

The Measurement of Life Histories through the Internet

Dirk Sikkel

CentERdata

P.O. Box 90153

5000 LE TILBURG, The Netherlands

dirk.sikkel@kub.nl

1. Introduction

Data collection using retrospective questions is a cheap, although awkward method of gathering data from the past. In general survey research this method is considered to be unreliable. Experience from qualitative research, in which the past is visualized by a time axis on which events are drawn, suggests that the modern electronic possibilities can be used to improve this type of data collection. The need to develop a questionnaire to measure life histories arose in a study concerning the needs and loyalties of bank customers. The procedure was developed by CentERdata, an institute which runs a computerized panel.

2. The procedure

The respondents of the questionnaire all used the Internet as a medium to answer questions. The procedure started by asking questions about the birth of the respondents. After that, the following subjects were presented:

- moving
- education
- marriages
- other relationships
- births of children
- children leaving home
- jobs
- promotions
- changes in working hours
- other event that made an impression
- other events with financial consequences

The respondents were presented with graphical feedback as in figure 1.

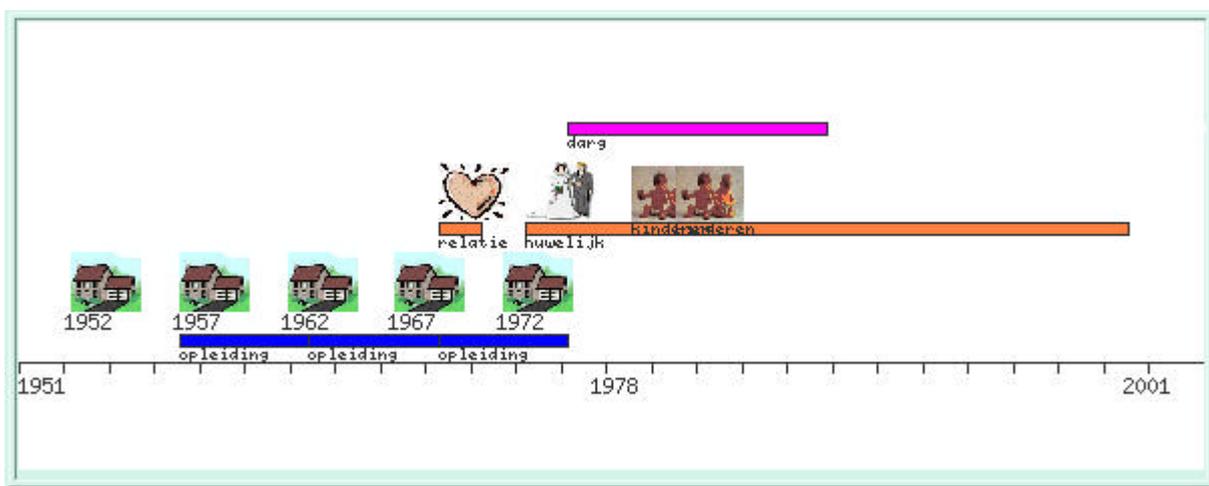


Figure 1. Graphical feedback in the life history questionnaire.

The houses represented moving from one house to another, the heart represents a relationship, the bridal pair a marriage, etcetera.

The general life history was asked within one interview. In a second interview, the data with respect to banking behaviour were added. The graphical feedback was given in a similar fashion. Reactions by respondents to this interview procedure were mixed. Some of them were very positive, and found this a nice opportunity to construct the story of their lives. Others still had problems with the level of abstraction of the feedback and the inevitable unfamiliarity of entering event history data. Still, the richness of the data set justifies all the programming and support effort.

3. An application

One out of the many possibilities for data analysis is the characterization of circumstances in which people move. Although causality can not be proved, it can be established which events coincide with moving. As the events are dated, it can also be established how these circumstances change over time. We look at two aspects of these circumstances: marriage and a change of job. To what extent is a move preceded in the same year or in the previous year by one of these two events and how did this develop over time? First, logistic regression analyses were carried out of year of moving and age of moving on the binary variables *preceded by marriage* (yes/no) and *change of job* (yes/no). Figures 2a and 2b show the predicted probabilities as a function of year of moving.

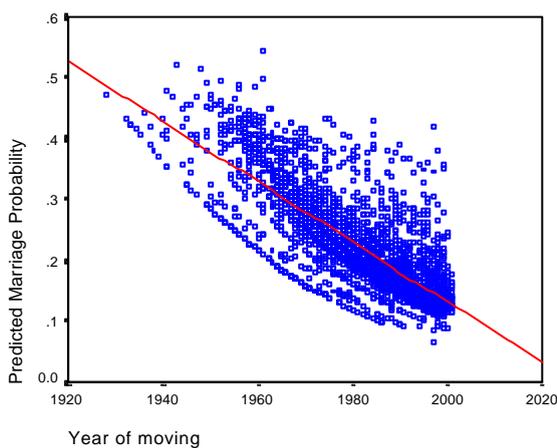


Figure 2a. Probability of a marriage close to moving as a function of time.

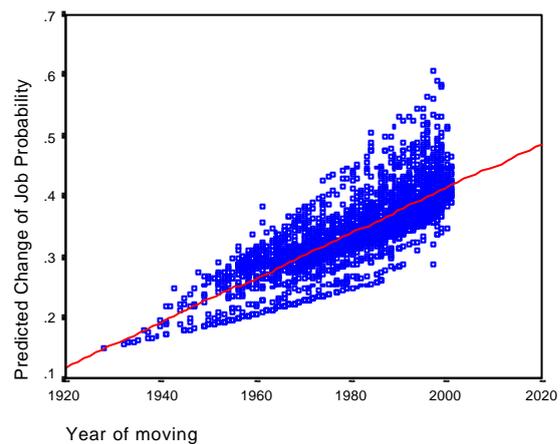


Figure 2b. Probability of a change of job close to moving as a function of time.

The clear conclusion is that over the past 80 years, marriage has become less and less a reason to move, whereas career has become more and more important as a reason to move.

RESUME

En utilisant l'Internet il est possible de presenter des graphiques pendant des enquêtes. Ces graphiques sont utilisés pour construire des biographies des répondants.