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Social Scripts and Sexual Agency

TOM DOUGHERTY
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Social scripts specify the normal way for people to interact in certain situations. For example, a social script for a restaurant conversation explains why the world over, these conversations take a similar form. I develop an account of how social scripts can structure people's sexual agency—sometimes, for the worse. I show how people's sexual agency can be constrained by the presence of a linear social script for heteronormative sexual encounters that escalate in intimacy and terminate in male orgasm. By marking off certain sexual options as deviant, as breaches of social obligations, or as sanctionable, this script can combine with certain motivations and circumstances to explain why people voluntarily take part in sexual encounters that they would ideally like to avoid. I discuss how this situation could be ameliorated by alternative social scripts. For example, in conjunction with changes to ancillary social norms, people would be more empowered if they had social scripts for using safe words to end sexual encounters.

1. Introduction

People are diverse, and yet there is a remarkable uniformity in some of our interactions with each other. Take conversations between restaurant servers and diners. The world over, these contain greetings, questions, requests, and expressions of gratitude. This similarity arises because of the globalization of social scripts that specify the normal way for restaurant interactions to go.

Social scripts have been of long-standing interest to social scientists, with classic theories invoking them to explain routinized interactions like restaurant orders (Schank & Abelson 1977); emotional regulation and expression (Tomkins 1978); behavior in organizations like firms (Gioa & Poole 1984); and sexual encounters (Gagnon & Simon 1973). In turn, social and political philosophers have used social scripts to give accounts of rape (Marcus 1992); social identities (Appiah 1994; 2005); fairness in cooperation and competition (Bicchieri 2006); the

Contact: Tom Dougherty <tom.dou@gmail.com>

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relationship between culture and social structures (Haslanger 2012); racial discrimination (Stoljar 2015); misogyny (Manne 2018); domestic violence (Bicchieri & McNally 2018); and street harassment (Hesni 2024; forthcoming).

While the restaurant example illustrates how social scripts can facilitate welcome cooperation, it is striking that many of these projects invoke social scripts to illuminate phenomena of ethical and political concern. In a similar fashion, I will develop an account of how social scripts can structure people's sexual agency—sometimes, for the worse. Specifically, I have two main aims. First, I aim to show how people's sexual agency can be constrained by the presence of a linear social script for heteronormative sexual encounters that escalate in intimacy and terminate in male orgasm. By marking off certain sexual options as deviant, as breaches of social obligations, or as sanctionable, this script can combine with certain motivations and circumstances to explain why people voluntarily take part in sexual encounters that they would ideally like to avoid. Second, I aim to show how this situation could be ameliorated by alternative social scripts. For example, in conjunction with changes to ancillary social norms, people would be more empowered if they had social scripts for using safe words to end sexual encounters.

At the outset, let me frame our discussion with a caveat. While I will focus on social scripts to isolate a theoretically and practically important object of inquiry, I do not mean to imply that these scripts are the most important social phenomena concerning sexual agency. Indeed, I will flag roles for other social phenomena, such as ancillary social norms and stereotypes, without giving these phenomena center-stage. To achieve a systematic understanding of the social bases of sexual agency, it is helpful to approach this topic piecemeal with detailed characterizations of each of the relevant social phenomena. My goal for this article is to develop such a characterization of social scripts.

This article is organized as follows. After clarifying my conception of a social script (§2), I will show how social scripts interact with other features of social contexts to constrain people's sexual agency (§3), before showing how this could be ameliorated by implementing alternative social scripts (§4). I briefly conclude by summarizing the results of our discussion (§5).

2. Social Scripts as Blueprints for Specific Interactions

2.1. Defining Social Scripts

In at least an inchoate way, the term "social script" resonates with how many people think about the social world: Significant parts of our lives seem like performances of roles that are defined by shared cultural resources. Presumably because of this resonance, some philosophers rely on an intuitive grasp of the notion of a

social script, without explicitly defining it. But this lack of explicit definition creates a risk that people have in mind different parts of our social world when they use the term. This risk is augmented by the variety of the theoretical roles that social scripts are meant to play: In addition to the templates for short interactions like restaurant orders, the term "social script" has been applied to narratives that people use when shaping their projects and telling their life stories (Appiah 1994; 2005), as well as to stereotypes of Black people as untrustworthy (Stoljar 2015). Once our attention is drawn to these different applications, it is natural to start to worry whether there is a univocal sense to the term across them. Are stereotypes of Black people really the same thing as the narratives behind the arc of a life? Are either of these the same phenomenon as a template for a restaurant interaction? Given that these differences are yet to be tracked in the philosophical literature, some initial groundwork will be helpful and so let us begin by asking: What is a social script? My hope is that addressing this question will have the dual functions of helping regiment the existing philosophical literature and setting up our later analysis of the constraints on sexual agency.

Since "social script" is not a phrase that features in everyday English, we are in the search for a definition of a theoretical term. For such a term, I follow Sally Haslanger (2012: 367-368) in holding that our theoretical goals determine which definitions are the most helpful for us to adopt in a particular project. My goal is to explain how certain social phenomena can constrain people's agency in sexual interactions with each other. As an example of the interactions that I am interested in, consider the following testimony of a college student from New York, Rachel:[1]

> I hate admitting how much sex I've had because it was "polite" to just let him finish. You read stories of rape and sexual assault but never about your own manners pressuring you into having sex. Sometimes you just don't want to have sex after all the buildup but there is no way to get out of it without coming off as rude or disappointing your partner, who is probably a good person, not some creepy dude in a club. (Bennett & Jones 2019: 82)

Why did "all the buildup" lead Rachel to think that good manners required her to have unwanted sex? And why did she think declining sex would disappoint her partner? Perhaps, he will feel some disappointment or frustration simply because he was hoping to have sex. After all, it isn't odd for someone to feel these emotions when social activities conclude earlier than hoped. However, in addition, I suspect that Rachel thought that her partner expected them to have sex,

1. "Rachel" is a pseudonym, as are subsequent names of students whose testimonies are related in (Bennett & Jones 2019).

and that she would be breaking off a social activity before it had concluded if she had declined. But if that's the case, then we should want to know: Why did she attribute these expectations to him and why did she take herself to be midway through a social activity that will later involve sex? To answer these questions and to explain why she saw unwanted sex as polite, my working hypothesis is that Rachel's attitudes were influenced by social phenomena that stated the "normal" way for casual sexual encounters to go: Specifically, these encounters proceed until the point of male orgasm, and once the encounter has begun, it is abnormal to break off the encounter.

To elaborate the hypothesis that the social world can determine what constitutes a normal sexual encounter, I will build on a mature social scientific research program that explains a wide variety of sexual behavior and misconduct in terms of social scripts.[2] This program views scripts as the social templates for interactions between different agents (henceforth "interactions" for brevity).[3] However, canonical works in the social science literature are not univocal regarding the details of scripts and do not always contain the tight definitions that are best suited for philosophical analysis. And so, it is welcome that within the philosophy literature, we find a thorough account of these templates in the work of Cristina Bicchieri (2006). Conceiving of schemata as "cognitive structures that represent stored knowledge about people, events, and roles,"[4] Bicchieri (2006: 93; see also 2017: 131-132) states that the

2. Inspired by the influential work of Gagnon & Simon (1973), social scientists have used social scripts to explain a variety of sexual behaviors and misconduct, including consensual sex (McCormick 1987), dating (Rose & Frieze 1993), sexual harassment (Popovich et al. 1995), rape (Byers 1996), sexualized dancing (Ronen 2010), and the use of pornography (Sun et al. 2016). For criticism of some variants of sexual script theory, see (Frith & Kitzinger 2001).

3. Concerning sexual scripts, John Gagnon and William Simon (1973: 20) state "Our use of the term script with reference to the sexual has two major dimensions. One deals with the external, the interpersonal—the script as the organization of mutually shared conventions that allows two or more actors to participate in a complex act involving mutual dependence. The second deals with the internal, the intra-psychic, the motivational elements that produce arousal or at least a commitment to the activity." They elaborate (1973: 20–21) that "at the level of convention is that large class of gestures, both verbal and nonverbal, that are mutually accessible. Routinized language, the sequence of petting behaviors among adolescents and adults, the conventional styles establishing sexual willingness are all parts of culturally shared, external routines. These are the strategies involved in the 'doing' of sex, concrete and continuous elements of what a culture agrees is sexual. They are assembled, learned over time, reflecting. . .general patterns of stages of development." This fits with social scientists' use of scripts to theorize non-sexual contexts. For example, Silvan Tomkins (1995: 313) states that "Script theory assumes that the basic unit of analysis for understanding persons, as distinguished from human beings, is the scene and the relationships between scenes, as ordered by sets of rules I have defined as scripts." These are "rules for the interpretation and response to sets of scenes" (314), specifically "rules for predicting, interpreting, responding to, and controlling a magnified set of scenes" (320).

4. We conceptualize the world around us by sharing schemas, understood as "clusters of beliefs, concepts, attitudes, and so forth" with which we "interpret and organise information and

> schemata of interest for understanding how norms affect behavior are event schemata that describe appropriate sequences of events in well-known situations. Examples of such schemata are descriptions of what happens at restaurants, soccer games, theaters, and lectures. Consider a 'lecture schema,' which contains roles (student, professor) and sequence rules (the teacher enters the classroom, the students seat and prepare to take notes, the lecture starts, the students take notes and ask questions, the lecture ends, all leave the classroom). Schemata for events such as this are called scripts (Schank and Abelson, 1977). A script for a lecture thus describes a stylized, stereotyped sequence of actions that are appropriate in this context, and it defines actors and roles.

People may have various motivations for following scripts, which can either explicitly feature in conscious reasoning or operate subconsciously. Over time, these motivations can lead to certain behaviors becoming engrained at the level of habit so that they are performed automatically. For example, lecturers and students typically internalize a social script for a lecture and hence follow it on autopilot (Bicchieri 2006: 97-98). As well as guiding people's behavior, scripts have implications for people's beliefs: If people view each other as following the script, then they will use the script as the basis of their expectations of each other's future behavior (96).

To illustrate, consider the restaurant script. The social script involves a representation of a certain situation, namely the table at the restaurant. The script also involves representations of the roles of the server and the diner. Finally, it contains prescriptive norms of requirement, permission, and prohibition, which apply to people as occupants of these roles. These norms designate some ways of carrying out the interaction as "normal" and other ways as "deviant" by specifying specify behavior that must, may, or must not be performed at various stages of the interaction. For example, in the restaurant script the server must ask what the diners want; they may ask for anything off the menu; they must not ask for a completely different meal that doesn't feature on the menu. I understand the normativity in this script—and indeed of all social scripts—to be conventional. Likewise, I understand "deviant" in a non-pejorative manner, such that behaving deviantly is simply behaving in a way that is conventionally abnormal. But as we will discuss in detail in §3, when certain contingent conditions are met, the conventional normality of an action can take on a particular significance for an agent.

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coordinate action, thought, and affect" (Haslanger 2016: 126). Schemas range broadly and include how we look at parts of the natural world like plants e.g. whether we see certain plants as sources of sustenance or medicinal drugs (Dembroff & Saint-Croix 2019: 574). Schemas also consist in certain normative or evaluative views, e.g. "people from a certain religion lack full moral status." By contrast, on my conception, social scripts specifically concern human interactions.

For example, if a diner would feel embarrassed or ashamed by acting in a way that is deviant according to the culture that they are in, then they will be motivated to conform with the social scripts that govern their restaurant interaction.

Generalizing from this example, we can follow Bicchieri's (2006) account to construct a definition that recognizes situations, roles, and prescriptive norms. To capture these, I propose the following definition of a social script as a blueprint for a specific interaction:[5]

> *Social Script Definition*: A social script for an interaction between different agents is a cluster of a representation[6] of a situation, representations of roles, and prescriptive norms. The norms determine what people in the roles may, must, and must not do in the situation in order to participate in the interaction in the normal way.

When I say that the norms govern what certain people "do," I aim to include both speech-acts and non-verbal behavior. According to this definition, certain roles are governed by a social script.[7] For some interactions, such as forming a queue in a minimally egalitarian society, the same script applies to members of all social groups. So the "person joining a queue" role is one that anyone can fill. Meanwhile, other scripts designate roles partly by group membership. For example, in patriarchal societies, heteronormative sexual scripts can be heavily gendered, with clear "man" and "woman" roles.[8]

2.2. Distinguishing Interaction Blueprints from Global Norms and Other Conceptions of Social Scripts

By governing interactions between different agents, social scripts' norms differ from other social norms, such as a global norm for men to be stoical. That global

5. I owe the terminology of blueprints to Robin Dembroff and Catharine Saint-Croix (2019: 574) whose definition of "social blueprints" tracks Haslanger's (2016: 126) definition of social schemas quoted in a previous footnote.

6. I define scripts in terms of representations in light of the fact that I conceive of scripts as schemata, and I follow Bicchieri (2006: 93) in conceiving of schemata as "cognitive structures that represent stored knowledge about people, events, and roles." Readers who prefer not to theorize scripts in terms of representations are invited to omit the mention of representations and define scripts directly in terms of situations, roles, and norms. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out this alternative.

7. In a commentary on this article, Catharine Saint-Croix made the interesting suggestion, on which I remain neutral here, that roles are metaphysically explanatory of scripts: e.g. the general social role for women partly explains the features of specific social scripts for interactions involving women.

8. For other gendered scripts, see (Manne 2018, esp. 216–217).

norm applies to more than just interactions. It also governs solo activities, like pushing through the pain barrier in private exercise, and patterns of thought and emotion, like suppressing thoughts or feelings that make one vulnerable.[9] That said, social scripts can specify determinate ways of satisfying these global norms that apply to social roles. Hypothetically, the global male stoicism norm could stand alone, with individuals using situational judgment as to which behaviors satisfy the norm. In actuality, this local norm is supplemented by scripts for particular interactions. An example would be a conversational script that specifies that general questions about a man's life are met with sanguine responses that focus on the less intimate aspects of his life rather than personal issues, problems, or feelings.

These interaction blueprints are analytically distinct from the global norm insofar as the latter would also govern solo activities (e.g. pushing through the pain barrier in private exercise) and patterns of thought and emotion (e.g. suppressing painful memories). Still, we need not presume that this analytic distinction tracks a deep ontological difference as the interaction norms and the global norms can be thought of as species of a broader genus of social norm. As such, what I am proposing is primarily a terminological choice: I propose that we restrict our use of the term "social scripts" to the interaction blueprints. In making this proposal, I allow that nothing of substance turns on which terminology we use to refer to various norms. Still I note two disadvantages of broadening "social script" to refer to any social norm. First, we already have the term "social norm" to refer to the more general category. Second, I have learned in conversation that some people see the lack of specificity of global norms as contrary to the role of scripts in specifying standardized forms of behavior. To illustrate this point, let us consider an analogy between theatrical scripts and social scripts. This analogy is loose because there are differences between paradigmatic theatrical scripts and social scripts. For example, paradigmatic theatrical scripts have a linear structure and specify verbatim sentences for actors to utter while leaving non-verbal behavior up to them and the director. Meanwhile, paradigmatic social scripts have a branching structure, range over non-verbal behavior, and specify the rough contents of communication while leaving agents with discretion as to which natural language sentences express these contents. Now, consider an improvisational theatrical performance in which actors retain artistic license about how to interact on stage so long as they follow general directions about their assigned

9. As well as global norms and specific norms for interactions between different agents, there are also specific norms for solo activities. For example, a religious community could have norms that specify the normal way for someone to engage in private worship. For some theoretical projects, it may be useful to employ a more encompassing definition of "social script" so as to include these social norms.

characters (e.g. "your character is a stoical person"). Since some people find it natural to describe this improvised performance as "unscripted," they correspondingly find it unnatural to use "social script" to refer to a global social norm for male stoicism.

To clarify the implications of this definition, and to ward off potential misunderstanding with anyone who uses the term differently, let me emphasize some points of contrast with other conceptions of social scripts in the philosophical literature. As I mentioned at the outset of this section, the term "social script" has also been applied to life-narratives and identity-based stereotypes. Let us consider in turn the differences between these conceptions of social scripts and my conception of templates for interactions.

First, in developing an account of the role that shared social resources play in the construction of identity, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005: 22; see also 1994: 159-160) defines "social scripts" as narratives that people use "in shaping their projects and in telling their life stories." Specifically, these are the narratives that are provided by collective identities—the identities of "kinds of person" including gay people, Black people, and Americans, as well as butlers, hairdressers, and professors (2005: 65).[10] While Appiah's paradigmatic narratives concern major life events—and indeed, Appiah often uses "scripts" and "life-scripts" interchangeably—my blueprints concern specific interactions that frequently, though not exclusively, are limited to a short timeframe of a matter of minutes or hours.[11] Moreover, there is a respect in which Appiah's conception is broader than mine insofar as narratives include solo actions and projects, as well as experiences, emotions, and events that are distinct from actions.[12] Finally, there is also a respect in which Appiah's (2005: 23) definition is narrower than mine insofar as "narrative form entails seeing one's life as having a certain arc, as making sense through a life story that expresses who one is through one's own project of self-making." While these narratives focus on meaningful events and share formal features, characteristic of "novels and movies, short stories and folktales" (22–23), these restrictions do not apply to interaction blueprints, which can also apply to humdrum encounters. For example, when queues of cars merge on a highway, this interaction is governed by a blueprint whose function is to facilitate efficient coordination rather than to enable people to tell the stories of their lives by drawing on their collective identities.

10. In earlier work, Appiah (1994: 159–160) focuses on "large collective identities."

11. I say "typically" because some scripted interactions take place over broader time horizons. For example, a society may have a script for a courtship practice that spans weeks.

12. For example, the identity of a professor comes with the narrative of the project of getting tenure (Appiah 2005: 68), and this project is in key respects a solo project. Meanwhile, the identity of a gay person comes with the narrative of coming out (Appiah 2005: 23), and this narrative partly concerns relevant experiences and emotions.

Second, in developing an account of how people's autonomy can be limited by internalizing negative ideologies that they do not endorse, Natalie Stoljar (2015: 106–107, 117–119) uses the term "social script" to refer to a variety of phenomena, including a negative stereotype of Black people as untrustworthy and a culture's evaluative ranking of Black people as having inferior social status.[13] By contrast, these phenomena are not covered by my definition of "social scripts." On the one hand, prescriptive norms of requirement and permission are distinct from evaluations of social groups as superior and inferior. On the other hand, while blueprints' norms specify interactions that can be stereotyped, these norms are distinct from other stereotypes, including stereotypes of kinds of people e.g. a pejorative stereotype of Black people as untrustworthy.[14]

But while I distinguish interaction blueprints from these phenomena to clarify my terminology, I also want to flag that these phenomena are connected in important ways. For example, if a social group is evaluated as inferior, then this can explain why there are prescriptive norms for interactions that disadvantage or disrespect members of that group. Moreover, if there exists a stereotype for Black people as untrustworthy, then this can explain why there are scripts for members of other groups to act in ways that express a lack of trust. Indeed, because social roles are multi-faceted, I do not mean to suggest that my terminology uniquely carves the social world at its metaphysical joints. Rather, I think that different terminological choices may be more or less helpful for projects with different theoretical goals. For the purposes of this article, my choice is made primarily in order to pick out a suitable object for our inquiry into how the social world structures sexual agency.

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13. Although Stoljar does not explicitly define "social scripts," I think that in light of their examples, it is charitable to interpret them as adopting a conception of a social script as a "cluster" of these phenomena—a cluster whose members share features that are theoretically significant for Stoljar's project of understanding how social phenomena can limit people's autonomy. (Here and elsewhere I use a gender-neutral "they" for reasons given in (Dembroff & Wodak 2018) and to avoid making assumptions about scholars' gender identities.) For another conception of social scripts as including role-based norms, see (Bailey 1998: 33-34). For appreciating the difference between a conception of a social script as a blueprint for specific interactions and a cluster conception, I am indebted to Samia Hesni's (2024: 25) distinction between "interpersonal" and "structural" scripts: "Structural scripts. . . encompass the norms, stereotypes, and expectations that pervade a dominant ideology (here I have in mind a value-neutral conception of ideology). Interpersonal scripts, on the other hand, most closely resemble a screenplay: they are tied to patterns of dialogue and model the ways in which one individual responds to another over the course of a given conversation."

14. There may be a third point of contrast in that Stoljar's (2015: 109, 118-119) conception also includes norms for what constitutes being a good mother. If these norms do more than prescribe mothering interactions (e.g. by also prescribing thoughts and emotions for mothers), then they differ from interaction blueprints.

3. How Social Scripts Constrain Sexual Agency

With this conception of social scripts as interaction blueprints, we can examine how social scripts structure people's sexual agency. Specifically, we will consider how they can scaffold or constrain people's agency by marking off certain sexual options as deviant, as the breach of a social obligation, or as sanctionable.[15]

3.1. Normality and Deviance

Social scripts can scaffold our agency by creating new options that facilitate coordination. For example, a restaurant script creates a conventional way for a diner to communicate their order to a server. In the absence of a script, the diner and server may still find a non-conventional way to communicate, but the conventional option has distinctive benefits when it comes to efficiently facilitating coordination: The diner and server do not need to spend time and effort thinking either about how they will manage their side of the interaction or about how the other person is likely to behave. Nor do they need to engage in a meta-discussion of how the conversation will take place. Similar benefits are on offer when it comes to sexual coordination. For example, if two people want to flirt, kiss, and have sex with each other, then they can achieve these goals more efficiently if there is a social script that creates conventional options for these behaviors. By contrast, it is likely to be more difficult and awkward for people to approach these encounters in cultures that lack hook-up scripts—in much the same way that it can be more difficult and awkward for people to discuss how they would like to have sex in the absence of scripts for how these conversations are to go.

But the very creation of conventional options can affect other options that already exist. For once a script marks out some options as normal, it also thereby marks out other options as deviant. As I mentioned when elaborating my definition of social scripts in §2, this normality and deviance is merely conventional. As such, it need have no special significance for any agent. For example, if someone is entirely indifferent as to whether they behave in deviant ways, and deviant behavior has no social consequences for them, then the deviance of an option will have no significance for how they deliberate. However, things are different

15. I intend "scaffolding" and "constraining" to be equivalent to "enabling" and "disabling" in the following senses. I assume that people's agency is scaffolded (or enabled) by creating new options or by making options less costly or less difficult. Conversely, I assume that their agency is constrained (or disabled) by eliminating options or by making options more costly or more difficult. While I limit our discussion to these three types of scaffolds and constraints for the purposes of this article, I note that it may be helpful to generalize the notion of scaffold or constraint for other theoretical purposes. I owe the terminology of "scaffolding" agency to Kukla (2021), who in turn borrows from Mackenzie (2014: 285).

for many agents precisely because they care about avoiding deviance in itself or because they are in circumstances in which there will be social consequences for behaving deviantly. For example, Kate Manne (2018: 169) notes that in certain contexts, deviant behavior can be "perceived as 'off,' off-putting, peculiar, and creepy." In other contexts, deviant behavior can indicate a lack of competence or experience. For example, Emma Atherton (2021) discusses why people may follow scripts that escalate sexual activity:

> In my work in sex education, one of the most common things I encounter is fear about not being normal with respect to sex or sexuality. Sex scripts give a blueprint for "normal" sexual interactions and so give a blueprint for what is to behave like and be a "normal" sexual agent or a "good" sexual partner, what "normal" desires are, what it is to be properly "functional" as a sexual agent, and so on. Escalation scripts tell us that "normal" sexual agents "follow through", "good" partners don't start what they can't finish, there's something wrong with you if you don't want to follow through, and that sexually sophisticated people aren't so prudish as to stop at "only" making out. Many people want to be sexually competent and normal.[16]

Moreover, deviance can take on a particular significance when it connects with specific aspects of people's identities. For example, when heteronormative scripts specify gendered roles, Atherton (2021) notes that people

> can be invested in performing to the script, in part, because they are invested in doing their gender properly. Failing to act in accord with the script can threaten someone's sense of being a masculine, sexually normal man, or a feminine, sexually normal woman.

Since some people are averse to behaving deviantly, particularly for their gender, the existence of a social script imposes costs on options that the script marks as deviant: In the absence of the script, these options would simply be neutral with respect to what is designated as normal. These costs may enter practical reasoning that has a cost-benefit analysis structure, as cons for these options to be weighed against any pros. But I suspect that more commonly the pressure to behave normally affects someone's practical reasoning in a different way: When someone considers deviant options in conscious reasoning, they may have attendant feelings of shame or inhibition. This emotional discomfort creates a psy-

16. This passage comes from Atherton's conference commentary on an earlier version of this article. I am grateful to Atherton for correcting that version's error of failing to appreciate the significance of a motivation to behave normally.

chological pressure to eliminate the options from their list of alternatives that they are deliberating between. At the limit, this will be manifest in these options not entering deliberative consideration at all. Additionally, the deviance of these options can affect someone's agency in a further way. Even if someone terminates their conscious reasoning in an advance intention to perform the deviant option, then they may find that when the time comes to perform the action, they experience a form of weakness of will that manifests in a failure to execute their prior intention (Holton 1999). This is characteristic of inhibitions that people feel with respect to other social norms governing public interactions. Compare, for example, the experiences of researchers conducting a norm-breaching experiment, designed by Stanley Milgram. Following the experimental design, these researchers formed prior intentions to ask strangers for their seats on the subway, without giving any reason, but found themselves unable to follow through on their plans when the time came. One researcher reported, "I was afraid that I was going to throw up … I really did feel sick to my stomach," another reported, "I start to ask for the man's seat. Unfortunately, I turned so white and so faint, he jumps up and puts me in the seat," and Milgram himself related that "the words seemed lodged in my trachea and would simply not emerge" (Luo 2004). Similarly, I suggest that when people are particularly invested in behaving in normal ways, they often find that they face visceral inhibitions that prevent them from following through on intentions to perform deviant actions.

3.2. Social Obligations

Social normalcy does not only matter to people in its own right. In addition, it can influence the social obligations that people attribute to themselves and others. A significant part of this phenomenon concerns the way that social scripts shape people's expectations of each other's behavior and hence mesh with social obligations not to disappoint others' expectations. By "social obligations," I mean the obligations that people have according to a particular culture or set of shared beliefs. The precise nature of social obligations strikes me as culturally specific, but I assume that social obligations connect with people's motivations in two characteristic ways.[17]

First, an individual is typically accountable to others for breaching a social obligation, and the prospect of being held accountable is a further source of motivation for them. (We will explore some aspects of this accountability in §3.3 on sanctions.)

17. In these respects, social obligations differ from the norms of social scripts, which merely mark certain behaviors as conventional or unconventional. As I go on to discuss, in sub-section 3.3, if someone engages in unconventional behavior, then this need not lead to them being held accountable for breaching an obligation.

Second, social obligations can be internalized with the consequence that people take these obligations to provide them with weighty—and sometimes decisive—non-instrumental reasons for action. This internalization can also have the consequence that they often feel negative emotions, such as guilt or shame, when breaching a social obligation. However, in saying this, I do not mean to imply that people are necessarily correct in taking social obligations to provide non-instrumental reasons for action. Similarly, I do not mean to imply that social obligations are moral obligations. For example, in a patriarchal culture, women may be socially obligated to defer to men, even though it is false that women are morally obligated to defer, and it is false that they have non-instrumental practical reasons to do so.[18]

As a way into this topic, let us consider how people's sexual-decision-making is influenced by the social obligation to be polite. Earlier, we saw that Rachel had sex "because it was 'polite' to just let him finish," since "there is no way to get out of it without coming off as rude or disappointing your partner" (Bennett & Jones 2019: 82). Other students had similar experiences. For example, a Massachusetts student, Courtney, recounted having sex "not because [she] had to under some form of coercion, but simply because it was the polite, lady-like thing to do," while a New York student, Meaghan, recalled thinking that having "let it go too far now…it would be rude to stop him" (68, 71). Since facts about politeness are social facts, these experiences have to be understood in terms of their social contexts. This should prompt us to ask why these students saw declining sex as rude.

I propose that the explanation concerns social scripts. To make this precise, let us distinguish two ways in which social scripts intersect with politeness norms. One way is that a script can specify a conventional way to express respect.[19] For example, a social script can designate handshaking as a way to express respect upon meeting someone. With respect to sexual decision-making, that possibility strikes me as far less common than another way that scripts structure politeness: Behavior can be seen as rude because it violates an independent social obligation, and a script partly explains why the behavior violates this obligation. In the context of casual sexual encounters, people are often sensitive to a social obligation concerning the expectations that they give each other: they are concerned not to have "led on" their partner. In general, one of the ways that social scripts shape

18. Of course, the prospect of being sanctioned for breaching the social obligation may give them instrumental reasons of prudence to comply.

19. The model goes as follows. Our social obligation to be polite is abstract and leaves open what counts as polite behavior. This can be specified by social scripts. This specification does not happen because deviant behavior is necessarily rude. For example, if a customer orders coffee with their hands on their head, then they are behaving oddly, but the barista need not be offended. Instead, handshaking is polite when there is a convention that this is the way to express respect. Thus, this model of politeness norms and social scripts involves three components: (i) a social obligation to be polite; (ii) a convention that following a certain social script constitutes politeness; and (iii) the social script itself.

people's interactions is by guiding people's expectations of each other's behavior. Applying this to the sexual realm, when one person follows the earlier parts of a script, such as flirting or kissing, their partner can come to view themselves as having been given a legitimate expectation that they will also follow the later parts of the script—i.e. intimate sexual activity resulting in male orgasm.[20] Moreover, once it is common knowledge that people form these expectations, people are mutually perceived as giving each other these expectations voluntarily. This can explain why if someone ultimately declines to have sex, then they may be perceived as having led the other person on and indeed may view their own behavior in this way. It can also explain why people feel that they have entered into a sexual "contract" that they are no longer unilaterally free to exit. As a New York student, Livia, related, "Entering the dating and hookup scene with low self-esteem and little knowledge led to many encounters of an 'icky' nature: I didn't know how to stop them, once started, and often felt as if I was contractually obligated to take the guy to the end and expect nothing in return."[21]

The social obligations that are structured by social scripts can be deliberatively significant in their own right. Someone can feel intrinsically pressured to meet what they take to be their social obligations. And they can feel pressured by others' beliefs that they have these obligations.[22] Indeed, people can

20. Compare Bicchieri (2006: 95-96):

> We are, in other words, subject to a naturalistic fallacy in most of our daily dealings. The projectible regularity, when human interactions are involved, comes to be perceived as a right or a duty, depending on the role one is playing. If tipping is part of the script, a waiter will feel it is her right to get a tip, and she will get angry if her expectation is not met. If the patron who is not a (possibly ignorant) foreigner does not leave a tip, the most obvious interpretations are that he is either unhappy with the service or miserly. If nothing suggests dissatisfaction, what is left is the attribution of a mean intention, and a justified emotional reaction ensues. The emotions that so often accompany norm violations seem to be the effect of our relying on scripts and acknowledging that our legitimate expectations have been neglected.

See also (Bicchieri 2017: 134-136).

21. Similarly, Courtney describes her sexual empowerment as affirming the idea that "dating is not a contract" (Bennett & Jones 2019: 67-68).

22. The motivation to comply with social obligations can be particularly strong in the context of unequal power relations—think of the employee who knows that their boss's expectations are unreasonable and yet still feels pressured to comply with the expectations of an authority figure. This motivation can also be augmented by a perceived obligation for women to care for men's interests, including their interests in having their expectations met. As part of an influential account of misogyny, Manne (2018: 110) notes that women are meant to engage in "forms of emotional and social labor" like providing "respect, love, acceptance, nurturing, safety, security … safe haven … kindness … compassion, moral attention, care, concern, and soothing." By engaging in this labor, individual women exemplify their society's ideals for femininity. In heterosexual sexual contexts, this can translate to a disproportionate concern for male desire and pleasure, in addition to a concern for not disappointing men's sexual expectations.

also be influenced by others' expectations, even when they neither think that these expectations are appropriate nor view themselves as responsible for creating these expectations. For example, someone may recollect the various ways in which they have indicated that they do not want an encounter to escalate from kissing to sex, even though their partner has been inattentive to these signals. Accordingly, this person may judge that they have not given their partner a legitimate expectation of sex, while realizing that nonetheless their partner has this expectation. Even though this person sees their partner's expectation as baseless, they can still feel pressured to meet the expectation.

3.3. Sanctions

Because social scripts provide determinate content to certain social obligations, these scripts in turn can also explain patterns of sanctioning: Sometimes, when people break from social scripts, they get punished by others for doing so.

The connection between scripts and social obligations is crucial when it comes to sanctioning. We might think that we can get by without the connection if we are tempted by the simple thought that script-breaking is sanctionable as a form of social deviance. But this thought is too simple in light of the fact that scripts merely state the normal ways for encounters to happen and not all unconventional behavior is sanctioned. Instead, some unconventional behavior may simply be seen as oddball rather than as meriting punishment. And in other contexts, unconventional behavior can be welcome. For example, Nick Riggle (2017) argues that it is "awesome" to engage in unconventional behavior that creates social openings for people to express their individuality.

Nor does the simple thought account for the fact that some transgressions are sanctioned more punitively than others. To explain this variation, it is necessary to attend to the social context of script breaking. An important part of this context is constituted by people's beliefs about whether script-breaking is also the breach of an independent social obligation and, if so, how grave that breach is. These beliefs matter because obligation breaches may be seen as independently sanctionable, and the appropriate sanctions are typically seen as proportionate to the gravity of the breaches. As we saw in the last sub-section, social scripts can shape what someone is socially obligated to do: By shaping people's expectations of each other's behavior, these scripts provide specific content to the general obligation not to disappoint expectations. Since a breach of this obligation makes some vulnerable to sanctioning, social scripts influence the sanctions that people face.[23]

23. Social scripts can influence sanctioning in another way. It often remains indeterminate what constitutes proportionate sanctioning, and this indeterminacy can be resolved by ancillary

These sanctions include not only physical harms but also social retaliations.[24] These costs are bad for people when avoiding an unwanted sexual encounter means breaking from a social script. And these burdens are politically significant when people face these sanctions in virtue of belonging to a social group since "[c]ultural norms and informal practices that impose unfair burdens on or create disproportionate opportunities for members of one group as opposed to another are oppressive" (Haslanger 2012: 315).[25] This scenario is realized when heteronormative sexual scripts intersect with gender norms and stereotypes in ways that constrain women's ability to avoid unwanted sex and thereby constitute a patriarchal subordination of women's interests for the sake of men's sexual interests and pleasures.

Empirical investigation would be required to determine at which times and places, social scripts and norms disproportionately constrain women's

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social scripts that specify default sanctions, in conjunction with a norm that this scripted behavior is a proportionate sanction for a breach of a particular obligation. Along these lines, Cristina Bicchieri and Peter McNally (2018) argue that there is a social script that determines how a "good wife" behaves in certain situations, and that if women fail to follow this script, then this can cue men to follow a distinct "domestic violence" script when sanctioning the script-breaking.

24. As Hesni (2024: 30) notes, social scripts can place us in double binds by forcing us to choose to "either act in accordance with the script, and so adhere to it, or diverge from the script and face some sort of negative social consequence such as escalation, shame, awkwardness, or embarrassment." Hesni illustrates this with an example of a transgender woman receiving an unintentionally transphobic compliment from a friend. ("Wow! You can really pass for a woman!") Since there is a social script that requires someone to be grateful in response to compliments, this puts her in a bind between putting up with the transphobia and committing the social transgression of refusing a compliment. As a way out of the double bind, Hesni proposes disrupting the social script e.g. with an unexpected comment that implicitly calls attention to the problem with the compliment. For a seminal discussion of how double-binds feature in oppression, see (Frye 1983). For recent discussions of double-binds, see (Jenkins 2014; Liberto 2014; Killmister 2017: 248; Hirji 2021).

25. While Haslanger's conception of oppression strikes me as plausible, it is not the only conception that could be used to evaluate social scripts as oppressive. For example, on Iris Marion Young's (1990: 48-63) landmark account, three faces of oppression are powerlessness, exploitation, and marginalization. Regarding powerlessness, we can draw a distinction between two ways that constraints can be disempowering. First, constraints on sexual agency are absolutely disempowering insofar as they make it harder for people to shape their sexual interactions in ways that they wish. Second, people can be relatively disempowered when they are less able to direct a sexual encounter than their partner. This can come about either because their sexual agency is constrained or because their partner's agency is scaffolded. Regarding exploitation, constraints on sexual agency can leave people vulnerable in the respect that they are less able to direct their sexual interactions with others. When others unfairly take advantage of this vulnerability, they exploit these people (Berman 2002: 85). Regarding marginalization, constraints on sexual agency can lead people to participate with less agency in sexual encounters that are less accommodating of their interests. (I take this to remain in the spirit of Young's (1990: 53–55) account of marginalization, even though Young's focus is on participation in social cooperation and in particular in the labor force. For a generalization of Young's account of marginalization to capture civil injustices of racial segregation, see (Anderson 2010: 14).) For other accounts of oppression, see (Frye 1983: 1-16; Cudd 2006).

sexual agency.[26] Since a general investigation of this matter exceeds what is feasible in this article, I will focus on one phenomenon as an illustrative example: social stigmatization based on gendered stereotypes. This phenomenon is exemplified by a college student, Leanne's, recollection that "by the time clothes were shed, it would've been awkward to stop," explaining that she "didn't want to be labeled a prude, a tease" (Bennett & Jones 2019: 81). Here, the gendered stereotype of a "tease" is a woman who does not intend to have sex with a man and yet intentionally causes him both to desire having sex with her and to think that sex is probable. Thus, to be labelled a "tease" is to be stigmatized as untrustworthy and inconsiderate.[27] When a woman breaks from a background sexual script according to which her prior flirting and kissing is followed by more intimate sexual activity, this gendered stereotype becomes salient as a possible interpretation of her behavior. Being labelled as a "tease" may lead to additional social sanctions such as angry behavior from a partner and even violence. But even without these additional consequences, the stigmatization in itself functions as a sanction insofar as people care about how others think about them.

This stereotyping can be partly explained by how, as we have seen, social scripts can shape people's expectations of sex. In addition, the application of this stereotype can partly be explained by a background social script determining which types of behavior call for explanation. To see how this can go, compare a sexually conservative university where the operative heteronormative script is for people to kiss and flirt but not have sex. There, a woman's declining sex after flirting would not be interpreted as behavior characteristic of a "tease." Instead, in virtue of conforming to a local script, this behavior would be accepted as normal and as requiring no special explanation. By contrast, when there is local social script for an encounter that escalates in intimacy, and someone breaks from the script, this usually raises the interpretive question of why they did so. In the context of a hookup, relative strangers typically have little more than generic, culturally received expectations about one another, and so their interpretations are particularly likely to be influenced by stereotypes that are locally available.[28]

26. In the context of theorizing heterosexual sexual encounters, Charlene Muelenhard and Jennifer Shrag (1991: 122) note that "men use many types of verbal coercion to obtain sex" including "telling a woman that her refusal to have sex was changing the way they felt about her … questioning the woman's sexuality … making the woman feel guilty … calling a woman a name angrily and pushing her away when she would not have sex."

27. Meanwhile, the stereotype of a "prude" is the stereotype of someone who has an unnatural aversion to sex. Thus, to be labelled as a "prude" is to be stigmatized as lacking a "natural" degree of sexual desire and openness.

28. By contrast, if people know each other well, then they can answer interpretive questions by drawing on their personal knowledge of each other. (For example, "I know my spouse is attracted to me so he is probably just tired tonight.")

Thus, the fact that ending a sexual encounter constitutes breaking from a social script can explain why interpretive questions are raised about women's declining sex and hence how they can be stereotyped as "teases" for doing so.[29]

4. Ameliorative Scripts

But if social scripts can be the problem, then social scripts can also be the solution. Consider how benign social scripts could empower people's sexual agency by making it easier for them to break off sexual encounters. (Or to be more precise: how the general internalization and acceptance of benign social scripts could have these effects.) We can build a model for a benign script by considering what Quill R. Kukla (2018: 88, writing as Rebecca Kukla), says about the use of "safe words":

> they let someone exit a scene or activity at any time without having to explain themselves or accusing anyone of transgression or any other kind of wrongdoing (although they can also be used when there has been a transgression). Calling "red" does not imply that anyone has messed up or violated consent; it simply ends things. It calls for no apology and requires no apology after its use. Without a safe word system, if I want to abruptly end a scene or activity, I need to say something like "Stop this immediately." It's very difficult for such a speech act not to come off as a rebuke; it almost inevitably creates a rift in our interaction that now needs repairing.

29. Social scripts also explain how gendered stereotypes can pressure men into sex. Consider the following conversation between Donna Freitas (2018: 76) and college students in the United States:

> "And the worst part," said the guy sitting next to him, "is that you're really tired, you've been dancing and drinking, you want to go to bed, but you don't want to hurt the girl's feelings, but now you're in this situation where you have to hook up. And you just want to get to that place where the hookup can be over so you can go home."
> "Yeah," other guys concurred.
> "And what is that 'place' where the hookup can be over?" I asked.
> "You know, when the guy comes," someone explained.
> "Yeah, the hookup gets to be over when the guy comes," one of the girls confirmed.

These students describe feeling pressured to follow a linear social script with sexual activity that is increasingly intimate until the point of male orgasm. The upshot is that there is "no 'just' making out at college—making the equation as follows: if one wants to make out, one also has to be willing to follow this with a hookup" (Freitas 2018: 79). Interestingly, the male students describe themselves as aiming not to hurt their partners' feelings—a concern that arises because "college guys were supposed to be sex fiends. So if they didn't want to hook up with you, this meant you were somehow undesirable—a massive insult" (75). This is illustrated by another college man's testimony: "Yeah … . If you don't go home and try to hook up with her, she's like, 'What? What's your problem? Why don't you want me?'" (75). Again, the operative script is an important part of this explanation because if a script instead were to normalize flirting and kissing but not having sex, then a man's declining sex after flirting and kissing would not be viewed as an insult.

While Kukla (2018: 89) locates the origins of safe word practices in BDSM communities, they argue that it "would be fantastic if the use of safe words became standard practice" since "[n]ormalizing their use would be a major step in empowering and protecting the safety and autonomy of everyone." If safe words were to become standard practice, then this would give someone like Rachel an easy way to exit a sexual encounter without a need for apology. As such, Rachel would be more sexually empowered than the actual social context that leaves her with no way to "get out of" the encounter "without coming off as rude."

Our earlier analysis helps illuminate why this practice would be empowering. We can see the safe word practice's blueprint as a social script according to which the use of a safe word ends an encounter without subsequent explanation or apology.[30] The practice is also undergirded by the norm that it is not rude to follow this script and the norm that it is inappropriate to sanction people for using safe words. The combination of the script and these norms scaffolds people's agency in three ways. First, the script creates a new option of a conventional way to end an encounter in the same way that a handshaking script creates a new option to express respect. Second, the script makes it easy to exercise the option of ending an encounter: A single word is all that is needed. Third, the intermeshing norms make the option costless: Using a safe word leads neither to sanctioning nor to repairing a relationship. If there were general internalization and acceptance of the safe word script and the accompanying norm within a community, then there would be a general safe word practice.[31] Since the practice creates scaffolds for people's agency and removes constraints that they otherwise face, they would be empowered by the popularization of the scripts and norms that undergird the practice.

The safe word script concerns breaking off a sexual encounter that has already begun. Other social scripts could empower people to avoid unwanted sex in the first place. As we saw earlier, some instances of unwanted sex can be explained by the prevalence of a linear social script for a heterosexual encounter, which begins with less intimate interactions, like flirting or kissing, and escalates to intimate sexual activity that ends with male orgasm. A key part of the problem is that this script problematically engenders expectations of sex, and people feel pressured into unwanted sex in order to meet their partners' expectations. This unwanted sex could be avoided by the presence of healthier sexual scripts. For example, Kukla (2018: 72-73) also advocates for spreading kink and polyamorous communities' practice of explicit discussion about what people are willing to do and what

30. In their forthcoming book, Kukla (forthcoming) theorizes how sexual agency can be scaffolded by e.g. safe word scripts.

31. Since social scripts govern both verbal and non-verbal behavior, the corresponding practice could be composed of both types of behavior. Depending on one's conception of ritual, this may mean that sexual rituals can be understood as undergirded by social scripts.

they would like to do. If there were a spread of social scripts that normalize this discussion, then this would disrupt the sexual scripts that are currently in place, with the consequence that people would be better able to control their sex lives.

Similarly, people are afforded greater control by social scripts that normalize explicit discussion of consent. In research interviews involving 51 adults, Kathryn Rittenhour and Michael Sauder (2023: 5) reported that "our interviews affirmed that a key characteristic of traditional sex scripts is that they constrain communication. Those who followed these scripts consistently reported that they did not feel it was necessary or comfortable to verbally communicate during sexual interactions."[32] One of their interviewees

> explained that people rarely engage in verbal consent because, "It's the assumed script, the roles that we are expected to play. That's the main one, especially like, I think the less experienced you are, the more you rely on them because you're already kind of freaked out … it's just too hard to think about so many variables." (Rittenhour & Sauder 2023: 5)

Rittenhour and Sauder contrast these traditional sex scripts with alternative scripts that have emerged in queer, non-monogamous, and kink communities. These alternative scripts "encouraged people to . . . engage in more open sexual communication." (2023: 6). In particular, Rittenhour and Sauder (2023: 8) single out the "kink script" as

> unique in its salience and tendency to center sexual communication and consent, encourage extensive sexual negotiations prior to sexual contact, promote explicit expression of sexual desire, and provide guidelines for the establishment of clear boundaries. This script is shared by most members of the community and is remarkably consistent.

Moreover, sexual escalation scripts can themselves be ameliorated. Compare a common restaurant script that separates a decision to order a main course from a decision to order a dessert. For example, if a server asks whether diners would like to see the dessert menu after they have finished their main course, then there is no presumption that diners will order dessert just because they earlier ordered a main course.[33] In that respect, the restaurant script normalizes "meal cooling off" as much as it does "meal escalation." Since refusing dessert is not a transgression, this disbars the server from certain reprisals like an angry

32. Thanks to Quill Kukla for bringing this study to my attention.

33. On the basis of merely statistical evidence that the majority of diners order dessert, the server may judge that a particular diner will do so. But normally this is neither an expectation on which the server will rely, nor an expectation for which the diner will be seen as responsible.

response. Similarly, a sexual script could normalize the option of cooling off a sexual encounter alongside the option of escalation. If the script were to normalize both options, then it could align with other social norms to enable someone to break off a sexual encounter, without this being seen as a social transgression that is an appropriate target of sanctions. If there were general internalization and acceptance of the script and these norms, then this would reduce the constraints that people face when exercising their sexual agency. Thus, by comparing problematic sexual scripts with alternatives, we can see that people's agency can be more or less scaffolded according to the sexual scripts that are present or absent in their society.[34]

This conclusion needs to be circumscribed with three qualifications. First, while the scripts can scaffold people's agency by improving their options, it would be myopic to focus on these scripts in isolation, without considering how they interact with broader features of social contexts. For example, proliferating a safe word script would be of limited value without the simultaneous proliferation of ancillary social norms (e.g. marking the use of safe words as non-rude).

Second, since changes to social scripts would not happen overnight, we can expect a transition period, in which ameliorative scripts co-exist alongside problematic scripts in a community. During this transition, it is predictable that some people will feel pulled in opposing directions by the different scripts. For example, even if someone consciously endorses an ameliorative sexual script, this will not automatically rid them of countervailing problematic scripts that they had previously internalized. This conflict can itself give rise to double binds: We could imagine someone thinking, "If I don't have sex with him, I'm being a tease, but if I do, I'm being a bad feminist."[35]

Third, it is impossible for scripts to eliminate constraints on sexual agency altogether. It is in the nature of a script to specify the normal way for an interaction to go: The script states what is required, permitted, and prohibited for a normal encounter. The requirements and prohibitions will function as constraints insofar as they limit people's options, make these options more difficult to pursue, or make these options more costly to pursue. (And as we have seen, since some people are intrinsically motivated to behave sexually in ways that are normal for their identities, the mere fact that a script marks a behavior as deviant can make that behavior costly for them.) To eliminate the constraints entirely,

34. To compare two scripts in detail, we would need a normative political theory of how to measure the extent to which someone is constrained by different impediments. While it is beyond the scope of this article to offer this theory, I note that we independently need this theory to evaluate the extent to which e.g. laws constrain people's agency. For work concerning how to measure people's freedom, see (Carter 1999; Kramer 2003).

35. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer both for the specific wording of this double bind and for the point that there are likely to be multiple conflicting scripts during periods of social change.

we would need to free an encounter from being governed by any social script at all. It is unclear that this radical freedom would be for the best, given that social scripts play beneficial roles in allowing people to coordinate in efficient ways. Since I will not attempt to compare these benefits and costs, I leave open whether the ideal way to eliminate constraints on sexual agency would be to discard sexual scripts or to reform our sexual scripts. This issue in ideal theory can be separated from my conclusion in non-ideal theory, which is that the social contexts of sexual encounters can enable or disable people's sexual agency, partly in virtue of the social scripts that are operative in these encounters. That conclusion is significant for highlighting ways to improve the actual social world that we live in.

5. Conclusion

I will end by summarizing the main points of our discussion. In general, social scripts specify the normal way for people to interact in certain situations and hence simultaneously determine what counts as deviant behavior. These scripts can explain people's sexual behavior in various ways: Social scripts can coordinate mutually beneficial sexual encounters; social scripts can engage with people's motivations to behave sexually in ways that are normal for their social identities; by shaping people's expectations of each other's behavior, social scripts can make determinate what is required by a social obligation not to disappoint others' expectations; and social scripts can influence what people would be sanctioned for doing or not doing. As such, these scripts can scaffold or constrain people's sexual agency by increasing or decreasing how available, costless, or easy their options are. For example, the existence of certain sexual scripts can explain why people feel that breaking off an unwanted sexual encounter would be rude in virtue of making it the case that they have led their partner on. In virtue of constraining people's sexual agency, scripts can be bad for people and indeed oppressive when people are constrained as the result of their membership of social groups. These problems could be alleviated by changes to our social world. For example, in conjunction with changes to other social norms, we would be more empowered if we had sexual scripts for using safe-words to end sexual encounters or if our sexual scripts normalized encounters in which people engage in flirting or kissing without this escalating into intimate sexual activity.

While I take these points to be important for understanding how the social world shapes our sexual agency, I do not wish to overstate their importance. When considering sexual agency, it would be shortsighted to focus on social scripts alone. Consider Marilyn Frye's (1983: 4–5) famous analogy of the wires of a birdcage:

> If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would have trouble going past the wires to get anywhere.

While Frye offered this as an analogy for oppression writ large, it is also helpful as an analogy for constraints on sexual agency: If we myopically inspect only social scripts, then we will fail to fully grasp why someone would be disempowered in their sexual encounters. I have aimed to acknowledge this point by emphasizing the interactions between social scripts and other social phenomena, such as social obligations and stereotypes. But while Frye's analogy brings out why we should not become so immersed in the details that we lose sight of the bigger picture, it can equally be taken to show the importance of these details in their own right: Just as we will not properly see the birdcage until we can see each of its wires, we will not grasp the extent to which people are disempowered in their sexual agency until we have a clear view of each constraint they face. Towards that end, I hope to have shown how these constraints can come from social scripts for sexual behavior.

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