

SYSTEMIC PRACTICE

Family Scripts

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What is it?

A theory which helps explain why individuals and families repeat patterns of behaviour. Just as an actor follows a script, so do individuals and families. Scripts provide a set sequence of predictable events – everyone knows their role and what comes next.



Types of Scripts

There are loads of types of scripts which impact daily life. Individuals and families have scripts which are passed through the generations (generational script), ones which define beliefs (a religious script), relationships (mother-daughter scripts); abusive scripts (domestic abuse); roles (victim scripts); health (illness scripts) or skills (problem solving script) etc.

Replicative Scripts are those experiences from the past which keep repeating, often unconsciously and therefore unavoidably too. These scripts can be helpful or unhelpful ones e.g. routines and keeping a tidy house vs drinking alcohol/using drugs to cope with intense emotions/stress

Family Ritual Scripts
Shared symbolic enactments which hold expectations of how the family will interact on particular occasions i.e. at weddings, funerals, Christmas or daily rituals such as hugs before bed etc.

Blended Scripts
When two adults come together in a relationship, they each bring their own script which must be blended if there is to be a harmonious relationship. A child thus adopts a 'blended script' from both its parents' families of origin

Corrective Scripts are those in which individuals try and alter a past (generational) script. E.g. physical chastisement of children

Family Myths – A set of beliefs the family has about itself which helps provide guidelines for the family behaviour/conduct. It is the behaviour which results from these beliefs which forms the script.

Transitional Scripts
When a family is testing out new ways of relating by changing their behaviours/rituals they are attempting to create a new script. If the family identify with the new script, but it is not yet 'embedded' this is a transitional script.

References:

- Byng-Hall, J. (1985). "The Family Script: a useful bridge between theory and practice", *Journal of Family Therapy*, 7: pp. 301-305
- Byng-Hall, J. (1995) *The Nature of Scripts. Rewriting Family Scripts. Improvisation and Systems Change*. New York: Guilford Press.

How can this help my practice?

Scripts can be seen by workers during observations of the family (watching them as they perform their script) or in the narrative (description) from family members about repeated family interactions – usually evidential when constructing a genogram or life cycle map with the service user. These have a goal of making the person feel more connected to the context of their lives in the past and present.

The brilliant thing is that scripts, once identified, can be re-written and changed so better ways of family interacting can be found which may reduce the presenting problem. These scripts have to be explored and brought into the conscious arena for individuals to then be able to explore whether they are happy replicating them or want to correct them.

When families are trying out new scripts (transitional scripts), if the script suits everyone and is repeated it will in time become incorporated as the new pattern of behaviour that is typical of the family. E.g. doing something different at Christmas; a new work/home/child care routine etc. Families have to be secure enough to change & try new ideas out – this links to attachment theory. When trying out new scripts 'relapse' to an old script is occasionally inevitable. As workers, we need to be supportive, have good coaching skills and help the family/individual unpick their thoughts, feelings and actions in relation to the old script and the potential new one.

Introducing Scripts to families

The 'hole story' by P.Nelson "Autobiography in 5 chapters" is a good metaphorical way of explaining to families what scripts are and how they impact us.

