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Life Scripts and Life Realities: Women in Nineteenth-Century Nijmegen

Theo Engelen*

Abstract: »Lebensskript und Lebenswirklichkeit: Frauen im Nijmegen des 19. Jahrhunderts«. On average, 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. Obviously, the cultural life script that allowed sexuality only within marriage was not a script all inhabitants lived up to. 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 deviance among Protestant youngsters. In any case, when studying cultural life scripts on sexuality, it is always important to note that it can be countered by human agency.

Keywords: Cultural life script, bridal pregnancy, extramarital sexuality, 19th century.

1. Life Scripts and Life Realities

Most (historical) actors do not realize this, but often they just live up to the expectations of their social peers. Education, socialization, and in the end even the law see to it that the boundaries of the free will are clearly delineated. Within these boundaries there is some space for individual decisions and some even conclude from this relatively small range of opportunities that they are masters of their own fate. Unfortunately, for them that is, social scientists and historians clearly show that present and historical actors in most cases just walk the path that they are expected to take according to class, religion, gender and age. We call these internalized paths the lifescritps. Some historians have argued that the scripts I refer to originate in economic rationality. Take the age at marriage, for instance. A certain age may be thought of as the appropriate age to marry,

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but in the long run and for many centuries it was a perfect way of avoiding overpopulation and malnourishment. Anthony Wrigley called this ‘unconscious rationality’.

Individuals not only have to live up to the moral regulations, but they also have to deal with social and economic constraints, and within these two spheres of influence they have some space for independent choices. This complicates our study of past and present behavior. What possibilities do we have to distinguish between these determinants? Even more difficult, how can we assess the relative importance of each of these determinants? My preliminary and cautious contribution to answering these questions is looking at the demographic characteristics of Nijmegen women in the nineteenth century. In their individual lives the reality of those years and that place meet with the scripts they are officially supposed to obey. Can we, by looking at the demographic contours of lives, discern what constraint is, what is choice, and what is cultural constraint? That is the question that will be tackled in the next pages. The answers will be tentative at best, but demographic data present the core of human lives and thus form a promising starting point.

We start by stating that raising children in human populations has the ultimate goal to create adults that live up to the generally accepted values and behaviour of society. These values are internalized and form the codified scripts members of society have to live up to. Still, as mentioned above, individual actors may choose to deviate from the norm. Whether one calls this simply a deviation or the birth of a new, personal life script, is not clear. Codified scripts, however, have existed in historical and contemporary societies, in all parts of the world, and in all social classes. Evidently, this does not imply that the officially codified rules were the same in all cases. One country, one region, even one municipality can harbour subpopulations with different views on the proper way of living one’s life. The study of these views may use two separate sources. First of all, we have the codified rules in legal documents, in church records, and in advisory literature. We can even implicitly deduce them from novels, proverbs and the like. This is what I call the official version of life scripts. Real, day to day life on the other hand offers possibilities to deviate from the scripts, or, in other words, confronts human beings with constraints to reach the official goal on the one hand, or with the choice to adapt the official life script in a slightly different personal one.

This paper is geared at finding the official life scripts by looking at actual behaviour. Although interhuman variance in behaviour is always possible, and may in some cases even be significant, there is also a general mean that reveals the common ideal these people pursue. In the introduction of this HSR Focus this was formulated as “an internalized set of culturally shared representations of an idealized life” (Schank and Abelson 1977).

As already mentioned, demographic behaviour is an excellent source to do research like this, especially the socialization with regard to sexuality. All

societies have strict rules on marriage and reproduction. The balance between the number of inhabitants on the one hand and means of existence on the other hand is a delicate one, especially in historical populations. If one has to choose between preventive and positive checks, the first option is the domain of life scripts, the second is not an option, but the result of deviating from the codified rules. This is where the so called European marriage pattern enters.

From Thomas Malthus via John Hajnal we know that west of the imaginary line between Triest and St. Petersburg a restrictive marriage regime was operational. In view of the limited possibilities to provide food, the number of mouths had to be checked. In a situation where reliable contraception was unavailable the only way to keep the right balance was to limit the number of people with access to marriage. Only within marriage a sexual and thus a reproductional relationship was allowed. This was not a fixed situation. When war or an epidemic depleted the population, more niches for new marriages were opened. When, on the other hand, the availability of food decreased marriage restriction became more severe. What we see is a well-functioning homeostatic system that lasted until the agricultural, industrial and reproductive revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The first step in our search for the Nijmegen scripts on starting married life and thus sexual activity is to assess what was 'normal', what was considered to be the appropriate age to do this. We find the answer in the average age at marriage. During the 19th century women in Nijmegen married on average at 27.4 years. The development of the mean ages at marriage in the 19th century reflects the situation within the city walls. In the course of the century Nijmegen suffered from a growing overpopulation. Since the city was a military stronghold, the walls were not pulled down until the late 1870s. A growing population had to be accommodated on a fixed surface. Not only the housing situation deteriorated, the city also witnessed a growing impoverishment of its inhabitants. The traditional reaction to these circumstances was a stricter control of the access to marriage. This explains the structural rise in average ages at marriage until 1890. In the last period covered in Table 1, the demolition of the city walls opened up new possibilities for the inhabitants of Nijmegen and the ages at marriage declined.

Table 1: Average Age at Marriage of Nijmegen Women

| Period | Age at Marriage | N |
|-----------|-----------------|-----|
| 1830-1849 | 26.9 | 244 |
| 1850-1869 | 27.6 | 456 |
| 1870-1889 | 27.4 | 102 |

Source: Engelen, Hsieh.

How can we translate this finding to life scripts? The basis for a marriage had been for centuries that a niche for the new couple, a possibility to provide income for the family had to be within reasonable reach. It is clear from the find-

ings mentioned above, that are completely in line with the figures found in other Dutch cities, but also in the neighbouring countries, that 27 was about the scripted age for women to marry. We also see that a small variation was possible if circumstances allowed this or necessitated this.

The first frivolity of youth must have vanished in order not to make a foolish step and to be able to fulfil the duties of the marital state. But it would also be wrong to wait until the freshness of youth is already gone and one is already settled too much in his or her own way of living, making it difficult to go and live together with someone else. Therefore, the age of approximately 25 years seems to be the proper age to marry.

This citation from an influential marriage guide published in 1866 is followed by a statement that in all simplicity summarizes the European marriage pattern: “unfortunately nowadays most men do not earn enough to take this step” (Van Poppel 1992). Given the unfortunate situation of Nijmegen, the average age at marriage we found is in line with this statement.

Still, when 27 is the mean age at marriage for the city as a whole, this leaves the possibility that various groups within the city differed in this respect. We did, for instance, not find a difference between Roman Catholic and Dutch Reformed brides. When looking at the respective social groups, however, they appear to differ significantly (see Table 2). Especially brides of farmers on the one hand and proletarians on the other hand answered to different scripts. Again, one can guess that economic conditions were crucial in shaping this script. Farmers, by definition, had to wait for a niche before they could start their own family. This did not go for proletarianized labourers who were dependent from the uncertain labour market anyway. Schooled labourers and middle class couples found their place in between these two extremes. Still, the extremes are well within a range that fixes the life script age at marriage at about 27 years.

Table 2: Average Age at First Marriage by Socio-Occupational Status, Nijmegen 1810-1890

| Socio-Occupational Status | Female | N |
|---------------------------|--------|-----|
| Proletarians | 26.0 | 84 |
| Laborers | 27.4 | 513 |
| Farmers | 29.3 | 72 |
| Middle class | 27.1 | 133 |

This, then, is what we consider to be the rule young girls were brought up with: do not marry too young, do not marry too old, but try to enter matrimony at the age of approximately 27. When times were good, this could be slightly lower, when times were hard, couples had to wait longer. Also, socio-occupational groups witnessed a variation around the scripted age. It is a remarkable success of pre-industrial societies that they had their young men and women obey this script. Even if sexual maturation in those days came later than nowadays, there

were still many years in which nature would challenge nurture. In how many cases natural urges were stronger than scripted behaviour we can only deduce from those sexual relationships that resulted in a pregnancy. How many couples did remodel the standard into their own script? Is there a difference between groups? These questions guide the next part of this paper.

In order to keep young couples from engaging in sexual relationships Western European societies had to have very strict rules with regard to sexuality and the means to enforce these rules. Nature, however, in some cases proved more powerful than restrictions. The main rule – no sexual contacts outside marriage – was ostentably broken when unmarried women ended up pregnant. Although this is only the tip of the iceberg, we can trace these breaches of the rules by studying illegitimate births and prebridal pregnancies. In the next pages these phenomena will show us in how many cases the scripts were adapted.

Table 3: Proportion of Illegitimate Births in Nijmegen, 1811-1890

| Period | % |
|-----------|-----|
| 1811-1820 | 8.6 |
| 1821-1830 | 6.0 |
| 1831-1840 | 7.2 |
| 1841-1850 | 9.0 |
| 1851-1860 | 7.4 |
| 1861-1870 | 7.5 |
| 1871-1880 | 5.4 |
| 1881-1890 | 3.4 |

Table 3 shows the mirror-image of the generally accepted life script for women. According to the legal and informal rules, children were supposed to be born within matrimony. Every extramarital child therefore was a breach of these rules. Still, 6.4 % of all births in 19th century Nijmegen were illegitimate. Two questions follow up on this finding: were Nijmegen women exceptional and was there a development in time? In almost every European nation there was a surge in illegitimate conceptions from approximately 1750 on, reaching its climax around 1850. In some cases, almost half of all births were illegitimate. Jan Kok explained this by pointing at the social disruption caused by agrarian reforms, urbanization and industrialization. The traditional normative networks of villages used to enforce marriage promises when a woman was pregnant, and the father of the child refused to take his responsibility. This was less possible in an urban environment and even in the countryside the moving labor force escaped societal control. In this way migration and poverty caused the ‘immorality’ of early 19th century Europe. From 1850 on, however, illegitimacy ratios declined again (Kok 1991, 147).

In the Netherlands, Kok found the same development. The 19th century started with a marked rise of illegitimacy in the first decades. Already in the 1820s, the illegitimacy ratios declined as a consequence of improving econom-

ic conditions and, thus, improved marriage opportunities. This process gained strength from the middle of the century on when clerical as well as secular authorities devoted much attention to disciplining the inhabitants of the country. This action was highly successful. Around 1900, the Netherlands came to be known as ‘the moral nation’ of Europe because of its low levels of illegitimacy (Kok 1991, 147-9).

In Nijmegen, we recognize the development as described by Kok for the country as a whole. The first decades of the century witnessed a high number of illegitimate births followed by a marked decline in the 1820s. In the 1830s, however, a new rise started, culminating in the early 1840s when almost one out of ten births was illegitimate. The nationwide decline after 1850 is visible in Nijmegen too. A remarkable development occurs by the end of the 1870s. Suddenly, the illegitimacy ratio dropped within a few years from 7 to 3 percent of all births. The civilization offensive of clerical and civil authorities appears to have been successful in Nijmegen too. Also, so shortly prior to the secular decline in marital fertility, one cannot rule out the possibility that contraceptive methods and appliances were accepted outside marriage before married couples did so. The decline was so steep, however, that we also suspect an influence of the economic resurrection of the city from the late 1870s on.

Please note that the above provides the usual way of reasoning when trying to explain social developments in the past. What we miss is an assessment of the life script part in the process mentioned. Did these scripts remain the same, while circumstances changed? Or, were the rules simply adaptive? On top of that, we cannot draw conclusions for the population as a whole, since we have to assume that life scripts were different for different sub populations. We will return to this point later.

We have one other way to measure the extent to which young people created their own life scripts. In Nijmegen, young couples were not supposed to use the engagement period as a time to start sexual relations. Our second measure for extramarital sexuality therefore is the number of pregnant brides. The following analysis will calculate bridal pregnancy as the percentage of those marriages of whom we find at least one birth in the registers. This excludes infecund couples. The definition of a bridal pregnancy is not simple. Within how many months after marriage has a child to be born to be considered the result of a bridal pregnancy? The biological variation in the time of gestation is relatively small, both within and between populations. Live births almost all follow a pregnancy of between 35 and 40 weeks.

Still, since, as we will see, bridal pregnancy is more characteristic for lower-class couples than for middle-class couples, we also mention that preterm births occur relatively frequent among women of lower socioeconomic status (Wood 1994). Following this biometric approach to pregnancy one expects a birth to occur between 8.1 and 9.3 months after conception. We decided to limit bridal pregnancy to those marriages that resulted in a birth within the first *seven*

months after the date of marriage only. The reason for this definition is simple. We only want to count those marriages in which the couple was aware of the pregnancy before marriage, and consequently may have been prompted to marry earlier than otherwise. Also, we want to be sure that the activities that resulted in a pregnancy took place even before the date of marriage was determined. The pregnant brides we study here therefore really followed their own rather than society's script.

On average and following our definition, more than one fifth of the 19th century Nijmegen brides, more precisely 21.9 per cent, were pregnant at the date of marriage (see Table 4). In a society where extramarital sexuality is explicitly forbidden, and where the success of marriage restriction depends on following that rule, this finding is remarkable. Also, the variation in the proportion of bridal pregnancies is small. First, from the 1820s to the 1850s we find a marked decline in the relative number of pregnant brides. In the 1860s, the proportion of forced marriages increased again, reaching the century's maximum of one quarter of all marriages in the economically booming period of the 1880s.

Table 5: Proportion of Bridal Pregnancies, Nijmegen 19th Century

| Year of Marriage | Total Number of Marriages | Birth within 7 Months | |
|------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| | | N | % |
| 1821-1830 | 637 | 152 | 23.9 |
| 1831-1840 | 744 | 176 | 23.7 |
| 1841-1850 | 836 | 189 | 22.6 |
| 1851-1860 | 862 | 154 | 17.9 |
| 1861-1870 | 1064 | 229 | 21.5 |
| 1871-1880 | 1098 | 215 | 19.6 |
| 1881-1890 | 1178 | 290 | 24.6 |
| <i>1821-1890</i> | <i>6419</i> | <i>1405</i> | <i>21.9</i> |

Was Nijmegen exceptional in this regard? The answer is negative. The proportion of forced marriages in Nijmegen was only slightly higher when compared to the results of studies in other Dutch municipalities. For the first half of the nineteenth century, 18.5% of 7505 marriages in five regions of the Dutch countryside were 'enforced'. Given the stricter social control in rural areas, one can safely assume that couples in an urban context engaged more in premarital sexual relations (Engelen and Meyer 1979). Still, the Nijmegen proportion of bridal pregnancies is well within the variation found in the countryside, as the values ranged from 2.5 to 28.3 per cent. The relative number of forced marriages in Nijmegen was about the same when compared to studies in other western European countries. Knodel (1988) found 25 per cent of the 19th century marriages in his German villages to start with a pregnant bride.¹ In their

¹ Knodel uses the number of marriages in which a birth was registered within 8 months.

definition for bridal pregnancy in England, Wrigley and Schofield (1981, 67) calculated all births within the first seven and a half months after marriage. Again the percentage of English pregnant brides was close to the percentage found in Nijmegen.

The most important secondary finding in the study on the 19th century Dutch countryside by Engelen and Meyer was that in every region the protestant population had a much higher proportion of bridal pregnancies than the Roman Catholic population, averaging respectively 24.4 against 11.6%. This difference between the denominations appears to be a constant in Dutch society. When studying the city of Breda in the second half of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th century, Engelen and Hillebrand (1985) found 31% of all Protestant marriages to start with a pregnancy, whereas only 19.2% of the Catholic brides were pregnant. Hendrickx (1997) reached the same conclusion for the villages of Borne and Wierden. He found the percentage of bridal pregnancy for the Roman Catholic village to be approximately 15, whereas the Protestants totaled 35%. For Nijmegen, we find the Protestant denominations to have a proportion of bridal pregnancies (24%) above that of Roman Catholics (19%).

The differences between the denominations may be straightforward and easy to determine, the explanation for this phenomenon is not easy at all. Both the Protestant and the Roman Catholic clergy strongly opposed sexual activities, unless within marriage. In other words, the scripts were alike. 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 deviance among Protestant youngsters. This automatically leads us to the control mechanism that is only practiced by Catholics. They had to go to confession regularly, and acknowledge what rules they had violated. Is it too bold to assume that these private conversations between priests and youngsters had a mitigating effect on the sexual behavior of the latter?

Table 6: Distribution of Forced and Non-Forced Marriages by Occupational Category, Nijmegen, 1811-1890

| Occupational Category | % Forced Marriages | % Regular Marriages |
|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Upper middle | 0.3 | 3.6 |
| Lower middle | 15.3 | 24.9 |
| Farmers | 4.3 | 8.2 |
| Laborers | 79.1 | 62.6 |
| Proletarians | 1.0 | 0.7 |

Deviance from rules set by society is not a phenomenon independent from social position. In order to determine the strength of this influence the marriages were arranged by occupational group of the groom. The population is divided into five major classes: upper middle, lower middle, farmers, laborers and proletarians. In Table 6 we present the relative distribution of forced and regular marriages. According to this classification bridal pregnancy was clearly a

lower class phenomenon. Among laborers and proletarians a disproportionate number of marriages started with a pregnancy. Contrarily, farmers and members of the lower and upper middle class were underrepresented in the category forced marriages.

This first attempt to get an idea of life scripts for women is illustrative, but also has its disadvantages. Not every extramarital intercourse results in a pregnancy. The extent of behavior not in line with the official script is much larger than suggested by the number of pregnant brides and illegitimate births. Nevertheless, the rule that a bride should be a virgin was very much alive in Nijmegen. The majority of brides were not pregnant and the overwhelming majority of births were legal. Also, looking at the age at marriage of pregnant brides, we find this age to be significantly lower than general, indicating that the pregnancy was a variable that advanced the date of marriage. And on top of that, the scripts for various denominations and social classes seem to have been different, or at least the number of individuals following a personal life path varied considerably.

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