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Life Happens When You Are Young: Reminiscence Bump in Cultural Life Scripts Regardless of Number of Events Elicited

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Cultural life scripts are representations of a prototypical life course within a culture, consisting of a shared understanding of culturally important transitional events and their timing. Cultural life scripts contain a “bump” for events in adolescence and early adulthood, mirroring the *reminiscence bump* in autobiographical memory. However, the bump in the cultural life script might be due to the typical methodology used, namely generating only the *seven* most important events in a prototypical life, thus prioritizing early events. Here, we tested whether expanding the number of events would level the bump in the cultural life script. Four groups of 100 participants each generated a cultural life script with four, seven, 15 or 25 events. Across groups, there was a clear bump in adolescence and early adulthood, showing that the bump in cultural life scripts is highly robust and not an artefact of methodology.

General Audience Summary

When people are asked to generate a cultural life script, that is, to indicate the most important life events that they think will happen in a newborn’s life and to estimate when these events will occur, they usually come up with a list of events that contains a “bump” for events in adolescence and early adulthood. This indicates that people expect most important events in a typical life to happen before the early thirties. At the same time, older people have a *reminiscence bump*, remembering more events from their adolescence and early adulthood when they look back across their lives. It has been proposed that people remember more from this period because they use the cultural life script as a kind of “search machine” for important memories. But the bump in cultural life scripts might simply be due to the fact that so far, in research investigating the cultural life script, people are usually asked to only mention the *seven* most important events. Here, we found that cultural life scripts showed a clear bump in adolescence and early adulthood, even if we asked people to come up with 15 or 25 events. Thus, it seems, people expect life to happen when you are young, regardless of how many events they are asked to name. This provides more evidence for the idea that people use cultural life scripts as a “search

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machine” for important memories from their lives. These findings also support the notion of a general youth bias, whereby individuals expect most important events—whether autobiographical events, as in the current study, or even important public events—to occur in one’s adolescence or early adulthood.

Keywords: Cultural life script, Reminiscence bump, Important memories, Autobiographical memory

Our cultural context influences the events we remember and how we understand them (Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011; Harris, Paterson, & Kemp, 2008). One way this occurs is via cultural life scripts: culturally shared representations of a typical life, reflecting semantic knowledge rather than personal experience. Cultural life scripts consist of important transitional events that are expected to happen in a set temporal order in a typical life course (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Rubin & Berntsen, 2003). They are usually studied by asking participants to imagine a newborn child of their own gender and culture, before listing the seven most important life events that will happen in this person’s life and estimating the ages at which these events will happen (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). The majority of important events are expected to occur before age 30. The cultural life script contains a “bump” in adolescence and early adulthood, with the peak located in the decade from 20 to 30 years of age. This distribution of events within the cultural life script has been replicated across different age groups (Bohn, 2010; Bohn & Berntsen, 2008; Janssen & Rubin, 2011; Tekcan, Kaya-Kızıloz, & Odaman, 2012) and cultures (Clark & Daggett, 2015; Coleman, 2014; Erdoğan, Baran, Avlar, Çağlar Taş, & Tekcan, 2008; Habermas, 2007; Hatiboglu & Habermas, 2016; Janssen, Uemiya, & Naka, 2014; Ottsen & Berntsen, 2014; Rubin, Berntsen, & Hutson, 2009; Zaragoza Scherman, Salgado, Shao, & Berntsen, 2017).

The cultural life script influences human cognition. Most prominently, there is considerable evidence that cultural life scripts structure recall of important autobiographical memories. The cultural life script provides one of the best-supported explanations of the *reminiscence bump*: the phenomenon that older adults recall more events from youth and early adulthood than from the surrounding years (Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986). The reminiscence bump for autobiographical memories is found both when asking participants to list important memories (mirroring the methodology of the cultural life script) and when asking participants to generate memories in response to cue words (Koppel & Berntsen, 2016b; Rubin & Schulkind, 1997). In both cases, the bump appears to hold regardless of how many memories participants are asked to cite, though the bump for important memories is later and more pronounced than the bump for word-cued memories (for a review, see Koppel & Berntsen, 2015a).

Furthermore, illustrating the role of the life script in producing the bump in important memories specifically, both the distribution of important memories and their contents have been found to overlap highly with cultural life script events (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010; Bohn, 2010; Collins, Pillemer, Ivcevic, & Gooze, 2007; Glück & Bluck, 2007; Koppel & Berntsen, 2016b; Rubin et al., 2009; Thomsen & Berntsen, 2008). When people are asked to recall important autobiographical memories,

they tend to generate “life script” events from the reminiscence bump period (e.g., graduating high school, starting university, getting married), again, independent of the number of recalled memories. This is likely because they use the cultural life script as a framework to search for such memories (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Bohn & Berntsen, 2013).

The robustness of the bump in life scripts has yet to be tested, due to a lack of methodological variation in most studies to date. That is, the “bump” of events in adolescence and early adulthood in cultural life scripts might simply be due to the typically-used instructions to generate the *seven* most important events. Reflecting the nature of scripts in general (Schank & Abelson, 1977), participants tend to generate life script events in chronological order (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Bohn, 2010; Ece & Gülgöz, 2014, 2017; Erdoğan et al., 2008). Thus, when restricted to only seven events, participants might run out of events before reaching the 4th decade of life. In this case, the bump in the cultural life script would merely represent an artefact of number of events requested.

Only few studies have manipulated cultural life script instructions. Ece and Gülgöz (2017) reported a study finding that participants who were asked for a life script for a “person” instead of a “newborn” reported fewer events from early life, but the bump was unchanged. Erdoğan et al. (2008) asked participants for a life script either for a newborn or a 90-year-old. They found that the life script for the newborn contained more early-life events, whereas the life script for the 90-year-old contained more later-life events. However, both life scripts showed a clear bump in adolescence and early adulthood. These results suggest that the bump in cultural life scripts is robust, regardless of instruction. Ece and Gülgöz (2014) instructed Turkish participants to generate a life script, but without including any of the ten most frequently mentioned events from the Turkish life script (Erdoğan et al., 2008). This resulted in a less pronounced bump, with an increase of events between 16–20 and 31–35 years of age, but not in the core bump years of 21–30. This suggests that the bump in life scripts is not simply due to “running out” of events, as there was an increase in events both directly before and after the bump period. It also suggests that, if individuals are asked to generate life scripts with more than seven events, this might yield a more extended bump, as individuals draw upon events from outside the core 20–30 decade, but still with a focus on early life. In the only study asking adults for more than 7 events, participants generated 10 cultural life script events (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008). A reanalysis of these data yielded no evidence that asking for more events changed the location or size of the bump. Rather than citing events from earlier or later in life, participants instead often split previously mentioned life script events expected in adolescence and early adulthood into subcategories, such as “high school”

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