

A longitudinal mixed-methods case study of quarter-life crisis during the post-university transition: Locked-out and locked-in forms in combination

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Abstract

Research on crisis episodes during the first decade of adult life suggests two types of such ‘quarter-life’ crisis exist; locked-in and locked-out. Both relate conceptually to the transition out of emerging adulthood. A female case study was studied over a four-year period, starting when she left university. Wellbeing and depression data were gathered five times, two interviews were conducted, as well as a structured email exchange. Results showed two episodes of crisis within the study period. The first was the locked-out type, which occurred when the participant experienced multiple failures to find work, leading to self-esteem decline and anxiety. The second crisis was the locked-in type, which occurred when she felt obliged to stay in a job despite a bullying boss. The case study provides a rich exemplification of quarter-life crisis theory, and provides insights for further consideration in multi-participant studies on the challenges of leaving tertiary education.

Keywords

Quarter-life crisis; Post-university transition; Case study; Mixed-methods; Wellbeing; Depression

A longitudinal mixed-methods case study of quarter-life crisis in a university graduate: Locked-out and locked-in forms in combination

The current study reports on the case of Mary, a university graduate who experienced several periods of personal crisis after leaving university. Data was gathered from her over a period of four years via quantitative questionnaires, interviews and email exchange. The aim of the study was to explore whether and to what extent this single case exemplifies the holistic model of quarter-life crisis, and whether it presents theoretical insights for further testing in future multi-participant studies.

The post-university transition

The transition out of university education into the labor market is an episode of life that is replete with challenges. Many graduates struggle to find work; a recent UK-based study found 40% still searching for work six months after graduating, with 25% still looking for work after a year (totaljobs.com, 2014). A period of unemployment coupled with intensive job searching can have a negative impact on stress and self-esteem (Borgen, Hatch & Amundson, 1990; Schaufeli, 1997; Brown et al., 2006). Finding a job alleviates the stress associated with job searching and unemployment, but then acclimatizing to the culture of the workplace and learning a new role brings new stressors (Candy & Crebert, 1991).

The post-university transition is much more than just the challenge of finding employment – it also includes changes to residence, relationships, identity, lifestyle and financial support. For those who have lived away from home during university, moving back in with parents temporarily or permanently is a feature of life after university. Graduates must also manage major changes in relationships and friendship networks, which are brought on by the shift in lifestyle and residence (Burns, 2015). Financial changes are also part of the post-university transition; in those countries where university is subsidized with loans, graduates no longer have the option of using student loans as funding, so may require extra help from parents prior to gaining work, which in turn can undermine a sense of autonomy (Ashford, 2015). It is also the key time for assuming adult responsibilities, lessening dependency on parents and financial loans, and becoming a contributing part of the societal systems of production, rather than principally a consumer of education services (Schoon, McCulloch, Joshi, Wiggins, & Bynner, 2001).

Transition and crisis

Major life changes such as the post-university transition can lead to a crisis episode if and when a person passing through the transition becomes overwhelmed and unable to cope

with the changes (Slaikou, 1990). The concept of the quarter-life crisis has been introduced into the academic literature to conceptualize how developmental crisis episodes manifest for people in their twenties. A survey of 1000 people in the UK suggested that over 70% of people in their thirties reflect that they had a major life crisis in their twenties that acted as a turning point. Of those aged over 40, 35% recall such a crisis in their twenties (Robinson & Wright, 2013). Some of the most prevalent features of quarter-life crises include relationship break-ups, debt, conflict with parents, feeling trapped in a dissatisfying job, unemployment, and job pressure (Robinson & Wright, 2012).

In Erikson's classic lifespan theory, experiencing a crisis holds potential for distress and deterioration, but also for developmental growth (Erikson, 1968; Stevens, 2008). It is during such difficult periods that a person is motivated to search for new understandings about self and world, and to find new ways of coping with life's varied challenges (Robinson, Litman & Demetre, 2017). Thus crises contain the seeds of change and transformation that tend to be ignored when life is going smoothly.

Crises are by no means rare. In one study that used a nationally representative UK sample, in response to a question that elicited information on the current presence of a major life crisis, 20% stated that they were currently in a major life crisis, 35% said that they may be in one, and 45% said that they were not (Robinson, Litman & Demetre, 2017). So arguably, at any one time, the majority of adults are in, or close to, crisis.

The holistic model of quarter-life crisis

The holistic model of quarter-life crises developed by Robinson (2016a; 2016b) relates crisis episodes in the 20-29 age range to the life stage of emerging adulthood as described by Arnett (2000). Emerging adulthood can be defined as the "in-between" life stage that occurs approximately between the age of 18 and 25, in which a young person is legally an adult, but remains unsettled, exploratory and relatively free of long-term commitments. The emergence of the life stage is strongly related to changes in society that have occurred in post-industrial countries since the 1970s, including deferred entry into parenting and marriage, a decline in the popularity of marriage, more young people going into higher education, more living with their parents for longer, along with a growing social acceptance of non-marital romantic cohabitation and sex before marriage (Arnett, 2007). Emerging adulthood comes with a mix of semi-autonomy and semi-dependence, along with a deep sense of ambiguity over one's status as an adult, and one's expected level of responsibility or lack thereof. For those in the stage of emerging adulthood, there is little requirement to

temper optimistic idealism for the future with the hard realism of making one's way in the job market and in the demands of family life, thus expectations tend to be artificially elevated in this age group about what is possible for their own future (Setterstein & Ray, 2010).

Quarter-life crises tend to occur when a person is aiming, or actively trying, to move *out* of the life stage of emerging adulthood. In other words, they occur when a person is switching or has just switched from a life structure that is unstable, open and exploratory to one that is more settled, more predictable and more rooted in productive roles (Robinson, 2016b). Two forms of such crisis have been distinguished, both of which relate specifically to the challenges of settling down into fixed roles. These are called the *locked-out* form and the *locked-in* form. The structure of both can be described as a series of sequential yet overlapping phases.

Presenting the models as a series of phases provides the theoretical benefit of depicting the discontinuities and transitions that occur within a crisis episode. It also brings the applied benefit of providing predictive power at the idiographic level. By using the model, individuals who are in a particular phase of crisis, or a recognised as such by a coach or therapist, can predict what may happen next or be helped to progress proactively through a developmental crisis. The model has been used in this idiographic way in a number of applied contexts, including coaching (Lifeworks, 2016), and therapy (Belanger, 2017). It is important to clarify that the phase pattern outlined is prototypical rather than universal. It applies to most cases, but individuals may omit a phase or move backwards through several phases (Robinson, Wright & Smith, 2013).

In the *locked-out* form of a quarter-life crisis, Phase 1 of an episode involves a period of optimistic active engagement with a goal to enter a valued social role, such as a job, long-term relationship, or member of a social group (Robinson, 2016a). This period of active and enthusiastic activity is a necessary prelude to the subsequent phase of frustration and disappointment. As the popular adage goes, "you have to be fired up to burn out." Phase 2 comprises a process of going through repeated failures to achieve the role, goal or relationship, and a feeling of hitting a barrier that is unexpectedly hard to get down. Realising that prior expectations for adult life may not be met is the essence of Phase 2, and this may come with feelings of depression about anticipated perceived loss, and/or anxiety at the implications of this. Phase 3 is a pause in activity in which a person reflects on their situation, and seeks new solutions and alternatives. In Phase 4, a new strategy to achieve the goal is enacted. This may often involve compromise on what is achievable, and a rescaling of goals.

The episode concludes with some kind of forward movement into a stable role or roles, which may not be what was envisaged at the outset of the crisis (Robinson, 2016b).

In the *locked-in* form of a quarter-life crisis, the episode starts with having made at least one major life commitment that is found, despite expectations to the contrary, to be dissatisfying and stultifying. Given the perceived importance of maintaining a committed focus on this role and/or relationship, in Phase 1 the individual continues on, increasingly feeling inauthentic and false as they put on a façade to hide their inner dissatisfaction. This carries on until Phase 2, when either by volition or external circumstance the individual leaves the commitment(s) and is thrust out of their settled life. This is a time of highly charged negative emotion, but also comes with some feelings of relief. In Phase 3 there is a time-out pause to gain perspective on life, and an exploratory moratorium in which new directions and understandings are sought. This period may involve some kind of career retraining if the crisis is work-focused. In Phase 4 there is a resolution in which, at least for the time being, the individual moves into a new set of rooted commitments that feels meaningful and authentic (Robinson et al., 2013).

Locked-out and locked-in patterns of crisis are not exclusive to the latter cusp of emerging adulthood or to early adulthood more broadly. They characterise aspects of crisis in other age groups too. However, the phase forms outlined above are argued to be specific to early/emerging adulthood. When the locked-in dynamic manifests in midlife it mixes with other key features of midlife crises, including coping with bereavement, physical signs of ageing, illness and the challenges of long-term marriage and parenting (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987). In later-life, crises have a distinct phasic form that typically stems from struggles to manage multiple losses, and the struggle for ego integrity that occurs in the face of loss and disengagement from productive roles (Robinson & Stell, 2015).

The post-university transition, wellbeing and crisis

The transition out of tertiary education is a period of life during which both kinds of quarter-life crisis are prone to manifest, as an individual makes efforts to develop a consolidated life structure around their fledgling career, and goes through major changes in many aspects of their social life and extra-curricular routine (Robinson, 2016b). The process of leaving university and moving into the labor market for many involves repeated rejection, and challenges to wellbeing, self-esteem, and positive affect. Haase, Heckhausen and Silbereisen (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of German undergraduates in the year after

leaving university, and found a complex set of wellbeing trajectories, which in turn related to goal orientation. They found that occupational goal engagement was associated with a reduction in depression in participants who had high employment prospects, but was associated with an increase in depressive symptoms in graduates with unfavorable employment prospects. Therefore, motivation to achieve career goals is a double-edged sword for graduates, which can bring positivity or negativity depending on the job search process and outcome. Haase *et al* also found that goal engagement was related to a lower sense of autonomy, suggesting that finding a job after university may be felt to be more of a necessity than an autonomous aspiration at the point of graduation.

For those students who have lived away from home during university years, another key challenge that shapes the post-university transition is the process of moving back in with parents. This can be felt as a developmental regression into an environment in which one takes on the role of child (BBC, 2014). In 2016, 47% of British graduates lived with their parents for 6 months or more after graduating. As key providers of financial and residential support, many parents can and do attempt to influence career decisions and other major life decisions in young adults, which in turn can undermine the much-needed sense of personal agency that fuels the arduous search for work (Jones, O'Sullivan & Rouse, 2006).

Rationale and aims

Case studies provide a number of important theoretical and methodological functions in the study of emerging adults. Robinson and McAdams (2015) describe four such functions: (1) case-based theory development; (2) individual-level prediction testing; (3) theory exemplification; and (4) idiographic psychobiography. The current study's principal functional aim is theory exemplification; to provide a rich theoretical exemplification of how quarter-life crisis manifests quantitatively and qualitatively at the individual level during the post-university transitional period. To show that a theory or model can be exemplified at the individual level supports its capacity for making sense of particulars, which in turn provides for applied impact when seeking to help individuals. Robinson and McAdams (2015) refer to this capacity to describe, explain and predict at the individual level as a theory's specificity.

A secondary aim was to explore whether any insights for theoretical development would emerge from an intensive immersion in a single case. Seeking theoretical insights from a single case works by proposing novel theoretical ideas for further testing in other samples, which emerge in the process of deep cognitive immersion in the particular. An example of this is Neisser's case study of John Dean's memory in his testimony at the Watergate scandal

(Neisser, 1981). Based on his findings in this single case, Neisser presented the theoretical proposition that there was a category of memory called ‘reepisodic’ that extant memory theory did not recognize. This was presented as a theoretical insight for further validation by others, and it did result in more systematic research on ‘reepisodic’ memory (e.g. Ward, Armstrong & Golestani, 1999).

The participant in this case study is referred to by the name Mary. She is British, of mixed ethnicity, and is the first in her family to be university educated. She studied Human Resource Management at university, and did not particularly enjoy her time in Higher Education. She left university feeling optimistic about her future career prospects, but encountered several significant periods of personal crisis. The key research question that I was looking to answer at the outset of the case study was; does the two-fold typology of quarter-life crisis present concepts that help to illuminate Mary’s experience, and conversely, do Mary’s experiences exemplify the model? It became apparent as the case study unfolded that Mary experienced two crises in sequence. Thus, a secondary question emerged several years into the study: Do locked-out and locked-in crises, when manifesting in sequence within the same individual life-story, show links in antecedents or phenomenology that may provide a theoretical insight or suggestion for further theoretical development?

Method

The Case Participant: Recruiting Mary

Mary was originally a participant in a 12-month longitudinal study on wellbeing in graduates. At the final phase of the 12-month longitudinal study of graduates, participants were asked if the past year had been a time of crisis. The presence of crisis was assessed using a retrospective version of the Crisis Definition & Question (CDQ) (Robinson & Wright, 2013; Robinson, Demetre & Litman, 2017). The following definition of crisis was first presented to participants: *“A crisis is a time in your life during which your emotions were more negative and unstable than normal, and you experienced changes and transitions that challenged your capacity to cope with stress, making you feel at times overwhelmed. During a crisis people often question things, including their goals, values and sense of identity. Typically crises last six months or more.”* Participants were then provided with the following question: *“Do you feel that you have been through a crisis since leaving university?”* to which they were required to respond using a binary forced-choice – yes or no. From the 184

individuals who completed the longitudinal study, 61 individuals (33% of the sample) reported experiencing a crisis in the past year.

Those who reported a crisis were asked to describe the key features of the crisis briefly using a brief open-ended textbox. From this open-ended text, a subgroup of ten participants was selected for having described a crisis that had been specifically linked to the challenges of finding work, while also extending beyond that into other areas of life such as relationships and residential issues. Mary was one of this group. Of the ten individuals who were approached, four consented to being interviewed. From this group of interviews, I selected Mary for continued case study work on the basis of *intensity sampling* (Miles & Huberman 1994; Robinson, 2010b). This strategy aims to locate an *information-rich* case, by selecting an individual who provides in-depth and comprehensive information about their life, and Mary was able to provide a higher level of in-depth information about her experiences in interview than the other interviewees

Mary attended the university that I work at, but our paths did not cross until she was selected from the longitudinal study. Her mother is from England and her father is from St Lucia in the Caribbean. She describes her ethnicity as Black British – Caribbean. She has one younger sister and two younger brothers. She grew up in East London, in a relatively affluent neighbourhood, and she felt that her parents did much to manage the perception that they were wealthy, including buying expensive cars instead of toys for their children. She describes her upbringing as very strict, and found that she had a tense and formal relationship with her parents, rather than a loving one. She felt that her mother used religion to enforce discipline and Mary has subsequently rejected religion as an important part of her life. Her parents divorced when she was 17.

Mary has been working part-time in retail or HR jobs since the age of 16. She was the first in her family to attend university. She studied Human Resource Management, but found the whole experience of university to be a struggle in emotional and academic ways, and this provides key context to the subsequent crises described below. She has been working in the field of Human Resources since graduating.

Ethical issues were rigorously addressed throughout the project. Mary was fully aware that her experiences would be described as an individual case study, and thus despite not using her name and anonymising many of the details of her life, she is in principal identifiable in this manuscript, by people who already knew her. She is aware of this and has given her consent for this. She provided informed consent at every assessment point during

the study and has been offered support should she need it in relation to the topics brought up in the interviews. She was shown the outcomes of the analysis, and was asked for comment on whether she felt that this was a fair rendering of her personal story (see below section on participant validation), which ensured that she was not offended or upset by any way that I had interpreted her data.

Longitudinal mixed-methods data collection strategy

Mary provided data over six assessment points during a period of four years. The first three assessment points (1 month, 6 months and 12 months after leaving university) were part of a larger longitudinal study of university graduates (N=184) and comprised of questionnaires only. The questionnaires used were (a) the Psychological Wellbeing Scale (PWB) 18-item version (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and (b) the CESD-10 measure of depression (Zhang et al., 2012).

The PWB measures six aspects of eudaimonic wellbeing; *Purpose in Life, Personal Growth, Environmental Mastery, Positive Relationships, Autonomy, and Self-Acceptance*. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert Scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

The CESD-10 is a 10-item scale for non-clinical populations that assesses feelings over the past week. Example items are “I felt lonely” and “I felt depressed”. Answers are given on a four-point scale: Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day); Some or a little of the time (1-2 days); Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days); All of the time (5-7 days).

Assessment point 4 took place 18 months after university, and comprised both quantitative questionnaires (PWB, CESD-10) and a semi-structured interview. The interview (a) explored Mary’s narrative account of the preceding 18 months, and (b) asked her to explain the quantitative data scores she had given in the first 12 months of the study. To facilitate this explanatory-interpretative discussion of her quantitative scores, Mary was provided with printed line graphs that showed her quantitative data from the wellbeing and depression questionnaires that she provided in Phases 1 to 3. She was asked whether the changes shown in the graphs were personally significant in relation to her life experiences, and to explain the peaks and troughs as best she could, and annotate the graphs with her explanations, as well as speaking them aloud.

Assessment point 5 took place 3 years after Assessment 1, and comprised questionnaires plus a semi-structured interview that followed her continued narrative account, as well as discussing her quantitative data over all 5 assessment points.

Both interviews were aimed at eliciting a narrative account of the portion of Mary's life that was under study, i.e. the transition from being at university to life after it, however the discussion was allowed to digress into other parts of her life when she felt that was relevant to understanding the period in question. In the second interview, the focus of the discussion was on experiences and events that occurred during the 18 months since the earlier interview.

The interviews both corroborated and clarified the quantitative questionnaire data via convergence and explanatory mixed-methods designs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Within the mixed-methods design used in this study, the aim of the quantitative analysis was not to establish statistical significance of quantitative changes over time, but rather to help *explain* them and make sense of them in light of the narrative data. Crucial to this was linking measurable changes with reported life episodes that were occurring at the same time, and also involving Mary in the analytical process by asking whether she found the changes shown in the psychometric data to be *personally significant* and meaningful (Bothe and Richardson, 2011). This aspect of the study is based on the explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007), in which qualitative data are used to explain and interpret previously collected quantitative data.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using a form of composite qualitative analysis developed for analyzing transitions and crises (Robinson & Smith, 2010a). It combines elements of Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (Smith & Eatough, 2006), and Miles and Huberman's Interactive Model of Analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). It emphasizes a mix of inductive and deductive thematic work; the researcher deploys theory-led concepts to frame research questions and create deductive concepts prior to data gathering. These generic a-priori concepts and questions are then interrogated in light of data, and new more particular themes, or revisions of existing ones, are allowed to inductively emerge. This mix of deductive and inductive coding distinguishes this approach from more purely inductive methods, such as Grounded Theory, or pure Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis.

Another key aspect of this composite method is that it emphasizes structuring themes into a series of phases, in order to depict the temporal pattern of the life transition or crisis in

question. It can be used with case studies (e.g. Robinson & Smith, 2010b) or multi-participant studies (e.g. Robinson & Smith, 2010a). In the current study, the conceptualized phases of quarter-life, as manifesting at four analytical levels (person-in-environment, identity, motivation, and affect-cognition) provided a-priori themes.

The analysis process commenced with establishing a-priori concepts for ordering the data, based on existing literature on the post-university transition, emerging adulthood and quarter-life crisis. I then intensively immersed myself in the interview transcripts, and annotated those transcriptions with possible themes, superordinate themes and illustrative quotes. These were then integrated into a tabular format. I then presented this table of themes, along with the interview transcripts, to a second analyst, and over a process of dialogic consensus-seeking, minor amendments were made to some theme names and supporting quotes. This led to a final analytic structure. Table 1 presents the superordinate themes, subordinate themes and associated time periods associated with each one.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Participant Corroboration Exercise

An aspect of this study that draws on phenomenological roots was a participant corroboration exercise, done to assess the extent to which the analytical outcomes were subjectively perceived by the participant as fair and appropriate. It helped to ensure that the analysis I engaged in had prioritised the subjective lifeworld of the participant, rather than distorting her story or inferred ideas beyond the data in a way that was out of line with her own views of her case (Robinson, 2008).

The process was undertaken with the participant's consent after analysis had been conducted. The participant was emailed a document containing the provisional table of qualitative themes grouped into phase-based meta-themes, with each theme illustrated by quotes taken from interviews. She was asked to comment whether (a) the timeframe was accurate for each of the phases in the analysis, (b) whether anything in the analysis was inaccurate, misleading or misrepresenting, (c) whether the inferences of two crises were appropriate and justified, (d) whether the analysis as a whole accurately captured the experiences described over the years in question.

The participant reported being wholly supportive of the analysis, and requested no edits or changes to either the timescale of the phases or the thematic content. The following extract is taken from her response to the participant corroboration exercise: "Overall, I do feel

that your analysis accurately captures my experiences over the years in question... What you have said has definitely provided a helpful perspective on this period in my life.” As a second part of this corroboration exercise, Mary was also asked to comment on the graphs showing her quantitative wellbeing and depression data over five phases. This provided further data for analysis on the personal significance of the quantitative changes.

Results

Mary’s story: Qualitative findings

Phase 1a: University as a constant struggle. Mary described her time at university in mainly negative terms. She had the desire to withdraw frequently, but kept going because she feared she had no other options. The pervasive negativity of her university memories is closely associated with her account of lacking confidence in her academic abilities, appearance, and in her behavior generally. She described a constant battle with getting work done, maintaining motivation, trying to make friends, keeping her boyfriend happy, and with physical health problems. She used the word struggle repeatedly:

“In terms of work, I just felt like I was struggling constantly. First year was a major struggle...I got everything done but it was just a massive struggle.”

The only subordinate theme within this superordinate theme that was not indicative of a struggle was that which pertained to the retail work she was doing 2 or 3 days a week. However, although not negative in itself, it put extra pressure on the time that she had to study. Mary described her time at university as one that laid the antecedents of her post-university crisis by leaving her feeling vulnerable and isolated and not providing a growing sense of resilience or confidence that is required for post-university life.

Phase 1b: Home or away? Residential struggles and upheavals. For the first year and a half of her time at university, Mary lived in shared apartments, but struggled to experience a sense of belonging within these living arrangements. She also struggled to pay the rent. During this time, she had confrontations with her mother, who wanted to rent her room out and for her to move out permanently. She described her mother as a cold and distant person. She asked Mary to give up her room key, but Mary had said that she wanted to come home in the holidays. In the end her mother did rent her room out, and Mary returned home

to find other people's belongings in her room. She described feeling angry about this, and how she found herself feeling unwanted:

“Whilst I was away at uni [sic] she for some reason thought it was a permanent fixture so she, during first year she would keep asking for my key back even though I'm telling her I'm coming home during the holidays. So we clashed on that and she said, well I would like to rent your room now. So there was a few times I would come home and there was someone else's stuff in my room which was very angering. So then when it came to the summer holiday, between the two, my mum had decided well this is it I want to rent your room out, I don't want you to be here.”

Eventually, Mary did move back home, but her mother then charged her rent, reflecting a move from a care-based relationship to a more transactional relationship.

Phase 2: "Locked-out" crisis: 22 job interviews in 9 months. When Mary left university, she optimistically expected that finding a full-time job would be quick. This expectation was confounded, and she went through multiple unsuccessful job applications, and found herself getting more and more anxious and losing confidence in herself during job interviews:

“I, sort of started to develop anxiety. I didn't really know I, well now I know I'm an anxious person, but prior to the job hunting I never knew what anxiety was. So as each interview went by I would start to stutter more. There were many occasions where I would open my mouth and nothing would come out, I'd be pausing for a few seconds, I'd try and laugh it off.”

She described developing an obsessive focus on job hunting, to the detriment of her wellbeing and her perspective on the situation. She said it was all she could think and talk about. She also described crying a lot during this period, and becoming increasingly desperate as she went through 21 job interviews without success:

“I was faced with constant rejection following multiple job interviews, which was a new concept to me, so my self-esteem took a battering. I wanted to progress but I felt unable to.”

It is at the point that Mary let go of her desperation, that she finally got a break. She decided she was going to do *one* more interview and then give up for the time being. She went to that

interview without putting so much pressure on herself, having almost resigned herself to failure, and got the job.

Phase 3: A growing sense of agency and confidence at work. Mary found that, in contrast to her dislike of university study, she loved her work as a Human Resources administrator. Not only did she feel positive towards work, she started to take up new intrinsically motivated activities such as dancing and rock-climbing, and undertook an online course to help her with her anxiety. At this time, she and her boyfriend started to look towards the future and considered saving for a mortgage. She reflected that she went from considering herself 'young' to considering herself 'old' during this time, which may reflect a subjective transition to adulthood. She also described going through a period of intensive learning about herself.

During the period she was living with her mother after university and doing self-help work on her anxiety, she also started to understand her mother better. She feels her mother is still a challenging person to be around, but she attributes less blame or intention to her mother's actions.

"I understand that my mum, it's not her behavior, it's not personal to me, she doesn't wake up and think, I don't know, "oh I'm going to be off with you today" or "I'm going to.." like it's she has her own issues that she is dealing with."

By externally attributing her challenging behavior to "issues" that she is dealing with – she finds it easier to connect with her mother in an adult-to-adult manner, rather than in a more emotional child-to-parent mode of interaction.

Phase 4: Moved jobs twice, culminating in "locked-in" crisis. Mary's HR job was a fixed-term contract. She was hoping to be made permanent, but the organization only extended the contract for six months, and then she was made redundant. She described feeling this as a kind of personal attack on her ability, and once again her confidence dipped. She struggled with depressive feelings, and when she did get a new job, she disliked it and found the tasks she was asked to do to be menial. She moved job again after several months, and while this new job started well, she realized that her boss had erratic behavioral patterns. This erratic mix involved both being inappropriately warm, for example requesting hugs, and then being aggressively critical and confrontational, as described in the following extract:

"After the third week, she, there was a day where she came in, she asked me to do a letter and I had done a spelling mistake in the letter, completely my fault, and she

started shouting and swearing and I said so, I'd done the letter, I printed out the letter and gave it to her and she just said "what the fuck is this?" She hadn't spoken to me like that prior to that day. I, it completely caught me off guard and I said you know "what is it?" and she said, she explained with shouty and swear words, so I got it right, gave it to her and then the afternoon I'd done another letter and I feel so stupid but I made another mistake. She told me what she wanted me to say but then I paraphrased it in the letter, whereas she wanted her exact words, so anyway, in that afternoon she called me "incompetent"...Then, by about home time she said that she needed a hug because she's had a long day, she's really stressed, she's really glad that I'm here to support her and glad that I'm here to give her a hug, could I pop to the shop to get her some chocolates and I said yeah and then from there it was like, that day was the beginning of the downhill spiral."

The boss then overstepped the professional nature of their relationship. She has a teenage son, and asked Mary to go through her son's mobile phone, to look for texts that might be inappropriate or pornographic. This created a sense of transgressed boundaries, which when added to the erratic mix of aggression and warmth, made Mary feel vulnerable and uncomfortable. Indicative of feeling locked in, she did not feel that she could leave the job. Having been through a period of instability, she was keen for a permanent role, and afraid of being out of work if she resigned:

"I just kind of felt like is this what I'm doing like is this my life now that I'm working with a manager that is so inconsistent and I thought I don't want to leave just in case they do make me permanent."

After some months of putting up with this disturbing and unpredictable work environment, Mary accepted that she must remove herself from the situation, and left for a new job. This released her from the sense of feeling trapped and unhappy, and she started once again to build a sense of confidence and agency.

Phase 5: Positive and agentic despite break-up. By six months after the locked-in crisis of Phase 4, Mary was increasingly focused on personal growth again, but came to the realization that she needed to move on from her long-term relationship with her boyfriend to do this. In the relationship, she experienced herself as passive, and this was increasingly juxtaposed with her growing self-confidence and sense of agency:

“I see that I was holding myself back for the sake of my relationship. He was the most important person to me and he was on a pedestal and I stopped my own growth.”

The confidence that Mary described in herself at the final interview of the research study as in stark contrast to the lack of confidence she described in Phases 1 and 2. She talked of feeling at ease with being on her own, a burgeoning sense of self-belief, and of feeling like a “different person” from the girl she was three years earlier:

“The majority of the time I am confident in my work, confident in my appearance. I feel like I am happiest on my own and yeah, I’m good at my job, I’m a good friend...But I don't know, somehow I’ve realized that I have myself and I’m here 24/7, I can talk to myself. I have my own back so if everyone, all my friends and family were to disappear tomorrow it’s okay, I don’t need to feel lonely because I’m still here within myself...I don’t know how to put my finger on it but I feel like a whole different person.”

Despite the positive trajectory over the years of study, Mary was clear that she had not resolved her life into a stable state. Continued instability was a feature. At the point of participation in the corroboration exercise, which was the final point of contact (in 2017), she was in the transitional process of buying a flat and moving out of London. She described this as a stressful experience, but one that she felt able to manage and cope with, and that having got through her earlier struggles she felt better equipped to manage the difficulties ahead:

“Seeing the changes that I've been through and looking at where I am now, shows how far I've come in my little life journey. And what I'm going through now doesn't seem as bad as what I went through then.”

Integrating quantitative findings and Mary’s story

Mary’s data on the six Ryff PWB scales of *Self-Acceptance*, *Environmental Mastery*, *Personal Growth*, *Purpose in Life*, *Positive Relationships* and *Autonomy* is shown in Figure 1, along with an average *Overall Wellbeing* line, which is a composite of the scores from these six subscales over the 5 data collection phases. Figure 2 shows scores of the CESD Depressive symptoms measure over the same timeframe. As mentioned in the Method section, the aim of this case study is not to explore the statistical significance of the changes indicated by the scores over time, but rather to explore their relation to the crises and transitions described in the qualitative interviews.

INSERT FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

The nadir point for the *Autonomy*, *Positive Relationships*, and *Environmental Mastery* lines occurs in Phase 2. This coincides precisely with the locked-out crisis pattern described by Mary during her time of repeated failed job applications. She described feeling rejected, powerless, lonely and isolated. This narrative description fits with the quantitative data. There is less association between the wellbeing variables and the second crisis period, suggesting a lower impact on wellbeing during this crisis. However, her sense of autonomy remained low through this period, only increasing after the second crisis was over. Mary's sense of purpose and personal growth remain high through this period of crisis, and indeed her purpose in life score gently increases up to Phase 4.

Figure 2 shows Mary's depression score. The two peaks coincide with the two crisis periods in Mary's narrative account. The first crisis shows a more pronounced depressive peak than the second, less intense, crisis which reflects the stronger emotions and higher amount of distress that Mary reports in her narrative within the first crisis. Mary was shown these graphs on two occasions (18 months after leaving university, 4 years after leaving university), and asked to comment on whether the changes illustrated were personally significant for her, and whether they linked to her memories of the times. At 18 months after leaving university, Mary reflected on the changes shown in these graphs as highly personally significant. She highlighted the Phase 2 low points to her crisis as follows: "I was in the middle of a tough time, and was close to giving up the job hunt." At the point of the participant corroborations exercise, several years later, she re-iterated the personal significance of the changes in both the depression and wellbeing graphs, stating:

"It's interesting to see the changes I went through on a graph, and I feel that they are consistent with what I went through at the time."

In sum, the quantitative data show potential markers of Mary's crisis in elevated depression scores and decreased autonomy, environmental mastery and positive relationship scores.

Discussion

The first research question that I posed for this study was whether the holistic two-type model of quarter-life crisis helps to illuminate Mary's experience, and whether Mary's crisis experiences exemplify the model. Secondly, I asked whether locked-out and locked-in crises, when manifesting in sequence within the same individual life-story, provide

theoretical insights or suggestion for further theoretical development about how crises link up.

In relation to the first research question, which sought to explore the extent to which Mary's story of crisis fits with the holistic model of quarter-life crisis, a number of issues stand out. The first crisis showed most, but not all, of the phasic features of a locked-out crisis (Robinson, 2016a). As outlined in the introduction, Phase 1 of a locked-out crisis is characterized by a period of optimistic and active engagement to achieve a social commitment (job/relationship/social role). Mary described exactly this process in the initial months after leaving university. Phase 2 of the model involves going through repeated failures, a feeling of hitting a barrier, and a realization that expectations may have to be altered. Mary went through 21 failures before success, and the realization that her expectations for life after university were out of line with the reality. Phase 3 is a pause in activity in which a person reflects, often accompanied by depressive feelings, on their situation and seeks new solutions and alternatives. Mary actually decided that she would engage in such a pause, but then did one more interview prior to taking a break, in which she approaches the interview in a more relaxed and less prepared way, and got the job, meaning that she moves quickly into Phase 4.

In terms of quantitative scores, the first crisis coincided with a heightened level of *depressive symptoms*, and the low point of the study on three wellbeing scales; *autonomy*, *environmental mastery* and *positive relationships*. These may be candidate markers of a locked-out quarter-life crisis. This can be explored in further multi-participant quantitative studies on the topic. Mary's sense of personal growth and purpose remain relatively high despite the drops in autonomy, mastery and relationships. This fits with previous research indicating that early adult crises can lead to accelerated personal growth and a revitalised sense of purpose (Robinson, 2008). Further research should examine whether these aspects of wellbeing do remain relatively unaffected by a crisis compared with autonomy, environmental mastery and positive relationships.

The second crisis exemplified many of the features of the locked-in pattern. Phase 1 of a locked-in crisis builds with a feeling of being trapped, which in turn often relates to feeling 'engulfed' by one's social situation and lacking a sense of agency to change it. In the words of Laing (1965), engulfment means feeling like an object in another's world, rather than an active subject at the centre of one's own world. Mary provides a clear idiographic depiction of this in relation to working with an erratic and controlling boss. While she is in

that job, Mary feels unable to manage the expectations and demands put upon her, and rightly feels that her manager oversteps boundaries and uses a combination of unpredictable bullying, aggressive actions and inappropriately intimate behavior to level control. Mary's lack of confidence and the difficult graduate work environment also may have partially exacerbated the problem, for she understandably felt concerned about the impact of leaving work given her initial struggle to obtain a job after university.

Mary eventually enacted a separation from the engulfing social system, as per Phase 2 of the model. Phase 3 involves an exploratory pause as a person seeks new direction, but Mary did not have a time-out; she moved directly into Phase 4, which was a new and more satisfying work role.

In both of these two crises, the Phase 3 moratorium is missing. Robinson et al. (2013) have previously documented this skipping of Phase 3 in some individuals, and have referred to it as a 'fast-forward' pattern in quarter-life crises that occurs when a person feels pressured to re-enter commitments. The pattern creates the possibility of falling into a similar trap in the future. When time for reflection is not taken, the same kind of commitment that defined Phase 1 may be re-adopted in Phase 4, therefore laying the ground for another crisis. However, Mary's trajectory over the course of the study is overall a positive one. She describes becoming a 'new person' in terms of confidence and self-belief. Describing the self in this way gives a 'contrast effect' within a life story (Kotre, 1995), the function of which is to emphasise the difference between the past self and the present self, and in so doing to create a sense of metaphorical rebirth and renewal (Robinson & Smith, 2009). Mary's personal growth seems to have been occasioned by personal exploration engaged in *while* she was maintaining commitments after each crisis, rather than during a specific phase within the crisis episode. This pattern of combining exploration and post-crisis commitment may indicate a productive way of managing the fast-forward pattern that facilitates a positive outcome, and could be explored in further qualitative work.

A key feature of Mary's crisis narrative is the frictional relationship with her mother, rooted in her upbringing and presenting an ongoing challenging relationship between the two. This fits with previous findings showing parental conflict to be a common feature of quarter-life crisis (Robinson & Wright, 2013). Negotiating an adult-adult relationship in which both parties accepted and understood each other was key to Mary's improved wellbeing, and over the course of the crises, Mary describes a clear improvement in both how well she understands herself and other mother, and accepts her mother's difficulties and limitations in

terms of the amount of love and care she has managed to give to Mary. This re-negotiation of the parental relationship, particularly in terms of finding a common understanding of what it means to be an adult, is central to the stage of emerging adulthood (Nelson et al., 2007).

A secondary research question that I sought to answer in this study was to explore whether locked-out and locked-in crises, when manifesting in sequence within the same individual life-story, show meaningful links. In answer to this, the two crises in sequence within Mary's narrative showed common antecedents – both were a function of perceived constraints in the employment market that made firstly finding work, and then moving job, arduous and stressful processes. In terms of how the first may have led to the second, a key conceptual distinction that helps to make sense of this is that the crisis has external and internal aspects (Robinson & Smith, 2010). The first crisis was resolved in terms of its external manifestation by getting a job, but the internal aspect – the struggles with anxiety and fragile confidence – was not resolved so easily. After starting her graduate job, Mary makes proactive steps to improve her emotions and her self-confidence – she does an online psychology course and reads self-help books. Her inward insecurity is improved by the time of the next crisis, but it is still there, and hence she initially blames herself for the problems that her boss creates, and finds her confidence easily knocked. An insight from this for future studies to look at further is that while a crisis may appear 'resolved' from an external viewpoint, the internal features of it – the motives, affect, cognitions and identity issues – may remain unresolved for some time, providing vulnerability for further periods of crisis or personal difficulty.

Quarter-life crisis theory has close links with emerging adulthood theory, as formulated by Arnett (2000). Emerging adulthood is a period of life that shows features of instability, role fluidity, optimism, exploration and deferral of major life commitments. Quarter-life crises typically manifest as a person struggles to move out of emerging adulthood into a lifestyle defined more by settled roles, commitment and predictability. Instability and self-exploration pervade the whole narrative, showing clear evidence of the many of the defining features of emerging adulthood. Mary also remained optimistic about the future through the unstable years of crisis.

I argue that the whole four-year period under study for Mary was a time in which she was moving falteringly from an exploratory emerging adulthood lifestyle to one that is defined by a fixed set of predictable commitments. The crises she experienced were key episodic points within this, each following a life event that created overwhelming challenges.

Even by the end of the study, she still described feeling unstable in many ways, as she was looking to move out of her mother's house, leave London and buy a house. Thus despite her many efforts, she was arguably still in the stage of emerging adulthood at the end of the study – still seeking the settled roots and residential autonomy that she very clearly desired.

The qualitative and quantitative findings fit with past research findings on university life in the UK and the post-university transition. With regards to literature on wellbeing at university, Mary described her difficulties with anxiety and low confidence in part a function of having experienced university as a continuous struggle and a period where she lacked personal growth. In relation to this point, research has found little provided at British universities for students in terms of resilience training or self-development activities (Thorley, 2017), so it is a reasonable inference that other graduates who have the same sense of lacking growth during their time in tertiary education may be likely to have a post-university quarter-life crisis.

As a graduate, Mary found that she had inflated expectations about the ease of getting a job, and a vulnerable self-concept that was easily lowered in esteem by negative events and perceived failure. This fits with research findings showing the widespread presence of unrealistic expectations in young adults (Setterstein & Ray, 2010), and it also reflects the mixture of idealism and instability that defines emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

In terms of congruity with literature on graduates, Brown et al. (2006) found that a proactive personality type combined with high levels of self-efficacy increased the likelihood of obtaining a job. While Mary was highly proactive in attempts to find work, she found that her lack of confidence, which can be considered as a narrative depiction of low self-efficacy, hampered her performance in interviews. Haase et al. (2012) found that being motivated to achieve in a career after leaving university, if combined with unfavorable employment opportunities, predicts depression. Mary's data show high motivation to find work, multiple failures showing the unfavorable nature of the search process, and also a peak in depression during the job search process, which in terms of her score on the CESD is indicative of clinical levels of depression.

Limitations and future directions

This case study provides information to further understand the nature of a quarter-life crisis, via a combination of narrative-based and psychometric data. Its principal aim was to flesh out, within a concrete instance, existing claims from previous quantitative and qualitative studies that have been used to develop the holistic model of quarter-life crises. A

key limitation is that the external features of the crises in Mary's case revolved around work, and should not be generalized to crises that revolve around romantic relationships or friend groups (Robinson & Smith, 2010a). While Mary does experience a break-up within the study period, it was not part of the two crisis episode peaks. The crises were principally about finding, and coping with, work. Other case studies are needed to exemplify and deepen an understanding of crises that revolve around other interpersonal domains.

In terms of methodology, the intensity sampling approach that was used selected a case that was information-rich, but Mary's story may or may not be typical of a representative sample. It is highly likely that her story of crisis and the post-university transition was in part shaped by structural social factors, her ethnicity and her gender, and these are not discussed in this article. Thus, the findings presented are intended not as generalizable fact, but as insights for further testing that emerged specifically through empirical and interpretive immersion in a single case. By exemplifying the holistic model of quarter-life crisis at the level of the individual, the findings support the *specifiability* of the model (Robinson & McAdams, 2015).

In addition to its function of exemplifying and filling out theory, the case does provide tentative insights that can be further explored in future studies. Firstly, Mary's narrative portrayal of how her confidence decreased during crisis episodes suggests that self-efficacy or self-confidence could be a measure used in future longitudinal studies of crisis. It may be that dips in this variable are a key indicator of the experience of crisis. Secondly, the sequential manifestation of locked-out and locked-in crises was not predicted, but rather unfolded as data collection progressed. Further qualitative research on this sequence could explore the nature of this sequential pattern, and whether the presence of two crisis episodes in sequence does indeed stem from a lack of resolution over the inner aspects of the first crisis, despite apparent external resolution.

Finally, the impact of the transition that young adults make out of tertiary education into the workplace on wellbeing and mental health has had a paucity of research directed at it. There are no more than a handful of published studies on the topic. Future work on this crucial life transition, using samples from different cultures, demographic groups and graduate types, is much needed.

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Table 1. Phases, timescale, meta-themes and second order themes from qualitative analysis

Phase and timescale	Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme
Phase 1a: Sept 2010 to June 2013	University as constant struggle	"Hated" time at university Lacking confidence Academic Work: constant struggle Motivational struggle Retail work 2 or 3 days a week, HR = career goal Social struggle: Lack of friends and not fitting in Relationship struggles: Boyfriend on a pedestal Physical struggle: Anaemia
Phase 1b: Sept 2010 to June 2013	Home or away? Residential struggles and upheavals	Flat share with 'random people' Difficulty with paying rent "My Mum didn't want me"
Phase 2: July 2013 to March 2014	"Locked-out" crisis: 22 job interviews in 9 months	False belief that job search would be quick Becomes obsessed with job hunting Constant effort: 22 interviews Feeling unable to progress Loss of confidence Developing anxiety Pressure A lot of crying Beyond desperation The breakthrough: Close to giving up, Letting go
Phase 3: April 2014 to Oct 2015	Building sense of agency and confidence at work	Loving work; intrinsic motivation; perfect job New activities: rock climbing, dance classes Thinking ahead long term; mortgage Still living with mother From feeling young to feeling old Self-improvement goals; working on anxiety; online psychology course Developing "adult to adult" relationship with mother Learning about self
Phase 4: Nov 2015 to April 2016	Moved jobs twice, culminating in "Locked In"	Contract ends in job, extended but only for 6 months

crisis

Phase 5: April 2016 onwards	Positive, confident and agentic despite instability	Felt under personal attack Low confidence Feeling depressed and frustrated First new job: Hates it; menial work; Moves job after several months Challenging and inconsistent behaviour from boss Boss overstepping boundaries; "engulfment" Harassment and personal attacks from boss Stuck / trapped Battle with self-blame / other-blame Self-appraisal "contrast effect": Different person Breaks up with boyfriend: developing agency, growing apart Confident Reflective - asks for feedback Exercise and weight loss: Proactive behavior From loneliness to independence: Post break-up
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Figure 2. Mary's change profiles on the seven Ryff Psychological Wellbeing subscales over five time periods within a 3-year period

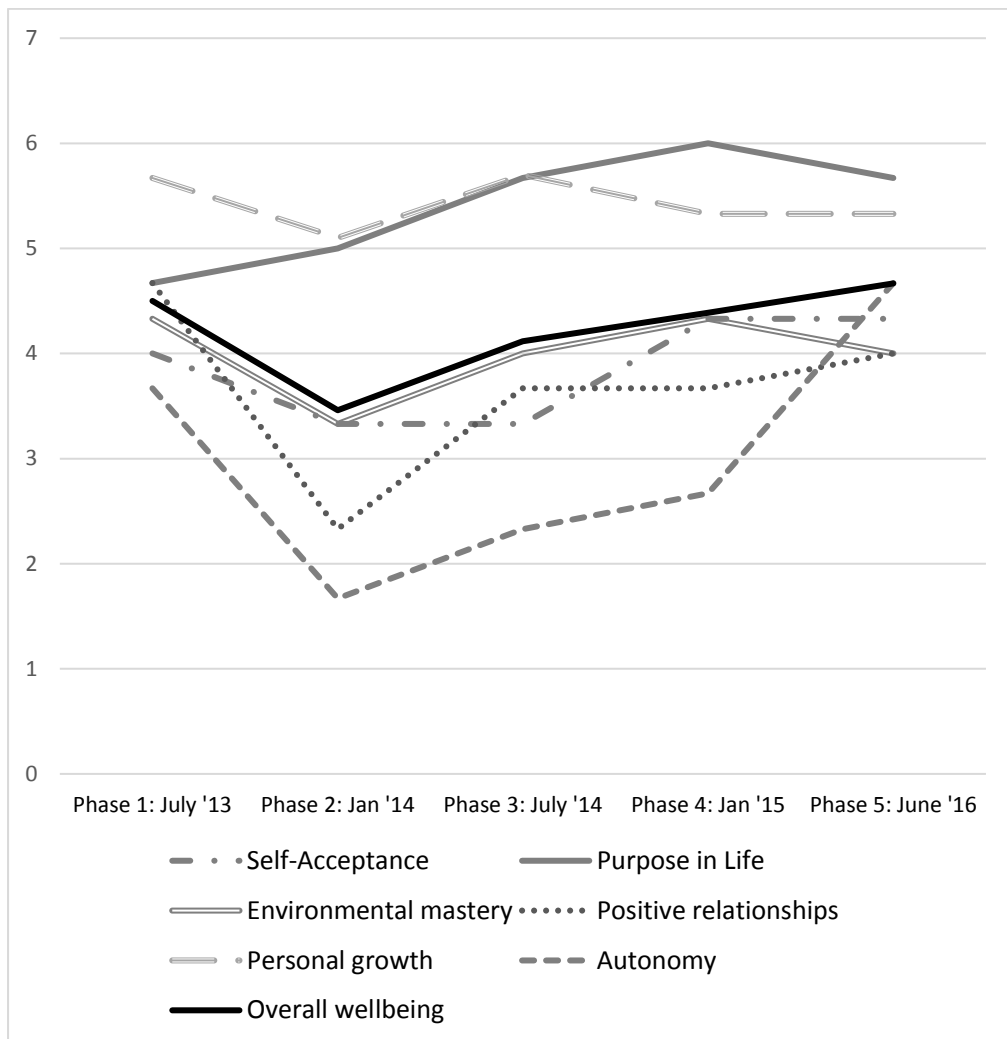


Figure 1. Mary's depression symptom scores over five time periods within a 3-year period

