

Do Deaf Individuals' Dating Scripts Follow the Traditional Sexual Script?

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Abstract The current study investigated Deaf individuals' dating expectations. Prior research on dating expectations has identified three common scenes: initiation/meeting, activities, and outcomes/conclusions. Participants were asked to report their expectations for each scene on a typical date. Talking was the most frequently occurring initiation activity. Dinner and a movie were among the top date activities in the activities scene. Activities were often reported as group gatherings. Dating outcomes included a good night kiss and making plans for another date. These expectations do not match prior research with hearing participants where the Traditional Sexual Script could be identified. Comparisons and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords Deaf · Dating · Relationships · Traditional sexual scripts

The pioneering work of Gagnon and Simon (Gagnon 1990; Gagnon and Simon 1973) proposed that sexual behavior is profoundly social; that is, through socialization processes we learn the expectations of the who, what, when, and how that guides our behavior within sexual situations. It is well established that people develop these expectations, or scripts, for the various social interactions that comprise sexual interactions, such as flirting, dating, and sexual intimacy (Bartoli and Clark 2006; Krahé et al. 2007; McCormick 1987; Rose and Frieze 1989, 1993). Traditional dating scripts involve the man picking up the woman, going to dinner and a movie, and end with the man taking the woman home and giving her a good night kiss (Bartoli and

The use of a capital D in Deaf denotes that these individuals are members of the Deaf culture.

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Clark 2006; Clark et al. 2009; Laner and Ventrone 1998, 2000). Hearing college students expect much the same behavior in dating situations for how they meet, what they do on a date, and how a date ends (Bartoli and Clark). Similarities in the initiation/meeting scene include talking, meeting in public, having a shared interest, the man picking up his date, and casual interactions. In the activities scene, going to a movie and/or dinner, talking, and engaging in a shared interest are similar across men's and women's dating scripts. In the outcomes/conclusions scene, similarities include talking, going back to the man's house, taking the date home, a good night kiss, relationship development, both upper and lower body petting, and the woman limiting sexual behaviors, as well as sexual intercourse.

Dating expectations are strongly linked to the Traditional Sexual Script (TSS) (Byers 1996; Laner and Ventrone 1998; Bartoli and Clark 2006; Clark et al. 2009). In the TSS, men are viewed as active and interested in sex. They are characterized as the initiator of sexual activities. Men's sexual exploits are seen as demonstrating their masculine worth—this view contributes to the expectation that men should be persistent in their sexual advances. Within this script, men are supposed to try to overcome any resistance to their advances from women (Byers 1996; Korman and Leslie 1982; LaPlante 1980; McCormick 1987). As such, the TSS socializes men to view women as possible sexual partners and for them not to accept a “no” to their sexual advances (Byers 1996). In contrast, the TSS dictates that women be passive and less interested in sex. They are characterized as the emotional facilitators and more interested in relationship maintenance. As the recipients of men's sexual initiations, women are placed in the position of placing limits on the level of sexual activity that occurs in male–female interactions.

The TSS not only provides expectations about sexual intent, but also lays out the roles for women and men in dating. Research on dating scripts has consistently noted that scripts for a “first date” include an emphasis on traditional gender role expectations (Morr Serewicz and Gale 2008; Rose and Frieze 1989, 1993). This line of research also highlights both the degree of overlap and areas of divergence in the scripts of women and men. On the one hand, the degree of overlapping activities included by women and men led Rose and Frieze (1989) to conclude that their participants were “quite knowledgeable about opposite gender scripts” (p. 265). On the other hand, consistent with the expectations of the TSS, the dating scripts of women and men reflect the notion that men incorporate more sexual behavior in their dating scripts whereas women are more focused on relationship building and social concerns (Morr Serewicz and Gale 2008).

Information about interpersonal relationships and dating scripts can be learned early through the media (Ganong et al. 1996)—especially from Walt Disney films such as *Snow White*, *Herbie Goes to Paris*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Lady and the Tramp*, and *the Princess and the Frog*. An open issue is related to the impact of family and media on the development of dating scripts for these individuals. Early work by Clark and colleagues (Reed and Clark 1991) found that children as young as eight had the basic dating script which appeared to have developed from the “mommy-daddy” script as well as children's media such as those noted above. In-home discussions about the roles for mothers versus fathers, as well as the inclusion of a date scene in nearly every Disney movie, appear to be the basis for the

early development of a date. Reed and Clark found in pilot data that if the dollhouse used as a prop for eliciting children's dating expectations included a nursery—5-year olds reported that Barbie and Ken were “Mommy” and “Daddy.” After replacing the dollhouse, children moved towards the dating scripts seen in typical children's films. By the time they were eight they expressed many parts of the traditional dating script as noted by one 8-year old's comments; “Ken and Barbie go to bed.” “What happens then?”, asks the experimenter. “You know, but I can't tell you,” replied the eight-year-old boy (Reed and Clark).

No research has investigated if the TSS is similar within Deaf culture. Within the Deaf population, questions arise about dating scripts; for example, where do Deaf individuals learn dating behaviors and are their expectations about dating similar to those expressed by hearing individuals? Byers (1996) wrote that sexual scripts are learned through socialization, much of which occurs “behind the head.” Individuals overhear conversations and acquire information about feelings and expectations from implicit aspects of the communication. Deaf individuals raised in Deaf families are socialized in much the same way, except that they use a visual language and “oversee” conversations. If all Deaf individuals were part of Deaf families using the current technology for closed captions, video chats, and Internet, one could assume that these individuals would learn about the TSS in much the same way as hearing individuals. However, this situation only applies to about five percent of Deaf individuals (Karchmer and Ross 2003). Indeed, most deaf individuals grow up in hearing families, some who sign and many who do not sign at all. This home situation often leads to the deaf child having limited access to the ongoing everyday communication at home, in school, and with peers (Foster 1996). As sexual scripts are learned via socialization, it is likely that the diverse language environments of deaf children have an impact on the dating scripts of Deaf individuals.

The current study investigated the following question: When Deaf college students are asked to describe a typical date, would their script include the cultural expectations embedded within the TSS? Hypothesis 1 predicted that highly scripted activities like dinner, a movie, and a goodnight kiss would be part of Deaf individuals' dating scripts, given their overrepresentation in visual media. Hypothesis 2 predicted that Deaf participants would include the gender related themes found in the TSS with their corresponding gender differences: relationship development in higher proportions for women than men, higher rates of sexual activity for men than for women, sexual limiting by women as reported by both women and men, and alcohol venues as both meeting places and activities. Hypothesis 3 predicted significant thematic differences between Deaf women's and men's dating scripts as have been found in hearing dating scripts.

Method

Participants

A sample of 41 individuals participated in the current study: 28 women ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.9$ years) and 13 men ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.9$ years). Participants attended a

bilingual university for Deaf and hard of hearing students on the east coast. Year in college was reported as: first-year ($n = 14$), second-year ($n = 2$), third-year ($n = 10$), fourth-year ($n = 5$), and other (English Language Institute, special student, or graduate student, $n = 10$). All participants self-identified as either Deaf or hard of hearing. Several background questions were asked, including sexual orientation. Only heterosexual scripts are reported as past research has demonstrated differences between heterosexual dating scripts and gay and lesbians' dating scripts (Klinkenberg and Rose 1994). Participants were compensated for their time with either a \$10 voucher or course credit.

Procedures

Participants were given a paper with three "dating scenes for a typical date" and asked to list as many activities as they could for each scene. The three scenes were (1) Initiation/meeting: "Where and how would the couple meet?" and "How does the date start?"; (2) Date activities: "What would the couple do on a date?"; (3) Outcomes/conclusions: "What would happen after the date activities?" and "How does the date end?" Participants entered activities and events under the scenes in which they were expected to occur.

Data Coding

The most frequently listed themes were categorized under the scene in which they were reported. Two groups of themes were collapsed in the meeting/initiation scene. The first collapsed theme was meeting through a "shared interest" and included the following themes: meeting at a sports center, at school, at work, and on vacation. The second meeting/initiation theme that was collapsed was "meet in public," where the people meet each other at some type of public venue. These themes included meeting at a restaurant or coffee shop, at an arcade, at a park, at a mall, or at the dorm.

In the activities scene, individuals reported a wide variety of activities that were viewed as occurring with a group and coded as "group activities." Several participants when listing these activities wrote comments like, "any kind of activity that is fun!" or "any activity that they like to do with others." The reported activities included going to the beach, a museum, a carnival, an amusement park, a coffee shop, swimming, traveling, go-karting, sporting events, playing cards, bowling, or a tour of the city.

Results

Across the three dating scenes, a total of 59 different themes were reported. Following the convention used in Rose and Frieze (1989), themes that were reported by 25% of the participants were included in the dating script. Given this Rose and Frieze criterion, the dating scripts for Deaf participants included 12 themes: four in the meeting/initiation scene, four in the date activities scene, and four in the

outcomes/conclusion scene (see Table 1 for a complete listing of all themes per scene). This Deaf dating script supported Hypothesis 1, in that highly scripted cultural expectations that are overrepresented in the visual media were elicited. Out of the 12 themes found in the script, only three (meeting through friends and family, group activities, and concluding with hugs) were not present in the dating scripts found for hearing participants, showing overlap with these highly scripted activities.

Hypothesis 2 was not supported, in that the Deaf dating script did not include many of the components of the TSS as expected. The theme of sexual activity did not reach the 25% criterion for inclusion in the dating script in either the outcomes/conclusion scene or the activity scene. Sexual limiting was not mentioned at all by either women or men. Relationship development did reach criterion and was included in the dating script, but there were no significant differences between women and men in how often it was mentioned (women and men reported this theme 46% of the time). In addition, alcohol related themes did not reach the 25% criterion for inclusion (see Tables 2, 3).

No significant differences were found between the percentages reported by women and men on these themes, disconfirming Hypothesis 3 that women and men would show significant differences among their reported themes. (See Table 4 for percentages of each theme and their corresponding chi square results.)

Table 1 Most frequently reported date scripts by Deaf college students

	Percent (<i>n</i>)
Initiation/meeting	
Talk	59% (<i>n</i> = 24)
Shared interest	29% (<i>n</i> = 12)
Family and friends	29% (<i>n</i> = 12)
Meet in public	24% (<i>n</i> = 10)
Date activities	
Group activities	63% (<i>n</i> = 26)
Dinner	73% (<i>n</i> = 30)
Movie	61% (<i>n</i> = 25)
Talk	39% (<i>n</i> = 16)
Outcomes/conclusions	
Good night kiss	51% (<i>n</i> = 21)
Take date home	34% (<i>n</i> = 14)
Hug	34% (<i>n</i> = 14)
Relationship development	46% (<i>n</i> = 19)

Table 2 Alcohol-related themes

	Percent (<i>n</i>)
Initiation	
Meet at bar or club	10% (<i>n</i> = 4)
Activity	
Have drinks	5% (<i>n</i> = 2)
Family and friends	2% (<i>n</i> = 1)

Table 3 Sex-related themes

	Percent (<i>n</i>)
Activity	
Sexual intercourse	2% (<i>n</i> = 1)
Hold hands	7% (<i>n</i> = 3)
Kissing	7% (<i>n</i> = 3)
Outcome	
Sexual intercourse	17% (<i>n</i> = 7)
Spend night at date's home	2% (<i>n</i> = 1)
Make out	2% (<i>n</i> = 1)
Cuddling	5% (<i>n</i> = 2)

Table 4 Chi square analyses of Deaf dating scripts by gender

Theme	Percentage of men (<i>n</i>)	Percentage of women (<i>n</i>)	χ^2
Talk—meeting scene	69% (9)	54% (15)	$\chi^2 = .90$ ($p = .50$)
Meet through friends and family	31% (4)	29% (8)	$\chi^2 = .89$ ($p = 1.00$)
Meet through shared interests	31% (4)	46% (13)	$\chi^2 = .90$ ($p = .50$)
Meet in public places	42% (6)	54% (15)	$\chi^2 = .20$ ($p = .74$)
Dinner—activity scene	62% (8)	79% (22)	$\chi^2 = 1.31$ ($p = .28$)
Movie—activity scene	62% (8)	61% (17)	$\chi^2 = .003$ ($p = 1.00$)
Talk—activity scene	46% (6)	36% (10)	$\chi^2 = .41$ ($p = .73$)
Group activities	77% (10)	57% (16)	$\chi^2 = 1.50$ ($p = .31$)
Kiss goodnight	62% (8)	46% (13)	$\chi^2 = .81$ ($p = .51$)
Take date home	31% (4)	36% (10)	$\chi^2 = .10$ ($p = 1.00$)
Relationship development	46% (6)	46% (13)	$\chi^2 = .00$ ($p = 1.00$)

One additional difference between these Deaf dating scripts and those found in Bartoli and Clark (2006) for hearing college students was in the theme “negative ending to a date.” The Deaf participants’ negative endings related to the notion that “things didn’t work out” or “I don’t want to continue on a second date.” The view is that the negative ending did not lead to more relationship development. Hearing dating scripts’ negative endings often reflect highly charged responses such as, “Blah—is that what you look like....turn the lights back off!” or “The door slams shut and hits her on the ass on the way out” (Clark et al. 2009).

Discussion

In general, it seems that Deaf college students have different expectations for a typical date than do hearing college students. In terms of Hypothesis 1, results found support for similarities in highly scripted activities like dinner, a movie, and a goodnight kiss which are overrepresented in visual media. On the other hand,

Hypotheses 2 and 3, which predicted a strong overlap in relationship development and sexual expectations among Deaf and hearing individuals reflecting the gender differences found in hearing dating scripts and the TSS, were not supported. These expectations related to the TSS are clearly part of the dating scripts of hearing college students but were not as clear in the dating scripts of the current sample of Deaf college students.

This study found no significant gender differences in Deaf dating scripts as has been found in hearing dating scripts (Clark et al. 2009). This finding may be related to several issues. First, fewer men than women were included in this study (28 women versus 13 men). Balancing this number may have provided different results. Second, many of the current participants focused on group activities rather than a one-on-one date. This situation with the participants' emphasis on having fun together may draw their scripts closer together and reduce gender differences. Finally, dating typically proceeds through several stages, from simply getting someone to go out with you, to practicing, to more mature sexual interactions (Feinstein and Ardon 1973). Deaf individuals' teenage years typically are not the same as the average hearing teenager. If the Deaf individual lives in a hearing family and is mainstreamed, where they might be one of a few or even the only deaf person in the school, friendships and social development may not follow an expected developmental pattern. Those Deaf individuals from Deaf families may have similar social development related to dating, and these questions are open to empirical investigation.

One potentially dangerous difference between Deaf and hearing dating scripts was that in the current sample of Deaf students, neither women nor men reported the expectation that women were the sexual limiters. The absence of this TSS component may be due to a variety of factors. One potential explanation is a lack of early exposure to the typical dating experiences as seen in the general population. This idea that women are the sexual limiters may be learned "behind the head" in implicit conversations to which many Deaf individuals do not have access. Additionally, individuals reported gathering in groups, which may lead to the perception that there is no dating occurring so that there is no need to limit sexual advances. It is possible if sexual limiting was explicitly mentioned, that Deaf participants might endorse sexual limiting as part of a date. But the open-ended method used here did not connect this theme of sexual limiting to dating scripts. Understanding the implications of these differences may help understand the high rates of partner violence in this population (Anderson and Leigh 2011; Anderson et al. 2011).

Another possibility in understanding the differences found in this study may stem from the finding that date activities in the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community tend to focus more on group activities. One participant reported, "I believe the way hearing people date is different than Deaf people since (the) Deaf world is smaller" and she continued to say, "when it is over, we still spend time (with) each other." The idea of group dates also was explicitly reported: "On the date, it can be a group." As noted in the results, the notion that dates were fun group activities was frequently reported. The idea of getting to know each other before a one-on-one date comes through in the responses. One participant wrote "NO MOVIES!", most

likely reflecting the need to see each other to communicate and get to know the person rather than focus on the TSS.

Drinking was not connected to dating for these participants, as alcohol activities were only mentioned six times. Going to a bar was mentioned four times as a potential meeting place. Going to a party was mentioned once, and having drinks as an activity was mentioned twice. In contrast, the dating scripts of 3rd and 4th year hearing college students included over 50% of the women and almost 50% of the men meeting at a bar or a party (Bartoli and Clark 2006). Alcohol related events continued as an activity for hearing college students, with 40% of the participants listing a party as a date activity. Alcohol has been traditionally linked to problems that occur in dating situations and it is not clear what the implications are for this kind of behavior not being reported by our Deaf participants.

In regards to “attraction” (holding hands and eye gazing), we did not find strong evidence for these kinds of expectations in our Deaf participants’ scripts. Perhaps attraction does not occur in these early dating stages or maybe the idea of a traditional date is not highly scripted for Deaf people. Supporting this idea was the low level of petting kinds of behaviors (hugging, making out, and cuddling) that were reported. The few times that making out and cuddling were reported, the responses included only upper-body touching. Given that these participants are college students, it is not that they do not engage in sexual activities (they will tell you “sure, we do that”); however, these results did not elicit the male expectations for “pushing” for access to sexual contact on a date as noted in the TSS.

Finally, relationship development was reported as an outcome in almost the same proportions as for the hearing college students. On the other hand, it was more likely to be reported as making plans for another date by our Deaf participants than as looking for someone for a long-term relationship. Interestingly, this part of the TSS did not show gender differences, with men apparently more focused on seeing the person again than pushing for sexual access. Additionally, the theme of “negative ending” for Deaf participants was related to a failure to continue into a relationship. This negative ending was similar across women and men’s scripts. Therefore, our second hypothesis, which estimated that there would be a strong overlap in regards to relationship development and sexual expectations between Deaf and hearing participants, was not supported by the findings of this study.

Limitations

Future research should be conducted to further define dating in the Deaf community, aiming to shed new light on the apparent absence of a TSS in the Deaf community. An important question that needs to be answered is, “Is there a difference between dating and being in a relationship?” It is possible that the current group of Deaf individuals considered being in a relationship equivalent to dating. In a concurrent study of dating between gay and lesbian Deaf individuals, participants reported that the distinction between a date and “hanging out” was confusing. Moreover, Deaf individuals reported high levels of group activities, therefore making it difficult to convey whether or not a date was actually occurring. Deaf individuals often gather in groups with friends, making their interactions appear more casual. Future

research needs to clarify the expectations in this type of dating situation. It is possible that given an early history of social isolation, being together in a group of signing individuals takes precedence over establishing sexual partnerships. Additional information on when and how these group activities change and move into more traditional sexual pairings will help to clarify these issues.

An additional issue that needs to be addressed is whether or not participants who included the sexual components of the TSS were from Deaf families with full access to a visual language while they were growing up. This study did not separate data based on native versus non-native signers. It is possible that those from Deaf families are the participants who reported activities that are more similar to the TSS as they could “oversee” discussions among adults and implicitly learn these scripts. Those individuals in hearing families tend not to have full access to all of the conversations that happen around them even if some members of the family sign to them. Therefore, people who learned to sign later or were not from Deaf families could have missed opportunities to pick up innuendos related to sexuality.

Future Research and Conclusion

Recent research has found that partner violence against Deaf women is roughly twice as high as for hearing individuals (Anderson 2010; Anderson and Leigh 2011). One potential place to look to better understand of this issue is in dating scripts. Future research should include more direct discussion of these issues with members of the Deaf community through focus groups. In addition, more quantitative measures, like the checklist in Bartoli and Clark (2006), will provide insight into what Deaf participants believe is *possible* on a date. These two methods avoid issues related to writing in English for this bilingual group of participants, many who prefer to communicate about personal issues in their primary language of American Sign Language.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the current study provided insights into dating expectations in the Deaf community. The current findings were surprising and led to more questions than answers. The focus of our study shifted from comparing dating scripts between hearing and Deaf individuals, to the need for further investigation to define and identify characteristics of dating in the Deaf community. There was little overlap between previous research with hearing college students and the current sample of Deaf participants with regard to dating expectations. The findings of this study provide opportunities for dialogue in which individuals can have an open discussion about dating and provide further insight of the details surrounding dating in the Deaf community. Dialogue can be in the form of one-on-one interview or group discussion, querying the individuals involved, the activities of a typical date between two Deaf people, the date location, and how the date begins, progresses, and ends, all need future exploration.

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