Summary

Autobiographical memory in longitudinal perspective

Stability and change of reported life-events over a five-year period

The main aim of this longitudinal, explorative study is to describe the dynamics of autobiographical memory (AM) over the lifespan. The study covers a period of five years in which the Life-line Interview Method was administered three times to 98 men and women about equally divided over a young (18-30 yrs), middle (31-55 yrs) and older age group (56-84 yrs). Autobiographical memories and expectations were analyzed from the perspective of number, affect and content of events. The effect of age, gender and time perspective on stability and change was determined.

In Chapter 1 a short overview is given of the history and position of research on AM. In the present study ‘autobiographical memory’ is broadly defined as ‘a type of episodic memory for both retrospective (memories) and prospective information (expectations) related to the self’. In studies on AM many different methods are used to collect autobiographical data. An overview of these methods is given in Chapter 1. In the present study autobiographical information was collected by means of the Life-line Interview Method (LIM), a semi-structured interview which combines a quantitative and a qualitative approach. The background and use of this method are described in detail. Administration of the LIM results in a life-line, a series of chronologically ordered life events and a life story. In this thesis analysis of the data was limited to the analysis of life events. A special LIM-category list was developed in order to classify reported events. Finally, a description is given of the design of this study, the respondents who participated in this study, the administration of the LIM and the statistical analysis of the LIM-data.

In Chapter 2 the number and distribution of events respondents report over their lifespan is examined. In the LIM-study the average numbers of events respondents identify over the total lifespan for the first, second and third wave is 7.03, 7.52 and 8.25, respectively. A salient finding is that the sum of past and future autobiographical events turned out to be constant across the lifespan; this was called the ‘Principle of the Constant Life Perspective’. Life
stories of all age groups are characterized by a greater number of past than of future events but the older the group, the greater the number of past events; in contrast, the younger the group, the greater the number of future events. Over three waves respondents mention significantly more events over their total lifespan, which is probably a test-retest effect. As respondents grow older the ratio of past and total number of events increases, i.e., respondents mention more events in the past and fewer in the future. The data indicate that the change in ratio of past and total number of events decreases as people grow older.

The distribution of past events shows a strong recency effect for the young age group, i.e., respondents recall more events from the recent past than from the distant past. For future events a proximity effect was found, i.e., respondents expect more events in the near future than in the distant future. This recency/proximity effect is moving with increasing age. For the older age group a recency/proximity effect is found and a ‘memory bump’, i.e., older respondents report a larger number of memories than expected on basis of the classical forgetting curve of Ebbinghaus for the period of late adolescence and early adulthood. The distribution of events for the middle age group shows an emerging bump and recency/proximity effects. Various explanations for the bump phenomenon are presented and discussed. In addition to the lifespan distribution of events it was found that the average age at which respondents situate the first event is about 12 years without an effect of age or gender. The mean age at which respondents expect the last event in life, which is mostly situated in the future, and at which respondents expect to die appears to depend on age; the older respondents are, the later in life they situate the last event and the moment of expected death.

In Chapter 3 the affective rating of events was determined and the ratio of (very) positive and (very) negative affect was examined as well as the distribution of (very) positive and (very) negative affect over the lifespan. Overall, respondents report as many positive as negative events for the total life and for the past and the future separately, i.e., the overall affective rating of the total life and of the past and future was found to be neutral. A tendency was found that young women are more positive about their whole life than young men, while middle-aged men are more positive than middle-aged women and older men and women are about equally positive (or negative). It was also found that the older respondents are, the more positive they are about the past and the more negative about the future. Concerning the percentage of intense affect it was found that more events are accompanied by an intense affect in the past than in the future. A greater percentage of past events is rated as ‘very negative’ than as ‘very positive’, while the percentages of ‘very positive’ and ‘very negative’
events for the future do not differ significantly from each other.

The distribution of positive and negative events over the lifespan shows a bump for positive events for the middle-aged and older age groups. For the older age group there is also a narrow bump for negative events which starts at the beginning of the Second World War. Besides, for all age groups there are recency effects for negative events and proximity effects for positive events which move with increasing age. The distribution of ‘very positive’ and ‘very negative’ events shows about the same pattern for the young and middle age group as the distribution of positive and negative events. For the older age group ‘very positive’ and ‘very negative’ events are distributed irregular over the lifespan without a specific pattern. The first important event respondents recall from the past is predominantly accompanied by a negative affect; for the last event a tendency was found that older adults are most negative about this event. The best period in life, i.e., the decade for which the ratio of positive events to the total number of events is highest, is the period between about 20 to 40 years of age. The worst period in life, i.e., the decade for which the ratio of the number of negative events to the total number of events is highest, is the period of 70 to 80 years of age followed by childhood.

In Chapter 4 the first wave is analyzed concerning the content of memories and expectations and the main affect of these specific events. To this end LIM-events were classified into forty subcategories divided over nine categories: Relations, School, Work, Health, Growth, Home, Birth, Death and Other. Per decade the distribution of events over (sub)categories was determined and the most frequently mentioned (sub)categories per decade were selected resulting in a description of the modal life course for the total group and for men and women of three age groups. For the total group it turned out that childhood and adolescence are characterized by School and Home, young adulthood by Relations, middle adulthood by Work, and older adulthood by Health and Death. The content of autobiographical memories and expectations turned out to be dependent of age and gender. For instance, young men expect Birth Child later than young women, Death Parents was mentioned more often by middle-aged men than by middle-aged women, and older men expected more often Death Partner in the future than older women. The past is characterised by more personal memories, while the future is more prototypical. As people grow older the view they have on their past and future changes, which favors a more dynamic view on the human life-course.

In Chapter 5 stability and change of (patterns of) life events over a period of two and five years are analyzed. First, the second and third wave were content-analyzed in the same way as
the first wave and the results of the three waves were compared to each other. Examples of patterns that appeared to be stable are: older respondents recall mainly events from the bump period which indicate a beginning or a development and which are rated positively; men appear to be more focused on Work while women are more focused on Health and Birth; men are more dependent on parents and partner than women; older adults report fewer events in the category Growth than younger adults.

Second, the intra-individual stability of events over three waves was determined. Stability was defined as recalling similar events, i.e., events that are classified into the same (sub)categories, by the same respondents at different points in time. Over a period of five years about one third of memories and expectations is mentioned at each wave. The view people have of the past is more stable than that of the future. Especially young adults have a very unstable view of the future. The periods in life from which respondents report most similar events over three waves are childhood and the period of 20 to 30 years of age. For the past negative events are more fixed in memory than positive events. For the future it was found that negative events are more stable for men while positive events are more stable for women. Events within the category Relations are most stable in the life story followed by School, Death and Other, while events concerning Growth are least stable. Events within the subcategories Relations Others, Travel, Problems Work, Death Family, End Relations, Birth Family, War and Rest, which are generally accompanied by a negative affect – except for Travel and Birth Family -, are most stable. In general, people have normative expectations for the future. They also expect fewer events to happen in the near future than actually happen. Most of these unexpected events are negative non-normative events. The younger respondents are, the stronger this pattern. The present study focuses on the stability of events. On the basis of theories of memory and on the basis of inspection of different versions of the life story possible explanations for changes in the life story are provided. It is concluded that the life story is constantly being reconstructed.

In Chapter 6 different aspects of the methodological approach followed in this study – explorative, quantitative and qualitative, more inductive than deductive, and idiothetic – are discussed. It is argued that due to the chosen approach the study has yielded rich information about AM and the subjective life course. An important contribution of the present study to the body of knowledge about AM is the fact that it is a longitudinal study and that both retrospective and prospective AM are included. Practical implications of findings of this study for the individual life and for setting out a policy in different areas are mentioned. Next,
various possibilities for clinical application of the LIM are discussed; the LIM can be used as the starting point for counseling, as a diagnostic instrument and as a therapeutic tool. Then, future research is outlined, based on the full LIM-data set, including a fourth wave, a life-line, a life story and several questionnaires. Finally, the main findings of this study are presented in terms of Principles, i.e., results for which a strong effect was found and which are also found in other studies, Hypotheses, i.e., results which were only found in this particular LIM-study, and Trends, i.e., results for which a trend was found. It is concluded that the contours of the dynamics of autobiographical memory over the lifespan have been marked.