There May Not Be a Cultural Life Script for Public Events, But There is a Youth Bias: Response to Janssen (2014)

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Abstract

Janssen (2014) asserts that, in a recent paper (Koppel & Berntsen, 2014), we introduced the concept of a cultural life script for public events, in the form of the *youth bias*. Moreover, he contends that we claimed to have found evidence for such a life script. Correspondingly, he frames his own failure to find evidence for a life script for public events as a rebuttal of our paper. We demonstrate, however, that the youth bias is in fact conceptually and methodologically distinct from life scripts. We conclude that we therefore deserve no credit for the concept of a cultural life script for public events, and that Janssen's critique of our paper rests on a misinterpretation of our central concept. Lastly, we argue that, though Janssen may not have found evidence for a life script for public events, his study serves as a confirmation and extension of the youth bias.

There May Not Be a Cultural Life Script for Public Events, But There is a Youth Bias: Response to Janssen (2014)

In Janssen's *Is There a Cultural Life Script for Public Events?* (2014), he tests the titular question, ultimately answering it in the negative. We are of two minds about Janssen's paper. First, we agree with his conclusion that he did not find evidence for a life script for public events. We part ways with Janssen, however, when he ascribes to us the credit for this concept. That is, Janssen asserts that, in a recent paper (Koppel & Berntsen, 2014), we not only claimed to have conducted our own test of a life script for public events, but professed to have garnered support for the notion. This assertion is part of Janssen's larger framing of his paper as a response to ours; by his account, he offers an improved test of the hypothesis that there is a life script for public events – improved, that is, over the test we allegedly conducted. In fitting our paper into this misleading framework, Janssen misinterprets our paper's key concept and its central conceptual contributions. In short, our paper serves as a straw man against which Janssen sets himself in opposition.

In addition, Janssen selectively describes the results from one of our analyses, concerning differences across age groups. Specifically, he notes that we attained an age effect in one of our two studies. However, in focusing on this relatively small age effect, Janssen does not allude to the broader picture presented by these age comparisons; this broader picture in fact undermines Janssen's arguments. We welcome this opportunity, therefore, to offer a more accurate rendering of our paper's core concept, as well as a more complete description of the results of our age comparisons.

The Concept of the Youth Bias

In our paper, we introduced and presented evidence for what we termed the *youth bias*. We defined the youth bias as a general cognitive tendency to favor the period of early adulthood when making inferences about the distribution of important public events across the lifespan of a typical individual within one's culture. This represents a striking cognitive bias, in that the occurrence of important public events should be randomly distributed across an individual's lifespan.

We tested this youth bias by asking participants to imagine a typical individual of their own culture and gender, and to indicate, from a series of response options representing five-year bins (e.g., ages 6 to 10), the age they expected this individual would most likely be at the time of the occurrence of the most important public event of their lifetime. We asked this question in two separate studies, employing a *subjective* phrasing of the question in Study 1 and an *objective* phrasing in Study 2. In the subjective phrasing, we asked how old an individual would most likely be at the time of the public event which the individual *considered* to be the most important of their lifetime; in the objective phrasing, we simply asked how old the individual would most likely be at the time of the most important public event of their lifetime. Our central finding was that, in both cases, most participants indicated that the most important public event of this typical individual's lifetime would most likely occur somewhere between the ages of 11 and 30. This served as a clear demonstration of the youth bias.

The youth bias, then, is conceptually and methodologically distinct from the concept of cultural life scripts. Conceptually, it shares one broad point in common with life scripts, in that they both concern the expected timing of events. However, the youth bias lacks at least two of the necessary properties of a script: (1) It contains no information about

which specific public events are expected to occur, and (2) it does not stipulate the order in which these events are expected to take place. For this reason, we did not claim that the youth bias represents a type of script, in contrast to what Janssen implies.

Methodologically, our examination of the youth bias is distinct from the way the cultural life script for autobiographical events is examined (e.g., Berntsen & Rubin, 2004), and therefore, as Janssen notes, also different from the method he employed in extending the life script method to public events: In contrast to our method, described above, Janssen followed the standard life script procedure, by asking participants to generate the seven most important public events that would most likely occur during a typical individual's lifetime (i.e., to specify the content of each event), as well as estimate the age of occurrence, importance, emotional valence, and likelihood of occurrence of each event. The age estimates represent the only point of even rough resemblance between Janssen's procedure and the one we employed.

In short, then, when Janssen describes the youth bias as an “analogue” of the cultural life script for autobiographical events, this characterization is simply inaccurate, and is untethered from anything we ourselves said; and when Janssen criticizes us for failing to demonstrate that the youth bias possesses the necessary properties of a life script, this criticism amounts to a non sequitur, as it rests on the false premise that we made any such claim in the first place.

In fairness, we will concede that we may share some of the fault for this misinterpretation of the youth bias, in that we may have inadvertently left room for the reader to misinterpret the youth bias as intended to represent a parallel of cultural life scripts. The distinction between the youth bias and life scripts seemed sufficiently clear to us that we did not think to explicitly detail the differences between the youth bias and the concept of life

scripts. However, this distinction may have been clearer to the reader if we had included a passage to that effect. Of course, however, a failure to explicitly renounce a parallel between the youth bias and life scripts is not the same thing as claiming there is such a parallel.

Age Effects

As to Janssen's rendering of the age effects we attained, as he notes, we found an age effect in Study 1. Specifically, we found a difference in the respective distributions of an older and a younger group, with the groups arrived at through a median split. We found no such difference in Study 2, employing a similar analysis. Janssen deploys this age effect in support of the argument that the peak we attained in early adulthood may not have reflected cultural expectations, but, rather, may have been an experience-based effect, in that participants may have answered the youth bias question according to the timing of the most important public event they had personally experienced. We agree that this possibility should be given serious consideration. We also concede that, depending on the nature of the effect, differences across age groups might support this experience-based interpretation.

However, as we noted at the outset of this commentary, Janssen ignores the broader picture which emerged from these age comparisons. Specifically, the age effect in Study 1 notwithstanding, the basic youth bias effect held across both age groups, in both Study 1 and Study 2. Indeed, the main conclusion we drew from our age analyses was that the youth bias appears to be stable across age groups. Though we cannot rule out the possibility that some participants used their own experience in responding to our query, the stability of the youth bias across age groups suggests that this was not the primary driver of the effect.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we can take no credit for the idea of a cultural life script for public events; this idea was introduced by Janssen in his article. Our concept of the youth bias shares only a broad conceptual commonality with the conception of life scripts, and is measured differently. Furthermore, contra Janssen's claims that our age analyses support an experience-based interpretation of our results, the broader picture presented from these analyses in fact does more to undermine any such interpretation. Lastly, we note that, though Janssen may not have found evidence for a life script for public events, and though he used a different method from ours, his results can be seen as supporting the youth bias: Most public events which participants cited were expected to occur between the ages of 0 and 20 (though Janssen contrasts the number of cited events from the ages of 0 to 15 versus the ages 16 to 30, Figure 1 in his paper clearly indicates that the drop-off in cited events does not occur until after age 20). To be sure, the peak in Janssen's distribution is earlier than the peak we attained, which likely reflects his use of a different method. However, in spite of these methodological differences, we would suggest that the peak he attained for early in the lifespan reflects the broader cognitive bias represented by the youth bias. Whatever Janssen's study suggests about a potential life script for public events, then, it stands as a confirmation and extension of the youth bias.

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