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Sex Differences in Reading Erotic Stories:

A Schema Approach

Matt McGlone

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Though originally developed many years ago by Bartlett (1932), only in the last 15 years has "schema theory" been recognized as a potentially unifying force in the wide range of speculation on mental processes. In cognitive research, the concept has been used to explore the nature of knowledge structures for ordinary experience. In social psychology, it has taken the form of "action rules" that dictate how the construct of social reality translates into actual behavior. Applications of this theory have been made in learning, clinical, and developmental psychology as well. Judging from the utility the schema concept has shown in these diverse areas, we believe it might be a useful approach in investigating the cognitive processes involved in human sexuality.

Supporters of the schema concept propose that comprehension and memory for information are heavily influenced by abstract, generic knowledge structures. These "schemas" select and modify incoming stimuli in order to arrive at a coherent, expectation-confirming mental representation of the experience.

We do not venture a comprehensive description of schema theory here; Alba and Hasher (1983) and Mandler (1984) offer recent literature reviews. Our specific interest in the theory is in how it relates to comprehension and memory for story information. It was in this context that Bartlett first theorized their existence. When a person reads a story, he/she is thought to "activate" a cognitive set of expectations about what normally occurs in the particular

context. These expectations are generated by memories of past experience, learned social norms, and personal beliefs (Mandler, 1984). To illustrate, consider the following simple story taken from Abelson (1981):

"John was feeling very hungry as he entered the restaurant. He settled himself at a table and noticed that the waiter was nearby. Suddenly, however, he realized that he'd forgotten his reading glasses."

Notice that what is explicitly stated and what is implied in the passage are equally important in conveying meaning: without his glasses, John couldn't read the menu. Now consider an excerpt from a popular Judith Krantz novel:

"...when Alan Wilton suggested that Valentine return to his place for a drink after dinner, she felt a sharp snap of relief. She was enchanted with herself for having waited without betraying her impatience."

In this passage, the intuitive significance of the "drink after dinner" for the reader lies in the couple's desire to encounter sexually. Yet neither the menu nor sex were explicitly mentioned in these passages, a fact which raises the question of where these expectations come from. The answer schema theory offers is that they are part of the reader's respective "restaurant" and "sexual advances" schemas. When these bundles of expectations are activated by explicit statements, they organize comprehension of the text according to story context.

In addition to their role in comprehension, schemas are also thought to serve a guiding role in memory. A series of

studies by Bower, Black, and Turner (1979) provide a clear demonstration of this function. First they had subjects list what they considered to be the basic events in a familiar episode, such as going to a restaurant. Bower et al. then went on to show the effects these action schemas, or "scripts," had on memory for stories. Subjects were given stories to study that included only some of the listed basic events. After the reading, subjects were assigned to either a recognition or recall condition. In the recognition condition, subjects frequently recognized unstated script events as being in the stories. Similarly, in the recall condition subjects tended to incorporate these unstated events into their reports of story content. These results suggest that general schemas have a powerful effect on memory for stories.

A useful principle developed by schema theorists to explain the observed incompleteness of people's memory for texts is the "importance effect" (Spiro, 1980). When an existing schema is activated during the presentation of text material, it will enable selection of only some of the information for encoding. Information deemed important to the theme of the story is given special attention and thus remembered best. Using stories as stimulus materials, several studies have demonstrated that recall of story elements is a positive function of the independently rated importance of those elements to the story's context (Brown & Smiley, 1977; de Villiers, 1974; Kozminsky, 1977; Miller & Kintsch, 1980).

The proposed study attempts to apply schema theory to the examination of how the sexes differ in response to reading erotic stories. Previous research on erotica has relied heavily on subjective/physiological measures (Schmidt et al., 1973; Heiman, 1975) and evaluative responses (Byrne & Sheffield, 1965; O'Donnell & Geer, 1975; Fisher & Byrne, 1978) to investigate these differences. The findings, however, have offered little support for any hypothesized sex differences in arousal or affective response. Schema theory offers a qualitatively different approach to this investigation: response differences might be a matter of male and female "sexual schemas," developed through past experience and role-specific social learning. These should act to guide men and women's attention to different story aspects. Consequently, these attentional differences, along with people's expectations of what "should" occur in a sexual encounter, will surface when they are asked to recognize/recall story content.

The content dimension of special interest in our study is that of erotic vs. romantic. Fostered culturally and perpetuated by the media, the existing sex stereotype typifies women as the more "romantic-oriented" and men as the more "sex-oriented" genders (Wiseman, 1976). If these orientations are yet intact, they may result in sex-differential "importance effects" for memory of a text with both romantic and erotic elements. Thus, we propose to test two hypotheses:

1. Males will recognize/recall more erotic story content than females.

2. Females will recognize/recall more romantic content than males.

Finally, we would like to draw attention to the fact that this is the first attempt to apply this "new" methodology from cognitive research to human sexuality. We believe this application has several advantages. First of all, an obvious benefit is derived from transfer between the fields. For quite some time, much of sexual research has remained isolated from the main body of psychological research. Establishing ties with cognitive psychology should result in benefits for both fields. A second advantage of this application is the potential for study of the relevant phenomena in an objective manner. Although many have recognized that a great deal of human sexuality involves cognitive processes, there has been little effort spent on examining these processes in detail. The methods of schema research may prove useful in this examination.

METHOD

SAMPLE

The subject sample will be composed of LSU undergraduate enrolled in psychology courses who are participating in the experiment for extra credit. The study will be described to volunteers as an investigation in "reading erotic stories."

DESIGN

The proposed study utilizes a 2x2 group design, with story content (erotic vs. romantic-erotic) and gender of the reader as its independent variables. The dependent variables that assess the role of schemas will be derived from memory tests of recognition and recall presented after exposure to the stories. In addition, correlative analyses of demographic and sexual experience factors will be conducted to determine the influence of subject background on the memory measures.

STIMULUS MATERIALS

Stories Two erotic narratives (E & E-R) will be prepared for the experiment. The "temporal scale of sexual behavior" (Geer et al., 1986) will provide the basic plot structure for the stories. This schematic model of sexual behavior represents the results of scaling by both men and women that was aimed at identifying the component actions and typical behavioral sequence involved in a heterosexual encounter. Flirting, petting, oral sex, coitus, and post-coital behavior will all be aspects of the narrative. An effort will be made to ensure both male and female characters display equal initiative, pleasure, and satisfaction in the encounter. Though the two stories contain identical erotic elements, only story E-R will

contain romantic elements. In accord with Heiman(1975), -
"romantic" story elements include information that the people
involved care for each other, relationship factors, and
references to mutual affection.

Measurement We will employ two tests to assess story
retention: a recognition and a recall task. In the computer-
generated recognition task, subjects must indicate whether a
displayed statement was or was not in the text by pushing one
of two keys on the terminal. Test items fell into six
categories: unstated/stated story events with erotic,
romantic, or neutral content. One category, stated romantic
events, applies only to story E-R. Two measures will be
recorded on the computer during this task: reaction time and
recognition accuracy. The first measure will be performed to
examine the salience in memory of certain story content;
salience here is interpreted as being inversely proportional
to reaction time. The accuracy measure will record the
frequency of correct/incorrect recognition in terms of the
item categories.

In the second memory measure, subjects will be asked to
write down as much of the story as they can remember. These
recall protocols will be scored against a propositional
analysis of the text (Kintsch, 1974). This analysis will
yield a correctly-recalled propositions score and a count of
"intrusions," i.e., propositions recalled that were not in the
story. These scores will then be analyzed in terms of the
romantic/erotic content dimension, *as well as S gender.*

PROCEDURE

Subjects will be tested individually over two sessions with a 24 hour intervening period. Complete anonymity will be maintained through the use of code-numbered materials.

DAY 1

When subjects arrive for the first session, they will be reminded of the sexual nature of the experiment and informed that they are free to discontinue participation at any point. After signing an informed consent form, subjects will complete two questionnaires assessing demographic information and sexual experience. Then subjects will be given one of the two erotic narratives to read for a fixed interval. Once the reading period is over, subjects will perform a 15 minute interpolated task (neutral reading) followed by the computer-generated recognition test. Test trials will begin when the space bar is pressed. Subjects will be instructed to indicate in each trial whether or not the displayed statement appeared in the text read earlier by pressing one of two keys on the terminal. When the key is pressed, the recognition program will automatically stored recognition time and accuracy for each test item. After completing this task, subjects will be asked to come back for a related experiment the following day.

DAY 2

Upon returning for the second session, subjects will be asked to write down all the events they can remember from the story read the day before. These protocols will be scored using the procedures described by Kintsch (1974) to detect both intrusions and stated story events subjects recall.

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