

# 1 The Puzzling Persistence of Gendered Dating

Karley Sciortino writes a recurring opinion column for *Vogue* on sex, love, and relationships. Recently she asked, “Can I Be a Self-Sufficient, #Empowered Woman and Still Enjoy It When a Guy Picks Up the Check?” Sciortino’s conclusion? Yes, as she finds herself feeling “like a whore—in a good way,” and “confused” as to why “wanting to blow someone for my dinner is seen as ‘regressive.’” As she explains,

Look, I’m a feminist or whatever, but I still like it when a guy picks up the check on a date. . . . In terms of gender equality, we’ve come a long way in recent years. At 32, I often earn a similar income to the men I date, and I like being in relationships that feel equal. And yet, there’s also this old-school part of me that likes it when a guy takes the reins, in ways that extend beyond just his wallet—like, offering me his jacket when it’s cold, or helping me down the stairs when I’m wearing nonsensical shoes, or spanking me when I get too drunk. You know, lovingly misogynistic Don Draper shit.<sup>1</sup>

Sciortino’s take on dating is not an outlier. But how do we make sense of her perspective?

A gender revolution is underway. Talk to middle-class young adults in the United States today, and you’ll see how firmly many embrace the new

cultural messages of gender equality. Young women are, more than ever, investing in their educations and careers, while putting their love lives on the back burner. When they do partner, they expect to do so with someone supportive of their ambitious professional goals and they plan to continue to support themselves financially. Heterosexual men are encouraged to desire and respect these independent, go-getter women and adjust their relationship goals accordingly. But while many progressive young adults claim a feminist identity, they define it by opportunities in the public sphere and meanwhile fail to examine the inequalities stemming from their most intimate desires. As a result, in spite of significant progress, the gender revolution remains “uneven and stalled.”<sup>2</sup>

While young adults now have a clear set of professional goals and a vocabulary with which to understand them, the social scripts for dating and courtship have not undergone a similar transformation. Despite enormous changes in how people construct relationships in 21st-century America, contemporary understandings of heterosexual romance, desire, and intimacy remain firmly rooted in assumptions of gender difference.<sup>3</sup> Dating norms and scripts continue to presume that men initiate sexual and romantic overtures, and women react. Men are still expected to ask for, plan, and pay for dates, initiate sex, confirm the exclusivity of a relationship, and propose marriage.<sup>4</sup> These conventions feel both safe and right, and heterosexual men and women actively desire them.

But these seemingly benign rituals may lay a lasting foundation for inequality. Once a couple marries, the gender division becomes more entrenched, with women taking on more of the housework and childcare than men.<sup>5</sup> This doesn't only influence the home. Women's caregiving responsibilities limit their availability for paid labor, leading to lower wages and greater challenges moving up in their careers in the long run.<sup>6</sup> Women are also more likely to make career sacrifices for their families, such as stepping out of the workplace for extended periods of time or relocating in support of a partner's career.<sup>7</sup> Men, on the other hand, are less likely to take time out of the workplace when they become parents, even when they have the option to do so.<sup>8</sup> Even women who out-earn their partners often end up doing more household labor to compensate for their success in the workplace so as not to threaten their partner's status in the family.<sup>9</sup>

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) people are not immune to this contradiction between an egalitarian ideal and established expectations as they navigate the tension between assimilation and innovation.<sup>10</sup> True, they often seek to form relationships that take critical aim at heteronormativity, and express greater support for egalitarian practices than do heterosexuals.<sup>11</sup> Yet having recently won a hard-fought battle for inclusion in one of the most conservative social institutions—the married couple relationship—some find themselves affirming more than challenging prevailing understandings of how relationships should work.<sup>12</sup> As a result, many gay and lesbian individuals still enact domestic inequalities in their relationships.<sup>13</sup> For everyone then, conventional norms compete with the stated desire for progressive relationship practices.

*The Mating Game* looks at how people with diverse gender identities and sexualities date, form relationships, and make decisions about commitments as they negotiate an uncertain romantic landscape. As college-educated residents of the San Francisco Bay Area, the young adults (ages 25–40) in this book have the economic resources and progressive social environment that should enable them to construct their lives in opposition to conventional practices. Yet surprisingly, for most of them, their intimate relationships are firmly shaped by entrenched inequalities. In the following chapters, I uncover how gender upheaval has only partly done its work; in fact, old gender tropes are firmly in place, shaping our personal lives, but raising little concern. Indeed, a tepid feminism has taken hold in which many people fail to interrogate how the personal is political. Yet others see the danger, sounding the alarm that reveling in gender difference is a recipe for gender inequality, and they advocate unconventional ways of building relationships. A showdown between traditionalism and egalitarianism is underway.

#### THE DEATH OF DATING?

Popular media narratives might have us believe that we are in an era of apocalyptic “anything goes” romance. In 2013 the *New York Times* ran an article proclaiming “the end of courtship.” According to journalist Alex Williams, traditional dating rituals are obsolete, replaced with a casual

and individualized approach in which young adults put limited effort, and money, into their dating lives.<sup>14</sup> Dating websites jumped on the bandwagon, declaring new rules in the “‘post-dating’ landscape” and encouraging women to look for romance in nontraditional ways and contexts.<sup>15</sup> And supposedly, it’s no longer only men running the show; economically empowered women now set the terms of intimacy. They purportedly aren’t playing by “The Rules” as outlined by the 1995 bestselling self-help book that encouraged women to play hard to get in order to secure commitment from men.<sup>16</sup> Reluctant to even use the word “date,” young adults now “talk” or “hook up.”<sup>17</sup> As *Rolling Stone* argues, millennials and Gen Xers are taking the sexual revolution a step further than their baby boomer parents, avoiding early commitments altogether in favor of casual sex, eschewing monogamy to leave space for flexible relationship structures, and refusing limits on their sexual orientation.<sup>18</sup> In what is portrayed as a welcome and freeing change from an overly rigid past,<sup>19</sup> young adults are no longer confined to just one relationship pathway, but instead feel free to pick and choose what works for them. As *Slate* states, “good riddance” to courtship and the sexism and heteronormativity embedded in its rituals.<sup>20</sup> Yet this assessment certainly doesn’t reflect the experiences of the majority of the people with whom I spoke.

In spite of the supposed and much-trumpeted rise of hooking up, the majority of young college-educated adults remain committed to gendered dating and courtship practices. Once college ends, even those who avoided dating in favor of hooking up tend to follow conventional dating patterns as they begin the search for a committed, long-term partner.<sup>21</sup> Those without college educations may be upending traditional courtship, but it’s the result of financial constraint, not empowerment. Struggling to attain the economic resources and stability that Americans understand to be the foundation of a good marriage, young adults who are low income or working class often feel shut out of the dating and marriage markets altogether.<sup>22</sup> Even so, many of the steps they *can* enact are often taken in a rather traditional manner.<sup>23</sup> Thus, alongside these narratives of gender role reversal and relationship anarchy, outlets such as *New York Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, and *Women’s Health* puzzle over why young adults, especially young heterosexual women who are vocal in their commitment to

gender equality, remain so attached to old-fashioned rituals. As one article asks, “You’re a Feminist . . . So Why Don’t You Date Like One?”<sup>24</sup>

These competing messages about how intimacy should look leave young adults with a murky sense of what constitutes an ideal romantic relationship. Very few of the people with whom I spoke either expressed a desire for a fully traditional, male breadwinner, female homemaker type of relationship *or* articulated a radical, gender-neutral worldview. Instead, I heard story after story of how, while the division of paid and unpaid labor in partnerships should be equitable and not determined by gender, gender-traditional romantic behaviors should be preserved. This was especially the case among heterosexual women and men. Indeed, three-fourths of heterosexual women and men wanted or expected some semblance of a traditional courtship, and almost everyone wanted at least certain aspects of one. In contrast, 80 percent of LGBTQ young adults wanted relationships that explicitly reject traditional dating conventions in favor of gender-neutral and egalitarian practices. This raises interesting questions about how, why, and among whom gender norms persist in romantic relationships.

#### DATING AS AN AMERICAN INSTITUTION

Current courtship conventions may put men in the proverbial driver’s seat, but historically women and their families had substantially more control over the process. Prior to the 1920s and the advent of the modern dating system, wooing often took place within the confines of women’s family homes.<sup>25</sup> Under the “calling” system, interested male suitors would visit women in their homes, where they would sit in the parlor and have a conversation. When a woman first came of “appropriate” age, dependent on her social status, her mother or guardian would invite eligible men to call on her. As she matured, a woman was able to invite her own suitors to the house. Those deemed unsuitable or undesirable were turned away at the door. Widely embraced, “calling” was created to emulate the wealthy counterparts of a newly formed and rising white middle class.<sup>26</sup>

After the 1920s, the United States saw the ascendance of “the date.” Courting was no longer relegated to the private sphere, but instead took

place in public. Originally a lower-class response to a lack of private space in which to receive suitors, dating was rapidly embraced by the middle class who saw it as exciting and freeing and who established it as an “American institution.”<sup>27</sup> And as middle-class white women increased their presence in the public sphere, entering college and professions, they also demanded broader access to public spaces. Yet ironically, as these women took their place in public life, they lost control over courtship. The date took women and men away from the prying eyes of family but also required transportation and money, as couples went out to dinner or a movie theater. In the process, control over courtship shifted to men, as they were the ones expected to ask for the date, plan the date, pick up the woman and drive, pay for the date, and then take her home again. As the relationship progressed, the man was supposed to ask her to go steady and, if things went well, to propose marriage. The woman could pick and choose among suitors, but she was never to initiate.<sup>28</sup>

Based on an assumption of a breadwinning, dominant male and a dependent, passive female, these courtship norms dictated distinct behaviors for men and women. They were premised on the belief that men and women are innately different and that these differences are reflected in their skills, activities, desires, and the separate spheres they inhabit. Cultural narratives about gender associated men with power, agency, ambition, and the public sphere, where their breadwinning activities were used to support their wife and children in the home. Women, on the other hand, were represented as nurturing, reactive, and expressive, ideal for homemaking in the private sphere.<sup>29</sup> Courtship conventions reflected these beliefs, situating men as the initiators. These norms were prevalent enough to shape people’s experiences and perceptions of courtship to the present day, establishing these behaviors as the most ideal and appropriate way to progress through relationships.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, the narratives and resources that undergird conventional courtship practices were not available or applied to everyone, but rather centered and reflected the experiences of the white middle class. Public dating required money, and concepts of what constitutes romance were constructed around affluence and consumption.<sup>31</sup> The family ideal of separate spheres was the result of a growing white middle class that had the resources to rely on one income.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, dominant narratives of

women as weak and in need of men's protection, one driver of the separate spheres ideology, have never been extended to women of color. Many men of color, on the other hand, were prevented from fulfilling the male breadwinner and protector role. Racial discrimination and oppression made it difficult if not impossible for people of color to fulfill these supposed ideals.<sup>33</sup> In the decades leading up to the start of the gender revolution, women's self-reliance was seen not as a sign of empowerment or equality, but rather as a result of men's failure to enact their role as heads of household and a dysfunctional breakdown in appropriate gender roles.<sup>34</sup>

In spite of these exclusions, dating remains a widely understood and accepted means of developing committed, long-term romantic relationships, particularly among white college-educated Americans. Powerful cultural messages perpetuate particular beliefs around how and what types of relationships we should form. Even those who are excluded from dominant relationship pathways frequently don't question the pathway or the end goal itself, but rather their own ability to enact it, delaying committed relationships until they have the resources to do so.<sup>35</sup> However, while traditional dating and courtship practices dominate the public imagination of how relationships should play out, the assumptions about gender difference on which these practices are based have been significantly destabilized.

#### GENDER AND INTIMACY IN UPHEAVAL

Since the 1960s, the United States has experienced a massive transformation in the gender system. So far-reaching are these changes that they have been referred to as a gender revolution, emphasizing the radical changes in women's educational and career attainment.<sup>36</sup> The narrative of revolution resonates most strongly with a particular demographic, the white middle class, who reaped the rewards of the increased opportunities for self-development among women. But the expectations for professional success are widely embraced as both ideal and necessary.<sup>37</sup> Middle-class parents raise their daughters with professional ambitions,<sup>38</sup> and now that women's college graduation rates exceed men's, these women are far more likely to expect career trajectories that mirror those of men.<sup>39</sup>

The decline of formal sex discrimination has increased women's access to a wider range of jobs, which are also better paying.<sup>40</sup> Well-educated women are delaying marriage until their late twenties and early thirties in favor of establishing careers;<sup>41</sup> this significantly increases their earning potential throughout their lives and their ability to support themselves independently of men.<sup>42</sup> The increase in the availability and reliability of birth control has given women greater control over their reproduction, allowing them to invest more heavily in their careers. They no longer have to worry as much about an unexpected pregnancy and can delay marriage in favor of starting a career without having to forgo sex, thereby making space for women to enter into a succession of dating and sexual relationships.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, it has become increasingly acceptable for women to be sexually active outside of relationships, signaling a decline in, though not an end to, the sexual double standard.<sup>44</sup>

Women have also seen a decline in the status of the homemaker, making it a less desirable pathway, even among couples who can most afford to support a family on one income.<sup>45</sup> Couples are having fewer children, who are born later in a woman's life. Women, especially those with a college degree, can expect to spend fewer years of their lives with young children in the house.<sup>46</sup> These changes make permanent homemaking less appealing in light of the opportunity costs of staying at home. At present, the majority of women continue to work after having children;<sup>47</sup> well-educated, well-compensated professional women are most likely to quickly return to full-time work.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, men can no longer count on being the sole breadwinner. Currently, only 19 percent of heterosexual married couples rely on the male breadwinner and female homemaker model,<sup>49</sup> while the woman brings in an equal or larger share of the income in 31 percent of heterosexual marriages or cohabiting relationships.<sup>50</sup> Women's wages have become increasingly important to attaining or maintaining a financially secure status,<sup>51</sup> and romantic relationships based on women's financial dependence are for the most part no longer viewed as either desirable or sustainable.<sup>52</sup> The gap between men's and women's mate selection preferences is narrowing, as men's preferences are increasingly coming to mirror those of women. More focused on women's career and income prospects, men are less concerned with women's appearance and sexual



histories.<sup>53</sup> One consequence is that men and women are now seeking to form relationships with peers, as many middle-class young adults consolidate their class privilege by marrying those with similar levels of education and career prospects.<sup>54</sup> As such, the two-income family, along with women's new economic and educational opportunities, have provided men and women with an unprecedented opportunity to create egalitarian partnerships in which partners share paid labor, housework, and caregiving equitably over the life course. And young adults claim those are the types of partnerships they want.<sup>55</sup>

Changes are not limited to heterosexual relationships. We have also seen an increased acceptance of same-sex and queer sexual and romantic relationships, including a very visible movement to give LGBTQ people the same marriage rights as heterosexual men and women. The culmination of this was the landmark 2015 Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states. Although this decision has been widely lauded by LGBTQ people and their supporters, the movement's focus on marriage, to the exclusion of other pressing human rights issues, was more controversial.<sup>56</sup> While the same-sex marriage movement in particular has emphasized long-term committed relationships, with some LGBTQ people living lives that are virtually indistinguishable from their heterosexual counterparts, others continue to challenge this one-size-fits-all version of family life.<sup>57</sup> Alongside this movement, new cultural understandings of gender challenge the assumed connection between sex category and gender identity.<sup>58</sup> Young adults are increasingly coming to understand their gender outside the binary, rejecting the association of sex assigned at birth with both gender identity and presentation.<sup>59</sup> When they form relationships, they bring into stark relief the limitations of the assumptions people bring to romantic relationships.<sup>60</sup>

This means that not only heterosexual men and women but also LGBTQ people face a tension as they build their intimate lives. On the one hand, LGBTQ people are exposed to the same cultural messages as heterosexuals about how intimacy, romance, and love "should" look. Legibility and legitimacy are tied to emulating heterosexual couplings as closely as possible. Yet there is also an extensive history of queer challenges to normative family life. Rejection, exclusion, and discrimination by and from families of origin and other institutions have left LGBTQ people creatively

reimagining intimacy for decades now, and they often demonstrate a more open-minded approach to the variety of ways relationships can be constructed.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, queerness is frequently understood as resisting and challenging socially accepted and expected ways of living.<sup>62</sup>

The increasing acceptance and visibility of LGBTQ relationships has created new pathways to relationships and marriage; it challenges the notion that distinct gendered behaviors in romantic relationships are based on inherent difference rather than cultural norms, undermines expectations for gender complementarity, and provides increased legitimacy for non-traditional couplings. As a result of these many social, cultural, and economic changes, the United States has experienced the dissociation of sexuality, reproduction, and kinship, as many people no longer expect sex and childbearing to go hand in hand, or either of these to go hand in hand with marriage.<sup>63</sup> Relationships are now expected to provide room for independence and self-fulfillment for both partners.<sup>64</sup> Gender norms are called into question.<sup>65</sup> Thus, conventional courtship rituals now compete with a commitment to self-development, individualistic understandings of intimacy, egalitarian impulses, and strong attachments to paid labor by all, meaning that young adults must negotiate contradictory expectations. While the cultural messages regarding education, career, self-reliance, and equality have taken firm hold, providing young adults with a clear path to follow and a narrative with which to make sense of it, no similar transformation in scripts has developed for dating and courtship. Young adults face a dilemma as they navigate uncharted terrain.

#### WHY COURTSHIP?

Looking at courtship helps us home in on one of the major questions of the gender revolution: why has it stalled in intimate relationships?<sup>66</sup> Is this about stagnating beliefs or unchanging structures? While people may say they want egalitarian relationships, they certainly don't have them. One school of thought argues that this is the result of structural constraints.<sup>67</sup> Workplaces refuse to accommodate dual-earner couples; the United States provides almost no public support for caregiving, and when push comes to shove, people have to make hard decisions about how to

divide paid labor and caregiving.<sup>68</sup> Evidence demonstrates that partnerships are often more egalitarian when public policies support that goal.<sup>69</sup> But when they don't, people look to "Plan B," or what they see as their next best option, and this is often laced with assumptions about gender. Although often couched in narratives about practicality, "fallback" positions tend to reveal, or are at least justified by, very conventional beliefs about the appropriate roles of men and women.<sup>70</sup>

Given this, certain research may overestimate the support for egalitarianism in romantic relationships. Studies have often clustered gendered beliefs in different arenas into one measure of support for equality,<sup>71</sup> but recent research demonstrates that Americans often hold competing beliefs. On the one hand, there is widespread cultural support for women's educational and job opportunities. At the same time, Americans cling to their belief that men and women are fundamentally different and that women are better suited for the home.<sup>72</sup> They are less concerned with equality for equality's sake, especially in heterosexual romantic relationships.<sup>73</sup> Instead, consistent with Americans' belief in individualism and free choice, people are more likely to support women's opportunities for upward mobility, such as access to rights and opportunities in the public sphere.<sup>74</sup> The benefits of challenging gender inequality in the home are less clear in light of the possible social sanctions.<sup>75</sup> And although the most up-to-date research shows millennials moving away from this divide and expressing support for equality in the home, it is unclear whether and how these beliefs will be put into practice.<sup>76</sup> We have a great deal of data demonstrating that people often fail to enact their supposed egalitarian beliefs in their everyday lives, or express contradictory beliefs about interpersonal relationships.<sup>77</sup> Certainly this was the case in this research: young adults who stated a desire for egalitarian relationships enacted gender inequalities anyway, and found ways to justify them.

Gender functions as a primary frame that individuals use to define who they are, how they will behave, and how they expect others to behave.<sup>78</sup> People draw on cultural knowledge, or "shared," "common" knowledge that "everybody knows," to coordinate their behavior and facilitate social cohesion.<sup>79</sup> Most adults continue to believe that men and women are innately different with either complementary or conflicting needs and desires, particularly in heterosexual romantic relationships. These

perceived differences are especially salient during courtship, when people tend to fall back on well-worn dating scripts to ease uncertainty and reassure themselves and others that they conform to normative gender standards.<sup>80</sup> Individuals are held accountable for such behaviors by others, who may sanction them for nonconformity, and by themselves, as nonconformity can be experienced as an assault on the very core of who they are. In the process of selecting a long-term romantic partner, our cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man or a woman are acted out in a ritualized manner through particular practices.

Sexism hasn't gone away; it has simply become subtler and research isn't accurately capturing the nuances. It has become less socially acceptable to express a desire for separate spheres, or women as homemakers and men as breadwinners.<sup>81</sup> LGBQ people, too, are attuned to the judgment leveled at unequal and gendered relationships.<sup>82</sup> And in response to economic need, even conservative men and women have shifted their beliefs about women's work outside the home.<sup>83</sup> Instead, studies on gender as "cultural rules or instructions," rather than studies on beliefs in separate spheres, may better illuminate the prevailing attitudes.<sup>84</sup> In addition, people tend to see courtship rituals as mere convention and preference, and therefore consistent with narratives of "free choice" feminism.<sup>85</sup> As a result, gender inequality in this realm tends to go unquestioned, making it less susceptible to social desirability bias and to economic need. This is thus an ideal location to explore changing (and stagnating) attitudes.<sup>86</sup>

Courtship lays the foundation for expectations in the relationship, so it is important to understand how dating conventions enforce gender difference and where openings for change, and greater equality, may be occurring. This book does just that, looking at how these practices influence our understanding of gender through "cultural rules or instructions"<sup>87</sup> in ways that perpetuate broader inequalities, all while flying under the radar.

## THE STUDY

In order to make sense of how young adults are dating and forming romantic relationships, I interviewed 105 college-educated young adults

in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. Sixty-five identified as heterosexual and forty as LGBTQ. Given that all were between the ages of 25 and 40, they were old enough to have a relationship history but young enough to be grappling with the changing norms that came out of the feminist, sexual, and gender revolutions. The people whose thoughts and experiences fill this book spent hours with me, telling me all about their past and current romantic relationships, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future. We met at coffee shops, restaurants, wine bars, parks, and in their homes. I asked, and they answered, questions about how they find partners, who they find attractive, what they like and expect on a first date, how a relationship should progress, when sex should take place, and how a marriage proposal should unfold. I also asked questions about what they wanted their family life to look like in the long run, such as how they expected to divide household chores and childcare, how they wanted to manage finances, and how they showed love to a partner. Some of the respondents were already in long-term cohabiting or married relationships, so I was able to see how they made sense of how their preferences were playing out at home. As a result, I have information on people's past and present dating, courtship, and relationship behaviors, as well as their preferences, their attitudes about what people *should* do, and their perceptions of the social consequences of various behaviors.<sup>88</sup>

I interviewed participants in two waves. In 2010–11, I interviewed 81 heterosexual and gay and lesbian individuals, recruited from the alumni networking lists of two universities in the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>89</sup> I returned to the Bay Area in 2015 and interviewed 24 LGBTQ people in order to increase the number of nonheterosexual people in my study.<sup>90</sup> I recruited participants through online postings with LGBTQ organizations in the Bay Area, as well as through social media, utilizing the help of friends and colleagues. While I did not recruit through universities in this wave, I did require all participants to have a bachelor's degree. All of the trans and nonbinary people I interviewed identified as LGBTQ, so they are included with that group.<sup>91</sup> Descriptive information for the sample is provided in appendix 1.

The young adults I interviewed were relatively privileged. First, they were more educated than the general college-educated population, as 30 percent had completed some form of graduate school or professional

training.<sup>92</sup> The heterosexual women in the study were more highly educated than the heterosexual men, with 41 percent of the women having completed more than a bachelor's degree compared to only 28 percent of the men.<sup>93</sup> All but 15 of the respondents were employed full time (and most of those who were unemployed or employed part time were in graduate school). Seventy percent were employed in a managerial or a professional occupation. Many of those who were currently in graduate school will likely end up in professional fields. Heterosexual women's employment was on par with men's, but LGBQ people were slightly less lucratively employed, possibly due to discrimination but also to personal decisions to avoid corporate jobs. Still, most were well employed or in the process of finishing graduate school. As a result, the majority of the sample is firmly middle class or above, and the remainder will most likely end up there as they complete schooling and enter or build up careers.

Although this is a narrow slice of the population, my decision was strategic. Part of what makes the persistence of gendered dating scripts so puzzling is exactly *who* we're talking about. These are highly educated, professional-track young adults in the San Francisco Bay Area; they are supposed to be at the vanguard of progressive beliefs. The women, in particular, are expected to epitomize feminist liberation. We see media narratives of them happily forgoing relationships while they climb career ladders. Early committed relationships are often viewed as a threat to their career aspirations and are to be avoided.<sup>94</sup> As professional-track women put increased effort into their careers, remain in the workforce either longer or permanently, and make salaries similar to those of professional-track men, they bring substantial resources into their relationships, which affects their expectations and interactions.<sup>95</sup> And college-educated men are more likely than those without a college education to express support for gender equality and egalitarian relationships.<sup>96</sup> Their high status allows them more flexibility in how they enact their masculinity.<sup>97</sup> In fact, previous research shows that members of this group often position themselves as "exemplars of egalitarianism in their interpersonal relationships with women" as a way to distinguish themselves from lower-class men, to whom they attribute a predatory masculinity and hostile sexism.<sup>98</sup>

Certainly, the class and racial privileges of the majority of the respondents shaped their understanding of the relationship pathways and

opportunities available to them. Two-thirds came from middle- to upper-middle-class backgrounds. College was all but guaranteed. The four-year university is a privileged path to adulthood that structures people's beliefs about appropriate courtship. Well-educated Americans face a "self-development imperative."<sup>99</sup> They are expected to pursue career opportunities while delaying marriage until their late twenties to early thirties, when they become financially secure enough to settle down.<sup>100</sup> However, throughout, they can feel reasonably secure that conventional courtship and family-building pathways will be available to them as desired.<sup>101</sup> They can expect to have the financial and personal freedom to "date around" and have marriageable people with good careers to choose from when they decide to settle down. And they can expect marriage to come with both personal and economic rewards. Indeed, it is this group that maintains the highest rates of marriage and marital childbearing, given the stabilizing influence of economic resources on intimate relationships.<sup>102</sup>

In addition to their class and educational advantages, 59 percent of the people with whom I spoke were white. Given this intersection of class and race privilege, they viewed the workplace as a guaranteed pathway to financial stability and expected to see a steady momentum of progress in their careers. The men saw only their own motivation rather than structural barriers as a potential limitation to their achievement. Second-wave narratives of feminist empowerment resonated with the women. They worried about the glass ceiling and abortion rights, and saw the home as a potential source of constraint. They were silent on workplace policies and inequalities at play in pink- and blue-collar professions, on more communal approaches to family, or on the racist sexual narratives that make certain forms of sexual empowerment available to them but not to women of color. They planned to use their own financial resources as an individualistic strategy to handle gender inequality, rather than advocate for policies and practices that would help everyone.

But while all of the people with whom I spoke had a college degree, not all of them came from privileged backgrounds. A third described their families of origin as either poor or working class. Forty-one percent were people of color.<sup>103</sup> Given that courtship norms center the experience of class-privileged white people, these groups have historically been excluded from conventional relationship scripts and practices.<sup>104</sup> The ability to