

How to think about life experiences:

Relationships among autobiographical memory, future autobiographical events, and life scripts

KAWASAKI Ayaka

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the content and characteristics in terms of culture, age, and gender of autobiographical memory, future autobiographical events, and life script, through a study including Japanese university students and middle-aged adults. This paper first outlines previous research on these topics, describes the purpose of this research, and discusses the findings. The paper comprises six chapters.

In Chapter 1, I explain each concept, and discuss the findings and limitations of relevant previous research. Autobiographical memory pertains to memory of one's past, while future autobiographical events are imagined events that one will likely experience in the future. The life script is based on semantic knowledge shared by members of a given culture. Previous studies have shown that these three concepts have certain commonalities: the number of events described peaks between the ages of 16 and 30 years, and the events mentioned vary by age, gender, and cultural characteristics. However, most of this research has been conducted in Europe and the United States; little research has focused on Japanese people, especially from early adulthood to midlife. Therefore, I focused my research on Japanese university students and middle-aged people. Furthermore, based on the fact that these concepts are interrelated, I discuss the significance of examining them in the same group of subjects.

In Chapter 2, I present my investigation of autobiographical memory in Japanese university students and middle-aged adults and summarize the results. University students described many important events that they experienced during changes of school, especially at the ages of 12, 15, and 18, and the reminiscence bump phenomenon was confirmed in middle-aged adults. Moreover, these findings were applicable to both positive and mixed (positive and negative) valence events. In addition, both university students and middle-aged adults recalled many events related to

education/school, where the frequency of recall of these events decreased after young adulthood. The positivity effect was seen in old age, and the results of this study support the possibility that the valence of recalled events may gradually change with aging, from mixed valence to positive. The experience of men and women of certain events differed, and the difference increased with age.

In Chapter 3, I present the results of my investigation of future autobiographical events in Japanese university students and middle-aged adults. The results show that, among the university students, the imagined events pertained to the life stage of up to 30 years old, while future events close to the current age were imagined more often by middle-aged adults. These findings were applicable to both positive and mixed-valence events. Events related to death were imagined by both the university students and middle-aged adults. This commonality between the groups may reflect the emphasis placed by Japanese culture on connecting with others. It is clear from the results that the content of images of future autobiographical events gradually changed from university to middle age, and the positivity effect seen in old age was evident for temporally close future events in the middle-aged participants in this study. Furthermore, the content and valence of the imagined events differed between men and women; the images reported by women more frequently involved other people.

In Chapter 4, I report the results of my investigation of the life scripts of Japanese university students and middle-aged adults. Both the positive and mixed-valence life script events described peaks between the ages of 16 and 30 years. The events included the "Seijinshiki" ceremony, which is an important aspect of Japanese culture, as well as "club activities" and "entrance examination," which pertain to the Japanese education system. Although life scripts are considered to reflect stable knowledge, the results imply some changes in the semantic content of events, and the age at which they occurred even after adulthood. Furthermore, the developmental process, the commonality between individuals, the frequency with which events were described, and the age at which some events were experienced differed between men and women.

In Chapter 5, I explore the relationships among autobiographical memory, future

autobiographical events, and the life script. The results indicate that life scripts guide both the recall of autobiographical memories and the imagining of future events, where the degree of such guidance may increase with age. Autobiographical memory also guided the creation of a life script. Moreover, the life script explained the difference between autobiographical memory and future autobiographical events.

In Chapter 6, I summarize the findings reported in this paper. I discuss the academic significance of considering both age and gender differences in a study of this nature on Japanese adults; in this respect, this study is the first of its kind. I conclude that understanding the content and valence, of images of past and future life events in Japanese adults, including the age at which they are imagined to occur, may improve mental health. Understanding age and gender differences in images of life events may promote multicultural understanding and a better understanding of others. Finally, issues with this research, and future research directions, are discussed.