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# The Gendered Nature of Sexual Scripts

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*Social scripting theory points to the fact that much of sexual behavior seems to follow a script. Similar to scripts that stage actors use to guide their behavior, social scripts instruct members of a society as to appropriate behavior and the meanings to attach to certain behaviors. In Western cultures, scripts for sexual activity are markedly different for males and females. In this article, the goals are to provide (a) an introduction to social scripting theory, (b) an exploration of the ways and potential reasons sexual scripts differ by gender, and (c) a discussion of ways that a social scripting perspective can be applied to work with individuals and couples experiencing sexual problems.*

**Keywords:** social scripts; script theory; gender; male-female differences; sexual behavior

Do men and women differ with regard to sexual attitudes, feelings, and behavior? Several reviews indicate that the answer is yes (e.g., see Baumeister & Tice, 2001; Okami & Shackelford, 2002; Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Whether men and women differ in their sexuality is often less controversial than the proposed causes of such male-female differences. The two general explanatory camps might be described as polar ends of a continuum. One end is anchored with inherent, biological, or evolutionary explanations and the other with socialization, cultural, and learning explanations. The purpose of this article is not to address the issue of why men and women differ with regard to sexuality but rather to apply social scripting theory in describing those male-female differences. In so doing, it is hoped that the value of applying social scripting theory for both counselors and their clients will become clear.

Social scripting theory rests on the assumption that people follow internalized scripts when constructing meaning out of behavior, responses, and emotions. With regard to potentially sexual situations, scripts provide meaning and direction for responding to sexual cues and for behaving sexually. As men and women exhibit certain differences in sexuality, we might say that the two sexes follow separate but overlapping (and often complementary) scripts. A social scripting perspective allows us to examine the interconnections within and across

each sex's scripts. From a counseling perspective, there may be value in better understanding how men's and women's sexuality are different and complementary without the distraction of simultaneously trying to explain why. Also, a social scripting perspective can be helpful to certain clients who would benefit by a framework that allows them to examine the content of their and their partners' sexuality without the necessity of explaining the origin of those scripts or whether one person's scripts are ultimately "better" than another's scripts. Inherent in social scripting theory is the assumption that people learn scripts as a function of being raised in a particular culture. Still, the theory may be seen as more descriptive than explanatory.

## SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL SCRIPTING THEORY

Gagnon and Simon (1973) first applied social scripting theory to human sexuality, noting the similarity between scripts that actors use in theater and patterned behavior people engage in sexually (also see Gagnon, 1990; Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 1987). Social scripts may be thought of as both social agents, prescribing what is considered normative within a culture, and as intrapsychic maps, providing directions for how to feel, think, and behave in particular situations.

These social scripts are communicated through the examples displayed by members of the culture who have already adopted the scripts as well as through mass media depictions of how people act and react in particular situations. Also, the very structure and the institutions of a society contribute to the formation of scripts, such as in the case of marriage laws and vows and laws against certain sexual behaviors or certain types of partners. Societal scripts specify the appropriate objects, aims, and desirable qualities of sexual interaction. They also provide individual actors with instruction as to the appropriate times, places, sequences, and so forth with regard to sexual activity.

At the individual level, social scripts reduce anxiety by decreasing uncertainty. Sexual scripts provide guidance for

the individual, thereby lending sense of predictability as to how the individual should feel and behave as well as what the individual should expect from a partner. These intrapsychic scripts also supply guidance as to probable motivation for each actor's behavior. Scripts help answer the question of what particular behaviors mean, whether those behaviors are one's own or one's partner's. As long as both individuals in a sexual couple are following complementary scripts, anxiety should be relatively low. Both people more or less know what to expect of the other, each shares similar perceptions as to the motives and ascribed meanings held by the other, and a minimal amount of explicit communication or negotiation is necessary.

When the members of a couple each hold intrapsychic scripts that are not complementary, predictability wanes, anxiety increases, and conflict is likely. "You're not playing by the rules," might be the spoken or unspoken conclusion. This realization that each member of the couple is following a different script compels examination and communication of those scripts, provided that the couple is motivated to resolve the apparent differences. Such explicit examination and communication of sexual scripts contradicts a common tenet of sexuality in Western culture: Sexual activity is supposed to be spontaneous and romantic (e.g., see Gilbert, Walker, McKinney, & Snell, 1999). Conflicting sexual scripts grind spontaneity and romance to a halt. It is then easy to blame all of this uncomfortable fallout on one's partner. After all, none of this would have happened had he or she just followed the "normal" sexual script (although each member of the couple is likely to believe that he or she follows the more appropriate or normal script).

People rely most heavily on the common elements of social scripts early in a relationship because they have little information about the idiosyncratic aspects of the other person's scripts on which to make adjustments. As a couple builds a history together, each member learns how his or her sexual scripts overlap and how they differ, and gradually each constructs his or her own mutually held scripts for sexual activity. However, between the start of their first sexual interaction together and the period during which an established couple enjoys the comfort of a mutually constructed set of scripts for sexual activity, the likelihood of some degree of disharmony is high.

Each individual constructs his or her own sexual scripts based on that individual's personal experience and social learning. So although there are some common elements shared by most members of a particular culture (e.g., see Geer & Broussard, 1990), sexual scripts still differ to various degrees across individuals. Also, any large culture is comprised of numerous subcultures, each of which might influence members' sexual scripts in different ways. A male of Irish descent raised in New York City may have some relatively pronounced differences in his sexual scripts compared to a male of African descent raised in a small town in Ala-

bama. This male may, in turn, differ substantially in his sexual scripts compared to a male of Mexican descent raised in Arizona. Regardless of ethnicity or locale, males and females represent distinct subcultures. However, for heterosexuals, members of each sex are expected to develop sexual scripts that complement those of the other sex.

What are the predominant themes in males' and females' sexual scripts in Western culture? What elements of those scripts originated and have been maintained because they serve complementary roles? What differences in men's and women's sexual scripts are most likely to cause conflict or at least misunderstandings and hurt feelings?

### MALE AND FEMALE SEXUAL SCRIPTS

Anatomically, boys have the benefit (or curse) of genitals that are more easily viewed and handled by their owners. The young boy is taught to hold onto his penis to urinate and to handle it for purposes of washing. Conversely, the young girl is not taught to touch her clitoris. She is taught to wipe carefully after urination so as not to contract an infection by transferring bacteria from her rectum to her vagina. The end result? Boys and girls are given two subtly different sets of messages regarding their own genitals. Boys readily discover that their genitals feel good when handled and are not necessarily any "dirtier" than other parts of their body that they can see. Girls readily learn that their genitals are difficult, if not impossible, for them to see and that there are "dirty" aspects that require appropriate precautionary measures.

Perhaps these anatomical differences and their subtle corresponding messages help explain why boys typically masturbate more frequently and at an earlier age compared to girls (Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Similarly, gender roles may encourage sexual exploration more for boys than for girls. Masculine gender roles dictate general independence, assertiveness, and exploration; feminine gender roles are based more on ideals of behavioral restraint and personal control (Lippa, 2001). Then there is the fact that females can get pregnant, whereas males cannot. In this light, it becomes understandable (though not fair) that parents frequently have a different set of sexual concerns and standards regarding daughters compared to sons. Indeed, research has demonstrated that daughters receive more parental communication about sex than do sons, most of which centers on warnings of risk and danger (Fisher, 1986). As a result, women end up being given the role of sexual gatekeeper in most male-female relationships.

For boys, earlier and more extensive masturbation experience, combined with gender role ideals based on interpersonal separation and self-reliance, sets the stage for a bodily centered set of sexual scripts (Garcia & Carrigan, 1998; Regan & Berscheid, 1996). Sexual stimulation is viewed in isolation as simply physical pleasure. Especially among

young men, sexual activity with a partner is goal directed (toward self-pleasure and tension release) and easily divorced from the more general relationship to one's partner. To view sexual activity in a vacuum—as an experience of bodily pleasure devoid of further meaning—is a relatively foreign concept for girls. Less experience with masturbation, combined with ideals based on behavioral restraint and self-protection, set the stage for a relationship-centered set of sexual scripts for females. Sexual activity is viewed as potentially dangerous to a female's body and to her reputation. So there has to be more incentive to engage in sexual activity with a partner than simply physical pleasure. The result is that female sexual behavior is framed within the context of a meaningful relationship and is imbued with meaning consistent with that context (Purnine, Carey, & Jorgenson, 1994; Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994; Taris & Semin, 1997).

Young adult men who have not realized that their female peers hold a different set of sexual scripts are often perplexed. At a time when young adults have finally gained a marked increase in privacy from family (such as going away to college or getting married), it often seems obvious to young men that sexual activity should “naturally” occur now that a major barrier has been overcome. Females who take such a view run the risk of being labeled deviant. To be too sexually interested or aggressive, especially outside the context of an intimate relationship, implies masculinity, or desperation, or some other flaw (even if only a “weak” character or a lack of proper upbringing or restraint). Young men who will establish ongoing sexual relationships with their female peers necessarily learn that women typically ascribe different meanings and motives to sexual activity than do men (Eyre, Read, & Millstein, 1997).

Note that the female role frees males to adopt and maintain a relatively unrestrained approach to sexuality in relationships. It is the female's role to limit sex, for both participants' own good, so the male is free to focus on outwitting her defenses to the extent necessary to achieve sexual activity. That females' standards typically represent a barrier each male must overcome fits well with the competitive and achievement-oriented aspects of masculine gender roles. Masculinity calls for being proactive and able to outdo one's opponent, and unfortunately this is the stance many young men take in relation to early sexual relationships. In many cases, male-female differences in sexual roles set up a dynamic of polar extremes; the more he pushes for sex, the more defensive she has to be, and vice-versa. For many couples, it can seem as though he is obsessed with sex and that she is completely indifferent or disinterested.

Social psychologists have well-documented phenomena referred to as “the scarcity principle” and “reactance.” In general, the more scarce something is, the more desirable it becomes (assuming that it was at least somewhat desirable to start). Reactance refers to the human tendency to promote a sense of autonomy and independence when confronted with

apparent infringement on one's personal freedom. It is the bedrock of the folk psychology known as “reverse psychology”: When someone is told to do one thing, the person is likely to want to do the opposite. Why? Because a directive, if followed, may feel like a blow to one's personal independence. What does the scarcity principle and reactance have to do with sexual scripts? To the extent that women's sexual scripts block men from attaining sexual activity, men will be motivated to value such sexual activity even more and to go to greater lengths to achieve their goals rather than “giving in” to women's decisions (Eyre et al., 1997).

With the differences in men's and women's sexual scripts described so far, males and females understandably ascribe different meanings to an initial sexual experience with a new partner. The female runs the greater risk with regard to pregnancy and damage to her social reputation. Also, because she is more likely than her male partners to construct the meaning of their sexual activity within the context of an ongoing relationship, she runs the greater risk of hurt feelings should a partner be following the traditional male script, in which sexual activity is goal-oriented and motivated by bodily pleasure for its own sake. These male-female differences in the meaning of sexual activity with a new partner leave the female in a relatively risky position, lending credibility to her role as the sexual gatekeeper.

The greater sexual reluctance in women's sexual scripts makes achieving sexual activity with a new partner all the more rewarding for males. Sexual activity with a new female partner is likely to boost the male's self-esteem (Baumeister & Tice, 2001); he must have been desirable enough to warrant this new female partner taking on the risks of sexual activity with him in particular. For women, achieving sexual activity with a new partner does not automatically boost self-esteem. Because men are thought to be willing to share in sexual activity indiscriminately and with little emotional investment, finding a new male sexual partner is not much of an accomplishment for a female. The exceptions would be if that male were of substantially higher status than the female's other partners or if the male seemed exceptionally willing and able to invest emotionally in a relationship with her (which implies that she must be more desirable than other women in whom he would not have invested so heavily).

These male-female differences in the implications of acquiring new sexual partners helps explain why men are more likely to estimate, perhaps “rounding up,” when asked how many different sexual partners they have had, whereas women are more likely to carefully count (Brown & Sinclair, 1999). Having had many sexual partners represents an accomplishment for males. For females, many sexual partners represents either willful deviation from the traditional female sexual script or lack of success following that script. If a woman follows the traditional gatekeeper role but has sexual experience with many men, the implication is that she must have lacked proper restraint or had poor judgment by giving

herself sexually to men who ultimately did not invest in an ongoing relationship. For these reasons, it makes sense that women seem to be more sensitive to social pressures when asked about sexual experience, thereby more likely to distort reports of their sexual histories compared to men (Alexander & Fisher, 2003).

Having already alluded to some potential problems with males and females following different sets of sexual scripts, let us focus even more explicitly on the negative potential. Assume a particular male-female couple is starting an erotic relationship, each following the traditional sexual scripts for his and her respective gender. From the start, he will be more willing and interested in engaging in sexual activity than will she or at least it must appear that way. If he doesn't express relatively strong sexual interest early on, there may be doubts as to his masculinity, sexual potency, and virility. She may question her sexual desirability (Gilbert et al., 1999). After all, men are supposed to be easily sexually aroused, so what does it say about her if he apparently is not? She must present herself as interested in a relationship, a sexual one, but not too eager for sexual activity (Eyre et al., 1997). Sexual eagerness may cast doubts on her femininity and her character. Her physical urges are not supposed to be as strong as his are, and she is supposed to have better control over them than he does.

The female's task is to show enough sexual interest to communicate to the male that he is special to her, possibly warranting the risks that come with sex, but that she is not the type of female who engages in sexual activity indiscriminately. His task is to communicate to her that she is special to him—desirable enough for him to consider an ongoing emotional relationship—and that sexual activity is not his only incentive for spending time with her.

This tenuous dance leaves plenty of room for miscommunication and hurt feelings or worse. There may be instances in which one or both partners are tempted to exaggerate willingness to give what the other person hopes for, especially if there is the perception that the other person is losing interest. Similarly, one or both members of the couple may feel compelled to follow the traditional sexual scripts for his or her gender, even though they do not correspond well to what that individual truly desires. This phenomenon has been investigated with young women, leading to the term "token resistance" (Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh, 1988; Muehlenhard & Rodgers, 1998). The dilemma arises when a woman would like to engage in sexual activity with a new partner yet feels compelled to resist advances (say "no") for the sake of minimizing risks (to health or social reputation or the future of a potential relationship with that prospective partner). Conversely, there is documentation of males reporting having engaged in unwanted sexual activity with females out of feeling obligated to their role (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998).

There are also anecdotes regarding a common experience that females have with males: A particular male will seem interested in a potential relationship with the female, yet once

the couple engages in sexual intercourse for the first time, he seemingly drops off the face of the earth, apparently no longer interested in spending time with her. To the extent that this occurs, male-female differences in sexual scripts may help explain it. Having received the self-esteem boost that comes with persuading a new female to engage in sexual activity, the cost/benefit ratio associated with continuing to see this particular female has shifted. Accurately or not, he may perceive any further involvement with her as entailing increasing expectations of commitment and sexual exclusivity.

From the female's perspective, it seemed as though the relationship was progressing just fine. The male exhibited interest in her beyond simply as a sex partner, so much so that she felt safe engaging in sexual activity with him. He may have been sincere in his protestation of feelings for her when there was the prospect of sexual activity (see Schmitt, Couden, & Baker, 2001), but if the cost/benefit ratio shifted after sexual activity (as described above), he may find himself doubting whether this female is indeed the "right one" for him with whom to build a lasting relationship. The female is liable to feel hurt and deceived and perhaps even more wary the next time she starts a potential relationship. The female is likely to require even more indication of emotional investment from future males before engaging in sexual activity. The next male with whom she starts a potential relationship may have to more vigorously express interest in her, trying to subtly reassure her that he is not like "other guys." As males and females enact traditional scripts, they may become mutually reinforcing.

What about enactment of sexual scripts within sexual interactions? As part of the more assertive masculine role, men are expected to play the aggressor, orchestrating sexual performance, as in "making love to" a woman (Gilfoyle & Wilson, 1992). Women's roles revolve more around being an attractive and seductive stimulus; she may focus on "setting the mood" and donning sexy lingerie. When sexual interaction actually begins, he is liable to "take it from there." The man's perception of himself as a desirable sexual partner is traditionally tied to his skill as a lover. Those skills may entail ability to maintain an erection, hold off ejaculation (thereby satisfying his female partner via an extended session of penile thrusting), and ideally reading her sexual needs and responding behaviorally. The woman's perception of herself as a desirable sexual partner may include her skill at certain behavior (e.g., performing oral sex), but is more likely than his self-perception to include notions of being visually attractive and sexually responsive to his behavioral performance.

There is the potential for conflict if only one member of the couple follows the traditional script for his or her gender. If the man is more passive than the traditional male script calls for, the woman may experience anxiety having to initiate and perform behaviors outside of her usual role. If the woman is more assertive than the traditional female script calls for, the man may feel as though his role has been usurped. If she takes

charge of her own sexual satisfaction, he may feel threatened as to his value (what role is he left to fill?). Objectively, her assertiveness could free him from responsibility for her sexual satisfaction. However, the anxiety inherent in following a script that is incompatible with one's partner is liable to undercut the potentially positive effects of her sexually independent stance.

Even within an ongoing relationship, the meanings surrounding sexual activity can differ as a function of traditional male and female sexual scripts, thereby inviting conflict. The longer that a couple is together, the more likely the male may come to view sex simply as to the meaning it has for him: tension release and bodily pleasure. He may gradually take the maintenance of their relationship for granted, thereby overlooking the possibility that she has different meanings attached to sexual activity. In couples constrained by traditional gender roles, the female may not express her continuing dissatisfaction with the perfunctory, genital-centered sexual activity to which both members of the couple have grown accustomed. Instead, she may come to define sex narrowly as just that activity she and her partner share. She might then conclude that she is not a very sexual person or that when it comes to sex, she could "take it or leave it." In contrast, she may feel desire for more nongenital touch and affection, concluding that given a choice between sex and cuddling, she would take the latter. Note that if both members of the couple could view sex more broadly as involving various forms of giving and receiving physical pleasure, both may view themselves and each other as desirous of sex.

By no means is the review here comprehensive. There are numerous ways that sexual scripts can result in potential problems for individuals and couples. Because of idiosyncratic aspects of some peoples' sexual scripts or unique ways that any two people's scripts may not mesh, it is impossible to anticipate all of the potential client issues that might arise. In closing, let us consider the explicit use of a sexual scripting perspective with clients.

### USING SCRIPT THEORY IN THERAPY

Most writings about social scripting theory are geared toward professional or academic audiences. When it comes to using social scripting theory in counseling or therapy, this means that the application to clients is indirect at best. However, scripting theory may be worth teaching explicitly to particular clients because it may facilitate understanding of the nature of their typical sexual interactions. In Western cultures, sexual activity is often considered a spontaneous result of certain feelings and nonsexual interactions with a potential partner. Against this cultural belief, clients are often surprised to realize the extent of the predictability (scripted nature) of their sexual activity.

How might therapists interject social script theory in addressing sexual problems? Starting with an introduction to

the general concept of social scripts (see Client Handout section) as well as providing common examples with which clients can identify, it is hoped that clients will see that scripts are necessary for all of us to be able to function in society. Social scripts provide predictability, lessen anxiety, and reduce the amount of time and energy we have to devote to making sense out of our social worlds. Extending these principles to sexual scripts, clients can come to appreciate the need for sexual scripts, particularly early in a relationship. However, as useful as certain sexual scripts might have been initially, or at an earlier point in the individual's life, they may have become dysfunctional by the current point. To work properly, scripts must match their circumstances.

After an introduction to social scripting theory, clients can be asked to write out, in list form, the steps involved in their typical sexual activity. This exercise should be performed separately for sexual activity involving a partner and for sexual activity performed by oneself. For couples in therapy, this exercise should be performed independently by each relationship partner. This allows for a subsequent comparison in which the therapist can help clarify the similarities and differences in how each member of the couple views his or her supposedly shared sexual script. Does one member of the couple identify certain behaviors (or steps) in the sexual sequence that the other member does not? Perhaps more important, do the members of the couple ascribe different meanings to certain behaviors or steps in the sexual sequence? What are each member's favorite and least favorite aspects of their shared sexual script?

By helping each client identify and communicate his or her sexual scripts, clients gain greater insight and perhaps enough distance from their own behavior to examine aspects of their scripts that work and those that do not. Similarly, coming to understand their partners' scripts for what they are—a set of meanings and behavioral guidelines for what is considered appropriate sexually—clients may gain enough objectivity to separate the scripts from the actors. Some degree of separation of actor and behavior may decrease blame and lessen the tendency to see another person's behavior as a direct indication of his or her character.

Helping clients to realize that males and females often follow different scripts can normalize some difficulties couples typically encounter in the bedroom. Men and women in our culture frequently view males and females as differing in certain important ways, especially about sex. Rather than promoting the notion that men and women are from different planets, however, script theory implies that such male-female differences are learned and can be modified. Importantly, rather than validate one partner's script over the other's, therapists can challenge the couple to construct their own shared sexual scripts, perhaps incorporating aspects of the old scripts and interjecting new behaviors and meanings not yet tried by the couple

Making the process of writing new sexual scripts a literal one can help ensure that each member of the couple recognizes what needs to change and how each behavior is viewed by the other person. Working explicitly on writing new sexual scripts is the antithesis of Western culture's notion of sponta-

neous sex. Working out shared sexual scripts in a nonsexual context (counseling or therapy or as homework) ultimately frees the couple to enact those scripts "spontaneously" as sexual situations arise. The result is lessened anxiety and a more satisfying experience for both partners in the sexual couple.

## APPENDIX

### *Client Handout*

#### **What Are Your Sexual Scripts?**

How do we know what to do when we meet someone new, or interview for a job, or attend a party? What is the appropriate behavior at a football game, or a wedding, or a funeral? These aren't trick questions. Most of the time we know what to do and say when we're in these kinds of situations. Many social situations have their own sets of rituals, and we know what most of these rituals are. How? Where did we learn these things?

Just as movie actors follow a script telling them what to do and say, each of us follows social scripts for each situation. These social scripts are important for several reasons. First, we know what to do and say. Second, if everyone follows the same scripts, we know what to expect others to do and say. Third, because social situations are then more predictable, there's less uncertainty and anxiety. Social scripts save us a lot of mental effort. Without scripts we would have to learn from scratch how to behave in every social situation.

What do scripts have to do with our sex lives? Well, sex with a partner is a form of social interaction, and sex too follows an unspoken script. People who grow up in the same cultures tend to learn similar sexual scripts. But there is one important exception. Men and women often differ in their sexual scripts. Why? Males and females are raised differently, and males and females have different concerns when it comes to sex. That's not to say that all men have certain sexual scripts and that all women have certain scripts, and that men's and women's scripts are always different. In the end, each person and each couple has their own unique sexual scripts based on their unique experiences.

How can you benefit from what you've learned about sexual scripts so far? Thinking of your sexual behavior as following a script let's you think about the different steps in that script. What does each step mean? Why do you do and say what you do at each step? Would you really rather do or say something different?

The good news is that sexual scripts can be changed. Many of us learned our sexual scripts before we were old enough, or experienced enough, to know what we really want or what is most satisfying. In your current relationship, you and your partner have worked out a set of sexual scripts. The two of you may not have worked these out intentionally, but over time the two of you did through your behavior. If you're less than happy with the sexual aspect of your relationship, now is the time to try the following sequence.

- 1) In private, write out the steps you think you and your partner go through, starting with the point where you or your partner show an interest in being sexual together and stopping at the point where the sexual episode together ends.
- 2) For each step, write down what typically is said and done by each of you. Note what you think each behavior means. What is your best guess as to why each behavior occurs?
- 3) Ideally, your partner independently performs steps 1 and 2 as well.
- 4) Compare what you and your partner each came up with. How do your views of your shared sexual scripts differ? What misunderstandings did each of you have about the other person's behavior and what that behavior means?
- 5) What aspects of the sexual script would each of you like to change? Why?
- 6) Try starting from scratch and writing a sexual script together. Compromise to make sure that each person gets at least some changes that person wants. Become familiar with the finished script so that the next time the two of you engage in sexual activity together you'll remember the general framework of the new and improved script.
- 7) Periodically perform this process again until there's no longer the need to make changes to your shared sexual script. Congratulations.

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