# YOUNG SINGLES' SCRIPTS
# FOR A FIRST DATE

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*Young single women's and men's cognitive scripts for the event "a first date" were examined to determine their content and to test for hypothesized differences in behavioral expectations. Participants were asked to list 20 expected actions involved in a first date for a woman and for a man. High agreement among participants was found for the content and sequence of actions that hypothetically would occur on a first date. The respondents listed a total of 19 different actions for women, and 27 for men. The scripts for women and men differed significantly. The scripts for women emphasized the private sphere (concern about appearance, conversation, and controlling sexuality); the scripts for men focused on control of the public domain (planning, paying for, and orchestrating the date). Gender roles were more prevalent in experienced daters' scripts. The results indicate that young adults' interpersonal scripts for dating maintain the traditional gender-power ratio.*

The concept of a "sexual script" has been used by sociologists to explain how social constructions of sexuality become institutionalized (Simon and Gagnon 1986). Sexual scripts serve as blueprints for both choosing a course of action and evaluating behaviors already performed. Scripts have three distinct levels: cultural scenarios (collectively developed scripts); interpersonal scripts (the use of a specific cultural scenario by an individual); and intrapsychic scripts (private wishes and desires; Simon and Gagnon 1986).

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The questions of what scripts govern gender roles in dating and courtship and what consequences women face for nontraditional behavior have been of considerable interest to researchers (e.g., McCormick and Jesser 1983; Muehlenhard et al. 1985; Zellman and Goodchilds 1983). In spite of the wide usage and appeal of the script concept, descriptions of specific scripts are largely speculative. Research typically has compared cultural norms with the prevalence of specific components of a script, such as how often women report having initiated a date, in order to determine social change. However, those scripts have not been determined empirically.

One methodology that has been developed to quantify scripts comes from cognitive psychology, where investigators have explored knowledge of routine activities in order to understand how information is organized and remembered (Abelson 1981; Bower et al. 1979). Subjects are asked to describe in detail their scripts for what goes on during familiar activities, such as eating in a restaurant. High agreement on the characters, actions, and order of the action reveals the script norms that are in operation.

In the present study, the cognitive-script methodology was used to determine the content of a routine sexual script, a first date. The event "a first date" was selected because it is an easily identifiable and still a widely experienced event among young heterosexual adults in the United States. Cultural norms for the first date are explicit, formal, and have changed little over the past 30 years. To establish cultural norms, we surveyed eight guides to adolescent dating representing the period from 1957 to the present. The results are presented in Table 1. Most dating etiquette is highly gender typed in the area of dominance-submission. Men are expected to initiate, plan, and pay for the date, and are the sexual aggressors. Women are supposed to assume a subordinate role by being alluring, facilitating the conversation, and limiting sexual activity.

Evidence about whether these rigidly gender-typed cultural scripts coincide with young adults' interpersonal scripts today is contradictory. McCormick and Jesser (1983) argued that the double standard of behavior implicit in traditional courtship patterns is starting to disappear among college students. They based their conclusions on evidence that dating partners have equal power when signaling sexual interest during the flirtation phase of relationships and that women are freer to have premarital sex than in the past. Many young women today share date expenses (Korman and Leslie 1982), and a majority of young men report having been asked for a date by a woman (Kelley et al. 1981).

## TABLE 1
## Dating Etiquette for Adolescents from Eight Guides

| | To Women | To Men | To Both |
|---|---|---|---|
| Westervelt (1957) | Be on time. | Have destination in mind. | |
| | Show you're having a good time. | Don't honk horn. | |
| | Be enthusiastic. | Seat date. | |
| | Compliment date. | Pick places can afford. | |
| | Act naturally. | Get date home on time. | |
| | Don't talk about other guys. | Tell date you enjoyed evening. | |
| | Don't be possessive. | | |
| | Keep your curfew. | | |
| | No kiss. | | |
| Scott (1965) | Wear appropriate clothes. | Wear appropriate clothes. | |
| | Be punctual. | Be punctual. | |
| | Walk without touching. | Meet date's parents. | |
| | No kiss. | Talk with father about cars. | |
| | | Open car door. | |
| | | Walk on outside. | |
| | | Walk without touching. | |
| McGinnis (1968) | Read up on date's interests. | Rich guys or "blind" dates will try | |
| | Find out if share common views. | to take advantage of women. | |
| | Act naturally. | | |
| | Act reasonably. | | |
| | Be punctual. | | |
| | Pay attention. | | |
| | Dress conservatively. | | |
| | Be tolerant. | | |
| | Be firm (no sex). | | |

| Source | (Advice for women) | (Advice for men) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Allen & Briggs (1971) | Graciously accept date. Be on time. Look good. Let him be master of situation. Be inconspicuous. Don't be too eager. Be interested in his successes. Be adaptable to any situation. Let him win at sports sometimes. Don't make him jealous. Try to like his friends. Keep your curfew. | Man takes the initiative. Dress carefully. Be on time. Pay for date. Be attentive and protective. Cater to date's tastes. Compliment her appearance. Don't swear. Be a good sport. Don't use the same line with every date. | |
| Lipke (1971) | Woman owes man a pleasant time but not a kiss. | Men are aroused more easily than women. | |
| Teen magazine (1982) | Self-respecting women say no. Women can ask men for dates. Physical intimacy is not proof of caring. | Don't say, "I'll call you," unless you mean it. | |
| Landers (1983) | Women should introduce date to parents. Don't go "all the way." Don't even go part of the way. If going Dutch, give man money privately. Keep your curfew. | Men should pick up date. Meet date's parents. Pay for date. Drive carefully. Don't drink. | |
| Carlson & Fitzgibbon (1983) | Be firm with aggressive dates. | Ask for date. Have an alternative plan. Be on time. Pay for date. Meet date's parents. Drive her home. Observe her curfew. | Stay with date. Don't cling. Let date know you like him or her. |

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In contrast, Muehlenhard et al. (1985) reported that 16 percent of 268 undergraduate men viewed rape as more justifiable in hypothetical instances of a woman asking a man for a date than of a man asking a woman. Green and Sandos (1983) also found that both women and men undergraduates rated a woman-initiated date as less socially acceptable than one initiated by a man. Women continue to be held responsible for controlling the level of sexual intimacy (LaPlante et al. 1980; Zellman and Goodchilds 1983). Other research has shown that men are more concerned about the appearance of their dates than women are (e.g., Hatfield and Sprecher 1986). Concern with physical appearance is reflected in lonely hearts advertisements in newspapers, where appearance is frequently listed as an asset—especially for women (Harrison and Saeed 1977).

These findings suggest that male dominance and control of dating persists, although some change may have occurred in the acceptability of sexual behavior for women. However, it is difficult to draw conclusions from the previous research because usually only one behavior (e.g., who asks for or who pays for the date) has been examined at a time, and the stage of relationship studied (e.g., dating versus committed relationship) often varies. In addition, although scripts are likely to be affected by experience (Berndt 1981), dating experience rarely has been assessed. In general, those who are more knowledgeable about an event have more well-developed scripts (Chase and Simon 1973; Larkin et al. 1980), but they may also feel freer to modify standard ways of behaving.

The use of the event "a first date" in the present study provided a starting point for exploring a temporally limited and more behaviorally complete interpersonal sexual script. The goals were to document empirically the content and sequence of the behaviors associated with a woman's and a man's role and the extent to which these still reflect traditional expectations. Scripts were expected to be strongly gender typed because the tendency to "pose," or conform to stereotyped gender roles is characteristic of beginning relationships (Levinger 1983). Consequently, we predicted that women would more often be described as (1) being asked for a date, (2) being more concerned with their appearance, (3) doing more to maintain the conversation, and (4) controlling sexual activity, whereas men would be described more often as (1) asking for, (2) planning, (3) paying for the date, and (4) initiating sexual activity. Finally, we expected more complex scripts with more script elements for those with some dating experience.

## METHOD

### Participants

Fifty-eight women and 39 men between the ages of 18 and 22 were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes at a large midwestern public university. The sample was predominantly white; 8 percent (N = 8) was black. The sex and race ratios of participants were similar to those for class enrollments. Most students from this campus (55 percent) were first-generation college students; 52 percent lived at home with their parents.

Men were slightly older than women ($M$ = 19.4 and 18.7, respectively, $t[95]$ = 2.37, $p < .05$). Women's and men's ratings of their dating experience did not differ (3.2 and 2.9, respectively, on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = none at all to 5 = quite extensive).

### Procedure

The following scenario was used to elicit subjects' responses:

> 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.

Then subjects were asked to describe the extent of their own dating experience.

## RESULTS

### The Scripts

A total of 104 different actions were identified from the essays, and the number of participants citing each action was counted. A script was defined as consisting of those actions mentioned by more than 25 percent of the subjects for either the woman's or the man's role (Bower et al. 1979). For these respondents, the man's script had 27 actions and was more explicitly defined than the woman's script, which had 19 actions (see Table 2). Fourteen actions, including all those related to date conversation, were identical for both scripts and were concerned with appearance and emotions before the date; actions done at the same time (e.g., leave; confirm plans; eat; go to the movies or date event; joke, laugh, or talk); the developing relationship

TABLE 2
First-Date Scripts Based on Actions Mentioned
by 25 Percent or More of Participants—per Script[a]

| Script | |
|---|---|
| *A Woman's First Date* | *A Man's First Date* |

| | |
|---|---|
| Tell friends and family. | Ask for a date. |
| *Groom and dress.*[b] | Decide what to do. |
| *Be nervous.* | *Groom and dress.* |
| *Worry about or change appearance.* | *Be nervous.* |
| Check appearance. | *Worry about or change appearance.* |
| Wait for date. | Prepare car, apartment. |
| Welcome date to home. | Check money. |
| Introduce parents or roommates. | Go to date's house. |
| *Leave.* | Meet parents or roommates. |
| *Confirm plans.* | *Leave.* |
| *Get to know date.* | Open car door. |
| *Compliment date.* | *Confirm plans.* |
| *Joke, laugh, and talk.* | *Get to know date.* |
| *Try to impress date.* | *Compliment date.* |
| *Go to movies, show, or party.* | *Joke, laugh, and talk.* |
| *Eat.* | *Try to impress date.* |
| *Go home.* | *Go to movies, show, or party.* |
| *Tell date she had a good time.* | *Eat.* |
| *Kiss goodnight.* | Pay. |
| | Be polite. |
| | Initiate physical contact. |
| | Take date home. |
| | *Tell date he had a good time.* |
| | Ask for another date. |
| | Tell date will be in touch. |
| | *Kiss goodnight.* |
| | *Go home.* |

a. N = 58 women, 39 men.
b. Italics indicate the action was mentioned for both scripts.

(get to know, compliment, try to impress date); and the polite closing coda and ritual good-night kiss. And of course, each was supposed to return to his or her own home. The five other prescribed behaviors for women were reactive, so their dating scripts were structured mostly around developing the interactions. The dating scripts for men had double the number of actions, and much of their script involved

self-directed actions (including "decide what to do" and "initiate physical contact").

Participants were quite knowledgeable about opposite-gender scripts, and women and men disagreed on the content of only two actions. Women more often than men described a woman as being concerned about her appearance on a first date ($\chi^2[1] = 12.0, p < .008$). Men more often than women reported asking for another date as part of the man's script ($\chi^2[1] = 4.8, p < .03$). If actual dates follow the hypothetical sequence described, such high agreement should enable women and men to predict each other's behavior on a first date with considerable accuracy.

### Stereotypes in Dating

The frequency with which specific gender-role actions were mentioned on the average within each essay was examined to test the gender-role hypotheses. Traditional stereotypes persisted. As expected, a first-date script for a woman still significantly more often included waiting to be asked for a date, being concerned about appearance, and rejecting sexual contact ($t[96] = 14.38, 7.19,$ and $4.07,$ respectively, $p < .001$) as well as keeping the conversation going ($t[96] = 1.95, p < .06$). Similarly stereotypical, a man was supposed to ask for and plan the date, pick up his partner, and initiate and pay for date activities ($t[96] = 8.13, 16.29, 6.79,$ respectively, $p < .001$) as well as to initiate physical contact ($t[96] = 2.74, p < .01$).

### Effect of Dating Experience
### on Scripts

The hypothesis concerning dating experience was only weakly supported. Overall, the more experienced group listed more script actions for a woman's date than did the less experienced group (21.4 versus 17.9, $t[32] = 2.45, p < .05$), but not for a man's date (22.5 versus 20.5, $t[45] = 1.73, p < .10$). Participants in the study who said they had extensive experience more often (at least at the $p < .10$ level) described a woman as spending time on, worrying about, checking, or changing her appearance in preparation for a date than did those less experienced at dating. They also more frequently included behaviors such as introducing roommates, sitting far away in the car, drinking on the date, accepting physical contact, talking, and being walked to the door as part of a woman's date script. For a man's date, actions more often mentioned by daters with more experience included

dressing for the date, checking appearance, carrying enough money, planning or strategizing about the date, and going out with friends.

## DISCUSSION

The high agreement among participants on script actions found in this study suggests that young adults' expectations for a first date constitute a strong script (Abelson 1981). Although 14 actions for a woman's and man's first date were similar, traditional gender behavior prevailed for the remaining 5 actions describing a woman's date and 13 actions describing a man's. Women were seen as sexual objects and emotional facilitators, and men as planners, economic providers, and sexual initiators. Participants with more dating experience described more elaborate scripts for a woman and placed more emphasis on planning in the man's script.

A first date might be highly scripted because it helps to create a good impression (Simon and Gagnon 1986). The formality of the script also may be reinforced because, for novice daters, it may serve to ease the awkwardness elicited by sexual intent and to divert attention from the exploration of mutual sexual interest. In addition, "few people have the desire, energy, or persistence to create highly innovative or novel scripts" (Gagnon 1977, p. 6).

The gender roles found here indicate that maintaining the traditional gender-power ratio is a significant aspect of creating a positive impression (Lipman-Blumen 1984). On a first date, as in other interactions between women and men, a man is supposed to control the public domain (make plans and transport the date) as well as the physical and economic resources (car and money). Women's control and resources (beauty, sexuality, and charm) are supposed to be in the private sphere. Daters with more experience emphasized gender roles even more, indicating that the success of a date is dependent on conformity to these roles. Perhaps those with greater dating experience come to accept the power relationships in traditional dating and to see them as natural. Additional research on experienced versus inexperienced daters would be necessary to determine whether experience leads to more acceptance of traditional roles or if adherence to stereotyped roles leads to more success in dating.

The emphasis in this study was to identify common script actions for a first date, not to identify alternative scripts. However, the results indicate that many more script actions were identified (i.e., 104) than

met the 25 percent usage criterion for inclusion as part of the final date script. In addition, the number of black participants was too small to allow any subgroup patterns to emerge. Other research might be aimed at identifying popular alternatives to the script presented here or examining subgroup differences (e.g., age and race) among scripts.

These results suggest that in spite of changes in gender roles and feminist attempts to provide alternative sexual scripts, the interpersonal scripts governing the dating behavior of midwestern young adults are highly conventional. Hypothetical date-role violations by women have been shown to be socially unacceptable (Green and Sandos 1983), but actual date violations have not been examined. The interpersonal scripts identified here provide a basis for studying the effect of script violations and the actual variation in gender roles. Future research should focus on whether the gender-power ratio is as well maintained in actual dating as in the interpersonal script and what factors promote script flexibility.

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