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## Let's Forsake the Standardized Approach in Life-Events Research

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*The meta-analysis and review by Bühler et al. suggest some reliable, small effects of commonly studied life events on Big Five traits, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. These effects are, however, specific to events and personality constructs. In this commentary, we recommend leaving the standardized approach in life-events research. Comprehensively considering the broader and immediate context of the individual, gaining a greater understanding of life events from participants directly, and diversifying the personality constructs under study are crucial for further theorizing and elucidating how life events can change personality.*

The review and meta-analysis by Bühler et al. summarize the body of evidence on how life events (do not) spur changes in personality traits, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. The target article highlighted some reliable albeit small effects of commonly studied life events but suggested that effects may be specific to events and personality constructs. Nevertheless, in general, traditionally studied life events are not strongly linked to changes in Big Five personality, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. This paper puts the field at a crucial fork in the road: Shall we proceed in testing life events on personality development as previously done, assuming that investing in or de-investing from social roles should have an average effect on traits and characteristics' development? Or shall we part with the standardized approach and rather focus on an individualized approach highlighting the potential moderating role of the context? In this commentary, we suggest shifting our attention toward an individualized and contextualized approach.

What makes life events a significant source of personality development is that they are deeply individualized and idiosyncratic. For example, a divorce is linked to different changes in life satisfaction depending on many factors including the relationship quality before the event, who initiated the divorce, attachment styles, etc. (Machia et al., 2023). Thus, what we need in our theories is not just which life events change people, but when and why life events change some people but not others. In particular, social relationships are a promising context to better understand how life events develop personality. Life events do not happen on a tabula rasa. Given that humans have an innate need to belong and form satisfying relationships, we need to ask questions about the social

context: Does marriage come with introducing agreeable in-laws into the social network? Is the birth of a child accompanied by a supportive work environment? Is retirement conveyed by pleasant social interactions? These human factors are linked to the event itself and could provide essential information that moderates the link between events and personality development.

The context can also be viewed from a broader perspective—together with Bühler et al.' discussion about the need for cultural diversity in samples, we can also consider people's subcultures and their political, familial, and personal contexts (e.g., Chung et al., 2023). Theoretically, the long-standing assumption has been that new social roles change personality traits in alignment with the expectations that accompany these social roles. However, social expectations not only vary from country to country, but from one subculture, family, and value system to another. For instance, one Peruvian mother might feel expected to become an agreeable, nurturing, and soft-spoken mother, whereas another might feel expected to become an organized, conscientious, and hard-working parent. These expectations could be based on the expectations, psychological characteristics, and norms of the extended family, social network members, or subculture. In addition, people's values (e.g., political, religious) combined with experiencing major life events might uncover when and partly why life events foster changes in some people's personalities but not in others. Importantly, contextual factors relevant for one event-personality combination may not be relevant for another and more specific theorizing might be necessary. Thus, simply examining country and ethnicity as moderators may not capture the wide variability in the context that is relevant to a specific life event and personality construct. Above all, to consider context-specific characteristics, measuring the status quo norms from the in-groups (e.g., family, friends, church or party members) as well as the general public will be the necessary first step to better comprehend what exactly engenders different personality trajectories as a response to life events.

Apart from widening the realm of contextual factors, we need to put effort into better uncovering individuals' understanding of when and why life events affected them. People recognize what the events are like for them (e.g., Haehner et al., 2022) and which life events change them (Schwaba et al., 2023). The personality field generally has kept many participants at arm's length—partly due to the publication pressures in academia and the convenience of secondary data. However, including participants and the public in panel discussions, dialogues, focus groups, narrative interviews, and as reviewers of grant proposals (see a recent initiative by the Swiss National Science Foundation [Studer, 2020]) has the potential to illuminate our field. Most researchers in this field do not know the details of their samples' experiences and may be limited in drawing on their personal, anecdotal experiences—which are most often contextualized in their highly educated, mostly Western values and views. Thus, the field would benefit much from collaborating closely with participants and letting them tell the story of how and why life events affect personality change.

The final point to address is the primacy of trait research. In addition to Big Five personality traits, Bühler et al.

included two of the most-often researched personality characteristics—self-esteem and life satisfaction. However, personality is much richer than these seven constructs. Nevertheless, sufficient publications are lacking for meta-analyses regarding changes in agency and communion, attachment styles, coping strategies, goals, humility, narrative identity, optimism, schemas, values, and other characteristics that might be more intuitively relevant for certain life events (e.g., Chopik et al., 2020; Fraley et al., 2021; Wehner et al., 2022). These are just some of the personality constructs included in contemporary definitions of personality. More recent conceptualizations, such as social, emotional, and behavioral skills (e.g., Soto et al., 2022), would be potentially fruitful to examine in the context of life events. Including a broader set of constructs could enable the testing of theories for how social roles might be linked more strongly to some of these personality constructs compared to others.

We congratulate the authors on this important contribution and for stimulating this discussion. There is a lot to uncover about experiencing major life events and subsequent changes in personality. However, relying on standardized theoretical approaches and annual panel data that mainly focuses on traits will unlikely help get us there.

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## The daily life of life events as the missing puzzle piece in personality development

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*The meta-analysis impressively integrates research on effects of diverse life events on personality development. This commentary argues to look beyond the mere occurrence of life events to explain personality change: Life events can serve as catalysts for changes in daily life situations, which stimulate behavioral and experiential adaptations and, together with reflective processes, pave the way for personality change. Research on personality development needs to focus on these daily situations, behaviors, experiences, and reflections as they differ between people for any given event and thus might explain the heterogeneity of life event effects.*

In their ambitious meta-analysis, Bühler et al. cover a multitude of events within the life domain love and work for examining their effects on personality development. We applaud the authors for their profound contribution, which in our view clearly underscores the need to move life events research to the next level. In this regard, we offer considerations on how research on personality development could progress with a focus on daily life aimed at comprehending why the effects of life events are often heterogeneous.

Concerning the article, we particularly appreciate the discourse on whether normative life events substantially contribute to normative personality development and to what extent normativity in events provide a more or less specified cultural script of normative experiences and behaviors. At the same time, the authors themselves emphasize potential individual differences in the experience of and reaction to the same life events. Indeed, we believe that (at least) three lines of thought, applicable to all examined life events, should guide future research. We use work events as examples because for many relationship events it is instantly apparent that events like parenthood or divorce can be linked to a range of diverse daily situations and experiences (e.g., joy, stress)—which is also true but less overt for work-related events.

Life events as catalysts of personality development. The heterogeneity in average effects, as demonstrated in the meta-analysis, primarily highlights that something is happening to many people when they undergo certain life events. Simultaneously, many of the anticipated effects do not converge.