

## Project "A Ranking Measure of Life Satisfaction (RankMe)": Cognitive Online-Pretest

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## GESIS Project Reports

2014 | 12

### Project „A Ranking Measure of Life Satisfaction (RankMe)“

Cognitive Online-Pretest  
September/October 2014

*Cornelia Neuert & Timo Lenzner*



GESIS Project Reports 2014|12

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## **GESIS Project Reports**

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## 1 Aims of the pretest

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The research project "A Ranking Measure of Life Satisfaction (RankMe)" examines the extent to which the previous method of measuring life satisfaction in the form of level queries allows consistent statements to be made about the ranking of life circumstances. The latter is based on the previously untested assumption that the numerical answers of different years and individuals are directly comparable. The questions tested in this study are intended to enable a direct comparison of two concrete life circumstances by the same person. This allows to check the robustness and validity of conventional life satisfaction measures.

As an empirical basis for answering these questions, two questions on life satisfaction will be included in a wave of the GESIS panel in spring 2015. In preparation for this survey, both questions should be subjected to a cognitive online pretest under methodological and questionnaire-related aspects and revised based on the test results.

For this purpose, the GESIS pretest laboratory was commissioned by Prof. Dr. Grisca Perino to conduct the cognitive online pretest.



## 2 Sample

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**Number of invitations to the pretest:** 100

**Number of completed questionnaires:** 82

**Selection of target persons:** Quota sampling. The test persons were recruited from the online panel "GESIS Online Panel Pilot". A total of 100 test persons were invited to the survey, whereby we assumed a completion rate of about 70 to 80 percent. In the end 82 test persons participated in the survey.

**Quota plan:** The test persons were selected according to the quotas age (18 - 40 years; 41 years and older), school education (advanced technical college entrance qualification/A-levels; no A-levels) and gender.

### Realized quota plan:

Age	School education	Women	Men	Sum
18 - 40	Less than A-levels	8	7	15
18 - 40	Advanced technical college entrance qualification/A-levels	10	13	23
41 +	Less than A-levels	9	12	21
41 +	Advanced technical college entrance qualification/A-levels	11	12	23
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>38</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>82</b>

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## 3 Methods

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<b>Field time:</b>	17 September 2014 to 30 September 2014
<b>Procedure:</b>	Use of an online questionnaire with additional open and closed-ended probing questions.
<b>Cognitive techniques:</b>	Category Selection Probing, Specific Probing.
<b>Incentive:</b>	5 Euro (for the entire online questionnaire which took about 20 minutes to complete).

## 4 Results

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### Question to be tested 1:

Im Folgenden würden wir gerne von Ihnen wissen, wie Sie die Entwicklung Ihres Lebens in den letzten 12 Monaten bewerten.

Hat sich Ihr Leben Ihrer Meinung nach in den letzten 12 Monaten insgesamt verbessert oder verschlechtert?

Bewerten Sie die Veränderungen aus heutiger Sicht.

[In the following we would like to know how you evaluate the development of your life in the last 12 months.

**In your opinion, has your life improved or worsened overall in the last 12 months?**

Evaluate the changes from today's perspective.]

### Frequency distribution (N=82)

deutlich verbessert [improved considerably]	14	17,1 %
leicht verbessert [improved marginally]	25	30,5 %
gleich geblieben [stayed the same]	29	35,4 %
leicht verschlechtert [worsened marginally]	6	7,3 %
deutlich verschlechtert [worsened considerably]	7	8,5 %
<i>weiß nicht [don't know]</i>	1	1,2 %

### Cognitive techniques:

Category Selection Probing, Specific Probing.

### Findings:

Of the 82 respondents in total, almost half (47.6%) state that their life has "considerably" (17.1%) or "marginally improved" (30.5%) in the last 12 months, while just over 15% state that their life has "marginally" (7.3%) or even "considerably worsened" (8.5%). The remaining 29 respondents (35.4%) state that their lives have neither improved nor worsened in the last 12 months. This is the reason given by the respondents in the subsequent Category Selection Probe ("*Could you please explain your answer in more detail? Why did you choose this answer?*"), on the one hand because nothing has

changed in their lives (23 out of 29), but also because positive and negative changes are roughly in balance (5 out of 29).<sup>1</sup>

One test person chooses the answer category "don't know" for question 1 and justifies this in the subsequent question with the fact that *"life is divided into various sub-areas, in which improvement / worsening is different"*<sup>2</sup> and the question is too general.

The responses of those respondents to the Category Selection Probe, in which a change has taken place, make it clear that they have mainly considered the professional (15 mentions; 10 positive, 5 negative) and private situation (11 mentions; 9 positive, 2 negative) when answering the question. The respondents cite positive changes in their occupational situation as being, for example, the fact that they have been given a (better) training place/job, the start of retirement or the reduction in stress. By contrast, the increase in stress, growing dissatisfaction or a transfer to another department are cited as negative. Positive changes in the private sphere are interpersonal relationships, a new love, children or the family in general, while relationship problems or the death of relatives are reported as negative changes.

In addition, the respondents think about their own health or the health of people close to them (9 mentions, 4 positive, 5 negative). The current financial situation (6 mentions, 5 positive, 1 negative) and the living environment (3 mentions; all positive) also play a role, which includes buying a house or moving house. Five respondents said that their situation was positive overall:

- *"Became a father, married, world champion, positive financial development, good friends"*<sup>3</sup>
- *"Because many things have changed positively"*<sup>4</sup>
- *"In the last 12 months, my health and that of my family has improved greatly. In general, there has also been a significant improvement (housing, finances, environment)."*<sup>5</sup>

Which areas of life the respondents had in mind when answering the question is also reflected in the following specific question (*"Which of the following areas of life did you have in mind when answering the question?"*), in which respondents were asked to tick all that applied. The answers are shown in the following table.

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<sup>1</sup> A person does not indicate why he or she has chosen the answer category "same".

<sup>2</sup> *„das Leben in verschiedene Teilbereiche untergliedert ist, deren Verbesserung/Verschlechterung unterschiedlich ausfällt“*

<sup>3</sup> *„Vater geworden, geheiratet, Weltmeister, positive Finanzentwicklung, gute Freunde“*

<sup>4</sup> *„Weil sich viele Dinge positiv verändert haben“*

<sup>5</sup> *„In den letzten 12 Monaten geht es mir und meiner Familie gesundheitlich viel besser. Auch allgemein hat sich einiges bedeutend verbessert (Wohnen, Finanzen, Umfeld)“*

### Frequency distribution (N=82)

Areas of life	Mentioned	Not mentioned	Mentioned	Not mentioned
Own family	59	23	72,0%	28,0%
Work	51	31	62,2%	37,8%
Spare time	32	50	39,0%	61,0%
Friends	24	58	29,3%	70,7%
Neighbourhood	16	66	19,5%	80,5%
Financial situation	45	37	54,9%	45,1%
Other, namely:	12	70	14,6%	85,4%

The most frequently mentioned areas are the own family (59 mentions), work (51 mentions) and the financial situation (45 mentions). Neighborhood was the least frequently mentioned (16 mentions). Twelve respondents stated that they had thought about another area of life in addition to the six areas mentioned. Under the category "other" they give the following information:

- Own home, housing situation (3 mentions)
- Health (3 mentions)
- Life in general (3 mentions)
- Relationship (1 mention)
- Daily schedule (1 mention)
- Material values (1 mention)

In addition, respondents should indicate when the changes or events they had in mind when answering the question took place and how many events took place at what point in time (Specific Probe: *How many of the changes/events they considered when answering the question took place more than 12 months ago?* etc.). The result is shown in the following table:

### Frequency distribution (N=82)

How many of the changes/events they have considered in answering the question...	None	Few	Many	All
... took place more than 12 months ago?	39	20	13	10
... took place 10 to 12 months ago?	34	26	17	5
... seven to nine months ago?	33	28	16	5
... four to six months ago?	30	23	23	6
... in the last three months?	33	16	22	11

It is striking that there are ten people who state that all the changes or events they considered when answering the question took place more than 12 months ago and should therefore not have been taken into account in the original question. On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that at least four of the respondents are persons who stated that their lives have "stayed the same" within

the last 12 months and that the answer that possible changes or events took place before then seems plausible.

In order to systematize the results of this question, the answers of each subject were categorized according to whether most changes or events occurred in the period from 7 to 12 months ago (answers: 10 to 12 months ago/7 to 9 months ago) or in the period of the last 6 months (answers: 4 to 6 months ago/last 3 months ago), whether there were no changes/events or whether they were distributed relatively evenly over the last 12 months: 32 percent of the respondents state that the changes/events occurred mainly in the last 6 months, 14 percent state that they occurred more in the period from 7 to 12 months ago or occurred. For 28 percent, the changes/events were relatively evenly distributed over the entire 12 months and 19 percent stated that no events or changes took place. The remaining seven percent (6 respondents in total) answered that all events took place 12 months ago, but at the same time answered that their lives had improved or worsened in the last 12 months.

When asked how understandable the respondents found the question, only two respondents (2.5%) indicated that they found the question "rather not understandable", while all others rated the question as "very understandable" (80.2%) or "rather understandable" (17.3%). The difficulties in understanding the question were explained by the fact that it was too general and by the fact that it was not constantly thought about.

**Recommendations:**

No changes recommended.

## Question to be tested 2:

Hat sich Ihr Leben Ihrer Meinung nach in den folgenden Bereichen in den letzten 12 Monaten verbessert oder verschlechtert?  
Bewerten Sie die Veränderungen aus heutiger Sicht.

[In your opinion, has your life improved or worsened in the following areas in the last 12 months?  
Evaluate the changes from today's perspective.]

## Frequency distribution (N=82)

	deutlich verbessert [improved considerably]	leicht verbessert [improved marginally]	gleich geblieben [stayed the same]	leicht ver- schlechtert [worsened marginally]	deutlich verschlechtert [worsened considerably]	weiß nicht [don't know]	missing
Eigene Familie [Own family] (N=81)	11 (13,6%)	16 (19,8%)	39 (48,1%)	11 (13,6%)	4 (4,9%)	-	1
Arbeit [Work] (N=79)	10 (12,7%)	18 (22,8%)	29 (36,7%)	7 (8,9%)	7 (8,9%)	8 (10,1%)	3
Freizeit [Spare time] (N=80)	4 (5,0%)	23 (28,8%)	37 (46,3%)	12 (15,0%)	2 (2,5%)	2 (2,5%)	2
Freunde [Friends] (N=80)	5 (6,3%)	15 (18,8%)	48 (60,0%)	10 (12,5%)	-	2 (2,5%)	2
Nachbarschaft [Neighborhood] (N=79)	5 (6,3%)	14 (17,7%)	51 (64,6%)	3 (3,8%)	1 (1,3%)	5 (6,3%)	3
Finanzielle Situation [Financial situation] (N=80)	6 (7,5%)	25 (31,3%)	30 (37,5%)	14 (17,5%)	5 (6,3%)	-	2

## Cognitive techniques:

Specific Probing.

## Findings:

The question of how their own lives have changed in the following areas in the last 12 months is answered by between 79 and 81 respondents in each case. While almost 35 percent of the respondents in the first question stated that their life has remained the same, the evaluation of question 2 shows a much more differentiated picture: While here, too, in the areas of "work" and "financial situation", slightly more than 35 percent of those surveyed stated that nothing has changed in this area, almost

half of the respondents stated that nothing has changed in the areas of "own family" (48.1 percent) and "leisure time" (46.3 percent), and in the areas of "friends" (60 percent) and "neighborhood" (64.6 percent) even far more than half of those surveyed stated that nothing has changed. Looking at the two answer categories indicating an improvement - "improved considerably" and "improved marginally" - it becomes apparent that, across all areas of life, fewer respondents choose the more positive answer category. Similarly, fewer respondents choose the answer that their life has "worsened considerably", but more often choose the answer category "worsened marginally" (with the exception of the area of life "work", where an equal number of respondents choose both answer categories).

When asked whether, after answering this question, respondents felt the need to change their answer to the previous question (question 1), only two persons indicated that they did so. The reasons for this need are as follows:

- *"Well, I have now thought about the question a bit more intensively, mainly because there are certain areas in my life that have improved."*<sup>6</sup> (Answer to question 1 "stayed the same")
- *"When all factors are taken into account (leisure time, family, friends, etc), the overall situation has not gotten any worse. Nevertheless, the increasing dissatisfaction with work is an important factor, but it should not determine everything."*<sup>7</sup> (Answer to question 1 "worsened marginally")

When asked how easy respondents found it to answer question 2, nine respondents (11%) said they found it "rather difficult" (8) or "very difficult" (1). These respondents cite the reason for their difficulties,

- that there has been little overall change in their life (2 respondents)  
*("Because only little things have changed."; „My life runs in an orderly fashion, there are hardly any serious events.")*<sup>8</sup>
- that the period of 12 months goes back far into the past and is therefore difficult to remember (2 respondents)  
*("12 months is a long period in which a lot (good & bad) can happen"; "Because it was difficult for me to review the past")*<sup>9</sup>
- that they find it difficult to make a self-assessment here (3 respondents), due to their personal situation

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<sup>6</sup> *„Nun ja, ich habe nun etwas intensiver über die Frage nachgedacht, vor allem weil es bestimmte Bereiche in meinem Leben gibt, die sich doch verbessert haben."* (Antwort auf Frage 1 „gleich geblieben")

<sup>7</sup> *„Wenn man alle Faktoren berücksichtigt (Freizeit, Familie, Freunde, etc) ist die Gesamtsituation nicht schlechter geworden. Trotzdem ist die steigende Unzufriedenheit mit der Arbeit ein wichtiger Faktor, der aber nicht alles bestimmen sollte."* (Antwort auf Frage 1 „leicht verschlechtert")

<sup>8</sup> *„Weil sich nur Kleinigkeiten verändert haben"; „Mein Leben verläuft in geordneten Bahnen, es gibt kaum gravierende Ereignisse"*

<sup>9</sup> *„12 Monate sind ein langer Zeitraum, in dem viel (gutes & schlechtes) passieren kann"; „Weil es für mich schwierig war, die Vergangenheit Revue passieren zu lassen."*



*("I am currently hanging something in the air: old job finished, new training/study is imminent"; "I observe myself too little"; "one can feel different regarding the topics")<sup>10</sup>*

- that it is difficult to answer using the scale  
*("Because I find it difficult to break down the evaluation of my life into such a scale.")<sup>11</sup>*

One test person gives no reason for his or her difficulties.

When we asked how the lives of the respondents had changed in different areas of their lives in the last 12 months, we also wanted to find out with a further question when the events or changes that the respondents thought of when answering the question mainly took place. The following table shows the respondents' answers for each area of life. When answering this question, the respondents had the possibility to select several points in time per area of life (multiple answers), for example if changes in an area took place at different times. However, a maximum of three respondents made use of this possibility over the entire question.

#### Frequency distribution (N=82)

	... took place more than 12 months ago?	... took place 10 to 12 months ago?	... seven to nine months ago?	... four to six months ago?	... in the last three months?	... there were no changes/events
Own family	15	7	8	7	18	29
Work	9	5	9	13	15	29
Spare time	7	11	10	7	13	33
Friends	6	9	8	9	6	42
Neighbourhood	5	6	3	6	10	50
Financial situation	9	6	13	11	13	28

Of the 82 respondents, between 28 and 50 state that no changes or events have taken place in the last 12 months in the areas of life mentioned. This is most frequently the case in the "Neighborhood" area, followed by the "Friends" area, where about half of the respondents state that no changes or events have taken place here. A comparison of how many events took place in the first half of the year (7 to 12 months ago) and how many events took place in the second half of the year (maximum 6 months ago) shows that the events or changes that were thought of in the areas "friends" and "leisure" when answering the questions are distributed equally over the two halves of the year (leisure: 21 mentions vs. 20 mentions; friends: 17 mentions vs. 15 mentions). In all other areas of life, considerably more events or changes are considered that took place in the second half of the year, i.e. in the period of the last 6 months (family: 15 mentions vs. 25 mentions; work: 14 mentions vs. 28 mentions; neighborhood: 9 mentions vs. 16 mentions; financial situation: 19 mentions vs. 24 mentions).

<sup>10</sup> „Ich hänge z.Z. etwas in der Luft: alte Arbeit beendet, neue Ausbildung/Studium steht bevor“; Ich beobachte mich zu wenig“; „Man kann sich bezüglich den Themengebieten unterschiedlich fühlen.“

<sup>11</sup> „Weil ich es schwer finde, die Bewertung meines Lebens in eine solche Skala herunterzubrechen.“

What is striking in this question is again the number of people who state that they have thought about changes or events that took place more than 12 months ago. A total of between five ("Neighborhood") and 15 respondents ("Own family") indicate that they were thinking about events or changes that took place more than 12 months ago when answering the question. Among them, however, there are again people who state that no changes have taken place in these areas: a total of eight for "Family", four for "Work", two for "Leisure", five for "Neighborhood" and one each for "Friends" and "Financial situation". Apart from these persons, one should not exaggerate the proportion of people who also chose this answer category. It seems plausible in many areas that events started more than 12 months ago and are now slowly changing. An example would be a person who became unemployed more than 12 months ago and has only recently found a permanent job. Here it seems plausible that the person, when answering the question, also thinks of a period longer than 12 months ago, since the event "unemployment" occurred more than 12 months ago and lasted until a few weeks ago. Such scenarios are also quite conceivable in the private sphere, for example an event such as a separation or the death of a relative that occurred more than 12 months ago and, measured against this, the changes that have taken place since this event.

Finally, the respondents had the opportunity to make comments or suggestions for improvement on this question in an open text field. A total of six respondents made use of this opportunity. Of these, three respondents were positive about the question (*"The subject areas and time intervals are well chosen"; "Everything understandable, good and interesting question"*<sup>12</sup>). Another person noted that the area of health was not covered by the question and two respondents made further remarks on their respondent behavior:

- *"I have only been able to pin the answers to months after the time of the changes in work, leisure and finances. All other changes affecting the social sphere have developed slowly. These changes have not come about through individual events, but through a gradual change in my own attitudes towards others and towards myself [...]."*<sup>13</sup>

#### Recommendations:

No changes recommended.

On the basis of the results of the first question, one could consider including "health" as an additional area in the survey of the individual areas of life, as this appears to play an important role for the interviewees in the assessment of their life satisfaction in addition to the areas already mentioned.

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<sup>12</sup> *„Die Themengebiete und die Zeitintervalle sind gut gewählt.“; „Alles verständlich, gute und interessante Frage“*

<sup>13</sup> *„Ich habe die Antworten nach dem Zeitpunkt der Veränderungen nur bei Arbeit, Freizeit und Finanzen an Monaten festmachen können. Alle anderen Veränderungen, die den sozialen Bereich betreffen, haben sich langsam entwickelt. Diese Veränderungen sind nicht durch einzelne Ereignisse eingetreten, sondern durch eine allmähliche Veränderung meiner eigenen Einstellungen zu anderen und zu mir selber [...].“*

## 5 Glossary: Cognitive Techniques

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<b>Think Aloud</b>	<p>Technique of thinking aloud:</p> <p><i>„Please vocalize everything that comes to your mind while you answer the following question. Please also vocalize things that seem unimportant to you. The question is...“.</i></p>
<b>Comprehension Probing</b>	<p>Questions on understanding, e.g.:</p> <p><i>„What do you understand by 'a highly responsible professional activity' in this question? “</i></p>
<b>Category Selection Probing</b>	<p>Question about the choice of answer category, e.g.:</p> <p><i>„You have said that you 'fully' agree with this statement. Why did you choose this answer?“</i></p>
<b>Information Retrieval Probing</b>	<p>Questions on how information was obtained, e.g.:</p> <p><i>„How did you remember that you had been to the doctor for the last 12 months?“</i></p>
<b>General/Elaborative Probing</b>	<p>Non-specific questions, e.g.:</p> <p><i>„Could you please explain your answer a little more?“</i></p>
<b>Specific Probing</b>	<p>Specific questions, e.g.:</p> <p><i>„You answered 'yes' in this question. Does this mean that you have already given up on career opportunities for your family, or that you might be willing to give them up but have not yet done so?“</i></p>
<b>Emergent Probing</b>	<p>Spontaneous questioning in response to an utterance or behavior of the test person, e.g.:</p> <p><i>„You just frowned and laughed when I read you the answer options. Can you please explain to me why you did that?“</i></p>
<b>Difficulty Probing</b>	<p>How easy or difficult was it for you to answer this question?</p> <p><i>If rather/very difficult:</i>  <i>„Why did you find the answer to this question rather difficult / very difficult?“</i></p>
<b>Paraphrasing</b>	<p>Test persons reproduce the question text in their own words:</p> <p><i>„Please repeat the question I read to you in your own words.“</i></p>
<b>Confidence Rating</b>	<p>Assessment of the reliability of the response, e.g.:</p> <p><i>„How sure are you that you've seen a doctor in the last 12 months?“</i></p>