

## CHAPTER 12



### Male-Female Relationships

Sanjeev Balakrishnan astonished his American friends when, just after completing the first year of a Ph.D. program in mechanical engineering, he told them he was going home to India to get married.

“We didn’t know you had a fiancée,” they said to him.

“I don’t,” he replied. He explained that his parents had selected thirteen possible brides for him. As soon as he got home he would begin interviewing them, spending an hour with each and selecting one of the thirteen to marry. After the wedding his bride would get an American visa and come back to the States with him.

At the start of the next semester, Balakrishnan returned to the United States with his new wife. He told his American friends that this woman had attracted him the most during the interviews. She was intelligent, lively, and had an engaging sense of humor. Furthermore, she seemed to have a spirit of adventure; the idea of going to another country to begin her married life greatly appealed to her.

Balakrishnan also said that the three-day wedding ceremony had gone off with no problems. Relatives on both sides seemed to get on well. The couple’s future looked bright.

In the minds of Balakrishnan's American friends, the idea of choosing a marital partner from a group of strangers on the basis of a one-hour interview was simply incredible. We will look at American ideas about romantic and other male-female relationships shortly, but first we will consider some of the factors that influence Americans' views of those relationships.

## INFLUENCES ON MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

### *Cultural Values*

As discussed in chapter 1 and mentioned elsewhere in this book, Americans fervently embrace the idea that people should be treated as individuals. In male-female relationships, this ideal means that men and women can interact with each other as individual human beings rather than as representatives of a gender. It is not always assumed that a man and a woman are romantically involved if they spend time together. Many men have women whom they consider to be "just friends" and vice versa.

Nor are women viewed as representatives of their families, representatives whose behavior helps determine the family's social or moral standing. Americans did not seem troubled by the fact that 2008 vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin's unmarried teenage daughter, Bristol, was pregnant. Indeed, two years later and still unmarried, Bristol was invited to be a contestant on the popular television program, *Dancing with the Stars*.

Americans are generally shocked by the "honor killings" that sometimes occur in certain immigrant communities, where a female family member is killed for having behaved in a way deemed to have "dishonored the family."

The general American idea that males and females can interact with each other in a manner that appears to ignore gender differences seems unrealistic and even bizarre to many international visitors, especially to those who come from places where male-female differences dictate aspects of the social order. A group of French exchange students in the United States for a summer academic program commented on the way that Americans seemed to disregard gender. "It is natural that there should be differences

in the way that men and women behave,” said one woman. “Why can’t Americans accept this biological fact?”

Another important influence on male-female relationships in the United States arises from the value placed on equality. Both men and women in America generally believe (at least in theory) that all people, regardless of gender, should be treated as equals. Neither gender, according to this view, should have built-in advantages in social or economic worlds due simply to their gender. This, of course, is the ideal, not the reality.

### *Women’s Liberation and Feminism*

The belief in equality of the sexes gained strength as a result of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s and has continued to grow as feminist ideas have gained a stronger hold in society.

Representatives of women’s movements have pointed out discrepancies between the professed ideals of individualism, freedom, and equality, on the one hand, and the actual practices of gender discrimination, stereotyping, and inequality, on the other.

*Women’s liberation* refers to a collection of opinions and developments that, in general, seeks to end discrimination against women—at least, discrimination that is based on the notion that women are somehow inferior to men. “Equal rights for women” is one of the movement’s stated goals. “Equal pay for equal work” is another, although that goal has yet to be met, as women still earn only about 80 cents on each dollar earned by men.

Before the women’s movement, women in the United States were generally expected to spend their lives preparing to be wives and mothers. Young women in school took “home economics” courses, which taught them how to cook, sew, manage household finances, and care for children. In light of the unfortunate possibility that they might not marry or might someday have to earn an income, women were also encouraged to take other courses that presumably prepared them for one of the three occupations that were deemed appropriate for women at that time—teacher, nurse, or secretary. Most women did not attend college, and those who did were not normally expected to pursue a career outside the home after graduating. Most women married at a relatively young age, after which they were expected to stay at home with their children while their husbands went to work.

Since the 1960s, supporters of the feminist movement have sought to change the role of women in the United States. Parents are more likely to try to convey the idea to their daughters that their prospects in life depend more on their personality, intelligence, and ambition than on their gender. School textbooks and teachers now acknowledge women's contributions to literature, politics, science, and other fields. Feminists argue for an end to what they see as stereotyping of women on television and in other media. They call for female representation on committees or other bodies whose decisions affect women's lives. In general they seek to raise the consciousness of all Americans concerning what they consider to be pervasive, unfair, and unwarranted anti-female attitudes.

The feminist movement has changed certain expectations for women. Many American women no longer see marriage and family life as their main goals and have broader ideas about the prospects life holds for them. Women wait longer to get married, as mentioned in chapter 6, and they also wait longer to have children so they will have time to develop their careers.

More females than males are attending postsecondary educational institutions; by 2009, more women than men were earning doctorates. Movies and television programs featuring women have become more numerous. Women's athletics have achieved significant stature in schools at all levels and in professional leagues.

Women are now found in many lines of work formerly considered male domains, including law enforcement, construction, and truck driving. There are many female doctors, lawyers, and professionals in the business world. Female political figures prominent in the early years of the twenty-first century include Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Former House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and 2008 vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Several major American universities now have female presidents, and some major corporations have female CEOs.

According to the AFL-CIO, an American labor union, the number of women who work outside the home has grown noticeably over the years. In 2008, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women comprised 59.5 percent of the labor force. In comparison, only 29.6 percent of women worked in 1950. The U.S. Labor Department estimates that 99 percent of American women will work for pay at some point in their lives.

The feminist movement; along with the 1960s introduction of the birth control pill, no doubt has had something to do with the increasing equality that women enjoy. Difficult economic times have also contributed to the increase in female participation in the labor force. Indeed, more males than females lost their jobs in the late 2000s recession, increasing the rate of female participation in the labor force and increasing the number of households in which the female earned more money than the male.

The increased presence of women in the workplace has implications for male-female relationships. More women are earning money and are therefore in a position to assert their independence. Traditional female responsibilities in the areas of child care and household maintenance are being reallocated, as has been mentioned. Certain tasks that were once considered “women’s work,” such as childcare, cooking, grocery shopping, and cleaning the house, are no longer performed solely by women. In fact, some couples have decided, for whatever reason, that the woman will be the one whose work supports the family financially and that the man will take care of the house and the children. As mentioned earlier, such men are popularly called “househusbands” or “stay-at-home dads,” and there are more and more of them.

The themes underlying the feminist movement are the same themes—individualism, independence, and equality—that underlie American society in general. Even so, support for the movement has not been universal, even among women. The women’s movement has shaken a traditional social order in ways that some people of both genders welcome and that others find disturbing. Visitors from abroad will see many indications of continuing flux in male-female relationships in America, including vigorous debates about the morality and legality of abortion, lawsuits alleging sexual discrimination, and, among individuals, widely varying views about women’s roles in family life and about social values.

### *One’s Upbringing*

Aside from cultural values and the women’s movement, people’s own upbringings also influence the way they think about and interact with members of the opposite sex. Children notice the patterns of interaction

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between their parents and between each of their parents and people outside the family who are members of the opposite sex. They notice the ways their parents speak to each other, the way they divide household labor, and the amount of respect they show one another.

Some American children grow up in homes that limit the amount of interaction between males and females. In these homes parents may not allow their children to go out on dates with members of the opposite sex before the age of sixteen or so. They may be less open to discussing sex in their homes, and they may not let children watch sexually explicit movies until they reach what the parents consider to be an appropriate age. More conservative families may also send their children to private schools that separate girls from boys or that promote “conservative” values.

On the other hand, some American families are less restrictive about their children’s interactions with members of the opposite sex. These parents may encourage their children to go out on dates, or they may let their teenage children host or attend mixed-gender parties.

Foreign visitors, then, are likely to encounter a wide range of views about male-female relationships.

## MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS IN VARIOUS SETTINGS

### *Informal Relationships*

Strict segregation of the sexes is not the norm in the United States except in increasingly rare male- or female-only educational institutions. In most settings males and females interact freely. In shops, for example, male and female customers and employees behave in ways that tend to ignore gender differences. Strangers of both sexes will speak with each other on sidewalks or buses, in classrooms, or in other public places. At receptions and parties, males and females may readily mingle with each other. Granted, the men may often gather in one area where they discuss sports and other “men’s topics” while the women collect elsewhere and discuss “women’s topics.” This segregation is attributed more to differences in interests than to differences in gender as such.

In schools male and female students may study together or participate jointly in recreational activities. Coed (that is, combined male and female) sports teams are common in communities, colleges, and universities. In a few noteworthy cases, young women have joined wrestling, baseball, and (American) football teams, which are traditionally male. Coworkers in companies often meet for “happy hour” after work in a bar or restaurant. Both men and women are likely to be included in such gatherings.

The characteristics of conversation in what is called “mixed company” are likely to differ from those in single-sex groups. Males are more likely than females to initiate conversation when strangers of different sexes interact. Both males and females are likely to be more willing to discuss “personal” topics among themselves than in mixed company. Americans are advised to “watch their language” when in mixed groups and typically refrain from using profanity or sex-related terminology, particularly in “bar talk” or at parties where heavy drinking occurs and inhibitions are lowered. These restraints are less salient than they were in the past, but they still have their effect, and international visitors will want to monitor their own language accordingly.

### *Workplace Relationships*

The issue of sexual harassment provides a useful way to view the matter of male-female workplace relationships in contemporary America. This issue lies at the intersection of several cultural values and a tradition of male dominance, and complaints and even lawsuits are the outcome of what is perceived as sexual harassment. Here are some examples:

- A worker is disciplined for sexual harassment because he posted a photograph of his bikini-clad girlfriend at his workstation in full view of fellow workers, some of whom were women.
- A department head is disciplined because a female supervisee reported to him that a male colleague persistently touched her hair or shoulders when he walked past her desk, and the department head took no action to stop the behavior.
- A company’s treasurer is fired after two of his female staff members reported that he threatened to prevent them from being promoted if they refused to engage in sexual activity with him.

- A university professor is charged with sexual harassment after a female student reported that he had offered to raise her grade in his class if she would allow him to see her breasts.
- A female high-school teacher is accused of inappropriately touching a male student in one of her classes.
- A committee of college professors and administrators spends months debating whether their institution's policy on sexual harassment should proscribe romantic relationships between teachers and students.

Many cultural values and assumptions underlie the Americans' concern with sexual harassment. They include individualism, equality, a belief that conditions of life can be changed and improved through conscious effort, and a belief that laws and rules can help bring about those changes. These values and assumptions have led to a search for "gender-neutral" policies, procedures, and behaviors in the workplace.

What this means in general is that hiring policies, training and supervisory procedures, salary schedules, and day-to-day workplace behavior are to be free of distinctions between men and women. Again, this may seem strange to people from societies where males and females are expected to behave and be treated differently, as was illustrated when a visiting Frenchman went to his host organization's office and asked to see the organization's sexual harassment policy. He had not had any problem related to sexual harassment, he said. He explained why he wanted to see the policy: "I teach English in France, and it's hard to keep the students engaged. But they find American issues about sexual harassment so amusing that they pay attention!"

In the United States, governments at all levels have passed laws—and many employers have policies—concerning sexual harassment. Even though there is still disagreement about the appropriateness of those laws and policies, and although there are various interpretations of them, international visitors who spend time in an American workplace will need to try to understand and abide by them. Failure to do so can lead to disciplinary action or even dismissal from a place of employment.

Many organizations require employees to have "training" concerning sexual harassment, so they presumably know what behaviors they should avoid. Generally speaking, sexual harassment policies are intended



to exclude from the workplace any behavior that entails discomfort for or mistreatment of employees that is based on the employees' gender. One definition of sexual harassment is "unwelcome behavior" of a sexual nature that makes someone feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in the workplace by focusing attention on her (or, less commonly, his) gender. Sexual harassment may be directed toward men or women, although stories about women who feel that they have been sexually harassed are much more numerous. Examples of sexual harassment in the workplace, in addition to the six instances given above, include unnecessary touching; telling jokes of a sexual nature that may make someone feel uncomfortable; placing sexually explicit posters or photographs in view of others; or asking a person for sexual favors in exchange for a promotion, pay increase, or favorable treatment of any kind.

As was said at the beginning of this section, the issue of sexual harassment provides a useful lens for looking at male-female workplace relationships in the United States. This does not mean that sexual harassment is an all-consuming topic in almost every workplace, but it does mean that, in general, males and females in a workplace are expected to treat each other as individual human beings with personalities and employment-related qualifications that have nothing to do with their gender. As has been stressed, behaving in accordance with this general idea can be difficult for people from societies where males and females customarily occupy separate realms and treat each other in ways that expressly acknowledge gender differences.

"My boss here is a lady," said a visiting scientist from Korea. "In Korea, my boss will not be a lady." The scientist had to make a number of adjustments in his ideas and behavior in order to become an accepted member of his American workplace.

### *Romantic Relationships*

Americans believe that the selection of a marital partner should be left entirely to the two individuals concerned. An "arranged marriage" such as Sanjeev Balakrishnan's is incompatible with the independence, freedom, and equality that Americans value so highly and is virtually unheard of in the United States, except in some immigrant communities.

This does not mean, however, that marital partners are selected at random. In fact, most Americans marry people of their own ethnic background, religion, and geographical origin—the same factors Balakrishnan's parents no doubt considered when choosing potential partners for their son. Traditionally, Americans meet their future mates through mutual friends or family, at a bar or restaurant, at their place of work, or in secondary school or college.

Those who marry (or remarry) later in life can have difficulty finding mates in the traditional ways. An increasing number of such people turn to Internet matching services that attempt, for a fee, to help people who are seeking romantic partners.

Marriages between adherents of different religions (usually called “interfaith marriages”) or of different racial or ethnic groups are increasingly common, although they still constitute only a small minority of marital unions.

Traditionally, romantic relationships began with a date. Dating once meant that a man asked a woman out for dinner and a movie (or some similar activity) so the two could get to know each other. The couple would arrange a time to meet, the man would pick the woman up in his car, and they would “go out.” The man would pay for the meal and the movie tickets, and sometimes, if everything went well, the woman would give the man a goodnight kiss at the end of the evening.

This concept of dating may still prevail among older Americans who find themselves single later in their lives. But for younger people, dating in this way is not so common. Instead they may go out in groups rather than in pairs. “Meeting up” or “hooking up” may be arranged spontaneously, perhaps by telephone but more often by some other form of electronic communication. Women might take the initiative in making arrangements to get together, and it is increasingly common for a woman to pay her own way, thus emphasizing her independence and equality and reducing her sense of obligation to her male companion.

Some reports indicate that, at least in some circles, dating in the traditional sense no longer takes place at all. “People here don’t date,” wrote a columnist for the Cornell University *Daily Sun*. “They either couple up and act married [that is, they live together like husband and wife] or do

the random, one-night hook-up thing” (that is, they get together once for commitment-free sexual activity) (Reimold, 2010).

As recently as a few generations ago, Americans generally disapproved of cohabitation—that is, of unmarried males and females living together. By now such arrangements are quite common and in many circles are entirely acceptable and even expected. The decline in the marriage rate—it was 11 per thousand in 1980 and 7.1 per thousand in 2008, according to the U.S. Census Bureau—can be attributed in part to the increasing numbers of couples who live together without getting married. In fact, cohabitation has become so acceptable that a growing number of colleges and universities were reported in 2010 to be offering coed rooms in their student residence halls.

Couples may date or otherwise spend time together for any length of time before they discuss marriage. International visitors should be aware that most Americans do not consider going out on one or even several dates to be indicative of a serious relationship. In fact, many Americans go out on first dates and decide that they never want to see the other person again. For couples that “hit it off” or decide they would like to see more of one another, dating can last a short time—several weeks—or extend over many years before they discuss marriage, if indeed they ever do.

Usually, Americans introduce their romantic partners to their parents only after they think the relationship is becoming more serious or when they think marriage is likely.

When Americans do decide to marry (usually at about twenty-eight years of age for men and twenty-six for women), some traditional rituals are usually observed. Often, the man asks the woman to marry him, although that is certainly not always true. Sometimes, the man will even ask his fiancée’s family if he may marry her. This ritual, however, is considered a formality.

Many couples choose to have their wedding ceremony in a church or synagogue even if they do not consider themselves particularly religious. Other couples choose to get married by a judge at a courthouse. This type of wedding is called a “civil ceremony,” as opposed to a religious one. In either case, it is usually important to the couple to have at least some friends or family members attend their wedding ceremony.

Although an American wedding is far shorter than the three days of

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Balakrishnan's experience, it may still be an elaborately planned event that follows a year or more of planning and costs many thousands of dollars.

This chapter has focused on romantic relationships between heterosexual couples, but it should be noted that homosexual romantic relationships are increasingly open and are becoming more accepted in American society. Many American cities have visible and vocal gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities. Polls consistently show that the younger generation is generally much more accepting of gay people than are their elders. More and more movies and television programs depict gay and lesbian people, including some in romantic relationships. Contentious debate has occurred in many states over proposals to allow same-sex couples to marry. At the time of this writing, same-sex marriages are legal in six states, while thirty states have constitutional amendments banning them. In some states these amendments are being challenged in court.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

To learn more about the many ways that males and females interact in American society, foreign visitors may want to observe female-male interactions as portrayed in movies and TV programs, then ask Americans how the movie and TV portrayals relate to reality.

Many Americans will be happy to speak about their own experiences in choosing a mate, their family's views on the subject, their notion about an ideal partner, or their views on feminism.

Discussing the topics of "interfaith" and "interethnic" marriages with people who are in such relationships can be particularly illuminating, because those involved in them have been forced to give more thought to the topic than those in marriages not involving major social, cultural, or religious differences.

Of course, international visitors who have these conversations will want to compare what they have learned with what they are accustomed to in their own countries. Rather than evaluating which system is better, international visitors can look for similarities and differences between the cultures.