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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jarmacLife Script Events and Autobiographical Memories of Important Life Story Events in Mexico, Greenland, China, and Denmark[☆]Alejandra Zaragoza Scherman^{*,1}, Sinué Salgado
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The aim of this study was to test the cultural life script theory across four different cultures. We collected life scripts from 606 middle-aged and older adult participants in Mexico, Greenland, China, and Denmark, and examined whether key characteristics of life scripts generalize across these cultures. We also collected autobiographical memories of important personal events from the same participants, and coded them for their correspondence with the life scripts to establish whether the life script serves as a guide for autobiographical memory recall. Finally, we compared the life span distribution of life script events with that of the autobiographical memories. Consistent with predictions, a life script was found in all samples and the life span distribution of life script events tracked the life span distributions of personal autobiographical memories retrieved within the same cultures. These findings indicate a central interplay between cultural life scripts and autobiographical memory across disparate cultures.

Keywords: Cultural life script, Reminiscence bump of important autobiographical memories, Life span distribution, Cross-cultural research

General Audience Summary

Imagine you are asked to remember the seven most important events of your life. For people older than 40 years, it is very likely that most of the memories they report refer to positive events they experienced during adolescence and early adulthood. This phenomenon is known as *the reminiscence bump*. We investigated whether the bump might result because individuals use the life script to help them recall autobiographical memories, but what is the life script? The cultural life script is information about the order and timing of important life events expected in someone's life, from birth to death.

We asked participants in Mexico, Greenland, China, and Denmark to nominate seven life events that a typical person in their culture will likely experience between birth and death, at what age they are expected to occur, and whether the events are emotionally positive, neutral, or negative. Subsequently, we asked the same participants to recall seven personal life events, indicate how old they were when the events occurred, and rate the emotional valence of their memories.

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Results showed that when the ages of the life events and the memories were compared, the reminiscence bump of the autobiographical memories resembled the life span distribution of the life script events, suggesting that the life script helped recall autobiographical memories, especially positive ones. We concluded that the way we remember our lives is influenced by cultural expectations about the life course, at least when we remember important memories.

An increase of autobiographical memories from adolescence and early adulthood, in response to cue words and when important or positive memories are elicited, is a well established memory phenomenon known as *the reminiscence bump* (Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986). Cultural life script theory (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004) claims that the reminiscence bump for memories of important events can be accounted for by the common cultural expectations that individuals hold regarding the order and timing of important transitional life events within their culture. Such expectations are reflected in the *cultural life script*, which in turn serves as a mnemonic template that helps guide recall of autobiographical memories, especially those of important transitional and emotionally positive life events (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004).

According to Berntsen and Rubin (2004, p. 428), the conception of cultural life scripts reflects an integration of Schank and Abelson's (1977) concept of script and sociological theories of the normative segmentation of the life span (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965). The cultural life script has several testable properties, which for the aims of the present study can be divided into two groups: those that refer to characteristics of the life script (e.g., life scripts are semantic knowledge that focuses on the timing and ordering of positive transitional events and events expected to take place in early adulthood) and those that refer to the mnemonic function of life scripts in relation to personal autobiographical memories (e.g., that retrieval of important autobiographical memories is guided by the life script and thus biased toward positive events from young adulthood).

Properties of the cultural life script have been tested separately in several individual cultures, but not collectively in a systematic cross-cultural comparison using the same cues and procedures across different cultures in middle-aged and older adults. The aim of the present work is to fill this gap in the literature by testing all properties of the life script in four different individualistic and collectivistic cultures. A cross-cultural study allows investigation of whether the properties of the cultural life script are found in these cultures even though the specific events in the life script events might differ from one culture to another.

Characteristics of the Cultural Life Script

In the standard life script task (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004) adults are asked to imagine a newborn baby with a prototypical life ahead and to generate important life events in this baby's future life from birth to death. When analyzed across participants, this task is a way of obtaining a representation of the life script of the culture of the participant. Such studies have obtained

life scripts in Denmark (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Bohn, 2010; Rubin, Berntsen, & Hutson, 2009), the United States (Coleman, 2014; Rubin et al., 2009), Germany (Habermas, 2007; Hatiboğlu & Habermas, 2015), the Netherlands (Janssen & Rubin, 2011), Turkey (Erdoğan, Baran, Avlar, Taş, & Tekcan, 2008; Hatiboğlu & Habermas, 2015; Tekcan, Kaya-Kızılöz, & Odaman, 2012), Japan (Janssen, Uemiya, & Naka, 2014), and Qatar (Ottson & Berntsen, 2014). Generally, these studies have found that the life events in the life script are predominantly positive, and that disproportionately many of the events are expected to occur during adolescence and early adulthood. However, methodological differences between the studies render more detailed cross-cultural comparison difficult.

Mnemonic Function of the Cultural Life Script in Relation to Autobiographical Memories

The objective of the studies that test the mnemonic function of life scripts is not to test the notion of the life script per se, but to directly test the claim that the life script helps guide recall of autobiographical memories, especially of important and positive personal life events, and thus the reminiscence bump for important memories can be accounted for by the cultural life script.

One common way to examine the mnemonic function of the cultural life script is to code the autobiographical memories according to whether or not they correspond to an event category in the life script (e.g., "getting married" or "having children"). In other words, once the life script of a particular culture has been established, it can be used as a "norm" for analyzing the autobiographical memories of the same or of other participants within the same culture. However, it should be noted that many of the studies that established these "norms" were mainly conducted with university students. As a result, they are approximations more than norms. After coding the memories for their correspondence with the life script, the percentage of overlap between the life script events and the autobiographical memories can be calculated. Studies using this strategy generally find that when participants are cued by a request for important (or emotionally positive) autobiographical memories, a high overlap is seen between these event memories and event categories represented in the cultural life script, typically in the range of 40–70% (e.g., Berntsen & Bohn, 2010; Berntsen, Rubin, & Siegler, 2011; Hatiboğlu & Habermas, 2015; Koppel & Berntsen, 2016; Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2013; Rubin et al., 2009; Thomsen & Berntsen, 2008; Zaragoza Scherman, Salgado, Shao, & Berntsen, 2015b), whereas such high overlap

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