

Puritan Values Still Resonate in Today's USA

A new study finds the value system of the early colonists, which links hard work, conservative sexual behavior and spiritual salvation, still has a hold on Americans' psyches.

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A cursory look at contemporary American culture suggests our ancestors' [Puritan values](#) have been definitively discarded. Given the quick-money ethos of Wall Street, the hook-up culture of college students and the vast pornography industry, it seems clear that the colonists' strict moral code — pro-hard-work, anti-promiscuous-sex — is, for better or worse, behind us.

Well, hold onto your bonnets: The Puritans' value system [remains lodged deep in our psyches](#), shaping our emotions, judgments and behaviors. And its effects can be seen regardless of one's political orientation or religious affiliation.

That's the conclusion of a group of researchers led by [Eric Luis Uhlmann](#) of the HEC Paris School of Management. Writing in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, the scholars — including Yale University psychologist [John Bargh](#) — present evidence of "an overarching American ethos" binding work, sex and salvation.

They describe a series of studies backing up this notion, including one that compares our implicit attitudes with those of our northern neighbors. It was conducted by questioning people passing through public parks in the state of New York and the Canadian province of Ontario.

Participants (108 Americans and 207 Canadians) began the experiment by unscrambling a sentence. For half of those in each nation, the sentence was heavily weighted with salvation-related words such as "heaven," "redeem" and "righteous."

All then performed an anagram task, in which they were asked to make as many four or more letter words as they could out of four different words. Previous research has

found this assignment is a good measure of one's willingness to work; the more mental effort you put into the task, the more words you come up with.

The results: "American participants, but not Canadian participants, worked harder when they were primed with salvation," the researchers report. Americans who had unscrambled the sentences containing religion-related terms "solved more anagrams than did participants in the neutral prime condition. In contrast, no priming effect was found for Canadian participants."

Importantly, Uhlmann and his colleagues found the participants' affiliation with any specific religion did not significantly impact the results. The mental link between salvation and hard work appears to be transmitted through the culture rather than any particular church or denomination.

A second study featured 101 ethnic Asians who were born in an Asian country but had lived in the U.S. for a considerable length of time (14 years on average). First, they completed a "consumer survey" designed to highlight either their Asian or American cultural identity. Half were asked to list their favorite Asian food, movie, song and holiday; the other half listed their favorite American food, movie, song and holiday.

They then unscrambled a series of sentences. For half the participants, most of the sentences included work-related words such as "job," "employed" and "labor."

Finally, the participants read two vignettes. In one, a school principal canceled a prom due to an excess of sexually charged dancing; in the second, a school instituted a conservative dress policy prohibiting revealing clothing. They then listed on a one-to-nine scale whether they agreed with the actions taken by the principal and school.

The results: "Implicitly priming the ethic of hard work led bicultural Asian-American participants to condemn revealing clothing and sexually charged dancing, but only when their American cultural identity had been made salient," the researchers write.

In other words, for those Asian Americans thinking about their American identity, the concept of hard work seemed to trigger conservative beliefs about sexuality — an effect not found in those thinking about their Asian identity. "This provides direct

evidence that American work and sex values are linked (at least in part) by virtue of their mutual association with American cultural identity,” Uhlmann and his colleagues conclude.

In both experiments (and a third involving deliberation vs. instant-reaction moralizing), the impact of implicit Puritanism could be felt even when Protestants — the people presumably most likely to be schooled in this traditional value system — were removed from the samples.

“Non-Protestant Americans condemn a promiscuous woman significantly less when primed to deliberate, perform significantly better on a work task when primed with salvation, and are significantly more likely to endorse restrictive sexual norms when primed with hard work,” the researchers write. “Such effects testify to the power of history and culture to shape the feelings, judgments, and behaviors of individual members of that culture.”

So, it appears Puritan beliefs aren’t confined to Evangelical churches, or classic novels. That famous [scarlet A](#), and the value system it represents, may be branded on Americans’ brains.

Adapted from <<http://www.psmag.com/books-and-culture/puritan-values-still-resonate-in-todays-usa-24930>>