

## **Young Singles' Contemporary Dating Scripts<sup>1</sup>**

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*Single women's and men's scripts for a hypothetical and actual first date were investigated for a sample of 135 predominately white undergraduates. Strong scripts were found for both. Hypothetical scripts contained 19 actions for women and men; actual dates consisted of 20 actions for women and 15 for men. Hypothetical scripts constituted a core action sequence that were embellished upon in actual dates. Gender-typed actions were evidenced as strongly for actual dates as hypothetical ones. A proactive male role and a reactive female role were reflected in script content as well as quantitative measures. Actual dates also were characterized by numerous interruptions of the hypothesized sequence.*

Sexual scripts refer to the cognitive models that people use to guide and evaluate social and sexual interactions (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). A script is defined as "a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him as either a participant or an observer" (Abelson, 1976, p. 33). Scripts vary in strength and the extent to which they are shared by others. According to script theory, people typically pattern their social responses in order to maximize their control over a given situation. This requires each person to be able to imagine a script or stereotyped event sequence for past, present, and future behavior (Abelson, 1981).

The fundamentals of sexual scripts, particularly gender roles, are acquired during childhood and adolescence (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Stereo-

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typed gender role postures designate the male role as taking possession of the object of desire and the female role to be serving as the object of desire (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). These roles are expressed by men assuming the proactive role in initiating sex and women adopting the reactive or "gatekeeper" role by resisting or refusing sexual advances (Cate & Lloyd, 1988).

Evidence indicates that traditional gender roles continue to define courtship today. Grauerholz and Serpe (1985) reported that in romantic relationships, men were significantly more comfortable than women at exercising proactive power, defined as the ability to initiate sexual intercourse and maintain sexual autonomy. Women were more comfortable utilizing reactive power, or behaviors occurring in response to an actor's initiation and involving resistance or refusal of these attempts. This reluctance to initiate by women may result from the fact that gender role violations have negative consequences. Women who ask men for dates tend to be viewed negatively (Green & Sandos, 1983). Muehlenhard and MacNaughton (1988) also found that students viewed a woman as more responsible for being raped if she initiated physical contact on a date (e.g., kissed her date, put his hand on her knee) than if she did not initiate contact.

The female role as the object of desire reinforces an emphasis on physical appearance among women. Men are more concerned about a potential partner's appearance than are women (Davis, 1990; Green, Buchanan, & Heuer, 1984). Weight is one prominent aspect of a woman's appearance. In interpersonal contexts women are judged more by their weight than are men (Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1988). Women also are judged by how much they eat; those who eat lightly are perceived more positively than women who eat a larger meal (Basow & Kobrynowicz, 1990). Thus, concern about their appearance is likely to be part of women's sexual scripts.

Gender roles are believed to be more salient earlier in a relationship because, during the initiation phase, individuals rely on socially defined roles to guide behavior; also, relationship continuation often depends on the adequate fulfillment of these roles (Levinger, 1983; Levinger & Snoek, 1972). Research supports this suggestion that gender roles indeed are more operative early in courtship than at later stages, especially for young adults. McCabe and Collins (1984) found that men between the ages of 16 and 25 desired significantly higher levels of sexual activity on a first date than women in the same age group; however, both desired similar levels of sexual activity after several dates or when going steady. Roche (1986) also reported men to be more permissive in their attitudes as to what is proper sexual behavior than women in the early stages of dating, but the gender

difference in sexual conduct disappeared at the stage of "dating one person only and being in love" (Roche, 1986).

Research by Rose and Frieze (1989) further supports the idea that behavior is highly scripted early in dating, particularly along gender lines. Young adults' descriptions of a hypothetical "typical" first date were found to constitute a strong script (Rose & Frieze, 1989). First, high agreement was found among participants for 27 actions associated with a man's script and 19 actions explicitly defining a woman's script. Also, 14 actions were common to both scripts. Second, a proactive male role and reactive female role were readily apparent, consistent with what had been outlined as stereotypical male and female roles in dating (McCormick & Jesser, 1983). Scripts for men were longer than women's and involved more self-directed actions, including asking for and planning the date, driving, initiating and paying for date activities, and initiating physical contact. Prescribed actions for a woman's script more often were reactive, specifying that she wait to be asked for a date, be concerned about appearance, keep the conversation going, and reject physical contact. These results indicate that male dominance and control of dating are expected by young adults on a first date. Whether these expectations are congruent with actual behavior remains to be determined.

The hypothetical scripts found by Rose and Frieze (1989) represent cultural scripts, i.e., collectively developed scenarios that serve to instruct in the requirements of specific roles (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). A second level of scripting pertains to the actual behaviors of individuals. Interpersonal scripts are believed to represent the individual's use of cultural scripts in a specific situation (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Whether hypothetical (cultural) and actual (interpersonal) scripts actually do correspond is the question addressed in this research. Although little is known about how scripts function as performative structures (Ginsburg, 1988), some predictions can be made based on script theory.

First, theoretically, hypothetical scripts serve as general action sequences for guiding events. As such, they probably encompass a smaller range of actions than actual scripts. Thus, hypothetical scripts were expected to include fewer actions than actual scripts, both in terms of total number of different actions used to describe the event and in terms of script length. Second, given that gender roles constituted a very strong script for hypothetical dates, they were expected also to be present for actual dates. Reactive actions were predicted to be used more to describe women's scripts, proactive ones to be more common in men's. Third, in real life, script interruptions, or unexpected actions, may sometimes occur, disrupting the hypothesized sequence and requiring individuals to create

new action sequences (Schank & Abelson, 1987). Hence, actual scripts were expected to contain interruptions.

A second question about hypothetical vs. actual scripts has to do with their impact on each other. Greater experience with an event may result both in more well-developed hypothetical scripts and/or greater freedom to modify them. Rose and Frieze (1989) reported that daters with more experience identified more script actions and emphasized gender roles more than inexperienced daters. It was hypothesized in the present study that a similar relationship would exist between actual date scripts and dating experience.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Undergraduates (74 women and 61 men) were recruited from introductory psychology classes at a large midwestern public university to participate in the study. The sample was predominantly white (90.3%); the remaining 9.7 percent ( $N = 13$ ) were African-American. Women and men were about the same age ( $M = 19.5$ ) and had similar amounts of dating experience [ $M = 3.1$  on a 5-point scale, ranging from (1) *none at all* to (5) *quite extensive*].

### *Procedure*

Participants' responses to the two following scenarios were elicited. The presentation of the scenarios was counterbalanced. Descriptions of a hypothetical date for a same-gender target requested the following:

We are interested in the events which occur during a first date. List the actions which a woman (man) would typically do as she (he) prepared for a first date with someone new, then met her (his) date, spent time during the date, and ended the date. Include at least 20 actions or events which would occur in a routine first date, putting them in the order in which they would occur.

Participants also were asked to describe an actual first date:

Describe the most recent first date you have had, using 20 actions or events to explain what you did on the date, from beginning to end.

Lastly, participants were asked to rate the extent of their own dating experience.

### *Coding*

A total of 47 script actions was used to code participants' responses. Thirty-two of the actions were identified by Rose and Frieze (1989) as part of hypothetical scripts. Fifteen new actions were added to encompass behaviors occurring in actual date scripts. Each action was coded as initiated either by self or partner. A random selection of 25% of the scenarios also was coded by a second rater; interrater reliability was 81%. The number of participants citing each action was counted. A script was defined as consisting of those actions mentioned by more than 25% of the participants for each scenario, following Bower, Black, and Turner (1979) and Rose and Frieze (1989). Bower et al., argued that if 1/4 of people spontaneously mention an action, it can be inferred that this action is part of a consensual script.

## RESULTS

As expected, hypothetical scripts included fewer actions than actual ones as assessed by the number of action codes required to classify each. As mentioned above, 15 additional actions were required to describe actual dates, including meet at friend's/work/office, pick up friends (e.g., double date), talk to friends, take friends home, share expenses, drink alcohol, don't eat too much, have something go wrong, violate gender/social rules, decide to accept or reject physical contact, fail to initiate physical contact, make out, have sex, stay with date overnight, and have another date. However, contrary to prediction, mean length of hypothetical and actual scripts did not differ ( $M = 18.3$  and  $18.2$  actions, respectively).

For hypothetical dates, 19 actions met the 25% criteria for inclusion in a woman's date script. Sixteen were initiated by the woman, 3 by the man (see Table I). Nineteen actions comprised the hypothetical date script for a man; all were initiated by the man. Five actions for a woman (GROOM AND DRESS; BE NERVOUS; Man: PICK UP DATE; TALK, GO TO SHOW) and eight for a man (WORRY ABOUT APPEARANCE; PICK UP DATE; MEET PARENTS; TALK, GO TO SHOW; EAT; TAKE DATE HOME; KISS GOODNIGHT) formed the "main conceptualization" or core of the hypothetical script, defined by Bower et al. (1979) as being those actions cited spontaneously by 50% or more of participants.

Eleven actions shown in bold type in Table I were identical for the woman and man target, most having to do with concern about appearance before the date, interacting on the date, and the goodbye ritual. The re-

maining actions for a woman and man fit the expected gender stereotypes. A woman was described as responding to the man's behavior (e.g., wait for and welcome date, accept or reject date's moves); in contrast, a man's actions were primarily self-directed (e.g., decide what to do, open doors, make out).

Actual date scripts for women consisted of 20 actions, of which 6 were initiated by the man (see Table I). Men's actual first dates included 15 actions; none were initiated by the woman. Four actions for a woman's date (TALKED; WENT TO SHOW; ATE; WENT HOME) and six for a man's (PICKED UP DATE; TALKED; WENT TO SHOW; ATE; TOOK DATE HOME; KISSED DATE GOODNIGHT) formed the core of the date script.

Ten actions were shared by both hypothetical and actual scripts, including actions done together (pick up date; leave; confirm plans; talk, laugh or joke; go to the movies or date event; eat; drink alcohol) and the closing sequence with a ritual good-night kiss. Again, the remaining actions followed gender roles. Women's scripts were more reactive (e.g., evaluate date); men's were proactive (e.g., picking up the date, initiating sexual contact, make out). One action expected to occur in women's scripts, "don't

**Table I.** First Date Scripts for Hypothetical and Actual Dates Based on Actions Mentioned by 25% of Participants Per Script<sup>a</sup>

Hypothetical date	
Woman's script	Man's script
	Ask for date
	Decide what to do
	<b>WORRY ABOUT APPEARANCE</b>
	Prepare car, apartment
	<b>PICK UP DATE</b>
	<b>MEET PARENTS/ROOMMATES</b>
	Courteous behavior (open door)
	<b>Leave</b>
	<b>Confirm plans</b>
	<b>Get to know and evaluate date</b>
	<b>TALK, JOKE, LAUGH</b>
	<b>EAT</b>
	Pay
	Make out
	<b>TAKE DATE HOME</b>
	Ask for another date
	<b>KISS GOODNIGHT</b>
	<b>Go home</b>
Man: Tell friends and family	
<b>GROOM AND DRESS<sup>b</sup></b>	
<b>BE NERVOUS</b>	
<b>Worry about appearance<sup>c</sup></b>	
Wait for date	
Man: <b>PICK UP DATE</b>	
Welcome date to home	
Introduce to parents, etc.	
<b>Leave</b>	
<b>Confirm plans</b>	
<b>Get to know and evaluate date</b>	
<b>TALK, JOKE, LAUGH</b>	
<b>GO TO MOVIES, SHOW, PARTY</b>	
Eat	
Accept/reject date's moves	
Man: <b>Take date home</b>	
Tell date had a good time	
Man: <b>Kiss goodnight</b>	
<b>Go home</b>	
Total	
16 actions for women	19 actions for men
3 actions for men	

Table I. Continued

Actual date	
Woman's script	Man's script
Groomed and dressed	<b>PICKED UP DATE</b>
Was nervous	Met parents/roommates
Man: <b>Picked up date</b>	<b>Left</b>
Introduced to parents, etc.	Picked up friends
Man: Courteously behavior (open doors)	<b>Confirm plans</b>
<b>Left</b>	<b>TALKED, JOKED, LAUGHED</b>
<b>Confirm plans</b>	<b>WENT TO MOVIES, SHOW, PARTY</b>
Got to know & evaluate date	<b>ATE</b>
<b>TALKED, JOKED, LAUGHED</b>	<b>Drank alcohol</b>
Enjoyed date	Initiated sexual contact
<b>WENT TO MOVIES, SHOW, PARTY</b>	Made out
<b>ATE</b>	<b>TOOK DATE HOME</b>
<b>Drank alcohol</b>	<b>Asked for another date</b>
Talked to friends	<b>KISSED GOODNIGHT</b>
Had something go wrong	<b>Went home</b>
Man: <b>Took date home</b>	
Man: <b>Asked for another date</b>	
Man: Told date will call her	
Man: <b>Kissed date goodnight</b>	
<b>WENT HOME</b>	
Total	
14 actions for women	15 actions for men
6 actions for men	

<sup>a</sup>*N* = 74 women, 61 men.

<sup>b</sup>Capital letters indicate the action was mentioned by 50% or more subjects per script.

<sup>c</sup>Bold type indicates the action was mentioned for both woman's and man's script.

eat too much," was cited by 12 women (16.2%), but did not meet the 25% criteria for inclusion in the script.

The reactive-proactive gender typing of scripts was further confirmed by a repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (Gender  $\times$  Type of Date) comparing the frequency (square root transformed) of partner-initiated, self-initiated, and total actions per script. A significant gender by type of date interaction effect was found for partner-initiated actions, Pillai's trace,  $F(2, 265) = 70.89, p < .001$ . Women cited significantly more partner-initiated actions for both hypothetical ( $M = 2.80$ ) and actual dates ( $M = 3.93$ ) than did men ( $M = .22$  and  $1.05$ , respectively). Partner-initiated actions for hypothetical and actual dates also differed significantly. No other significant effects were found.

An examination of 9 gender-typed behaviors (e.g., McCormick & Jesser, 1983), 8 of which had been identified by Rose and Frieze (1989) as part of the hypothetical date script, also supported the hypothesized gender

roles for both hypothetical and actual scripts. For hypothetical dates, 7 significant gender differences in the mean frequency with which actions were cited were found using Wilcoxon Z tests. A woman's actual first date script significantly more often than a man's script included waiting to be asked for a date and being concerned about appearance (see Table II). In the hypothetical scripts, a man's role significantly more often involved asking for the date, planning and paying for it, initiating courtly behaviors such as opening car doors, and initiating sexual activity. Gender differences also were found for 5 behaviors associated with an actual date: women were more concerned about appearance; men with asking for the date, planning it, being courtly, and initiating sexual activity. Women's conversationalist and gatekeeper roles were not supported for the frequency measures.

As predicted, interruptions occurred on actual dates, disrupting the hypothesized sequence. Four major interruptions were identified. First, about 20% ( $N = 27$ ) double dated on their most recent first date, whereas no participants mentioned this possibility for a hypothetical first date. Second, many participants (24.4%,  $N = 33$ ) reported having something go wrong on an actual date. Problems were wide ranging and often necessitated that new action sequences be initiated. For instance, one young man had car trouble after picking up his date and was mortified by having to take her back home. Another's date abandoned her at a party and began to cruise other women, leaving the woman to fend for herself. Embarrassing events also were common. One participant reported having made a fool of herself by throwing the ball backward while bowling; another woman got

**Table II.** Mean Frequency of Gender-Typed Actions Used to Describe Hypothetical and Actual First Dates

Action	Hypothetical date		Actual date	
	Woman	Man	Woman	Man
<b>Woman's role</b>				
Be asked for a date	.07	0 <sup>a</sup>	.11	.02
Concern about appearance	4.73	2.42 <sup>c</sup>	1.45	.58 <sup>b</sup>
Maintain conversation	2.72	2.17	2.12	1.88
Control sexual activity	.41	.20	.05	0
<b>Man's role</b>				
Ask for date	0	.29 <sup>c</sup>	.07	.22 <sup>a</sup>
Plan date	.49	1.73 <sup>c</sup>	.60	1.03 <sup>a</sup>
Pay	.08	.61 <sup>c</sup>	.07	.22
Courtly behavior (open doors)	.38	1.22 <sup>c</sup>	.10	.48 <sup>c</sup>
Initiate sexual activity	.58	1.47 <sup>c</sup>	.40	1.35 <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> $p < .05$ , Wilcoxon Z test.

<sup>b</sup> $p < .005$ .

<sup>c</sup> $p < .001$ .



extremely upset when her date insisted it was "love at first sight." A third type of interruption reported by 12.7% ( $N = 17$ ) was related to perceived violations of gender roles, such as "He lost points for not opening my car door," and "We went out to eat later at Pizza Hut and she was a pig," "He never touched me the whole night . . . and I began to wonder about him." Lastly, a few participants (2.2%,  $N = 3$ ) mentioned having had sex on the first date, an action that was not mentioned by any participants for hypothetical scripts.

Contrary to prediction, dating experience did not affect script length. Inexperienced daters used a similar number of actions to describe their date as experienced daters ( $M = 17.6$  and  $19.0$ , respectively).

## DISCUSSION

The scripts identified here support findings by Rose and Frieze (1989) that first dates are highly scripted. High agreement was found for actions associated with both hypothetical and actual dates. The results also suggest that cognitive scripts serve to guide behavior, as proposed by Abelson (1981) and Gagnon (1977). Hypothetical scripts appeared to form a core action sequence that was embellished during actual dates. Although actual scripts were not longer than hypothetical ones, as had been predicted, a wider range of action codes was required to encompass them, as had been expected.

Also as predicted, a major emphasis of both hypothetical and actual scripts was a strong degree of gender typing. Men's proactive role encompassed initiating the date (asking for and planning it), controlling the public domain (driving and opening doors), and starting sexual interaction (initiating physical contact, making out, kissing goodnight). Women's reactive role focused on the private domain (concern about appearance, enjoying the date), participating in the structure of the date provided by the man (being picked up, having doors opened), and responding to his sexual overtures. Such gender differences serve to give men more power in the initial stage of a relationship (McCormick & Jesser, 1983).

Men appeared to exercise more power in the actual first dates in another way as well. Women, in spite of being asked to "explain what you did," tended to cite a number of actions their date performed, as well as things they themselves had done. Men focused much more on their own actions, as instructed. Thus, women appear to see their first dates as highly dependent on their male partner. Furthermore, men were expected to perform 4–5 male gender-typed actions (asking for date, planning, courtly behavior, and initiating sex), women only 1 of 4 female-typed actions (being

concerned with appearance). These results imply that men's scripts for a first date are more rigid than women's. Perhaps this partially accounts for the greater anxiety men express about dating (Himaki, Arkowitz, Hinton, & Perl, 1980)—it is easier to do something wrong. It should be noted that male study participants generated the male scripts while females generated the female scripts. Further research might assess the degree to which these gender differences are a function of gender role expectations shared by both sexes and to what extent they represent differential perceptions of males and females about what happens on their dates.

These results suggest that changing social norms have not had much effect on female and male roles early in relationship development. One explanation is that successful execution of the roles is important in creating a "good impression." Thereafter, people are freer to interact based on private desires and abilities. Future research could address this question by examining dating scripts at different stages, e.g., a first and fifth date. Responses to violations of gender-typed behaviors also could be assessed to determine if there is a "hierarchy" of appropriate actions, i.e., is it more important that a man pay for the date than that he drive? Investigating the consequences of nontraditional behavior could provide further insight as to what factors maintain scripts.

The results concerning date interruptions opens other avenues for research. From a script theory standpoint, interruptions require that new action sequences be initiated. A person's ability to respond to such events adequately and resume the normal dating sequence may be greatly affected by knowledge of and experience with the typical routine. Thus, more experienced daters might more easily recover from interruptions than less experienced ones. Contrary to Rose and Frieze (1989), dating experience did not affect scripts in the present study. However, script length may not be a very sensitive measure. Exploring its relationship to other variables, such as recovery from interruptions, may be more productive.

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