

## Types of Life Events

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I like to think that Kurt Lewin would be pleased that a sociologist is presenting this invited address in his honor because it is further recognition of his profound influence on the manner in which sociologists study individual social behavior. His influence on my own work goes back thirty years, to my doctoral dissertation, "The Acceptance of New Behavior in Child Rearing." In that study I experimented with methods of getting mothers to change the ways in which they fed their two-year-old children, and demonstrated that cultural norms and the pressures of husbands' wishes were the factors of first importance. But more than that: Kurt Lewin's daughter, Dr. Miriam Lewin, is here in the audience, and she was teacher and advisor to my wife, Kathleen V. Brim, from the time when, in mid-life, Kathleen started as a freshmen in college at Manhattanville until her recent graduation. Life is filled with twists and turns, as we now shall see.

Paul B. Baltes (1979) has shown how in recent decades there has been an outpouring of developmental work dealing with the entire life span. In psychology this movement has come to be known as life-span development psychology. It is not a specific theory, but an orientation to the study of behavioral development. Development is conceived of as a life-long process. In principle, there is no one period of the life span that can claim general primacy for the origin and occurrence of developmental changes. Second, life-span researchers conceive of development as a system of diverse, that is, pluralistic changes. Life-span researchers assert that developmental change beyond childhood can take many varied

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forms of directionality, of order, of dimensionality. To put it differently, there is a lot of variation between individuals. The life-span development view is opposed to the notion of adult stages that cast development as unidirectional, hierarchical, and irreversible sequences, tied to chronological age—ideas not supported by commanding evidence. In essence: “People are different”; “One is never too old to change”; “Life is full of surprises”; and “This generation’s surprises are likely to be the next generation’s routines.”

Central to the field of life-span development is the concept of “life events.” As Hultsch and Plemmons (1979) observe in a recent review, research on life events has examined their relation to physical illness in general, to specific types of physical illness, to psychiatric disorders, to psychological symptoms, to self-assessed status, and to life transitions. Researchers have focused on specific events, such as combat, entrance into school, marriage, parenthood, widowhood, migrations, and institutionalization. Given this diversity, the use of a single term, “life events,” is somewhat hazardous. Nevertheless, life events are as integral to life-span development theory as are atoms and lesser particles in physical theory, and we must try to make some headway in an analysis of properties of life events.

Imagine that each person could look ahead from birth over the life course to be covered, envisioning the tens of thousands of naturalistic life events to be confronted in the passage from birth to death. Some of these events issue from within, so to speak, caused by one’s growth as an organism, as in the case of puberty. Other events are the consequences of the fact that humans must live in social groups: life thus is patterned by major social events which are customary in a given society, and life is also filled with events that are non-customary, whether they are deviant or unregulated social acts, the intended or unintended consequences of other individuals in society with whom one is going through life. And still other events, such as fire, storm, avalanche, and tidal wave, are, we might say, the physical world in process.

Some will say that there is an obvious omission, namely, the internal or psychological events which occur through the life span: for instance, the religious experience and conversion, the “Born Again” experience; the resolution to devote one’s life to one’s country; the decision to leave one’s spouse; the recognition that one has reached the top in one’s career; the confrontation with one’s own mortality at mid-life (and the resulting changed orienta-

tion towards time, in which one starts defining time in terms of years left to live rather than years since birth, as Neugarten (1968) notes, and emphasizes the importance of the immediate day); the acceptance of the fact by fathers that their sons may turn out to be stronger and more successful, and by mothers that their daughters may be more competent and attractive; the realization that one may have, on balance, done more harm than good to mankind; and so on, through a great number of psychological experiences along the course of life. One feels that these events should take their place as equals with significant events in the physical, biological, and social realms through the life span.

Obviously, internal or psychological changes can be viewed as "causes" of physical, biological, and social events which may follow. One would take this course, for example, if one were studying biological illnesses of a psychosomatic nature, that is, illnesses induced by a psychological event. In contrast, I am considering these psychological processes as the end point in a sequence, and will focus on the physical, biological, and social sources of events as the "causes" of behavioral and personality change over the life span.

#### *STATUS OF "LIFE EVENTS" AS A BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE CONCEPT*

Social psychology seeks to predict, to explain, and eventually to understand the contemporary behavioral responses to contemporary situations, e.g., an aggressive response to a particular social situation. In a similar way, life-span development seeks to predict, explain, and understand changes in behavioral responses to similar situations as they occur over a longer period of time. In moving from social psychology to life-span theory, it requires simply to recognize that the environment no longer is a large set of similar situations "out there" that the person may confront, but instead a great variety of successive events to be faced as time goes by. The concept of present life span is extended over time and becomes the "expected future environment" over the life span.

The properties of life events, like the properties of situations in social psychology, are described in ways that are salient for the observer or investigator, the student of human behavior—salient because they help the observer explain the behavior of particular interest. Life events, as Hultsch and Plemmons (1979) point out in their review, have been studied as subjective and objective, gains and losses, controllable or uncontrollable, and

so on. As with situational analysis in social psychology, the possible number of event properties that one might conceive is very large indeed.

Sometimes properties are assigned to events in terms of the effect the event has on behavior, e.g., one that produces stress. This is similar to describing situations in terms of their stimulus characteristics. At other times properties are assigned to events in terms of the person's perception of the event, that is, it is subjectively experienced as good or bad, as under control or not, as being stressful or not stressful. We use a third approach to assigning event properties. The properties of the life event are seen to be in the event itself. They are qualities that can be appraised objectively, such as whether the event's occurrence is highly correlated with a person's chronological age or not, or whether the event occurs for a large number of people rather than just a few.

But, if we say that an event has certain properties, such as being highly correlated with age, the fact is that this property does not always hold up across different groups of people, in different subcultures, and in different historical periods. This is to say that the properties of events change under different conditions of history and culture, in the same sense that the physical properties of objects change if one applies intense heat or intense cold. But, if one can say that, with reference to most people in the world or even in one society, at most times in history or even for the present, that a certain event has a certain property (e.g., "it is experienced by many persons"), then that property is a useful characteristic and is similar to some feature of the state of a physical object under its natural conditions. The task, then, is to describe events in terms of properties of interest according to their model status, that is, how they are for most persons, and then, to study the variability of those properties of events for different times and places.

#### *A Typology of Life Events*

Any person confronting the future, and any one of the great range of events that might take place, wants to know: Will it happen to me?; If so, when will it happen?; If it happens, will there be others like me, or will I be the only one? In terms of properties of events, these questions point to three fundamental properties of events, namely: 1) the probability that the event will take place for a particular person; 2) the correlation of the event with chronological age; and 3) the social distribution of

the event, i.e., whether the event will occur for many people or just one or a few persons.

When events are cross-classified by these three properties, eight types of events are produced, as set forth in Table 1. These properties are selected from among the many that might receive attention because they seemed most useful in our current analysis of how persons try to maintain self-respect through the life span.

To illustrate, *social distribution* is important because it tells us whether or not the individual has a support system to help buffer the change, and to provide new reference figures to link with new norms for behavior. *Age relatedness* matters because it usually is associated with whether or not the individual was prepared for or caught unexpected by the life event. The *likelihood of occurrence* for the individual is fundamentally important on the premise that individuals will only attend, in advance, to those events that are likely to happen to them. But I think these three properties of life events suggest some new strategies in life-span development research. I will mention three such strategies.

*Extending the range of events included in life-span theory.* Type 1 events include the familiar status changes frequently studied in the sociological tradition. In these instances, where the event is shared by many, the probability is high, and the event is related to age, the stage is set for anticipatory socialization. The new roles that one is expected to learn when the event takes place, the new attitudes and values and overt behaviors, and the new persons and groups who become significant, all can be worked on in advance. For example, many children have been prepared by their parents and others for their first day of school. It is not only that the role behavior can be taught ahead of time in the pre-change socialization; it is also that the new social reference groups, which are easily found and entered in such familiar status changes, can be introduced ahead of time. These events are most frequently studied in the sociological tradition. But these theories deal with only the most obvious of social roles that follow predictable timetables and have well-established socialization patterns. In contrast, the events of a person's life rarely are as orderly as the sociological study of the life cycle implies in its emphasis on regular status changes.

There is no special story in the Type 1 events. A child is born, grows up, marries, has children, works, grows old, and dies. If this were all, then all lives would be much the same, by definition. The Type 1 events describe the status structure

TABLE 1  
LIFE EVENTS TYPOLOGY

		Experienced By			
		Many		Few	
		Probability of Occurrence			
		High 1	Low 3	High 5	
				Low 7	
Strong Correlation With Age		marriage	military service	heirs coming into a large estate	spinal bifida
		starting to work	draft	accession to empty throne at 18	first class of women at Yale
		retirement	polio epidemic		pro football injury
		entering school			child's failure at school
		woman giving birth to first child			teenage unpopu- larity
		Bar Mitzvah			
		first walking			
		heart attack			
		birth of sibling			
Weak Correlation With Age		2	4	6	8
		death of a father	war	son succeeding father in family business	loss of limb in auto accident
	death of a husband	Great Depression			death of daughter
	male testosterone decline	plague	earthquake		being raped
	"topping out" in work career	migration from South			winning a lottery
	children's marriages				embezzlement
	accidental pregnancy				first black woman lawyer in South
					blacklisted in Hollywood in '40's

of a society, but there is no story here. John Cheever's (1978) stories, for instance, are filled with events of many other types: of child runaways, of falling in love with a younger girl, of a near fatal fight with a brother.

It is not original to call attention to this imbalance of emphasis in life-span studies, to the need to study other types of events, but it needs reiteration. As Bernice Neugarten (1970) says, it is not the birth of a child but the death of a child we should be studying.

The greatest contrast to the traditional sociological events are the Type 8 events. These events have a low chance of occurrence, the individual does not know when they might happen, and he or she has few other people with whom to share the experience. This type of event has been studied by scholars dealing with stress adaptation and coping behavior in relation to varieties of loss, disfigurement, and death of a loved one. No one spends time anticipating what life would be like and how one might adjust in the event that a leg was lost in an automobile collision. In contrast, where an event is rare and unpredictable for most persons, but is a Type 1 event for certain subgroups in society, it is dealt with as such by them. Merlin Olsen, speaking for many professional football players, says, "I knew that on any Sunday afternoon an injury could end it all" (Freeman, 1978); and, as other ballplayers do, he developed business ventures concurrently with his playing career.

Examining the typology further, we can see that for Type 5 events, prior socialization and establishment of reference figures and support systems takes place, although in a highly specialized manner: the young future king or queen is trained in advance for succession to the throne. In contrast, Types 2 and 6 present life events which the person knows are likely to occur, but does not know when. But, since there is no age linked to the events of these types, they are not embedded in any social context and, as a consequence, there is less anticipatory socialization by society. The person is alone, and, if he or she tries to deal in advance with the event, is forced into an "advance rehearsal" on an individual basis (e.g., a wife contemplating what it would be like to get out of her marriage, or a mathematician realizing that his most productive years will soon be over). Types 3, 4, 7, and 8 have a low probability of happening at all and have little anticipatory socialization or advance rehearsal. The Type 4 events, compared to Type 8, are characterized by having more people who experience the event, and this greater social distribution

does lead to organized attempts to provide anticipatory learning, even though the probability is low and one is uncertain when it might happen. Familiar anticipatory socialization efforts include: teaching persons what to do in cases of fire (e.g., fire drills); and Red Cross first aid courses designed to help persons deal with natural disasters.

Consideration of event Types 3 and 7 furthers our understanding of anticipatory socialization. For both types of events, the human stance seems to be one of wariness and a concern to get the event behind one, recognizing that there are age periods where the possibility of certain events increases substantially, only to disappear as one gets still older. There is little incentive for anticipatory socialization on society's part or, even, advance rehearsal by the individual. Young parents, for instance, can hardly be expected to start practicing in advance to take care of a birth-damaged child, when there is no reason to believe ahead of time that the odds are anything but remote that this will happen.

*Discovering hidden events.* In the course of life each person experiences events which are unnamed. What are these nameless experiences? In what sense do they exist? At the most general level, there are events that are unrecognized and unnamed by any member of humanity—events for which no concept has ever been invented. At a less general level, cross-cultural analysis of life-span development reveals that each culture has its own distinctive set of life-span terms. To paraphrase Ruth Benedict (1961), each culture selects from the life span some events that it chooses to identify and leaves behind a myriad of other events, never recognized or named. Thus, in addition to unnamed experiences for humanity as a whole, there are some life experiences for which one's culture has no name. All of us, therefore, have passed through some life events which we could not name; and it is likely that many of us here have had the same nameless experience.

The search for as yet unnamed significant life events should be like the search for new plants, animals, elements, particles, planets, and diseases; but it has not had the systematic, sustained effort that it should receive. Instead, the discoveries come as by-products of work for other purposes. For instance, advances through the working career are not as well marked as are the transitions through the family career. The event of reaching the top of one's achievements, or "plateauing," in a career has had some attention in works of fiction; but it has only been in the past decade that there has been any serious, scholarly attention

given to this event, associated with studies of social mobility, and we still do not have any well-accepted name for the event equivalent to, say, marriage or widowhood.

The search for unnamed events should lead us back to reading cultural anthropology, and to the study of subgroup cultures within our own society. Much more use should be made of national sample surveys, collecting individual subjective reports on experiences with life-span events. In the end, the best bet probably remains the ear of the clinician—the Horneys, Eriksons, and Levinsons—and the revelations of poets and other artists in their attempts to describe their own personal experiences and to provide a basis for sharing these with other human beings.

*Emerging and transitional events.* Events appear and disappear from the life course and also may change in type over time. Social change brings new kinds of life experiences, not just in their substance but in their number and intensity. Thus, the life-span development of any given birth cohort differs in significant ways from earlier and later cohorts.

To illustrate, a hundred or more years ago it was likely that before a person was 20-years-old someone in the immediate family would have died, probably a younger sib. But infant mortality rates have dropped, and the death of a younger sibling, an event which used to be a probable, age linked, and shared experience, has now become an accident and a tragedy.

Changes in age linkage result from population changes: we experience a lengthening of the family career; shorter childrearing periods; longer times, both early and late in the family life, during which spouses live without children being present; families with smaller numbers and more parent-child interaction; and a change, especially among women, toward a later age for marriage and birth of first child.

Increased sharing or social distribution of an event is seen in familiar instances resulting from increased longevity; e.g., the experience of retirement from work, and the experience of the "empty nest," common now, used to be events faced by only that small part of the population that had unusual longevity.

It is the contribution of historians, demographers, and sociologists to our understanding of life events to show us how they have changed in their occurrence, and how their properties are altered through time. As for the years ahead, the futurists have their long lists of new events to come, many with probable dates of appearance assigned to them, and, as we all know, the

rate of such change and the unpredictability of the event structure of our lives continues to increase.

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