Cultural Life Scripts for Events Experienced with "Agency"

Çağlayan Özdemir, Maggie Crean, Michelle D. Leichtman, and David B. Pillemer
Department of Psychology, University of New Hampshire

Introduction

- *Cultural life scripts* are societally expected, idealized, life events that everyone experiences within a certain time frame (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). These are predominantly positive transitional events that typically take place within late adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., graduation, finding a job, marriage, childbirth). This period coincides with the phenomenon known as the "Reminiscence Bump," whereby in the lifetime distribution of memories, late adolescence and young adulthood are overrepresented (Rubin & Schulkind, 1997).

- Previous findings have consistently shown that life scripts for events associated with negative emotions (e.g., death of others, illness and medical issues) do not reveal the bump, and instead accumulate more around the later periods of life (Haque & Hasking, 2010).

- Scrutiny of previous studies reveals that for most scripted negative events the cause is external forces, and the experiencer has little agency. Overrepresentation of such events could presumably suppress a bump for negative events that involve personal agency.

- In this study, we implemented an "agency" component into traditional life scripts instructions and investigated their temporal distributions and contents.

Method

Participants

- 301 undergraduate students (M = 20.33 years, SD = 8.01) participated for SONA course credits.
  - 224 females, 74 males, 3 non-binary/third gender
  - 273 Caucasian/White, 9 Asian, 4 African American/Black, 4 Hispanic/Latinx, 11 Other/Mixed.

Procedure & Materials

- Participants were informed that the study involved imagining a typical 80-year-old person of their own gender and from their own society.

- Participants were presented with 10 emotion words (order counterbalanced). For each emotion cue, they were asked to generate hypothetical event descriptions that this hypothetical person might be remembering in association with these emotion words. Specific to our study, events were framed as "things this hypothetical person did, and now remembers with (*emotion word*)"

- After the descriptions, participants dated most likely ages to engage in these behaviors. Each estimate was followed with 7-point Likert-type rating scales: (a) confidence in age estimate; (b) positivity; (c) negativity; (d) importance; (f) recall frequency; and (g) sharing frequency.

- Event descriptions were categorized based on themes represented, following previous research on cultural life scripts (e.g., Özdemir et al., 2021).

Results

- Figures 1-10 show the temporal distributions of age estimates in response to each emotion cue; all distributions except the 'Saddest' behaviors consistently showed reminiscence bumps with varying strengths. In line with our expectations, the exaggerated recency effect typically found in the temporal distributions of negative events was not present.
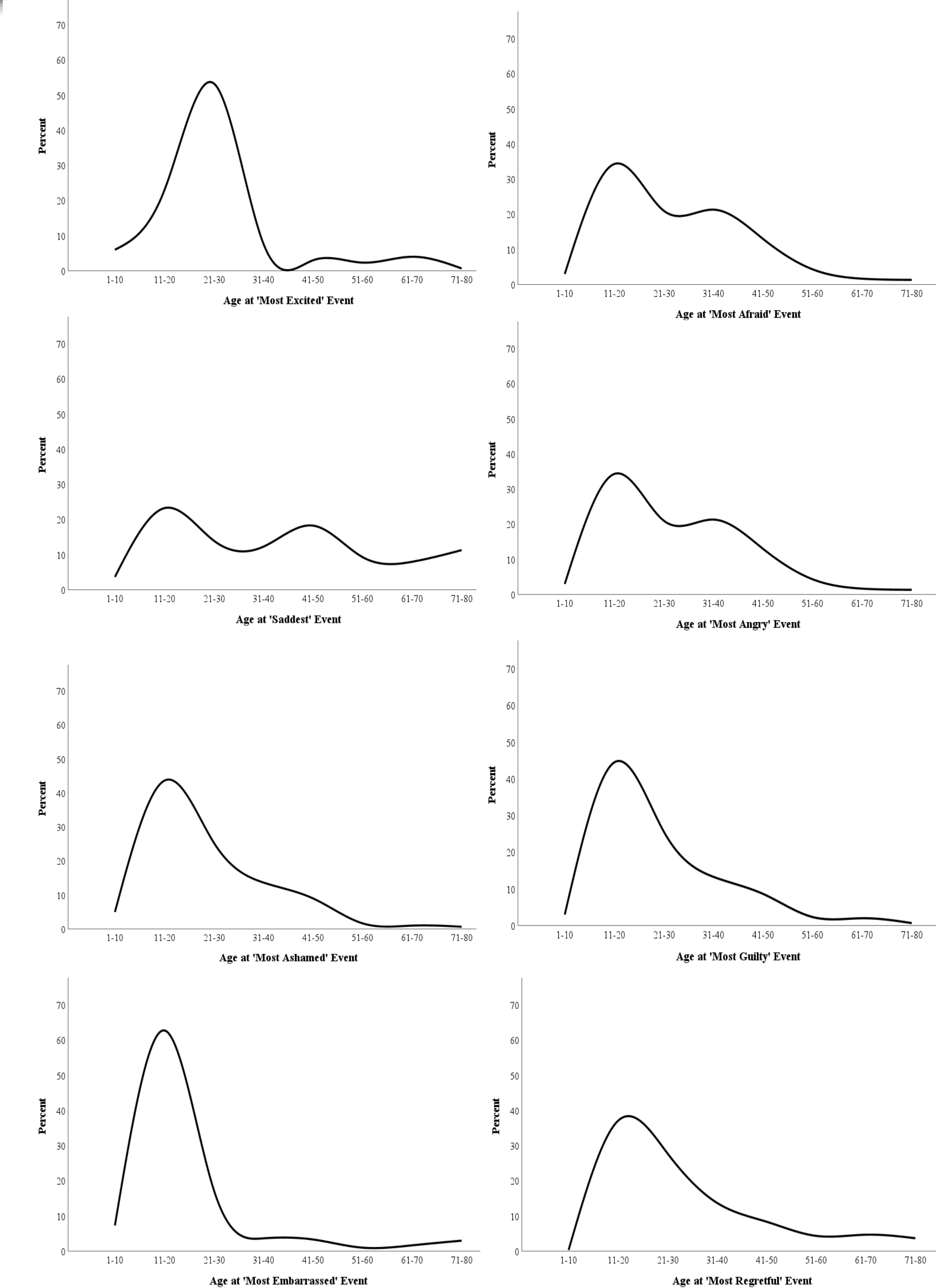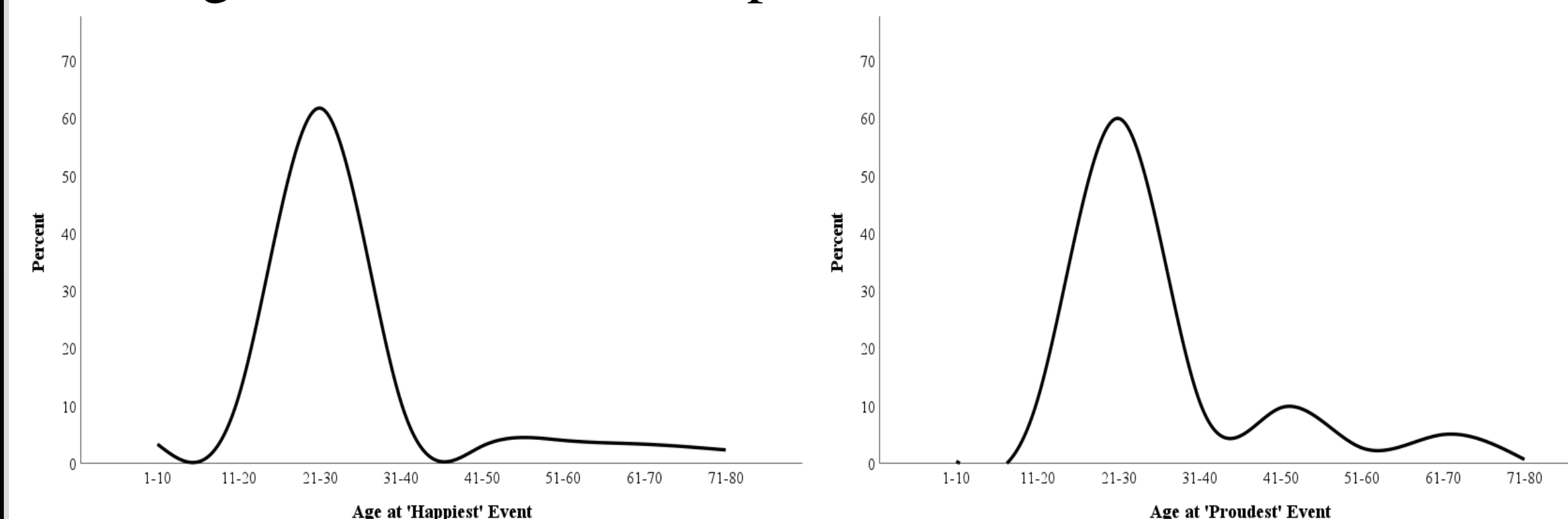
- Table 1 shows the results of content analyses on hypothetical behaviors generated in response to emotion cues. Content categories for positive life events largely overlapped with the categories found in previous studies.

- 'Death', 'Illness', and 'Accident'-related events were lower in frequency among events associated with the negative emotion cues; instead, themes expressing interpersonal conflicts made up the majority.

Table 1.

Positive		Negative	
Theme	Percent	Theme	Percent
Marriage	19.2	Romantic Cheating	7.9
Graduation	15.2	Accident/Injuries	7.8
Childbirth	13.5	Romantic Conflict	7.1
Finding Job	6.3	Family Conflict	6.7
Traveling/Outing	4.4	Interpersonal Conflict	5.8
Sports/Hobbies	4.1	Career Setback	5.7
Career Achievement	3.9	Others' Death	4.6
Becoming Grandparent	3.4	Substance Use	3.8
Starting College	3.2	Parents' Death	3.1
Social Events	3.1	Theft	2.9
Other	23.7	Other	44.6

- Ratings of confidence in age estimate, importance, recall and sharing frequencies were consistently higher for positive events (all ps < .01).

Discussion

- Introduction of an "agency" component into cultural life script instructions resulted in overrepresentation of both positively- and negatively-charged expected life events in late adolescence and young adulthood--i.e., a reminiscence bump.

- These results are at odds with the established literature on life scripts and autobiographical memory (e.g., Koppel & Berntsen, 2014). We reason that the discrepancy is the due to agency instructions activating search strategies biased towards more identity-related events, a defining feature of life events during the reminiscence bump years.

References

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