

# Life Experience and Its Transformation: A Model of Transition from Situations to Events

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** The relevance of life-related issues, including the concept of life experience, stems from the interest of contemporary personality psychology in changing individuals in a changing world. This study aims to present a new perspective on the relationship between the concepts of "situation" and "event" in human lived experience. We propose the concept of a dynamic "situation–event" system developing in life experience, transforming it as a result of the transition from the situation-related level to the event-related one. Experience is considered the primary mechanism for this transition. **Methods.** To empirically verify the proposed two-level "situation–event" model, a qualitative study using a "self-disclosure" situation was conducted. Fifty participants ( $M = 21.6 \pm 7$  years) from various Russian cities participated in the study. They were asked to write about their experiences in which they confessed something intimate and important about themselves to others, and how this situation influenced them and their lives. Content analysis, frequency analysis, descriptive statistics, testing the differences between two independent samples (the Mann-Whitney U-test), and cluster analysis were used to process the results. **Results.** The results showed the differences between experiences of self-disclosure as a "situation" and as an "event". The experience of self-disclosure at the event-related level is associated with a sphere of individual meanings and values and is characterized by the emotional richness of experiences and the creation of new meanings that lead to changes in life experience. **Discussion.** The study enabled us to propose a dynamic "situation–event" system based on human lived experience. Within this model, an event is a kind of "pivotal moment" in the individual's life, enabling the transformation

of lived experience by generating new meanings through the mechanism of experience. The proposed model expands existing understanding of situations and events in the context of the individual's life experience and considers them to be interrelated concepts where one can be transformed into another under certain conditions.

## Keywords

life experience, situation, event, experience, situation-related level, event-related level, "self-disclosure" situation, meanings

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## Introduction

The concept of "life experience" is part of a conceptual system associated with the study of ontological issues of personality (such as life course, life scenario, life model, etc.). Without this concept, no description of the life of an individual in the context of his or her development can be complete, which reflects the existential nature of the interaction between the individual and the world around him or her in all its diversity of actions, thoughts, and feelings.

The definition of "life experience" is most often used to describe various life situations that can influence changes in both the inner world of the individual and his/her life (Ananyev, 2010; Vasilyuk, 2005; Abulkhanova-Slavskaya, 1999, et al.).

At the same time, according to S. L. Rubinstein, when we talk about life experience, it makes sense to use the concept of "event" (Rubinstein, 2003) as a "pivotal moment" that initiates both the process of change in life and the changes in the individual.

S. L. Rubinstein emphasized that the existential status of an event is the basis for its distinction from a situation that usually occurs in the context of the individual's everyday life. A situation becomes an event because the individual makes it a personally significant moment in his/her life (Grishina, 2020), memorizing it by creating a "special imprint" in their life experience that impacts the perception and interpretation of other situations in the future (Shors, 2006). In other words, to turn a situation into an event, it must resonate in the inner world of the individual.

It is the experience of a life event that forms the individual's life experience (Schwaba, 2023), which determines how it is processed within the experience and becomes part of it. It can be said that the whole diversity of events experienced in life provides a reference

framework for understanding the processes of integration and transformation of the individual's life experience.

### ***Events and Situations***

In literature, the concepts of "situation" and "event" are traditionally synonymous and have no distinction (Gasparyan, 2005; Goncharova & Pergamenshchik, 2007, etc.), or events are described as fragments of a situation (Filippov & Kovalev, 1986; Savitsky, 2013), which is actually incorrect.

In the context of life experience, the concepts of "situation" and "event" cannot be considered identical. This raises questions of when should we talk about a situation, when should we talk about an event, and how does a situation become an event for an individual?

Furthermore, if we consider an event "a pivotal moment in life" (according to S. L. Rubinstein), it cannot be part of a situation. An event for an individual can encompass a variety of life situations, not only current ones, but also unified (link) situations of the present, past and future, which, when combined or layering against each other, form a complex life event that becomes a turning point — a point of choice in the trajectory of an individual's life (for example, the birth of a child, accompanied by a multitude of situations — external conditions, relationships with loved ones, changes at work. These may relate not only to family relationships, but also to the circumstances of the birth of the child, the difficulties of the first days, changes in living conditions, etc.).

Although the authors use the concepts of "situation" and "event" as synonyms, in scientific discourse there can be a distinction between them according to the following parameters: a) "external/internal": an event occurs in response to a situation in the inner world of an individual, the situation is part of the objective reality (Loginova, 1978; Klementyeva, 2014); b) "changes/no changes": here, an event is considered a special kind of perception of a situation that leads to personal changes, while a situation is often a context for the emergence of an event (Kartseva, 1988; Sapogova, 2005); c) depth of experience: events, compared to a situation, are experienced at a deeper level (Antsiferova, 2006; Popova, 2011); d) value-meaning associations: events always occur in the inner world of an individual due to the relationship between the system of values and meanings and the experience and interpretation of the situation (Buhler, 1971; Petrovsky, 1993; Leontiev, 2022).

The emergence of an event can result from the response of an individual's existing value system to a situation; that is, the value system, which is essentially the core of life experience, can induce the process of unfolding in the inner world. An event may also arise as a result of a clash, a challenge to the system of values and meanings, leading to the need for its revision and possible transformation.

Nevertheless, the interchangeability of the two concepts remains quite consistent. Scientific views on the concept of *situation* have undergone significant changes,

transferring it exclusively from the external field to the internal one, considering it as a unit of the individual's inner world (Korzhova, 2012; Solntseva, 2021), making this distinction even more complex.

We believe that a solution to this problem could be to consider these two concepts as interconnected, where one, under certain conditions, can become the other, using the parameter of "trace" in the individual's life experience as a conditional boundary point.

### ***The Event-Related Status of Situations***

When we talk about a situation, we essentially describe not the situation itself, but its image. And any image can be created and experienced at different levels: directly at the situation-related level—more superficial—as the processing of information (the results of which can constitute the individual's cognitive experience and be based on it), and at another level, where it acquires a new, different character, leaving a "special traces", becomes a point of bifurcation for the emergence of something qualitatively new — "special knowledge", "special skill", "special meaning", etc. —that is, moving to an event-related level that is consistent with individuals' life experiences, grounding it and enriching it with new elements at the same time.

When situations are transferred to the event-related level, i.e. when they become events, they acquire characteristics of a value-related emotional relationship and become imbued with special meaning. Consequently, they can be considered moments of deterministic rupture, when the usual rhythm of everyday life and the usual way of life are disrupted, when old experiences lose their relevance and new experiences have not yet taken shape, when they disrupt daily routine and are perceived as personally significant and memorable by those who have experienced them (Luhmann, 2021).

In this case, situations evoke profound responses and influence meanings, life values, and the path of life (Bergis, 2014). At such moments, the individual's inner balance shifts; the feeling of inner balance gives way to confusion, worry, anxiety, and bewilderment, leading to an increase in entropy. Thus, a situation at the event level not only acts as a source of change but also leads to structural changes: the emergence of new connections and qualities within experience (Zinov'yeva & Kostromina, 2022).

The scientific literature contains attempts to describe the event-related status of situations within the structure of life experience. For example, models are described for reorganizing or changing life experiences due to the resulting formative, life changing choices or the experience of critical life events (the Transformative Life Experience (TLE) model, Russo-Netzer & Davidov, 2020). Such experiences can lead to radical changes where an individual faces the need to reconsider his or her values, identity and life strategies.

Other models describe the mechanisms through which events are integrated into experience and realized in order to predict the future (Barsalou, 2015; Rubin & Umanath, 2015). Events in this context are not considered isolated facts, but dynamic scenarios that connect the past, present and future within lived experience.

However, these models ignore the process of transitioning a situation into an event without revealing the dynamics of the "situation–event" system within the structure of lived experience.

### ***Experience as a Mechanism to Transform Situations into Events***

It is important to note that events, with their transformational properties, connect various temporal aspects of the individual's life. Thus, an event that occurred much before other events can be relevant in the present and influence the future (Grishina & Kostromina, 2021).

Experience can act as a mechanism to move from the situation-related level to the event level, leading to changes in the individual's lived experience (Zinovyeva & Kostromina, 2022).

Experiences, although part of daily life, highlight extraordinary moments in the normal flow of events. Experiences are surprising and astonishing in the sense that they have the ability to diverge from expectations, thus creating a changed consciousness and a new understanding of the situation. Awareness of participation in perception and feeling is a necessary condition for gaining experience (Ulanovsky, 2009; Jantzen, 2013).

It is known that not all people react in the same way to different situations, even to extreme ones (Luhmann et al., 2021, Yap et al., 2014). This depends on many factors, including previous experience, personality traits, cognitive characteristics, etc. (Luo et al., 2023; Kobasa, 1979). However, it is the experience itself that determines the level of processing – situation-related, characterized by more superficial experiences and low personal significance (Antsiferova, 2006), or event-related.

In psychology, the impact of a personally significant event on the individual is more commonly studied in the context of the individual's encounter with difficult (traumatic) life situations and the consequences associated with them (Pergamenshchik, 2004).

Events that are not objectively "difficult" are studied significantly less frequently, as are those initiated by individuals due to the need to resolve internal tensions caused by conflict between what is desired and what really happens (e.g., leaving one's job, moving, divorce, revealing hidden information about oneself to another, etc.).

The traditional situation-event approach views individuals as passive reactants to external circumstances and ignores how they experience these circumstances, how past experiences contribute to these experiences, and what traces remain in their lived experiences that influence their future.

The most common methodological approach in these studies is to compare differences in personality change between those who have experienced such a situation and those who have not (Hudson & Roberts, 2016), or to examine changes in average pre- and post-exposure scores. In many cases, major life events are assessed using lists that already include many categories of events, asking participants to indicate whether they have experienced them or not (Dohrenwend, 2006).

Such methodological approaches are based on the hypothesis that situations tend to influence different people in similar ways, resulting in changes in all individuals experiencing them. However, studies using these approaches produce mixed and often contradictory evidence (Schwaba, 2023). In fact, these results indicate the heterogeneity of experiences in encounters with situations and the diversity of these experiences between individuals. Another approach is to allow participants to self-evaluate their perceptions of major life events. We believe that measuring individuals' retrospective perceptions of life events, including how they experience and evaluate them, including important characteristics of the situation that they believe they have caused them to change, and how this affects their experience, can be a way of understanding this heterogeneity. Current narrative research in this field shows that people are attentive to the role that situations and events play in their own lives (Pasupathi et al., 2007; Singer et al., 2013). They are able to accurately identify the specific events that affected them and assess to what extent these events have precipitated changes.

In an attempt to explore empirically how a situation moves to the event-related level, we studied "self-disclosure" situations, i.e. situations in which individuals were obliged to communicate "hidden" information about themselves to another person, in order to confess something important about themselves (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

We hypothesized that although this situation is initiated by individuals themselves with the aim of change, it will not be an event for everyone; for some, it will remain at the situation-related level.

Those who have classified it as a personally significant event in their lives may show specific ways of interaction within it, including those related to the depth of emotions, the construction of meanings that lead to changes in life experiences, through the experience of it as a break point between "before" and "after" and the emergence of something "new" (this could be a new meaning, "knowledge", skill, etc.).

## Methods

In our study, we asked participants to write about how they experienced a situation in which they voluntarily confessed to others something intimate and important and how it affected them and their lives. They answered the question, "*Was this situation a personally significant event in your life?*" The following attributes of the event were included in their descriptions: the presence of more intense emotions, indications of intra-personal changes following the event, and the perception of the event as a point of change – "before" and "after". Due to the confidentiality of the information obtained, the content of the self-disclosure situations described and their classification were omitted. We will only focus on simply highlighting the deep personal context of the situations cited by the respondents in their interviews.

The study involved 50 individual participants aged 18 to 42 years, including 33 (66%) women and 17 (34%) men ( $N = 46$ ,  $M = 21.6 \pm 7$  years). Respondents were from

various cities across Russia and Belarus. The majority of respondents were residents of St. Petersburg, Moscow, and the city of Oryol, of whom 38% had a higher education, 35% had a secondary vocational education, and 12% had a general secondary education. The criteria for inclusion were as follows: 18 years and older, and a single or multiple experience of self-disclosure. We deliberately did not limit the age of the respondents, allowing us to analyze the diversity of life experiences and avoid data bias due to excessive homogeneity in the sample.

Our analysis units were segments that reflect experiences (feelings, sensations, associations), assessments and meanings of events, as well as indications of changes in the individual's internal and external reality after self-disclosure.

Content analysis, frequency analysis, descriptive statistics, testing differences between two independent samples (the Mann-Whitney U test), and cluster analysis were used to process the study results. Quantitative data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22.

## Results

The main categories of content analysis we examined were as follows: (a) experiences (feelings, sensations, associations), (b) self-image, (c) life experiences (meanings, senses), and (d) factors and characteristics of the situation accompanying self-disclosure.

The study identified three key aspects of the experience of the self-disclosure situation – emotional, cognitive and behavioral.

The dominant experience during self-disclosure was fear (40% of participants). One third of respondents (36%) reported anxiety accompanied by somatic reactions (hand tremor, voice trembling, lump in throat). The majority of respondents (68%) felt relief, freedom, ease, and relaxation after self-disclosure, while also experiencing a positive attitude towards themselves (24%) and others (18%).

During self-disclosure, 20% of participants experienced thoughts of possible rejection and non-acceptance by the other person (18% feared a negative reaction, and 16% worried about potential changes in their relationship). For 12% of respondents, self-disclosure increased negative self-perceptions ("I'm difficult", "I'm stupid", "I'm bad").

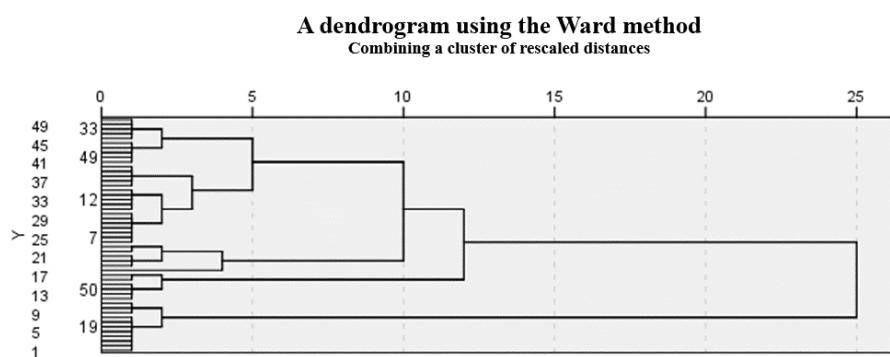
In most cases, the behavioral component (74%) consisted of avoidance and escapism ("I left immediately", "I turned away") and freezing ("I couldn't move").

The overwhelming majority of participants (96%) reported finding new meanings and values (self-acceptance, authenticity) after self-disclosure, while 62% reported strengthening positive self-perceptions ("strong", "confident"). In 80% of cases, transformations occurred in key areas? Including professional self-determination, rethinking social roles, changing the image of the future, and improving interpersonal relationships (82%).

Furthermore, we identified two clusters of respondents based on the study results. To divide the sample into subgroups, Ward's method of hierarchical clustering was used, using the interval measurement of the squared Euclidean distance. Content analysis categories were used as clustering variables (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Cluster analysis of variables related to the content of respondents' experiences in their self-disclosure descriptions*



The first cluster included all respondents (39 individuals) who rated the situation of "self-disclosure" to others as a personally significant event that resulted in the emergence of new meanings, more intense feelings, changes in major areas of life, and a vision of the future. The second cluster consisted of 11 individuals—those for whom this situation was irrelevant, not leading, in the respondents' opinion, to any changes. As a result, respondents in the first cluster were referred to as "experiencing the event", while those in the second cluster were referred to as "experiencing the situation".

Differences between the experiences of self-disclosure as a "situation" and as an "event" were observed in the content of the descriptions themselves (Table 1).

The texts of the respondents for whom self-disclosure was a personally significant event contained a larger number of words and narrative details (descriptions of time and place, experiences, use of adjectives, participial and adverbial phrases, etc.). They predominantly used perfective verbs (told, did, said, did, etc.), whereas in texts where self-disclosure was not a personally significant event, the activity was largely attributed to others (he asked, found out, guessed, etc.) or to other "forces" or circumstances (it just happened, I had to, etc.). There was no evidence of new knowledge or meanings emerging.

**Table 1**

*Differences between experiences of self-disclosure as a "situation" and as an "event"*

Event	Situation
Longer narrative with details	Short narrative without details
Descriptions of changes in self-image, vision of the future, and impact on personally significant areas of life are included.	Changes in self-image and the impact of the situation on areas of life are denied.
Feelings are more intense, predominantly negatively charged ("fear", "anxiety", "jitters", etc.)	Feelings are characterized by less intensity ("calm", "acceptance", "excitement", etc.)
There is an indication of a sense of dividing life into "before" and "after".	No indication of a "break" ("there was no before and after", "nothing has changed")
The narrative usually reveals the authorship of the person in the situation ("decided", "understood", "told", "planned", "wanted", etc.).	In the narrative, the authorship of the person in the situation is clearly the least ("it just happened", "it happened by itself", "spontaneously", etc.)

A comparative analysis revealed statistically significant differences between the two groups in the following thematic categories identified during content analysis: "Liberation", "Changes", "Feelings", and "Meanings".

The respondents in the first group usually included sections in their texts mentioning the emergence of a sense of inner freedom after self-disclosure ("I can just be myself", "I finally became free") ( $U=115$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), as well as more intense feelings ( $U=169$ ,  $p=0.033$ ) (both negative: "I was very afraid" and positive: "I felt joy and pride"). There was also a

greater number of segments in which respondents reported changes ( $U=51$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) affecting their image of the future ("I finally understood what I wanted to do"), self-image ("I became braver and more confident"), and the emergence of new meanings ( $U=71.5$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) ("being myself and accepting myself", "being open to people has become very important to me").

The analysis of the descriptions showed that respondents who experienced a self-disclosure situation as an event were characterized by certain conditional stages of transition from a situation to an event. Of course, these stages cannot be regarded as universal; rather, they are a kind of exploratory result requiring a separate examination.

As an example, we will provide an expanded example of a description where one can see how a situation becomes an event during its experience.

We identified the emergence of emotional reactions as the initial stage, "I told my best friend about it. I think I was about 20 years old. I was really afraid to tell her, in case it affected our relationship". Here we see the emergence of emotions even before self-disclosure. Then, emotional reactions emerge at the moment of self-disclosure, "I remember I started talking about it and I burst into tears". Here we also see the emergence of life experience (I was afraid to speak up, perhaps there had already been situations where the other person's reaction was negative).

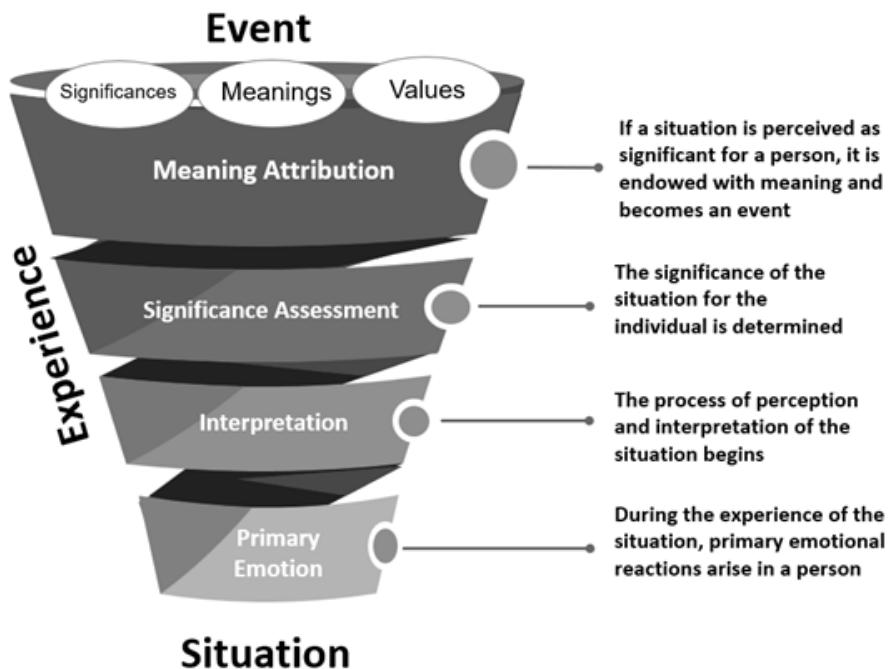
The second stage begins the process of interpreting the situation. At this stage, individuals evaluate the situation, explain it for themselves, and also construct hypotheses regarding the cause-and-effect relationships of what happened based on their lived experience and knowledge: "I don't remember what prompted me to talk about it at that particular moment; perhaps there were some difficulties in the relationship that I had no one to share with".

Then the meaning of the situation is determined, "At that time it was very important for me because I spoke to the person closest to me whose support was extremely important for me". The presence in the descriptions of its assessment as personally significant may mark the beginning of its transition to the event-related level.

Then the situation begins to make sense, reflecting a new experience, "For me, this situation showed that we need to open up to people with whom we feel like ourselves, that we don't need to be shy or afraid of anything or anyone; everything is in our hands". At this stage, the event is again linked to lived experience, through a comparison of the existing and the "new".

Generally, the transition from a situation to an event can be represented as follows (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
*Model of Transition from Situations to Events*



These results lead us to the following interim conclusion: When faced with a personally significant situation, individuals start to respond to it and experience it based on their lived experience. In the process of experiencing the situation, individuals experience initial emotional reactions, and the processes of perception, interpretation, and assessment begin, resulting in the determination of the meaning of the situation.

If a situation is personally significant for an individual and requires a reconsideration of existing tasks and goals, leading to a deepening of emotional experiences, then such a situation is imbued with special meaning and becomes an event. In turn, an event, which includes emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components, again undergoes a cycle of experience, but at a level that meets the criterion of a "pivotal moment" in life, altering its trajectory, transforming individuals themselves, and opening up new possibilities. Thus, a situation, transformed into an event, not only integrates into individuals' lived experience but also influences their values, meanings, and relationships.

At the event-related level, change is not only quantitative (for example, changes in the level of emotional arousal); it is primarily qualitative. When experiences become complex, it occurs due to the awareness generated by these qualitative changes. They draw an

individual's attention to what is happening. Complex experiences are characterized by the emergence of this focus.

The proposed model focuses on the view of a situation and an event as a single dynamic system and describes it as a process based on lived experience, enriching it with new meanings as a result of the transition from the situation-related level to the event-related one.

## Discussion

The results obtained during the study suggest the presence of a common "situation-event" dynamic system in experience, based on lived experience. Within this system, an event appears as a qualitatively different level of experiencing fragments of reality (a combination of situations), being a kind of "pivotal moment" in the individual's life. It is through events that an individual's lived experience is transformed and enriched with new meanings and senses.

The transition of a situation (situation-related level) to an event (event-related level) is ensured by an experiential mechanism that includes (a) the emergence of primary emotional reactions, (b) the process of interpreting the situation, (c) determining the personal significance of the situation, and d) imbuing meaning that reflects the new experience.

A situation that has reached the event-related level, that is, has become an event for an individual, acquires special characteristics associated with the depth of feelings and the construction of meanings and values, leading to changes in life experience. An event, unlike a situation, is characterized by the ability to generate *new meanings*, integrating into the system of values and meanings of the individual.

The proposed model was empirically validated using a self-disclosure situation as an example, which made it possible to clearly demonstrate the differences in the experience of the same episode at the situation-related and event-related levels. We found that respondents for whom the self-disclosure situation became a personally significant event were characterized by deeper and more intense experiences, changes in their self-image and future vision, and the emergence of new meanings. A comparative analysis revealed statistically significant differences between respondents for whom the self-disclosure situation had reached the event-related level and those for whom it remained at the situation-related level.

These results are consistent with previous studies. Situations perceived as personally significant and reaching the event-related level were reported to promote profound changes in self-perception, the formation of new meanings and the re-evaluation of personal values (Singer et al., 2013; Schwaba et al., 2023). It has also been confirmed that events are key structural units integrated into an individual's life experience, ensuring its transformation and further enrichment (Pasupathi et al., 2007).

Furthermore, an analysis of scientific literature shows that the problem of the event-related level of a situation in the structure of life experience was previously mainly considered in the context of (a) the reorganization or modification of lived experience through experiencing critical life events (Transformative Life Experience, TLE model, Russo-Netzer & Davidov, 2020) and (b) the mechanisms for integrating personally significant episodes into autobiographical memory (Barsalou, 2015; Rubin & Umanath, 2015).

Until now, however, the process of transition from situations to events has not yet been explored. The proposed model aims to fill this gap in psychological science.

### **Conclusion**

This study enabled us to expand our understanding of concepts such as situation, event, and lived experience. The scientific novelty of the study is in describing the process of transition from situations to events, based on lived experience and enriching it through the emergence of new meanings as a result of the transition from the situation-related level to the event-related one through the mechanism of experience.

The practical significance of this study lies in the fact that the proposed model enables a better understanding of the processes of formation and transformation of an individual's lived experience as a result of experiencing various events.

Of course, the proposed model of a transition from a situation to an event is not universal or comprehensive, but requires further verification and could be used as a perspective for future research in this field.

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## Author Contribution

**Yana S. Platonova** conducted the study, collected the data, performed processing and analysis of the results, wrote the text of the manuscript, worked with sources.

**Elena V. Zinovyeva** contributed to the research concept and theoretical grounding, wrote the overview section, approved the final version of the manuscript.

**Svetlana N. Kostromina** edited the text of the sections Introduction, Results and Discussion, performed the critical review of the manuscript.

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## **Conflict of Interest Information**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.