

## Lifelines: A Review of Content and Context

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Lifelines, linear and episodic representations of lives from birth to death, have enjoyed some empirical attention; they represent an integration of an event-based perspective with life course narratives. A predominant focus of the existing research has been on the number and distribution of events across the lifeline, with interesting gender, age-cohort, and temporal differences. A secondary focus has examined the nature of events with event types ranging from the unique and singular to the more common and generalized; positive events predominate, again varying by temporal location and age-cohort identification. The context created by these events has received somewhat lesser attention, but such examinations begin to underscore the richness and complexity of lifeline research. Future work may expand on the contexts of and created by lifelines in addressing some of the limitations of this approach.

*Key Terms:* Life Lines; Life Events; Hermeneutics; Life Story

Life stories may be graphic—in many senses of the term. In its most literal form, the graphic nature of life stories may be represented by and illustrated through a variety of visual aids. For example, research has examined life stories by way of life graphs (e.g., Bourque & Back, 1977; Lowenthal, Thurnher, & Chiriboga, 1975) and life drawings (e.g., Whitbourne & Dannefer, 1986) wherein the recording of life events, along with their affective ratings, depicts the highs and lows of life—the peaks and valleys. Somewhat more recent forms of visual narratives include pie charting of life (“My Life in Graphs,” Knock Knock, 2011), graphically representing likes and dislikes, priorities and preferences, among other dimensions of an individual’s choosing, and life mapping (Cooper, 2013), an evocative and creative anthropological exercise wherein individuals fill in blank maps of their city (e.g., the shell of New York City) by personally meaningful themes and dimensions which include their sexual lives, their love stories, and their developmental experiences, among others. The rising popularity of this framework for representing and understanding lives may be noted in the presence of timelines in Facebook, which encourages individuals to “highlight your most memorable posts, photos, and life events on your timeline. This is where you can tell your story from beginning, to middle, to now” (<https://www.facebook.com/about/timeline>).

Shared in these approaches are efforts to describe,

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organize, and hopefully gain an understanding of the pivotal events of life—and ultimately of a life itself. The lifeline (e.g., de Vries, 1988; Rappaport, Enrich, & Wilson, 1985) may be seen to be a central, sometimes implicit, feature in these approaches. Drawing largely (and admittedly narrowly) from my own research, this article reviews some of the empirical literature based on the lifeline method. As seen below, there exists some substantial analysis of the life events identified by way of lifelines with somewhat lesser research on the context within which these events are embedded and most wholly understood. This method promises a nuanced, individually-contextualized approach to understanding the elements, flow, and ultimate gist of an individual’s life; the body of research in this area has not yet fully achieved this elegant and holistic potential. Some of the limitations of this approach are summarized below along with suggestions for future research.

### Background and Theoretical Orientation

The lifeline approach grew out of the life course and life events research traditions. Life course research establishes the importance of examining lives in time and place—i.e., historical and biographical perspectives (Elder, 1998). Life events research focuses on pivotal incidents and circumstances and their resulting life changes, which have generally been viewed as inherently stressful (Dohrenwend, 2006). The foundational work of Holmes and Rahe (1967), most typically noted in their Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS), stands as a prominent example of this approach, in which participants are asked to report the occurrence of normative life events that have occurred over some prescribed period of time giving rise to life-change unit scores interpreted as an index of social stress. Notwithstanding empirical associations between scores on

the SRRS and mental and physical well-being, more recent research has shown that the consequences of life events may be more dependent on their timing, nature, and context (de Vries, Blando, Southard, & Bubeck, 2001; de Vries, Blando, & Walker, 1995). That is, rather than the objective occurrence of life events, the focus is on the subjective meaning of the events to the particular individuals who experience them (Jang & Haley, 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Concomitantly, there has been a move away from event recognition and their scalar assessments to more narrative descriptions of events in the context of an individual's life (de Vries, Suedfeld, Krell, Blando, & Southard, 2005; de Vries & Watt, 1996)—an integration of an event-based perspective with the personal life course narrative.

The central stimulus used for the derivation of lifelines is a linear graphic illustration of life: a line anchored at one end by “BIRTH” and at the other by “DEATH” (Rappaport, Enrich, & Wilson, 1985). Individuals are asked to indicate on the line those events that are, have been, or are anticipated to be of significance and the age at which these events occurred/will occur. Individuals then label these events, either on the line or on a separate page and often rate them on a series of dimensions, along continua of positivity, desirability, predictability, and controllability, for example (de Vries et al. 1995; de Vries et al., 2005). In an application of this approach to life story research and practice, individuals are often asked to elaborate on each event, wherein the event listings and ratings become the substance of the questions posed in the ensuing discussion, rooted in the individual experience of the lifeline author. These individual event stories stand as personal narratives (and data) on their own; they also may be woven together into an organic life narrative (upon which further analysis may be engaged).

### Event Number

Research has employed the lifeline measure with women and men of various ages adopting a particular focus on event number and distribution. Overall, studies (e.g., de Vries & Watt, 1996; de Vries et al., 1995) have revealed an average of about 19 events in total across age groups (who are typically divided among younger adulthood, middle-age, and older adults) with a wide range in event number from the single digits to several dozen; for example, the event number in the sample described by de Vries et al. (1995) ranged from 5 to 41. Schroots and Assink (1998) proffered the Principle of the Constant Life Perspective to account for the absence of overall age differences wherein the sum of past and future events is constant across the life span.

Gender differences have often been noted; de Vries et al. (1995), for example, reported that women identified an overall greater number of events than did men (with respective means of 21 and 17). The relational context of women's lives (e.g., Miller, 1976) has been named in the

interpretation of this finding, wherein the events of others became the events of the women in proportions greater than the events of men.

Events also are not evenly distributed across time. The majority (i.e., about three-quarters) of events occurred in the past, but about one quarter of identified events were yet to occur (i.e., future events) suggesting that our memories are more numerous than are our plans, hopes, and fears (de Vries & Watt, 1996). Across age groups, event density is somewhat greater in times nearer to the present and was often greatest during the decades representing the 20's, 30's, and 40's. This event density in the years approaching midlife has been identified as the memory bump (a time of tight spacing of [normative] life events), also interpreted along the lines of a Janus model (Schroots, van Dijkum, & Assink, 2004), named after the Roman god with two faces, one face looking into the future and one into the past.

Even as age differences were not noted in the total number of events, younger persons tended to have a greater number of future events than did older persons who, in turn, tended to have a greater number of past events than did younger persons. Only among the youngest group of respondents (e.g., those in early adulthood) were the numbers of past and future events not significantly different; by contrast, only about one-half of the older participants reported *any* future events. Life course dynamics and position have been offered to account for such age differences: younger persons are often believed to see an almost unlimited future of possibilities (a type of beneficance, Greenwald, 1980) whereas older persons are often seen to have a richer past and a more limited future (Hooker, 1992). It may be that normative events, the largest proportion of identified events, favor older adults in retrospect and younger adults in prospect (de Vries & Watt, 1996), elaborated below.

### Event Type

That life events are more than the presence (or sometimes absence) of an objective stressor is a central premise of the lifeline perspective. The perceived and gauged meanings of these events provide their weighty substance. Even still, the type of events identified interestingly and largely mirrored those addressed in the SRRS (de Vries & Watt, 1996; Schroots & Assink, 2005). The broad categories included education, career, relocation, personal health, relationships and family, births and deaths, and personal growth.

Importantly, however, more than one quarter of all identified events in lifeline research were coded as “unique” and are hence unlikely to appear on standardized life events lists (de Vries et al., 1995). As de Vries and Watt (1996) note, these include events such as “watching a snake eat a lizard” (and consequently becoming a vegetarian); “giving a child up for adoption,” “attending the world's fair,” “going

hunting for the first (and last) time,” and “quitting piano lessons” (hence initiating a life trend of never completing something that has begun). Perhaps these may be seen as paradigm events—those events that signal life thematic substance. These idiosyncratic events are important adjuncts to the nomothetic events that predominate.

In analyses of the affective ratings of the events on lifelines, comparisons were made for both past and future events across three categories: positive, negative, or neutral (de Vries, Blando, Southard, & Bubeck, 2001). The majority of past events were rated as positive (about 53% – the rosy view perspective, as Schroots & Assink, 2005, offer); 25% of past events were rated as negative and 22% were rated as neutral. With few exceptions, these percentages did not differ by gender or by age, although differences were uncovered on the analyses of future events. A greater proportion of future events was rated as positive (73%) and correspondingly smaller proportions were rated as either negative (12%) or neutral (15%). Younger and middle-aged respondents had a greater percentage of positive future events than did older respondents who, in turn, had a greater percentage of negative future events than did the younger two age groups; perhaps this stands as further evidence of the role and presence of normative life events within specific age ranges of the life course.

Along similar lines, de Vries et al. (2001) also examined the generality or specificity with which an event was described. A specific event was coded when it was listed either in greater detail or by a particular term or proper name (e.g., “sick with pneumonia”); a general event was coded when it was described in looser terms, was vague or generic (e.g., “illness”). Overall, life events are identified in somewhat more general terms: 64% of past events and 72% of future events. These percentages differ by age, however. Older and younger persons tended to identify past events in more general terms than did middle-aged adults, who tended to be relatively more specific in their event identification. For future events, younger adults identified events in more general ways than did either of the older two age groups. These percentages reflect the difference between experience and anticipation, echoing the affective interpretations of above.

These findings, and their interpretation, allude to the deeper meaning and structure of the events arrayed on lifelines—part of the context they provide in personal narratives. This is the focus of the following section.

### Events in Context

In true hermeneutic fashion (Howard, 1982), events add dimensionality and substance to the lifeline, which provides the scaffold and linkages for the events—life events are the text of the life story context. The lifeline may be just a line on a page without the events; the events may be scattered and often disconnected conversations without the structure

of the lifeline. Several authors have attempted to explore how different life (and ultimately study) contexts may manifest in lifeline completions—both the particular and broader stories. These remain, however, partial attempts at uncovering the complexity of lives through a lifeline operationalization.

For example, de Vries et al. (2005) employed this technique with a sample of Holocaust Survivors (all of whom were Jewish) and comparison groups of similar ages—one Jewish and one non-Jewish. The study sample comprised participants from a couple of studies with somewhat different foci; nevertheless, all were provided the lifeline with standard instructions for administration of the lifeline (as above). The war years were highlighted by the study purpose description for the two Jewish groups and only implicitly mentioned for the non-Jewish group. This constructed context, interacting with the life contexts of the groups, may be seen to underlie the noted variations among these groups.

That is, there was a density of events around the years of the war, particularly for the Holocaust Survivor group; this convergence of events was also seen to be associated with an interpretation of prior and subsequent events in the context of Holocaust experiences. Survivors of the Holocaust were much more likely to place the war years on their lifelines (three times more likely than other Jewish women and men in the comparison sample and twice as likely as the non-Jewish comparison group); both Jewish groups were also more likely to include family births than the non-Jewish group. In contrast, the non-Jewish comparison group was more likely than were the other two groups to identify career issues (almost six times more likely than the other two groups), education (twice as likely), family deaths (twice as likely), and personal illness and injury (ten times more likely). Both the life experiences of the two Jewish groups, interacting with the context of the war years promoted by the study foci, are believed to help create the broader story lines within which the more particular story is told, possibly setting some base level of events against which others are compared and considered. Perhaps consequently, an overall smaller number of events were found for survivors of the Holocaust (7 events on average for the Holocaust Survivor group, 10 events for the Jewish comparisons, 17 for the non-Jewish comparisons).

In a comparable manner, research has examined the events reported in a relational context (de Vries, 2002). In this research highlighting the social nature of lifelines, 43% of the events identified concerned other persons explicitly, about one quarter of which were specific to friends and friendship. These relational events, in general, tended to focus on births and deaths of loved ones, graduations and moves, and illnesses and awards. The more particular “friend” events tended to describe beginnings of significant friendships, the deepening or changing of a friendship and/or the death of a friend. This shared nature of life events

on the lifeline is evocative: it speaks to the interpersonal worlds into which individuals are born, live, love, and age. In order to understand these individuals, it is as if one also has to understand the others in their lives.

### Limitations of the Approach and Future Directions

The above examples and interpretations begin to chart the depth and complexity of the lifeline approach; respondents in previous research studies, however, have also made clear some of the limitations of this approach. For example, one 50-year-old woman reported, following her participation in a study using the lifeline that “her life was a circle, not a line” and that she found the linearity of the task restrictive. A 45-year-old man similarly commented on what he perceived to be obstructive linearity. He reported that he had been near death, at an earlier point in his life, but was no longer; he thought the laying out his life on a singular plane was an inadequate fit, offering only a single direction in movement over time. A 67-year-old woman, in another study, said that her life did not begin with a conventional birth nor would it end with her physical death; that no room was provided on either end of these anchoring life events was limiting.

In addition, several older respondents in research studies reported that their lives could not appropriately be characterized by events neatly arrayed across time. A 65-year-old man exclaimed that his life was phasic not episodic; similarly, a 73-year-old woman felt that there were overarching themes to her life that superseded the events about which I was asking in the study in which she was participating (de Vries, 1998). A few other older respondents in studies we have undertaken (de Vries et al., 2005) have also made it known that the approach we were taking seemed to trivialize, or at least compartmentalize, the circumstances of their lives. Even as these are minority opinions in the several studies conducted, they are important and it is evocative that older persons in particular have voiced them.

It is as if the hermeneutic theoretical potential of these lifelines manifests in more of an empirical figure and ground approach, wherein the focus on the former overtakes (and perhaps restricts) the focus on the latter. The primary “figure” in this regard, and in much of the research, has been the events of life. But are these events able to embody the narrative terms of plots and scripts, characters, heroes and villains of life (McAdams, 1993)? For some, life events are but representations, and even placeholders, for these more complex constructs.

The nature of the instructions for the completion of lifelines merits consideration; at the same time, some personal analysis of the completed lifeline may offer integration satisfying and culling this more complex perspective. That is, prompts for the completion of the task

may offer constructs and terms beyond those of events, including phases, periods, and perhaps even some indication of movement and direction. In a project currently underway, we (LeBlanc, Frost, & de Vries, in progress) have adapted the lifeline to relationships and ask same-sex couples to identify events, circumstances, or periods over the course of their relationship (from the time they met until whenever in the future they choose to project) that are impactful on them—as a couple.

Following the task completion, participants could be encouraged to review the finished product and offer some perspective on what it reveals to them: the story about and above the lifeline story. In unpublished pilot work, I asked participants to do just that and suggest a theme for the story told by what was presented. Themes ranged in complexity from impressions of accomplishment (or failure) to appraisals of overall emotion (e.g., happiness, sadness) to evaluations of self in terms like redemption, transformation, dependence. Such efforts reflect on some of the meaning-making and meaning-conveying functions of life stories as proposed by Wong and others (e.g., Wong, 1995). Elaborating on such efforts begin to complete the hermeneutic circle of text and context and highlight the potential of life line research and practice.

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