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Inquiry Paper

"Personal Reflection on Ethnocentrism in an Increasingly Global Business Atmosphere"

As long as I can remember, I have received advice from my family about my future. They always told me that I should go to college so that I could obtain a good job. “If you go to school, you can become a doctor or a lawyer,” my grandparents would say. From day one, I have been taught that attending college was not an option, but a duty, a responsibility I had to both my family and myself so that I could make something of myself. I entered kindergarten with the feeling that I must perform well academically so that I could increase my chance of winning a scholarship to attend a four-year institution. I never lived or studied focused on the year that I was in school, but focused on the future. My goals in school were always focused on what was to come after elementary and secondary school. Any opportunity I thought might increase my marketability to universities, I took. I took accelerated classes in middle school and later in high school. In high school, I ran on the varsity cross country and track team for four years, held three officer positions in student council, was a member of the senior leadership committee and the National Honor Society, and served on special committees as I was requested. I had perfect attendance throughout all four years and was ranked number eight out of 567 students in my class. I worked very hard in school, and from a goals standpoint, I was successful. I received a scholarship from Southwestern University that covered full tuition and fees as well as an additional \$5,000 per year to help cover expenses for books, room and board. However, when I look back on my high school career, I wonder whether or not I truly enjoyed my time at Mesquite High School, or did I do everything with my eyes set on the future. I have no regrets, as I did have fun in school, and did not spend all of my time working, but I did not take as many opportunities to participate in events for pure pleasure, such as attending sports games and other functions hosted by the

school. I feel as if I missed out on a great deal of experiences that surround such activities.

After I looked back on my high school career, I began thinking about other things that had to do with enjoyment of life. My mother is an accountant and is a Chief Financial Officer for Benning Power Electronics. Although her job brings her financial security and independence, she often feels a great deal of emotional stress, not because the work is difficult, but because of the structure of the company and the problems that are existent in the company that should not be there. However, she spends a great deal of time in the work place, a place where she endures the stress and lacks time for other activities that she enjoys, such as reading. She oftentimes feels that she would much rather be doing something else with her time. When I was younger, she traveled nationally and internationally about once couple of months. To this day, she still feels guilty because she things that she missed much of my childhood. I cannot remember a single day that my mother came home from a day of work feeling totally gratified about her job or leaving in the morning ecstatic to go to work. She has mentioned several times in passing that she wishes that she had studied marketing instead of accounting. My grandparents pushed that I become a doctor, not so that I could contribute to the well being of people, but because a medical doctor is regarded as having high prestige and a high level of income. When asked why they attend college, many colleagues replied by stating they were in school so that they could get a well-paying job. What does this mean on our culture and how does it relate to others? We live in a culture that values hard work. We often view long hours in the workplace as something to be regarded with high respect (Hurst 2006). According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the

average working American spends more than 7.5 hours at work and less than 2.5 hours caring for their children (BLS 2005). This time does not even include the time required to commute to and from the place of employment. The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) published an occupational prestige listing in 1984, which still remains in use today. Among the most prestigious professions were medical doctors, astronauts, lawyers, and business professionals. The amount of work required to gain entrance into these professions are immense and the hours required during work when a person has obtained these occupations are high as well.

Why do we as Americans place so much importance on work? In 2004, according to a study performed by the Families and Work Institute, 33% of United States employees feel chronically overworked and 54% felt overwhelmed at one point within the month prior to the study. Although 79% of employees had access to paid vacation, only 64% actually used it (Butler 2005). This means that 36% of people who have access to paid vacation are not taking advantage of it, either because they may be penalized one way or another, or for other reasons. This may not seem significant since it is a person's option to work or take a vacation, but the ramifications of work overload are severe for both employees and employers. Employees that feel overly stressed at work are more likely to call in sick, have less productivity when they are at work, and have the potential to decrease the overall morale of the people around them as well as the company. From an employer standpoint, when workers are not showing up to work or morale becomes an issue, productivity becomes an unpredictable as does net income, sales, and labor costs. If an employee quits or gets terminated, then the company has to invest more time and money training new employees. Employee turnover can be very important to a

company's success or failure. Culture is very important to the socialization process that makes us value work to such a high degree. Advertisers are constantly bombarding us with messages and discrete advertising that is aimed at creating problems that are solved by the respective company's product or service. The average American is exposed to over two million discrete advertisements per day (Achbar and Abbott 2004). A combination of these elements causes us to increasingly place value on material goods that portray a social status rather than necessities. What's more is that we buying things that we can only enjoy when we are at work. For example, Americans are buying expensive cars that are primarily used to drive to and from work and buying large homes that sit unoccupied for a large portion of the day (De Graaf 2001). Our culture is shifting away from group interaction and into a more individualistic lifestyle. This evident with the amount of cellular phones that are glued too people's ears or the large number of people who cannot seem to walk from the car to the entrance of a store, or even walk around a store, without an Apple iPod providing a constant stream of music. This shift is changing the entire dynamic of social interaction with one another. Technological advances have allowed for a higher number of widgets to be produced than ever before. In non-service oriented careers, since 1965, the average number of work hours has actually decreased. The people enjoying the most reduced hours at work are men with less education and those working the most compared to before are women with higher educations. However, the majority of free time is being more translated to into more time watching television and surfing the Internet (Hurst 2006). Again, the people enjoying the ability to work less are those in professions that are not highly respected according to the research conducted by the NORC.

Compared to European countries, Americans work substantially more than do Germans, French, and Italians. This is contrary to the trends of the 1970s when Europeans worked more than Americans (Hurst 2006). Arguments are made that the American citizens must work more in order to make up for the things that are provided in most developed European countries such as France, Denmark, German, and the United Kingdom. For example, in these countries, all citizens are provided with health care. At least in France and some of the other countries provide subsidized desirable housing for all citizens that prove unable to provide fully for themselves in contrast to the government assisted homes in American that often become run down and undesirable. In the United States, the cost of health care is so high that, for many people, it is only available if they have medical insurances, which are usually a benefit provided by a person's employer. With a lessening faith in social security benefits, Americans have to personally plan for their retirement. In order to combat the lower employee morale and the lack of people taking advantage of paid vacation opportunities, human resource departments are starting to implement more programs aimed at making it more acceptable and expected for people to take these breaks. Some of these programs are requiring employees to take a certain amount of vacation time. Others are stating that a person must take a specified amount of time off consecutively. The more generous programs call for giving the employees up to \$500 for luggage and travel expenses. Caroline Neal, HR director of Motek, a software firm that employs some of these programs, says that CEO An Price, "has a very European attitude toward vacation" (Butler 2005). It is interesting to see that when management does not penalize their workers for taking vacation, but actually encourages it, they are seen as having a European attitude. Many

scholarly sources from leading economic sources claim that while cultural aspects account for many of the differences between the workweeks of European countries the taxation system plays a major role. The taxation policies of France and many other European countries allows for individuals to retain much less of their earnings from income than the United States does (Precis 2004). The tradeoff once again, is that in the European countries analyzed, a person does not need as much dispensable cash in order to live adequately.

How do people feel about the differences between the work hours put in between the United States and the European counterparts? Do the Protestant work ethic and the idea of the American dream prevail over the ability to work fewer hours and have more time to do other things? I interviewed two individuals from Europe that are foreign exchange students, Elena from France and Anne from Denmark. Their answers were very similar. I recognize that there is a weakness in the sample. First, these respondents were not the result of a random sample, rather given the restraints of time and other resources they were more easily available. Both of the respondents are female in their early twenties. Given the gender inequities that exist throughout the world, the fact that they are both women may have had an impact on their responses. Also, they do not have the work experience that an older person would have. However, for the purpose of my research, their observations and limited experiences were suitable for the general questions that I asked. According to both respondents the average workweek consists of 35 hours, compared to the expected 40 hours per week. The numbers that were put forth by the BLS show that the average workweek is actually closer to 44 hours (BLS 2005). This extrapolates to about six weeks less per year that Europeans are working (Precis

2004). The average European vacation time allotted to employees is around five weeks, and they are encouraged to take them. Because many of the institutions are regulated by the government, there are much more government opportunities in these countries. The government jobs there are similar to the ones in the United States in the sense that the pay is the wages paid are not necessarily higher than a non-government job, but the benefits provided compensate lack of cash income. Also, people who work for the government in those countries were able to retire sooner than the average working citizen. In additions to basic benefits, the jobs often have programs such as cheap vacations, allowances to purchase gifts for employees' children, and others that increase the overall level of feeling that a person is supported by their work. The expectations and goals that a person has about work are different than those embodied by the average American. Where we as Americans expect to find a job where we will be adequately compensated for the work that we do and bring social prestige, because of the struggling economy and the resistance to companies wanting to spend the money on training new employees in the areas of the respondents their first priority is to simply find a job and hold on to it. The anxieties that they had regarding obtaining a job are similar to the anxieties faced by college students in the US, as jobs suitable for college graduates are diminishing. I asked both what they normally said to a person when meeting for the first time. They replied that they ask their name and make small talk, but usually do not ask what a person does for a living. I did not expect to hear that. However, it does show that the value placed on a person's occupation is much less in these countries than the value placed on person in the United States. After the basic information regarding work in Europe, I asked what their opinions were about work in America. The first question I asked was whether or

not they believed that Americans work too much. Elena replied that she did not think that Americans work too much. She said that most of the people she knows would not mind working more hours in order to make more money, but that the minimum wage in America is not high enough to sustain a decent life. A person in America working fulltime on minimum wage still cannot afford to live off of one job. In Europe, the minimum wage is approximately eight euros. At the time of this research eight euros converts to \$10.17. She claimed that is easier to live with holding one job because benefits such as health care are provided regardless of the job. Also, if rent is too expensive for a person to afford, the government will subsidize the cost so as to make it affordable. She feels that there are more opportunities to find work in America, but that she likes the healthcare system in France and the hours. France first implemented the 35-hour workweek to allow for more jobs to be created, but after people found themselves having more free time and enjoyed being able to leave earlier on Fridays the policy has stayed in place. People that work during the week fulltime rarely work on the weekends. In fact, most stores are closed on weekends, so even those who work retail are able to have weekends off. Those days are seen as days of rest (Zoebisich 2005). In Denmark, the minimum wage is even higher at twelve euros, which is \$14.30 per hour. The workweek fluctuates between 35 and 37 hours depending on the occupation.

When comparing the United States to European countries, the work ethic can be summed up in a simple phrase: Americans live to work, and Europeans work to live. I found that people of different regions could be just as satisfied with less material goods as we as Americans seem to be with much more. However, our society values materialism. The American Dream has become so central to our way of life that we have

forgotten much about what life is all about. In today's business and life, we have become so involved with production and consumption; we have neglected the small things that have brought peace and joy to many generations of people. Animals are becoming extinct at a record breaking pace. Interpersonal skills are becoming more and more crucial as they are being taught less and less. In many businesses, it is very hard to succeed without being willing to put in the strenuous, long hours. When the amount of time put into something is translated to stand for the strength and determination of a person's will, the idea of work, as a meaningful experience, is lost. There is an increased level of detachment between a person and the final product. According to Karl Marx, when enough people become disengaged from their work and have less fulfilling experiences, a revolution should occur. For a revolution not to occur, there must be an opiate or some sort of false consciousness. From the data I was able to gather from my interviews and secondary research, I venture to say that both are at work into American society. Actually, I think that the European countries are facing these as well, just not to the same degree that the people of the United States are. The culture of consumerism has created a hegemonic force that many of us do not realize. In a sense we are all caught in the matrix. This force is complicated because it is very difficult to try and determine a causal relationship between work, consumption, and success. The opiate is work. Work is routine, takes up a large portion of the day's time, and provides a person with something to do continually so that they do not have the opportunity or the will to evaluate what is actually going on. In this sense, work is doing today what religion once did years ago. The overall happiness of American citizens has been declining, but the workplace provides a ritualistic place that occurs at a given time on a regular basis that

baby-sits the mind. Does the desire to consume fuel the feeling that one must work strenuously, or does the large amount of work provide more financial resources to be able to consume? Is a person really successful because they have become a doctor, even though they are unhappy because they never have time for other things they feel are important? There is not a simple answer to any of these questions, as every single person has their own value system and goals with which to evaluate them.

Although I cannot come up with an answer that will suffice nationally or globally, I know how I view these issues as it relates to my future in work and in life. The idea of becoming accomplished has always been central to my being. If I am going to do something, whatever it is, I am going to do the best that I can. I figure, if I am not going to try my best, then what is the point in doing it at all. Before conducting this research, I too felt that work was one of the defining characteristics of a person. I did not believe so much in the status of a person being related to their occupation, but I valued the commitment it takes to perform at the highest level of efficiency possible. I viewed a persons' work ethic as insight to their character. If this meant that I would have to work 50 hours a week to get to where I wanted to get, then that is a sacrifice that I would have to take. However, my view of what is successful is beginning to change, and I see an opportunity to help make this change occur. Again, the change that I make may not be on a national or global scale, but I want to make a difference in people's lives where I can. In my research I saw that we are spending more time on the road driving to and from work than we are spending with our children. I normally do not make judgment calls, but there is definitely something wrong with this picture. I do not want to be a father that spends more time on the road than in my home. My definition of success has

changed. I want to be able to provide for myself and be a contributing factor in my place of work and community. Given the restraints of the American work ethic, I still feel that I can be successful without losing the ability to get where I want in the business world. Work is important to me, but I cannot justify sacrificing everything else in order to work. This is a concept that I hold with all seriousness and one that I will extend to those who come to work for me, given that I am in a position to be the employer. If a person runs his or her own business, it is easier to bring the concept of work as a means to bring meaning to reality. I want to help bring the positive work environment back to America. I want to see my employees enjoy coming to work. I think one of the most comprehensive solutions that can take place, however, is education. As I mentioned earlier, happiness is declining, but many cannot explain why they are not happy. Many say they wish they had more time to spend with their family, go fishing, or relax, but cannot find a way to do it. Education will give people the tools they need in order to have a voice. Once the masses find out how to make a difference the difference will be made. Human resource departments around the nation are waking up and making implementations to do their part in making the work environment a better place to be. Companies are, in fact, listening. After all, behind every corporation, there are people. I do not hold a negative outlook on the future of American work, because I think sooner or later something will have to happen or the system we have in place will collapse. If nobody is happy, then going to work will eventually not be justifiable by any means and a new system will have to take its place. We can learn some things from the European countries. The seemingly few hours per day not working has translated to a multitude of cultural changes. I think the same can happen for us.

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