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The Multidimensionality of Cultural Life Scripts: Results from a 1970s Survey

Onno Boonstra[*]

Abstract: *»Die Multidimensionalität von Lebensskripten: Ergebnisse einer Umfrage aus dem Jahr 1970«.* In order to understand people's life courses in history, it is important not only to get an idea about the way transitional events were shaped by cultural life scripts, but also about the views people had about the way their life course could be shaped by themselves. Shaping your life, this is what human agency is about: the capacity for human beings to make choices and to impose those choices onto the world. But fairly uncertain is the degree to which people in the past perceived the potentialities of human agency. It is therefore important to find out not only the tools and possibilities they had to make decisions and enact them on the world, thus shaping their life course by themselves, but also the perceptions they had on putting human agency into action. Some people may have perceived human agency to be restrained because of structural impediments, while others may 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. As a consequence, perceptions on human agency will be very different, not only between people, but also between time periods. In this paper, the dimensions are explored of perceptions on human agency between people who lived in the Netherlands in 1970.

Keywords: Cultural life script, agency, The Netherlands, 20th century, cluster analysis.

1. "Nobody has the Program for the Concert of Life"

In order to understand people's life courses in history, it is important not only to get an idea about human agency, i.e. the way people shaped their life courses in the past. For a better understanding, it is also important to get an idea about the *beliefs* people had about the way their life course *should* be shaped. But even this is not sufficient. Just as important are the beliefs people may have had about the way their life course *could* be shaped by themselves. After all, it really does make a difference when you are convinced of being able to strike out the course of your life, or not. It defines someone's *habitus*, as Bourdieu

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would call it. According to him, a *habitus* is created through the interplay and interrelations of individuals, to be fixed into a set of structural rules which tends to get an impact of its own in structuring the life of individuals (Bourdieu 2000, 139-44). This is where *habitus* meets *agency* meets *cultural life scripts.* Where Bourdieu employs the concept of *habitus* to denote intentional, personal action that is socially and culturally constrained, *agency*, on the other hand, is defined as the subjective awareness that one is initiating, executing, and controlling one's own volitional actions in the world (Jeannerod 2003). It is the capacity for human beings to make choices and to impose those choices onto the world. But these choices do not come out of the blue: they are tied by cultural norms and values. As such, *agency* is the active, calculated execution of a *cultural life script* (Ratner 2000). Therefore, if one looks into human agency, it is important to do so from a cultural script perspective, more precisely from a "cell C" perspective: a study at a cultural level of analysis, with a macro-sociological scope.

However, if one wants to study human agency in the past from such a historical cultural script perspective, things tend to become complicated for several reasons. First of all, there is a lack of historical sources to study cultural life scripts in the past beyond an individual level. Surely enough, there are sources available: personal views on how to handle can be distilled from literature, from Shakespearean theatrical plays to postmodern novels. They may help us to generalize such views, or to derive a range of views that may be characteristic of an era or a social background. An even better source may be biographies in which such views sometimes are described in detail, as Marjet Derks shows in this HSR Focus, or, even better, letters and autobiographies. Although pinpointed to only one individual, it may give us a clue about the possibilities and constraints of a cultural life script. Take for instance the autobiography of 18th Century writer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in which he gives us a clue about how he acquired his sense of agency by learning to perceive the possibilities to shape his own life course.

> M. Gaime took pains to make me properly acquainted with myself, without sparing or giving me too much discouragement. He spoke in advantageous terms of my disposition and talents, adding, that he foresaw obstacles which would prevent my profiting by them; thus, according to him, they were to serve less as steps by which I should mount to fortune, than as resources which might enable me to exist without one. He gave me a true picture of human life, of which, hitherto, I had formed but a very erroneous idea, teaching me, that a man of understanding, though destined to experience adverse fortune, might, by skilful management, arrive at happiness; that there was no true felicity without virtue, which was practicable in every situation. He greatly diminished my admiration of grandeur, by proving that those in a superior situation are neither better nor happier than those they command. One of his maxims has frequently returned to my memory: it was, that if we could truly read the hearts of others we should feel more inclination to descend than rise: this reflection, the truth of which is striking without extravagance, I have

found of great utility, in the various exigences of my life, as it tended to make me satisfied with my condition (Rousseau 1857, 49).

Unfortunately, most of the time such views are too singular and therefore hard to generalize. There are more generalized sources, but they are few. For instance, they can be found in old folk tales, as Hilde Bras shows in her article in this HSR Focus. Proverbs, maxims and sayings are an interesting source to find out more about cultural life scripts in the past, too. They can be thought of as views, detached from personal experience, and reflect, as a consequence, a cultural life script. Rousseau literally uses such maxims, detached from personal experience, to make explicit his personal cultural life script: "A man of understanding might arrive at happiness", "There is no true felicity without virtue", "If we could truly read the hearts of others we should feel more inclination to descend than rise", to quote a few. In fact, there are quite a few proverbs and sayings which are connected to cultural life scripts and human agency. And they are not all alike. In Dutch, as elsewhere, there are many sayings which deny the capacity for human beings to make choices and to impose those choices onto the world. Take for instance a saying like "Van het concert des levens heeft niemand een program" ("Nobody has the program for the concert of life"), or "De mens wikt, God beschikt" (It is God who decides), or "Wie voor een dubbeltje geboren is, wordt nooit een kwartje" ("Who has been born a dime, never becomes a quarter"). But, on the other hand, there are other sayings like "Ieder is het kind zijner eigen werken" ("Everybody is the child of the efforts he pursues"), which state that there are no constraints on human agency apart of one's own efforts.

This leads us to the second problem one encounters when studying agency in the past from a historical cultural life script perspective. The sayings and maxims clearly show that people have very different senses of agency, be it nowadays or in the past. From a cultural life script perspective, this will come as no surprise: views are not only different because some people are convinced that they are able to shape their life course, while others are not, but they are also different because they are driven by various sets of structures, norms and beliefs – by different cultural life scripts, for that matter. It is therefore of the utmost importance not to label a particular historical moment in time with the presence or absence of one particular cultural life script: there will always be other cultural life scripts around which some people embrace, but others decline. It is even more complicated than that: some beliefs a person has about the way his or her life course should be shaped and could be shaped may be contradicted by other beliefs to which he adheres at the same time. For example, if Rousseau states that there is no reason to admire grandeur, this is somewhat in conflict with his opinion that if one looks into the hearts of people, one will be inclined to be humble, which, to some extent, causes the grandeur of others to be admired.

Finally, it is even highly probable that the multiple dimensions in views about someone's life course are dynamic, and are continuously changing throughout history. It is therefore important not to transpose "human agency" or "cultural life script" as universal, one dimensional concepts for the study of life courses upon peoples in the past.

So, if one wants to study the tools and possibilities people had to make decisions and enact them on the world, thus shaping their life course by themselves, it is necessary to study the *perceptions* they had on putting human agency into action. Some people may have perceived human agency to be restrained because of structural impediments, while others may have perceived human agency to be restrained by cultural or moral obstacles. Some will have perceived these constraints to be tight, while others may have considered them to be loose. Studying perceptions of people on human agency means studying the beliefs people had about shaping their lives. It is therefore a study into the cultural life scripts of people, which are thought to be 1) multidimensional, 2) varying between people and 3) varying over time. In this paper, I will try to find out the dimensions of perceptions on human agency between people who lived in the Netherlands in 1970.

2. Surveys as a Source for Discovering New Answers to Old Questions

In the previous paragraph, I have stated that the number of sources available for macro-sociological research into cultural life scripts at a cultural level of analysis is scarce. But, for the second half of the 20th century, there is a source which does contain personal views that can be generalized: the survey. After WWII in the western world, and therefore in the Netherlands as well, various governmental and non-governmental organizations started to feel the need to learn more about the inhabitants of a country, especially about their views and ideas. In order to meet such needs, the survey was developed. It is a research tool with which a small part of the population is selected to be interviewed about their views. This is done in such a manner that the views of this small population are representative for the population as a whole. Another important characteristic of survey research is that within the scope of the survey a wide variety of normative questions can be asked together with a large set of questions which are related to the background of the respondents, like age, sex, place of residence, political and religious affiliations and so on, thus enabling researchers to look into possible correlations between the two. In the Netherlands, large scale survey research reached its peak in the years 1960 to 1980. Because of high costs and growing non response, survey research started to be used less often from the 1980s onwards.

Survey research is constructed in such a way that it contains a representative sample of the population, and because of that, a representative sample of people's views. It is a great source for historical research to get to know various views on various subjects at a specific moment in time. Next to traditional historical analysis of reviews and newspapers, or research methods like oral history, in which people at moment *t* are interviewed about their opinions and beliefs at moment *t-1*, historical surveys provide an interesting additional source of information. But surveys can serve more purposes: not only the answers that people gave can be re-analyzed, but the questions as well. Take for instance a question about suppressing contraceptive methods. Fifty years ago, this question was put into a survey because researchers wanted to know someone's opinion about birth control. But we may also consider it to be a question about governmental involvement in people's own lives and decisions. This is which makes historical survey research so interesting: with old surveys one can ask new questions to people who answered those questions already a long time ago!

3.   Perceptions on Human Agency in a 1970s Survey

In this paper, I will try to get answers to new questions from people who answered these questions more than 40 years ago. In order to find out the dimensions of cultural life scripts, I will try to raise questions about human agency, more specifically about the sense of agency people may or may not have had in shaping their life course. The people are a representative selection of almost 2,000 men and women who participated in a survey carried out in 1970 by the Instituut voor Marktonderzoek en Opiniepeiling in Amsterdam.[1] The survey was initiated by the sociologist Cees Middendorp, who was interested in the ideological dimensions of the concepts "progressiveness" and "conservatism" and in class differences between people who could be labeled as progressive or conservative (Middendorp 1978). The survey contained over 300 questions, mostly created to get an idea about the multidimensionality of progressiveness and conservatism. After the respondents had answered some basic background variables, the interviewer continued the interview as follows:

> I am going to ask you a number of questions, about which we would like to know your opinion. I would appreciate it very much if you could give me your answer as spontaneous as possible. It is really not so that you should think long about a question. The first question is: Do you expect your own future to

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be defined by what you make of it by yourself, or by circumstances that are beyond your control?

Cees Middendorp thought this question to be highly relevant in order to make a distinction between progressiveness and conservatism. But, in my opinion, it can be regarded as a key question about the perception of human agency as well. In answering the question, a large majority of 73 percent answered that their future life course would largely be defined by their own efforts; 27 percent did not agree, holding the opinion that one's future life course could not be shaped by themselves. More than 50 questions later, the interviewer asked the respondents a more or less similar question. The question was: "Should man's destiny be decided by God?"

To that question, 47 percent of the respondents agreed, either mainly of completely. This may come as a surprise, not because the percentage is high compared to today's standards in the Netherlands, but because the percentage is much higher than the percentage of 27 from the first question, in which people stated that their future could not be defined by themselves.

It becomes even more surprising to note that of the people who completely agreed that man's destiny is decided by God, a large majority (70%) also stated that their future was defined by what they made of it by themselves. As Table 1 shows, their answer did not differ that much from the people who did not agree that it is God who decides.

Table 1: Crosstabulation of two Questions on Man's Destiny

VAR093; Should Man's Destiny be Decided by God?	VAR025; Personal Influence in Determining Future					
	By own Efforts		Dependent on Outside Circumstances			
Completely agree	70,4	(219)	29,6	(92)	26,4	(311)
Agree mainly	67,4	(163)	32,6	(79)	20,6	(242)
No opinion	60,3	(38)	39,7	(25)	5,4	(63)
Don't agree really	76,1	(169)	23,9	(53)	18,9	(222)
Do not agree at all	79,6	(270)	20,4	(69)	28,8	(339)
	73,0	(859)	27,0	(318)		(1177)

The result makes very clear that the two views do not match. It means that views about human agency cannot be thought of as being of a one dimensional nature. Instead, perceptions on human agency are multidimensional – they reflect the complex multidimensionality of cultural life scripts.

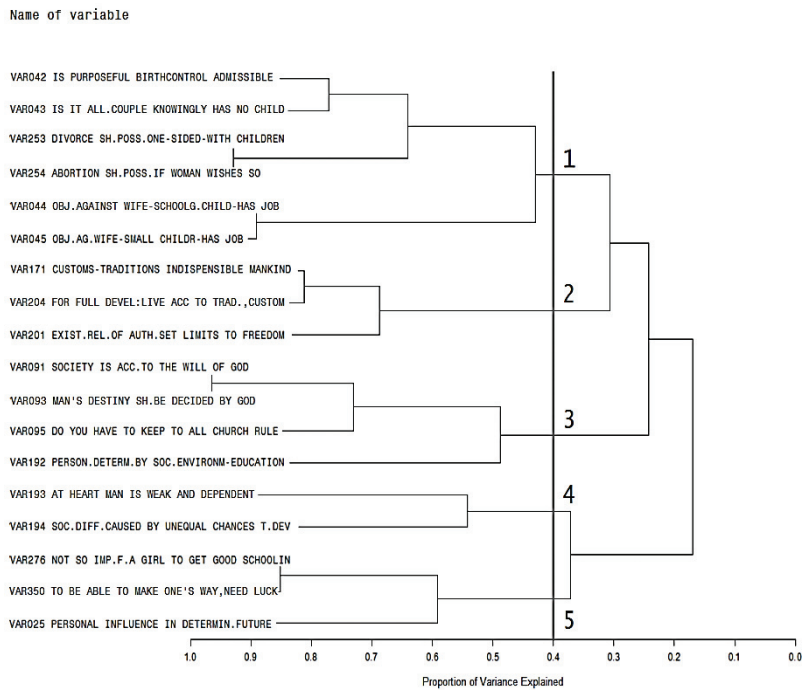# 4. An Analysis of the Dimensions of Cultural Life Scripts

Table 2: Questions (Translated into English; with Abbreviations) Selected from the 1970 Survey

Variable	N	Question (ABBREVIATED)
VAR025	1901	Do you expect your own future to be defined by what you make of it by yourself, or by circumstances that are beyond your control? (PERSONAL INFLUENCE IN DETERM. FUTURE)
VAR042	1874	There has recently been quite a stir about birth control. Do you view a deliberate restriction of the number of children admissible in all respects, do you have objections but can you think it to be admissible in some cases, or do you have fundamental objections? (IS PURPOSEFUL BIRTH CONTROL ADMISSIBLE)
VAR043	1844	A couple has decided to have no children while there is no medical objection to it. Can you justify such a position? (IS IT ALL.COUPLE KNOWINGLY HAS NO CHILD)
VAR044	1862	Do you think it objectionable when, in a family with school-age children, the woman has a job next to her duties in the household? (OBJ.AGAINST WIFE-SCHOOLG.CHILD-HAS JOB)
VAR045	1351	And what if there are small children in the family, who will have to be sent to child care? (OBJ.AG.WIFE-SMALL CHILDR-HAS JOB)
VAR091	1178	The present society is according to the will of God (SOCIETY IS ACC.TO THE WILL OF GOD)
VAR093	1178	Man's destiny should be decided by God (MAN'S DESTINY SH.BE DECIDED BY GOD)
VAR095	1148	Do you think that you should keep to all the rules of the church or religious group to which you belong? (DO YOU HAVE TO KEEP TO ALL CHURCH RULE)
VAR171	1791	The customs and traditions of society are of indispensable value to mankind (CUSTOMS-TRADITIONS INDISPENSIBLE MANKIND)
VAR192	1787	A person is almost completely determined by his social environment and his education (PERSON.DETERM.BY SOC.ENVIRONM-EDUCATION)
VAR193	1759	At heart, man is a weak and dependent creature (AT HEART MAN IS WEAK AND DEPENDENT)
VAR194	1741	The existing social differences between people are mainly caused by the unequal chances they get to develop themselves. (SOC.DIFF.CAUSED BY UNEQUAL CHANCES T.DEV)
VAR201	1712	The existing power relationships within society limit the freedom of people (EXIST.REL.OF AUTH.SET LIMITS TO FREEDOM)
VAR204	1706	In order to reach full development, people should live according to the traditions and customs of society (FOR FULL DEVEL:LIVE ACC TO TRAD.,CUSTOM)
VAR253	1799	Divorce should be possible if one of the spouses wishes to do so, even if the couple has children at home (DIVORCE SH.POSS.ONE-SIDED-WITH CHIL-DREN)
VAR254	1837	It should be possible for a woman to get an abortion if she wishes so (ABORTION SH.POSS.IF WOMAN WISHES SO)
VAR276	1866	Compared to a boy, it is not so important for a girl to get a good schooling (NOT SO IMP.F.A GIRL TO GET GOOD SCHOOLIN)
VAR350	1855	One needs luck in order to be able to make one's way in society (TO BE ABLE TO MAKE ONE'S WAY,NEED LUCK)

In order to get an idea about the multidimensionality of cultural life scripts, a statistical analysis was made, in which questions were examined that are related to issues concerning human agency, i.e. personal involvement in shaping the life course. To this purpose, the same "Progressiveness and conservatism" survey was used. From this survey, 18 questions were selected which, in our view, had such a relationship towards human agency.

To find out the multidimensionality of these 18 variables, a statistical method was used called *variable clustering*. Variable clustering is one of a number of variable reduction methods. The purpose of the method is to place variables into a smaller number of groups (clusters) by arranging them in such a way that the variables within a given cluster tend to be similar to one another, and dissimilar to the variables in the other clusters. The clustering process comes to a halt when adding an extra cluster does not lead to a significant rise in the proportion of variance explained (Everitt 2011).

Figure 1: Dendrogram of the Clustering of the Original Set of 18 Variables

Name of variable

VAR042 IS PURPOSEFUL BIRTHCONTROL ADMISSIBLE
VAR043 IS IT ALL.COUPLE KNOWINGLY HAS NO CHILD
VAR253 DIVORCE SH.POSS.ONE-SIDED-WITH CHILDREN
VAR254 ABORTION SH.POSS.IF WOMAN WISHES SO
VAR044 OBJ.AGAINST WIFE-SCHOOLG.CHILD-HAS JOB
VAR045 OBJ.AG.WIFE-SMALL CHILDR-HAS JOB
VAR171 CUSTOMS-TRADITIONS INDISPENSIBLE MANKIND
VAR204 FOR FULL DEVEL:LIVE ACC TO TRAD.,CUSTOM
VAR201 EXIST.REL.OF AUTH.SET LIMITS TO FREEDOM
VAR091 SOCIETY IS ACC.TO THE WILL OF GOD
VAR093 MAN'S DESTINY SH.BE DECIDED BY GOD
VAR095 DO YOU HAVE TO KEEP TO ALL CHURCH RULE
VAR192 PERSON.DETERM.BY SOC.ENVIRONM-EDUCATION
VAR193 AT HEART MAN IS WEAK AND DEPENDENT
VAR194 SOC.DIFF.CAUSED BY UNEQUAL CHANCES T.DEV
VAR276 NOT SO IMP.F.A GIRL TO GET GOOD SCHOOLIN
VAR350 TO BE ABLE TO MAKE ONE'S WAY,NEED LUCK
VAR025 PERSONAL INFLUENCE IN DETERMIN.FUTURE

1.0 0.9 0.8 0.7 0.6 0.5 0.4 0.3 0.2 0.1 0.0
Proportion of Variance Explained

Because the clusters are not defined a priori, but suggested by the data, cluster analysis serves mainly as an exploratory tool, which only gives a hint about how the results should be interpreted. This is even stronger the case because

there has been developed a large amount of clustering methods, with different definitions of clusters and similarity statistics, that lead to results which are sometimes diverging. In our case, a default clustering method was chosen using an oblique principal component method of analysis.

Table 3: Five Clusters of Human Agency, N=566

Cluster	Variable	R^2 with own cluster	R^2 with next cluster	$1-R^2$ ratio	Variable Label
Cluster 1	VAR042	0.3436	0.0904	0.7216	IS PURPOSEFUL BIRTHCONTROL ADMISSIBLE
	VAR043	0.3693	0.0666	0.6757	IS IT ALL.COUPLE KNOWINGLY HAS NO CHILD
	VAR253	0.3362	0.0403	0.6917	DIVORCE SH.POSS.ONE-SIDED-WITH CHILDREN
	VAR254	0.4750	0.0501	0.5526	ABORTION SH.POSS.IF WOMAN WISHES SO
	VAR044	0.2430	0.0292	0.7798	OBJ.AGAINST WIFE-SCHOOLG.CHILD-HAS JOB
	VAR045	0.2875	0.0202	0.7272	OBJ.AG.WIFE-SMALL CHILDR-HAS JOB
Cluster 2	VAR171	0.5149	0.0351	0.5027	CUSTOMS-TRADITIONS INDIS-PENSIBLE MANKIND
	VAR204	0.5296	0.0356	0.4878	FOR FULL DEVEL:LIVE ACC TO TRAD.,CUSTOM
	VAR201	0.4548	0.0649	0.5831	EXIST.REL.OF AUTH.SET LIMITS TO FREEDOM
Cluster 3	VAR091	0.5330	0.0647	0.4993	SOCIETY IS ACC.TO THE WILL OF GOD
	VAR093	0.6126	0.1136	0.4370	MAN'S DESTINY SH.BE DECIDED BY GOD
	VAR095	0.4602	0.0797	0.5866	DO YOU HAVE TO KEEP TO ALL CHURCHRULE
	VAR192	0.0527	0.0504	0.9976	PERSON.DETERM.BY SOC.ENVIRONM-EDUCATION
Cluster 4	VAR193	0.5554	0.0270	0.4569	AT HEART MAN IS WEAK AND DEPENDENT
	VAR194	0.5554	0.0318	0.4592	SOC.DIFF.CAUSED BY UNEQUAL CHANCES T.DEV
Cluster 5	VAR276	0.5274	0.0913	0.5201	NOT SO IMP.F.A GIRL TO GET GOOD SCHOOLIN
	VAR350	0.5679	0.0234	0.4424	TO BE ABLE TO MAKE ONE'S WAY,NEED LUCK
	VAR025	0.3199	0.0086	0.6861	PERSONAL INFLUENCE IN DETERMIN.FUTURE

Proportion explained = 0.43.

The result of the variable clustering process is visualized in Figure 3. The figure shows a dendrogram. If one looks from right to left in the diagram, variables and clusters are progressively disjoined until a all variables form a cluster

of their own. On the X-axis is the proportion of variance explained by the clusters at the current level of the tree diagram.

The result was that the 18 variables grouped themselves into five different clusters, the largest one consisting of six, and the smallest one consisting of two variables. The clusters 1, 2 and 3 differ most with the clusters 4 and 5, but clusters 1 and 2 are also highly different from cluster 3. Table 3 shows the statistics after the final step in the clustering process.

As has been said before, cluster analysis serves mainly as an exploratory tool. Therefore, this analysis gives us nothing more than a hint about the dimensions of cultural life scripts in the 1970s. But this does not mean to say that such hints are without meaning. On the contrary, the results clearly show that in the 1970s, in the Netherlands, there were indeed multiple dimensions of cultural life scripts. What the meaning of these dimensions were is open for discussion. In my opinion, the five clusters point toward five distinct cultural life scripts. My suggestion is that cluster 1 is a cultural life script which is driven by *family values*, cluster 2 is a script driven by *societal norms and values*, cluster 3 by *religion*, cluster 4 by *social structure* and cluster 5 by *individual agency*. So, there are scripts with an individual, familial or societal scope, and there are scripts with a social, cultural or religious meaning.

However, there are some statistical and intrinsic anomalies within the clusters. With regard to statistical anomalies, for instance, variable 192 hardly fits within cluster 3 (the R^2 *within own cluster* is very low), but it does not fit into one of the other clusters, either. In a similar fashion, variable 44 and variable 45 are included in cluster 1, but their relationship with the other variables in cluster 1 is rather weak. The statistical anomalies of some variables within clusters coincide with anomalies with regard to the content of the same clusters. For example, variable 192 ("A person is almost completely determined by his social environment and his education") has a societal scope, but does not have the religious connotation that is characteristic of the other variables in cluster 3. As to the variables 44 and 45 in cluster 1: they not only relate to family values, but also to economic restrictions.

5.   Conclusion

The analysis presented here was not intended to find out which people adhered more to one perception on human agency and which people adhered more to another. The main goal of the analysis was to find out whether the concept of cultural life scripts is a multidimensional one. Results show that this indeed is the case. In a cluster analysis, based on results from a survey held in the 1970s in the Netherlands, five different perceptions on human agency, and, as a consequence, five different cultural life scripts were identified. The scripts seem to have been driven by different levels of aggregation: individual, familial or

societal, and driven by different normative systems: social, cultural or religious.

If the scope of cultural life scripts has either a micro, a meso or a macro level, and if the meaning of cultural life scripts is either grounded in society, culture or religion, it must come as no surprise that people do not have one single straightforward belief about how to live their life, but adhere to more than one. It must come as no surprise either if these beliefs contradict one another.

The consequence of it all is that, when the concept of cultural life scripts is used in historical research, one cannot assume a cultural life script to be a fixed set of beliefs about the way a life should and could be lived. It is a challenge for those who want to find out cultural life scripts in the past inductively, to look for all possible dimensions the concept may have had at that time, for society, for groups of people and for single people. It is even more challenging for those who want to use the concept deductively, because one needs to define beforehand which dimensions of a cultural life script will be used in analysis. But if research is done with these notices taken care of, cultural life scripts are a great framework for social and cultural historical research.

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