Reconstructing event histories in standardized survey research:

Cognitive mechanisms and aided recall techniques

Tina Glasner
The quality of retrospective reports in survey research is often compromised by the respondent’s inability to recall personal events accurately. As retrospective data collection is an integral part of social surveys, these inaccuracies are of great concern to researchers. In order to reduce reporting error caused by memory problems, various aided recall techniques have been developed. This dissertation focuses on calendar instruments, such as the Event History Calendar, which combine the use of temporal landmarks and visual response feedback. So far, a limited number of methodological studies have examined the effects of those methods. In order to add to the body of research, the dissertation addresses the question whether cognitive processes differ between interviews with calendar instruments and interviews with regular retrospective questionnaires. Furthermore, it discusses the results of a methodological experiment that was aimed at examining the differential effects of temporal landmarks and visual response feedback on data quality in a web-based retrospective life course survey. Based on the findings of that experiment, recommendations are made for the optimal design of standardized calendar recall aids in self-completed life course surveys.

Tina Glasner (1977) graduated from the University of Amsterdam in 2003 with a Master’s degree in Communication Studies. The present study was conducted at the Faculty of Social Sciences, VU University Amsterdam and at Wageningen University and Research Centre. Since October 2009, she has been employed as an assistant professor at the department of Methodology and Statistics, Faculty of Social Sciences, Utrecht University.