

Dating Scripts of Gay Men and Lesbians

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ABSTRACT. Scripts for a first date for 51 gay men and 44 lesbians were explored. Well-defined scripts were found for both hypothetical and actual accounts. Hypothetical scripts contained fourteen actions for gay men and lesbians; eleven were common to both. Gay men's actual scripts had eighteen actions and lesbians' had nineteen, with twelve common to both. Gay men's scripts were more sexually oriented and less intimacy-focused than lesbians'. However, scripts for both genders were free of many other aspects of traditional heterosexual roles and involved some actions unique to this population.

Current models of relationship development do not adequately address gay and lesbian relationships, particularly at the initiation stage. Research on courtship predominantly has been aimed at heterosexuals (Cate & Lloyd, 1992), whereas the study of gay and lesbian couples has emphasized later stages of long-term relationships over the acquaintance phase (Clunis & Green, 1988; McWhirter

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& Mattison, 1984; Tanner, 1978). Consequently, information about courtship among gay men and lesbians is scarce.

Script theory provides one avenue for understanding courtship and dating. Scripts are a form of schema that are used to organize the world around us, a set of stereotypical actions (Ginsburg, 1988). Scripts allow us to predict the actions of people with whom we interact, as well as to guide decisions about how to act. Sexual scripts specifically refer to the cognitive models people use in choosing and evaluating behavior in sexual or relationship contexts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Sexual scripts operate on three levels: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Cultural scripts are shared, collective guides that instruct members on appropriate behaviors and emotions in specific roles (e.g., driving a car or interviewing for a job). The use of a cultural script in a specific situation constitutes an interpersonal script. Interpersonal scripts combine the actions present in cultural scripts with ones individuals typically add through experience. As a result, interpersonal scripts are more detailed and individualized than cultural ones. For example, a cultural script for eating in a restaurant may include having a beverage, whereas an interpersonal one may specify white wine for one person and cola for another. Lastly, intrapsychic scripts are those which represent our private wishes and desires. Intrapsychic scripts reconcile our internal wishes with the realities of the external world. They are highly individualized, containing both aspects of fantasy life and personal expectations for other's behavior.

A public and well-defined cultural script does not exist for same-sex courtship as it does for heterosexual relations. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that gay men and lesbians will have to draw on a heterosexual model to some extent in developing a variant cultural script. Gender roles are a core aspect of the heterosexual script (Hendrick, 1988). Numerous researchers have established that gender role postures designate men as the initiators of relationships and assign women to a reactive role, e.g., accepting a date, rejecting sexual activity (e.g., Grauerholz & Serpe, 1985). It is likely that gay men and lesbians will incorporate some elements of these roles into their scripts. However, because they are not interacting with a part-

ner who assumes the traditional complementary heterosexual role, they also are likely to have more opportunities to develop new scripts based on personal abilities or desires. Hence, it is to be expected that gay men's and lesbians' dating scripts would encompass some aspects of gender roles and reject others.

Evidence of gender differences in lesbian and gay dating exists in three areas: physical attractiveness, sexual behavior, and intimacy. First, in personal advertisements, gay men are more likely to both offer and seek physical attractiveness in prospective partners than lesbians (Deaux & Hanna, 1984). A partner's appearance also is the largest determinant of how much gay men like their dating partner (Sergios & Cody, 1985). Second, many gay men stress the sexual aspects of a relationship over the emotional ones, particularly in the early phase of courtship. For instance, Munchmore and Hanson's (1982) advice to gay men about appropriate behavior in a bar focuses on how to deal with sexual overtures: "Whether you make the approach or somebody comes on with you, the beginning of interest is likely to be signaled by prolonged looks, perhaps stares" (p. 32). They then elaborate on the rules regarding the expression and rejection of sexual interest. Reasons for having sex also differ for gay men and lesbians. For gay men, pleasure is a primary reason, whereas pleasing the partner is a primary reason for lesbians (Leigh, 1989). Third, in contrast, intimacy is a valued aspect of lesbian courtship. Lesbians emphasize personality traits and the possibility of a permanent relationship more often than gay men do in personal ads (Deaux & Hanna, 1984). Cini and Malafi (1991) reported that compared to heterosexual women, lesbians described deep emotional sharing more often as being part of a first date. In addition, lesbians frequently establish a friendship with a potential partner before the relationship becomes sexual (Vetere, 1982; Zand & Rose, 1992).

On the other hand, rigid gender roles appear to be less common among gay men and lesbians. On the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, gay men were more expressive than heterosexual men, and lesbians were more instrumental than heterosexual women (Kurdek, 1987). McWhirter and Mattison (1984) also reported that the division of tasks along traditionally masculine and feminine lines observed in heterosexual couples is much less likely to appear in male couples.

Further, many lesbians interviewed by Zand and Rose (1992) stated specifically that a unique aspect of lesbian dating was equality of role taking. Specific behaviors such as who initiates the date or sexual activity are shared by both partners. Lesbians also are less likely than heterosexual women to engage in a "gatekeeper" role regarding sexual behavior (Cini & Malafi, 1991; Zand & Rose, 1992).

Other elements of lesbian and gay dating that are likely to differ from heterosexual scripts concern issues related specifically to sexual orientation. For example, due to the risk of HIV infection, safer sex techniques are likely to be part of gay men's dating behavior. Also, lesbians and gay men are probably less likely to introduce someone they are going out with to family members or to be physically affectionate in public.

The question of what scripts guide gay men and lesbians in dating is of interest from the perspective of script theory. Are there cultural, collectively developed scripts? This question can be answered by determining if gay men and lesbians agree on the characters, actions, and sequence of a date. High agreement suggests that social norms are operating (Bower, Black, & Turner, 1979). Another relevant question concerns the congruence between hypothetical "typical" scripts and actual behavior.

A cognitive script methodology has been used successfully by Rose and Frieze (1989; in press) to answer these questions with regard to heterosexual dating. Heterosexual scripts for a hypothetical first date are well defined. High agreement among participants was found for 27 actions describing "a man's date" and nineteen for "a woman's date" (Rose & Frieze, 1989). Fourteen actions were common to both. Despite the common actions, gender roles clearly were prescribed by the remaining behaviors. A woman's date was reactive (e.g., wait to be asked for a date, limit sexual activity, be concerned about appearance). A man's date was proactive, requiring him to ask for, plan, and pay for the date, and initiate physical contact. Rose and Frieze's (in press) study compared hypothetical and actual scripts. Hypothetical scripts were found to constitute a core action sequence which was elaborated upon within actual date scripts. Gender-typed actions were very strong in both scripts.

The goal of the present study was to apply cognitive script theory and methodology to explore the dating scripts of gay men and lesbians. The intent was to identify and compare hypothetical and actual scripts for a first date. In addition, several hypotheses regarding gender differences were proposed. Gay men were expected to be more concerned about their own physical appearance, to more often engage in sex on a first date, and to be less concerned about intimacy than lesbians. It also was anticipated that several new script actions unique to a gay/lesbian orientation would be identified, including safer sex practices.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Fifty-one gay men (ages 21 to 51) and 44 lesbians (ages 19 to 55) were recruited from gay/lesbian organizations, a gay pride picnic, and friendship networks using "snowballing" techniques. Volunteers were given the option of completing the forms during the community event or returning the completed forms in postage-paid envelopes.

The sample was predominantly white (88.3%), 4.2 percent was African-American, 3.2 percent was Native-American, 3.2 percent was Hispanic, and 1.1 percent was Asian-American. The sample was well educated with 55 percent of the men and 68 percent of the women having at least a Bachelor's Degree. Income was distributed as follows: under \$10,000, 15.6 and 22.7 percent for men and women, respectively; \$10,000-\$20,000, 33.3 and 20.4 percent; \$20,000-\$30,000, 23.5 and 31.8 percent; \$30,000-\$40,000, 19.6 and 20.4 percent; \$40,000-\$50,000, 4.0 and 2.3 percent; and over \$50,000, 4.0 and 2.3 percent. A 2×2 (gender by target) MANOVA performed on the demographic variables age, educational level, and income indicated a significant main effect for gender (Pillai's $F[4, 86] = 3.84, p < .007$). A subsequent univariate ANOVA revealed that the lesbians were slightly older than the gay men ($M = 34$ years, $SD = 7.3$, and $M = 30.6$ years, $SD = 6.8$, respectively, $F[1, 92] = 5.12, p < .05$). No other significant effects were found.

Men were more likely to be single than women, $\chi^2(2, 95) = 7.33$, $p < .02$ (see Table 1). One-way ANOVAs (by gender) revealed no significant differences between gay men and lesbians in relationship status length. A 2×2 MANOVA (gender \times target) performed on the three dating experience variables yielded a significant main effect for gender (Pillai's $F[5, 82] = 2.37$, $p < .05$). Univariate analyses revealed that men indicated having had significantly more gay/lesbian dating experience than women, $F(1, 89) = 4.11$, $p < .05$, and reported having dated a greater number of people in the past year, $F(1, 89) = 7.07$, $p < .01$ (see Table 1). No differences in reported heterosexual dating experience or other significant effects were found.

TABLE 1. Relationship status and dating experience by gender

	Gay Men (N = 51)			Lesbians (N = 44)		
	%	M	(SD)	%	M	(SD)
Relationship Status		Years			Years	
Single	44.9	3.2	(5.4)	19.0	2.3	(3.4)
Involved/ not committed	8.2	.8	(.8)	16.7	.5	(.5)
Committed	46.9	3.1	(3.5)	64.3	3.8	(4.2)
Dating Experience ^a						
Gay/Lesbian		3.5	(1.0)		3.1	(1.0)
Heterosexual		2.2	(1.1)		2.6	(.7)
Number people dated past year		3.7	(6.5)		1.0	(.9)

^a 5-point scale, 5 = extensive experience

Measures

Subjects completed a questionnaire on dating experiences. One half of the participants received a measure asking them to describe what a man/woman would *typically* do the first time he/she went out with someone new, using twenty actions or events. Then, participants were asked to rate (5-point scale) how closely their description matched their most recent experience of going out with someone new.

The other half of the participants were asked to describe, in twenty steps, their most recent *actual* first date, i.e., “the last time you went out with someone new.” Participants also specified how long it had been since their most recent first date, how long they dated the person, and to rate how typical the date was and their level of satisfaction with the date (5-point scales).

Coding

A coding scheme consisting of fifty-four actions was used to classify participants' responses; forty-seven were from Rose and Frieze's (in press) coding scheme, seven were new actions. Actions were coded as either self-initiated or partner-initiated. Each script was coded by one rater, then recoded four weeks later. Intrarater reliability was 90.4 percent. A second coder randomly selected and coded twenty forms. Interrater reliability was 87.3 percent. Actions cited by at least 25% of the participants were considered collective script actions (Bower, Black, & Turner, 1979).

RESULTS

Hypothetical scripts for gay men and lesbians included fourteen self-initiated actions, eleven of which were common to both (see Table 2). Common script actions shown in bold type in Table 2 included pre-date preparations (e.g., grooming, cleaning the apartment, discussing plans for the date), date events (e.g., eating, going to a movie), initiating physical contact, and closing rituals (e.g., making plans for another date, going home). Six of the eleven

TABLE 2. Scripts for hypothetical and actual first dates based on actions mentioned by 25 percent of participants per script

Hypothetical Date		Actual Date	
Gay Men (N = 28)	Lesbians (N = 19)	Gay Men (N = 23)	Lesbians (N = 25)
<p>DISCUSS PLANS^{ab} GROOM/DRESS Prepare (clean apt., etc.) Meet date at pre-arranged location GET TO KNOW/EVALUATE DATE TALK/LAUGH/JOKE GO TO MOVIE, SHOW, ETC. EAT/DRINK NON-ALCOHOL Drink alcohol/use drugs Initiate physical contact Make-out Make plans for another date Take date home Go home</p>	<p>DISCUSS PLANS Tell friends about date GROOM/DRESS Prepare (clean apt., etc.) Meet date at pre-arranged location Leave one location for another GET TO KNOW/EVALUATE DATE TALK/LAUGH/JOKE GO TO A MOVIE, SHOW, ETC. EAT/DRINK NON-ALCOHOL Initiate physical contact Make plans for another date Kiss/Hug goodnight Go home</p>	<p>DISCUSS PLANS Was nervous GROOMED/DRESSED Went to date's house/ Picked up date Met at pre-arranged location Left one location for another GOT TO KNOW/ EVALUATED DATE TALKED/LAUGHED/JOKED Talked to friends while on date WENT TO A MOVIE, SHOW, ETC. ATE/DRANK NON-ALCOHOL/USED DRUGS INITIATED PHYSICAL CONTACT Made-out Had sex Stayed over Made plans for another date Went home</p>	<p>DISCUSSED PLANS Was nervous GROOMED/DRESSED Prepared (cleaned apt., bought flowers, etc.) Went to date's house/ Picked up date Picked up date Left GOT TO KNOW/EVALUATED DATE TALKED/LAUGHED/JOKED WENT TO A MOVIE, SHOW, ETC. ATE/DRANK NON-ALCOHOL Positive affect Drank alcohol/used drugs INITIATED PHYSICAL CONTACT Kissed/hugged goodnight Took date home Went home Went home Evaluate feelings post-date</p>

a Capital letters indicate script actions were cited by 50% or more participants

b Bold type indicates the action is common to both gay men and lesbians

c Indicates partner-initiated action

common actions (DISCUSS PLANS, DRESS, GET TO KNOW DATE, TALK, GO TO SHOW, EAT) formed the "main conceptualization" of the date for both women and men, defined by Bower et al. (1979) as those actions cited by 50 percent or more participants.

As expected, gay men's scripts were more sexually-oriented (e.g., make out) and also included drinking alcohol. In addition, though not meeting the 25 percent criteria to be included as a script action, more men (22%, $N = 6$) indicated that they expected sex to occur on a typical first date than women (15%, $N = 3$). However, concerns about appearance or intimacy were not reported as part of either women's or men's hypothetical scripts.

Actual first date scripts also are shown in Table 2. Actual scripts for gay men had eighteen actions; lesbian scripts contained nineteen. Twelve actions were common to both. The shared actions were the same as for the hypothetical scripts and included one additional action: feeling nervous. The main conceptualization of an actual date contained two actions for gay men not part of the hypothetical script core (DRANK ALCOHOL, INITIATED PHYSICAL CONTACT) and one for lesbians (INITIATED PHYSICAL CONTACT).

As predicted, actual scripts for gay men emphasized the sexual aspects of the date (e.g., made out, had sex, stayed over). Nearly 48 percent ($N = 11$) of the men indicated having had sex on a most recent first date, compared to 12 percent ($N = 3$) of women. Also similar to traditional roles for men, gay men more often mentioned orchestrating the date (e.g., met at a pre-arranged location, made plans for another date) and described only self-initiated actions. In contrast, as expected, intimacy/affective actions were unique to the lesbian script (e.g., evaluate feelings about date, had positive feelings about the date). Lesbians also included two partner-initiated actions in their script (e.g., partner picked me up, partner went home). However, concern about appearance was not reported as part of either script.

No gender differences were found for other actual date characteristics. A one-way MANOVA revealed that both gay men and lesbians felt their most recent first date met their expectations fairly well ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 1.1$; 5-point scale, 5 = Met virtually all my expectations). They also expressed similar high levels of satisfac-

tion with their most recent first date ($M = 4.5$, $SD = .8$; 5-point scale, 5 = Very satisfied).

In terms of script content, congruence between hypothetical and actual scripts was high. Scripts for gay men shared twelve actions, lesbians eleven. However, ANOVAS (gender by target) revealed that hypothetical date descriptions contained fewer actions than actual ones ($M = 16.6$, $SD = 8.3$, and $M = 22.9$, $SD = 8.4$, respectively; $F[1, 88] = 12.58$, $p < .0007$). Hypothetical dates also were rated as significantly more typical of participants' experience than were actual date descriptions ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 1.1$, and $M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.3$, respectively, 5 = Very typical; $F[1, 88] = 7.88$, $p < .007$).

The last question addressed in the present study concerned what script actions would be unique to a gay and lesbian population. Contrary to expectation, safer sex was not reported as a standard part of gay/lesbian scripts. Only four men and no women mentioned safer sex practices. Other new actions identified for this sample but not found in Rose and Frieze's (in press) research on heterosexuals included: discussion of gay and lesbian issues such as coming out ($n = 4$ for both men and women), pre- and post-date masturbation ($n = 0$ for men and $n = 2$ for women), sadomasochism ($n = 2$ for men and $n = 0$ for women), watching pornographic movies ($n = 3$ for men and $n = 0$ for women), and calling the partner immediately after the date ended ($n = 2$ for men and $n = 6$ for women).

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study provide evidence that cultural and interpersonal scripts for same-sex dating are clearly defined and parallel heterosexual scripts, at least for predominantly white, well-educated, and middle-class gay men and lesbians. The scripts identified here included actions for all stages of a first date, including preparations, interactions with a date partner, and closing rituals. More than half the script actions found in the present study also were reported by Rose and Frieze's younger participants. The degree of similarity, found despite the differences in age (32.2 years and 19.0 years for the gay/lesbian sample and heterosexual sample, respectively) and sexual orientation of the two samples, attests to the strength of the first date script.

Many actions associated with hypothetical scripts were cited by more than fifty percent of participants, hence constituting a "main conceptualization" (Schank & Abelson, 1977). These high-frequency actions formed the backbone of the script; other actions depended on them. Thus, it is not too surprising that hypothetical date descriptions were rated as more typical of previous first dates than actual dates. Hypothetical dates contained fewer actions and could be seen as a general schema; during actual dates, participants have the freedom to develop specific actions within it. The strength of the script as well as the relationship between hypothetical versus actual scripts could be further explored in future research by having participants rate the degree to which each action identified here usually occurs on a first date. Participants also could be asked to arrange the most likely temporal sequence for actions to more accurately determine script structure.

As predicted, strong gender differences in the areas of sexual behavior and intimacy were found. Gay men included sexual contact more often as part of their hypothetical and actual scripts, although few mentioned safer sex practices. Lesbians emphasized the intimate and emotional aspects and more often mentioned partner-initiated actions than men did. However, within a date pair, lesbians and gay men did not adopt specific gender-typed roles, as has been found for heterosexuals. Orchestrating the date, maintaining the conversation, and initiating physical contact were performed jointly by participants and their partners. Likewise, concern about appearance was notably absent from both women's and men's reported scripts.

These results suggest that some gender differences are expressed more strongly in same-sex dyads than opposite-sex ones. Perhaps gay men's scripts are more sexual because there is no socialized "gatekeeper" role, as in heterosexual relationships. Similarly, as women, lesbians have not been socialized to assume the "sexual initiator" role; it must be negotiated in the relationship. One consequence of the lack of gender differences within same-sex pairs may be greater script compatibility than among opposite-sex pairs, although this remains to be tested.

Scripts for gay men and lesbians had some noteworthy differences from the scripts of heterosexuals. First, several of the actions

added to the Rose and Frieze (1989) coding scheme were specific to this population, although they were not used frequently enough to meet the 25 percent criterion. It is likely that a less open-ended instrument such as a checklist would elicit a greater frequency of responses for actions such as discussed gay and lesbian issues and practiced safer sex. The infrequency of reports of safer sexual behavior was surprising, and we hope that it is merely a reflection of the open-ended format. The findings also indicate that different populations are likely to have some actions unique to each, e.g., older or divorced samples will have their own variations.

Conversely, some actions used by heterosexuals were not applicable to this sample. For instance, heterosexual women expected to tell their parents about the date in the Rose and Frieze study (1989); lesbians did not. Lesbian scripts also did not contain an action for something going wrong, but did contain actions for positive emotions and evaluating feelings about the date after it ended. These results suggest that perhaps first dates are better experiences for lesbians than heterosexual women. They also raise the issue of how subjective evaluations of the event affect scripts.

In conclusion, the present findings suggest that script theory provides a useful framework for understanding gay and lesbian courtship. Future studies could use a checklist of actions instead of free recall in order to assess script components more fully. Additional questions which could be explored include the extent to which hypothetical and actual scripts identified here correspond to intrapsychic ones, i.e., private wishes and desires, as well as what alternatives to dating are available as courtship scripts.

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