

The Development of Cultural Life Scripts from Childhood to Adolescence

A cultural life script is defined as a series of events expected to take place in a specific order at specific times in a prototypical life course within a given culture. Researchers agree that life stories are developed in close interaction with a person's cultural environment (e.g. Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Nelson, 2003), i.e. the development of a coherent life story depends partially on the knowledge of the cultural life scripts of one's culture. Research has established the existence of stable cultural life scripts in samples of young Danish and American adults. However, little is known about the development of life scripts across childhood and adolescence.

Hypotheses

We hypothesize that the typicality of life scripts increases with age. We expect younger participants to include more events that do not fit the normative event categories established by adults, and to include events that are less frequently mentioned in adult life scripts. We expect younger participants to include events that are idiosyncratic both regarding adult norms and regarding events mentioned by children at the same age. We expect the older participants to be more on target concerning the age norms for life script events. That is, we expect less variations within older groups on the expected timing of the events compared to the younger groups. Based on findings on gender differences in the development of autobiographical memories (e.g. Buckner & Fivush, 1998), we expect girls to score higher on life script typicality and show less disagreement regarding timing when compared to boys.

Design

Participants: 121 Danish children (67 boys) consisting of 4 groups: 43 third-graders (mean age $M=9.51$; $SD = .28$); 26 fifth-graders ($M= 11.51$; $SD= .42$); 15 sixth-graders ($M=12.41$; $SD=.27$); and 37 eighth-graders ($M=14.48$; $SD= .32$).

Participants were asked for a cultural life script by writing down 10 events in a typical life course and by estimating the expected age at the occurrence of these events. Participants were also asked for an account of a recent autobiographical event and their life story.

Here, we will focus on the life script data.

Scoring

The events were classified according to the 36 categories developed by Berntsen and Rubin (2004). Events that did not fit these categories and were mentioned more than 4 times were identified as new categories. Remaining events were scored as “other”.

Results

Preliminarily, we operationalized the typicality of life scripts by the number of events scored as “other”. We found significantly less “other” events in the older age groups compared to the younger age groups, as well as significantly less “other” events for girls than for boys (see Figure 1).

For some of the most prevalent life script events (e.g. having children, getting married, falling in love, retirement) we found no significant differences in mean predicted ages between the oldest and the youngest group; however, Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances showed significantly larger standard deviations for the youngest group.

These preliminary results seem to indicate that cultural life scripts develop from late middle childhood to adolescence towards adult typicality.