SOEP-IS 2014 – Major Life Events

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Module Title in SOEP Documentation: Future Life Events

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Major Life Events

Proposal for the SOEP Innovation Sample

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Overview

We propose to include a list of life events in the SOEP Innovation Sample that will be administered with varying instructions. In the first version of the scale, each event is rated according to how likely this event will occur in the next 12 months. In the second version of the scale, each event is rated according to its associated role expectations. Finally, in a third version of the scale (to be administered in the following wave), participants indicate whether and when they have experienced each event in the past 12 months.

The three versions of the scale consist of the same list of life events and differ only in terms of the instructions. The first two versions (likelihood and role expectations) can be administered completely independently. The third version (actual occurrence), however, needs to be administered in the following year to allow a direct intraindividual comparison of whether expected and actual changes match.

Including this life-events list will help address a range of research questions from mechanism of personality development to changes in subjective well-being to what drives people to make important life decisions. In the following, we provide theoretical background and research questions for each of these instructions.

Likelihood of life events

Most life events do not happen out of the blue but can be anticipated beforehand. It has been speculated that the degree of anticipation can explain why psychological outcomes often start changing before the actual event (e.g., Lucas, 2007) and why people react negatively to some undesired events (e.g., job loss) but not to other undesired events (e.g., divorce) (Luhmann,

Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). However, neither of these hypotheses has ever been tested empirically because data on whether individuals expected the life event are typically absent.

We propose to include a scale that assesses the likelihood of a range of life events. The data collected with this scale will help us better understand the psychological processes that occur before life events (and, perhaps, cause these events; see Luhmann, Lucas, Eid, & Diener, 2013). They might also help explaining why certain individuals are more prone to experience certain events than others. For instance, longitudinal studies have found that the likelihood of life events is associated with diverse characteristics such as demographics (e.g., job loss is more likely among individuals with poor education), personality (e.g., divorce is more likely for individuals high in neuroticism), and life satisfaction (e.g., child birth is more likely for individuals high in life satisfaction) (e.g., Headey, 2006; Luhmann, Lucas, Eid, & Diener, 2013; Magnus, Diener, Fujita, & Payot, 1993; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007).

To evaluate the accuracy of the likelihood ratings and to evaluate the actual impact of these events, it is important that the same list of life events is administered in the following wave to check which events have actually occurred.

Major life events and behavior norms

Major life events differ in their effects on personality and subjective well-being (e.g., Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012), but it is still unclear why this is the case. There have been several attempts to categorize life events, for instance, according to their valence or their controllability. However, these categories can only insufficiently explain the observed differential effects.

A largely overlooked but presumably important aspect of life events is whether they are associated with specific behavior expectations. It has been argued that the effect of major life events on personality development depends on their *normativeness* which should be considered as a continuum (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993; Neyer, Mund, Zimmermann, & Wrzus, in press) and essentially depends on the prevalence of social expectations or social behavior scripts. Unfortunately, there is no existing taxonomy that classifies major life events according to their *"skriptedness"*, that is, the behavior expectations they are associated with. Such a taxonomy needs to be empirically based and include a comprehensive list of major life events that occur in different age groups and sociocultural contexts.

As a large and representative sample, the SOEP-IS would provide an ideal data base for the development of such a taxonomy. We therefore propose a second version of the life-events list where people are asked to rate the extent to which life events are associated with specific behavioral norms. The proposed items were pre-tested and adapted accordingly as part of two former empirical studies (Alt, 2013; Häberlein, 2013).

With this version of the scale, we can attain various research goals. First, it would allow us to categorize life events according to their average perceived normativeness. Second, we could examine how behavior expectations are associated with individual characteristics such as age, socioeconomic background, personality, and subjective well-being. Third, we could examine whether low vs. high scripted events have differential effects on psychological outcomes such as personality, subjective well-being, or self-esteem.

Content of life-events list

We propose 19 major life events from all life domains, including social relationships, job, health, and mobility (see appendix). This list is a translated and slightly modified version of a similar list used annually in the HILDA. We dropped events that are unlikely to be anticipated and/or associated with specific role expectations (e.g., incarceration). In addition, we added a number of specific mobility events.

Mobility events are of particular interest for us because recent research revealed that distinct forms of mobility experiences fundamentally differ with respect to the associated psychological conditions and consequences (Jokela, 2009; Lüdtke, et al., 2011; Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). For instance, individuals low in life satisfaction are more likely to relocate (Luhmann et al., 2013), and young adults who spent some time abroad differ in their personality development from young adults who stayed at home (Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). These events are of particular interest for the research questions outlined. For instance, mobility events are actively initiated by the individual. Hence, individual differences in personality and life satisfaction are more likely to affect the occurrence of these events than the occurrence of other events such as widowhood. Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between various forms of mobility (e.g., within the same country vs. going abroad) to evaluate which aspects of mobility drive the changes in personality reported previously. Finally, since mobility is increasingly common and even required in our society, we are certain that other researchers will be interested in these various forms of mobility as well.

Requested sample

We propose that the scales are administered repeatedly to the entire SOEP-IS by CAPI. Ideally, each version is administered at every wave; however, at the very minimum, Versions 1 and 2 (likelihood and role expectations) should be administered in the next wave and Version 3 (actual occurrence) at the following wave.

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Life events list

(for instructions and response options, see table on the next page)

1. Eingehen einer festen Partnerschaft
2. Heirat
3. Trennung vom Ehepartner oder Lebenspartner
4. Versöhnung mit Ex-Ehepartner oder Ex-Lebenspartner nach vorausgegangener Trennung
5. Schwangerschaft
6. Geburt oder Adoption eines Kindes
7. Schwere Erkrankung oder Verletzung der eigenen Person
8. Tod des Ehepartners oder Lebenspartners
9. Tod eines anderen nahen Verwandten (z. B. Eltern, Kinder, Geschwister)
10. Renteneintritt
11. Entlassung durch Arbeitgeber
12. Jobwechsel
13. Beförderung beim aktuellen Arbeitgeber
14. Starke Verbesserung der finanziellen Situation (z.B. durch Lottogewinn, Erbschaft)
15. Starke Verschlechterung der finanziellen Situation (z.B. Privatinsolvenz)
16. Dauerhafter Umzug innerhalb Deutschlands
17. Vorübergehender Wohnortwechsel innerhalb Deutschlands (Dauer mindestens 2 Monate)
18. Dauerhafter Umzug ins Ausland
19. Vorübergehender Auslandsaufenthalt (Dauer mindestens 2 Monate)

Version	Instruction	Response options
1	Für wie wahrscheinlich halten Sie es, dass Sie die folgenden Ereignisse in den nächsten 12 Monaten erleben?	1 = sehr unwahrscheinlich 2 = eher unwahrscheinlich 3 = eher wahrscheinlich 4 = sehr wahrscheinlich
2	Wie sehr stimmen Sie folgender Aussage im Hinblick auf die unterschiedlichen Lebensereignisse zu? Es gibt in der Gesellschaft klare Vorstellungen oder Erwartungen, wie man sich verhalten soll, wenn man dieses Ereignis erlebt.	1 = stimme gar nicht zu 2 = stimme eher nicht zu 3 = stimme eher zu 4 = stimme sehr zu
3	**A:** Haben Sie das folgende Ereignis in den letzten 12 Monaten erlebt? **B:** Falls ja, trat dieses Ereignis vor weniger als 3 Monaten, vor 3 bis 6 Monaten, vor 6 bis 9 Monaten, oder vor 9 bis 12 Monaten ein?	**A:** 1 = ja, 2 = nein **B:** 1 = vor weniger als 3 Monaten, 2 = vor 3 bis 6 Monaten, 3 = vor 6 bis 9 Monaten, 4 = vor 9 bis 12 Monaten