

# CULTURAL STEREOTYPES ABOUT AMERICANS

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## A SPANISH VIEW

Here is a list of cultural stereotypes, which **Spaniards between age 15 and 21 who have never been to the U.S. or who have never had any American friends**, might have about Americans. Which of the following are stereotypes and which, if any, are accurate descriptions of American culture?

### Physical Appearance and Dress

- Most Americans are very tall with blue eyes and blond hair.
- All American men are as handsome as movie stars.
- Men in the U.S. have muscular builds; they resemble Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone. American men like to wear short, sleeveless T-shirts to show off their physiques.
- American women are either unusually fat or unusually thin, never of normal build.
- Women in the U.S. wear a lot of make-up.
- Americans wear very bright colors and mixed patterns, and they wear summer clothes even in the winter. They have no sense of style.
- The typical American "native dress" is jeans, cowboy boots, and a cowboy hat.

### Work and Leisure

- Americans spend almost all day at work; they have very little free time.
- Although they are extremely punctual and efficient in their jobs, Americans don't consider their work important; family comes first.
- The first two things an American wants to discuss are salary and age.
- The two favorite leisure-time activities in the U.S. are movies and rodeos.
- Young people usually just take walks for fun, because they're not allowed to drink or go to discos.

### Home Life

- Most Americans live either in skyscrapers or on farms.
- In big cities everyone has a large car like a Cadillac, but outside of cities people usually travel on horseback.
- Americans divorce repeatedly and have very complicated private lives.
- In marriages in the U.S., the wife always dominates.
- American cities are so dangerous that a person has a good chance of being killed in the street; therefore, American men either know kung-fu or carry a gun.

### Food

- Americans eat almost nothing but hamburgers, hot dogs, popcorn, and Coke.
- Americans generally eat fast food Monday through Saturday, but never on Sunday.
- American men are always drinking beer, even at breakfast.
- American breakfasts are huge. A typical one might consist of eggs, toast, bacon, and pancakes with peanut butter.

### Communication and Social Interaction

- Americans speak very quickly and very loudly. They use their hands a lot, often gesturing in an exaggerated way when they talk. Their strange intonation makes their speech sound like singing.
- American English is extremely difficult to understand because people speak as if they were chewing gum.
- The typical American is very rude, often putting his feet on a desk or table and frequently belching in public. He

yawns a lot, never trying to hide it. In international affairs as in personal life, Americans do whatever they want and don't care what other people think.

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## AUSTRALIAN COMMENT ON THE ABOVE

Questions: For those not living in the context, are stereotypes figments of the imagination ? **How have these Spaniards arrived at these decisions** - T.V. ? Hollywood ? That's how I have arrived at them to be honest ! I've only been to the U.S. for 5 weeks a few years ago at I went to C. University - hardly representative. Do Americans have stereotyped views of each other ? That is, what is a NewYorker's view of a Californian ?

**My Australian cultural stereotypes about Americans are in brackets.**

### Physical Appearance and Dress

- All American men are as handsome as movie stars. (Well, yes ! That seems to be the message.) America men like to wear short, sleeveless T-shirts to show off their physiques. (Beverly Hills 90210, Baywatch, Melrose Place, even the X-files !!! give this impression. Many boys-only type Hollywood movie gives this impression. GQ magazine gives this impression and the list goes on. Have I ever seen a male in Star Trek The Next Generation without his shirt on ?)
- American women are either unusually fat or unusually thin, never of normal build. (Oprah, Rozanne, every Hollywood starlit has made something out of some body part, Donahue loves talking about this doesn't he? Is Weight Watchers an American invention?)
- Women in the U.S. wear a lot of make-up. (That's the message from print and televised media. )

### Home Life

- In big cities everyone has a large car like a Cadillac, but outside of cities people usually travel on horseback. (The Cadillac = a big car...that's the message I receive from the stuff that comes my way...)
- Americans (divorce repeatedly and) have very complicated private lives. (any U.S. soap opera will bear witness to this statement, and Australia has seen most of them !)
- American cities are so dangerous that a person has a good chance of being killed in the street; therefore, American men either know kung-fu or carry a gun. (I guess carrying a gun is the most common 'stereotype' about America today. Tell me this isn't true !!! )

### Food

- Americans eat almost nothing but hamburgers, hot dogs, popcorn, and Coke. (Well thank goodness for advertising !!! I got the impression that Americans had much better diets, however, I may be mistaken. I would add Pepsi and pizza just to be safe. I did see an advertisement in the advertising section of a Sunday paper when I was in the U.S. ages ago which had chocolate and marhmallow on diet bread !)

### Communication and Social Interaction

- Americans speak very loudly (I thought this was true of New Yorkers. If you are like me with a different accent, then some people have spoken to me very loudly...)

The point I am trying to make is that, even in the International Year of Tolerance, people will make judgements based on something they have read or seen or believe. Teaching a foreign language is very tricky because it is so easy to say "The French say and do X" or "The Japanese are Z." Unless generalisations can be safely made in an informed manner, then all else is suspect. Because I live in Sydney Australia and not somewhere in the U.S. , the U.S. is truly an imaginary country. I know it exists, but somewhere out there. What I see and hear and read about the U.S. is given to me via some medium (even this e-mail bulletin board tells me so much about the U.S. and its culture) and I hope we teachers all know that mediums of communications can be manipulated to give the rest of the outsideworld a certain impression, one that may be for the real living American a stereotype.

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## A RUSSIAN VIEW

Another view of US from our friends to the East. This is from an interview of Vladimir Posner (notorious propagandist of

Soviet Radio Moscow), published by the newspaper Moscow News in August '93 (quoted from Genevra Gerhart's *The Russian's World: Life and Language*, 2nd ed., 1995, p. 7):

Q. You have almost become our major expert on America. What do you have to say about the popular point of view that Americans are, of course, good guys, but they're primitive?

A. The American is less educated than the former Soviet citizen. There [in America], for example, it has never been prestigious to have a large library.

They have a different concept of what compliments [sic] a person. A house, a car, money. (By the way, we [Russians] are taking giant steps in that direction.) But not knowledge. **America is anti-intellectual.** In this sense it is true that the average American has a narrower world view than does the average Russian. But they are not more stupid, I assure you. It's just that their intellect and energy are directed elsewhere. I could say that in America I don't have the opportunity to converse at the same level that I do here.