

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

The List of Threatening Experiences: a subset of 12 life event categories with considerable long-term contextual threat

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SYNOPSIS In a survey of a random sample of the general population recent life events, collected and rated for long-term contextual threat according to the methods of Brown & Harris (1978), were also recorded where possible on an inventory of life event categories (Tennant & Andrews, 1977). Of the 82.5% of all events collected which were covered by the inventory, 12 of the 67 event categories accounted for 77% of life events with an aetiologically significant rating of marked or moderate long-term threat. Where practical and economic constraints oblige research workers to choose the inventory method, a brief list of event categories, such as the List of Threatening Experiences, is recommended in preference to much longer lists.

INTRODUCTION

Several groups of workers (Bebbington *et al.* 1984a; Tennant *et al.* 1981; Brown, 1981) have argued the advantages of the individualized or contextual rating of life events collected by means of a semi-structured interview developed by Brown & Harris (1978) over structured interview or checklist methods based on inventories of life events, such as those of Paykel and his colleagues (1971) and Tennant & Andrews (1977). Two studies have been reported which compare some aspects of these methods. Katschnig (1980) contrasted total Life Change Unit scores derived from an inventory based checklist with 'severe' events obtained by interviewing the same group of patients. Bebbington and his colleagues (1984a), using a semi-structured interview, compared the relative risk of minor psychiatric disorder for events appearing in an inventory with that calculated using events rated 'marked' or 'moderate' on long-term threat (Brown & Harris, 1978). Their findings suggest that the use of contextual or individualized ratings is superior in discriminating

between 'cases' and 'non-cases' of minor affective disorder.

However, it has been possible for data obtained using the inventory technique to be rated in several different ways. Earlier workers were interested in the role of life change and summed values ascribed by an independent rating sample, both to supposedly desirable events (such as marriage) and to undesirable events (such as a death of a close relative or friend), in order to produce a Life Change Unit score (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Paykel and his co-workers (1976) have classified events into several sub-categories which take some account of their meaning: desirable *versus* undesirable, 'exit' *versus* 'entry', controlled *versus* uncontrolled. Various other scaling procedures have been used in order to provide scores for events appearing in inventories (Paykel *et al.* 1971, 1976; Tennant & Andrews, 1977).

The inventory method for establishing a history of life events even when administered to the subject in a structured interview, rather than as a questionnaire for self-completion, is cheaper than the semi-structured interview used by Brown & Harris (1978). In the latter, data collection requires both a long interview and separate rating sessions, taking up the time of several trained research workers. To this must be

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added the cost of training, most of which is concerned with the rating procedures and relatively little with the semi-structured interview technique. The length of the interview increases cost directly, but it may also adversely affect the willingness of research subjects to cooperate, increasing the bias due to refusals.

There is, however, an additional issue. Complex hypotheses have been suggested, and in some cases tested, which require that stressful life events be examined in relation to deficiencies in social relationships and personality traits (Henderson *et al.* 1981), expressed emotion (Leff & Vaughn, 1980), social support, help seeking, causal attributions to life events (Firth & Brewin, 1982), social role performance and genetic loading. It has become customary to include several of these in individual studies. It seems likely that many workers will see the continued use of inventories as a way of ensuring the practicability of such studies.

In this study, events elicited during a semi-structured interview were both recorded on a prescribed inventory (Tennant & Andrews, 1977) and were rated from their context, according to the method of Brown and his colleagues (Brown & Harris, 1978). The first aim in this report is to determine whether any of the event categories in the prescribed inventory encompass events which are particularly likely to receive a high rating of long-term contextual threat. The second aim is to see whether other categories cover events which are particularly likely to be rated as having only mild long-term threat. The proposition being tested is that a substantial proportion of all events with marked and moderate long-term threat will be accounted for by a small subgroup of those event categories identified by a life event inventory. If substantiated, there are practical implications for the construction of event inventories for use in aetiological research.

METHOD

Details of the methods used in this study are given by Bebbington and his colleagues (1981a, b, 1984a). A history of life events was obtained from a random sample of 310 men and women from the general population of Camberwell and from 74 psychiatric out-patients with affective disorders referred to psychiatric facilities in the

same area. Events were identified through the semi-structured interview described by Brown & Harris (1978) and by Bebbington and colleagues (1981b). Where possible, each event was also coded under the rubric of the 67-item life events inventory of Tennant & Andrews (1977). Events were recorded which had occurred in the year before onset in cases of affective disorder and in the year before interview in non-cases.

RESULTS

Not all events identified in the course of the Bedford College semi-structured interview and subsequently confirmed by the post hoc contextual rating fitted the descriptions in the Tennant & Andrews inventory (Table 1). This failure of the inventory to cover 17.5% of events rated as having marked or moderate long-term threat corresponded directly to a difficulty during field work and life event rating sessions in fitting some events into the inventory categories which had been gathered by means of a semi-structured interview. However, only 7 events (0.5%) which seemed to fit the rubric of the inventory were not considered as events under the rules laid down by Brown & Harris (1978).

Of the 67 event categories listed in the inventory, 30 were never required to cover a life event of marked or moderate long-term threat and another 22 categories accounted for less than 4 such events each. Many of these kinds of events were infrequently recorded in this study, but 15 categories in the inventory accounted for 383 of the events identified by the Bedford College interview, only 12 of which received a marked or moderate long-term threat rating. These 15 categories are listed in Appendix B and cover those relatively common life events which seem, on the face of it, particularly unlikely to precipitate episodes of psychiatric disorder. Appendix A includes the 12 categories which account for two thirds of all events collected and four fifths of those rated marked or moderate in long-term threat (Table 2).

The frequency distribution of events with marked or moderate long-term threat was extremely negatively skewed, with a mean frequency of one event for each category on the inventory (Fig. 1). There was a single modal point at zero representing the 30 event categories

Table 1. Long-term threat ratings and inclusion in the Life Event Inventory

Contextual threat	Inclusion in inventory				Total	
	Events included		Events not included			
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Marked or moderate long-term threat	204	82.5	43	17.4	247	18.6
Mild or no threat	648	60.0	434	40.0	1082	81.4
Total	852	64.1	477	36.0	1329	100.00

Table 2. The List of Threatening Experiences and contextual threat ratings

Contextual threat rating	No. events	% of all such events	% covered in inventory
Marked or moderate long-term threat	165	67	81
Mild or no threat	206	19	32
Total	371	28	44

which accounted for no threatening life events at all. The frequency distribution conformed to the pattern of an exponential decay curve, with a small number of outliers represented by those categories in which relatively high numbers of threatening events occurred (see Appendix A).

DISCUSSION

Previous reports from this unit have fully discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the sampling and instrumentation used in this project

(Bebbington *et al.* 1981 *a, b*, 1984 *a, b*; Sturt *et al.* 1981). The analysis carried out here supports the contention that a substantial number of event categories in one particular inventory is either rarely rated as having marked or moderate long-term threat, or occur so infrequently as to make their inclusion relatively unrewarding. The choice of the 12 event categories (the List of Threatening Experiences) in Appendix A was based on the threat ratings of the reported events covered by those categories. Unfortunately, the 12 categories also encompassed a large number of events rated as of mild or no long-term threat (Table 2): there were only 3 event categories on the inventory in which at least three quarters of all events gathered were rated as having marked or moderate long-term threat (see Appendix A).

Seven other event categories which covered 22 life events, of which 14 were rated as having marked or moderate threat, have not been included in the List of Threatening Experiences as they occurred so rarely in this study. Although most of them have considerable face validity as threatening life events, had they occurred more frequently they might have received a wider range of threat ratings. They include the categories: failed an important exam; abortion or miscarriage; broke off an engagement; and civil law suit, including divorce.

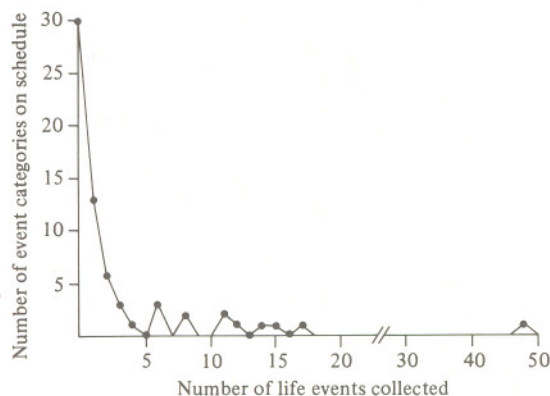


FIG. 1. Frequency distribution of events.

It is sometimes useful in reviewing life event research to consider the types of events which are found to be associated with an increased risk of disorder. One of the disadvantage of reports of life event research using the methods of Brown and his colleagues is that this information is rarely provided. However, Brown & Harris (1978) do provide data from their patients, but not from their onset cases, on two related event categories: birth of a child, and pregnancy or birth. In their study these events were more likely to be rated as severe in patients than in normal women. Of their 114 patients 12 (10.5%) had a severe event (involving marked or moderate long-term threat) associated either with pregnancy or birth, and among the normal women in the general population 6 out of 382 (1.1%) had such an event. In our study there were 22 such events, of which 5 were rated as having marked or moderate long-term threat. This is an example of an event category in which the individualized, contextual rating both of threat and independence reveals significant variation between subjects. Failure to rate in this way would therefore reduce the specificity of the relationship between event and disorder. However, in our series there was only one other event category which we excluded from the List of Threatening Experiences which occurred with a similar frequency: namely, 'moderate financial difficulties', which was threatening on 3 out of 17 occasions.

To the best of our knowledge, no investigation of this kind has been carried out elsewhere. In another population the frequency of particular events might well differ and the contextual rating of long-term threat might be significantly altered by local social factors. The contextual method of rating marked or moderate long-term threat was chosen because it appears to identify those events which are most likely to be of aetiological importance in studies of depressed subjects (Brown & Harris, 1978). The List of Threatening Experiences may not therefore be useful in studies of other conditions and, in particular, in studies of physical disorders. The 15 event categories in Appendix B, which account for over half the life events collected in this series and of which 97% were rated as having either mild or no long-term threat, includes such items as 'subject got married', 'subject got engaged', 'subject started a completely different type of job', and 'subject moved house'. These common

events are all generally recognized to be major life *change* events: clearly they have not been shown to be of aetiological importance in studies of minor psychiatric disorders, but there may still be those who favour their inclusion in studies of other conditions. Hence, both nosological and sampling considerations should be borne in mind by any research worker wishing to make use of the List of Threatening Experiences in order to obtain an inexpensive measure of a substantial proportion of external stress.

It is important to bear in mind that, in this study, we have been able to compare only two methods for rating life events. All the events were collected in the same way in a semi-structured interview; it is possible that the use of the List of Threatening Experiences in order to collect life events in the course of a structured interview or self-completion questionnaire would lead to greater or less precision in event collecting. It should be emphasized, therefore, that our study was not designed to compare the relative merits of different methods of life event data collection, but of different ways of establishing which subjects have events of possible aetiological significance. It is not our intention to make any comment here about the relative merits of different event data collection techniques.

Corroborative support for the list can be obtained by comparing it with an earlier scaling of life events study (Paykel *et al.* 1971). Six of the event categories on the List of Threatening Experiences correspond to the 6 most upsetting events on the Paykel scale, and the remainder fall within the first 25 event categories on that scale. It has been possible to investigate the use of the List of Threatening Experiences using a structured interview method in an independent study. A prescribed inventory of life events was administered by means of a structured interview to depressed psychiatric out-patients and healthy matched controls (Brugha & Conroy, 1985). The 12-item List of Threatening Experiences and another subset of the schedule of life events consisting of 36 undesirable event categories (Paykel *et al.* 1976) were compared. Paykel's list of undesirable life events has been used quite frequently in recent studies of adversity in psychiatric disorders. The relative risk of developing depression (PSE - CATEGO Class N and R) (Wing *et al.* 1974), comparing life events reported by symptom-free controls during

the 6 months before interview and by patients during the 6 months before the onset of acute episodes of illness, was found to be 4.84 using the 12-item List of Threatening Experiences and 3.69 using the subset of 36 undesirable life events (Brugha & Conroy, 1985). The List of Threatening Experiences brings about an increase of almost one third in the relative risk of developing depression. Most of this difference originates from a reduction by almost a half in the number of controls reporting an event when the List of Threatening Experiences is used, rather than the subset of undesirable life events. This suggests that extending lists of life event categories is counter-productive, because the events added are unlikely to have aetiological importance.

In conclusion, the analysis presented here provides support for the proposition that a substantial proportion of measured adversity is accounted for by a relatively small group of the life event categories covered in one particular inventory. The event categories themselves describe serious illness, injury and death of close others as well as other major losses and have considerable face validity. However, the categories still cover many life events with little or no threat and they fail to include a substantial minority of events with moderate or marked long-term contextual threat. Our conclusions from this study are fourfold. First, the semi-structured interview and panel rating technique is much to be preferred. Secondly, the practice of amalgamating event lists to produce yet longer inventories is suspect. It is based on the idea that longer equals better, and the results of the current study suggest that this is not the case. Thirdly, where a decision is taken to use an existing inventory, bearing in mind all the arguments, there may well be grounds for using the short inventory given here under the title of the List of Threatening Experiences. If this short inventory rather than an existing longer inventory is used in the study of depression and other minor psychiatric disorders, this will not reduce the degree of association, although other events may be more salient in other disorders.

Finally, in the construction of a new life event inventory it would be good practice to analyse its performance by examining the contextual threat of the events which are elicited according to the manner described here.

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APPENDIX A

Commonly reported prescribed events with a high proportion rated as having moderate or marked long-term threat

Description of 12 prescribed life event categories	Long-term threat rating		
	Marked or moderate		Mild or no threat
	No.	(%)	No.
*Serious illness or injury to subject	17	(37)	29
*Serious illness or injury to a close relative	49	(42)	68
*Death of first-degree relative including child or spouse	17	(94)	1
*Death of close family friend or second-degree relative	14	(36)	25
Separation due to marital difficulties	6	(75)	2
Broke off a steady relationship	12	(55)	10
Serious problem with a close friend, neighbour or relative	8	(35)	15
Unemployed/seeking work for more than one month	8	(30)	19
Subject sacked from job	6	(43)	8
Major financial crisis	11	(79)	3
Problems with police and court appearance	6	(43)	8
*Something valuable lost or stolen	11	(38)	18
Total	165		206

* Events which are likely to be independent of the subject's symptoms.

APPENDIX B

Frequently reported prescribed events with a high proportion rated with mild or no long-term threat

Description of 15 prescribed life event categories	Post hoc long-term threat rating		
	Marked or moderate	Mild or no threat	
	No.	No.	(%)
Subject had a minor illness or injury	1	34	(97)
Subject had a baby	2	12	(86)
Subject got married	0	9	(100)
Subject became engaged or began a 'steady' relationship	0	42	(100)
A new person came to live at subject's home	1	14	(93)
A marked improvement in the way the subject gets on with someone else who is close	0	15	(100)
A separation from someone important	2	15	(88)
Completed a course of training	0	9	(100)
Studied for or completed important exams	1	22	(96)
Promotion at work	0	18	(100)
Big change in the people, duties or responsibilities at work	0	17	(100)
Started in a completely different type of job	1	84	(99)
Moved house within subject's own town/city	1	53	(98)
Subject had moderate financial difficulties	3	14	(82)
Subject became much better off financially	0	13	(100)
Total number of events	12	371	—