

Dating, first Date

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Contemporary courtship typically relies on dating as a way to initiate romantic relationships in the United States and in many other countries. Dating refers to informal interactions between two individuals with the implied intent of assessing each other's romantic potential but has no specific commitment or goal. A graduated series of dates is considered the first step to a serious romance. The purpose of this entry is to describe sexual scripts for a first date, address how gender and sexual orientation affect the first date script, and briefly discuss some newer forms of first dates such as Internet and speed dating.

A first date is an easily identifiable and widely experienced event among young adult heterosexuals. Most of the research on first dates uses Script Theory as a framework. Scripts refer to the routine actions involved in familiar activities. For instance, "look at the menu" and "order food" would be some routine actions or script elements that would occur when eating in a restaurant. Sociologists William Simon and John Gagnon proposed the concept of sexual scripts as a blueprint for guiding sexual behavior specifically. Sexual scripts operate on three distinct levels: Cultural scripts refer to collectively developed scripts, interpersonal scripts refer to the use of a specific cultural scenario by an individual, and intrapsychic scripts pertain to private wishes and desires. Recent interest has focused on whether cultural scripts regarding gender roles in dating continue to guide interpersonal scripts and what new scripts or forms of dating are developing.

Cultural scripts for the first date are explicit, formal, and have remained stable over the past 40 years. A defining feature of the first date is its gender etiquette. This may be because the tendency to pose or conform to stereotyped gender roles is a characteristic of beginning heterosexual romantic relationships. Men are to initiate, plan, and pay for the date; engage in courtly behavior such as opening doors; and initiate sexual contact. Women are to fulfill a subordinate role by being alluring, engaging the man in conversation, and limiting sexual activity.

In research conducted on mostly White college students, young adults' descriptions of a hypothetical first date were found largely to conform to the cultural script of male initiation-female reaction. For instance, when listing the actions a woman [or man] would typically do on a first date with someone new, young adults described self-directed actions such as "decide what to do" and "initiate physical contact" as being unique to the man's script. Actions unique to the woman's script involved reactions such as "wait for date" and "accept [or reject] the man's moves" such as an "arm around shoulder" or a "kiss." These findings suggest that the cultural script for a first date is very strong and familiar to young heterosexual adults.

Actual first dates closely conform to abstract cultural scripts. When women college students described a recent actual first date, 14 actions referred to what she did on the date (e.g., "groomed and dressed" and "talked, joked, and laughed"), and 6 actions were initiated by the man: "picked up date," "opened doors," "took date home," "asked for another date," "told date he would call her," and "kissed goodnight." Men described

15 actions and all were self-initiated. Thus, actual first dates were highly similar to the cultural script in terms of defining the man's role as active and the woman's as reactive.

Sexual behavior on a first date is influenced by certain contexts. For instance, actual first dates that were initiated by men had more sexual activity than first dates that were initiated by women. Also, more sexual behavior occurred on actual first dates when alcohol was consumed. More sexual activity was used to describe a hypothetical date occurring "at a keg party" than one occurring "at a coffee shop." This difference suggests that both the cultural script and the actual behavior of young adults vary depending on the context of the date.

An interesting question regarding the cultural dating script concerns how it affects lesbians and gay men. Similar to heterosexual gender roles, gay men who described both a hypothetical and actual first date mentioned more sexual actions ("make out" and "have sex") than lesbians, whereas lesbians more often than gay men mentioned "positive affect" for the date and "get to know/evaluate date." Lesbians and gay men also were not likely to introduce a date to family or to show affection in public. However, active or reactive gender roles were not assigned to one person. On a same-sex date, either person was free to pick up the other person, pay for the date, or initiate sexual contact. Thus, personal abilities or desires, more so than gender roles, appear to guide both dating scripts and actual behavior for lesbians and gay men.

Some newer forms of first dates include speed dating and Internet dating. Speed dating is a phenomenon that refers to a brief series of dates typically lasting from 3 to 8 minutes that an individual may have with others attending an event. If both wish to meet each other when time is up, they are told how to contact each other for a future date. Conformity to a gender-typed dating script is likely to be important to success in speed dating. Internet dating occurs through chat rooms or other social networking groups and has the advantage

of allowing people to get to know each other without the time and effort involved in an initial face-to-face meeting. It also may reduce the relevance of gender conformity and physical attraction in initial attraction.

In sum, a first date is strongly influenced by a highly gender-typed cultural script. Heterosexuals tend to adhere to the cultural script in order to create a good impression. The script is less influential for same-sex and online dating, where more private desires and interests may be expressed.

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See also

- Courtship, Models and Processes of (</reference/humanrelationships/n117.xml>)
- Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Relationships (</reference/humanrelationships/n238.xml>)
- Gender Roles in Relationships (</reference/humanrelationships/n240.xml>)
- Initiation of Relationships (</reference/humanrelationships/n274.xml>)
- Internet Dating (</reference/humanrelationships/n285.xml>)
- Speed Dating (</reference/humanrelationships/n524.xml>)

Further Readings

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