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## **EAST EUROPEAN WOMEN AND THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES IN AMERICAN CULTURE**

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**ABSTRACT**—How do women from patriarchal cultures adapt to gender equality and feminism in the Great Plains? How do women from Eastern Europe change as a result of living in a gender-neutral environment? The study (1) identifies the major cultural differences that Eastern European women perceive between gender-related norms in Eastern Europe and the American Midwest, (2) examines the strategies that women use to cope with these differences, and (3) investigates when encounters with American feminists help and when they hinder immigrants' adaptation.

Eastern European culture is characterized by a greater separation of gender roles and little concern about sexism. Women from this region perceive male and female behavior in American culture as ambiguous and gender-neutral. They observe egalitarian gender relations in the US, but do *not* prefer the forms of male-female interaction that this involves. They adapt to US culture behaviorally but do not significantly change their values about gender relations. The negative attitude of feminist activists toward gender roles in Eastern Europe often creates resistance toward American ways and slows immigrants' adaptation.

**Key Words:** acculturation, Eastern Europe, feminism, gender, norms and values, women

### **Introduction**

This is the story of women caught in a battle in which they find it difficult to take sides. The battle of the sexes is a war fought sometimes fiercely, sometimes subtly, in boardrooms, classrooms, and living rooms across the Great Plains. American men and women do not take their place in the world for granted. Following the pioneer spirit passed on to them by their ancestors, in recent decades they have challenged the most basic assumptions about what it means to be a man and a woman in "the American

way.” Most immigrant women come from societies in which gender roles are rarely challenged. Life in the United States forces them to go beyond the realm of womanhood they have known and to venture into unfamiliar territory.

How do immigrant women from patriarchal cultures adjust to life in the Great Plains, where gender equality and feminism prevail? Do they feel that they have freedom from sexism and more social opportunities, or do they long for the female role that they left behind in their home culture? There are few places in the world where the women’s movement has been as vocal and active as in American culture. Gender equality is highly valued, and Americans believe that they have made more advances in this area than most cultures around the world (E. Kim 2001). As a result, many Americans assume that immigrant women will embrace gender equality and prefer to be women “in the American way.” Because American feminists perceive traditional women as oppressed, they seek to educate them about feminism and try to help them shed the traditional female role they were socialized to fulfill. How do immigrant women respond to American attitudes toward gender? How do they change as a result of living in a gender-neutral environment? Do encounters with American feminists help or hinder their cultural adaptation?

The goals of the study are threefold: First, to identify the major differences that Eastern European women perceive between norms that guide the behavior of women (and men) in Eastern Europe and in the Midwest. Second, to examine the strategies that Eastern European women use to cope with these differences. Third, to explore when exposure to American feminism helps and when it hinders immigrants’ adaptation. The study is part of a larger research project about the cultural adaptation of Eastern European men and women to gender-related norms in American culture. In this article I focus on women’s experience and their encounters with the “battle of the sexes” in American culture.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Cultural Adaptation and Gender-Related Norms**

The acculturation of immigrants is the subject of a growing literature (see Berry 1998 and Ward et al. 2001 for reviews). Immigrants go through a period of intense cultural adaptation after they settle in a new country. They realize that the norms of social interaction in their new home differ significantly from the norms in their culture of origin. They spend the first few years observing prevalent patterns of interaction between men and

women, children and adults, subordinates and superiors, and they learn to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate ways of behaving in the host culture. For the purposes of this study, cultural adaptation is conceptualized as the learning process that takes place when a person lives in a new cultural environment (Ward 1996; Berry 1997). Acculturation involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes (Y. Kim 2001) as well as psychological responses to these changes ranging from stress and depression to identity conflict (Zaharna 1989; Ward et al. 2001). During cultural adaptation immigrants selectively adopt certain elements of the host culture, and at the same time unlearn behaviors that are not appropriate in their new environment (Kim 1995).

Most previous research on cultural adaptation examines the role of culture-general variables, while there is a lack of research on culture-specific variables. Some culture-general studies of adaptation examine variables such as an immigrant's flexibility, preparedness for change, or motivation for migration as factors in the success or failure of acculturation (Berry 1997, 1998). Others investigate whether immigrants' level of fluency in the host culture's language affects their acculturation and explore whether watching television facilitates newcomers' communication with host nationals (Taft 1988; Nesdale and Mak 2003). There is a lack of research in the field on the acculturation of immigrants to culture-specific variables. Very few studies examine how immigrants cope with cultural differences in concrete areas of social interaction such as friendship, male-female interaction, or workplace communication in a particular host culture. We know that when immigrants enter a new culture, they gradually develop the ability to communicate effectively with host nationals and the ability to form meaningful relationships with them (Gudykunst and Hammer 1988). What we do not know is how these developments come about and how exactly immigrants change their communication patterns in order to form meaningful relationships with host nationals. The only way to find out is to explore extensively the adaptation of immigrants in a concrete area of social interaction within a specific culture.

The lack of such "domain specific studies" has been identified as a problem in the literature (Ady 1995), but very few researchers have taken a different course. My research responds to this problem directly. I explore the cultural adaptation of Eastern European immigrant women to gender-related norms in American culture because gender is one of the spheres of life in which cultural differences are most challenging for immigrants. For the purposes of the study, gender role is defined as "a set of expected behaviors and the values associated with them" (Wood 2002:53). Gender

roles guide the way men and women in a particular culture are expected to behave, talk, dress, and communicate with each other.

Although behaving in a gender-appropriate way is not an immediate need for immigrants the same way as housing or language competence, not knowing how to behave with members of the other sex may cause significant anxiety and thus make cultural adaptation more difficult and more psychologically intense. Learning appropriate male and female behavior is especially salient for young people who are forming relationships and looking for potential partners.

Rules about appropriate male and female behavior tend to be subtle, unspoken, and ambiguous. In the United States, gender norms have changed rapidly in the past 30 years, making them more difficult to articulate for Americans themselves (Wood 1996). Gender issues are widely discussed in American society, and gender equality is given significant academic and media attention, which makes accidental violations of gender-related norms more noticeable and salient. It seems that people are highly sensitive to gender issues and therefore they pick up any irregularities easily. This makes the task of immigrants more difficult because the mistakes they make are less likely to be overlooked and more likely to be punished. The prominence of sexual harassment lawsuits makes many immigrants particularly fearful of making mistakes and causes them to avoid interacting with members of the other sex outside their own ethnic group (Dimitrov 2000).

### **Eastern Europe and Gender in the Literature**

The term *Eastern Europeans* refers to individuals who were born and raised in countries of the former socialist block located in Central and Eastern Europe, including Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the Baltic Republics, and the European part of Russia. These cultures share many fundamental characteristics, and therefore immigrants from the region usually struggle with similar issues during their adaptation to American culture. Combining these cultures in one study involves some generalization, but their similarity, especially with regard to gender-related norms (Richmond 1995), makes it possible to group them together in this initial study. Pollard (1989) approached Latin American cultures in a similar way in a study of gender roles and adaptation.

Writings on Eastern Europe stress the patriarchal nature of society, in which gender roles are distinct but complementary, with apparent respect for the role of women (Richmond 1995). Gender relations in Eastern Europe

exist on two very different levels. On the one hand, the world of public institutions is patriarchal and male dominated. Even though men and women participate in the workforce in equal numbers, men receive higher salaries and hold most positions of power. On the other hand, interpersonal relations between men and women are either egalitarian or women receive preferential treatment in them. Politeness toward women is highly valued. Men are attentive to the needs of women and seek to protect them from harm. Gestures of respect such as opening the door for a woman or giving up one's seat on the bus for a woman reflect a positive attitude toward women's feminine qualities within the interpersonal realm. "Eastern Europe is still very much a man's world. Women are flattered to excess, have their hands kissed, are presented with flowers, and are given other deferential treatment, but traditional attitudes toward the female sex still prevail. Women attempting to work professionally must prove themselves before they are accepted as equals" (Richmond 1995:18). This characterization is also supported by ethnographic and sociological studies of Russian (Attwood 1990; Kerig et al. 1993; Takoosian et al. 1993; Goodwin and Emelyanova 1995), Polish (Gryzmala-Moszczyńska 1993), Slovak (Butorova 1996), and Bulgarian (Wenkett-Smollett 1989) culture.

Feminism is rarely discussed in Eastern Europe. Most East Europeans associate feminism with gender equality in the legal sense. They feel that feminism cannot have much impact on their lives because during the past 50 years socialist ideology already promoted gender equality, women worked alongside with men, and equal opportunity clauses guaranteed their rights, in some countries earlier than in the West (Rohrlich 1979), yet discrimination in the workplace still prevailed.

### **Gender Roles in American Culture**

By contrast, the American culture to which Eastern European women need to adapt is characterized by an emphasis on gender equality, by the prominence of feminism in public discourse, and by gender roles that are less easily distinguished than in Eastern Europe (Denmark et al. 1993; Althen et al. 2003). Most feminist research in the United States is based on the assumption that treating men and women differently has a detrimental effect on both individuals and on society (Wood 2002). Efforts are being made to decrease the presence of gender in professional interactions and to avoid sexism, the discriminatory treatment of women. As a result of feminism, changes took place in notions about what is considered feminine and masculine, and in what is appropriate work for men and for women. Women

strive to become more assertive and to enter formally male-dominated areas of life (Hofstede 1998). Gender-neutral use of language is expected in public and professional interaction (Lakoff 1975; Murphy and Zorn 1996). It is important to note, however, that these developments are relatively recent in American culture; male and female spheres of life were more separate in American culture until recently (Wood 1996).

This study focuses on the experiences of immigrant women in Minnesota. While regional cultural variation exists within the United States, immigrants are likely to encounter similar gender dynamics in other parts of the country, including in the Great Plains, for two reasons. First, Eastern European women's descriptions of gender relations in Minnesota are highly consistent with the literature on American gender norms in general (Bennett and Stewart 1991; Denmark et al. 1993; Murphy and Zorn 1996; E. Kim 2001; Wood 2002). For example, while discussing male-female relationships and equality in American culture, Gary Althen describes the reaction of foreigners to "gender neutrality," which the vast majority of Eastern European women in the study echoed precisely:

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. . . . The idea that males and females can interact with each other in a manner that does not involve gender differences seems unrealistic and even bizarre to many foreign visitors, especially to those who come from places where male-female differences dictate aspects of the social order. (2003:174)

The same difficulties that Eastern European women described in their adaptation to egalitarian gender norms in Minnesota have been noted in the experience of refugees from around the world in Nebraska (Pipher 2002), Nuer refugees in Minnesota (Holtzman 2000), Russian immigrants in Utah (Dimitrov 2004), and in the relationships of Russian-American couples from coast to coast (Visson 2001).

Second, values and norms in the Great Plains are similar to values and norms in the rest of American culture, particularly with regard to gender roles. For decades, it was assumed that gender roles in the Great Plains were more conservative than in the rest of the country. Recent research has shown, however, that the evolution of gender patterns, sexual behavior, and family structure are neither significantly more conservative nor slower to change in the Great Plains than in other parts of the US (Bailey 1999;

Peterson 1999). In addition, values that are central in the lives of American women and men nationwide, such as egalitarianism, self-reliance, and individualism (E. Kim 2001), are also salient in the culture of the Great Plains (Schweider 2002).

### Methods

A qualitative, exploratory approach was used in this study. The sample consisted of nine Eastern European women living in Minnesota. Average length of residence in the United States was four years; actual lengths ranged from two to nine years. Participants' countries of origin included Hungary (3), Bulgaria (2), Belarus (1), Albania (1), Bosnia (1), and Croatia (1). Four participants were married, four single, and one divorced. The mean age was 29, ranging from 22 to 45 years. One participant came to the United States as an immigrant, one as a refugee, while seven originally came as students but then changed their status and immigrated. Four years after the initial data collection, all are still in the United States.

**Data Collection.** Extensive, face-to-face interviews were conducted and audiotaped with the participants. Six interviews were conducted in English and three in Hungarian when that language was the shared native language of the interviewees and the researcher. The latter were translated and transcribed into English by a professional translator. Participants responded to three groups of questions. First, they were asked to describe the differences they perceived between male-female interactions in East European and American culture. Second, they were asked to describe the ways in which they changed and adapted to the norms of the host culture, and third, they were asked about the way these changes affected their self-perception and discussed the way they felt about the changes they had to make.

**Data Analysis.** Data analysis took place in two steps. First, transcripts were coded for themes using the principles of theme analysis described by Kvale (1996). This step entailed looking for categories and themes in the interview texts and marking them for further interpretation. The themes I looked for in this stage reflected the research questions, which revolved around behavioral adaptation, coping strategies, and descriptions of male and female behavior in the two cultures. In the second stage of the analysis axial coding was used to identify themes that emerged from the text within the categories identified in the first stage (Strauss and Corbin 1990). First, all the sub-themes that appeared within the main categories were identified, labeled,



and separately listed. The most frequently discussed themes, mentioned by at least half of the participants, were then selected to be included in the analysis.

**Validity and Reliability.** Several measures were taken to establish the validity of the study. First, a face-to-face interview provides a good opportunity to validate the researcher's interpretation of the data with the participants during the interview itself through paraphrasing, probing, and follow-up questions (Kvale 1996). Second, care was taken to assure the accuracy of transcription (Brislin 1980). Third, after the analysis was completed, several participants read and discussed the interpretation of the material, a form of validation called "member checking" (Lincoln and Guba 1985). During the first round of coding, a second coder categorized approximately 10% of the data in order to establish the reliability of the categories. Inter-coder reliability was 88%. This method, also known as inter-rater reliability in quantitative research (Judd et al. 1991) or peer review in qualitative research (Creswell 1998), provides an external check of the research process to assure that two independent observers agree in their assessment of the categories. This check "is usually measured by the percentage of scored units on which observers agree" (Judd et al. 1991).

## Results

Participants vividly describe the challenges of moving from a patriarchal culture to an egalitarian society. Most appear knowledgeable about gender issues in American culture and are open toward their new culture. All are very fluent in English and can communicate with Americans well. On the following pages I will first give a brief overview of gender relations in Eastern Europe, then discuss participants' perception of gender-related norms in America, address participants' encounters with feminism, and finally, describe the ways in which they change in order to cope with life in a gender-neutral environment.

### Gender Roles in Eastern Europe

Participants describe the position of women in Eastern Europe as ambiguous. Women receive preferential treatment in some situations while they are discriminated against in others. Participants' description of gender dynamics in Eastern Europe is dominated by two themes: the validation of women's identity in everyday interaction through politeness and the clear separation of male and female roles.

All of the participants describe their home culture as patriarchal. Patriarchy usually evokes an image of dominant men and submissive women, but in Eastern Europe this is not entirely the case. While men are dominant in many situations, deference toward women is also common. As the participants explain, gestures of respect and attention toward women can be found in all the countries of the region. For example, men open the door for women and allow them to walk through first. A man who does not do so is considered rude and uneducated. In winter, men help women take their coat on or off, particularly when visiting or going out. If they give a woman a ride, men first open the car door for her, help her in, close the door, and then get in themselves. Men offer their hand to women friends and family members for support as they get off the bus and give them the more comfortable seat. When men and women go out together, men pay the bill and walk nearer to the street on a sidewalk to protect women from traffic. Men also help women carry heavy luggage, offer help with any other difficult physical tasks, and they are also expected to greet women first.

Some western feminists argue that men open doors for a woman because they assume that she is weak and cannot do it for herself. East European women emphasize that in their culture such gestures of politeness are a sign of respect accorded not only to women, but also to those of higher status. The same expressions of respect may be used by a student toward his or her professor or by a child toward her parent. As a Bulgarian woman sums it up: "Women are treated like flowers, but are respected for their strengths." Participants explain that these gestures of attention make women feel appreciated and noticed. Women expect and accept such privileged treatment, and bask in the sunshine of attention whenever they can:

I won't refuse to be a woman in any way. On the contrary, I insist to be treated in a certain way, and I think I deserve it. You cannot have a man walking next to me and I'm carrying something heavy, and he comes and asks me to carry it and I would say, "No, I'll carry it, because you know, I wanna show you that I'm as strong as you." Give me a break! Of course he will carry it. He is three hundred pounds more than me, he has muscles that are . . . Why should I carry it? And if he comes, boy, I appreciate it! (Bulgaria, age 35, 6 years in the US)

Even though these expressions of politeness seem trivial, they fulfill a very important role in the culture because they validate gender identities of women in everyday life. Men treat women with distinction, and this allows them to fulfill the appropriate masculine role. Women invite such politeness

by behaving in a feminine way, and when they accept privileged treatment they fulfill the appropriate feminine role. The validation of femininity that these gestures provide is one of the things that East European women miss most after moving to the United States. They feel unnoticed and unappreciated without them. Many women also miss compliments about their physical appearance, which are common and are not regarded as sexist in Eastern Europe.

Gender roles in Eastern Europe are separate, and as a Bosnian woman put it, people “want to keep it that way.” In essence, men and women play on different teams and follow different rules. Different norms guide their behavior and there is a strong belief in inherent differences between the sexes physically and emotionally. The sphere of physical differences, however, is very clearly separated from the intellectual sphere, in which no gender differences are assumed:

The way Yugoslavian society sees women and men is as two separate genders. They don't really try to blend masculinity and femininity and put it into one category. They want it to stay separate . . . and you have to be gender distinguished all the time. (Bosnia, age 22, 4 years in the US)

Gender separation in Eastern Europe means that men and women bring a unique perspective to every task and that these perspectives complement each other:

Bulgarian society remains a very traditional society in many ways, but I think that women are quite liberated there, and I think that it has to do with this cultural notion that women bring certain things to certain areas that men cannot. And men respect this and they love it, and it seems to me that they believe that without this sense of woman in certain things, from government to the shopping mall, they just can't survive without women. (Bulgaria, age 35, 6 years in the US)

Two-thirds of the participants agree with this view; only one Croatian participant feels that women's contribution is not recognized adequately in her country: “So coming here, I felt more at home here with respect to gender than back home. . . . We always talked about all kinds of equality, but you could see quite clearly that there was a big gap.” (Croatia, age 28, 9 years in the US)

When interviewees note inequalities between men and women, they usually pertain to the participation of women in politics, differences in salary levels, or to their larger share of household work, but not to inequalities in interpersonal communication between men and women. Several participants note that even though men dominate public life, in the private realm of the family women have a significant amount of power and make the majority of the decisions for the family. To illustrate this, they cite a proverb that is well known in Bulgaria, Bosnia, Albania, and Belarus: “The man is the head of the family, the woman is the neck, and when the neck moves, the head moves.”

### **Eastern Europeans’ Perception of Male-Female Interaction in America**

Eastern European women find it difficult to decipher gender-related norms in American culture. When asked about their perception of gender in America, their answers revolve around five main themes: gender-neutral relationships, competition between men and women, female assertiveness, sexual harassment, and feminism.

East European women feel that in the US gender lines are blurred and the behaviors of men and women are very similar to each other. They are not always able to distinguish between men and women based on appearance, manners, or conversation. They notice that American colleagues at their workplaces carefully avoid discussing gender differences in order to stay in the “neutral zone.” From the East European perspective, acknowledging the differences between men and women makes conversations come alive, even if there is no romantic interest between a man and a woman. Gender-neutral treatment “sterilizes” relationships between male and female colleagues, and as a result East Europeans often lose interest in interacting with American colleagues of the other sex. At the same time, participants acknowledge that Americans are very skilled at such gender-neutral relationships, and women are indeed treated in a more equal way than in their home culture. That is, East Europeans see egalitarian gender relations in the US as successful, but not desirable for their own lives.

The competitive relationship between men and women in the US so vividly described by the phrase “battle of the sexes” puzzles many participants. While in Eastern Europe men and women are dominant in their own separate realms and do not really interfere with each other, American men and women do not take the separate realms for granted. Instead, participants feel that there is an ongoing “power struggle” in which American men and women seek to define and redefine their realms of influence.

East European women perceive American men as less masculine than men in Eastern Europe, because they are not as attentive to women's needs. Eastern European women perceive American women as more assertive than they are, and they feel that American women "try to be like men," "boss men around" (Albania, age 22), "try to dominate a lot," "dress like men" (Bulgaria, age 35), and "expect to be treated the same way as guys" (Hungary, age 23). At the same time, participants note that American women are self-confident and are good at making decisions. Most East European women feel resistance toward the assertive female role in American culture, and this resistance stems primarily from negative associations with such a role during the time of communism, when women were pronounced equal but could only participate in public life if they behaved like men:

During the Soviet culture, a businesswoman—if she had a position, she had to behave like a man. I didn't like loud voices of women shouting or advocating communist ideas from the stage, and always appreciated women who could stay as a woman but stay strong and expressive enough. (Belarus, age 45, 2.5 years in the US)

Participants note the prominence of discourse about sexism and sexual harassment in American culture. They sense an ever-present fear of misunderstanding in American workplaces and notice that Americans pay special attention to avoid any references to gender that may be interpreted as sexist. "Men don't see women at work, they are afraid to look at a person who is female," says a woman from Belarus (age 45, 2.5 years in the US). As a result, interactions with coworkers often become, as participants refer to it, "sterile," "cautious," and "impersonal." Such communication is characterized by an avoidance of personal issues and discourse routines, which make the interaction more predictable.

### **Encounters with Feminism**

Encounters with feminists and discussions about feminism add an extra hurdle to the already difficult task of Eastern European women's adaptation. These encounters often take place between immigrants and American women who describe themselves as feminist activists, feminist researchers, or students of feminism. During conversations between immigrant women and feminists, divergent perceptions about the goals of feminism often result in misunderstanding and conflict. Some Eastern Europeans first encounter feminism in the United States, others are familiar with its

main ideas before their arrival. One would assume that women from a patriarchal culture would welcome the freedom that the achievements of the women's movement bring them, but with Eastern Europeans this is not the case.

Eastern European women approach the relationship between men and women from a perspective similar to cultural feminism (Osmond and Thorne 1993; Wood 2002). They strongly believe in equality for men and women in the legal sense. At the same time, they accept male-female differences in communication style, division of labor, and gender roles as an important part of their culture and expect men and women to be treated differently in social interaction. The American women they encounter often advocate a liberal feminist position (Osmond and Thorne 1993; Wood 2002) and argue that men and women are alike and should be treated the same way in every respect. Hofstede (1998) notes that in cultures that value assertiveness, like the United States, the goal of feminist movements is to help women enter formerly male-dominated spheres of life. This description is consistent with the goals of liberal feminism (Osmond and Thorne 1993). By contrast, in the cultures of Eastern Europe, which are oriented toward nurturing rather than assertiveness, the goal of the few existing feminist efforts is to encourage men to adopt some of the values related to nurturance that women hold (Hofstede 1998).

Because of their different interpretation of feminism, the majority of the Eastern European participants acknowledge the advances toward gender equality in the United States, but have reservations about embracing feminism—particularly liberal feminism—for several reasons. First, some participants believe that promoting gender equality means giving up women's femininity. They feel that American women "pay a high price for being equal," and by being treated the same way as men, they no longer have as many privileges as women in Eastern Europe do. Second, feminism reminds many of them of the Soviet era, when women were pronounced formally equal but were discriminated against in reality. As a Belorussian woman explains: "I lived under the Soviet system, I know what does it mean to be equal in terms of the constitution, [and] I don't want such equality." "The communists tried making everyone gender equal but it didn't work," adds a woman from Hungary (age 26, 4 years in the US). Third, East European women cannot identify with what they perceive to be the goals of liberal feminism—equal participation of men and women in the workforce—because in Eastern Europe men and women have already been working side by side for 50 years under communism.

Bulgarian women have worked outside of the home forever. They are perfectly aware of their abilities to function in public. And probably this long history of being able to work—I think we can thank the communists for that—has kind of eased the relationship [between men and women], because both men and women had a chance to observe each other in public. When I was little, I knew only one, I swear, only *one* woman who stayed at home and cared for her three children, and this was such an unusual case that my mother and her friends used to discuss it for hours. (Bulgaria, 34, 5 years in the US)

Finally, the examples of feminism that most immigrants encounter or notice are its extreme forms. During conversations with individuals who aggressively advocate feminism without accurate knowledge of the cultural context of gender relations in other countries, Eastern European women are repeatedly told that they are oppressed by men even if they do not feel that way, and they are reproached for their acceptance of politeness from men. Given that a commitment to “end unjust subordination” of women lies at the heart of feminism, and that “feminists want not only to know about the world, but also to change it” (Osmond and Thorne 1993:592-93), this attitude is neither surprising nor uncommon. Its effects on the adaptation of immigrant women are considerable.

At least four participants of this study encountered American coworkers whose judgmental attitude toward Eastern European culture created a backlash and increased their resistance toward the host culture:

And I had this argument, with [an American woman] recently. I was trying to explain to her that I am an educated person, I come from a very liberal background, I certainly read a lot of stuff about feminism. . . . The misunderstanding between me and her comes at a point where she refuses to realize that I feel my mind, my body, I’m free as a bird. I want my rights, my civil rights. I, however, do not insist in bearing arms, on being asked to do things that I do not enjoy.

And I tried to tell to her that the feminist movement in Bulgaria is not as popular as it is here precisely because of some history of gender relations, precisely because they are quite different than gender relations in the United States. She jumped from her chair, and she declared that I was not correct, and that the movement, the feminist movement in Eastern Europe is very strong. . . . I’ve read

many feminist writings and it seems to me that they equate their experience with women throughout the world.

[She implied] that I wasn't understanding what American feminism was about. I think I perfectly understand. And the other thing that struck me was her aggressive attitude. We weren't discussing at a point. She was patronizing. She was telling me that I don't understand. And I think I do understand. And I backed up, and I thought it was not worth it, because she wasn't listening to me. (Bulgaria, 35, 6 years in the US)

During such debates, Eastern Europeans' cultural identity and gender identity was challenged, and at times invalidated by the individuals they encountered. The negative attitudes of feminists slow immigrant women's adaptation because they feel that if members of the host culture are so unwilling to recognize the validity of Eastern European culture, then they should not accept American norms either. Incidents like the one above hamper communication in general and create a resistance toward host culture norms and values.

### **Adaptation Strategies**

East European women try to adapt to the gender-neutral ways of the new culture, but the task is difficult. The four most prominent themes in participants' description of adaptation are (1) accounts of their learning from misunderstandings, (2) caution and avoidance, (3) the difference between their public and private world, and (4) the sense of invisibility they experience because their feminine identity is less frequently reinforced in everyday interaction. I address each of these themes in turn below.

Immigrants learn about gender-related norms in America through trial, error, and misunderstandings. In Eastern Europe, asking questions about others' likes and dislikes, emotions, and political views is acceptable in casual conversation. In the United States, such topics are sometimes considered too personal and are therefore off limits between coworkers and acquaintances. Until immigrant women learn about this norm, they ask personal questions from American men, who often think that the women are flirting with them.

A number of misunderstandings result from different interpretations of touch in the two cultures, and as a result 80 percent of the participants describe changes in their use of touch. In Eastern Europe, people occasionally touch each other on the arm or shoulder during conversation for emphasis or to express empathy. In the US, casual touch is often interpreted by men



as a sign of liking or flirting. As a result the women become cautious around American men and avoid the use of touch during conversation with men entirely. At first they think that they can relax among American women and greet a friend with a kiss on the cheek as they do back home, but then they realize that they are mistakenly identified as lesbian. The same happens when Eastern European women walk hand in hand with female relatives or friends, a practice that is still common in Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania.

At first, East European women expect the same gestures of respect from men in America that they are used to in their home countries. They assume that they have the right of way when going through a door next to a man, but after they bump into men several times, they learn not to take this right for granted. They also learn that they cannot expect privileged treatment from male coworkers, and they get used to paying for themselves when they go out with someone. Many explain that their expectations toward male politeness become lower and they no longer wait for men to open the door for them.

The majority of immigrants cope with misunderstandings through caution and avoidance. They seek to avoid cultural misunderstandings by becoming more gender-neutral and more impersonal. One woman from Belarus (age 45, 2.5 years in the US) describes checking the language of her e-mails five times before she sends them to American men in order to make sure that she does not sound too familiar, because earlier someone broke off contact with her, possibly for this reason. They also avoid touch, gender-specific topics in conversation, and sometimes they avoid interacting with American men altogether.

Though the primary coping strategy is avoidance, two of the married women in the group tried to communicate about gender issues openly and received a positive response. They noticed that some American coworkers who were very cautious in cross-gender interactions with other Americans gradually became more open with them exactly because they openly expressed their views about gender roles:

With many (male) co-workers I have an excellent relationship, and we talk about stuff that they don't talk about with other women. They think I'm more predictable in a way, and they are comfortable with my views, because I want to be treated as a woman. (Bulgaria, age 34, 5 years in the US)

East European women have to change their behavior significantly in order to conform to American norms. Behavioral change does not, however,

bring along a change in their attitudes toward the female role. They emphasize the skills they learn and use “in public” to meet environmental demands, but they clearly separate the new behaviors from the “private world” of their family in which their values about gender remain the same:

I’m residing in a foreign culture, [so] I have to respect certain things that are going on in this culture. Not because I believe in the ideology that defines these relationships, or not because I’m accepting everything that is going on. . . . I know what I can do and what I cannot do, definitely. But I do it in public. In private, my attitudes or the way I conduct myself hasn’t changed. (Bulgaria, age 35, 6 years in the US)

The separation of the public and private world is particularly clear among married women. They find refuge from the ambiguity of American gender relations in their family home, during the time they spend with their Eastern European spouses and friends. In these interactions their role is more predictable and their femininity is reinforced in familiar ways.

I enjoy certain activities. Why I enjoy them, I don’t know. Their assumption is that if I do cooking every day, I necessarily do it because I’m pressured by my husband. On the contrary, I enjoy to cook for him, and my favorite part of the day is when I serve the meal and we sit next to each other and we talk. I’m not pushed to do it, I’m not pressured to do it, I do it with pleasure, and I don’t want to give it up. (Bulgaria, age 35, 6 years in the US)

East European women gain strength from these predictable interactions within the family, and are then able to cope with the uncertainty that is an inherent part of communicating with Americans at work during the day. Single women, who cannot rely on the family as a support network, seek reinforcement from their friendships either with other Eastern Europeans or with individuals from other cultures who hold similar beliefs about appropriate male-female communication, such as Latin Americans, people from southern and western Europe or Americans with extensive overseas experience. In these relationships, the women feel that they do not have to worry about misunderstandings and that they can enjoy communicating without being cautious all the time.

The psychological price of living in a foreign culture is high, even after immigrant women learn to interact with American men without misunder-

standings. Because people behave in a gender-neutral way in most public interactions in America, East European women feel that part of their feminine identity is *invisible* or has to be hidden (Paige 1993). They dress in a more informal and less feminine way when they are with Americans, because when they *do* dress and behave “like an East European woman,” others around them seem intimidated and interact with them less. Shutting part of their femininity out makes them feel guilty, depressed, and uncomfortable:

I simply I feel like part of my personality is trapped on some bed or I am strapped to the chair. I am sitting in the class and I feel that I cannot be myself. I cannot appear in a way that I really am, naturally, because the expectation that you shouldn't be too personal and you shouldn't be too feminine. (Hungary, age 22, 2 years in the US)

Even when immigrant women master the art of neutrality, they feel constrained by their newly acquired persona. It is a role they play or a mask that they wear to shield themselves from the consequences of misunderstandings or disapproval. Using metaphors to describe their experience, one woman talks about being like a chameleon that changes color to adapt to its environment; another describes wearing a costume in order to be accepted in the new culture:

I try to be myself, but I don't want to scare them with who I am, so first I put on their mask . . . the Minnesota nice . . . and when I enter a class or group I look around and survey the territory, and when there are a couple of people with whom I can make friends, with whom we are on the same wavelength, then I take off the costume layer by layer. (Hungary, age 22, 2 years in the US)

That's why it is hard for me to date somebody, because I feel I have to be the man of the relationship. (Bosnia, age 22, 4 years in the US)

Because of misunderstandings, many women become overly cautious and perhaps “keep the mask on” longer than it is necessary, thus making their own adaptation slower and more difficult.

### Discussion

Every individual needs validation, particularly during an intercultural experience when her cultural assumptions are frequently questioned

(Zaharna 1989; Hoffman 1990). Every individual also has a need to reduce the uncertainty in their environment and make the behavior of those around them predictable (Gudykunst and Hammer 1988). Immigrants fulfill these needs in two main ways: either through active adaptation or through withdrawal. In the first case, they learn to behave according to host-culture norms and develop meaningful relationships with host nationals. During this process they are able to predict the behavior of host-culture members, and they come to be accepted as members of the host community. In the second case, they avoid interacting with people whose behavior they cannot predict and turn to other immigrants from the same culture. They seek validation within their family and ethnic community and withdraw from the host culture. In the intercultural literature, withdrawal is clearly categorized as nonadaptation or maladaptation (Ady 1995; Kim 1995; Berry 1998). Both types of strategies are present among East European women. The particular choice of strategy depends on two main factors: on their knowledge of host-culture norms regarding gender, and on the degree of negative attitude that they encounter toward their home culture (Paige 1993).

The more accurate immigrants' knowledge of American culture is, the better they are able to adjust to life in a gender-neutral environment. Interestingly, the women who have the most knowledge about gender norms in the host culture, and who are most competent in communicating with Americans, are the ones who struggle most with the psychological effects of acculturation. The two participants who were largely oblivious of gender differences between Eastern Europe and the United States experienced little psychological difficulty, whereas those who could describe US gender norms in detail reported stress, identity conflict (Zaharna 1989), and a sense of invisibility (Paige 1993). The women who have more knowledge of gender norms in the United States struggle with decisions about how to behave toward, talk to, and relate to people, and about who exactly they are as women, because they are familiar with the expectations of both cultures, and those expectations often contradict one another. The process of having to sort out such gender issues makes these women better at communicating smoothly with Americans. The art of smooth, gender-neutral interaction is a skill that they acquire but do not prefer.

Negative attitudes demonstrated by host-culture members may significantly increase the psychological intensity of newcomers' adaptation (Paige 1993), and some of the liberal feminist attitudes that participants encountered exemplify this effect. Immigrants who do not encounter negative attitudes toward their home culture adapt better and are more open toward accepting host-culture norms than those who do encounter negative atti-

tudes. In this sample, such negative attitudes were most often voiced by feminist activists. The feminist activists that participants of the study encountered evaluated gender norms in Eastern Europe from the perspective of their feminist ideology and declared that the gender situation in Eastern Europe was “wrong” and therefore in need of correction. Although evaluating a set of norms would not by itself hinder immigrants’ acculturation, what made these feminist activists hinder the adaptation of immigrant women was that they failed to acknowledge the validity of a cultural gender system that was different from their own, and that they often claimed to know gender relations in Eastern Europe better than Eastern Europeans themselves. This lack of respect for their home culture created more resistance in Eastern European women’s adaptation than most other cultural misunderstandings related to gender combined. It caused several participants to choose avoidance as an adaptation strategy, and made them acutely aware of the gap between behavioral adaptation and value change. As a result of encounters with feminism, several of the women decided that they would maintain East European values and attitudes toward gender and conform to American norms of female behavior only when absolutely necessary.

In essence, instead of joining the battle of the sexes, East European women in the United States tend to withdraw and become spectators. Watching from the sidelines, they find comfort in the fact that in their world men and women play on different teams, by different rules. They draw strength from their interactions with their East European spouses, friends, and male family members in which their female identity is validated in a familiar way. They watch American men and women compete against each other and negotiate new rules, and when they join the game, they play cautiously and conservatively.

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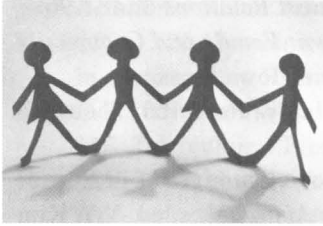
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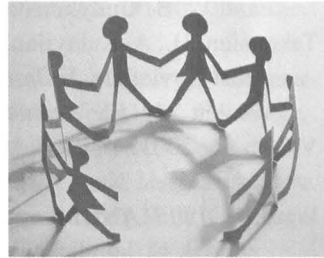




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