

# **LIFE EVENTS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONING**

**Theoretical and  
Methodological Issues**

**Edited by  
Lawrence H. Cohen**

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# *Life Events and Psychological Functioning*

## *Theoretical and Methodological Issues*

LAWRENCE H. COHEN

The empirical study of life events is currently one of the most prolific research enterprises in the behavioral and social sciences. Although a number of recent books have been devoted to the effects of life events, the growing popularity of this research topic warrants an updated account of current trends in the field. This book is intended to provide such an account.

This book is directed toward researchers and graduate students in the behavioral and social sciences who already have some appreciation of general research methodology and the conceptual and methodological issues unique to life events research. Background material on the history of life events research is, for the most part, not included. The emphasis is on the relationship between life events and *psychological* functioning, and therefore all of the authors are active researchers in the field of *psychology*. However, as is evident from their chapters, all are cognizant of the important contributions of related disciplines. The effects of life events on *medical* status are not discussed in detail. Although this obviously is a related issue, it warrants a separate book given the popularity this research topic currently enjoys. The focus of most of the chapters is on the *accumulation* of life events as measured by a paper and pencil questionnaire; this paradigm has dominated American research on life events. However, most of the authors also acknowledge the important contributions of competing paradigms, especially those developed in England that rely more heavily on an interview methodology.

The chapters present a wide variety of theoretical and methodological issues related to the study of life events, but despite their diversity there is convergence on a number of points. Specifically, the authors agree that:



- (1) The study of the life events-psychological functioning relationship requires appreciation of complex *measurement* issues. The chapter by Cohen is devoted to the measurement of life events. Monroe and Peterman and Reich and Zautra discuss the assessment of criterion variables, and Stone, Helder, and Schneider, Barrera, and Swindle, Heller, and Lakey consider the measurement of variables hypothesized to serve as life stress moderators.
- (2) A *cross-sectional* approach is usually an inadequate research methodology. More complex longitudinal and prospective designs are called for with a concomitant increase in the complexity of statistical models.
- (3) The relationship between life events and psychological functioning is a *recursive* one; simple cause-effect interpretations usually are impossible. Monroe and Peterman's chapter emphasizes conceptual and methodological issues related to testing the etiological (causal) role of life events.
- (4) The life events-psychological functioning relationship is influenced, to varying degrees, by *third variables* that, if not measured or at least considered, can lead to erroneous conclusions about the causal role of life events. These variables include enduring environmental and personality characteristics.
- (5) Far too little attention has been directed to the study of *positive* life events. Reich and Zautra's chapter specifically addresses the direct and stress-moderating effects of positive events.
- (6) The study of the effects of life events requires a *developmental* (temporal) model of the stress process. The chapters by Zautra, Guarnaccia, Reich, and Dohrenwend, Stone, Helder, and Schneider, and Barrera emphasize this point.
- (7) Finally, life events research must be motivated by, and interpreted within, a *specific* (and, by definition, complex) theoretical model of the role of individual differences and environmental variables in psychological health and disorder. Not surprisingly, the authors emphasize different aspects of such a model. For example, Stone, Helder, and Schneider, and Swindle, Heller, and Lakey question the validity of a trait-oriented view of the coping process, whereas Barrera considers the complex and recursive role of social support. But all agree that specificity is called for, where hypothesized relationships reflect specific exchanges between people and their environment over time.

Space limitations preclude an exhaustive sampling of current research programs. Nevertheless, the authors present the important theoretical and methodological issues facing the field today. Although life events research has generated far more questions than answers, the chapters that follow reveal that this uncertainty has had an energizing rather than stultifying effect on scientific progress.

*PART I*

*Effects of Life Events  
on Psychological Functioning*



# I

## *Measurement of Life Events*

LAWRENCE H. COHEN

This introductory chapter presents issues relevant to the measurement of life event occurrence. Most life events research has relied on a questionnaire (rather than interview) methodology, due in part to the influence of Holmes and Rahe (1967) and the development of the Schedule of Recent Experiences (SRE) and the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). Therefore, most of the issues discussed pertain to a questionnaire methodology, although some methodological problems unique to an interview approach are covered as well. Specifically, the present chapter considers: (a) item composition on life events measures, (b) the reliability of life events measures, (c) the validity of life events measures, (d) various scoring strategies for life events questionnaires, (e) classification of life event occurrences, and (f) the conceptualization of life events as a *dependent* variable.

There is an enormous literature on the measurement of life events. The present chapter is not intended as an exhaustive review, but instead as an overview of the diverse methodological issues associated with the assessment of life experiences. Comprehensive reviews of the measurement literature were recently presented by Tausig (1982), Monroe (1982b), Zimmerman (1983), and Thoits (1983). The review by Thoits is outstanding with respect to its coverage and integration and it contributed significantly to the substance and organization of the present chapter. Although a large number of life events studies have

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I thank Scott Monroe for providing helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

been published since Thoits's review, many of which are cited in the pages that follow, many measurement problems that were recognized in the early years of this decade still have not been adequately resolved.

### *Item Composition of Life Events Measures*

Specific events included in a life events measure should be clearly worded, indicative of a discrete occurrence, representative of the domain of life experiences relevant to the population studied, and not be, themselves, manifestations of psychological or physical problems. Ambiguously worded items were a serious problem with Holmes and Rahe's (1967) SRE, and recent scales have attempted to provide more specific descriptions of life events. There is some confusion over the definition of a *discrete* life event, in that a number of life events scales include items that really signify stressful *processes* (marital difficulties, chronically ill family members, and so on) or chronic role strains (e.g., unemployment), rather than discrete event occurrences. Combination of these types of items with more discrete events renders interpretation of scores and obtained correlations problematical. The research of Pearlin (e.g., Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981) underscores the importance of distinguishing these various forms of life stress; he found that the relationship between life events and psychological functioning was attributable to the former's influence on chronic role strain.

Specific life event items, of course, should be representative of the life experiences of the *studied population*. The critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) is one method to ensure the relevance and representativeness of items (Dohrenwend, Krasnoff, Askenasy, & Dohrenwend, 1978; see the chapters by Johnson & Bradlyn, Murrell, Norris, & Grote, and Reich & Zautra in this book). In this method, subjects are asked to recall a time in which they felt "exceptionally bad (or exceptionally good)," and to describe in detail life events that preceded their reactions.

Selection of items for a life events scale is much more complicated than is usually assumed. In addition to the issues already mentioned, a researcher must consider: (a) the relative number of *desirable* and *undesirable* events; (b) the inclusion of anticipated events that do not occur, that is, *nonevents*; (c) the natural causal relationships among some events, for example, divorce and finance-related events; (d) the possibility of event redundancy, for example, arguments with spouse and marital separation; and (e) the possibility of some underlying

environmental situation that can account for a number of event occurrences, for example, a natural disaster precipitating a host of financial and social events (Monroe, 1982b).

### **Item Contamination on Life Events Measures**

If a list of life events includes experiences that are symptomatic of maladjustment, then obviously the relationship between life stress and psychological functioning is in part tautological. In fact, in such an instance, the relationship between life stress and physical disorder is also suspect, even if physical health-related events are excluded, because psychological health-related events might reflect concomitant somatic disorder.

Dohrenwend et al. (1978) conceptualized life events as falling into one of three categories: (a) confounded with physical illness, (b) confounded with maladjustment, and (c) independent of physical and psychological problems. They asserted that measurement of these three types of events must be kept separate and that only the third type is useful for etiological research. Dohrenwend, Dohrenwend, Dodson, and Shrout (1984) documented that many items in life stress surveys can be considered symptomatic of psychological problems and that this type of item contamination often is responsible for significant relationships between life stress and maladjustment. Similarly, Thoits (1983) and Zimmerman (1983), in their reviews of life stress research, concluded that a number of life events instruments, even recently developed ones, contain items reflective of maladjustment (e.g., sleeping and eating difficulties, feeling lonely).

There is no question that life events surveys should not contain items obviously reflective of psychological or physical difficulties, or that if included, must be scored separately. However, it is unclear to what extent the inclusion of contaminated events has significantly biased the reported relationship between life stress and psychological difficulties, because this depends on the specific life events and dependent measures used, the specific population sampled, and so on (Thoits, 1983; Zimmerman, 1983). Interestingly, Schroeder and Costa (1984) found that the significant relationship between SRE life stress and physical illness was attributable to events symptomatic of physical problems or reflective of neurotic difficulties.

The most recent debate over the potential bias inherent in the inclusion of contaminated life events concerns the hassles scale developed by Kanner in collaboration with Lazarus (Kanner, Coyne,

Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). B. P. Dohrenwend (Dohrenwend et al., 1984; Dohrenwend & Shrout, 1985) has been particularly critical of the item composition and scoring of Kanner et al.'s inventory (see the chapter by Zautra, Guarnaccia, Reich, & Dohrenwend in this book). Lazarus's (Lazarus, DeLongis, Folkman, & Gruen, 1985) reply to Dohrenwend and Shrout (1985) was that some event-distress confounding is inevitable in a model of stress that posits a dynamic transaction between the person and his or her environment.

From a theoretical standpoint, Lazarus is correct, but what is required is *separate* measurement of event occurrence and the individual's *evaluation* of that event (Green, 1986). In the hassles scale developed by Kanner et al. (1981), the subject indicated which events made him or her "feel hassled" and hassles were events that were evaluated as at least "somewhat severe." Therefore, by definition, a hassle was an event with which the individual had difficulty coping (Dohrenwend et al., 1984; Dohrenwend & Shrout, 1985). It is not particularly illuminating to find that coping difficulty is related to psychological problems (see the chapter by Stone, Helder, & Schneider in this book).

Lazarus's most important contribution is theoretical, with his emphasis on subjective appraisals of event occurrence to capture the dynamic process of coping with life stress. The chapters by Monroe and Peterman, Stone, Helder, and Schneider, and Swindle, Heller, and Lakey in this book discuss in detail the importance of including idiographic evaluations of life events. However, even if event occurrence is measured separately from event evaluation (which was not the case in the Kanner et al. [1981] study), we still are left with the problem of event evaluation (ratings of desirability, controllability, anticipation, threat, loss, and so on) being confounded with respondents' psychological characteristics. The problem then becomes testing the causal direction between event evaluations and psychological problems if one is interested in the etiological importance of life event appraisals.

### ***Reliability of Life Events Measures***

Previous research has relied on three methods to evaluate the reliability of life events measures: (a) distribution of recalled events over time (the fall-off issue), (b) the test-retest correlation between the same measure administered repeatedly, and (c) the internal consistency of responses on a life events questionnaire. The first method has produced

relatively consistent results. In general, individuals report fewer life events for more distant time periods compared with very recent time periods, with estimates of event reporting fall-off of about 5% per month over a 12-18 month period when questionnaires are employed (Funch & Marshall, 1984). Interview methodologies are less susceptible to this problem, due in part to the opportunity to probe and specify events more clearly, resulting in a fall-off of about 2% per month (e.g., Paykel, 1983). Monroe (1982a) compared retrospective reporting of life events with concurrent reporting. His findings suggest that the fall-off figure for questionnaires, based on retrospective data, might be a significant *overestimate* of reliability of this type. Recent research suggests that unreliability due to reporting fall-off is most serious for ambiguously worded events (e.g., Jenkins, Hurst, & Rose, 1979) and positive events (Monroe, 1982a). Surprisingly, it is unclear if very severe events are less vulnerable to unreliable reporting of this type (e.g., Funch & Marshall, 1984; Jenkins et al., 1979; Yager, Grant, Sweetwood, & Gerst, 1981). Funch and Marshall (1984) also found that fall-off in life events reporting was associated with respondent characteristics; subjects with better social resources were less likely to forget events experienced in the distant past.

Computation of test-retest reliability has been conducted primarily for life events questionnaires. Zimmerman's (1983) review suggests that although the SRE suffered from low test-retest reliability, more recent and more clearly worded questionnaires have somewhat higher temporal stability. Of course, the longer the interval between test and retest, the lower the obtained reliability coefficient.

Two issues are worthy of note here. First, a test-retest reliability study must measure life event reporting on two occasions, but for a period of time that is identical for both administrations, that is, reporting of life events that occurred between January 1, 1987, and June 1, 1987, determined once on June 2, 1987, and again on June 30, 1987, for example. Surprisingly, some test-retest studies have included at retest life events that might have occurred during the test-retest interval (e.g., Brand & Johnson, 1982; Lewinsohn, Mermelstein, Alexander, & MacPhillamy, 1985; Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978). Second, a test-retest correlation simply indicates whether there is stability in life event scores, not whether *specific events* are reliably reported over time. The determination of test-retest reliability, therefore, must consider consistency in the reporting of specific life events as well as stability of scores (Zimmerman, 1983).



As an example, Cohen, Burt, and Bjorck (1987) computed the test-retest correlation for past year negative event unit scores on the Junior High Life Experiences Survey (JHLES; Swearingen & Cohen, 1985b). The two administrations were separated by two weeks, although both administrations reflected life event reporting for the same one-year period. The test-retest  $r$  was .96. When *specific* life events were examined, there was approximately 90% agreement on the reporting of events for the two scale administrations.

Some studies have examined the internal consistency of life events questionnaires, for example, Cronbach's alpha. In general, this form of reliability has been low to moderate. However, a high internal consistency suggests that the questionnaire includes events that are nonindependent, an outcome that is undesirable if the measure is designed to assess an accumulation of relatively independent life experiences (e.g., Cleary, 1981). For example, Lewinsohn et al. (1985) reported an alpha coefficient of .98 for their Unpleasant Events Schedule, a figure so high to suggest that the scale is measuring some underlying environmental or personality variable rather than an accumulation of discrete negative life events.

### Response Biases on Life Events Measures

Life events reporting might be influenced by current mood. A mood-related bias would serve to lower the reliability of a life events measure and to call into question the meaning of a significant relationship between number of reported events and concurrent measures of psychological functioning. Specifically, current mood might be related to selective memory for recent events or biased appraisal of remembered events if subjective evaluations of experienced events are employed rather than normative judgments. Surprisingly, very few studies have examined the relationship between current mood and responses on a life events measure.

Two studies employed a mood induction paradigm, with inconsistent results. Bower (1981) found that subjects in a hypnotically induced sadness condition reported more negative events from their daily diaries and more negative childhood experiences than their elated controls. However, the hypnosis procedure might have been vulnerable to the effects of demand characteristics, given that the sadness induction involved instructing subjects to *recall negative experiences*. Siegel,