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Adrian R. Camilleri Ph.D.

Life's Biggest Decisions

#### EDUCATION

# What Are Life's Biggest Decisions?

New research reveals life's most common big decisions.

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Reviewed by Gary Drevitch



Every day you make *thousands* of decisions. Most of them are small and forgotten nearly as quickly as they're made. Can you remember what you had for breakfast last Wednesday? However, every so often, you are faced with a decision that is neither inconsequential nor fleeting. Every so often you are faced with a big decision.

I have spent my career studying decisions. Most were of the small and forgotten variety. But a few years ago, I found myself amidst a number of big life decisions. It turned out that little of my research was helpful with these decisions. So, I began to ask people between the ages of 20 and 80 to tell me about their biggest life decisions.

## What is a “big” decision?



Source: qimono/Pixabay

make a choice between two or more options knowing that the outcome would have a significant and often long-term im-

impact for yourself or others. When asked to identify a big decision, two of the most frequent responses are “whether or not to get married” or “whether or not to have a child.” These certainly fit the bill. What about the decision to attend a party where you happened to meet your future spouse? Not so much.

Given that you know big life decisions are coming it seems wise to get prepared. The question we’ll consider here is what will those big decisions be. I’ll answer this question first by describing the most common big life decisions, and second, by describing the most important big life decisions.

## What are the most common big life decisions?

Some big decisions are very common. For example, the first big decision many people face is whether or not to go to university. Other big decisions are much more unique. In reading through thousands of different decisions, it was of primary importance to categorize them in a meaningful way. I identified nine different super-categories and fifty-eight different sub-categories.

The super-categories were: Career, Education, Family, Finances, Relationships, Relocation, Self-Destruction, Self-Development, and Other. The figure below shows the full list of sub-categories. These have been comprehensive enough that the “Other” category is rarely needed.





Figure 1: Different types of big life decisions, categorized.

Source: Adrian Camilleri

The first question of interest is which big decisions are the most common. Here are the top 20 most common big life decisions amongst all respondents as well as the percentage of respondents mentioning that decision at least once:

1. Start a new job/position (or not) - 60%
2. Get married (or not) - 59%
3. Pursue a degree (or not) - 52%
4. Have/adopt a child (or not) - 44%

7. Move to a new state (or not) - 30%
8. Choose where to study - 26%
9. Get divorced (or not) - 24%
10. Other - Family - 23%
11. Other - Education - 23%
12. Buy something (or not) - 23%
13. Get a pet (or not) - 21%
14. Begin a romantic relationship (or not) - 21%
15. End romantic relationship (or not) - 20%
16. Move to a new city (or not) - 18%
17. Make a decision for your child (or not) - 18%
18. Start a new business (or not) - 17%
19. Care for a family member (or not) - 17%
20. Get treatment/medicine (or not) - 15%

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Of course, the most commonly mentioned big decisions depend on who you ask. The figure below shows the types of big decisions reported by different age groups.

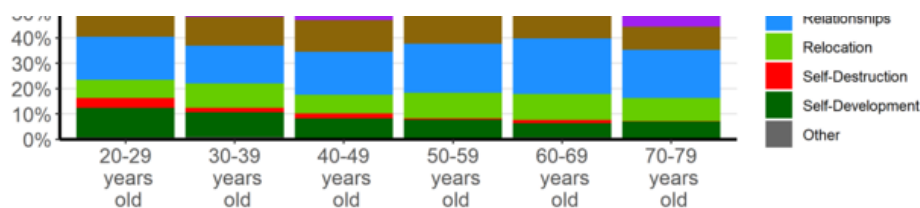


Figure 2: Proportion of big decision categories split by age group.

Source: Adrian Camilleri

What jumps out is that those who are younger are much more likely to indicate having made big decisions regarding education. We expect this because decisions about university tend to arise right out of high-school. By contrast, those who are older are much more likely to indicate having made big decisions regarding their career, including the final career decision of when to retire.

## What are the *biggest* big life decisions?

The second question of interest is just how big these different decisions are. In the survey, I asked respondents to rate how big the decision felt at the time. Of the 20 most common big life decisions, the 10 considered *biggest* were:

1. Get divorced (or not)
2. Have/adopt a child (or not)
3. Get married (or not)
4. Move to a new state (or not)
5. Make a decision for your child (or not)
6. Buy a home (or not)
7. End romantic relationship (or not)
8. Other - Family
9. Move to a new city (or not)

There were a couple of less common decisions that were also considered very big. Namely, the decision to end a life (or not) and the decision to accept/change sexuality (or not).

Stepping back, these results suggest that most people are trying to solve the same problems:

- What kind of education should I get?
- How should I earn a living?
- Where should I put down roots?
- What kind of family should I build?

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There are a few important take-homes from this analysis. First, there is a lot of overlap in the reported biggest life decisions of people across demographic characteristics. This bodes well for those who are interested in making good decisions because much can be learned from the experience of others.

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Second, big decisions are not limited to one or two areas of life. There are big decisions related to your education, career, relationships, family, finances, and where you live. Apart from education-related decisions, people of all ages agree that their biggest life decisions span all of these domains.

Finally, the biggest decisions are those that impact not just you but those around you. Getting married, getting divorced, and having a child all affect loved ones. As social beings, we often struggle to decide what is best not just for ourselves but those around us. It's these kinds of decisions that we should reflect on the most.

*The next post in this series is “[When do the Biggest Life Decisions Happen?](#)” In the meantime, if you'd like to see how your own big decisions compare to others, complete the survey yourself [here](#) and also check out the data.*



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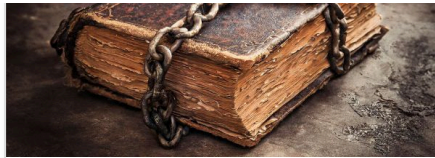
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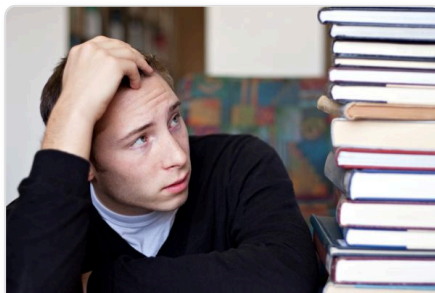


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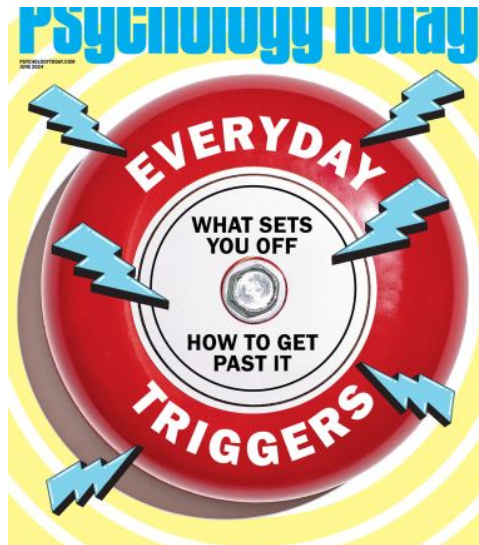
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