Rules of engagement: A content analysis of accepted and rejected marriage proposals

Lisa B. Hoplock & Danu Anthony Stinson
University of Victoria, Canada

Author Note

Lisa Hoplock 🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7064-0359
Danu Anthony Stinson 🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1492-7133

Abstract

Little research exists concerning the Western marriage proposal ritual, and rejected proposals are particularly understudied. The current research used the lens of life script theory to quantitatively and qualitatively analyze 374 first-person written accounts of accepted and rejected marriage proposals between men and women that were sampled from online forums. Rejected proposals were more likely than accepted proposals to violate the proposal script. Compared to accepted proposals, rejected proposals included fewer ritual elements and they often happened "off-time." Specifically, rejected proposals came earlier in the relationship, typically prior to the discussion of the topic of marriage by the couple, and rejected men sometimes proposed to "save" an unstable or abusive relationship that was headed towards dissolution. As with other important life transition events, audiences played an important role in many proposals. Rejected proposals were more likely to occur in public than accepted proposals, and when present, audience members often participated in the proposal by encouraging couples to follow the proposal script and by expressing dissatisfaction when the script was violated. Some audiences became hostile when the woman said "no." Also consistent with life script theory, couples evinced strong emotions during proposals, and confusion and anger were common emotional responses among rejected suitors. Indeed, 15% of rejected proposal accounts described intimate partner violence. Yet about 30% of relationships continued after the rejection, sometimes for years. These and other novel results contribute to the science of close relationships, family psychology, life script theory, commitment, rejection, and social rituals.

Keywords: Close Relationships; Rejection; Gender; Commitment; Communication

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If asked, most people who are raised in a Western culture can probably visualize a marriage proposal, and they can probably describe the scene very well. In this scene, the proposer might get down on one knee, and the proposee might cover their mouth, overwhelmed with emotion. The proposer might present a ring and make a short speech ending with, "Will you marry me?" The proposee may say, "Yes!" and hug the proposer, and both may start crying. People can easily imagine this script because the Western marriage proposal is an overlearned ritual, described in movies, books, and oral traditions (Schweingruber et al., 2004).

The Proposal Ritual

According to life script theory (e.g., Berntsen & Rubin, 2004), cultures hold shared ideas about when, and in what order, major transitional life events should ideally occur. These scripts lend meaning to such events by helping people to understand how the event fits into the story of their life, and how the story of their life fits into the broader culture to which they belong. Thus, people generally start to learn these scripts as children. For example, one popular Western children's rhyme includes the lines "first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage," which teaches children the script for the ideal timing of romance, marriage, and procreation. Reflecting the consequence of life scripts, people often keep track of whether they are personally conforming to the scripted timing of major transitional life events, and their broader social circle will reinforce the scripts by celebrating when events happen "on-time" and condemning events that happen "off-time." To aid in both the personal and cultural memory for such scripts and to further reinforce their consequence, participants will often record major transitional life events with photographs, video, or written accounts.

The scripts for major transitional life events can be complex. For example, the Western life script for marriage includes many specific *episodes*, which describe how people might meet, fall in love, become engaged, and eventually, hold a wedding ceremony (e.g., Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). Moreover, many of these episodes involve *rituals*, which are purposeful, scripted behaviors that facilitate connection and perpetuate social norms (e.g., Rossano, 2012). Rituals that accompany major transitional life events are usually costly or difficult to perform, which serves to further reinforce the consequence and memorable quality of the event or episode. Many rituals also pertain to infrequent celebrations, including graduations, the birth of a child, and most relevant to the current research, marriage (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). These celebration rituals typically evoke strong emotions, contain universal symbols, and are particularly meaningful to actors, all of which serves to reinforce the personal and cultural memorable quality of the scripted event. The events often become part of the stories families tell about themselves, promoting family cohesion and continuity (Ponzetti, 2005). Thus, rituals can help to reinforce cultural scripts by promoting connections among group members, communicating cultural values, and establishing participants' social identities (e.g., Berntsen & Rubin, 2004).

The marriage proposal is a key family story for Western families, because it signifies a transition towards marriage (Ponzetti, 2005). The conventional elements of the Western proposal ritual include the proposer kneeling on one knee; the proposer offering a ring to the proposee; and the proposer asking "Will you marry me?" (e.g., Schweingruber et al., 2008). The proposal is also a "surprise" to the proposee, who may help plan the proposal by specifying their wishes and selecting the ring while remaining ignorant of superficial event details, like the date and location. Furthermore, as with other romantic scripts in Western culture (e.g., Cameron & Curry, 2020), the conventional script for the Western marriage proposal is *heterosexist* – it reflects an

ideology that values and prioritizes heterosexual relationships while marginalizing non-heterosexual ways of being (Rose, 2000). As a result, the conventional Western proposal ritual implicitly describes how a man should propose to a woman, and for many heterosexual couples,[1] including the couples who are the focus of the current research, performing the proposal ritual may help to reinforce gender as a social identity and role (Schweingruber et al., 2004). For such couples, the proposal ritual can be described as a gendered performance, what West and Zimmerman (1987) call "doing gender": Enacting the ritualistic elements allows heterosexual couples to claim their gender identities and convey those identities to others, confident in the knowledge that their performance will allow their social circle to accept the legitimacy of their engagement.

Because most romantic scripts in Western culture prioritize heterosexual relationships, same-sex and queer couples often reject dominant cultural scripts for romance and develop new interpersonal scripts that better reflect their needs and values (Rose, 2000). Thus, the heterosexism that is implicit in the Western marriage proposal may help to explain why same-sex and queer couples often renegotiate and reshape the ritual to feel more authentic (e.g., Jowett & Peel, 2019; Suter & Daas, 2007). For example, some same-sex couples include aspects of the conventional script in their proposal (e.g., presenting a ring while down on one knee), but they also reshape the script so that partners propose to each other (Jowett & Peel, 2019). Other same-sex couples may not want to enact the ritual at all, and instead emphasize shared decision-making, legal ramifications, and resisting the script when they commit to one another. Thus, although it is beyond the scope of the current research, it is important to recognize that many same-sex and queer couples, along with heterosexual couples who question heteronormativity, may refuse to conform to the proposal script and some may reject the ritual all-together.

Yet the Western proposal ritual remains an important and central transitional life event for those couples who do participate. However, there is a lack of empirical scientific research concerning the proposal ritual, and rejected proposals have been particularly overlooked. Such research is needed, not only to shed light on the characteristics of rejected proposals, but also to reveal the consequences of violating one of the central transitional life scripts in Western culture.

Violating the Proposal Script

Transitional life scripts help people to organize autobiographical memory and make sense of their lives. Therefore, events that violate such scripts, and especially events that happen "off-time," can be stressful for individuals and can be socially stigmatized (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). For example, people who violate important life scripts can experience negative emotions, uncertainty, guilt, and depression (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1993; Rubin et al., 2009). Moreover, family, friends, and other social observers of life script violations can respond with moral outrage (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo, 2017), or anger and aggression (Ellison, 2003). As a result, people who violate important life scripts may try to manage the spread of the news about their violation or otherwise fend off stigmatizing responses from their social circles (e.g., Park, 2005).

Similarly, we suggest that when heterosexual couples violate the proposal script, it could be disconcerting for both actors and observers. For example, due to the heterosexism that is implicit in the Western proposal ritual, some people may react negatively when a woman proposes to a man. To people who endorse conventional gender roles, such a proposal may be viewed as illegitimate (or a joke) because it violates the proposal script (Schweingeruber et al., 2004). Indeed, it was so unconventional for women in the United States to propose that a tradition developed at the turn of the last century whereby it was only deemed acceptable for a woman to propose to a man on February 29th in a leap year (Parkin, 2012). Moreover, if a

proposer fails to enact each necessary component of the scripted proposal ritual, the couple or observers may feel that the proposal is lacking or somehow unfinished (Schweingeruber et al., 2004).

We also suspect that rejected proposals may be distressing for heterosexual couples and observers, in part because a rejected proposal violates core elements of the proposal script. From the perspective of the rejecting proposee, a proposal that comes too early in a relationship or from the wrong person may be distressing because it is perceived to be happening "off time," and before they are ready to commit (e.g., Agnew et al., 2019). From a rejected male proposer's perspective or from observers' perspectives, a woman who rejects a man's proposal of marriage contravenes deeply-rooted social conventions concerning gender and power, and so a woman's "no" violates a gendered proposal script that requires her to accept. Thus, similar to other script violations (e.g., Park, 2005), audiences who observe a woman rejecting a man's proposal may react with outrage or anger. In turn, rejected male proposers who feel entitled to a "yes" may become angry or violent. Indeed, rejection is an important trigger of intimate partner violence (e.g., Hardesty & Ogolsky, 2020).

The current research explores these and other key characteristics and consequences of following or failing to follow the Western proposal script by quantitatively and qualitatively coding the content of written accounts of marriage proposals between men and women that have been posted online. Popular online forums provide richly detailed proposal stories that invite readers to experience the storyteller's thoughts, feelings, and motivations first-hand.

Research Overview

The overarching goal of the current research was to document the characteristics of accepted and rejected marriage proposals between men and women, with an eye to identifying

and interpreting any observed differences between the two outcomes.[2] Our approach was

exploratory and descriptive, in general, because our research is novel and we wanted to be open

to the discovery of new information and ideas. Thus, we used an observational design and

adopted a qualitative descriptive approach to our thematic analysis of first-person written

accounts of marriage proposals between men and women that were posted online.

People often visit social media websites for entertainment, self-presentation, and

connection (Utz, 2015). Therefore, people may share their proposal stories online as a means of

achieving these goals. Indeed, proposals make for an entertaining story, and sharing a proposal

story is part of the performance (Schweingruber et al., 2004). Moreover, the proposal story

conveys information about the couple (e.g., Vannini, 2004), and by extension, the self. Thus,

telling the story may meet people's self-presentational goals in addition to aiding in the memory

and recall of this important life transition. These accounts may or may not be objectively

accurate, because they are influenced by hindsight and people's autobiographical memories may

differ between accepted and rejected proposals. Yet such accounts are considered to provide

meaningful insight into social and relationship rituals, and proposal stories can be used in

therapy to affirm or elucidate a relationship (Ponzetti, 2005).

To help focus our research, we asked specific exploratory research questions (RQs) that

are consistent with life script theory.

Research Questions

RQ1: Does Proposing "Off-Time" or "On-Time" Differ by Proposal Outcome? We

explored whether proposal timing in terms of life stage, relationship stage, and commitment

readiness (Agnew et al., 2019) was related to the proposal outcome.

RQ2: Does Adherence to the Proposal Script Differ by Proposal Outcome? The proposal script specifies that a man should propose to a woman and describes the behaviors he should enact during the ritual. We explored whether proposer gender and adherence to the scripted elements differ by proposal outcome.

RQ3: Does Community Involvement Differ by Proposal Outcome? Communities often play a role in the proposal ritual, thus we explored whether community involvement and audience type (e.g., strangers versus friends and family) differed between accepted and rejected proposals.

RQ4: Do Emotional Reactions to the Proposal Differ by Proposal Outcome? Transitional life events often provoke strong emotional reactions. Therefore, we used qualitative analysis to explore peoples' emotional reactions to accepted and rejected proposals.

RQ5: What Other Relationship Characteristics Differ Between Accepted and Rejected Proposals? The extant literature provides little insight into the relationship characteristics that may differentiate accepted and rejected proposals. Therefore, we coded the accounts for characteristics like relationships status before and after the proposal, and remained open to other discoveries that could emerge from our descriptive thematic analyses.

Methods

Below, we report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations (there were none), and most study measures (Simmons et al., 2012). Additional procedural details and analyses are reported in the Online Supplemental Materials [OSM]: https://osf.io/hb3g4). We consulted with our ethics board at the University of Victoria prior to project commencement. Data were collected as part of a two-study, larger-scale doctoral dissertation concerning marriage proposals. Quantitative data are available on the OSM.

Data Collection

Based on power analyses that were conducted for the larger dissertation project of which this study was a part (see the OSM), we aimed to sample 200 accepted and 200 rejected proposal accounts, after exclusions. From January 7 to February 12, 2015 and from May 6 to 7, 2015, coders A, B, and C and the first author searched Reddit.com and Weddingbee.com for first-person written accounts of proposals. We chose to search these two sites because they are popular among users in Canada and the U.S. (e.g., Reddit has over 300 million active users and it is the 19th most visited site in the U.S. and in the world; approximately 60% of its user-base comes from the U.S. and Canada; c.f. wikipedia.org, 2020; the majority of visitors accessing Weddingbee.com are from the United States; Alexa, n.d.). We searched both websites using terms like "marriage proposal" and "proposal + reject" and sampled the first accounts that returned from our search. Our original intent was to collect an equal number of accounts from each website, but Weddingbee.com did not have enough proposal accounts to meet this goal. Therefore, most of the accounts were sampled from Reddit. We excluded very short accounts that did not provide any details about the proposal and/or the couple (e.g., "She said "no".”). We examined usernames to ensure that our sample represented unique proposal accounts (there were no duplicates), and we excluded accounts that we recognized from movie/TV plots (e.g., one account precisely described a proposal that occurred on *The Office*). We included first-person accounts written in English and involving a man and a woman (note that same-gender marriage was not legal at the federal level in the United States at the time of data collection).

The 400 sampled accounts (200 accepted and 200 rejected, after exclusions) were posted between April 2006 and January 2015, but the proposals could have occurred outside this timeframe.

Coding the Written Accounts

Quantitative Coding

Seven trained coders and the first author independently read the full set of proposal

accounts; the second author read a sub-set of the proposal accounts as needed to resolve

discrepancies or to help clarify particular themes. Coders other than the authors were unaware of

the research questions. If it was unclear whether or not the item being coded was present, then

the item was left blank on the coding sheet and treated as missing in the data file (see the OSM).

Materials were investigator-developed. When two coders rated a particular dimension, the first

author resolved the rare discrepancies. When only one coder rated a particular dimension, the

first author also coded the sample to establish reliability and the second author resolved any

discrepancies (e.g., Syed & Nelson, 2015). Unless otherwise stated, agreement between coders

was good, with Krippendorff's alphas greater than 0.70 (see OSM for all alphas).

Coders A, B, and C and the first author recorded the proposer's apparent gender (based

on pronouns and self-identification). Coder D and the first author recorded who was telling the

proposal story (i.e., the proposer or the proposee).

Proposing "Off-Time" or "On-Time." Coders A, B, and C and the first author

recorded the ages of each couple member when mentioned. Coder D and the first author recorded

the approximate relationship length before the proposal occurred. Coder C recorded whether or

not the writer indicated that the couple members had discussed marriage before the proposal (0 =

no; 1 = *yes*).

Adherence to the Proposal Script. Coders E and F noted whether or not the proposer:

knelt on one knee; presented a ring; asked "Will you marry me?" (0 = *behavior absent*; 1 =

behavior present), and whether the proposee seemed to be surprised by the proposal (0 = *no*, 1 =

yes). Due to a lack of clear and consistent relevant information in the accounts, coders were not able to reliably code whether the accounts mentioned the proposer asking "Will you marry me" ($a = .49$) or whether the proposal was a surprise ($a = .52$), so we will not report results for these two unreliable variables.

Community Involvement. Coders E and F also recorded the approximate number of people who were present for the proposal using a 7-point scale ($1 = 0$ *others present*, $7 = 101$ *or more others present*). Coders also noted whether people were present in general ($0 = no$, $1 = yes$), and coded the type of audience that was present, if any (i.e., friends, family members, or strangers). Unfortunately, coders could not reliably code audience type ($a = .67$), again because this information was not clearly or consistently described in the accounts, so we will not report results for this unreliable variable.

Other Relationship Characteristics. Coder C recorded the following relationship characteristics ($0 = no$, $1 = yes$): Did they date before the proposal? If yes, were they broken up when the proposer proposed? If they dated before the proposal, did they break up after the proposal occurred? Did they date after a rejected proposal? Were they still together at the time of writing? Did they remain friends after a rejected proposal (not coded if they were still together at the time of writing)? The first author also noted the romantic relationship length after a rejected proposal and noted if couples became engaged or married later ($0 = no$, $1 = yes$).

Motivations and Emotions. To facilitate our qualitative coding of motivation and emotion during the proposals, Coder D recorded the answers to the following questions: What was the writer's perception of the proposer's motivation for proposing? What reason was given for the proposee's response? What was the proposee's reaction to the proposal (e.g., thoughts, feelings, behaviors)? What was the proposer's reaction to the proposee's response?

Qualitative Descriptive Coding

There are many different methods of qualitative coding, each with their own merits. We initially took a qualitative descriptive approach, whereby we aimed to describe "the who, what, and where" of proposals (Sandelowski, 2000, p.339). Our aim was to describe what was occurring, not develop a new theory or apply an existing theory per se (Saldana, 2009; Sandelowski, 2000). This method is appropriate due to the lack of observational research concerning marriage proposals in general, and the lack of research on rejected proposals, specifically. We initially evaluated accepted and rejected proposals separately to ensure that anything unique to either proposal outcome was not overlooked. The first author independently read the accepted accounts on multiple occasions, considered what was occurring (i.e., who was in the story; what they were thinking, feeling, and doing; and where they were in physical location and life), and assigned the observations to codes. The first author also considered the motivation and emotion data during this phase. The first author stayed close to the data by using terms the writers used to create the codes (e.g., Levitt et al., 2018). For example, "I feel a little disappointed" was coded as "disappointing." Then, this process of assigning observations to codes was repeated for rejected proposals. The first author also kept memos to keep track of their thoughts throughout the study process (e.g., Levitt et al., 2018). For additional methodological integrity, coder G coded 20% of the sample and independently observed codes that were conceptually similar to those observed by the first author.

Next, the first author used a data-driven/bottom-up approach to consider the relationships between the codes and collated codes into themes that were evident across proposal outcomes or that differentiated proposal outcomes. For example, codes for how the audience encouraged the script, treated the proposal as a performance and spectacle, and encouraged an affirmative

response were combined into a single theme concerning community involvement. The first and

second author then reviewed and refined the themes together (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with a

particular focus on noting how the codes that comprised each theme differed between accepted

and rejected proposals. The second author specifically aided in theme refinement by probing the

first author's conclusions (e.g., by asking what made them come to a certain conclusion or by

asking what the first author thought caused a particular observation), by identifying awkward or

unclear conclusions, by helping identify when data tied to theory, and by highlighting points of

interest. During the refinement process we noticed that many of the observed themes were

consistent with life script theory elements, so in this final stage of analysis we used life scripting

theory to refine our groupings of some codes and to name our themes.

Results

We calculated descriptive statistics (e.g., means, frequencies) to describe the sample and

account characteristics. We also conducted independent-samples t-tests to compare means for

accepted and rejected proposals for ratio variables, and we used chi-square analyses to compare

accepted and rejected proposals for nominal and ordinal variables. We also calculated odds ratios

to further characterize the chi-square results (see the OSM for analysis code).

Preliminary Analyses

Most proposal accounts were written by women (81%), but consistent with the proposal

script, nearly all proposers seemed to be men (94%). Because so few women proposed (n = 25),

we could not examine whether proposer gender differs by proposal outcome. Thus, to avoid

potential gender confounds we limited our analyses to proposal accounts in which the man

proposed (final sample n = 374; one account said the proposal was mutual so it was excluded

because it did not have a proposer). Not every account provided the information we needed to

assess all variables. Therefore, we report in parentheses the actual number of written accounts that provided the relevant information and thus were included in each set of quantitative analyses.

Main Analyses

Quantitative Coding

RQ1: Proposing "Off-Time" or "On-Time." Age was described for only 8% of men and 16% of women, so we could not explore age differences between proposal outcomes. However, we were able to explore relationship length differences (M_{years} = 2.94, SD = 2.21, n = 106): Couples who experienced rejected proposals had a pre-engagement dating period that was two years shorter (M_{years} = 2.20, SD = 2.10, n = 67) than couples who experienced accepted proposals (M_{years} = 4.20, SD = 1.81, n = 39), M_{diff} = -2.00, 95% CI [-2.80, -1.20], $t(104)$ = -4.97, p < .001, d = 1.02. Rejected accounts were also less likely than accepted accounts to report that the couple had discussed marriage before the proposal, $\chi^2(1)$ = 44.61, p < .001, Cramer's V = .68, p < .001 (n = 97). In fact, of the accounts that provided the relevant information, only 40% of the 43 rejected proposal accounts said they discussed marriage in advance, whereas 100% of the 54 accepted proposal accounts said they discussed marriage in advance.

RQ2: Adherence to the Proposal Script. Rejected proposals were more likely to violate the proposal script than accepted proposals, in that kneeling and offering a ring were both less common in rejected proposals (29 of 72, or 40% and 48 of 94, or 51%, respectively) than accepted proposals (130 of 171, or 76% and 124 of 138, or 90%, respectively). Put another way, the odds of being rejected were 8.49 times higher if the man did not offer a ring compared to if he did offer a ring, $\chi^2(1)$ = 43.88, p < .001, Cramer's V = .44, p < .001, n = 232. The odds of

being rejected were also 4.70 times higher if the man did not kneel on one knee compared to if

he did kneel, χ^2 (1) = 28.62, p < .001, Cramer's V = .34, p < .001, n = 243.

RQ3: Community Involvement. Fully 63% of proposals took place with only the couple

present (n = 287). While audience size did not distinguish rejected from accepted proposals, χ^2

(6) = 5.33, p = .514, Cramer's V = .14, p = .514, Fisher's exact p = .507, n = 270, the odds of

being rejected were 1.73 times higher if the proposal was public compared to if it was private, χ^2

(1) = 4.77, p = .031, Cramer's V = .13, p = .031, n = 287. Of the accounts that provided relevant

information, 45% of the 105 rejected proposal accounts said there were other people present

compared to 32% of the 182 accepted proposal accounts.

RQ5: Other Relationship Characteristics. All couples who experienced an accepted

proposal were dating at the time of the proposal (i.e., they were not broken up) and they were

still together at the time of writing (see OSM for results table). In contrast, 10% of rejected

proposals came from men who had never even dated the woman they proposed to: Six came

from strangers and 12 proposals came from a friend. These results also yielded a novel

discovery: Fully 31% of couples continued to date after a rejected proposal. We could not

reliably code relationship length after a rejected proposal because writers were often vague about

that detail, but for those who were more specific (n = 21), the average relationship length after

the rejection was 2.41 years (*SD* = 3.17, range = 0.02 – 12 years). Thus, some couples remained

together after a rejected proposal, often for years. Five couples even went on to marry.

Thematic Coding

The Importance of Timing

Consistent with life scripting theory and theories of commitment readiness, many of the

reasons for declining a proposal seemed to reflect poor timing: Timing in their life stage (e.g.,

age), timing in what was going on in their lives (e.g., death; recovery from a previous long-term relationship), and timing in the relationship (e.g., whether the proposal came too soon or they were about to break up). For example, the most common reason for rejecting a proposal was the belief that they were too young or not ready to get engaged. One woman described an impromptu proposal at a gas station after just two months of dating. She rejected the proposal because she was "young and still in college" and not yet thinking about marriage. Another wrote, "I told him we were too young, and that he could ask me when I was 21 if we were still together." Another described how she had "just gotten divorced" and had told her partner that she "wasn't ready for anything serious and wouldn't be any time soon." These accounts seem to reflect a mismatch between partners' perceptions about where they fell on the timeline of the marriage script: these proposees were not ready for the role transition that would occur with engagement, but the proposers were ready.

Additionally, one common reason for proposing that was only mentioned in rejected proposals was proposing as a way to "save the relationship." In one such account, the woman wrote that her partner believed that marriage would solve their relationship problems and would make them happy, and she thought that he proposed to stop her from ending the relationship. Another wrote, "I guess he thought he could save the relationship that way, but we both knew that it wouldn't last much longer." One man wrote that he knew his partner was leaving him and that her response would likely be "no," but he proposed anyway because, "I didn't think I could live with that question mark for the rest of my life." Thus, it appears that some proposers believed that pushing through to the next phase of the marriage script could fix their relationship problems.

The Importance of Script

Writers frequently described elements of the proposal script, but they had varying reasons for doing so. Some storytellers mentioned script elements that were missing, but assured readers that they appreciated their non-conventional proposal. One such woman wrote, "I've never been into the whole 'down on one knee' thing because I get nervous being the centre of attention, so I appreciated [his non-conventional proposal] all the more." Another wrote, "No ring, no down on one knee, no planning, no one else there... I loved it! Perfectly us!" One man wrote, "She said yes and kissed me without ever seeing the ring :)." As with deviations from other life events, these assurances may have represented attempts by the storytellers to avoid or downplay the social consequences of failing to conform to the proposal script (e.g., Park, 2005).

Many other writers valued the presence of scripted elements. For example, one woman wrote, "I consider myself lucky he got on his knee with a ring." Another wrote, "He knelt and proposed 'properly', put the ring on my finger and then we kissed in the rain", while another wrote, "he reached in his pocket and pulled out a little box, got down on one knee, and asked me to marry him…it was just perfect." Women in both accepted and rejected proposals complained when their proposal was missing conventional elements. One accepting woman wanted her partner to specifically ask, "will you marry me?" rather than just phrasing it as a statement. Another woman wrote, "He didn't ask my dad even though that's what I wanted." Yet another wrote, "Admittedly, I was disappointed that he didn't take a knee, but it's a minor issue." One rejecting woman wrote, "I told him if he wasn't confident enough to propose face to face with a ring he had acquired, then he wasn't ready for marriage." None of the storytellers complained that their proposal was too conventional. Furthermore, deductive coding indicated that dissatisfaction with the proposal orchestration was far more common for rejected proposals (79%, n = 105) than accepted proposals (19%, n = 186).

Community Involvement

Consistent with the importance of community for participating in, documenting, and re-enforcing the scripted elements in transitional life events, audience members were often present during or after the proposal. Audience members encouraged the couple to follow the proposal script. For example, one rejecting woman wrote, "Someone even gave him a ring to put on me, as a rental I guess." An accepting woman described how her fiancé's parents showed up right after the proposal: "We heard his parents enter the house … His stepdad was recording us on his camera–asking 'SO DID YOU PROPOSE? WHERE'S THE RING?!'"Another account described an aunt facilitating the ring selection: "I also had picked out my ring, without knowing because I went shopping with his aunt a few months before and she asked me what rings I liked."

When present, audiences also seemed to encourage the proposal as a performance and to enjoy the proposal as a spectacle. Clapping, "awing," and cheering were common. One woman's proposal took place at a church with "over 1000 people" in attendance and she "could hear everyone cheering and applauding" after she accepted. Another woman described how the man who was "harassing/stalking" her proposed in front of "100+ girls" who "gasped and squealed" when he asked her to marry him. Audiences often took pictures and video of the proposal, even when they did not know the couple. For example, one woman wrote that "EVERYONE was taking pictures" of her proposal at a concert, and another described how the audience was eager to know her answer.

Audience members also encouraged an affirmative response to the proposal. For example, one man wrote that people were "rooting for [her] to say yes." A woman wrote, "Some random guy at the bus stop was standing two feet away from us taking pictures on his phone and saying 'say yes! Say yes.'" If the proposal was rejected in public, the audience fell silent and

sometimes became hostile. One man wrote, "Silence, people are staring, and kids are pointing and wondering what's going on." One woman who rejected a proposal wrote that she was "booed out of the bar" and another described being kicked out of a restaurant: "… when I said no he started crying and had to be taken into the back by a couple of the servers. I was asked to leave and not come back, told I was horrible and cruel, etc. lol." As these examples illustrate, when an audience witnessed a rejected proposal, they often treated the man better than the woman. As one man wrote about his own rejected proposal: "I felt a pat on my back as some people came to comfort me. I got some hugs from some older women, sympathetic pats on the back from a few men."

Emotion

Consistent with life script theory, writers often described strong emotions in their accounts.

Women's Emotions. Surprise, happiness, excitement, shaking, kissing, and hugging were common reactions by women who accepted a proposal. For example, one woman wrote, "I was shaking for a good hour afterward", while another wrote, "I was shaking and laughing and kissing him." Some accepting women also described memory loss as a result of their arousal. For example, one woman wrote "I couldn't tell you what he said now, so much excitement, surprise and adrenaline." Another wrote, "He then dropped to a knee and said the sweetest words I can't remember (I was shocked!)"

Women who rejected a proposal often expressed concern and sympathy for their rejected suitor. One woman wrote, "I turned him down as gently as I could. The look on his face still haunts me." Another wrote, "I felt bad, it was really sweet, he had gotten the ring specially designed for me, and he had even asked my Dad for permission." Women who rejected a

proposal sometimes tried to stop the proposal from happening. One woman wrote, "I literally had to cut him off and tell him, verbatim, that 'Nobody deserves to a hear a 'no' response to the question you're about to ask me. I can't let you do that.'" Rejecting women also tried to separate themselves from their partner after the proposal by leaving or by telling their partner to leave. For example, one woman wrote, "I just awkwardly stared for a few minutes before I burst out into tears. He asked to explain and I asked him to leave."

Laughing and crying were common responses for both proposal outcomes, but the reasons behind the emotional expressions differed. Accepting women seemed to laugh and cry because they were overwhelmed with positive emotion (e.g., "I began to laugh and cry and laugh and cry"; "I laughed through my tears and shouted "YESSS!!!!"). Rejecting women seemed to laugh to express incredulous surprise or perhaps hostility. As one rejecting woman wrote, "I laughed in his face." A man wrote, "Her laughter turns to a serious look on her face, and eventually to a sad expression." Rejecting women seemed to cry because they were overwhelmed with negative emotions. For example, one woman wrote, "It was an unexpected proposal, I knew it would never work out, and I started crying. That made it worse because he thought I was crying from happiness. No, no, it was definitely sad crying."

Men's Emotions. Accepted men reacted with shaking, crying, pounding hearts, laughing, and relief. For example, one woman wrote, "I laughed, he laughed" and another wrote, "I of course said yes, and then he hugged me to him for like 5 min, and I could feel his heart racing." Hugging and kissing were the most common responses (e.g., "When he slipped the ring on and kissed me, the entire museum erupted in applause and cheering"). Rejected men expressed hurt and confusion (e.g., "He looked like he had the wind knocked out of him"; "He then put it back in his pocket and said 'never mind, that hurt. It just seemed like the perfect moment with the sun

setting over the ocean'"), but crying was the most common response. For example, one woman wrote, "I said no and told him to leave. He sat in his car crying for awhile." Another wrote, "His reaction was to cry and sing me Bruno Mars songs." Some men reacted with understanding. (e.g., "i told her i understood"). Others kept trying to propose (e.g., "he kept trying until we broke up"). Some men also felt the sting of rejection for a long time. One man wrote "The experience has fucked me up for life (happened about 6 years ago)." Another wrote, "I was really deeply hurt by the whole thing. I couldnt believe i'd misread her so badly. I proposed in January of this year. i'm still a bit of a mess about it."

Anger and Violence. Intimate partner violence was described in 15% of the rejected proposal accounts. None of the accepted proposal accounts mentioned intimate partner violence. Excessive control, threatening suicide, stalking, coercive and manipulative behaviors, emotional intimate partner violence, and physical intimate partner violence were all coded as intimate partner violence. In some cases, the violence preceded the proposal. For example, one woman wrote, "He liked to isolate me and constantly demanded my attention." Another wrote, "I had been explaining to him that he had reaches [sic] a point that he was just verbally abusive and sending me into a depression. He would cry and apologize and swear he would get better." But sometimes the violence happened during the proposal, such as hair pulling to get the woman's attention. One woman wrote, "Just shoved me awake and apathetically mumbled it, mentioned some copper ring he had." Often, the intimate partner violence occurred after the rejection. Consistent with prior research documenting angry and hostile reactions to script violations in other domains (e.g., Ellison, 2003), some rejected men reacted in frightening or violent ways (e.g., "I declined he filled with rage"), with stalking being the most common form of post-rejection intimate partner violence. For example, one woman wrote, "So began the stalking,

obsessive calling and texts, letters on my car while I worked, following me while on dates, and

asking for updates on me from my family." Another wrote, "Of course, I told him no but still

tried to remain friends with him.... Until he started legitimately stalking me."

We describe four additional minor themes in the OSM.

Discussion

The present research took a step towards documenting the intra- and inter-personal

processes that characterize accepted and rejected marriage proposals between men and women.

More specifically, this research revealed what happens when there are (in)consistencies between

men's and women's perceptions of where their relationship stands on the marriage life script,

and what happens when people enact or fail to properly enact the proposal script. These

complexities highlight the fact that while many people expect important life events like

proposals to be positive (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004), real life affords mixed outcomes. We may

not have achieved some of these insights had we interviewed people face-to-face, as researchers

have done in the past. Some people seem reticent to share their rejected proposal stories. Some

writers of the rejected proposals in our study indicated that they had never told their story before,

even to friends or family. Thus, our choice to study anonymous proposal accounts is a strength of

our research, and one that likely allowed us to discover novel insights concerning rejected

proposals.

Nearly all proposers in our sample were men, affirming that the proposal ritual remains

highly gendered within heterosexual couples (e.g., Robnett & Leaper, 2013). Because so few

women proposed, we cannot make definitive claims about the perceived legitimacy of women's

proposals to men in our sample. However, among the 25 women who proposed in our original

sample, 20 were rejected while only five were accepted, suggesting that women's proposals were

rejected at approximately twice the rate of men's proposals in our sample. Thus, our findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that women's proposals to men are not taken seriously because they violate the heterosexist proposal script and its associated gender roles (e.g., Schweingruber et al., 2004; Wolin & Bennet, 1984). Yet some women did propose and some of those proposals were accepted. Perhaps such couples hold more feminist attitudes than more conventional couples, or include one or more bisexual or queer people who are used to subverting gender in their relationships (e.g., Jowett & Peel, 2019). Future research should explore these possibilities and compare gendered characteristics of proposals at different points in time, as researchers have done for other romantic scripts (e.g., Cameron & Curry, 2020).

Accepted proposals conformed more closely to the ritual than rejected proposals in terms of kneeling and presenting a ring. It is unlikely that enacting the ritual behaviors in-and-of itself causes someone to accept or reject a proposal. Rather, following the ritual communicates important information to the proposee and to the audience (Schweingruber et al., 2004). For example, "costly rituals signal belief commitments" (Rossano, 2012, p.540). Thus, presenting an engagement ring signals that the proposer is willing to literally invest in the relationship (e.g., Cronk & Dunham, 2007). Enacting the proposal script also communicates that one is part of the cultural group, knows what is expected, and shares the cultural group's values (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). If indeed "rituals provide a preview to what lies ahead" (Maniotes et al., 2020, p.3118), then some proposees may have interpreted a lack of conventionalism as a sign that their partner did not value them sufficiently, was not a true member of the cultural group, or lacked important cultural values. Therefore, failing to present a ring – or failing to conform to the ritual in other ways – may lead the proposee and the audience to question the proposer's readiness for marriage. There may be a kernel of truth to this assumption. Compared to accepted proposals,

rejected proposals seemed to occur "off time." They came earlier in the relationship, and

rejecting proposees commonly reported that they were too young to get married or the

relationship was too new. Indeed, rejected proposals typically occurred before the couple had

even discussed the possibility of marriage. Thus, some proposers may have felt ready to commit

even though the timing was not right, a result that is consistent with the hypothesis that "some

people who report that they are ready for commitment have little idea of the kinds of cognitions

and behaviors necessary to sustain an involvement" (Agnew et al., 2019, p. 1054).

     More generally, our results may also speak to the ways in which rituals are linked to

relationship commitment (Campbell & Ponzetti, 2007). Performing celebration rituals during the

dating episode of the marriage life script appears to amplify dater's pre-existing feelings about

their relationships – whether positive or negative – and to spur thoughts about the state of the

relationship and the future (Maniotes et al., 2020). For example, some writers of rejected

proposals appeared to visualize their future and think that it "didn't feel right," (see Monk et al.,

2020 for similar findings with broken engagements). Visualization of this sort might be a way to

slow the "slide" into deeper levels of commitment (Stanley et al., 2006; see also Joel &

MacDonald, in press). Thus, enacting the proposal ritual may have acted as a catalyst for the

proposee to clearly communicate their desires to the proposer. Indeed, some proposees may have

been ambivalent about the relationship before the proposal and thus sent conflicting messages to

their partner (Ogolsky et al., 2015). In contrast, some proposers' greater commitment may have

led them to overlook signs of uncertainty or neglect (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). It is also

possible that some optimistic proposers believed in the proposal script so strongly that they could

not conceive of the possibility that their partner would violate the script by refusing their

proposal. Yet, even though many couples broke up after the rejected proposal, a rejected

proposal did not always signal the end of the relationship. About 30% of relationships continued after the rejection, sometimes for years. A small number even got married. Future research should determine why there are differences in relationship outcomes for couples experiencing rejected proposals. Additionally, clinicians should encourage clients to discuss timelines and commitment readiness to ensure that couple members avoid miscommunication.

Our results also reveal a darker side of marriage proposals between men and women. More than one in six rejected proposal accounts described intimate partner violence. Quite a few men responded to rejection with aggressive, frightening, or violent behavior. Rejected men also engaged in strategies to re-gain lost power, including being vengeful or stalking their partner. Such responses are consistent with the literature concerning intimate partner violence. Indeed, men are most likely to hurt or kill their female partner after a rejection (e.g., Hardesty & Ogolsky, 2020; Hotton, 2001). Furthermore, similar to other life script violations (e.g., Park, 2005), audiences sometimes became hostile when the woman said "no," and offered more sympathy to a rejected man than they offered to a rejecting woman. Perhaps anticipating this kind of audience response, some men may have orchestrated public proposals to pressure their partner into accepting. Future research should seek to understand this dark side of marriage proposals between men and women that has previously gone unnoticed, and incorporate those findings into policies and interventions aimed at reducing intimate partner violence.

Limitations and Future Directions

The accounts that we sampled may not be representative of the general population. Not everyone is willing to post their proposal story online, and people who do may have extraordinary accounts or certain personality types or demographics. However, people between the ages of 18 and 34 commonly post personal information online (Smith & Anderson, 2018) and

this age group are the main users of Reddit (burgess_meredith_jr, 2011). Given that this is the

same age group that is most likely to get engaged (e.g., Milan, 2013), the anonymity afforded by

the method (meaning a wider variety of people might feel comfortable posting; Szinovacz &

Egley, 1995) may have resulted in a sample that is fairly representative of proposals between

men and women in Canada and the U.S. That said, wholly 80% of the accounts were written by

women. Narratives from the man's perspective may provide additional information that was not

captured in our research. Our research also excluded the experiences of female proposers and

same-gender couples. To date, only one case study (Lucca & Bala, 2013) and three small

qualitative studies that we are aware of (Glass, 2014; Jowett & Peel, 2019; Suter & Daas, 2007)

have documented same-gender marriage proposals. Clearly, more research is needed to

document LGBTQ+ people's experiences. Additionally, our research is limited to one marriage

proposal ritual of unknown prevalence. Future research could examine outcomes associated with

proposal rituals in other cultures and determine whether they are similar to the one studied here.

It is also possible that what people choose to post online varies systematically with the

proposal outcome. For example, writers of accepted proposals may follow the proposal script in

their accounts because they have told their story before and they know what their audience wants

to hear. Writers of rejected proposals may feel guilt or shame that shapes their retelling (e.g.,

Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Furthermore, we were unable to assess whether adherence to the full

proposal script predicts the proposal outcome because most accounts did not reliably describe the

information we sought to code. Future research should replicate our results using methods that

are not susceptible to these confounds and limitations.

Conclusions

The marriage proposal is an important story for Western families, because it signifies the transition to marriage and "family beginnings" (Ponzetti, 2005). Yet, not all proposals are accepted, and even rejected proposals may be an important event in people's lives. Our research sheds light on the similarities and differences between accepted and rejected proposals between men and women, providing a more nuanced picture of such couples' proposal experiences, both good and bad. Our results highlight the importance of "the rules of engagement" for making sense of heterosexual couples' proposal experiences, and illuminate the importance of talking about marriage in advance of the proposal to ensure that both members of the couple are on the same page of the marriage script.

Footnotes

[1] We use the term "heterosexual couples" to refer to romantic couples comprising a man and a woman, not to describe the couple members' sexual orientations.

[2] This research was conducted as part of a larger-scale dissertation project, and the first study in the project revealed that very few same-sex proposals were posted online at the time that data were collected, too few to reliably analyze. Thus, to maintain consistency with the first dissertation study and to ensure that we had an adequate sample size to draw reasonable conclusions from our data in the current study, we chose to focus on proposals between men and women.

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