Collecting information about the life course: The ELSA life history interview and possible implications for future studies

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Overview

- Experiences of using an Event History Calendar in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing
  - reasons we chose to use an EHC
  - development of the program used to collect life histories
  - evaluate the extent we retained the key features of the EHC approach
  - whether incorporating the EHC into a Blaise CAPI interview restricted its effectiveness as a tool to aid recall
ELSA background
Key facts about ELSA

- A study of people aged 50+ and their partners
- Multi-disciplinary
- Longitudinal (2002 to present)
Life History Interview

- Follow up interview at Wave 3
- Main ELSA focuses on current circumstances
- Age at first interview = 46 to 90+
- Aim to enhance our understanding of how early life and events throughout life impact upon circumstances of older people
Topics covered

- Children & fertility
- Partners
- Where lived
- Work history
- Health
- Relationship with parents as a child
- Other important life events e.g. death of parent
How we collect the life histories

• Difficult to remember all events in life
• Life histories can be incomplete and inconsistent
• Event History Calendar method - utilises our understanding of memory processes in order to help people remember past events
• Life grid method shown to improve accuracy of recall (Belli et al, 2001)
Elements of the Event History Calendar approach

1 Providing personalised cues and stimuli to aid recall

(i) Personal events e.g. year child was born

(ii) External events e.g. year JFK was assassinated

(iii) Age at time of event
Elements of the Event History Calendar approach

2 Making the interview flexible so that respondents can recall events in their own way

(i) Entering events whenever raised
(ii) Moving forwards and backwards in time
(iii) Order of topics
(iv) Verifying and revising data collected during the interview
Development of the calendar
Development of the life history interview: Aims

- Initially tried to incorporate these key elements of the EHC approach

- Testing showed there were factors which meant a more standardised approach was required

- Retained elements of the approach that we considered most important for aiding recall
Development stages

• Pre-test 1:
  • Paper EHC then CAPI interview

• Pre-test 2:
  • Calendar focused CAPI interview (very flexible, eg mouse used)

• Pilot 1 and Dress rehearsal:
  • Dual focused CAPI interview
Stage 1: Paper EHC then CAPI

- Very flexible
- *But* impractical, time consuming, difficult to administer

| What to write | Age grouped event | 1900 | 1901 | 1902 | 1903 | 1904 | 1905 | 1906 | 1907 | 1908 | 1909 | 1910 | 1911 | 1912 | 1913 | 1914 | 1915 | 1916 | 1917 | 1918 | 1919 | 1920 | 1921 | 1922 |
|---------------|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Where formed  | Global | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 |
| Milange and | Serbian | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 |
| Partnerships | Serbian | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 |
| Children | Serbian | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 |
| Work | Serbian | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 |
| Other key | Serbian | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 | 2500 |
Stage 2: Calendar focused interview

Life History (for 76 year old female)

Now I'm going to ask you for some more details about the work you have done in your life. Have you ever done any paid work in your life?

- Yes
- No
- Cancel

1930-1939
1940-1949
1950-1959
1960-1969
1970-

1. Children
2. Partners
3. Accommodation
4. Work
5. Other events

Important events around this year:
- 1962: Bay of pigs invasion of Cuba
- 1963: JFK assassinated
- 1963: Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.
- 1965: Escalation of war in Vietnam

Personal events in this year:
- Child named Jim born
- Married with Catherine
- Living at 2 Laureen Lane
Stage 3: Dual focused interview

• Response to problems
  
  • very different from Blaise programs interviewers used to (e.g. used a mouse)
  
  • events could be missed out
  
  • questions did not flow well
  
  • repetition
### Work Module

Did you stay on your next job straight after leaving this job or was there a more than 3-month gap?

- [ ] Straight from job to job
- [ ] Had a gap of 3 months or more before starting next job
- [ ] Started next job before the previous job ended
- [ ] This was responsible for last paid job

### Key (C Italic)
- Children
- Partners
- Accommodation
- Work
- Other events

#### Important events in this year
- 1969: Neil Armstrong becomes the first man on the moon
- Living with Jane
- Reside: 12 Park Street, London
- Working as Plumber

#### Key
- [ ]
Summary: Key elements of EHC

1 Providing personalised cues and stimuli to aid recall
   
   (i) Personal events
   
   (ii) External events
   
   (iii) Age

2 Increasing the flexibility of the interview

   (i) Entering events whenever raised
   
   (ii) Moving forwards and backwards in time
   
   (iii) Order of topics
   
   (iv) Revising and editing
1 Providing cues and stimuli to aid recall

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**Important events in this year:**

1969: Neil Armstrong becomes the first man on the moon

**Personal events in this year:**

Living with Jane
Residence: 19 Park Street, London
Working as Plumber
2 Increasing the flexibility of the interview

(i) Entering events in any order
(ii) Moving forwards/ backwards

WORK MODULE
Did you start your next job straight after leaving this job or was there more than a 3-month gap?

1. Started next job STRAIGHT AFTER this job
2. Had a gap of 3 MONTHS OR MORE before starting next job
3. Started next job BEFORE this job ended
4. This was respondent’s LAST PAID JOB

1963: Neil Armstrong becomes the first man on the moon
(iii) Order of topics

**ACCOMMODATION MODULE**
In the next section of the interview, I am going to ask you for some details about the different places you have lived in during your life.

INTERVIEWER: Press 1 and <Enter> to continue.

Important events in this year:

1969: Neil Armstrong becomes the first man on the moon
(iv) Revising and editing

WORK MODULE
Did you start your next job straight after leaving this job or was there more than a 3-month gap?

1: Started next job STRAIGHT AFTER this job
2: Had a gap of 3 MONTHS OR MORE before starting next job
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Important events in this year:
1969: Neil Armstrong becomes the first man on the moon

Personal events in this year:
Living with Jane
Residence: 19 Park Street, London
Working as Plumber
Interviewer training

• Different interviewing skills needed
  – instructions, questions and probes are identical in a standard interview
  – interviewers now have to generate personalised cues and questions as the need arises
  – more freedom for flexible cueing and probing
  – should not accept don’t knows

• Technically more challenging
  – some interviewers found the lifegrid difficult to use, especially if less computer literate

• Briefings needed to be very interactive
  – workshops
  – demonstrations
Conclusion

• Dual focused CAPI life history interview retained key features of the EHC approach

• Benefit from more development work in some areas

• A more structured approach does not make the EHC less effective in helping respondents give more accurate life histories
Future work

Evaluation of ELSA’s Event History Calendar approach

- Pilot stage (Paper then CAPI)

- Main stage (Dual focus)
  - Computer Assisted Recorded Interviewing (CARI)
    104 audio recordings

- Package of work involving multiple evaluation methods (quantitative and qualitative)
Questions?
Life history program

- Blaise datamodel provides the questions, rules and checks

- Dynamic Link Library (DLL) takes place of the normal data entry program
  - calendar display
  - question text
  - retrieval of next question on route
  - display of check and signal messages