

AMERICAN WAYS

Americans' attitudes about privacy can be difficult for people from other countries to understand. For example, Americans will often give visitors a tour of their house, including the bedrooms, which people from many other places consider private. They may speak quite openly, even to strangers, about personal or family problems that would be kept confidential elsewhere. Yet, in Americans' minds, there are boundaries that other people are simply not supposed to cross. When such boundaries are crossed, the Americans' bodies will visibly stiffen and their manner will become cool and aloof.

On the other hand, users of the social-networking site Facebook will often reveal information about themselves that, outside the environment of a computer network, they would probably keep to themselves.

EQUALITY

Americans are also distinctive in the degree to which they believe in the ideal, as stated in their Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal." Although they sometimes violate the ideal in their daily lives, particularly in matters of interracial relationships and sometimes relationships among people from different social classes, U.S. Americans have a deep faith that in some fundamental way all people (at least all American people) are of equal value, that no one is born superior to anyone else. "One person, one vote," they say, conveying the idea that any person's opinion is as valid and worthy of attention as any other person's opinion. U.S. Americans generally admire a higher-status person who acts "down to earth" or does not "put on airs." By wearing blue jeans in his public appearances, for example, multimillionaire Apple founder Steve Jobs can appear to be a "regular guy."

Americans are usually uncomfortable when someone treats them with obvious deference. They dislike being the subjects of open displays of respect—being bowed to, deferred to, or treated as though they could do no wrong or make no unreasonable requests. They may even be offended at the suggestion that there are social classes in the United States, so strong is their belief in the ideal of equality.

It is not just males who are created equal, in the American mindset, but females too. While Americans may violate the ideal in practice (for example, women continue to be paid less, on average, than do men in similar jobs), they do generally assume that women and men are equal, deserving of the same level of respect. Women may be different from men but are not inferior to them. In fact, as women in the early 2000s came to hold a larger portion of jobs, get more formal education, and attain more influential positions, concern arose in some circles that men were inferior to women, or at least less able to adjust their behavior and attitudes to the modern era.

This is not to say that Americans make no distinctions among themselves as a result of such factors as gender, age, wealth, occupation, level of education, or income. They do. But the distinctions are acknowledged in relatively subtle ways. Tone of voice, order of speaking, choice of words, seating arrangements—such are the means by which Americans acknowledge status differences among themselves. People of higher status are more likely to speak first, louder, and longer. They sit at the head of the table or in the most comfortable chair. They feel free to interrupt other speakers more than others feel free to interrupt them. The higher-status person may put a hand on the shoulder of the lower-status person. If there is touching between the people involved, the higher-status person will touch first.

Foreigners who are accustomed to more obvious displays of respect (such as bowing, averting eyes from the face of the higher-status person, or using honorific titles) often overlook the ways in which Americans show respect for higher-status people. They think, incorrectly, that Americans are generally unaware of status differences and disrespectful of other people. What is distinctive about the American outlook on the matter of equality are the underlying assumptions that (1) no matter what a person's initial station in life, he or she has the opportunity to achieve high standing and (2) everyone, no matter how unfortunate, deserves some basic level of respect.

Although some research indicates that it is less and less the case, U.S. Americans in general hold to the idea that they can move up the social ladder if they get a good education and work hard enough (*The New York Times*, 2005).