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Sexual scripts among young heterosexually active men and women: Continuity and change

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Abstract

While gendered sexual scripts are hegemonic at the cultural level, research suggests they may be less so at dyadic and individual levels. Understanding “disjunctures” between sexual scripts at different levels holds promise for illuminating mechanisms through which sexual scripts can change. Through interviews with 44 heterosexually active men and women aged 18-25, we delineated ways young people grappled with culture-level scripts for sexuality and relationships. Findings suggest that although most participants’ culture-level gender scripts for behavior in sexual relationships were congruent with descriptions of traditional masculine and feminine sexuality, there was heterogeneity in how or whether these scripts were incorporated into individual relationships. Specifically, we found three styles of working with sexual scripts: Conforming, in which personal gender scripts for sexual behavior overlapped with traditional scripts; exception-finding, in which interviewees accepted culture-level gender scripts as a reality, but created exceptions to gender rules for themselves; and transforming, in which participants either attempted to remake culture-level gender scripts, or interpreted their own non-traditional styles as equally normative. Changing sexual scripts can potentially contribute to decreased gender inequity in the sexual realm and to increased opportunities for sexual satisfaction, safety, and wellbeing, particularly for women, but for men as well.

Keywords

sexual scripts; gender; heterosexuality; qualitative research

The sexual script perspective offers a “conceptual apparatus with which to examine development and experience of the sexual” (Simon & Gagnon, 1984, p. 40) that is now quite widely used in social scientific research on sexuality (e.g., Bowleg, Lucas & Tschann, 2004; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). Sexual scripts are cognitive schema that instruct people how to understand and act in sexual situations. They operate on cultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels; each level reciprocally influences the others and scripts on all three levels are important determinants of individuals’ sexual beliefs and behavior (Gagnon, 1990; Gagnon & Parker, 1995; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Culture level sexual scripts are one contributor to constituting mainstream norms for gendered behavior in heterosexual relationships (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005; Gagnon & Parker, 1995). But because sexual scripts also operate on inter- and intra-personal levels, there can be areas of discontinuity between people’s dyadic or individual scripts for gendered behavior in heterosexual relationships and their cultural scripts. Critical here is the difference between recognizing that an idea about gendered sexuality, such as “men want sex and women want love,” is part

of the cultural script, and having that idea integrated into one's own personal or dyadic script for what one wants or expects out of relationships. At the individual or dyadic level, people may desire or enact very different gender scripts for sexuality than those they observe as being cultural norms.

Assessing sexual scripts empirically is one way of understanding the larger gender structures that shape heterosexual behavior, and potentially even contributing to change in these structures. Sites of “disjuncture” between cultural and inter- or intra-personal sexual scripts are a particularly promising location for the study of change in sexual scripts (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005). New sexual scripts do not emerge on their own; cultural scripts are changed via the influence of people's inter- and intrapersonal innovations in how they enact sexuality (Laumann & Gagnon, 1995). Likewise, mainstream, traditional cultural scripts are not a given, but require maintenance and reinforcement at personal and dyadic levels to persist. These interactions between sexual scripts at the cultural level and those on inter- and intrapersonal levels do not occur automatically; both change and continuity are active processes involving significant human effort.

Research on sexual scripts at all three levels, and on disjunctures between culture level and individual and couple level scripts, has contributed valuable knowledge of what these scripts and disjunctures look like. This “what” knowledge would be enhanced by “how” knowledge of the ways young people grapple with these scripts and disjunctures in their own relationships. Thus, this study's aim was to delineate the ways young people worked with culture-level sexual scripts by examining disjunctures between scripts at different levels in their accounts of their own sexual behavior and relationships.

Gender and Sexual Scripts

Heterosexual relationships are a significant stage on which men and women enact gender (Connell, 2002; Gavey, 2005; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson, 1998). Actual characteristics and behavior of men and women – in both sexual and other realms – run along a continuum such that there can be as much within-group as between-group difference. At the same time, beliefs regarding masculine and feminine characteristics and behavior tend to polarize them (Connell, 2002). Current theoretical conceptualizations of gender emphasize that it functions as a social structure, that this structure affects people at individual and interactional levels, and that the gender structure is in turn recursively affected by people's actions within social relations (Connell, 2002; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Risman, 2004; Risman, 2009). Thus, sexual scripts can be thought of as one point of interaction between individuals and gender structures. Via culture-level sexual scripts, gender structures shape people's sexual desires, beliefs, and behavior, and via their personal or dyadic sexual scripts, people reinforce, or can sometimes reshape, these same structures.

The traditional, mainstream cultural sexual script is highly gendered and prescribes specific, often opposite positions for men and women (Gavey, 2005; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Tolman, 2002). Scripts are not primarily comprised of behaviors; rather, they are “cognitive frameworks” (Byers, 1996) that include norms that guide behavior, individuals' interpretations of the implications of cultural norms for interpersonal interactions, and individuals' constructions of their own desires (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005). The literature that identifies elements of traditional scripts includes review articles examining the relationship of traditional scripts to behaviors (Byers, 1995; Flood & Pease, 2009), qualitative analyses of semi-structured interview or focus group data (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Maxwell, 2007; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Tolman, 2000; Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso & Porche, 2003; Tolman & Szalcha, 1999), coding

and quantitative analysis of semi-structured interviews (Bay-Cheng, Robinson, & Zucker, 2009; Tolman & Szalacha, 1999), and quantitative analysis of survey or questionnaire data (Beadnell et al., 2008; Hynie, Lydon, Cote & Wiener, 1998; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993; Santana, Raj, Decker, Lamarche & Silverman, 2006).

Across these studies, traditional sexual scripts for men have them desiring sex, not necessarily being desired, having strong “sex drives,” frequently being the ones to initiate sex and push it to the next level of intimacy, and needing to be sexually skilled. They are also seen as more likely than women to prefer recreational sex, to value sex itself over relationships, to be “players” wanting no-strings sex, and to seek multiple partners. Women's place in traditional sexual scripts is being desired but not desiring sex, having weak “sex drives,” resisting advances, and being more highly valued if they are less sexually experienced. They are seen as preferring relational sex, wanting commitment and monogamy, and seeking emotional intimacy and trust with sex. While these are the predominant norms, interpretations and constructions, studies do report evidence of movement away from them and of desire among some young men and women to adopt alternative views and practices (Byers, 1995; Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Maxwell, 2007; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Tolman & Szalacha, 1999;).

Scripts are thought to guide behavior, and, as such, there may be certain behaviors that can be identified as consistent with a traditional mainstream sexual script. Traditional scripts have been studied in relation to sexual initiation (Byers, 1995; Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005), unprotected vaginal sex (Santana et al., 2006), condom use (Hynie et al., 1998), contraceptive behavior (Hynie et al., 1998), monogamy (Beadnell et al., 2008), sexual coercion (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Byers, 1995; Tolman et al., 2003), and intimate partner violence (Flood & Pease, 2009; Santana et al., 2006; Tolman et al., 2003). Variation in purpose and methodology among these studies makes it difficult to generalize from their results. Subscribing to traditional hegemonic female sexual scripts has been found to relate negatively to protection against STIs and pregnancy, for example, women who reported not using condoms held stronger “relational” ideals (Hynie et al., 1998). Traditional male scripts relate positively to behaving in a violent manner in intimate relationships (Santana et al., 2006). Study limitations, including a preponderance of college-student samples, geographically limited samples, and reliance upon retrospective recall of complex situations and behaviors, further limit the ability to draw general conclusions about the ways in which scripts map onto behavior.

Continuity and Change in Gender Scripts for Sex

Scholarship on sexual scripts suggests the presence of both continuity with stable traditional scripts regarding appropriate male and female sexual and relational behavior, and change and innovation in these scripts. On the continuity end of the scale, both male and female college students' free-written scripts for an initial sexual encounter portrayed the female character's orientation as more relational than the male's (Hynie et al., 1998), and sexual scripts drawn from interviews with African American women were consistent with traditional scripts such as “men control sexual activity” (Bowleg et al., 2004). On the change end, Dworkin and colleagues (2006) documented the effects of research participation on individual sexual scripts for both intervention and control group members of an HIV prevention trial. After one year, women in both groups moved away from male-dominated and toward female-dominated decision-making, as reported in in-depth interviews on their sexual relationships.

Bridging these findings of swift change in gendered sexual scripts and the previous findings of script stability is much research documenting combinations of continuity and change. For

example, a series of linked studies found that the traditional sexual script, particularly aspects of it that supported male sexual coerciveness, was widespread among college-aged women and men (Byers, 1995). However, many young people practiced only some elements of the script, such as male sexual initiation but not coerciveness, or appeared to endorse a different sexual script altogether, such as female initiation. Among urban women participating in an HIV/ STI prevention program, researchers identified both traditional and non-traditional gender scripts for a romantic sexual encounter with a man (Ortiz-Torres, Williams & Ehrhardt, 2003). Young people in the United Kingdom, describing their heterosexual relationships, included both traditional and alternative gender scripts; however, they were more likely to practice traditional ones (Maxwell, 2007). When Dworkin and O'Sullivan studied young men's scripts for sexual initiation, they found many disjunctures between participants' actual initiation patterns, which were largely traditional and male-dominated, and their desired patterns, which tended toward a more mutual script or even, to a lesser extent, a female-dominated one (2005). Tolman's in-depth qualitative study (2002) also produced a mixture of hegemonic and resistant scripts: One group of young women reported not feeling desire, one felt desire but sought to resist it, and one described feeling both desire and an entitlement to these feelings.

One explanation that links these mixed findings regarding change in gender scripts for sexuality is that studies are tapping into sexual scripts on multiple levels. When investigating sexual scripts empirically, it is important to maintain distinctions among scripts at different levels and to avoid “conflat[ing] sexual scripts with dichotomous gender norms in the cultural realm” (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 1). Making this distinction reveals that while mainstream culture-level gender scripts for sexual relationships appear to be tenacious, scripts at inter- and intrapersonal levels show considerable innovation. The current study adds to existing scholarship on gendered sexual scripts by focusing on people's active role in working with cultural scripts via their personal scripts and behavior.

Study Overview

This study aimed to characterize the ways young people grappled with culture-level gender scripts for sexuality, and with disjunctures between scripts at that level and their personal scripts, in their own relationships. It drew on data from two other studies. *Guys' Turn* was a mixed methods study of young heterosexually active men's sexual and relationship scripts and their association with behaviors such as the use of sexual safety strategies; data from the study's qualitative component were used for this analysis. Data were also drawn from *Girl Talk*, a qualitative study of young heterosexually active women's sexual experiences and relationships. Recruitment and interview protocols for these studies were similar and produced comparable narratives of sexual relationships that included participants' beliefs about sexuality and gender.

Method

Both *Guys' Turn* and *Girl Talk* drew participants from the Puget Sound region of Washington State. All research procedures for the two studies were approved by the institutional review board at the University of Washington.

Participants

Male participants—A stratified recruitment approach (Creswell, 1998) was used to attract a sample that included roughly equivalent proportions of White, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Latino men. Advertisements invited men to “share [their] views for a study of sexual relationships.” Flyers about the study were posted in a variety of neighborhoods; advertisements were also placed on social networking sites and in online

classified. Potential participants contacted the research team and were screened for eligibility. Inclusion criteria were having had sexual intercourse with a woman at least once; having current interest in having sex with women in the future; being age 18-25; and residing in the U.S. at least since the beginning of high school. Eligible participants were scheduled for interviews.

Twenty-seven men were interviewed for the study, although one participant's data was excluded due to concerns about his sobriety and mental health at the time of the interview. Of the 26 men in the final sample, four identified as African American, five as Asian/Pacific Islander, five as Latino, nine as White, and three as multi-racial. Participants ranged in age from 18-25. All of the men had completed high school or obtained their general equivalency diplomas, 12 reported being enrolled in college currently or at some point in the past, and another eight had obtained at least a four-year degree. At the time of the interview, 17 men reported being currently involved in a romantic or committed relationship, and nine were single and/or casually dating.

Female participants—The *Girl Talk* study employed stratified, purposeful sampling (Creswell, 1998) to recruit both racially diverse participants (approximately equal proportions of white, African American, and Latina women) and respondents with different current relationship statuses (approximately half with steady, committed partners and half without). Advertisements solicited “women who date men” to “tell [their] stories about sexual relationships.” Ads were posted in public locations, such as coffee-shops and hair salons, in online classifieds, and in the local urban free newspaper. Flyers were also distributed by participants, and by Latina and African American colleagues of the first author, to women within their social networks. Interested women contacted the study, were screened for eligibility (18-25 years old, sexually active with men, and fluent in spoken English), and if eligible and interested, were scheduled for interviews.

Eighteen women participated; their ages ranged from 19 to 26. Six women identified as African American, five as Latina and seven as White. All but one of the women had completed high school or obtained a GED, nine reported being enrolled in college currently or at some point in the past, and another three had obtained at least a four-year degree. Finally, ten of the women reported that they were involved in a steady, committed relationship at the time of the interview, while eight identified as single or casually dating.

Measures

Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in length and were digitally recorded. Interviewers, interview protocols, and transcription varied slightly between male and female participants, but produced comparable data that included reports of participants' sexual behavior and relationships and their beliefs about sexuality and gender.

Men's interviews—When they scheduled their interviews, male participants could choose either a male or a female interviewer; most expressed no preference, and those who did opted for a woman. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured protocol. Men were asked to talk about each of three types of sexual relationships with women: a committed romantic partnership, an on-going casual sexual relationship and a one-time only sexual encounter. Within each relationship type relevant to them, men were asked to describe the relationship's initiation, one or more sexual encounters, any negative or hurtful sexual encounters, sexual safety strategies, and feelings about and perceptions of the relationship. Through these prompts, men also discussed their beliefs or experiences around how men and women behave in sexual and relationship situations. At the completion of the interview, respondents received a check for \$25. Interviews were professionally transcribed.

Women's interviews—All female participants were interviewed by the first author, a woman. Participants received a \$20 cash incentive before the interview began to demonstrate that payment was not contingent on what they chose to disclose. We used open-ended prompts such as “Tell me about your current sexual relationship situation,” and “How did you learn about sex and relationships?” to elicit narratives of participants’ sexual and relational lives. Participants were also asked to talk about both positive and negative sexual experiences, their beliefs about how men and women behave in sexual relationships, and about sexual safety strategies. Digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed by the first author.

Procedure

The aim of this analysis was to delineate the ways participants worked with culture-level traditional gender scripts for sex and relationships on the intra- and inter-personal levels of their own relationships. To accomplish this aim we conducted both within-case and across-case analyses (Ayres, Kavanaugh & Knafl, 2003). We used techniques including pen portraits (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), coding and categorization (Saldaña, 2009), data summarization and display (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These techniques, and the sequence in which we deployed them, are described in detail below.

The entire analytic team read the transcripts multiple times; each member then worked with a subset of them to produce a one page “pen portrait” of each participant. The function of these person-centered, within-case summaries, each of which was given a pseudonym, was to allow the analyst to keep the whole case in mind while working with fragmented chunks of coded text. Analysts extracted data on topics specified by the team to create a concise overall picture of each interviewee as a sexual person. Pen portraits were specified to include elements such as sexual and relational development, types of sexual relationships discussed and relationship history, use of birth control, condoms and other pregnancy and STI/ HIV prevention techniques, and beliefs regarding sexual relationships.

We also coded sections of text that discussed cultural norms for men and women regarding sexuality and relationships. Each transcript was coded by two researchers. Agreement on topic coding was high, and minimal instances of disagreement about whether a section of text was indeed on topic were resolved with discussion. The first and second authors then characterized each coded statement with a brief descriptive label (e.g., “men are players,” or “women initiate sex less often”). Moving to across-case analysis, we grouped related statements together into categories. We refined, split, or merged categories when associations, divisions, or overlap appeared in the data (Hall & Stevens, 1991). This set of categories produced the findings on culture-level sexual scripts that we report below in the Results.

The first and second authors then produced descriptive within-case summaries of how participants were working with the culture-level relational and sexual gender scripts described in their accounts. We re-approached both the coded culture-level excerpts and the pen portraits, and we used these analytic materials together as complementary ways of “thinking with” the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). One worked primarily with the men's data and the other with the women's; we referred back to original transcripts as needed and consulted frequently.

Finally, we grouped participants into categories based on their styles of working with culture-level relational and sexual gender scripts, and we assigned descriptive names to these categories. We created the categories by looking for patterns across the case summaries using data display matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and constant comparison.

The first and second authors worked collaboratively to assign each participant to his or her best-fitting category. These categories produced our findings on the different ways participants worked with culture-level gender scripts for sex in their own relationships.

Results

The culture-level gender scripts for behavior in sexual relationships that participants mentioned in their interviews were remarkably congruent with descriptions of traditional, mainstream, hegemonic masculine and feminine sexuality found in the literature. These included men desiring sex without necessarily being desired, having strong “sex drives,” being the ones to initiate sex, and needing to be sexually skilled. Men in general were also seen as more likely than women to prefer recreational sex, to value sex over relationships, to be “players” wanting no-strings sex, and to seek multiple partners. Women in general were seen as being desired but not desiring sex, having weak “sex drives,” resisting advances, and being more highly valued if less sexually experienced. They were seen as preferring relational sex, wanting commitment and monogamy, and seeking emotional intimacy and trust with sex.

At the individual or dyadic level, however, we saw many participants desiring or enacting very different gender scripts than those they cited as cultural norms. When we examined participants’ accounts for their ways of working with traditional gender norms for sexual relationships, via the intra- and inter-personal scripts they lived out in their own lives, we delineated three chief methods of interaction with these hegemonic gender scripts: Conforming, Exception-Finding, and Transforming.

One prominent way of working with gender norms in sexual relationships was conforming to stereotypical beliefs about men, women, and sex; in these cases, participants’ intra- and inter-personal scripts largely matched cultural scripts. Another group of participants described ways of being in their sexual relationships that looked for or created exceptions to gender rules. This method involved a disjuncture between cultural and intra- or inter-personal scripts, but it did not link this individual disjuncture with a critique of or wish to see change in cultural gender scripts. A third way of working with gender norms was more complex. These interviewees constructed their own sets of gender rules for relationships and sex, transforming those they had received so that their intra- and inter-personal scripts were different from cultural scripts. Furthermore, this way of working involved both this disjuncture between cultural and intra- or inter-personal scripts, and either a critical, change-oriented stance toward cultural scripts that emphasized the disjuncture, or an easy acceptance of non-traditional intra- or inter-personal scripts’ equal legitimacy that de-emphasized the disjuncture.

Different styles of interaction with cultural sexual scripts, and variation within these categories, are described in detail and illustrated with quotes below. The distribution of men and women across these categories is depicted in Table 1. All names in this section and throughout the paper are pseudonyms.

Conforming

Conforming participants’ intra- and inter-personal scripts largely matched cultural scripts. This category was the largest and represented over half of male and approximately two-fifths of female participants. In this group as in the others, we observed important within-category variation. There were both stylistic and substantive differences in the ways young people conformed. The conforming group was split almost evenly between unquestioning and conflicted conformity; similar proportions of men and women were represented in each subgroup.

Unquestioning conformity—Some participants' personal scripts for masculine and feminine sexual behavior showed considerable overlap with traditional ones and an acceptance of these scripts as natural, normal, and inevitable. Their conformity was unquestioning.

Madison enacted the “men have strong ‘sex drives’ and women have weak ones” norm as she discussed how she appreciated her teacher talking about girls' right to not have sex at Homecoming or prom:

My teacher... stressed the points about homecoming and prom, like he had this huge list that he'd go through, what to do and what not to do for Homecoming and prom. And one of them was “Don't feel obligated to do anything.” Because it's supposed to be your night to have fun. You shouldn't have to have sex, or do anything.

The right of all persons to sexual autonomy is inarguable. It is this account's positioning of young women as sexual “gatekeepers,” coupled with its opposition, for girls, of having fun with having sex, that demonstrates Madison's unquestioning acceptance of a traditional cultural gender script for sex.

Rondell and Jay exemplified unquestioning conformity; their personal gender scripts for sexual relationships were highly congruent with traditional cultural scripts of men wanting recreational sex and women relational sex. Rondell described being at a club with a group of male friends and having a contest to see which of them could acquire the most phone numbers from women. He eventually got together with one of these women, and they had sex, but her subsequent interest in a continuing relationship turned him off:

Like after that, she just got kind of clingy, like way too clingy for me... I didn't like how she was just coming on too strong to me, like she wants me to be her boyfriend or something... I don't want to do all that. I don't want to deal with anybody stressing me, you know, drama, calling me, asking me where I am.

Jay described a similar encounter with a new sex partner:

She really had, uh, deep feelings for me... but I didn't have the same deep feelings for her. I think it was more of a sexual thing for me, but for her it was more of a relationship thing. So I feel kind of bad in that part. Most of my relationships have been like that, where, um, I've broken their hearts... I've had, I've made plenty, I've made you know a couple girls cry...

To Jay and Rondell, situations where they want recreational sex and their female partners want relational, intimate sex are natural and normal. While Jay stated he felt “kind of bad,” the boastful tone of his remarks suggests that in fact, he is content – and perhaps even proud – to be a heartbreaker.

Sexual jealousy and suspicion of men's tendency to roam dominated Saskia's narrative. She cited numerous examples of this phenomenon, and the urgency of her felt need to thwart it in boyfriends was apparent. Her explanation of why she felt the way she did was that it stemmed from her gender:

I am a female. I grew up with the fairy tale, the Cinderella story – meeting Prince Charming, having this beautiful wedding... every little girl wants to be a princess, find a Prince Charming. I mean whether it's realistically like that or not, every woman wants to find a man that they can call their own and love, be with, without them straying to some hot little female, you know?

On the one hand, Saskia asserted that being female is abundant justification for the perspective she holds – that monogamy is something that “every woman wants.” On the other hand, she acknowledged that this ideal may not be attainable due to men's equally natural roving eyes, and that what she wants may be a “fairy tale.” Saskia's membership in the unquestioning conformity group may be on the verge of shifting to the conflicted conformity described below.

Conflicted conformity—While some interviewees described unquestioning conformity, and even satisfaction with knowing and following cultural gender rules for sex, many reported feeling trapped by these scripts, or dissatisfied with elements of their resulting relationships, though they were unable to see alternatives. Ethan talked about enjoying the relational sex he had with his former girlfriend far more than the strictly recreational sex he was currently having with a casual partner:

[Having an ongoing relationship] just really enhances your sexual life... What I was saying about girls being kind of emotional more? Maybe both people are kind of emotional... say they're making you meals and, like, you know, giving you breakfast in bed, and just giving you love no matter how it is. Maybe you're making meals for them and doing all this stuff. With that in the back of your head, it's like while you're having sex, you remember why you are, and what you love about that person, I guess. It makes it that much better than with just someone random that you don't really know her.

In spite of this statement of nonconformance when it came to valuing relational over recreational sex, however, Ethan also felt it was his “mission” to have sex with “as many girls as I can.” His overall affect regarding sexual relationships was sad and unsatisfied. However, he described himself as unable to change his behavior, ascribing it to “instinct.”

Armando narrated his reasons for being in a committed boyfriend-girlfriend relationship – wanting a “healthier” life – but clearly missed the aggressive, borderline coercive courtship of his player days, speaking of his “salesperson personality” when it came to seducing women: “I try to sell you something. You don't want to buy it. I don't care.” He also spoke of having wilder, more passionate sex, the “best of [his] life,” with a casual partner than he thought would be possible within his current steady relationship. However, at the same time he stated that “sleeping with many girls” is “messed up” both for him and for them, because it can result in emotional hardening and the inability to trust, connect, and ultimately, mature. He was aware of being in the midst of this conflict: “I'm still feeling good about the thing [a successful seduction] but I know that it's not really good. I mean it's not going to take you anywhere, like spiritually-wise.”

Another conflicted conformer, Me'shell, doubted that a conventional boyfriend-girlfriend relationship could be optimal for a young woman, but did not see a possibility of improvement in this type of relationship. She spoke of wanting her daughters, once grown up, to have their first sex with their best friends instead of with boyfriends. She wanted emotionally close sex for them, but not the stereotype of heterosexual romance, because she assumed a boyfriend was likely to relate to his girlfriend in a sexually exploitative way:

Your boyfriend could just be using you... he could just be your boyfriend to get in your pants. You know? I wish I would have lost my virginity to my best friend. You know? And him, me... and it wouldn't have been anything after that. You know, [that] type of thing – we'd still be friends.

Me'shell's assessment of the stability of cultural gender scripts for sex led her to wish that she had opted out herself, and to hope that her daughters would when it was their time. In

that she saw the possibility of such an opt out, though she did not put it into practice, her account is on the border between conforming and exception-finding.

Exception Finding

Exception-finders did not emphasize changing gender scripts for sexual relationships in general through their personal or dyadic behavior or attitudes. Rather, they accepted culture-level gender scripts as a given, and focused on creating exceptions to gender rules for themselves or on finding partners who were exceptions to these rules. Often they spoke of stereotypical groups of men and women e.g. “players” or “a lot of girls,” and then placed themselves, their partners, or their relationships outside these groups. This category was the smallest and included the greatest within-group proportion of women, about one-fourth of all female participants (see Table 1).

Alex and Jonquil exemplified the exception-finding category. Alex described herself as a person who “gets along really well with guys” and among groups of women “tends to be more sexually open,” and said she was “not quite the way other people [were] – the way girls and boys are supposed to be” and “relates more like a guy.” She narrated a sexual history that emphasized her polyamory, bisexuality, and unwillingness to play by the rules. And Jonquil, who labeled herself a “tomboy,” stated that she refused to be in relationships where she was the “wifey,” and instead sought out “just a friendship for sex.”

While David had had casual, recreational sex himself and saw it as part of stereotypical masculinity, he stated that it was important to him to “make a decision that I won't regret, sexually,” by passing up opportunities to have non-relational sex and instead choosing:

...somebody that I connected with maybe intellectually, maybe even for a moment. You know? Uh, somebody that I was definitely attracted to, somebody that I could foresee a future beyond the next morning with. I, I'm, I've [pause] I've discovered that I'm not, um, some kind of chauv that can just get it – a chauvinist Don Juan that can just get a date and just like throw it away, because I [pause] I have more feelings than I let myself really, than I let, than I let on.

Although David did not want to be among their number, he viewed these “chauvinist Don Juan[s]” as typical heterosexual men. His verbal hesitation may suggest the difficulty of having a personal script that was an exception to the culture-level gender script for men.

Some women who were exception-finders spoke spontaneously of their perceived need to conceal their transgressive behavior. For example, LaJuana, who narrated a complex history involving multiple overlapping sexual partners, was at pains to conceal her status at the same time as she seemed to relish it:

I was known as one of the girls that was really hard to get... I was really, really selective. I only picked the ones that I knew were gonna keep me private, because I had such a busy sexual lifestyle that I didn't want it getting out there that I was a whore... I mean, I was getting around the block, but nobody knew it.

LaJuana's statements included both her enjoyment of her identity as a, as she put it, “closet freak,” and her emphasis on keeping it secret to avoid the negative label of “whore.”

Transforming

Interviewees in this category constructed their own sets of gender rules for relationships and sex, transforming those they had received so that their intra- and inter-personal scripts were different from mainstream cultural scripts. The transforming category represented approximately one-third of male and one-fourth of female interviewees. We observed

important within-category variation in this group as we did in the others. Overall, participants were either conscious, explicit transformers, who wished that gendered relationship norms at the cultural level were more congruent with their own scripts, and sometimes were involved in deliberate attempts to make them so, or they were unconscious, implicit transformers, who had a worldview in which their non-traditional intra- or inter-personal scripts' legitimacy was taken for granted. A higher proportion of men than of women (see Table 1) were represented in the implicit subgroup, and in the explicit subgroup, women were proportionally predominant.

Conscious transformation—Joshua was part of an alternative sexual subculture in which people with non-traditional individual level scripts – here regarding sexual initiation by mutual consent versus through masculine pressure and feminine reluctance – had consciously sought to influence scripts on the cultural level, at least within their subculture. In his interview, Joshua stressed his beliefs regarding the importance of sex being mutually consensual for both parties, and how he and his new girlfriend enacted these beliefs in their relationship:

You've probably heard like “consent is not the absence of no; it's the presence of yes,” um... so we kind of have adopted that as our own thing, so whether it's, you know, “should I get a condom?” or “would you like to have sex?” it's usually fairly explicit.

Joshua situated himself in an alternate set of rules regarding gender and sexual relationships via this statement and via the report, woven through his interview, of a long-term open relationship with his previous partner, in which at her instigation they negotiated their own set of guidelines for consensual non-monogamy. According to his account, this polyamorous practice, which emphasized female desire and mutual consent, was not simply a way of living that suited Joshua and his partner individually and as a dyad. Rather, this script supported a way of living that could work for others and potentially improve their lives, and should be diffused on the cultural level as much as possible. Joshua described being happy to be monogamous with his new girlfriend for as long as she wanted, but at the same time feeling that she might be a potential convert, and offering her what he called “poly propaganda.”

Another participant, Molly, was also part of a sexual subculture that was in the process of having its sexual scripts transformed by the non-traditional individual scripts of its members, including her. She described gendered courtship behaviors in the place she had previously lived, then contrasted them to scripts in her new city:

Guys try to prove how masculine they are, they'll get kind of like aggressive, and then, just seems like girls get really silly. Just giggling... stuff like that. But where I am now, I live in [city], it's just a totally different culture. And it's not like that at all.

Both in this new city and with her current partner, in contrast to previous boyfriends, she said, “Verbal consent is very, very important to us... Yes means yes, and no means no, and no answer? That's no answer and you need to dig deeper.” Molly was struck by the way her relocation had brought her personal script regarding drinking, seduction, coercion, and sexual decision-making into alignment with that on the cultural level:

...it's actually really weird, in [city], everyone is just way more cautious about alcohol... It seems like a lot of girls get taken advantage of when they're drunk. I know I did. Um, and like, we need to remember that it's also guys who can get taken advantage of. Even though women definitely are at a way higher risk, and it

happens way more often, but when someone's been drinking... ASK. You have to ask.

Not all conscious transformations were successful. Ana initiated a no-strings-attached sexual relationship and clearly stated that though it was more typical for a man to seek this type of partnership, she too felt entitled to choose it. She attempted to transform the cultural gender script that said men sought no-strings sex while women did not by taking on the traditionally male role.

I was in a relationship for a long time, and I was used to having sex. And I wanted to keep having sex, without strings attached... if I wanted to have sex, I could just call somebody and they would come, and – I know that a lot of guys have girls like that, and I figured, “Well, why can't I?” [laughs]

However, the interaction between her own intra-personal script for how women and men acted, that of her sex buddy, who eventually wanted a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, and the culture-level script that would have assigned each of them to the other's role, resulted in this partnership splitting up.

Another participant described being caught in the midst of the transformation of cultural scripts for masculinity in sexual relationships. Nate reported strong feelings of not being able to measure up to what he thought of as the new, woman-focused way of relating, accompanied by awareness that he also found the old, man-in-charge script unsatisfactory.

I think a lot of relationships for guys are kind of either end of the spectrum. You either want to be like an ideal boyfriend, or you completely reject that norm, and you tend to be more controlling like other guys. And I see myself, more than anything else, trying to be more ideal, and I think it's kind of a lot of pressure.

While Nate and his girlfriend were “working towards kind of an equal relationship,” his assessment was that it was his position, rather than hers, that needed improvement in order to attain this equality. Rather than initiating transformation himself, he was reacting to an external transformation of gender scripts for heterosexual relationships.

Unconscious transformation—Interviewees in this group had intra- and inter-personal gender scripts for sex and relationships that were different from cultural scripts. Furthermore, their way of working involved both this disjuncture between cultural and intra- or inter-personal scripts, and an easy acceptance of these non-traditional scripts' equal legitimacy that deemphasized the disjuncture. They took for granted that their fairly unusual way of relating to sex partners was simply the way it was.

Eric and Andrea exemplified the implicit transformation group; though they were not one another's partners, their stories were remarkably complementary. Eric described with pleasure, but not with surprise, how his girlfriend pursued him romantically and sexually when they first met. She got his number from a friend and called, and when he asked her out to dinner, she responded by saying yes, then immediately asking him if they could have sex afterward. As their relationship went on, she continued to initiate sex with him:

She likes to talk kind of dirty sometimes, especially with the text messages... in the middle of the day I'll be in class, and she'll say something completely straightforward, like, “I want to fuck you.”

Eric's acceptance of the equal legitimacy of his girlfriend seducing him, or him her, demonstrates both the disjuncture between his personal gender script for sex and the hegemonic cultural script of male pursuit and initiation, and his lack of concern about this disjuncture.

Andrea initiated sex in her current relationship, which she describes as typical for her, saying “I’ve never really waited.” She was her boyfriend’s first lover, and as she narrated it, her being the more sexually experienced of the two was perfectly acceptable and unexceptional to both parties.

At first he had no idea what he was doing, you know like virgins don’t know what they’re doing. I didn’t know what I was doing – I did this time, but when I was a virgin [I didn’t]... He was really interested, ‘cause you know, he’s new. And so he started going on Wikipedia and looking up all these different positions and stuff and he was like, “We should try these!” So like some of them I had already tried and I was like, “Oh, I hate that one” or like, “That one’s okay, that one’s uncomfortable, that one’s fun.”

Between Andrea and her boyfriend, a relationship between a more experienced woman and a less experienced man was not seen as a rebellion against cultural gender scripts for sex, but rather as a normal state of affairs.

Both Andrea and Eric’s stories also suggest partners’ importance to successfully transforming cultural scripts for sex. In each case, their partners’ reactions to these young peoples’ intra-personal scripts allowed the development of a dyadic inter-personal script that departed from the traditional cultural norms for male and female sexual initiation and experience. Had their individual scripts met with resistance from their partners, as Ana’s did from her non-romantic sex buddy, these transformations may not have succeeded, or may have remained explicit.

Discussion

This study’s aim was to understand how young heterosexually active men and women worked with culture-level traditional gender scripts on the intra- and inter-personal levels of their own relationships. Many of the young people we interviewed seemed to desire or to enact very different scripts than those they cited as cultural norms. We delineated three main methods of interaction with culture-level sexual scripts in participants’ accounts; we characterized these processes as Conforming, Exception-Finding, and Transforming. We noted suggestive gender differences in the representation of participants within these categories, though the proportions of men and women in each category are not definitive. However, these differences offer preliminary insight into first, each gender’s stake in maintaining or destabilizing cultural scripts, and second, similarities and differences in men’s and women’s style of interaction with gendered cultural scripts for sex. In addition, each of the styles we characterized has implications for understanding continuity and change in sexual scripts.

The conformers described intra- and inter-personal sexual gender scripts that largely matched cultural scripts; this group included slightly more men than women, proportionally. Overall, people in the conforming category expressed or implied the greatest dissatisfaction with their sexual scripts. The finding that women were less likely than men to be satisfied conformers is not surprising. While the traditional sexual script, and the gender structure of which it is a part, has genuine down sides for men themselves (Fracher & Kimmel, 1995; Seal, Wagner-Raphael & Ehrhardt, 2000), it offers men greater sexual autonomy, and thus increased opportunities for sexual satisfaction, safety, and wellbeing, than it does women (Amaro & Raj, 2000; Gavey, 2005; Logan, Cole & Leukefeld, 2002).

People who are conformers contribute to the maintenance of hegemonic culture-level gender scripts for sex through their repeated enactment of them on individual and dyadic levels. On the one hand, this steady reinforcement makes mainstream culture-level gender scripts for

sexual relationships very robust. The sexual realm is one of many social relational contexts in which gender beliefs become structures (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), and in the accounts of conformers reported here, we see this process in action. On the other hand, the poor fit that these hegemonic scripts offer for many women, and some men, may contribute to people's identification of and experimentation with ways of relating sexually that move beyond traditional gendered scripts.

People in the exception-making group created exceptions to gender rules in their sexual relationships, but without connecting disjunctures between their intra- or inter-personal scripts and cultural ones to any critique of cultural gender scripts. The exception-finders were a predominantly female group. This finding is congruent with a social context in which women who are open sexual nonconformists are vulnerable to demeaning gender-specific criticism (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Holland et al., 1998). In fact, many of our female exception-finders cited their efforts to avoid labels like “slut,” “freak,” and “whore” while looking for ways to enact their less conventional sexual scripts.

The exception-finding style, since it creates individual alternatives to traditional culture-level gender scripts for sex but leaves these scripts in place, also contributes to the maintenance of traditional cultural scripts. People in this category, most frequently women, achieved some individual, partial liberation from cultural sexual scripts that did not serve them. But because the exception-finding style – unlike either the conforming or the transforming style – did not involve reinforcement of individual scripts by those on the dyadic or cultural level, this change seemed likely to lack tenacity. Some participants' stories, however, did suggest a potential path from exception-making to transformation in cases where exceptionalism was expressive and dramatic, was sustained over time, and traveled with an individual into different relationship contexts.

Transformers tried to make change in gender rules for relationships and sex. Their intraand inter-personal scripts were different from cultural scripts, and they combined these disjunctures with either explicit attempts to alter cultural scripts or implicit acceptance of non-traditional scripts' equal legitimacy and reality, at least on the sub-cultural level. In many cases, these transformations aimed to ameliorate the potential for exploitation or dissatisfaction inherent in hegemonic scripts, to improve sexual autonomy for women, and to enhance wellbeing for both women and men. These changes were small, but real. They serve as a vivid example of Risman's (2009) point that gender structures that disadvantage women and privilege men, though resilient, can be altered by people's behavior.

The transformation of mainstream cultural scripts for sex that we saw in our participants' accounts was more dependent upon context than the other styles: Subcultures and dyadic relationships could support and sustain script change, or they could thwart it. While the conforming group's personal scripts overlapped with cultural scripts with well-established roots and thus tended to persist regardless of the environment, the transforming group's personal scripts needed planting in fertile ground to influence higher level scripts.

Our findings extend scholarship on gendered sexual scripts in several ways. By preserving distinctions among sexual scripts at different levels and not conflating them with culture level mainstream gender norms, we were able to account for the presence in our participants' stories of both continuity with traditional sexual scripts, and change in these scripts, in a theoretically coherent way. Like Dworkin and O'Sullivan's (2005) generative work on disjunctures between men's actual sexual initiation patterns (traditionally male-dominated) and their desired patterns (often, and less conventionally, more mutual or female-dominated), we found many areas of discontinuity between people's individual scripts for gendered behavior in heterosexual relationships and the scripts they described as

operating on the cultural level. Further, we were able to capture information about the ways young people grappled with differences between their personal scripts and cultural scripts, shedding light on the active role individuals play in both maintaining and changing mainstream sexual gender scripts. Single gender studies (e.g. Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Tolman, 2000) have provided important insights about the distinctive experiences and beliefs of men and women, as well as about within-gender variation in experiences and beliefs. However, our inclusion of men and women in the same analysis allowed us to explore both within- and across-gender variation and to examine ways that gender contributed to people's styles of interaction with traditional sexual scripts at the cultural level.

The study had several limitations. While participants were recruited from the community and comprised a diverse group along dimensions of race-ethnicity and socio-economic status, the study's goal was to represent a broad range of perspectives rather than to attempt to analyze group-specific scripts. Like most social scientific research on sexuality, the study depended on self-reporting. Interview data are likely to have been shaped by participants' tendencies to present what they perceived as socially desirable selves. Methods that elicit narratives, like those we used, are especially appropriate in such cases, and have been demonstrated to keep a participant's account closer to actual events than methods that elicit explanations or opinions (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Some participants' narratives, particularly those of older or more sexually experienced individuals, mentioned that their styles of working with cultural gender scripts for sex had changed over time. While we tended to get more detailed information about recent relationships, limiting the extent to which we could evaluate the role of developmental issues, exploratory analyses did suggest that these changes were most often from conformity to exception-finding or transformation. Future work with sexual gender scripts that included longitudinal data collection, especially within the often sexually intense and labile periods of adolescence and young adulthood, could trace the process of these changes. Such research would enable the identification of environmental and individual facilitators of change in sexual gender scripts. Such changes could potentially contribute to decreased gender inequity in the sexual realm and to increased opportunities for sexual satisfaction, safety, and wellbeing, particularly for women, but for men as well.

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Table 1

Distribution of Participants Across Styles of Negotiating Cultural Sexual Scripts

	Conforming ^a		Exception-Finding ^b		Transforming ^c	
	Unquestioning	Conflicted	Explicit	Implicit	Explicit	Implicit
Men (n = 26)	9	7	2	3	3	5
Women (n = 18)	4	4	5	3	3	2

Note:

^aConformers' intra- and inter-personal scripts largely matched cultural scripts.^bException-finders accepted culture-level gender scripts as a given while creating exceptions to these scripts for themselves.^cTransformers constructed their own sets of gender scripts for relationships and sex.