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The holistic phase model of early adult crisis

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Abstract

The objective of the current study was to explore the structural, temporal and experiential manifestations of crisis episodes in early adulthood, using a holistic-systemic theoretical framework. Based on an analysis of 50 interviews with individuals about a crisis episode in this phase of life, a holistic model of early adult crisis was developed. The model comprises four phases; (1) *Locked-in*, (2) *Separation/Time-out*, (3) *Exploration* and (4) *Rebuilding*, which in turn have characteristic features at four levels – *person-in-environment*, *identity*, *motivation* and *affect-cognition*. A crisis starts out with a commitment at work or home that has been made but is no longer desired, and this is followed by an emotionally volatile period of change as that commitment is terminated. The positive trajectory of crisis involves movement through an exploratory period towards active rebuilding of a new commitment, but 'fast-forward' and 'relapse' loops can interrupt Phases 3 and 4, and make a positive resolution of the episode less likely. The model shows conceptual links with life stage theories of emerging adulthood and early adulthood, and it extends current understandings of the transitional developmental challenges that young adults encounter.

*Keywords***:** Early adulthood, emerging adulthood, early adult crisis, life structure, quarterlife crisis

The holistic phase model of early adult crisis

The phenomenon of developmental crisis during early adulthood has received little attention in the lifespan development literature, in marked contrast to the body of research on adolescent crisis (e.g. Marcia, 1966; Marcia 1993) and midlife crisis (e.g. Freund & Ritter, 2009; Lachman, 2004; O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987). The research programme described in this article aims to fill this vacuum – it proposes a holistic model of early adult crisis, and a functional developmental role for crisis in relation to the tasks and challenges of early adulthood as a psychosocial life stage.

The meta-theoretical perspective that was used to guide the research was the holistic development paradigm articulated by neo-Eriksonian theorists such as Levinson (1986) and also in a more systemic way by Wapner and Demick (1998). The paradigm conceives of development as a lifelong process of orthogenetic change that proceeds inter-dependently on biological, psychological and socio-cultural levels, and views the developing person as more than the sum of his/her parts. This approach conceives of optimal development as proceeding towards an integrated person-environment state, which is flexible, hierarchically integrated and stable (Wapner & Demick, 1998).

The person-environment matrix is stabilized at any point during development by way of a *life structure* (Levinson, 1986). A life structure is a developmentally-achieved integration of internal structures such as values, goals and beliefs, allied to external structures such as roles, commitments, relationships and activities. Over the course of adulthood, a person will move between periods during which a life structure is stable and periods of transition when it is less so. Crises are emotionally volatile, stress-inducing, time-limited episodes during which a person moves out of an existing life structure and towards a new one (Caplan, 1964; Slaikeu, 1990). Not all major life structure transitions will be crises – the word conveys those that are recognized as exceptionally stressful and retrospectively viewed as being major turning points (Wethington, Kessler & Pixley, 2004). They are all-consuming events that occur at multiple levels: at the *physical* level a person may experience major changes in physical location and biological symptoms of stress; at the *psychological* level a person may question their own beliefs or sense of self, at the *interpersonal* level, crises frequently involve changes in roles and relationships; and at the *socio-cultural* level, crises often involve a re-evaluation of social roles, social identity and social norms (Robinson & Smith, 2008).

Within the holistic-systemic paradigm of adult development, crises are conceived of as a part of human growth and integral to a dynamic adult life (Erikson 1968a; Forer 1963; Gould 1978; Hollis, 1993; Levinson 1978, 1996; Marcia, 1993; Waterman, 1993). Crisis help to overcome the *change inertia* that has been found to characterise adult life structures (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). A second development function of crisis is that coping with difficulty and stress can facilitate positive development, for example coping successfully with a crisis provides direct evidence of personal efficacy, which can be boost confidence (Robinson, 2008). Encountering the limits of an immature identity or incoherent life structure can lead to a more mature and realistic sense of self and a more balanced lifestyle (Levinson, 1978), while changes made as a result of a personal crisis may lead to an increased sense of life's meaningfulness (Denne & Thompson, 1991) and an increase in authenticity (Robinson & Smith, 2010b).

Crisis in emerging adulthood and early adulthood

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of the lifespan was the first to propose a crisis at the commencement of early adulthood (Erikson, 1968a; 1980). Developmental crisis at this age is characterized by the challenges of adult 'intimacy', i.e. difficulties with social *embeddedness* in relationships, roles and organisations (Erikson, 1980). Such embeddedness results in the loss of the exploratory activity that defines adolescence and of idealistic conceptions about possible futures (Lidz, 1976). The difficulties that are endemic to this autonomy-reduction process can precipitate crisis and potentially episodes of mental ill health; epidemiological statistics show that the adolescent-adult transition is one of the most high-risk periods for the onset of mental illness in the whole lifespan (Robinson, 2012).

The theory of emerging adulthood has been proposed by Arnett (2000) to account for the unique challenges that occur in the transition to adulthood in modern, Western countries. Around the age of 18, young people in Western countries are given the legal rights of adulthood, and in the past this would be the time that adults enter adult roles such as marriage, parenthood and a full-time job. At this point young people enter the period of emerging adulthood, and will stay in this phase until the age of 25. There is now a lag in the lifespan between the attainment of legal adulthood at 18 and

entering 'social adulthood' by way of commencing parenting and entering the workforce. Currently, the average age for marriage is between 26 and 30 in most developed countries and the average age for first-time parenthood is between 27 to 31 (Robinson, 2012). The result of this lag between legal and social adulthood for many young people is that they are unsure of their status as adult, typically stating that they feel adult in some ways and not in others (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2001). During this period, frequent changes in residence and relationship are the norm (Arnett, 2000), and risk-taking behaviour such as substance abuse is more common than at any other point in the lifespan (McManus & Bebbington, 2009). Financial independence from parents is yet to be fully achieved for many emerging adults, and this continuing reliance on parents can counteract feelings of adult maturity with a sense of continued adolescent dependence (Galambos, Turner & Tilton-Weaver, 2005).

Emerging adulthood is similar in many ways to the period that Levinson (1986) referred to as the early adult transition, placed in his model directly prior to the stage of early adulthood. A person typically emerges from this transition and enters early adulthood around the age of 25, and we use this age as the lower cut-off for our sample. Our aim is to explore crisis that occurs when a person enters early adulthood – a phenomenon that is sometimes referred to as 'quarterlife' crisis (e.g. Robbins & Wilner, 2001). This also overlaps with a transitional period in Levinson's model termed the 'Age 30 Transition' (Levinson, 1978; Levinson, 1986). It occurs in the 28-33 age range and is characterized by moving from the life structure that defined one's twenties, which for many does not involve marriage or parenting, to the more embedded life structure that will define the next decade of adult life, referred to by Levinson as the 'Settling Down' period. The Age 30 Transition can become a crisis if it involves high levels of stress and disruption in the life structure.

Aims and research questions

Our aim was to develop, test and refine a holistic psychosocial model of early adult crisis using in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis. The research questions that we aimed to answer were: 1) What does early adult crisis involve as an experience? 2) Is there a common process underlying differing manifestations of early adult crisis? 3) Are early adult crises perceived by those who go through them to have a formative role in their development? As the analysis progressed, and

we had developed a linear provisional model of crisis, we added the following questions: 4) Do nonlinearities exist in crisis that the linear model has so far missed? and 5) What particular disjunctions exist between individual cases and the general model proposed?

Method

Design

The study employed a retrospective-autobiographical design. Adults were interviewed about a past episode of crisis that occurred during early adulthood. A benefit of this design is that it focuses on a period of development in its patterned and systemic entirety, rather than on a specific variable or subset of variables (Levinson, 1986). Furthermore, a crisis is by definition an episode, i.e. a defined temporal period of a life with a beginning and an end. Episodes can only be delineated in retrospect, as part of a life story (McAdams, 1993), for hindsight permits the distinction of a crisis from life before *and* after it. This fact that certain developmental patterns can only be construed in hindsight may be what the philosopher Kierkegaard meant when he stated "life must be lived forward but can only be understood backward." (Kierkegaard, 1996, p.63).

Participants and sampling

Participant Recruitment. Participants were recruited from around London using various means of advertising. Firstly, two 'participant pools' were used; one database of e-mail addresses of nonstudents used by a university, and an online recruitment system of students and non-students used by another London university. Emails and in-person requests to students in departments across an adult education college were also used, and general advertisements were placed in non-university locations. Participants were offered £10 for their time to participate.

Qualifying criteria: In order for participants to qualify as experiencing an early adult crisis, a series of inclusion and exclusion criteria were constructed based on past literature (Caplan, 1964; Halpern 1973; Lazarus, 2000; Murgatroyd & Woolfe, 1982; Perosa & Perosa, 1984; Slaikeu, 1990). Participants were provided with the following definition of crisis: 'A crisis is an episode of life that that is profoundly difficult and stressful but acts as a turning point and a time of transformative

change'. They were also told that the episode should have lasted at least a year, that it disrupted work life and / or home life to a substantial degree and that it reached some kind of conclusion or improvement at least a year ago and that they should personally reflect on the period as one that warranted the term 'crisis'. The crisis was required to have occurred between the ages of 25 and 35. Bereavement-related crises were omitted, as they contain unique adaptive challenges (Parkes & Weiss, 1983), as were crises related to postnatal depression as they are widely considered to have a partially biological basis (Kumar et al. 1997).

      The sample. The N=50 sample consisted of 25 men and 25 women. Of this sample, two were British-born of Indian ethnicity, two were British-born of Pakistani ethnicity, one was Iranian by both birth and ethnicity and one was Turkish by birth and ethnicity. Of the 44 White individuals, one person was born and raised in Italy, one was born in Mexico and raised in the USA, one was born and grew up in Poland and another was born and grew up in Australia. The remainder were White British. Professions represented in the sample were: private sector management, consultancy, marketing, journalism, banking, public-sector administration, floor-fitter, truck driver, oil rig construction worker, addiction group facilitator, charity teaching and lecturing, law, waitressing, retail management, cashier, receptionist, IT, musician, artist, and plumber. There were also two unemployed individuals, two stay-at-home mothers and four full-time adult students in the sample.

Data collection and procedure

      Semi-structured interviews were used as the mode of data collection. Participants chose the location of the interview, with the option of a university room. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The names of the participants, significant others, and places were changed to protect anonymity. The flow of the interview was managed by the use of an interview topic guide, which consisted of key questions and probes. The final part of the interview involved showing participants a diagram of the phases and levels of the provisional model, and asking them to what extent it corresponded to their own crisis episode. They were asked which elements fitted with their own crisis, which did not and why.

Data analysis

The analytical method used for the study integrates inductive and deductive methods of qualitative analysis in a composite hybrid, and this innovation is described at length in Robinson and Smith (2010a). That paper also provides a brief outline of a provisional model of crisis that was developed based on a subsample of 16 (12 of which were included in the current analysis, 4 were omitted due to crises occurring between ages 35 and 39). The reader is directed to that paper for an exhaustive descriptive of the methodological process – here we briefly summarise the fundamentals.

Initially, lists of themes and super-ordinate themes were developed for individual interviews through an intensive theoretically-informed interrogation of interview transcripts. The phases and levels of the model were then developed by placing themes on a timeline for each individual participant, and then comparing these thematised timelines across cases to locate commonalities. This led to the derivation of conceptual levels and temporal phases, which when crossed led to cells of the model. These cells were then allocated the status of second-level super-ordinate themes. First-order super-ordinate themes were grouped within each of these cells.

As the research progressed, analysis evolved to become more deductive, and for the second phase of data collection, 28 interviews were systematically compared with a provisional model and areas of fit or discrepancy were highlighted.

Throughout the analysis process, triangulation of findings between researchers was used as a source of inter-researcher reliability; this was achieved by regular scheduled discussions between researchers during which interview analyses would be compared, and themes correspondingly modified and agreed. To view the various documents that specify the steps of the analysis in detail, the reader is asked to contact the corresponding author.

<div align="center">

Results

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The outcome of the analysis was a model of early adult crisis defined by four phases (with one phase divided into two sub-phases) and four levels of analysis. Phase 1 of the model is *Locked-in*, Phase 2a is *Separation*, Phase 2b is *Time-out*, Phase 3 is *Exploration* and Phase 4 is *Rebuilding*. The four levels of analysis are: *person in environment*, *identity*, *motivation*, and *affect-cognition*. The

person in environment level considers the systemic changes in physical locations, relationships and work commitments. *Identity* focuses on changes in a person's subjective sense of personhood, while the *motivation* level focuses on how a person describes their orientation towards goals, values and action. *Affect-cognition* describes the dominant affective and ruminative quality of a particular stage.

In the model, the phases are described at all four levels of analysis, which provides the 20-cell structure of the holistic phase model, shown in Figure 1. Table 1 provides illustrative quotes that convey the thematic content of the 20 cells of the model, and each phase is described in more detail below.

Phase 1: Locked-in. Phase 1 is indicative that a crisis is building in a person's life. It is defined by a central commitment (or set of commitments) within a life structure that is no longer desired, but which is not yet perceived as a realistic target of change. This leads to a felt sense of powerlessness and being trapped. The most common locked-in person-environment patterns are: a) a relationship that is no longer wanted or; b) a career path that is highly pressured or dissatisfying. Less common examples are being in a social group that is felt to be dissonant with values or personality, or being resident in a dangerous or threatening environment. Such commitments are typically adopted for *extrinsic motivations*, such as being pressured to by others, passively drifting into a commitment, or being bound by a sense of duty to the status quo. Phase 1 frequently involves compulsive activities such as a drug or alcohol use, particularly in males, which may add to the sense of being out of control.

In terms of identity, a person in Phase 1 experiences a sense of outward identity that has been formed to adapt to the role(s) they are in, which conceals a more authentic sense of self. Outward behavior is typically aimed at meeting the expectations of others and hiding suppressed affect. This effortful concealment is stressful, and it increases the sense of being restricted and trapped. Participants also described being strongly identified with the roles they are in during Phase 1, as they impart a sense of value and location in the adult world. See Table 1 for individual descriptions of Phase 1 at the four levels of analysis.

Phase 2a: *Separation.* Phase 2 commences when a person starts to distance themselves mentally and physically from the commitments that defined Phase 1, which may be a relationship, job

or social group. The separation phase is the most affectively intense period of a crisis; emotions experienced may include guilt, sadness, anxiety, excitement, relief and shame, while self-evaluations may oscillate between upbeat self-confidence and self-disgust. During Phase 2a, for those who initiate the separation and change, there is a gradual de-coupling of identity from commitments and roles, leading to a conscious acceptance that leaving is possible, and a growing motivation for change and escape. For those who do not initiate the act of separation, but instead are fired from their job or their partner leaves them, the physical act of separation occurs prior to the cognitive-affective separation. Having lost the identity that defined them during Phase 1, but not having yet gained a new identity to replace it, a temporary 'identity vacuum' is experienced. The sense of confusion that comes with this is described as anxiety-provoking and disorientating.

Phase 2b: *Time Out.* During this phase, a person intentionally takes time away to reflect on their transitional situation, to resolve painful emotions, and to develop a new foundation for their adult identity. During the time-out period, whether before or after final separation, a person often travels or moves to a different physical location in order to gain some distance and perspective on the troubles of Phase 2a. The reason that the Separation and Time Out phases are labelled as sub-phases of Phase 2 is that they are two parts of a *detachment* process, and Phase 2b sometimes comes before Phase 2a, while in other cases it occurs after Phase 2a. Motivationally, this period is described by avoidance – the desire to not bind in to new commitments or pursue future aspirations. See Table 1 for individual descriptions of Phase 2 at the four levels of analysis.

Phase 3: Exploration. In this phase, new commitments and goals are proactively tried out and explored. A person now purposefully looks for ways of developing a life structure that is more aligned with their own values, aspirations and inner identity than pre-crisis. For those whose crisis revolved around the demise of a relationship rather than job, Phase 3 typically involves experimentation with relationships, sexuality and new partners. For those whose crisis revolved around the demise of a job or career, Phase 3 involves trying out new career avenues and options for retraining. A clear change in identity is present at this stage – participants describe becoming increasingly comfortable with *exploring* their identity in an open-ended way, allowing it to evolve and change rather than to fix on to

a particular externally defined role. The self becomes a question rather than an answer, and a process rather than a product. See Table 1 for individual descriptions of Phase 3 at the four levels of analysis.

Phase 4: The phase of *Rebuilding* involves a renewed engagement with long-term commitments and clear plans. Motivationally, this period is defined by a stronger sense of *intrinsic motivation* than pre-crisis; work and home life are described as more inherently satisfying and enjoyable, and more reflective of personal interests and passions, compared with pre-crisis. Typically, Phase 4 intrinsic motivations are linked to an enhanced sense of purpose and meaning, often based around a unifying aspiration or dream that is perceived as valuable and helpful, rather than purely instrumental. Identity in Phase 4, when compared with pre-crisis descriptions, is distinct by being more *coherent*; inner values, preferences, feelings and goals are now expressed in outward behavior, leading a stronger sense of *authenticity*. Not all individuals describe a positive Phase 4 resolution, and these individuals are mentioned below in the 'individual discrepancies' section. See Table 1 for individual descriptions of Phase 4 at the four levels of analysis.

The person-environment level: a systemic depiction

The model shown in Figure 1 describes four levels of change during a crisis episode. One of these levels, the *person in environment* level describes changes at the level of 'agent-in-habitat', i.e. shifts in quotidian social environments (Wapner & Demick, 1999). Another way of modelling this level of analysis is by way of a 'nested' systemic depiction, as shown in Figure 2 (see Sameroff, 2010 for a recent example of this approach to depicting development).

In the first image in Figure 2, the person in Phase 1 is shown as contained within a social system, which may be a dyadic relationship, friend group or work role. This system is experienced as a source of constraint and being locked-in, hence the inward arrows illustrating that the person is held static by their environment. In Phase 2a and 2b, the person is then shown as emerging from this system and temporarily being without a defined social context. Phase 3 is illustrated by a frenetic movement between new social systems, as the young adult engages with new activities and roles that bring them into contact with new social contexts. By Phase 4, for those who reach it, there is a healthy balance of person and social environment, so that a person's social context allows for a public expression of their identity, as illustrated by the outward arrows pervading the surrounding circle.

Nonlinearities in the model

Nonlinear and cyclical features of crisis episodes were noted in a proportion of participants' accounts and built into the model by way of two additional loops, termed *the fast-forward loop*, and the *relapse* loop, as illustrated by the backwards and forward arrows at the bottom of Figure 1. *The fast-forward loop* occurs when a person omits a time-out period and/or an exploratory period, and instead progresses straight from the separation phase to the rebuilding phase. This was found in 3 male and 3 female participants (12% of sample). Fast-forward to rebuilding can be an adaptive solution when a person knows exactly what career or relationship they want after leaving their previous one. An adaptive example of the fast-forward loop was Lara, who left a career in finance and already knew that she wanted to become a clinical psychologist, so immediately applied to retrain in this field. However the fast-forward loop can also be the product of constraining circumstances that do not permit exploration and time-out, for example when Danny left the army and divorced his wife in the same year, he gained custody of his children and so had to start a new career as a truck driver immediately to maintain income. Many years later, he pursues his own aspirations to get a degree.

The *relapse* loop occurs when a new direction or commitment that is thought to provide a working resolution to the crisis leads to further problems, a repeated feeling of being locked-in that emulates the same feeling from Phase 1, and a further traumatic separation period. This was found in 5 male and 3 female participants (16%). An example of a relapse loop was Martin, who left financial consulting to train as a chef, but found that the high-stress environment of the kitchen was not what he wanted to do after all, so left that career after just a year to explore alternatives.

An example of the co-occurrence of the fast-forward loop and relapse loop in a single case was Eve, who upon divorcing her husband immediately commenced a new relationship with a work colleague, only to relapse back into another painful period of separation a year later. This combination of fast-forward and relapse is referred to as a 'false-start' pattern in early adult crisis.

Discrepancies between individual cases and the model

The model shown in Figure 1 provided an accurate holistic summary of 42 of the 50 crises described in the sample. The remaining eight showed certain discrepancies, and given that the model

is put forward at the individual level of analysis as an invariant pattern, it is important to account for why these discrepancies occurred.

Firstly, one participant who did not fit the model described a brief temporary break-up with his partner that lacked the transformative nature of the other episodes described. We argue that it is better classified as a transient stressful life-event rather than as a crisis, and in this way it does not challenge the model's adequacy as a model of crisis. The basis for us re-categorising his episode is the timescale of it was several months, while the duration of crisis events described by participants was in all cases a matter of a year or more.

Secondly, three discrepant cases revolved around chronic mental health problems. One male participant recounted a process of recovery from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, another described his difficulties with chronic social anxiety, while a third described three years of depression following a divorce. In order to clarify the remit of developmental crisis for future research studies, an exclusion criterion on a chronic mental disorder would be recommended.

Thirdly, a female participant who did not fit the model described living at home with her parents and her difficulties with lacking independence of adult responsibilities. Her description was of being 'locked in' was reminiscent of the adolescent-adult transition rather than the descriptions of others of already having taken on an adult commitment prior to crisis. This participant was of an ethnic group for whom living with one's parents for the duration of one's twenties is normal, and her account reflects the fact that adolescent-type transitions are possible even in the 25-35 age group, and that there may be demographic groups for whom early adult crisis does not apply within the age group specified for this study.

Fourthly, two male participants and one female participant described no increase in intrinsic motivation, wellbeing or enjoyment in the rebuilding phase. All three had children at the time of the crisis and said that they felt obliged to take jobs that were not intrinsically motivating or based on a passion in order to provide financially for their children. Two of these individuals described a later change of career once they could afford it, long after the crisis had ended and a new post-crisis life structure had been constructed, but they show that a positive resolution to early adult crisis is by no means immediate or inevitable, particularly in those cases where career change and retraining is not

economically viable. It may be of benefit in future studies to classify participants into those with and without children, given the difference that this fact makes for the post-separation time-out and exploratory periods.

Discussion

The holistic model of early adult crisis described in this article supports the basic tenets of the holistic, systemic developmental paradigm as a framework for studying major transitions in adult life – it shows that in times of developmental transition, goal-directed change occurs at multiple levels simultaneously, in ways that lead to adaptive developments in the person-in-world system (Wapner & Demick, 1998). If any one of the four levels that are present in model were studied in isolation, they would be less comprehensible, and this supports the importance of a holistic research focus. For example, if a person during crisis was found to have signs of cognitive and affective anxiety (affect-cognition level), this is more comprehensible if concurrent changes in the person-environment level are known (e.g. not currently in work and unsure of future source of income), as well as the motivational level (aim to start new career) and identity (confused sense of self in relation to work).

The model also fits with the theory of emerging adulthood, which considers the first decade of adult life to be a time of instability, role ambiguity and transition, as many adults remain in limbo between legal and social adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Early adult crisis starts with a life structure that is indicative of moving *beyond* emerging adulthood, but then the young adult moves back into a lifestyle that is more similar to emerging adulthood later after Phase 2. Indeed Phase 3 of the model, the exploratory period, bears the hallmarks of an *adult psychosocial moratorium* – a phenomenon alluded to by Waterman (1993), as an extension of Marcia's theory of adolescent identity crisis. Adult moratoria are periods of adult life in which commitments are intentionally avoided so that a more exploratory mode of living can be undertaken. Phase 3 also reflects many of the features of emerging adulthood, such as transitory changes in residence and job, personal exploration, and experimental trial-and-error (Arnett, 2000). We therefore consider early adult crisis to be on the developmental cusp of emerging adulthood and early adulthood, and that is why during the crisis there are

oscillations between periods that resemble emerging adulthood and periods that resemble early adulthood.

Erikson (1980) suggested that the defining challenge of early adulthood is relinquishing personal independence in order to participate in adult institutions and family life. Early adult crisis is what occurs when this developmental challenge can go awry; at the start of a crisis a person describes having embedded themselves in specific adult roles and commitments, and therefore having relinquished a certain amount of autonomy in the process. These adult commitments at home and/or at work are found to compromise basic psychological needs, typically because they are based on extrinsic motives, and this leads to separation and a new attempt at the autonomy-reduction process of early adulthood, based on more intrinsic motives. The motivational shift from extrinsically regulated goals (based on the acquisition of later reward or external pressure), towards intrinsically motivated goals (based on personal interests, passions and satisfactions), fits with quantitative research that shows a general shift away from extrinsic motivation towards intrinsic motivation with adult age (Morgan & Robinson, 2012). It also fits with research that suggests that crisis events may act as a catalyst in the development of meaning and purpose (Denne & Thomson, 1991).

The accounts of crisis collected for this study, and correspondingly the model itself, show similarities with the concept of quarter-life crisis as described by Robins and Wilner (2001). Robins and Wilner interviewed a number of individuals between the ages of 21 and 35 about their experiences of crisis in their twenties and found that crises in this age group are typically characterised by major career and relationship changes, and by the instability and uncertainty that comes with such changes. While our age range is slightly higher than Robins and Wilner's sample, the constructs of quarterlife crisis and early adult crisis overlap, with the former referring to crises occurring during a person's twenties, and the latter extending into a person's thirties.

A key trajectory in the identity level is the shift towards a greater sense of authenticity and expressiveness. This positive trajectory relates to previous research that shows that these characteristics are indicative of maturity and psychological health (Jung, 1966; Maslow, 1998; Robinson, 2012). Indeed Maslow, in his later work, suggested that authenticity and the sense of inner-

outer harmony that comes with it, is *the* most salient feature of self-actualized persons (Maslow, 1998).

Crisis episodes may help to make sense of symptoms of distress. For example, there is extensive co-morbidity of depression and anxiety symptoms in young adults (Moffitt et al., 2007). It may be that this co-morbidity has a developmental aetiology, as all early adult crisis episodes involve distress-inducing endings *and* new beginnings. Endings typically lead to a sense of loss, which has been shown to be associated with depression, while new beginnings lead to the unpredictability of one's future and uncertainty has been empirically related to anxiety (Finlay-Jones & Brown, 1981). Future researchers may be able to establish if the experience of crisis transitions in young adults could help to explain this affective disorder co-morbidity.

The Eriksonian and Levinsonian theoretical foundations of this research state that crises are a functional part of individual development and have a definable function in moving development forward in a positive manner. Based on the model outlined in this article, the function of early adult crisis can be speculatively stated. Early adult crises facilitate the winding down and conclusion of one or more commitments in early adult life that is/are felt to be hindering growth and wellbeing. This in turn provides an opportunity to explore alternatives that are more closely aligned with a person's values and goals, and that correspondingly feel more intrinsically motivated and authentic. This positive function of crisis occurs when a person has the opportunity to move through the four phases of the model and avoid falling into a relapse pattern. However our findings also suggest that a proportion of individuals will not receive the positive functionality of crisis episodes. Subsequent large-sample research will need to be conducted to explore the relative proportions of adults who experience a positive or negative developmental outcome following early adult crisis.

Testable predictions of the model

A number of testable predictions can be inferred from the model. It has been developed to be testable at the individual or aggregate level, therefore predictions based on it can be tested on case studies as well as aggregated samples. Firstly, the model predicts that an individual who retrospectively reports a crisis occurring in early adulthood will describe an episode that fits with the four-phase structure at

all levels, or with the alternative 'fast forward' three-phase version, or more iterative 'relapse' pattern. We predict that the same phase structure would also be found in prospective data, and we discuss this in relation to limitations below.

We would predict that the majority of crises in early adulthood will be appraised as resulting in positive growth rather than negative decline, but individuals whose crisis pattern fits with the fast forward loop are less likely to experience post-crisis growth than those who report *Time-Out* and *Exploration* phases.

All persons who report a resolved early adult crisis are predicted to report an increase in intrinsic orientation, a decrease in extrinsic orientation, and an increase in subjective authenticity. This has implications for the theory of intrinsic motivation more broadly – it suggests that the quantitative positive relationship that has been found between intrinsic orientation and age (Morgan & Robinson, 2012) may be mediated by particular life episodes, and that a lifespan development theory of intrinsic/extrinsic motivational development should specify how these episodes act as key occasions of change for motivational orientation.

When testing a model, discrepant data at first problematizes aspects of the model, and then this cumulatively adds up to falsification if the theory cannot be modified to deal with the disconfirmatory data (Popper, 1959). The model would be problematized by any account, or set of accounts, of crisis in early adulthood that is based on the same inclusion and exclusion criteria as this study, but which reveals a different process and structure to the phenomenon. If discrepant accounts could be dealt with by qualifying the model without over-extension of it to the point that it loses the parsimony required of an empirically-testable model, it would be falsified.

Limitations and future directions

Our research employed a single form of data collection and analysis to explore early adult crisis. Interviews involve considerable researcher participation, which opens the possibility of leading questions or bias, however they also provides a safe, intimate environment in which participants feel able to open up about highly personal autobiographical material. The sample used in the study was relatively small, compared with typical quantitative studies, but it must be emphasized that in the

approach taken here, conclusions pertain to *all* individuals other than those mentioned in the discrepancies section, while in quantitative research, conclusions pertain to the group as an aggregated whole and need not apply to any particular individuals within the group. It is therefore a complementary form of nomothetic research to standard large-sample quantitative research designs that seeks for invariant structures and processes rather than probabilistic associations or group differences (Robinson, 2011). 16% of the sample did not fit the model comprehensively – half of these discrepancies related to the fact that those individuals did not qualify as a developmental crisis episode. This relates to the fact that early adult crisis does not have agreed definitional criteria, and that in exploratory research such as this, inclusion and exclusion criteria evolve by necessity, as the phenomenon is gradually understood further.

A methodological limitation inherent in the retrospective interview design is that crisis episodes are recounted through the filter of autobiographical memory, which is prone to distortions and to interpersonal presentational differences (Pasupathi, 2001; Kotre, 1995). The current model may therefore be framed by the structure that autobiographical memory creates to recount a past 'nuclear episodes' through language (McAdams, 1993). For a more substantial discussion of the use of narrative in crisis episodes, see Robinson & Smith (2009). A key question is whether the time-linked ways that identity, motivation and affect change over the course of crisis within the model are a result of the reconstructive 'smoothing out' that is typical of autobiographical memory (Kotre, 1995), or whether such links would also be found in prospective data. A longitudinal study of crisis could be done to help answer this question, using a representative sample of young adults who commit to completing a diary for a number of years. Then for those report a crisis in retrospect, their diaries could be analysed to explore the actual chronological progression of affect, intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, identity and life events that occurred during the crisis period. Such as study would be help settle the issue of whether our model is or is not specific to retrospective data.

Qualitative research provides a way to explore the complex intra-individual structure of developmental phenomena and to create models that capture it. However it is not well placed to gain prevalence data, and so cannot conclusively assert the relative extent of such episodes in males and females, different ethnicities, different socio-economic groups and different age groups, and the

overall proportion of young adults who experience an early adult crisis. Gaining such prevalence data requires a quick-to-administer screening instrument to self-assess the presence of a crisis episode, and access to a large representative sample. We are currently pursuing this direction in our research and expect soon to have robust prevalence estimates of early adult crisis across demographic groups.

A final recommended further line of research will be to explore whether the holistic approach to modelling crisis taken in this study, which combines multiple levels of analysis with a chronological framework, is applicable to studying crisis in other adult age groups, and whether parallels exist between early adult crisis, midlife crisis and later life crisis.

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Table 1. Illustrative quotes for all phases and levels of the early adult crisis model

	1.Locked-in	2a.Separation	2b.Time out	3.Exploration	4.Rebuilding
Environment and relationships	"I was pretending to be an adult…you know, nice house and having dinner parties and it was all very 'grown up'…I hated it, absolutely hated it with a passion." Keely	"I just couldn't keep carrying on like that. But I did try to separate myself from the social group I suppose, I did tell a few friends I didn't want to… I feel terrible about it now, but I just said 'Look…' I wanted to cut off." Lillian	"I lost my job and it was at that point, I had a backpack, nowhere to go and no one to talk to and was wandering round London figuring out how to kill myself." Angus	"I was looking for a new path for my life, and I kept saying to myself 'Its brilliant' because I could do anything, there's a world of opportunity, but I was like 'f***, what have you done, what have you done you stupid idiot?'" Daisy	"So I think where I am now is much more reflective of who I am, so it's reflective of what I do value, like I really value my friends and I really value my family and I think those are the really important things." Lara
Identity and self	"I was covering myself up in terms of my sad inner self. I wasn't very happy and I would put on a smiling face." Jim "I just felt something really deep inside me, it was rotting, it was a rotten job, it was not in tune with who I am or what I believed or what I wanted to be doing with my life." Margaret	"I think my self-esteem was in the toilet." Nicholas "It was awful. I was feeling so guilty – so guilty – because I thought, 'He's right. Because I told him I love him; now I don't love him anymore. It's my problem; it's my fault. I'm being a bad person." Eve	"Yes, I would say I was beginning to doubt who I was and what I was about. Even in terms of a relationship I thought I'm 27 and now I'm single and some of my friends are in relationships, these are the kind of things that go into your head." Marvin	"I felt disorientated and…I don't know how to describe it to you other than to say I found the loss of status very difficult… To be right at the very bottom again is really difficult." Lara "I think it's about being a sort of seeker" Regina	"I am that better version of myself that I always wanted to be, I am the person who I always knew that I could be and I just wasn't doing." Sadie
Motivation and coping	"I just couldn't break away from it, it was very strange, I don't know if I had a, a fear of being single forever or, you know, lonely or, you know, the whole, don't know." Abe	"I'm going to leave him. I'm not going to live with him anymore. I don't care what anyone says. I can't do this anymore" Eve	"I had a lot of time to myself… I would go shopping, I'd go to the cinema in the afternoon, ..and then get back to the flat and make the tea and stuff, so it was really simple domestic chores, and just keeping myself busy and doing things that I liked, it made me feel good." Maxine	"I joined an improvisation group because I couldn't think of anything that terrified me more, I knew I needed a hobby to go and meet some friends. So I thought what could I do that would be really awful and so I did it and I overcame all sorts of things" Sadie	"I am now very motivated because I'm doing something that I actually believe in. My career is something that it's you, it's your piece of art if you like, you could look at it that way, so I am quite motivated with studying, I didn't really look at it like that." Marvin

Feeling and thinking	"it was just a feeling of being trapped in a situation with very few options to get out." Karl "I was trapped, I had to stay there, there was no getting out …If I could have got out any earlier I would have." Morgan	"I was incredibly unstable, I was very tearful, I think I found it very hard to think, just getting out of bed, I was deeply depressed I'd say." Sadie	"I had to reflect, I had to see about the past and what went wrong, why things went wrong" Jim "I think I was gradually learning more about what I want from life. I kind of picked up on a few things and I was trying to take opportunity in every situation as well." Marvin	"Shit scared. Really, truthfully, shit scared. The reality set in that I was really on my own… I just was so titillated by the sense of expansion and frightened by it, initially…I just had this sense of it being the most incredible opportunity that was going to transform me as a person, which it did in droves." Nicholas	"To be really fair and true I would like to help other people, that's where I find joy inside, that's what I want to do" Jim "I'm happier in myself, relaxed, less stressed and all kinds of things and there's more, for instance I've learned to face things as well" Angus

Figure 1.

The holistic phase model of early adult crisis

TIME →

		BUILDING CRISIS	CRISIS		RECEDING CRISIS	
		Phase 1: Locked-In	**Phase 2a: Separation**	**Phase 2b: Time Out**	**Phase 3: Exploration**	**Phase 4: Rebuilding**
Level 1	**Person in environment**	Adult commitments and roles at work and at home	Separation from problematic relationship and/or job	Temporary moratorium, avoidance of commitment	Exploratory steps towards new commitments and roles	New relationship and/or job, new lifestyle
Level 2	**Identity**	Split identity: outer and inner different	Decoupling of outer self with roles, identity vacuum	Identity in question: who am I now?	Open, evolving, exploratory identity	Coherence between inner and outer self
Level 3	**Motivation**	Extrinsic motivation	Escape motivation (if initiator)	Avoidance motivation	Approach motivation	Intrinsic motivation
Level 4	**Affect-cognition**	Sense of being trapped, bottled-up emotion	Emotional upheaval, trauma and distress	Reflection, introspection. Lessening distress	Anxiety and excitement about new possibilities	Day-to-day enjoyment and fulfilment

Relapse loop   Fast-forward loop

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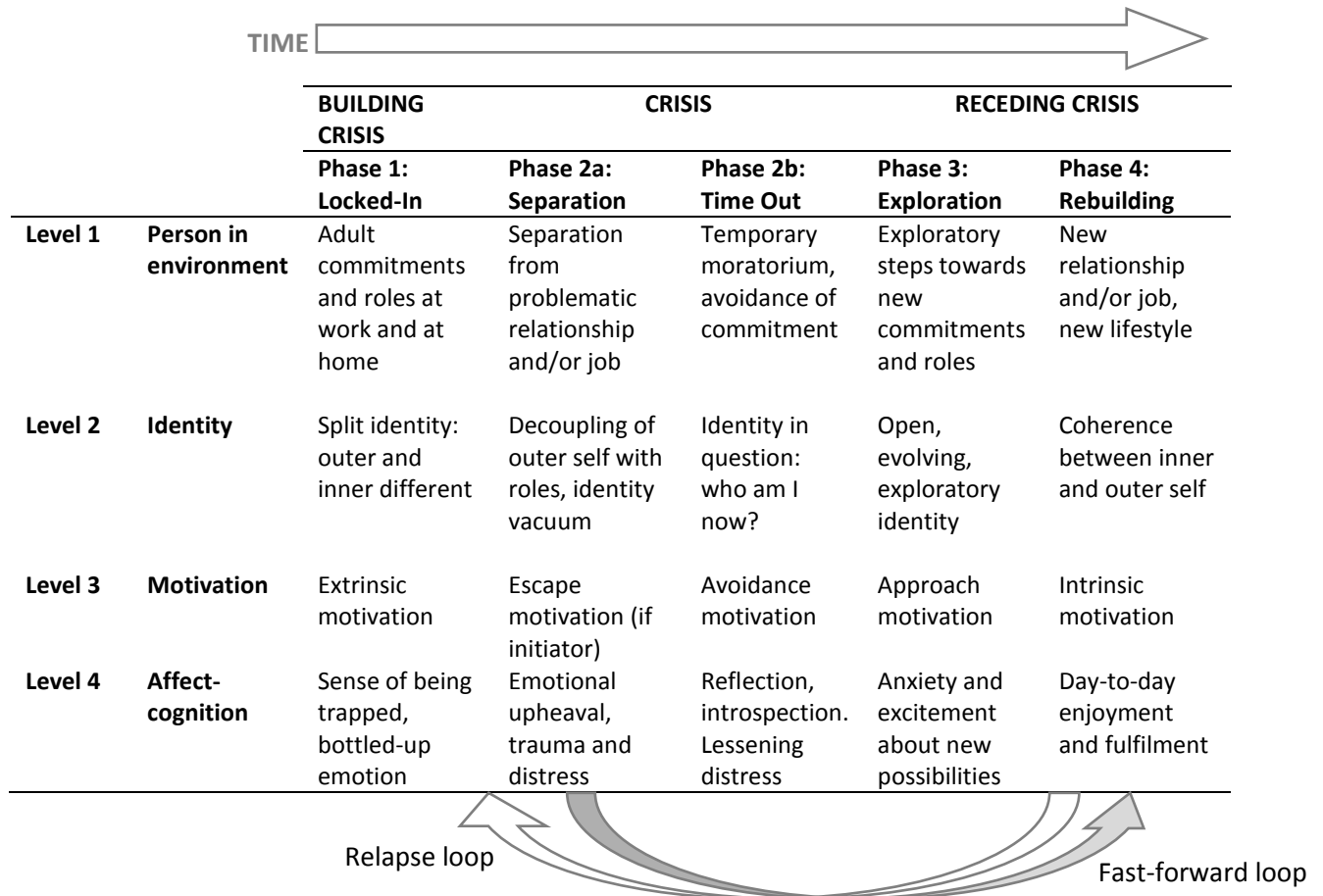The holistic phase model of early adult crisis

Figure 2.

Visual depiction of changes in person-environment systems over the course of early adult crisis

Building Crisis

1. Locked In

Full-blown Crisis

2a. Separation

2b. Time out

Receding Crisis

3. Exploration

Post Crisis

4. Rebuilding