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Paper Proposal

Culture and Coherence: The acquisition of cultural life scripts and the development of coherence in life stories

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ABSTRACT

Based on Habermas and Bluck's (2000) theory on the development of life stories and Berntsen and Rubin's (2004) studies on cultural life scripts, we investigated the relationship between the acquisition of cultural life scripts and the degree of coherence in children's and adolescents' life stories. One hundred and forty Danish children aged 9 to 15 years participated. In three sessions, participants wrote down a recently experienced autobiographical event (from their fall vacation), their life story, and their cultural life script. Vacation stories were used as baseline measures for the children's ability to coherently narrate an autobiographical event. Vacation- and life stories were scored for coherence; life scripts for normativity compared to an adult norm. Results showed a steady increase in life script normativity across childhood and adolescence. Further, a significant relationship between the normativity of life scripts and the coherence of life stories, but not vacation stories, was found.

Key Words: autobiographical memory, cultural life script development, life stories

SUMMARY

Research has shown that the development of autobiographical memories happens across the preschool years in close interaction between the individual and the culture in which he or she grows up in (see Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Reese, 2002 for overviews). But even though school age children are able to remember and recount autobiographical events, they are not able to narrate their life story coherently, according to Habermas and Bluck (2000). They theorize that there are a number of prerequisites (i.e. development of temporal, thematic, and causal coherence) for developing the ability of telling coherent life stories, one of which is the internalization of a cultural concept of biography.

In this study, we investigated the relationship between the acquisition of a cultural frame work for the construction of one's life story, and the ability to coherently recount one's life story. We operationalized the cultural frame work by using the concept of cultural life scripts introduced by Berntsen and Rubin (2004; Rubin & Berntsen, 2003). 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. Research has found evidence for the existence of stable cultural life scripts in populations of young Danish and American adults (Berntsen and Rubin, 2004; Rubin & Berntsen, 2003; Rubin, Berntsen & Hutson, under review). However, little is known about the acquisition of life scripts across childhood and adolescence, and the relationship of this acquisition to the ability of narrating a coherent life story.

Method

Participants

A total of 140 Danish children participated in the study. Participants who did not attend all three data collection sessions (see procedure, below), or who did not follow instructions, were excluded from the study, leaving a total of 121 participants (67 boys). The sample consisted of 3 groups: 43 third graders (mean age $M=9.5$ years; $SD=.29$), 41 fifth- and sixth-graders ($M=11.9$; $SD=.57$) and 37 eight-graders ($M=14.5$; $SD=.31$).

Procedure

Data collection took place classwise in regular Danish lessons during school hours. In three sessions of 45 minutes each, the following data were collected from the children:

- (1) A written report of a recent autobiographical event. The children were asked to write about an event that had happened during their fall vacation. This insured that the participants wrote about similar events happening at about the same time. The vacation stories were used as a baseline measurement for the children's' ability to coherently narrate an autobiographical event.
- (2) A written life story. Participants received oral and written instructions to write their life story to a person who would like to know more about them and about the events that had happened to them since they were born and up to the present.
- (3) A cultural life script. Participants were asked to imagine a newborn of their own sex, and to write down the ten most important events that they thought would happen in the newborn's life across the life span. They were further asked to estimate how old the newborn would be, when these events occurred. Participants were told that there were no right or wrong answers for this task, but that we were interested in their opinion.

In order to measure the development of the acquisition of cultural life scripts, a norm was established by collecting cultural life scripts from an adult group of psychology majors ($N=111$; 36 male; $M=28.5$; $SD=6.7$).

Scoring

First, the adult group life scripts were scored to set an adult norm for cultural life scripts to serve as a baseline against which the children's life scripts could be evaluated. The life script events were classified according to the 36 categories found by Berntsen and Rubin (2004). Events that did not fit these categories and were mentioned four times or more were identified as new categories.

Remaining events were scored as "other". This procedure resulted in a total of 42 event categories.¹

Two scores were developed to measure life script normativity: (1) a *typicality sum score* based on how often each of the generated life script events had been mentioned by the adult baseline group. For example, the life script event "having children" received the typicality score 100, as it was mentioned by 100 of the 111 adult participants. Thus, the higher a participant's typicality score is, the more normative is his/her life script. (2) An *idiosyncrasy sum score* was based on the number of idiosyncratic events generated by a participant. Idiosyncratic events are events that were mentioned by less than four adult participants (and thus did not fit one of the 42 event categories). Children's vacation stories were scored on general coherence using a scale from 0 to 3, adapted from Peterson and McCabe (1983). As life stories are more complex and involve more than one autobiographical event memory, life story coherence was measured by the following parameters: (1) number of life script events mentioned in the life story. (2) a scale rating the way in which the life story begins, and (3) a scale rating the way the life story ends (adapted from Habermas, in press).

Main Results

Cultural life scripts

The typicality of the life scripts increased systematically across childhood and adolescence, while the idiosyncrasy of the life scripts decreased. There was a strong and highly significant negative correlation between children's life script typicality score and idiosyncrasy score. Even though the cultural life scripts of the children became more and more adultlike with age, there were still significant differences in the typicality and idiosyncrasy scores of eight-graders and adults.

¹ The higher number of event categories compared to the Berntsen and Rubin study (2004) is due to the circumstance that in this study, ten life script events were elicited from participants vs. seven events in the original Berntsen and Rubin study (2004).

Cultural life scripts and coherence

We found significant correlations between the typicality of the life script and life story coherence, while this relationship was not found for the coherence of fall vacation stories. This pattern was present, even when age and length of vacation- and life stories was controlled for.

Conclusion

This study investigated the acquisition of cultural life scripts and their role for the development of coherence in children's and adolescents' life stories. We found evidence that cultural life scripts develop towards an adult norm across childhood and adolescence, but are not adultlike yet in 14-15 year-olds. Further, our results support the hypothesis of an important connection between the acquisition of cultural life scripts, and the degree of coherence in life stories, but not in autobiographical memory narratives dealing with a single event.

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