans' seeming insistence on group loyalty would not surprise Williams who, in *American Society*, described Americans as conformists. But the contradictions call for explanation.

One important explanation is that cultures, like individuals, live with contradictions (Archer, 1985). The American cultural "toolkit" (Swidler, 2001) contains the autonomous self as a discourse and a strategy of action —action including answering survey questions—but it contains other tools as well. Americans may typically employ individualism in some spheres and not others (see Cerulo, 2002; Hewitt, 1989 for related analyses).[13] In particular, as Williams suggests, Americans may endorse *laissez-faire* in only the economic sphere. In other contexts, Americans may typically apply other cognitive tools. The key tool may be faith.

As Seymour Martin Lipset (1963, 1996) often pointed out, one distinguishing feature of American exceptionalism is the comparatively intense commitment of Americans to faith and to moralism. (It is striking that Williams [1970:501–502] did not include faith as one of American society's eight distinctive value orientations.[14]) Thus, we could explain Americans expressing anti-individualistic positions by their religious faith trumping the autonomous self in sacred arenas such as the family and the church. I noted earlier that American survey respondents were least likely to agree that "right and wrong should be a matter of personal conscience" (ISSP V63). Shortly before asking that question, the ISSP asked respondents whether they believed that "right and wrong should be based on God's law" (ISSP V61); Americans agreed at exceptionally high rates—as they did to the proposition that churches provide the answers to moral problems (WVS V152). An ideologically consistent individualist, a libertarian in the Ayn Rand mode, say, would endorse the freedom to have extramarital sex, but not the typical American; faith often trumps individualism. As useful as this explanation is—that Americans restrict individualism to economics—it does not suffice. It does not account for all the patterns of Americans' exceptionalism, for example, their intense loyalty to the nation (e.g., Americans are the most likely to say they would fight for their country [WVS V263]).

[13] Halman's (1996) analysis of item intercorrelations in WVS surveys led him to conclude that "the various indicators of individualism are hardly correlated and they do not reveal a clear pattern. It turns out that individualism appears to be dependent upon the domain under investigation. … Such findings suggest that individualism does not appear as an ethos or underlying attitude."

[14] In his chapter on religion, Williams briefly notes that Americans may be less secular than Europeans (1970:384).

Another approach to resolving the contradiction looks for the underlying logic that may reconcile surface inconsistencies. What distinguishes American culture is not individualism but *voluntarism*. In contrast to societies based on corporate communities into which individuals are born and to which they are organically bound, American society defines groups—with the great exception of racial groups—as voluntary associations (see Bellah *et al*., 1985; Block, 2002; Breen, 1975; Fischer *et al*., 1977:ch. 10; Fischer, 1989; Howe, 1997; Swidler, 1992; Varenne, 1977). A person is a member of a group—a married couple, family, neighborhood, church, club—*voluntarily*. He or she joins out of free will and stays or leaves as a matter of free will; the individual cannot be drafted into or obliged to stay in a group. (How *realistic* this notion of free will may be is not especially relevant.) Unlike individualism, voluntarism incorporates, even celebrates, group affiliation. Indeed, in this worldview, individuals pursue their personal goals *through* the voluntary association.

The paradigmatic, historical case is the sectarian Protestant congregation, particularly one holding to adult baptism. Members find salvation not through the mediation of an authority or a hierarchy, nor do they find it alone in a hermitage or on a mountain top, but they find it in willing community with other believers. And members remain free to leave and join other congregations—and they often do—in pursuit of their religious goals. Another, more mundane example is the residential community. Americans are active participants in neighborhood organizations, but are not constrained by neighbors or norms (or guilt) from moving on to other neighborhoods as their interests dictate.

An important corollary to the voluntaristic principle might be called contractualism or covenantalism.[15] Implicitly, each member has made a "contract": he or she is free to join, stay, or leave, but while belonging he or she owes fealty to the group. One might call this the "love it or leave it" rule. American marriage has this character: modern Americans believe that people are free not to marry and free to leave an unsatisfactory marriage, but so long as a marriage continues, it demands faithfulness. (Not for Americans is discreet adultery *à la française*.) Similarly, Americans commonly switch faiths or denominations, but those who do are at least as devoted to their newly chosen faiths as those who stay in their parents' churches.[16] One can join and one can leave, but when in the group one is expected to be committed: love it or leave it. This contractualism helps explain in part why Americans are not anarchists, free lovers, or the

[15] Both these terms have other meanings in philosophy and theology.

[16] On marriage attitudes, see Fischer (2004), Thornton (1989), and Swidler (2001). On religious switching, see Hoge *et al*. (1995) and Roof and McKinney (1987:177–181).

like—stances more logically consistent with standard notions of individualism—but are more often establishmentarian than other Westerners.

And this, I suggest, helps explain the American contradiction between, on the one hand, belief in individual distinctiveness, freedom, and agency and, on the other hand, group commitment. So long as someone *chooses freely* to remain an American, he or she owes the nation loyalty; the same with clubs, churches, neighborhoods, and jobs. So, for example, Americans are the most likely to say that owners should run their businesses without workers' input (WVS V126) and to say that they would follow orders at work even if they disagreed (WVS V127). The logic is that the worker signed on freely to be an employee and the contract stipulates following the boss's orders even if they are stupid; after all, if the worker is unhappy, he or she is free to leave.

Thus, American *voluntarism*, properly understood, combines the autonomous self *and* commitment to (covenant with) freely formed groups. Logically, each complements or even necessitates the other. Groups must be voluntary if they join together autonomous selves; members must be autonomous for a community to be voluntary. Historically, the standard narrative—Tocqueville's and the American social contract creation myth—begins with disconnected autonomous individualists in the New World who, seeing the necessity of cooperation, form voluntary associations.[17] An alternative narrative could give priority to a voluntary society that trains up its members to have, express, and even demand personal preferences. In any case, autonomy and community become complements rather than opposing principles.

CONCLUSION

At the center of American culture is the certainty of what Williams called the "individual personality," that unique, *a priori* persons form society. And yet, in many realms, Williams pointed out, Americans seem less, rather than more, individualistic than Europeans or other Westerners. How, for example, can Americans be both intense individualists *and* so obviously familistic and moralistic? One answer to this paradox is that

[17] Tocqueville (1969:506–510): "[I]n ages of equality, every man finds … all his feelings are turned in on himself. … Individualism … disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows … but in the long run it … finally merges into egoism. … They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine their whole destiny is in their own hands. … [Then] each notices that he is not as independent of his fellows as he used to suppose and that to get their help he must offer his aid to them." And thus voluntary associations. American social contract: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union. …"

American culture is, as all cultures are, multivalent. A different answer is that we have mis-specified the nature of American distinctiveness. It is the principle *not* of individualism—egoism or social withdrawal—but of *voluntarism*. Unique, *a priori* persons freely choose to associate with one another to attain their ends; doing so voluntarily, they commit themselves to adhere to the association and its collective rules and needs, to be its "agent" (Block, 2002). They are morally free to leave but not morally free to trespass the implicit contract. One can choose to divorce, but not to cheat; to change congregations, but not to be indifferent; to quit a job, but not to be insubordinate; to leave the nation, but not to betray it.

REFERENCES

Alesina, Alberto, and Edward L. Glaeser. 2004. *Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Archer, Margaret S. 1985. "The Myth of Cultural Integration," *British Journal of Sociology* 36: 333–353.

Bamber, Greg J., Ryan Shuan, and Nick Wailes. 2004. "Globalization, Employment Relations and Human Resources Indicators in Ten Developed Market Economies: International Data Sets," *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 15: 8: 1481–1516.

Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Block, James E. 2002. *A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a Modern Self and Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Breen, T. H. 1975. "Persistent Localism: English Social Change and the Shaping of New England Institutions," *William and Mary Quarterly* 32: 3–28.

Caplow, Theodore. 1985. "Contrasting Trends in European and American Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 46: 101–108.

Cerulo, Karen. 2002. "Individualism … Pro Tem: Reconsidering U.S. Social Relations," In Karen Cerulo (ed), *Culture in Mind: Toward a Sociology of Culture and Cognition*: pp. 135–171. New York: Routledge.

Curtis, James E., Edward G. Grabb, and Douglas E. Baer. 1992. "Voluntary Association Membership in Fifteen Countries: A Comparative Analysis," *American Sociological Review* 57: 139–152.

De Tocqueville, Alexis. 1969. *Democracy in America*, J. P. Mayer (ed.), George Lawrence (trans.). New York: Perennial Library, Harper & Row (Orig. pub. 1835).

Friedman, Lawrence M. 1990. *The Republic of Choice: Law, Authority, and Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Fischer, Claude S. 2004. "Just How is it that Americans are Individualistic?" Unpublished paper, University of California, Berkeley; revision of paper presented to the American Sociological Association, Washington, DC, August.

Fischer, Claude S., Kathleen Gerson, Robert Max Jackson, Lynn McCallister, and Ann Stueve, with Mark Baldassare. 1977. *Networks and Places: Personal Networks in Town and City*. New York: Free Press.

Fischer, David Hackett. 1989. *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Glendon, Mary Ann. 1991. *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse*. New York: Free Press.

Haller, Max., Franz Hollinger, and Otto Raubal. 1990. "Leviathan or Welfare State? Attitudes Toward the Role of Government in Six Advanced and Western Nations," In Duane F.

Alwin *et al.* (eds.), *Attitudes to Inequality and the Role of Government*: pp. 33–62. Rijswijk/ Alphen aan des Rijn: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureua/Samsom.
Hewitt, John P. 1989. *Dilemmas of the American Self*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
Hochschild, Jennifer L. 1981. *What's Fair? American Beliefs About Distributive Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Hoge, Dean R., Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens. 1995. "Types of Denominational Switching Among Protestant Young Adults," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34: 253–259.
Hollinger, Franz, and Max Haller. 1990. "Kinship and Social Networks in Modern Societies: A Cross-Cultural Comparison Among Seven Nations," *European Sociological Review* 6: 103–124.
Howe, Daniel Walker. 1997. *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Iyengar, Sheena S., and Mark R. Lepper. 2002. "Choice and Its Consequences: On the Costs and Benefits of Self-Determination," In Abraham Tesser, Dierderik A. Stapel and Joanne V. Wood (eds.), *Self and Motivation*: pp. 71–96. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
Jackman, Mary R., and Robert W. Jackman. 1983. *Class Awareness in the United States*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Kim, Heejung, and Hazel Rose Markus. 1999. "Deviance or Uniqueness, Harmony or Conformity?: A Cultural Analysis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77: 785–800.
Kohut, Andrew, and Bruce Stokes. 2006. *America Against the World: How We are Different and Why We are Disliked*. New York: Times Books/ Henry Holt & Company.
Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1963. *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. New York: Basic Books.
Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1996. *American Exceptionalism: The Double-Edged Sword*. New York: Norton.
Markus, Hazel Rose, and Shinobu Kitayama. 1991. "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation," *Psychological Review* 98: 224–253.
Markus, Hazel Rose, and Shinobu Kitayama. 2003. "Culture, Self, and the Reality of the Social," *Psychological Inquiry* 14: 3–4: 277–283.
Mezulis, Amy H., Lyn Y. Abramson, Janet S. Hyde, and Benjamin L. Hankin. 2004. "Is There a Universal Positivity Bias in Attributions? A Meta-analytic Review of Individual, Developmental, and Cultural Differences in the Self-Serving Attributional Bias," *Psychological Bulletin* 130: 711–748.
Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Englehart. 2004. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Osberg, Lars, and Timothy Smeeding. 2006. "'Fair' Inequality? Attitudes Toward Pay Differentials: The United States in Comparative Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 71: 450–473.
Oyserman, Daphna, Heather M. Coon, and Markus Kemmelmeier. 2002. "Rethinking Individualism and Collectivism: Evaluation of Theoretical Assumptions and Meta-Analyses," *Psychological Bulletin* 128(1): 3–72.
Perry, L. J., and Patrick J. Wilson. 2004. "*Trends in Work Stoppages: A Global Perspective*," Working Paper No. 47. Geneva: Policy Integration Department, Statistical Development and Analysis Unit, International Labour Office.
Roof, Wade Clark, and William McKinney. 1987. *American Mainline Religion*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
Shweder, Richard A., and Edmund J. Bourne. 1984. "Does the Concept of the Person Vary Crossculturally?" In Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. LeVine (eds.), *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*: pp. 158–199. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Siegel, Stephen. 1998. "The First Amendment's New Standard History," *Reviews in American History* 26: 743–750.

Smith, Tom W. 1990. "Social Inequality in Cross-National Perspective," In Duane F. Alwin, *et al*. (eds.), *Attitudes to Inequality and the Role of Government:* pp. 21–29. Rijswijk: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureua; Alphen aan des Rijn: Samsom.
Swidler, Ann. 1992. "Cultural Constructions of Modern Individualism," Paper presented to the American Sociological Association, Pittsburgh, PA, August.
Swidler, Ann. 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Thornton, Arland. 1989. "Changing Attitudes Toward Family Issues in the United States," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51: 873–893.
Triandis, Harry C. 1995. *Individualism and Collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2007. *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2007*. Washington, DC: Department of Commerce.
Varenne, Hervé. 1977. *Americans Together: Structural Diversity in a Midwestern Town*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Williams, Robin M. Jr. 1967. "Individual and Group Values," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 371: 20–37.
Williams, Robin M. Jr. 1970. *American Society*, 3rd ed. New York: Knopf.