

Research Essay, Graduate Level

Assigned for Social Policy Seminar MSP 501

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Assignment:

Habits of the Heart by Robert Bellah et al. paints a portrait of American life: the strengths and weaknesses of American culture, its values and expectations, its manifestations of individualism and community. Drawing on sociological and historical studies and on interviews with "representative" Americans, Bellah and his associates conclude that the tension between individualism and commitment is central to understanding American culture. In doing so, they identify white, middle-class Americans as the norm, and the cultural and political heritage of British Protestants as the historically shaping factor.

In an 8-10 page, double-spaced essay, we want you to examine how the above account fits your own concept and experiences of culture. We want you to examine critically [critique](#) the analysis of individualism and commitment characterized by Bellah and his colleagues.

First discuss the various [definitions](#) of individualism in *Habits of the Heart*. Then comment on the **argument** contained in the text. That is, Bellah and his colleagues are engaged in more than describing American culture; they are taking a point of view. We want you to critically assess the argument that claims that individualism has contributed to weakness of American culture. Is this a convincing argument? Drawing on the assigned readings and pre-residency materials, structure a well-informed **response** to Bellah, et al.'s thesis.

Many good answers are possible. Your answers might not reflect your mentor's personal view, nor are they expected to. In most cases there isn't a "correct" answer at all. However, it is expected that you clearly and carefully respond to the readings and issues in an informed and cogent way. When you offer your own opinions, you must clearly present the reasons and evidence supporting your conclusions. Such support should include ideas and information you derive (and appropriately reference) from the assigned readings and independent research.

Instructor's Comments

(additional intertextual notes, referred to by number)

What a wonderful, lively, intelligent essay. I found myself in the company of a mind who is truly able to engage with Bellah on his terms, while opening up other ways of analyzing his chosen objects of study. You were absolutely convincing in your critique of his 1) historical romanticizing of the past as a "before" time when people were more connected; b) his limited sample, and his tendency to generalize inappropriately - your points about the individual today and the social networks they create is absolutely on the mark. In addition, your critique of his "masculinist" view of the "individual" was excellent, in that you effectively demonstrate that women have always been necessarily interconnected - That's been our role historically, as well as in present-day society. So, in a sense, his reflections on individualism feel culture-bound, and inappropriate to the experience of numerous other social groups. What a pleasure to read this paper. Truly, one of the best I've read as a teacher.

Paper

Bellah et al present a very striking opinion of the nature of being American. This presentation of our character begins with setting a historic comparison in colonial America, and in placing a high degree of reliance on the theories of Alexis de Toqueville. The authors convey a strong message that we, the current keepers of the culture, should hearken back to colonial philosophies and Old Testament lessons. By doing so, we would strengthen our ties to each other, to our nation, and to our universe. Coming together, not as individuals, but as parts of a whole, will take us off our path toward consensual despotism or nuclear demise.[1](#)

The authors present the concept of a divided individualism: modern Americans are trying to pursue utilitarian (economic) ends with most of our energies, and must fit expressive individualism (emotion, the need for connectedness) into our private lives.[2](#) For Bellah, utilitarian individualism can include various types of behaviors such as the pursuit of work, callings or professions. "Work" is performed by those whose only motivation is to support themselves or their families. "Callings" are vocations, and are chosen because of the inherent value to self and society. "Careers" are pursued by those seeking material rewards, power, recognition, and other trappings of success. Although the research subjects represented variations of all three of these types of employed persons, the conclusion that America is unhealthy was primarily drawn from the conversations with career-oriented professionals.[3](#)

According to Bellah, work and careers have a common problem: they do not provide a sense of connectedness to the wider world. Both offer little sense of the bigger picture, the common good, a higher purpose. Careers, however, are especially damaging because individuals pursuing them do so out of greed.[4](#) In both cases, utilitarian individualism has overtaken all other forms of the self. Only in "Callings" do individuals become whole and connected. Connectedness seems to mean that a person has a sense of belonging to a world community, which is founded in a sense of its own history.

Bellah states that the cure for America's pernicious individualism is in part dependent on people finding callings. Yet, each of the respondents in the study who have callings are discredited for not using the correct language in describing his or her motivations and rewards.[5](#)

The Historic Comparison

Bellah uses colonial America as a comparison for our condition today (in the 1980's) because he believes that the earliest Americans established the traditions of our current culture. Bellah indicates that, in colonial America, utilitarian and expressive individualism were lived and experienced together. Because work was performed close to home, and farms or businesses were small, the expressive self did not separate from the purposeful, pragmatic part of the self. Small communities and strong churches provided moral structure, homogeneity, and a sense of belonging. This interdependent lifestyle of the past is presented as ideal, from which our present modes have diverged too far.[6](#)

The individuality split was foreseen by the historic voices quoted in *Habits of the Heart*. Toqueville was dubious about the potential results. Bellah discusses the ways in which Benjamin Franklin and John Winthrop embraced it. Some of the earliest Americans in print, quoted by Bellah, demonstrated a proclivity toward self-actualization as a growth away from the larger society. Bellah describes this as a foretelling of our current focus on utilitarian individualism.[7](#)

Vincent Harding pointed out (in "Toward a Darkly Radiant Vision of America's Truth," 1990)

that colonial America contained enslaved Africans, indentured servants, diminishing (and later slaughtered) native cultures, and other oppressed peoples. As Carol Gilligan points out (in *In a Different Voice*, 1969) women did not have the vote, nor any recognized rights as self-governing citizens. Before they were called by these names, the early abolitionists, suffragettes, and the middle-class white male thinkers of the day understood the need to recognize, respect, and develop the self. To what degree did Bellah's wonderful world really exist?[8](#)

Again referencing Harding, America has a rich and varied heritage. So much of our culture is shaped by people who are not included in *Habits of the Heart*. Every generation since the earliest colonies has brought new and different influences into what we call America. To ignore that is inexcusable.

The historic comparison presents issues in addition to idealization and misrepresentation. These issues encompass Bellah's perspective on community and expansion.

The historic American community's sense of connectedness, to which the author wishes to return, was based on several factors. Before police forces were very prominent, before the legal system addressed so many issues, before retirement plans, nursing homes, telephone companies, life-, home-, and crop insurance, people banded together for protection and survival. Far from representing a natural drive for togetherness, these interdependent communities were based on physical need.[9](#)

Bellah describes the colonial communities as having homogenous lifestyles and belief systems, which apparently contribute to feelings of connectedness. But small towns without communication or mechanical technology, and with strong religious heritages, are expected to have a narrowness of focus. However, Bellah does not explore the costs that the strict behavior and restrictive options had on society.[10](#) Role expectations of men and women separated them, in many ways, from each other. Anyone whose "Calling" was in opposition to the standards of the church, family or community faced unhappy choices. Some who may have wanted to leave home could not. Other oppressed groups had even fewer choices, and no rights. People were punished simply for living differently than the strict norms. Thus, much of the connectedness was forced upon society's members. This is "community" in a different spirit than the "Community of Caring" that Bellah wishes to inspire today.[11](#)

If the small colonial communities were as homogenous as Bellah believes, were they not exceedingly similar to "Lifestyle Enclaves" of today? In the early days of the colonies, most settlements were small and intimate. But in short periods of time, most of them grew. Some became cities, even before the turn of the eighteenth century. Residents of those cities probably saw themselves as parts of neighborhoods, or other segments within the larger community, much as we do today. As communities grow in size and density, people find ways to remain part of an intimate environment. This might mean focusing closer to home for many of our interpersonal rewards.

The rise of individualism (self-actualization) was perhaps a response to changes throughout the Western world, not only in the colonies. All people have an initial priority to provide themselves with certain essentials: food, shelter, clothing when necessary, and safety. According to Freud, when these basic needs are met, people are free to explore the next step: pleasure. By the nineteenth century, the middle class was established enough that some members could spend a noticeable portion of their energy on developing the self.[12](#) An argument can be made that self-actualization is the goal of human existence. This is, of course, not unmitigated self-interest, but a healthy concern for making the self happy while maintaining responsibilities to others' rights (John Stuart Mill, 1946).[13](#) Bellah shows that the rise of large business interests of the Industrial

Age created a power schism. The people at the top wielded vast amounts of wealth and control over the people at lower levels. In Bellah's perfect modern world, power and wealth would be evenly distributed across all of the people. Practically speaking, this is a dreamer's task. Over the last two centuries, however, the level maintained by "the poor" has gradually risen, due in part to the technology that benefits us all. Another reason is the number of programs implemented on their behalf.

Bellah might suggest that we were better off before businesses became large and competition was so predominant. Yet it is precisely this competition that has caused growth in the economy that Bellah credits with encouraging social welfare programs meant to close the gap between Haves and Have Nots. Bellah appears by implication to be against technology; or rather, the vast number of results of technology that he believes foster disconnectedness.

Some of the inventions that made big business and intense competition possible are also what allow people in far-away places to be in touch and to learn about each other. The telegraph and the train were the first breakthroughs in transportation and communication. The railroads were some of the first large enterprises, and also a wonderful way to bring people together. Thus, in many respects, technology has helped us to become closer as a nation and members of the universe.[14](#)

Even those who would like to return to a simpler time would not like to do so without their contact lenses, central heating and waterproofed snow boots. Technology is a natural result of the human condition. As long as people have tasks to perform, they will look for better ways to accomplish them.[15](#) We need to be responsible in using technology, which has been a difficult lesson. Perhaps practical measures should be the focus of concerned social commentary. These measures could target environmental reform, suggest a higher degree of responsibility within businesses, and increase our concern for people with lessened opportunities. Bellah states that we are an involved people, this can be the basis for a great deal of optimism.

Each generation has members who express pessimism about the direction of current society and yearnings for the Good Old Days. Bellah provides examples of these worriers from past centuries, and from more recent decades. They all ask, "Where is the world going?" If Bellah could measure Toqueville's worries about American individualism, racism, and bleak future, it might even score lower than his own. Two hundred fifty years later, this is still a place of mixed optimism and foreboding, in which families bring forward children to enjoy their place in it.[16](#)

The Modern Society

The language Bellah uses to describe the historic values (community, mores, connectedness) meets a new set of terms in the modern era. Bellah's focus on language is important because it is the basis for his interpretation of American culture. The "Language of Therapy" is presented as the structure by which adults in the 1980's think of themselves and their world. The Therapeutic Language is a symptom of our culture's individuality disease. Language indicates that we are not in touch with our needs or with the larger society. Bellah justifies time spent on Therapeutic Language by citing that many respondents used it. This does not, however, explain the time spent focusing directly on therapists and their patients as representatives of American culture.[17](#)

Many of the terms used in therapy are common in popular language. This contemporary terminology comes from a variety of sources in psychology, education, religion, music, literature, and other areas. A special weight is carried by the terms used within a therapeutic relationship. The therapist or patient uses them to describe a person who has come seeking professional help. The type of therapy discussed in *Habits of the Heart* is directed at people who

want help in areas of individuation, self-assertion, confidence, balancing priorities or communication. These are self-centered topics, because it is that self who has come seeking guidance.¹⁸ Other types of therapy and therapy patients do exist. A large number of counselors and therapists work with children, the mentally ill, substance abusers, and criminal offenders. Some of their patients may need help looking outward at others, instead of inward at themselves. The language of their therapy might be different from that found in Margaret Oldham's office.¹⁹

Bellah places great importance on his and his colleagues' interpretation of the meaning of language. While numerous studies have shown important empirical findings regarding the symbolism of language, Bellah falls short of finding any objective conclusions. The respondents' unique use of terms is not controlled to a common scale of meaning. Their words, and their non-verbal actions, are subjectively interpreted by the interviewers and by Bellah. The author detects that the respondents have language problems, which indicates to him that they are confused, and unable to express their role and place in society. He comes to this, among other conclusions:

"Values" turn out to be the incomprehensible, rationally indefensible thing that the individual chooses when he or she has thrown off the last vestige of external influence and reached pure, contentless freedom. (79-80)

He claims that his respondents represent this problem: Modern Americans have "freedom" but do not know what their place is in the world and thus are empty. Bellah then reassures the reader that he does not mean to imply that his respondents have empty selves.

Some of Bellah's interpretations are inconsistent. The quest for individuality has caused people to view relationships as contracts, he says. The very same woman used as an example of this contractual view of the community was also shown as an example of how we

...know ourselves as social selves, parents and children, members of a people, inheritors of a history and a culture that we must nurture through memory and hope. (138)

Those traits are what Bellah wishes we all had. Many of the respondents do clearly describe their motivations, morals and goals. Some even explain themselves as part of an interactive world to which they contribute positive change. Bellah discredits their statements, claiming that they display confusion or defensiveness.

Bellah claims our freedom isolates us. Not all readers would agree with Bellah's interpretation of his respondents' emptiness; in fact some readers would use the same terms as those respondents and feel perfectly secure in their own connectedness, fulfillment and individuality. We are not free; we have commitments. But we hold fast to our right to choose what those commitments shall be.²⁰

Possibly Americans are not so self-interested as Bellah fears.²¹ According to Carol Gilligan's work from the late 1960's, surveyed female college students regarded individualism in the following ways: One student saw the "...Individually-centered' approach of balancing rights and claims in the failure of this approach to take into account the reality of relationships." (147) She indicated that individual freedom is limited because of one's responsibility to others' needs and desires. Another student explained that a proper way to achieve balance is to "Do the most good for other people...while fulfilling your own potentialities." (136) A definition of morality was provided: it is a

"Consciousness, a sensitivity to humanity that you can affect someone else's life...your own life...and you have a responsibility not to endanger other people's lives or hurt other people." One must "Consider [other person] as a part of your needs because you are dependent on other people."

Gilligan found that women's concerns about balancing internal needs with external pressures had not changes much since the nineteenth century.²² It is surprising then, that Bellah did not find respondents who expressed any of these feelings. Even Margaret Oldham is likely to agree that,

while she is not responsible for her husband's actions or decisions, she is responsible to attempt to coordinate her needs, wants and lifestyle with his.

Bellah cites family relationships as another problem area. Marriages are contractual, and parents and children do not rely on each other. But, this reader's observation shows that many adults live near their parents and siblings, and a majority of families' members are closely connected to each other. Adults are spending greater energy in caring for aging parents. People dedicate much of their energy to supporting relationships and family life. The contractual nature of marriage means that, if a person should find that he or she has made a drastic mistake, it will not corrupt the rest of his or her life and that of all associated family members. Some people view relationships less seriously than they should. This is indeed a problem. But if they stayed together simply because it is God's will, the world would not be a better place.[23](#)

The role of employment and the workplace is displayed as dismally as relationships in *Habits of the Heart*. With Brian Palmer as the centerpiece, Bellah shows how an empty self can only fail to find fulfillment in life and work. The typical middle-class professional was caught up in the standards of the middle-class world: In touch only with greed and the good life, he could not comprehend that he was connected to anything other than the drive for career advancement. Bellah infers that Brian still had not found his place in the world even after his divorce and metamorphosis into a family man, because he could not explain adequately why he had made this change. Perhaps, quite simply, his wife's leaving him with the kids had rolled him around the block pretty thoroughly. But, being the type of man he is, the last explanation out of his mouth would be that he made a turnaround because he had to, and then found that he liked it.[24](#)

But Brian is not a typical middle-class person; he is a stereotypical example of what many people consider the Baby-boomer middle-class ethic. He is not even exemplary of the respondents in this book. *Habits of the Heart* is a tiny view of the narrow field of middle-class Americans. From this sample, no fair conclusions can be drawn about the nature of American culture and individuality.[25](#)

Many readers perhaps identify with work environments vastly different than the uncaring places presented in this book. Co-workers are often considered in a special category between friend and family. Jobs are a part of who we are; they usually fill a combination of our needs to suit our interests, to support ourselves, and to contribute to society. Some disenchantment is expected; we see imperfections and care enough to wish they were not present. Not everyone will find work that is a perfect match with the three need areas above. But each person is composed of many factors and strives to find a balance between themselves and their world.[26](#)

Bellah wishes for a common morality and return to ancient lessons. Which lessons should we revisit? The ones that say homosexuality and usury are sins? Or should we select only those that we agree with such as Honor thy mother and father and Don't murder, rape or steal? Who shall decide on a common morality: churches, mystics, politicians, voters or Mr. Bellah? Bellah uses religion as another of this American individuality disease. He seems to favor Episcopalian churches, but finds no complete answers to his wish list even there. Several congregations are shown to be giving, caring, community oriented people. Yet, Bellah proposes that the only church that could actually heal America is one that does not exist.

We are not hopelessly disconnected just because we interpret through self. The self is the one person for whom we all can speak.[27](#) It is the eyes through which we see and the psyche through which we live. In the absence of danger imperative to identify primarily as a group, the individual is our standard unit of experience.[28](#)

Bellah's argument does not prove his case. Only the concept of Social Ecology is valid, as far as it means that we should be conscious of the interconnected interest of each other and of planet earth. The central morality which we need is not religious or historic. It is simply to offer each other respect, to take responsibility for our actions, for the natural environment, and for the decisions elected officials make.²⁹ Businesses should use their powerful influence to assume a larger effort toward the common good. Perhaps a way to start making these changes is to write materials that show people the positive impact they can have; to encourage participation and concern rather than pessimism and indefensible judgments.³⁰

References

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Source:

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