Retrospective Data Collection

Kate Cox, Elizabeth Hacker, Carli Lessof, Hayley Cheshire, and Colin Miceli
National Centre for Social Research (NatCen)

This paper will outline the selection, design, and use of a CAPI event history calendar (EHC) to collect retrospective life course data. In contrast to traditional linear questioning models (Q-lists), the event history approach encourages the sequential and parallel retrieval of information from autobiographical memory, and has been found to produce better-quality retrospective reports (Belli et al. 2001). This method was employed to collect detailed information about key events that had occurred in the lives of approximately 8,850 participants from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA). We aimed to enhance our understanding of how early life events influence the circumstances of older people by asking participants to recall events that had happened prior to joining the ELSA study in 2002. Key dimensions covered were relationships and fertility; housing and mobility; jobs and earnings; and health.

The following aspects of the event history calendar will be described in the paper:
(a) Advantages of an event history approach over traditional questioning methods in terms of improving recall and increasing user-friendliness
(b) Outline of the time units and domains covered in the calendar
(c) Issues relating to the design of the calendar - e.g. flexibility of the interview, changing responses during the interview, displaying events on the calendar
(d) The role of Blaise and Visual Basic as the calendar interface
(e) Implications for interviewer training
(f) Coding and editing of data
(g) Application to other large-scale social surveys