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# Historical Research on Cultural Life Scripts. An Exploration of Opportunities and Future Prospects

Onno Boonstra, Hilde Bras and Marjet Derks\*

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**Abstract:** »Die Historische Forschung von Lebensskripten: Möglichkeiten und Perspektiven«. People live their lives guided by images and assumptions based on dominant representations of an idealized life that are shared with others in the community. They view the representation of an idealized life as a "cultural life script." The cultural life script provides a conceptual link between individual and society. Such cultural life scripts are not fixed but change in the face of new ideas and in response to changing social en economic structures and conditions. For that reason, scientific research based on cultural life scripts is not only a challenge for sociologists, social psychologists and anthropologists, but also for cultural historians, social historians and historical demographers. Seven contributions of the Nijmegen based research group Self, Script and Society have been selected to show the wide variety of research possibilities of cultural life scripts within the domain of historical research and to place cultural life scripts more firmly on the future agenda of historians.

**Keywords:** Cultural life script, cultural history, social history, historical demography.

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## 1. Introduction

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In 399 B.C., the free citizens of Athens condemned Socrates for spoiling the city's youth and refusing to acknowledge the gods. As a consequence, he was sentenced to death by drinking a cup of poisoned hemlock. They put him in jail in order to await the moment he was going to be submitted to the verdict. But the warders of the gaol felt sorry for the old man. They let the jail gates open for him to escape. Socrates, however, didn't seize the opportunity; instead, he just waited for the moment the drink was brought to him. Referring to this story, Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, wrote in his famous book, *The System of Nature (Le Système de la Nature 1770)*, about agency, and the impossibility to exercise agency freely:

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The virtuous Socrates submitted to the laws of his country, although they were unjust; notwithstanding the doors of his gaol were left open to him he would not save himself; but in this he did not act as a free agent; the invisible chains of opinion, the secret love of decorum, the inward respect for the laws, even when they were iniquitous, the fear of tarnishing his glory, kept him in his prison: they were motives sufficiently powerful, with this enthusiast for virtue, to induce him to wait death with tranquility; it was not in his power to save himself, because he could find no potential motive to bring him to depart, even for an instant, from those principles to which his mind was accustomed (Mirabeau 1795, 363-64).

According to d'Holbach, Socrates' possibilities to act were limited because of the standards, values and principles to which he adhered; they were limited because of his personal belief on how to live his life.

Such a personal belief on how to live your life, influenced by internalized values like 'respect for the laws', may be called a "cultural life script"; and, indeed, there are some who use this concept in this manner. But in the social sciences and humanities, when the concept of "cultural life script" is used (which up until now has been done only on a limited scale), it is being understood somewhat differently and in a more generalized manner. In social science, a cultural life script is defined as an individual belief, but to the concept is added that a cultural life script deals with beliefs that are based on knowledge that is learned *detached from personal experience*. In doing so, a "cultural life script" is being defined as an *internalized set of culturally shared representations of an idealized life* (Jansen and Rubin 2010; Schank and Abelson 1977).

The concept of cultural life scripts is by no means a new one. A brief and by no means complete survey shows that there have been earlier scholarly operationalizations on three different, yet interacting levels of analysis: a personal one (through psychoanalysis), an interpersonal one (through symbolic interactionism) by developmental and social psychologists, and a social-cultural one (by referring to cultural scenarios, the instructional guides that exist at the level of collective life) by life course researchers, sociologists and historians (Simon and Gagnon 1986). However, in the fields of psychology, life course studies, and sociology, cultural life scripts have hardly been historicized, whereas among social and cultural historians, they have scarcely been acknowledged as a central theoretical notion.

The first more general notions of "script" were developed by transactional psychologists in the middle of the 1970s (Jansen and Rubin 2010, 291). Its pioneer Eric Berne (1972) described it as "an ongoing program, developed in early childhood under parental influence, which directs the individual's behaviour in the most important aspects of his life". Such interpsychic and interpersonal scripts constitute a huge, often ambiguous and complex system of knowledge and views about the world. The system can be viewed as a cognitive as well as an emotional network, containing the concepts' attributes and the links between those attributes. The networks function by organizing prior

knowledge, norms and values, and emotional rules to aid the understanding and categorization of new information. Thus, they influence what we see and remember and how we interpret and construct reality (Simon and Gagnon 1986).

Social psychologists work with the concept of cultural life scripts when doing research on autobiographical memory and the analysis of life stories. There, the scripts refer to culturally shared expectations about the timing of life events in an idealized life course. If a life script is “a mental representation of culturally expected life events and their age norms,” then “cultural life scripts” are “normative biographies” that guide how people both live and date their lives (Rubin, Berntsen and Hutson 2009; Thomsen and Berntsen 2008). Moreover, they depict an idealized life story, which is continuously being transmitted from older generations to younger, from master narratives, and from observations of behavior of other people within the same community and culture. Danish psychologists Berntsen and Bohn (2009, 62) argue that life stories are mental representations of culturally expected life events that are associated with certain culturally sanctioned age norms. Their content is controlled or constrained by cultural norms. These influence the demarcation lines within the life cycle and what people think of as important and as less important from the perspective of telling their life story. Berntsen and Bohn highlight that life scripts are part of culturally shared knowledge and, therefore, help to structure a life story, but the two are not the same. Life scripts are schemata for culturally expected transitional events and their timing in the average life course (i.e. getting married and then having a child), whereas individual life stories can be in contrast to the idealized scripts. Tensions due to agency, contingencies, or other influences, can emerge when transitional events do not correspond with dominant cultural and societal norms (like having a child out of wedlock, or pursuing another career than family members, leading to estrangement).

Age and sequencing norms related to life course transitions and trajectories are also central to the work of life course researchers. The study of the life course, as it has developed since the 1960s, is a highly interdisciplinary field, joining insights from, amongst others, sociology, psychology, and social history, as well as from different thematic areas (such as family demography and the sociology of aging etc.). The life course perspective or paradigm can be seen as a theoretical orientation that stresses the *contextualized* nature of life. It studies the life course as consisting of age-graded patterns that are embedded in social institutions and history. The life course paradigm is based on five general principles: 1) life span development; 2) agency; 3) time and place; 4) linked lives; and 5) timing. The first principle stresses the fact that human development and aging are lifelong processes and that lives should be studied over a considerable stretch of time. Next, it is assumed that individuals have agency, i.e. that they construct their own life through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance. The life course is furthermore shaped by the historical contexts and geographical loca-

tions in which individual lives take shape. Linked lives refer to the interdependence among individual lives, and to the fact that socio-historical influences are channelled to the micro-level of individual lives via the households and social networks in which people are embedded. The principle of timing refers to the developmental causes and consequences of life course transitions and behavior, which may vary according to their timing in a person's life (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson and Crosnoe 2003, 4).

Life course notions and research about (cultural) life scripts are primarily related to the principle of *timing*, which stresses that the very meaning of an event may differ at different stages of the life course. For instance, becoming a parent at a very early age (e.g. as a teenager) may have large detrimental repercussions on a person's material and mental conditions and may even negatively affect the rest of his/her life. As a consequence, life course events can be considered "on" or "off" time, and (implicit) social norms with respect to the appropriate age, quantum, and sequence of life course transitions and behaviors are thought to shape behavior (Liefbroer and Billari 2010; see also Neugarten and Hagestad 1985). *Age norms* encompass expectations about the appropriate age range within which behaviors should occur such as ideal ages of marriage, parenting, and retirement. Usually, certain lower and upper age limits for specific behaviors, which have also been defined as "cultural age deadlines" or as "goal deadlines", exist (Settersen and Hagestad 1996a, 1996b; Heckhausen 1999). *Quantum norms* refer to the number of times an event should or should not be experienced. For instance, what are normative guidelines about the number of children a family should consist of, or what prescriptions or proscriptons exist about the occurrence of divorce or a childless life? *Sequencing norms* concern the order in which events should occur in the life course, e.g. the expectation of marriage before childbirth, or norms against the combination of school enrollment and parenthood.

In most life course studies dealing with post-industrial societies, life scripts are often conceptualized and studied as the concatenation of particular age, quantum and sequencing norms. However, besides these 'social clocks', different forms and multiple meanings of temporality have an impact on life scripts. A broad distinction is often made between natural, cosmic and biological time versus time that is culturally constructed (Mills 2000). Natural and cosmic time is based on the relatively fixed, repetitive or cyclical rhythm of the natural environment such as the lunar or seasonal cycles. Biological development refers to the internal clock of the individual, which is often operationalized by age or life stage, such as in quantitative studies of life events. In contrast, *cultural time* is the subjective conception, use and meaning ascribed to temporality in different cultures. The cultural construction of reality is usually laid down in

*institutional calendars* that shape lives.<sup>1</sup> These are timetables produced via the adaptation and life span of particular institutions, such as religious calendars, calendars related to the institutions of work and production, political system or government or to gender divisions (Mills 2000; see also Hägerstrand 1981; Adam 1995). For example, in the past, most youngsters left the parental home to work and co-reside with a new employer during two specific days of the year – one in spring and one in autumn –, days that were closely tied to the agricultural production system. Religious calendars too shape the timing, rituals and entourage that mark important passages in the life course (such as baptisms, weddings, funerals) (see also Van Gennep 1960). However, as Mills (2000, 10) has noticed, “these multiple calendars are often neglected, underestimated, or viewed only in relation to the family or production systems”.

A broader conception of temporality in terms of cultural time and institutional calendars is particularly relevant for historical studies on life scripts, as the previous examples showed. For much of the past, age in the sense of biological aging did not play a decisive role in regulating if and when life course transitions took place. For instance, whether and when a child left the parental home, migrated for work, or got married was not so much subject to age norms, but above all to that child’s position in the parental family, its gender, and being an eldest, middle or youngest child. Moreover, the social status and the religious beliefs of the family played an important role in shaping a person’s life. Tamara Hareven (2000) has called this *family time*, indicating that life course transitions of household members were highly interdependent, and that an individual’s life course transitions were synchronized with those of other family members in order to achieve common family goals. Moreover, not only the institution of the family, but other collective expectations, ranging from community norms, religious prescriptions and popular beliefs and taboos influenced the life course. These collective expectations sometimes specified the age limits within which certain life events should take place, but underlined much more often the particular season, month, or even the day of the year for important transitions. Moreover, other aspects of life transitions such as the context, place, specific rituals and behavior, clothing, social network and role of personal relations surrounding the event were also often closely prescribed (Gillis 1996). Hence, the notion of cultural life script should encompass, besides age norms, also the cultural and institutional beliefs, prescriptions and taboos emphasizing place, context, and behavior surrounding life events in order to be of fruitful use for historians.

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<sup>1</sup> Giddens (1981) refers to these institutional calendars as a third temporal level. According to him, there are three temporal levels, 1) experience in everyday life, 2) temporality of the life cycle, and 3) the duration of social institutions produced and reproduced through regularized practices.

The concept of “cultural life script”, together with “agency”, has also been applied within cultural studies. There, it has been used both as a metaphor and as a model of analysis to describe and evaluate the way in which human behavior is being constituted within certain socio-cultural contexts. Here, historians come in because they take into consideration that cultures vary over time and place. Therefore, they stress that there is no such thing as ‘the cultural life script’, but rather a variety of scripts within certain historical frames. Post-war secularized and urban Western cultures, for instance, tend to value agency, individuality, and distinctiveness. Individuals are encouraged to stand out and develop and maintain private beliefs, attitudes, and personality traits (Buchmann 1989). Alternatively, 19th century rural cultures often valued group solidarity, communion, and interconnectedness. Individuals were encouraged to develop a sense of self that was aligned with social roles, duties, and responsibilities. Therefore, a “cultural life script”, as it is conceived by cultural historians, is tied to a *belief* someone has about the way his life course *should* be shaped, whereas the historical demographical notion of a life script is that of a person’s conception of the way a life *could* be shaped.

Finally, an influential historical focus comes from women’s and gender history, where the concept of “scripting” has been used to distinguish between dominant “sexual scripts” for sexual behavior and identity on the one hand and alternative ones on the other. How are socio-cultural dominant and scripted patterns used to label sexual behavior as “deviant” (Simon and Gagnon 1986)? The concept of scripting has also been used within the context of gender studies, by looking specifically at women and life cycles (Barclay et al. 2011). Here we see life cycle studies and scripting approaching each other. How do individuals understand themselves and the stages through which they go? Questions like this can be answered by looking at dominant scripts, how these co-define the normal life-style and its transitions, and how and to what extent people conform themselves to them.

How can the concept of cultural life scripts be applied in historical research? On a theoretical level, approaches from life course studies can be of help. Although there are many angles from which life courses can be studied, the scheme offered by Marlis Buchmann (1989; see table 1) helps to structure research angles and clarify the range of research questions. She states that both the scope (macro or micro) and the level of analysis (structural or cultural) play a role. A structural perspective focuses on problems of social action and exchange in the life course; a cultural perspective emphasizes the symbolic structuring of the life course. From a macro-sociological angle the main question is how society constructs, organizes and defines the life course. From the micro-perspective of the actor, the question of how individuals perceive, evaluate and carry out their lives is of interest.

**Table 1:** Analytical Distinctions and Concepts in the Study of the Life Course

Level of analysis	Scope of analysis	
	Macro-sociological	Micro-sociological
Structural	Institutionalization of the life course as a set of rules; institutionalized status/role configurations (A)	The life course as an actual sequence of status/role configurations (B)
Cultural	Collective representations and ideologies of the biography (C)	Individual representations of the biography; biographical perspectives and strategies (D)

Source: Buchmann 1989, 16.

In a similar vein, historical research on cultural life scripts may take a variety of forms, related to different combinations of scope and level of analysis. It may focus on describing and explaining how individuals perceived, evaluated, were forced, or strategically dealt with the social clocks and institutional timetables that set a normative framework for their lives (cell D). It may also be geared to deductively generating knowledge about cultural life scripts from a structural analysis of individual life course transitions and trajectories under the assumption that life course behavior is regulated by such cultural life scripts (cell B). It may also focus on the societal and institutional framing of cultural life scripts themselves and describe structurally regulating social clocks laid down in age, sequencing and quantum norms (cell A) or focus on cultural time and institutional calendars produced by particular institutions, including religion, family and work (cell C).

As a consequence, the variety of forms historical research on cultural life scripts can be categorized with help of a scheme which is similarly structured as the one Marlis Buchmann has used on the study of the life course.

**Table 2:** Analytical Distinctions and Concepts in the Study of Cultural Life Scripts

Level of analysis	Scope of analysis	
	Macro-sociological	Micro-sociological
Structural	Age, sequencing and quantum norms (social clocks) (A)	Deduction of cultural life scripts from structural life course trajectories (B)
Cultural	Cultural timetables (C)	Influence of social clocks and cultural timetables on individual lives (D)

## 2. Seven Examples of Historical Research into Cultural Life Scripts

The research group Self, Script and Society of the History Department at the Radboud University Nijmegen has started to analyze cultural life scripts from



these different angles, aiming at blending the different notions of a “cultural life script”, as they have been used by researchers in social, cultural and demographical history, into one coherent research paradigm. All contributions in this HSR Focus fit within this paradigm, focusing on the intersection of historical beliefs about the way lives *should* be shaped within a certain period and how they *could* be shaped. They are selected to show the wide variety of research possibilities and to place cultural life scripts more firmly on the future research agenda of historians. They are also selected to show the wide variety of historical sources that can be used to analyze cultural life scripts, and to show which sources are particularly suited for discovering or deducing historical life scripts, and which sources are particularly suited to analyze the consequences of cultural life scripts.

In this volume, there are four contributions which analyze cultural life scripts at a cultural level, looking for (changing) cultural timetables on individual lives (cell D). Two of them use (auto) biographies as a source for analysis. *Peter Rietbergen* takes numerous biographical sources as a starting point in order to find out more about 15 Italian men who shared a particular occupational life course, by becoming prime minister as well as cardinal to the Church of Rome, from the late 15th until the late 18th century. Some became prime minister after having been cardinal, others had a reversed career of becoming cardinal after having been prime minister. It is obvious that personal experiences will have influenced the policies they set out, especially when a prime minister had been a cardinal before. But Peter Rietbergen sets out to analyze to what extent the impersonal cultural life script of being a cardinal or being a prime minister may have predominated personal inclinations.

*Marjet Derks* analyzes if, how and to what extent the cultural life script of athletes changed during the first half of twentieth century. She argues that sport, by becoming a large-scale and culturally acknowledged phenomenon, influenced the cultural timetable by allowing the physically talented to pursue a different life course. By focusing on young Dutch elite female athletes in the 1920s and 1930s and using interviews and biographical sources, she maps how, on a personal level, the life scripts of several women from various social, religious, and regional backgrounds changed because they excelled in sport and how this influenced their social clocks and family time. Furthermore, she also explores how, on a societal level, this process also invoked the rise of a new life script in which the pursuit of a sporting career became a cultural ideal. In so doing, she adds a cell C analysis to her paper.

The two other papers that look into cultural life scripts at a cultural level use historical surveys as their source. There is for instance the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam, which collected information on all sorts of (folk) religion and popular beliefs as well as on customs and rituals in the first half of the 20th century. *Hilde Bras* takes as a starting point a questionnaire which contained questions on popular beliefs related to pregnancy, birth and infant care, the data

of which was collected in 1941. She examines the occurrence, content and geographical patterning of such popular beliefs in relation to fertility patterns in more than a thousand Dutch rural communities during the nineteen-forties. Popular beliefs in the isolation and churching of women in childbed existed in almost half of all communities, particularly among Catholics, while beliefs expressing fear of enchantment of infants were still alive in about a fifth of all municipalities. A multivariate analysis showed that in communities where popular beliefs in churching and bewitching still existed, birth rates were significantly higher. By including prescriptions on social contexts, conducts, customs and practices surrounding important life passages, the study extends the concept of cultural life scripts beyond that of age, sequencing and quantum norms.

*Onno Boonstra* uses also a Dutch survey, but from the 1970s and for quite a different purpose. His aim is to get an idea about *agency*, in particular about the views people may have had about the way their life course could be shaped by themselves. Although people will have perceived human agency to be restrained by cultural life scripts, some will have perceived these constraints to be tight, while others may have considered them to be loose. Next to that, different dimensions of cultural life script may have influenced perceptions of human agency, not only between people, but also between time periods.

The relationship between agency and cultural life scripts is also studied by *Theo Engelen*, but instead of a Cell D perspective he uses a Cell B perspective: he sets out to deduce cultural life scripts from deviances in demographic behavior in the city of Nijmegen in the nineteenth century. At that time, more than one fifth of the 19th century Nijmegen brides were pregnant at the date of marriage. In a society where extramarital sexuality was explicitly forbidden, and where the success of marriage restriction depended on following that rule, this finding is remarkable. It is obvious that there were, at the same time, more cultural life scripts to which people adhered. A remarkable secondary finding is that the protestant population had a much higher proportion of bridal pregnancies than the Roman Catholic population, although both the Protestant and the Roman Catholic clergy strongly opposed sexual activities, unless within marriage. Therefore, when bridal pregnancy among Protestant couples was twice as high as among Catholics, this points either at a stricter control by the Catholic clergy, or at more freedom to devise a cultural life script among Protestant youngsters.

There are two other papers which have a Cell B perspective. *Jan Kok* looks into the life course of more than 15,000 Dutch individuals in order to find out more about the timing of marriage. Marrying too old, too young, or not at all could elicit scorn from all sides: family, friends and neighbours. The same could occur when a partner was much younger or older. During modernization new societal norms on marriage are supposed to have emerged and to have become more pervasive, as individual access to and timing of marriage became

less dependent on family fortunes and family strategies. Jan Kok therefore tries to answer the question: was their timing of marriage and choice of partner related to (changing) life scripts – and what social or cultural groups were the carriers of these scripts – or were they still predominantly determined by family dynamics?

Finally, *Angelique Janssens* and *Ben Pelzer* focus on the way people cared for small infants in the nineteenth century. Especially religious rules and traditions may have influenced cultural life scripts. Such scripts could sometimes be lifesaving, as in the case of the orthodox Jewish treatment of infants, or rather the opposite, they could be lethal, given the circumstances. In Dutch historiography, the Dutch Catholic community in the period 1880-1920 has been held responsible for the loss of large numbers of infants because of the ban issued by the church on the baring of breasts in public. The assumption is that Catholic women in this period stopped breastfeeding their babies, thereby exposing their infants to life threatening dangers. Janssens and Pelzer first of all try to determine whether southern Catholics, as opposed to other groups, were likely to have denied their infants the mother breast, and secondly, whether this resulted in higher infant mortality levels amongst southern Catholic women.

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Historical Research on Cultural Life Scripts. An Exploration  
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