Gossip as Power: Flipping the Sexual Script

The modern story of a first date is one that comes to be told time and time again, acted out by us and then reperformed to our closest of friends. One version of a heterosexual, western retelling goes a little like this: The woman and man meet up one evening, usually outside of a restaurant or bar. Before this, they have exchanged lines of niceties and basic information about themselves. ‘What do you do for work?’ and ‘Do you have any pets?’ Depending on the dating app they mutually swiped each other on, the man or woman may have made the first move, a text of vague but subtle charm. When they sit down, the man pulls out the woman’s chair. She gushes while complimenting his kindness. In her bag, she secretly carries a can of pepper spray; she has also shared her location with her friends. The conversation consists of each person revealing more about themselves, facts and interests reserved for an in-person get-together. ‘I’m a momma’s boy, we talk every day’ and ‘Yeah, I love to travel and adventure (only in Europe).’

Upon the delivery of the bill at the end of the meal, the man nonchalantly pulls out his wallet to pay. He and she know what is coming in the tale: next, he will suggest going back to his place for further talking, and the night may or may not end in coitus. The next day, he and she relay the facts of the encounter to their individual groups of friends.

More than just an imagined scenario, this story involves social scripts: the chosen location and choice of conversation topics adhere to a script of what a first date entails while the actions of the man pulling out the chair or paying for the date adhere to scripts of chivalry and “beneficial” masculinity. A script, as detailed in cognitive psychology, is a “structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context” (Hunt et al., 1979). Upon the activation of situational triggers, we engage in scripts that inform us of chains of behaviors to engage in.
Social scripts can refer to situations that are both specific and broad, both long lasting and short lived, and both positive and negative. They can also vary with cultural and social norms. For example, in the U.S., when we see someone on the street, we may say ‘hello’ and smile, and are usually met back with a smile or wave. Whereas in South Korea, people do not say hello to strangers and if they do, they are often ignored. These types of social scripts, learned and acted out, culminate in distinct cultures. According to Edward Sapir, “Culture … is essentially a systematic list of all the socially inherent patterns of behavior which may be illustrated in the actual behavior of all or most of the individuals in the group” (Edward, 515).

Just as script theory can be applied to situations and conversations like everyday greetings, it can also be applied to the norms surrounding sex and pleasure. In this essay, I will outline how structural scripts about sex come about both through (a lack of) sexual education and consumption of pornography, referencing Amia Srinivasan’s “Talking to my Students about Porn.” I will then expand upon Srinivasan’s ideas by arguing how gossip plays an overlooked role in solidifying schemas about sex. By referencing Paulina Sliwa’s ideas on hermeneutical advice, I will explain the unique epistemological role gossip plays. Lastly, I will propose ways we can all disrupt interpersonal scripts when harmful ideas about sex are brought up in conversation, referencing Samia Hesni’s “Social Disruption and Social Change.”

Sexual script theory originated in the 1970s, and sexual scripts are defined as “culturally available messages that define what ‘counts’ as sex, how to recognize sexual situations, and what to do in a sexual encounter” (Frith and Kitzinger). So then, from where are we learning scripts about sex?

One may think of formal sex education, usually consisting of instruction taking place in a structured setting such as school. In the U.S., 39 of the 50 states currently mandate some kind of
sex education and/or HIV education, and even then, the decision comes down to individual school districts to decide what will and won’t be taught, creating a patchwork of inconsistent policies and practices within states (Guttmacher Institute). 19 of those states require that there must be a stress on abstinence whenever sex education is taught (Kaiser Family Foundation), yet comprehensive sex education programs (not stressing abstinence) have demonstrated favorable effects on adolescent behaviors, including decreases in the frequency of unprotected sexual activity, STIs, and pregnancy (“Abstinence-Only Education Is a Failure”).

As a result of this inadequate pedagogy, Srinivasan proposes that pornography is the place where sexual scripts are truly assimilated. While sexual education hopefully approaches sex from an intellectual and factual perspective, porn does not inform in this way: “Porn trains. It etches deep grooves in the psyche, forming powerful associations between arousal and selected stimuli, bypassing that part of us which pauses, considers, thinks” (Srinivasan, 72). In return for our undivided attention, pornography pulls us into the hypnotic screen and shows us “good, proper” sex, thus doing the epistemic “heavy lifting” for us. Our imaginations are stomped to the curb and our own sex may simply be a mimicry of what was previously consumed. Thus, pornography becomes the ruler against which sexual encounters are measured: “Almost every woman in the class would have had her first sexual experience, if not in front of a screen, then with a boy whose first sexual experience had been. In that sense, her experience too would have been mediated by a screen: by what the screen instructed him to do” (Srinivasan, 50).

When pornography is our exposure to sex, its common depictions of male dominance, objectification of women, and lack of consent carry into the routines that we perform. Pornography develops in us a script governing not only the positions we ought to contort our bodies into, what our bodies should look like, the space we are allowed to take up, and the
sounds we should make, but also the larger desires we hold, the control we have over our and others’ bodies, and ideas about who is deserving of pleasure. Pornography, like Srinivasan argues, largely enforces the patriarchy and normalizes violence toward women. 

Yet, Srinivasan is underestimating the criticality that most people who watch porn possess. For these sexual scripts to heavily dominate our notions of sex as she claims, we must then consider all porn to be real. An analogy to a horror film can be made: we may jump and scream and feel fear while watching the movie, but when the movie theater’s lights flicker back on, we do not believe that the supernatural is about to haunt us. After watching pornography, we know that the angles and positions and sounds were produced with the intention of getting the most reaction and views. Srinivasan does not consider that her students are possibly aware of pornography as sex that is not an accurate reflection of most people’s offline sexual engagements.

More than ever, the concept of pornography literacy is on the rise. Just like how the rise of the internet led to the need for media literacy, the accessibility of modern-day pornography has led to many questioning the messages being communicated, both implicitly and explicitly in the pornography they watch. Young people are able to make sophisticated distinctions between different kinds of pornography, some of which could be called “realistic” and others which consist of “negative” and “unrealistic” portrayals of sex (Byron et al., 2020). A study conducted on 13 men and 11 women aged between 18 and 30 years of age discussing their relationships with porn all noted their critical attitudes toward the stylised, ‘porno-style’ bodies they saw in professionally produced content. These ideal, hairless bodies were labeled “fake,” and this label of “fake” extended to the general nature of internet pornography. The participants noted the ways

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1 It would be remiss of me not to mention how pornography can also be beneficial. Pornography can provide representation, show someone that their body is desirable and their interests are valid, and serve as a means of genuine education. For some, pornography is empowering. This essay more so focuses on the negative scripts of sex, but these other perspectives on porn are absolutely necessary in the messy discussion around pornography, sex, and feminism.
in which porn was unrealistic, in how it lacked intimacy and authentic reactions whilst prioritizing male pleasure (Keene, 2023). They also noted the ways in which mainstream pornography presented an aggressive sexuality toward women.

As the zeitgeist grows more and more aware of the falsities of online mainstream pornography, where will accurate information about sex be derived from? Will sex scripts still remain a patriarchal tool? Gossiping with friends about sex, I’d argue, has the power to contribute to sexual scripts in a different and often overlooked way. Here, I am referring to gossip that involves an individual disclosing an aspect of their sex lives by talking with their intimate friends. Gossip, as an epistemological tool, yields incredible influence over those of the group, whose members share first hand testimonies and elaborate on their opinions, cumulating into the knowledge base that a group shares.

Gossip, as argued by Tommaso Bertolotti and Lorenzo Magnani, is an inferential activity (i.e. moving from some premises to some conclusions), displaying a “collaborative nature within the group of gossips, which ultimately manages to reach a collective self-appraisal” (pg. 4042). When friends are gossiping about sex, one person may be telling their friends about sex they found pleasurable, sex they found strange, sex that they disliked, or sex that they weren’t sure how to feel about. These sexual acts are usually described in great detail before their friends will analyze the act before reaffirming or rejecting the opinions of the “confessor.” This interaction, despite taking place between individuals of similar standings and who presumably are close in everyday life, still includes elements of power. Through their reactions to the sexual act and the judgements they levy, the listeners have the ability to shape and reform the confessor’s framework for sex.
This power is made salient by the social norms within society. Compared with other things that one may gossip about, conversing about sex in an emotional and honest way is still repressed and policed, causing such discussions to occur between a few select people. The confessor will likely choose listeners that they already hold in high regard, causing the listeners to wield significant influence over the confessor’s perception of sex. Not only that, but gossip as a whole can hold a different power compared to pornography. Not only is pornography increasingly seen as unrealistic, but the proximity of the listeners to the confessor is much more intelligible on a social level than the messages that pornography sends out; namely, pornography lacks the dialogic nature of gossip, and thus cannot compete against direct conversation with friends who care about and respect one another. As a result, the opinions and recommendations of the listeners influences the confessor’s perception of sex – what good sex looks like, what bad sex looks like, what behavior is deviant, what desires are inappropriate.

Here is an example of gossip leading to change in sexual scripts.

A: I forgot to shave down there before we had sex and I was super self-conscious about it the whole time.
B: Wait, so what did he say? Did he tell you he didn’t like it?
A: No, not at all. He told me he didn’t mind whether or not I shaved, and said that the decision was solely up to me since it’s my body.
C: Yes! We should never need to be self-conscious about things that are natural on our bodies. Plus, it’s time that we stop conforming to ideals of feminine hairlessness, a concept that constructs the “appropriately” feminine woman as tamed and less than fully adult.
B: Wow. I’ve never thought of it like that before, but you’re right.

We may be tempted to suggest that the last friend’s gain is conceptual, that the confessor and other friend suggested to them a new concept to apply to their worldview. This would be the way that Miranda Fricker has defined the idea of hermeneutical injustice. In her 2007 work *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, hermeneutical injustice occurs when there is a “gap...in our shared tools of social interpretation” caused by unequal access to knowledge production that reinforces unequal power dynamics. By suggesting to the last friend
that they should understand hairlessness as a social construct, the rest of the gossip circle has enabled them to name and communicate it. Yet, there is more to it. The friend isn’t just learning a linguistic fact here, that not shaving means hairlessness. They already knew that. Rather, they are making sense of their perspective and ideas about sex without shaving. That last friend has, in fact, gained a new moral viewpoint on shaving and hairlessness as a socio-cultural construction. This type of interaction, as coined by Silwa, cannot be summed up solely by Fricker’s ideas, but is more accurately referred to as hermeneutical advice. Hermeneutical advice is a “staple of our moral experience: it is what we seek out when we try to make moral sense of a situation, when we feel stuck or confused” (Silwa 5). The concept of hermeneutical advice applies to gossiping about sex in a unique way. It is not only the confessor who walks away with a changed attitude: the shift in perception affects how the entire gossip group thinks and behaves afterward, playing a role in producing changed individuals. By scaffolding their original sexual script with the response of the listeners, the ways in which the group moves through society and their sexual scripts are influenced by their new understanding of sex.

Beyond the structural scripts of sex that the group has agreed upon, there is also an interpersonal script within the group. For the same reasons why gossip is beneficially influential in changing one’s viewpoint of sex, the inherent closeness and trust of the group when gossiping can lead to negative ideologies spreading. Like watching pornography, things can go bad quickly. What if one friend in the group, upon hearing about the confessor’s sex, states offensive beliefs? Do the other members of the group simply ignore the comment? What if the group that the confessor is talking to starts to engage in a script of mob mentality? How can the situation be resolved in a way that is respectful but also points out the flaws in the friend’s thinking?

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2 This scenario applies when the friend’s offensive comments are from a place of genuine belief that what they’re saying/defending is true, and not from a place of intentional harm.
A: I forgot to shave down there before we had sex and I was super self-conscious about it the whole time.
B: Wait, that’s super inconsiderate of you.
A: No, not at all. He told me he didn’t mind whether or not I shaved, and said that the decision was solely up to me since it’s my body.
B: I don’t know, I just think that it looks nicer when shaved.
C: Yeah, I think so too. Plus, it doesn’t even take much time.

There are a couple ways in which interpersonal scripts can be disrupted. In particular, Rae Langton’s “Blocking as counterspeech” argues that blocking a “back-door speech act” can be a way of shining a spotlight on the underlying assumptions (Langton, 2018). This is when one can point out the reasoning behind a covert, but insidious comment.

A: Hey, why does it look nicer? I’m just curious why you think that.
C: I don’t know. I guess I’ve always thought being hairless was the norm, since it’s in porn.
A: I like how my body looks as a fully matured woman.

Beyond the expectation that the listeners accommodate the “smuggled in” notion that women ought to be hairless, there is another added expectation of herd conformity, of inclination for a group to continue to speak or behave in accordance with a expressed thought. By disrupting a script in this way, by respectfully calling attention to the ideas expressed by one speaker and blocking the idea, it helps to subvert both expectations of group discussion and importantly, helps to undo the damage that the ideas threaten.

Another idea, expressed by Samia Hesni, is aggregation. If enough people disrupt enough scripts (in situations where it is safe to do so), then maybe those “scripts will become defunct, or lose their grip over time” (Hesni, 15). Individual acts of disruption can add up, rather than individuals joining up to act collectively. Furthermore, the knowledge that others are also participating in acts of disruption can lend individuals a sense of security in numbers. Seeing instances of others can have an empowering effect and over time, the norm will be disruption. Eventually, harmful scripts will hopefully fade out.
When interrogating the origin of sexual scripts, gossip is often overlooked as an epistemological tool yet it can both positively and negatively impact our notions of sex. Compared to traditional sources of information about sex like sexual education courses or pornography, gossip allows for dialogue with ones we trust. By sharing our intimate stories with our close friends, we listen to their evaluations and thus, become changed individuals in the process. This type of hermeneutical advice is ultimately unique because it transforms an entire group’s perception of an issue. To combat discussions centered around problematic notions of sex, we must block and disrupt both structural and interpersonal scripts. Either by shining a light on underlying deleterious beliefs or empowering others to perform disruptions that feel right to them, we can promote sex that is healthy, pleasurable, and fun for all.
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