
Sexual Script Theory: Past, Present, and Future

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*All the World's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
(Shakespeare, As You Like It)*

In their book *Sexual Conduct*, John Gagnon and William Simon (1973) described their *sexual script theory* perspective on human sexual behavior. Its basic premise was that all social behavior, including sexual behavior, is socially scripted. Of course, as the quote from Shakespeare attests, Simon and Gagnon were hardly the first to liken human behavior to scripted performance. Still, their book represented a watershed moment in sex research, and has been deemed one of the top 25 classic works of sexual theory (Weis 1998b). Bancroft (2009) referred to sexual scripting theory as “one of the, if not *the* most frequently cited theoretical models in post-psychoanalytic sexual science” (p. 10), McCormick (2010) declared that “No single theoretical perspective better accounts for the complexity of human sexual motivation and behaviors” (p. 91), and Kimmel (2007) concluded that Gagnon and Simon’s book “heralded the new paradigm from which all subsequent readings of sexuality in the social sciences and humanities have sprung” (p. ix).

If the basic tenet of sexual script theory was not novel, why has it proven itself such a pivotal and long-lasting theoretical perspective? An attempt to answer that question requires both an explanation of sexual script theory and consideration of its place in history.

2.1 Sexual Script Theory

Central to sexual script theory is the notion of social constructionism—the interpretation of reality, including human behavior, is derived from shared beliefs within a particular social group (DeLamater and Hyde 1998). In this case, the human behaviors in question are sexual, and the meanings attached to those behaviors, including what makes them “sexual” behaviors, derives from metaphorical scripts individuals have learned and incorporated as a function of their involvement in the social group (Simon 1996; Simon and Gagnon 1986, 1987, 2003). “Scripts are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequencing of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience” (Gagnon and Simon 1973, p. 17).

Social scripts are conceptualized as the mental representations individuals construct and then use to make sense of their experience, including their own and others’ behavior.

Scripts are a metaphor for conceptualizing behavior within social life. Most of social life most of the time must operate under the guidance of an operating syntax, much as language is a precondition for speech. For behavior to occur, something resembling scripting must occur on three distinct levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts. (Simon and Gagnon 1984, p. 53)

Although cultural scenarios are at the most abstract level of scripting, they are necessary for

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providing the context for roles, and contain institutional arrangements and symbols that comprise collective life (Simon and Gagnon 1986, 1987, 2003). Mass media certainly play an important role in conveying cultural scenarios, but sexual norms are conveyed even through the ways in which cultural institutions such as government, law, education, and religion are experienced on a daily basis (Gagnon 1990; Simon 1996). Because particular sexual behaviors are illegal, stigmatized, and warned against, whereas others are instructed, encouraged, and envied, individuals learn the general contexts for sexual activity. In a sense, cultural scenarios lay out the playing field of sexuality; what is deemed desirable and undesirable, and where the broad boundaries lie between appropriate and inappropriate sexual conduct.

As important as *sexual cultural scripts* are, they are not synonymous with sexual behavior. "The enactment of virtually all roles must either directly or indirectly reflect the contents of appropriate cultural scenarios. These cultural scenarios are rarely entirely predictive of actual behavior, and they are generally too abstract to be applied in all circumstances" (Simon and Gagnon 1984, p. 53). So cultural scenarios lay out the general cast of characters (roles) and the relationships among them, yet usually do not provide enough concrete direction to guide actual interpersonal behavior in specific situations. This is where the interpersonal level of sexual scripts enters.

Interpersonal scripts rest on the roles and general circumstances provided by cultural scenarios, yet they entail adaptation to the particulars of each situation. Accordingly, each social actor helps create interpersonal scripts by adapting the general guidelines he or she learned from his or her experiences in the culture to the specifics presented in each social encounter (Simon and Gagnon 1986, 1987, 2003). At the interpersonal level, the script was said to provide "the organization of mutually shared conventions that allows two or more actors to participate in a complex act involving mutual dependence" (Gagnon and Simon 1973, p. 18). When the two or more actors involved share similar scripts, the social interaction may play out with relative harmony.

However, there is always room for differences in the interpersonal scripts followed by each actor, with potentially troublesome results (Wiederman 2005). Also, the specifics of each circumstance differ, requiring modification and improvisation of previously adopted scripts. Especially when alternative outcomes are available in a particular scenario, the ability to engage in mental rehearsal is important for choosing among potential behaviors. This internal, individual experience of scripts is the intrapsychic level within script theory.

Intrapsychic scripts may entail specific plans or strategies for carrying out interpersonal scripts, but they are so much more (Simon and Gagnon 1986, 1987, 2003).

This intrapsychic scripting creates fantasy in the rich sense of that word: the symbolic reorganization of reality in ways to more fully realize the actor's many-layered and sometimes multivoiced wishes. Intrapsychic scripting becomes a historical necessity, as a private world of wishes and desires that are experienced as originating in the deepest recesses of the self must be bound to social life: individual desires are linked to social meanings (Simon and Gagnon 1984, p. 54).

Intrapsychic scripts include fantasies, memories, and mental rehearsals, and it is within the intrapsychic scripts that individuals work out the difficulties involved in enacting interpersonal scripts within the general context of cultural scenarios (Gagnon 1990; Simon and Gagnon 1986, 1987, 2003).

Whereas cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts may be thought of as more narrative in structure, intrapsychic scripts need not be.

When dealing with erotic elements in the intrapsychic we are dealing with a more complex set of layered meanings which has much more to do with non-narrative tradition in literary representation and imagery. What is arousing may not be the plan to have sex, but fragmentary symbolic materials taken from mass media or from local experience. (Gagnon 1990, p. 7)

In this way, intrapsychic scripts represent the particulars of each individual's unique sexuality, including those aspects that cannot be formed into words.

As described here, each of the three levels of sexual scripts may seem rather static. For de-

scriptive purposes, it may be necessary to characterize cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapersonal scripts as “things” in the sense that each exists on its own. However, Gagnon and Simon viewed all three levels of scripts as dynamically related, and frequently in flux as a result. As actually played out in behavior in the context of peoples’ lives, there is potentially perpetual interplay among the three levels of sexual scripts. Unfortunately, this potential complexity is difficult to describe, capture, or examine in all its richness.

Gagnon and Simon also noted that the relevance of each of the three levels of scripting varies across settings. For example, in what they termed “paradigmatic societies,” cultural scenarios and a specified set of ritualized variations may be all that is required to provide instructions such that social participants understand their respective roles and the meanings ascribed to their behaviors. In these societies, cultural scenarios and prescribed variations are sufficient to provide direction for successful enactment of scripts. In “postparadigmatic societies,” in contrast, there are substantially fewer shared meanings and more disjunctures of meaning across different spheres of life. “As a result, the enactment of the same role within different spheres of life or different roles within the same sphere routinely requires different appearances, if not different organizations, of the self” (Simon and Gagnon 1984, p. 54). Postparadigmatic societies entail so much variability in meanings of sexual behavior that each social situation may require a unique adaptation of the individual to that situation.

Although Gagnon and Simon focused on sexual behavior in application of scripting theory, within their view there is nothing inherently special about sexual behavior or its motivation.

From a scripting perspective, the sexual is not viewed as an intrinsically significant aspect of human behavior; rather, the sexual is viewed as becoming significant either when it is defined as such by collective life—sociogenic significance; or when individual experiences or development assign it a special significance—ontogenic significance. (Simon and Gagnon 1984, p. 54)

Sexual activities gain their special status simply because the society ascribes such status or because of the individual’s own unique experiences.

Sexual scripting theory also entails a developmental or life-cycle aspect. Gagnon and Simon noted that particular scripts, or aspects of scripts, have age requirements, such as “You cannot engage in X until you are Y years of age,” or “By age Y you must have done X.” Common scripts themselves may have variants based on the relative ages of the actors, or at least the actors within a particular script are evaluated differently based on their respective ages. Adolescence and early adulthood are the most troubling stages for individuals and for the culture to which such individuals belong; it is during these stages that individuals are developing and refining their interpersonal and intrapsychic sexual scripts. “The major cultural scenarios that shape the most common interpersonal scripts tend to be almost exclusively drawn from the requirements of adolescence and early adulthood. There are virtually none tied to the issues of subsequent segments of life” (Simon and Gagnon 1984, p. 58). Accordingly, Simon and Gagnon (1984) noted that the extreme ends of the lifecycle might be thought of as the presexual (childhood) and the postsexual (old age), at least in terms of predominant, shared scripts. “Not that sexually significant events do not occur during these periods, but they are not or only rarely anticipated in prevailing cultural scenarios dealing with the very young and the very old” (Simon and Gagnon 1984, p. 58).

Interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts fashioned in adolescence and early adulthood frequently take on a conservative nature in that, once successful, individuals are motivated to retain them and not stray too far from what has worked in the past.

Once they have found a formula that works—in other words, the realization of sexual pleasure, as well as the realization of sociosexual competence—there is an obvious tendency on some level to para-ritualize that formula. Variations can occur, but variations generally occur within the limits of a larger, stabilizing body of scripts both interper-

sonal and intrapsychic. The stabilizing of sexual scripts, often confused with the crystallization of a sexual identity, occurs partly because it works by insuring adequate sexual performance and providing adequate sexual pleasure. It also represents an effective accommodation with the larger self-process, in which sexual practice and sexual identity do not disturb the many components of one's non-sexual identities. (Simon and Gagnon 1984, p. 57)

To contemporary readers, sexual script theory is likely to be non-controversial. If so, this level of comfort attests to how constructionist perspectives have become inherent in Western thought about human experience. Why Gagnon and Simon's ideas took hold when they did remains an open question. They certainly were not the first to describe and discuss the importance of membership in society for providing individual members with explanations for human behavior, or the process of meaning making. Indeed, sexual script theory is a logical extension of symbolic interactionism, a term coined by sociologist Herbert Blumer in the 1930s based on the work of his mentor, sociologist George Herbert Mead. "Symbolic interactionism focuses on how meaning is created, modified, and put into action by individuals in the process of social interaction" (Brickell 2006, p. 94), and has its own history in the study of sexuality (Gecas and Libby 1977; Longmore 1998; Waskul and Plante 2010).

Similarly, Gagnon and Simon were not the first to employ the script metaphor to social interactions. For example, the sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) famously presented dramaturgy as a sociological perspective, likening human social interaction to performance of assumed roles in a theatrical production (see Henslin and Biggs 1971, for an early example of applying dramaturgy to sexuality). If the ideas underlying sexual script theory were not unique, but instead applications and extensions of symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, and other social constructionist theories, why did the elaboration of sexual script theory come to represent such an important point in the history of sex research?

2.2 Sexual Script Theory in Historical Context

Sexual script theory emphasizes that social context is extremely important for understanding human behavior, including the behavior of widespread adoption of the theory itself. There are several social factors that may have facilitated the proliferation of sexual script theory. First, Gagnon and Simon explicitly applied the sociological principles described earlier specifically to sexual behavior. Although such application seems commonplace decades after the fact, at the time such a perspective was novel. Second, the cultural milieu may have been ripe for such a social constructionist perspective on sexuality. As Simon and Gagnon (1984) noted, their perspective was a reaction to the dominant theoretical views of human sexuality at the time: psychoanalytic and biological (see Plummer 1982, for comparison of social scripting to these then-dominant, perspectives in sex research). Within these dominant perspectives, sexual behavior was seen as essentially determined, either by instincts or drives, inherently tied to human biology. For example, Freud based his psychoanalytic theory on an assumed instinct toward life and procreation—Libido—that may find natural and healthy expression or may be distorted into psychopathology.

Freudian psychoanalytic perspectives on sexuality continued to hold sway even as biological perspectives rose to attention. Perhaps the most famous of the "new" biological perspective on sexuality was Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues (1948, 1953) who catalogued sexual behaviors of respondents and plotted them against such variables as age, sex, and social class. Whereas some variables Kinsey and his colleagues considered relevant were societal in nature (e.g., social class, education), the underlying assumption seemed to be that these social variables distorted otherwise natural expressions of sexuality. Similarly, William Masters and Virginia Johnson (1966, 1970) focused their research and therapy on bodily response to sexual stimuli; work based on the assumption that there is universal, and therefore

natural, sexual functioning. Even casual examination of the titles of the books by Kinsey and his colleagues (1948, 1953), and Masters and Johnson (1966, 1970), reveals the assumption they were working under; that there were inherent sexual universals for humans that could be analyzed and described by researchers such as themselves.

Unlike the psychoanalytic and biological perspectives, Gagnon and Simon believed that nothing could be assumed about sexuality, apart from the notion that anything considered “sexual” arose because those meanings were attached to the stimuli, or situation, or behavior by the individuals so involved. This social constructionist approach may have been especially appealing to a growing number of researchers in the late 1960s and 1970s as cultural events called into question essentialist perspectives that had been taken for granted previously. Similarly, Gagnon and Simon (1973) considered sexual scripts as explicitly interwoven with gender scripts, and feminist movements at the time were calling into question assumptions about male and female, and the extent to which these assumptions were inevitable versus products of culture and socialization (see Simon and Gagnon 2003 for discussion of cultural changes that shaped sexual script theory). So, sexual script theory may have benefitted from coming along at the right time in history as it presented a framework very much in tune with changing cultural values in the United States.

2.3 Similar Theoretical Perspectives in Social Science

The previous section included a brief discussion of the intellectual history from which sexual script theory emerged, including social constructionism generally, and symbolic interactionism and dramaturgy more specifically. Given that sexual script theory took shape through the late 1960s and into the 1970s, there were other theoretical perspectives present at the time (and some developed shortly thereafter) that shared some important features with sexual script theory. The

most prominent ones are described briefly here, in hopes of more clearly illuminating both similarities and differences with social scientific perspectives that may be related, at some level, to sexual script theory.

In examining script theories, and those that share similarities with script theories, an important and early distinction becomes apparent based on academic discipline. That is, some script theories, including sexual script theory, emerged out of sociology, thereby resting on the foundations of social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, and dramaturgy. Other script theories, however, emerged out of psychology and psychiatry, thereby resting more on psychoanalytic assumptions or mentalistic models in which the emphasis is on the individual and his or her cognitive experience, created by past experience.

In 1964, psychiatrist Eric Berne published his most famous book, *Games People Play*, popularizing Transactional Analysis (TA). Generally, TA appropriated particular psychoanalytic concepts, renamed them, and embedded them in interpersonal interactions between individuals. Berne’s TA provided a framework for analyzing and describing the “moves” within social transactions between two or more people, including the parts of the personality from which particular aspects of interpersonal interactions derive, as well as the psychological “pay offs” for engaging in particular ritualized sets of transactions. It was these ritualized, or scripted, interpersonal interactions that Berne termed “games.” One could say that the fact that some games were common enough to be documented implied that such interpersonal interactions are at least loosely scripted, and a specific set of games Berne (1964) described had to do with sexual encounters. Interestingly, Berne (1973) also used the term “life scripts” to refer to overarching patterns of behavior that seemed to characterize some individuals’ lives, resulting in repetitive types of interpersonal relationships and ultimate psychological pay offs (also see Steiner 1974). One important difference between TA and sexual script theory, however, is that Berne, perhaps by nature of being a psychiatrist, seemed most interested in games and scripts that were pathological and caused problems in some way.

Similar to Berne, Aaron Beck (1967) focused on pathological experience, primarily with individuals suffering from clinical depression. Beck's model focused on rigid, maladaptive ways of perceiving the world, which subsequently resulted in depressive emotion. Beck (1967) termed the mental mechanism through which people perceive the world as "cognitive schemas," which he defined as: "A (mental) structure for screening, coding, and evaluating the stimuli that impinges on the organism. On the basis of the matrix of schemas, the individual is able to orient himself in relation to time and space, and to categorize and interpret experiences in a meaningful way" (p. 283). In a general sense, cognitive schemas are mental representations individuals construct regarding their knowledge pertaining to a particular concept. Such concepts could be things (e.g., schools, apples), events (e.g., one's 16th birthday, religious services generally), roles (e.g., parents, police officers), and particular people (e.g., one's sibling, a coworker), including oneself (so called "self-schemas"). The importance of cognitive schemas is that they allow us to organize mental material according to the concepts to which that material relates.

The cognitive schemas that seem most closely related to script theory are those pertaining to events, and more specifically, to events as general concepts (e.g., "having sex") rather than specific events that have already occurred. Indeed, some theorists elaborated such cognitive conceptualizations of scripts (e.g., Abelson 1976, 1981). In that way, sociological script theory and cognitive script theory both entail mental material about how to act, what to expect from others involved in the particular scenario, and how to interpret stimuli and happenings within the delineated episode. The primary difference, however, seems to arise out of the emphasis placed on the dynamic and social nature of scripts (sociological perspective) versus the internal and enduring nature of scripts as held by individuals (psychological perspective). Also, sociological scripting perspectives have been applied to human sexuality much more frequently and extensively than have psychological scripting perspectives.

The cognitive schema perspective on scripts has been incorporated into a well-established line of theory and research: attachment theory. Based on the notion that our earliest experiences with caregivers create mental representations of what can be expected in close relationships with others (Bowlby 1969), attachment theory has been a rich source of theoretical and empirical work on a variety of types of emotionally close relationships (Howe 2011). More recently, theorists and researchers in that area have extended the mental representations inherent in attachment theory into the realm of "generalized event representations," or "scripts," that entail what the individual has come to expect in particular kinds of emotional interpersonal relationships (Fivush 2006; Waters and Waters 2006). In particular, attention has been paid to the "maternal secure base script" as the ideal that results from interactions between an infant and a mother who consistently meets the infant's needs (Vaughn et al. 2006). This notion of attachment scripts has apparent relevance for sexual scripts (Dewitte 2012) to the extent that sexual activity occurs within ongoing, emotionally close relationships that provoke caregiving schemas (Peloquin et al. 2014).

A more direct application of mentalistic scripts to romantic relationships was elaborated by Sternberg (1996, 1998), who hypothesized that people each build "stories" about romantic love relationships, based both on personal experience as well as exposure to such stories in one's culture. Based on analyses of both mass media portrayals of romantic love as well as responses from interviews of American adults, Sternberg identified 25 primary love stories, or scripts, that his respondents seemed to follow in their enactments of romantic love relationships. Couples who followed the same or complementary love stories (scripts) were most satisfied with their respective romantic relationships. Although Sternberg did not employ the term "script," or include sexual aspects of romantic relationships, there are apparent conceptual similarities to sexual script theory.

In addition to using script theory to conceptualize mental representation of relationship behavior and meaning, some theorists have extended

the script metaphor into the individualistic realm of personality (most notably, Tomkins 1979, 1987). Within these perspectives, the assumption is that personality is organized around emotionally significant experiences, or “scenes.”

To understand and deal with such emotionally significant experiences [scenes], people cognitively but nonconsciously link scenes based on their similarities. This co-assembling of scenes results in ‘scripts,’ which are implicit assumptions for anticipating and dealing with life experiences so as to maximize positive emotions and minimize negative emotions. (Demorest 2013, p. 583)

An individual’s personality is the collection scenes experienced as well as the set of expectations that result from these past experiences. Of course this is a perspective very much rooted in the cognitive schema tradition in psychology, and although not explicitly tied to sexuality, it presumably encompasses stable aspects of sexuality presumed to be part of the individual’s personality.

From this brief review of behavioral science theories seemingly tied by the use of the term “script,” we see that most have occurred in the psychological tradition of cognitive schema theory. Sexual script theory, in contrast, emerged and developed from a sociological perspective. That is not to say that the two lines of theory and research are entirely unrelated, but they do appear to maintain important differences, and the identification of one set of theories with psychology and psychiatry and the other with sociology likely discourages integration. Returning to Gagnon and Simon’s sexual script theory, the section below is dedicated to consideration of how scripts are typically measured in research that employs their theory.

2.4 Methods and Application in Research on Sexual Scripts

What types of scripts, respondents, and topics have been addressed in research employing sexual scripts theory? How have researchers evaluated or measured scripts? Comprehensive answers to these questions are beyond the scope

of this chapter, but general answers, and some exemplars, are offered. Still, any attempt to answer these questions entails particular difficulties. As Gagnon (1990) noted, researchers may explicitly or implicitly employ sexual script theory in their work. In other words, some research and the rationale and explanations offered by the researchers may fit sexual script theory particularly well, even when those researchers never mention or reference such theory. At the same time, researchers may make reference to script theory explicitly, yet interpret or apply the theory in ways that are inaccurate or unjustified. An additional complication is that frequently researchers appear to use the term “script” synonymously with terms such as “socialization,” “mass media,” “cultural messages,” and “social roles.” With these problematic issues in mind, the published work reviewed here entails explicit reference to sexual script theory consistent with Gagnon and Simon’s work.

2.4.1 Critical Review Approaches

In evaluating sexual scripts, researchers have used two broad approaches. One entails deciphering cultural scripts (“cultural scenarios” to Gagnon and Simon) by critically reviewing either cultural artifacts such as mass media, or the collective research published previously. As an example of the cultural analysis approach, Mosher and Tomkins (1988) drew on numerous cultural sources in making the case that particular sexual and gender scripts defined a subpopulation of hypermasculine (“macho”) males. In particular, they examined the socialization of boys to acknowledge particular emotions but not others, male adolescent rites of passage, and mass media as evidence that males are commonly provided hypermasculine scripts that result in machismo.

Other researchers have relied on examination of previously published research for examining sexual scripts. For example, Hill (2006) elucidated a common sexual script for feminine heterosexual males based on what previous research revealed about male-female relationships among men considered feminine. Although femininity

may impair a man's sexual attractiveness to women, Hill concluded that "feminine heterosexual subvert overly restrictive heteropatriarchal sexual scripts, freeing both traditional and nontraditional men to explore ways of being sexual with women outside a dominant-submissive dialect" (p. 145).

Monto and Carey (2014) examined shifts in national data on sexual behavior collected over 25 years to determine whether sexual scripts for young adults in the U.S. appeared to have shifted toward a more casual, "hook-up" orientation. They found that, although the number of sex partners had not changed over time, contemporary young adults were more likely to report having had sex with a friend or acquaintance, thereby demonstrating some changes in normative sexual scripts. Other writers have reviewed published research to make the case that traditional sexual scripts facilitate sexual aggression from men toward women (Beyers 1996), as well as the case that sexual scripts in the US have become more egalitarian over previous decades (McCormick 2010). Also relying on published research, Eaton and Rose (2011) examined the research published in the journal *Sex Roles* over a span of 35 years to determine the ways in which traditional dating scripts and premarital sexual scripts for males and females in the US may have changed. They concluded, however, that dating relationships in early adulthood remained firmly tied to traditional gender roles and traditional cultural scripts.

Other researchers have analyzed mass media in attempts to uncover what may be prevalent sexual scripts. For example, Kim et al. (2007) analyzed episodes from the top 25 primetime television programs broadcast in the US to elaborate what they termed "the heterosexual script." In contrast, Markle (2008) examined episodes from a popular cable television program in the US that featured sexually assertive female characters, and in so doing determined that the primary female characters enacted a traditionally masculine sexual script. Kelly (2010) analyzed dramatic television series aimed at teen girls in the US to describe scripts related to loss of virginity. Kelly identified three primary virginity loss scripts, and elaborated the positive and negative components

and implications of each script, as well as the meanings ascribed to virginity and its loss within each script.

2.4.2 Self-Report Approaches

In addition to analyzing published research or cultural artifacts such as mass media, the other broad approach to the evaluation of sexual scripts entails researchers gathering self-report data directly from research participants. In essence, respondents are asked to generate or describe particular sexual scripts, or are asked to validate the existence of particular sexual scripts. This latter approach may involve presenting various possible elements of a sexual script and asking respondents to rate how likely it is that each element would be included in the scenario the respondents are provided (e.g., first date). To the extent that the research participants exhibit consensus, the researchers conclude that the respondents shared a cultural script for the given scenario.

As an example of this approach, Krahe et al. (2007) asked teen respondents to rate the likelihood of several script elements for having sex with a new partner for the first time. Ratings of the individual script elements were compared under instructions to consider adolescents in general versus the respondent him- or herself. Interestingly, respondents' personal scripts contained less risk elements and more positive outcomes compared to their general cultural scripts. Similarly, Littleton and Axsom (2003) asked college student respondents to rate how typical several script elements were for "seduction" and "rape." The researchers found that, although there were clear differences between two scripts, there were several elements that overlapped, which may explain why some instances of sexual assault are viewed ambiguously, even by the victims.

The second general self-report method entails asking research participants to generate a verbal (written or spoken) description of either what did occur in a defined sexual event, or might occur in a hypothetical scenario presented by the researchers (e.g., Clark and Carroll 2008; Eaton

and Rose 2012; Krahe et al. 2007). The assumption is that themes that emerge from respondents' descriptions of their sexual experiences represent common cultural scripts. With responses to a hypothetical scenario, the assumption is that respondents rely on their cultural scripts to generate the anticipated events and elements comprising the scenario.

There are numerous examples illustrating the primary self-report approaches that have been employed to collect data from respondents concerning sexual scripts. Consider Masters et al. (2013) who conducted individual, face-to-face interviews with heterosexual young adults. The researchers were interested in potential differences between respondents' cultural sexual scripts and personal sexual scripts, and how they negotiated any such discrepancies. They found that respondents seemed to fall into three broad categories: those whose cultural and personal scripts coincided, those who accepted gender-based cultural scripts as reality yet created exceptions for their own such behavior, and those who attempted to either transform cultural scripts or view their own variation on those scripts as equally valid. Whittier and Melendez (2004) conducted multiple interviews with a small sample of gay men, examining how the respondents viewed their own sexuality. "Analysis revealed that intersubjectivity, or what individuals thought others thought of them, is a common process in participants' intrapsychic sexual scripting" (p. 131).

Interviews have been a common method of data collection in sexual script theory research. For example, Karlsen and Traeen (2013) interviewed young adult women regarding their experiences in "friends with benefits" relationships, Mutchler (2000) interviewed gay men about their sexual lives, and Hussen et al. (2012) interviewed African American men regarding their early sexual socialization and subsequent sexual experiences. In each of these studies, respondent narratives were analyzed for themes indicative of what the researchers considered predominant sexual scripts. The interview or focus group approaches to gathering data, with subsequent analysis of themes emerging in responses, has been employed to examine sexual scripts among

African American teen girls (French 2013) and women (McLellan-Lemal 2013), Nigerian adolescents (Barnett et al. 2011), women living in urban cities in the US (McLellan-Lemal 2013; Ortiz-Torres et al. 2003), deaf adults (Gilbert et al. 2012), adults with cerebral palsy (Dune 2013), adults with physical impairments affecting sexual functioning (Dune and Shuttleworth 2009; Mitchell et al. 2011), female family clinic clients (Dworkin et al. 2007), HIV-positive men who have sex with other men while under the influence of alcohol (Parsons et al. 2004), and those seeking casual sex partners through web sites designed for that purpose (Sevcikova and Daneback 2011).

2.4.2.1 Innovative Approaches

In addition to the typical means of gathering data on sexual scripts, there have been some particularly novel approaches to measurement. For example, Stulhofer et al. (2010) were interested in the extent to which young adult men had incorporated scripts displayed in mainstream pornography into their scripts for sexual activity with actual partners. Initially, a sample of young men and women were asked to list separately the things, activities, and sensations that are important for (1) pornographic depictions of sexual activity, and (2) personal experience of great sex. A set of 42 elements that emerged from analyses of the free responses was then presented to a large sample of young adult men who were asked to rate the items as to importance, first when the set was presented in the context of "great sex" followed by the context of depictions of sex in pornography. The researchers compared each respondent's rating of each pair of matched items in the two contexts to create a difference score. The lower the overall score, the more similarly the respondent rated the importance of elements required for good sex and for pornographic depictions of sex. The researchers interpreted relatively low scores (high similarity between sets of ratings) as indicative of greater overlap between the sexual scripts respondents maintained for personal sexual activity and for sexual activity in pornography.

Lenton and Bryan (2005) also started by asking college students to generate scripts; however the context was initiation of sexual activity within two types of dating relationships—casual vs. committed. Based on the themes that emerged, these researchers constructed scenarios representing each of the two types of sexual scripts and presented them to a second sample of college students. Lenton and Bryan intentionally left out particular script elements in their constructed scenarios, and respondents were each tested as to whether they remembered particular elements as having been present in the scenarios they read. The researchers assumed that elements that were falsely remembered as having been present must be part of the respondent's script for sexual activity with that particular type of dating relationship. That is, if a respondent incorrectly recalled a particular element as having been included in the scenario he or she read, Lenton and Bryan concluded that the respondent misremembered the element because it is part of the respondent's sexual script pertaining to the given scenario. In this way, the researchers approached assessment of individuals' sexual scripts in an innovative way.

Alvarez and Garcia-Marques (2008), who were interested in the extent to which college students' scripts for casual versus stable sexual relationships included use of condoms, also took a multi-stage approach to examining sexual scripts. These researchers began by asking a sample of college students to each create lists of about 20 typical actions or situations, in sequential order, involved during an episode of sexual intimacy within either a casual or stable relationship. In addition to examining the incidence of condom use in these reported scenarios, Alvarez and Garcia-Marques constructed prototypical scripts from the responses, and presented those to a second sample of college students. The second set of respondents were asked to construct the endings to the presented scenarios, each of which stopped short of sexual intercourse, and the authors examined the incidence of mentioning condoms. Last, Alvarez and Garcia-Marques (2008) presented a series of written scenarios, only some of which were sexual, to a third sample of col-

lege students. The sexual scenarios included script-typical and script-atypical elements, and respondents were tested on their memory of the presence of each element subsequent to a cognitive distraction task. The respondents' abilities to correctly remember condom-related elements of particular scenarios were compared to their abilities to remember script-typical or script-atypical elements. From such comparisons, the authors examined whether condom use appeared to be a typical element of college students' sexual scripts in casual versus stable sexual relationships.

The review thus far has featured published research in which sexual script theory was used explicitly to frame the research methodology chosen. However, there are numerous instances in which researchers employed sexual script theory in their interpretation of results that were based on data gathered from respondents with traditional, non-script methods. For example, such research has entailed examining the influence of gender in judgments about casual sex (Reid et al. 2011), the initiation of sexual activity within dating relationships (La France 2010; Vannier and O'Sullivan 2011), reactions to first sexual intercourse (Pinquart 2010), young women's negotiation of cunnilingus in dating relationships (Backstrom et al. 2012), whether oral sex is considered "sex" (Dotson-Blake et al. 2012), and how heterosexual men are able to perform in gay pornography (Escoffier 2003). In each of these examples, the researchers gathered data in conventional ways, yet used a sexual scripts framework for interpreting their data.

2.5 Sexual Script Theory: Critique and Future Directions

Despite its popularity, some important concerns have been raised regarding sexual script theory. A primary criticism involves its status as a formal theory. Ideally, theories facilitate prediction in the form of testable hypotheses. With accumulating knowledge based on those tests, the theories offer the ability to explain causal connections among variables. It is with regard to explaining causal relationships among the variables of inter-

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