An Investigation of Big Life Decisions

PRESENTER:

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BACKGROUND

► The assumption that small consequential or big hypothetical decisions studied in the lab are good models for real "big" life decisions seems dubious given that no lab study can replicate all of the relevant factors nor the substantial consequences.

► The purpose of this study was to begin answering the following questions: What are life's biggest decisions? What makes them so big? When do they occur? How can we make a good one? Which of them lead to happiness?

STUDY 1

► 62 participants ranging in age between 25 and 75 years qualitatively described their definition of a big life decision, the elements of a big life decision, and three of their own big life decisions.

► Based on my analysis in addition to two independent judges, big decisions could be classified into a taxonomy comprising 58 decision types and 9 decision categories and were found to have ten elements.

STUDY 2

► 120 participants ranging in age between 24 and 75 years indicated to what extent each of the ten decision elements applied to each of the decision types, estimated the age that an average person makes each big decision for the first time, how relatively big each decision was, and estimated the percentage of adults in the country who would include the decision in their list of ten biggest life decisions.
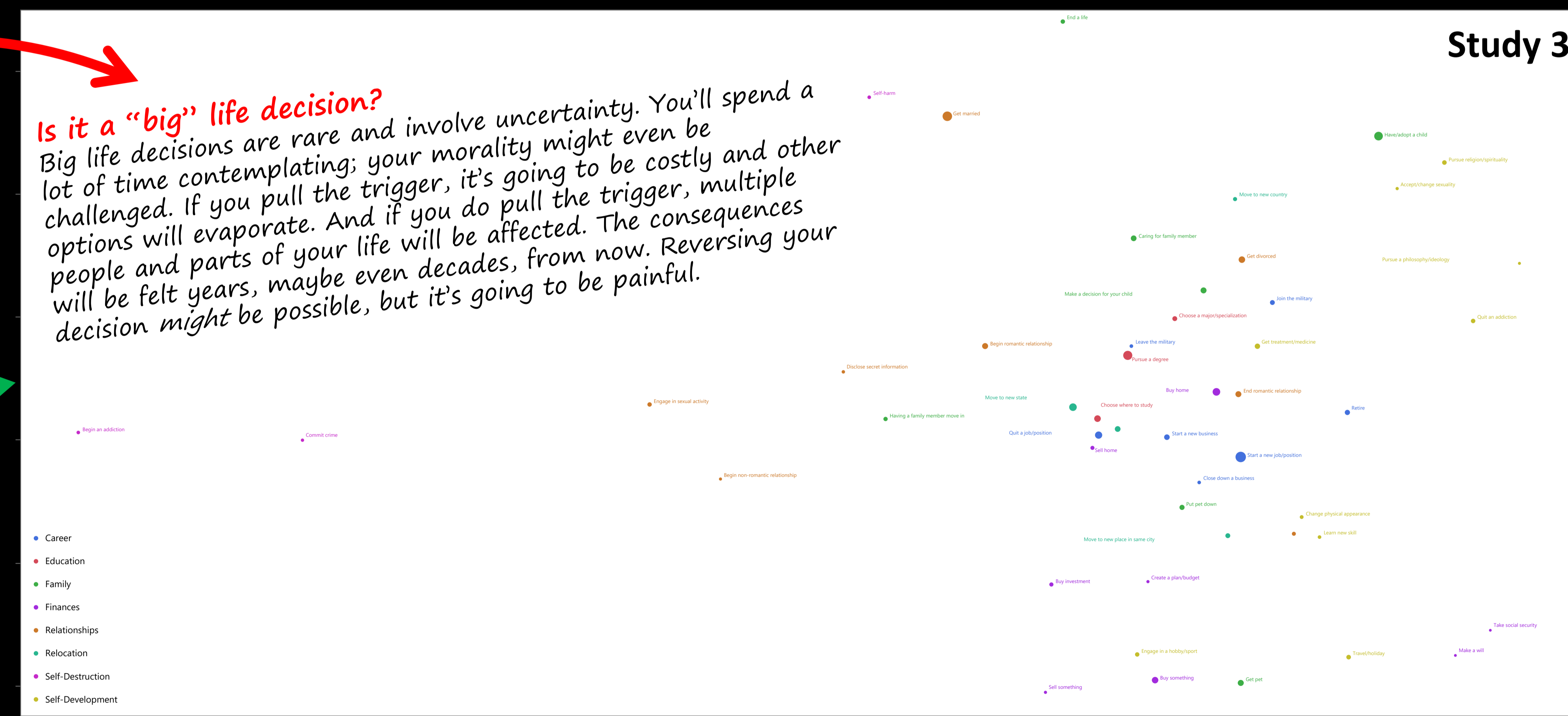
FLAGSHIP STUDY 3

► 658 participants ranging in age between 20 and 79 years were asked to describe and rate on numerous dimensions the ten biggest decisions they had made in their past and the ten biggest decisions they expected to make in their future.

► The key dependent variables for recalled decisions:
  ► *Decision timing*: Age at the time of the decision.
  ► *Decision evaluation*: Retrospective evaluation of how good each decision was.
  ► *Decision importance*: Ranked order of the ten decisions from most-to-least important.

Life's **most common** big life decisions include getting married, buying a home, and starting a job.


More Common Decisions

More Important Decisions

Study 2
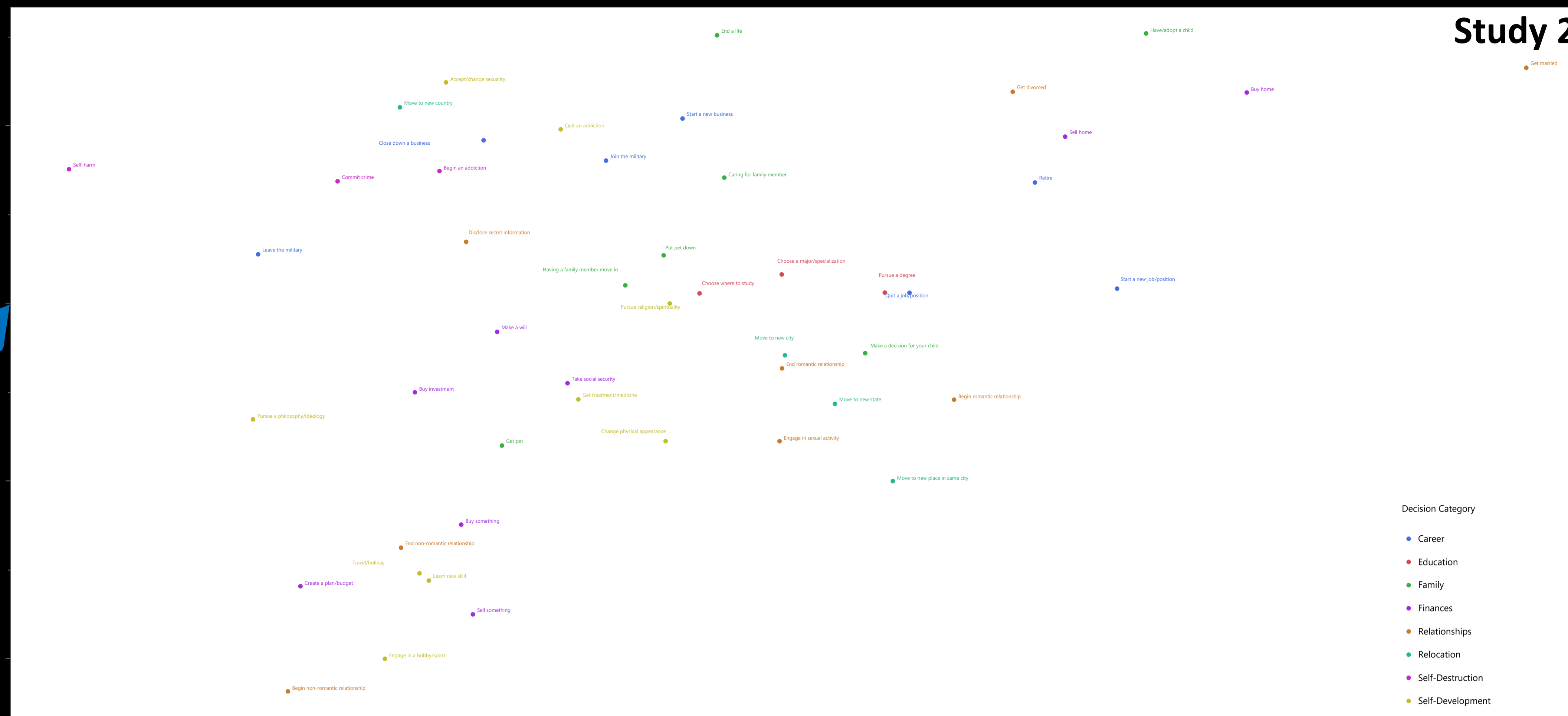
Life's **biggest** decisions include ending a life, having a child, and getting married.

Better Evaluated Decisions

Study 3

More Important Decisions

Is it a "big" life decision?
Big life decisions are rare and involve uncertainty. You'll spend a lot of time contemplating; your morality might even be challenged. If you pull the trigger, it's going to be costly and other options will evaporate. And if you do pull the trigger, multiple people and parts of your life will be affected. The consequences will be felt years, maybe even decades, from now. Reversing your decision might be possible, but it's going to be painful.

Life's **best** biggest decisions are those of self-development, including pursuing a philosophy, ideology, and religion.

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Percent of Recalled Past Big Decisions for each Decision Age Period and Age Group in Study 3
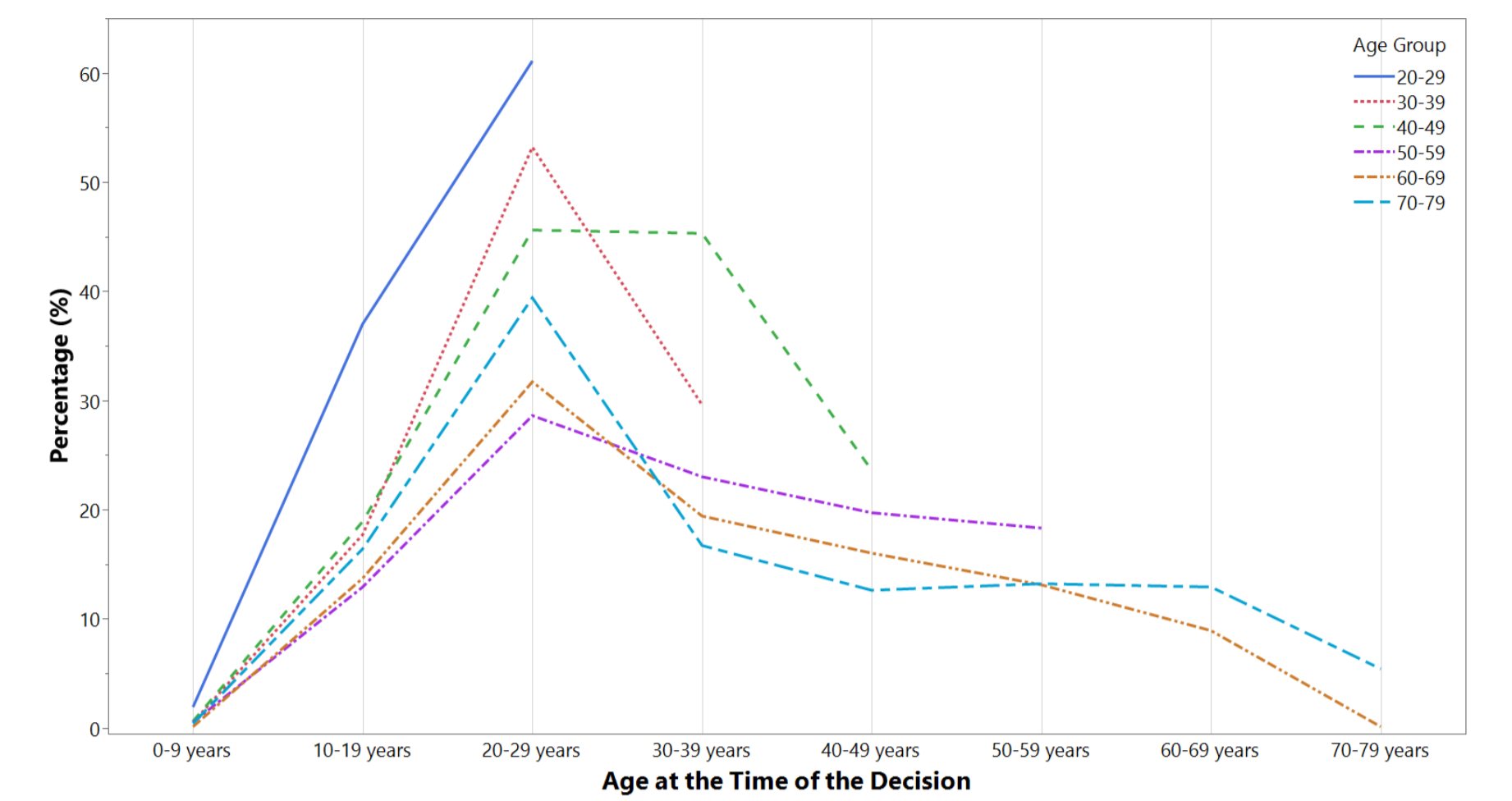
Average Number of Big Life Decisions Split by Age Group and Decision Category in Study 3

Decision Category	N	Age Group[1]						All[2]
		20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	
Career	1,292	1.56C	1.64C	1.84BC	1.82BC	2.25AB	2.60A	**1.95A**
Education	889	2.06A	1.47B	1.47B	1.23B,C	0.94C	0.97C	**1.36B**
Family	1,240	1.39B	2.06A	1.99A	1.94A,B	1.90AB	1.97A	**1.88A**
Finances	706	0.95A	1.13A	1.25A	1.23A	0.92A	0.92A	**1.07C**
Relationships	1,195	1.69AB	1.50A	1.70B	1.93AB	2.18A	1.91AB	**1.82A**
Relocation	585	0.72A	0.96A	0.74A	1.01A	1.04A	0.91A	**0.90CD**
Self-Destruction	103	0.38A	0.18B	0.19B	0.06B	0.13B	0.03B	**0.16E**
Self-Development	532	1.17A	0.98AB	0.78AB	0.76AB	0.56B	0.65B	**0.82D**
Other	38	0.08A	0.09A	0.05A	0.02A	0.07A	0.04A	**0.06E**

[1] Values in the same row not connected by the same letter are significantly different by Tukey HSD.
[2] Values in the same column not connected by the same number are significantly different by Tukey HSD.

Average Rank of Big Life Decisions Split by Age Group and Decision Category in Study 3

Decision Category	N	Age Group[1]						All[2]
		20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	
Career	1,292	5.69A	5.92A	6.07A	6.20A	5.95A	5.85A	**5.95B**
Education	889	4.37B	5.83A	6.08A	5.63A	5.89A	6.06A	**5.55C**
Family	1,240	5.40A	5.06A	4.85A	4.56A	4.88A	4.87A	**4.91DE**
Finances	706	7.09A	6.29A	6.55A	6.62A	6.88A	6.92A	**6.70A**
Relationships	1,195	5.31A	4.22B	4.32B	4.80AB	4.51AB	4.45B	**4.59E**
Relocation	585	5.64A	5.53A	5.37A	5.73A	6.13A	6.34A	**5.81BC**
Self-Destruction	103	4.71A	5.94A	4.92A	7.17A	4.77A	2.00A	**5.05CDE**
Self-Development	532	6.37A	6.27A	5.78A	5.62A	5.59A	5.12A	**5.86BC**
Other	38	7.38A	4.22A	7.00A	2.50A	6.71A	6.80A	**6.11ABCD**

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Evaluation of Big Life Decisions for each Age Group and Decision Category in Study 3

Decision Category	N	Age Group[1]						All[2]
		20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	
Career	1,292	4.19AB	4.14B	4.22AB	4.05B	4.31AB	4.53A	**4.27B**
Education	889	4.09AB	3.96AB	3.91B	3.92AB	4.34AB	4.40A	**4.07CD**
Family	1,240	4.29A	4.38A	4.29A	4.15A	4.06A	4.40A	**4.27B**
Finances	706	4.04A	4.18A	4.11A	4.20A	4.29A	4.38A	**4.20BC**
Relationships	1,195	4.07A	4.11A	4.07A	3.79A	3.71A	3.87A	**3.92D**
Relocation	585	4.11A	4.15A	4.07A	4.05A	3.97A	4.17A	**4.09BCD**
Self-Destruction	103	3.08A	3.06A	2.52A	2.67A	1.38A	3.33A	**2.71E**
Self-Development	532	4.39AB	4.27B	4.66AB	4.79A	4.47AB	4.50AB	**4.51A**
Other	38	4.25A	3.78A	4.71A	3.00A	4.14A	4.20A	**4.13ABCD**

[1] Values in the same row not connected by the same letter are significantly different by Tukey HSD.
[2] Values in the same column not connected by the same number are significantly different by Tukey HSD.

Average Age at Time of Big Life Decision for each Age Group and Decision Category in Study 3

Decision Category	N	Age Group[1]						All[2]
		20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	
Career	1,292	22.29C	26.46D	31.61C	35.34B	37.17AB	38.70A	**33.03B**
Education	889	18.83B	20.58B	23.11A	24.77A	23.82A	23.39A	**22.05E**
Family	1,240	21.27D	27.64C	32.35B	35.74A	37.72A	37.71A	**32.71B**
Finances	706	21.80D	29.08C	32.80C	41.09B	43.96AB	47.38A	**35.94A**
Relationships	1,195	20.54A	25.68B	28.66B	32.75A	31.88A	32.61A	**29.16D**
Relocation	585	20.35C	25.85B	28.76B	35.74A	35.21A	39.05A	**31.52BC**
Self-Destruction	103	18.03B	22.94AB	25.76A	25.67AB	30.85A	22.00AB	**22.94E**
Self-Development	532	20.08C	24.89C	31.87B	37.58A	39.12A	39.59A	**30.71CD**
Other	38	21.25C	25.11BC	26.57BC	21.50BC	41.57AB	54.00A	**31.21ABCD**

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