

‘Forced adulthood’: An aspect of ‘quarterlife crisis’ suffered by young English and Assamese adults

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Quarterlife crisis’ describes difficulties experienced by young people in their transition to adulthood. Little is known about how this crisis manifests in different cultural contexts or the impact of educational background. Using photo-elicitation and timeline interviews, we explore the lived experience of ‘quarterlife crisis’ among 22-30 year olds from England (n=16) and Assam, India (n=8), each group including people with and people without a university-level education. Data were analysed with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. We report the key theme of ‘forced adulthood’, consisting of the traumatising experience of having to assume adult roles and responsibilities before one feels capable of so doing. We explore how cultural and educational factors shape this experience though: feeling rushed to financial self-sufficiency; having to train oneself to be an adult; and having to be the ‘man of the house’. In conclusion, we demonstrate that, even though there is some consistency around the traumatising effect of too early an assumption of adult responsibility, culture and educational background can change the contours of this experience and its meaning.

Keywords: life span, identity crisis, cross-cultural differences, young adulthood, visual methods, phenomenology.

Introduction

High rates of mental health problems have been noted globally among individuals aged 18 to 25 years (Bittner et al., 2004; Kessler & Walters, 1998). This has been linked to a decrease in social connectedness (Twenge, 2000) and rise in youth unemployment (Galambos, Barker & Krahn, 2006; McGee & Thompson, 2015). Given the potential for lifelong negative consequences, contemporary researchers have shone the spotlight on depression and anxiety among young people in order to understand how this impacts life trajectory (e.g., Aseltine Jr & Gore, 2005; McGee & Thompson, 2015; Mossakowski, 2011). Socio-economic context is one important factor influencing transition to adulthood and, in developing countries, this can be complicated by a clash between westernization and traditional values which can unsettle

young people's "dreams, aspirations [...] and overall quality of life" (Fatusi & Hindin, 2010, p. 500). The purpose of this study is to explicate lived experiences of young people in the UK (developed country) and India (developing country) who perceive experiencing crisis during their transition to adulthood.

Research on transition to adulthood has explored the relation between young people's psychological wellbeing and typical developmental tasks during this period such as employment and marriage (Arnett, 2000; Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth & Tellegen, 2004). For example, Aseltine and Gore (2005) found that enrolment in college or having full time work were associated with lower levels of depression and positive quality of life. A sense of direction appears to be important, with fewer psychological problems reported when young people had a sense of structure in their daily life.

From interviews with young Americans, Robbins and Wilner (2001) coined the term 'quarterlife crisis' to describe a problematic transition to adulthood, defining it as a "state of panic, sparked by a feeling of loss and uncertainty" (p. 7). However, although the term has been popularised in television, cinema and music (Thorspecken, 2005), there is little research into its validity, meaning or impact on young people's lives. The concept is not completely new, though, and the idea of a 'quarterlife crisis' is compatible with the earlier lifespan development theories of Levinson (1986) and Erikson (1950). Both these earlier theories propose that crises are more likely at certain life stages and that these are shaped by biology as well as by a typical trajectory in familial, social, educational, economic and political conditions. Specifically, crises are theorised to arise when a change in values, possibilities and/or circumstances prompt a re-evaluation or re-structuring of the purpose and direction of life, accompanied by a sense of urgency to resolve the situation, but amidst significant challenges to doing so (Hermann, 1972).

Arnett's (1997) concept of 'emerging adulthood' also includes aspects of vulnerability and potential crisis. Emerging adulthood is described as a time of exploration, but also of instability due to breaking with institutions, such as school and family, that had provided safety, purpose and direction. Facing multiple choices, Arnett argues that emerging adults need to find their place in the world in line with social expectations, which includes securing a life partner, appropriate occupation, and strong sense of identity. Young people may suffer if they perceive too wide a gap between their current position and societal expectations, often alongside a sense that this needs to be resolved within a pressured timeframe (Billings, Milburn & Schaalman, 1980). Moreover, Robbins and Wilner (2001) see similarities between 'quarterlife crisis' and

its more famous cousin 'midlife crisis' in that both implicate a "major life change" (p. 2). However, they propose that, whilst midlife crisis is theoretically associated with monotony and stagnancy, 'quarterlife crisis' is a state of unpredictability and apprehension amidst multiple choices, generating feelings of being "alone, confused, and anxious one minute and social, centred, and calm the next" (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008, p. 241).

Stage models of development and the notion of crisis are highly contested, particularly in terms of their assumed inevitability and universality given that many studies fail to find evidence of crisis and most have been limited to university-educated western populations (Bynner, 2005; Henry & Kloep, 2010; Rossi & Mebert, 2011). Yet there is growing evidence that young people can experience crisis (Côté, 2006; Robinson & Smith, 2010) across a range of cultural settings. For example, Pole's (2014) study of the Tongan community in New Zealand found that, upon completing education, young adults experienced a form of 'quarterlife crisis' which involved a sense of failing to contribute to community goals. This finding is particularly illuminating given that the population on which the concept of 'quarterlife crisis' was developed, i.e., young Americans, experience their crisis in terms of failing to attain stability and direction in personal and professional life (Robbins & Wilner, 2001).

This variability in experience of crisis directs attention to how social and cultural context set the parameters of success. For example, according to Hofstede (2011), typically, in developing countries with traditional values, "people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups" and are protected "in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (2011, p. 11). Hofstede (2011) contrasts this to the Anglophone west where it is more typical for parents to encourage independence and autonomy in their children. In practice, the situation is more complex and Killen and Wainryb (2000) highlight how "concerns with autonomy are not absent from traditional societies, but are played out differently for individuals in different roles and positions, resulting in a complex interweaving of independence and interdependence" (p. 16). This is true also of 'individualistic' societies where people are socialised also to care about the welfare of others (Killen & Wainryb, 2000).

With globalization and new ways of interacting, such as social media, young people are exposed to a wider range of cultures and, potentially at least, choice of affiliation (Wichalls, 2012). For example, there is evidence that in some Asian countries, like India, China and Japan, that emphasise collective values (Hofstede, 2011), are undergoing a cultural shift whereby young people have increasing aspiration for self-determination which may be in tension with

obligations they are expected to meet with regard to their family-of-origin (Hamamura, 2012). However, traditional cultural values have immense inertia and provide the frame within which potential changes are interpreted and evaluated: “One could say that while a social system is structurally open (i.e. it clearly has contact with other systems and cannot be regarded as a container), it is functionally closed (i.e. the mechanism for interpretation does not come from the outside, but from within the cultural system itself)” (Wichalls, 2012, p. 15). Hence, forging a life path against expectations is not easy and many such young people may experience difficulties finding their place in the world.

The aim of our study is to elucidate central features of the ‘quarterlife crisis’ as experienced by young adults in two different cultural contexts and with reference to educational background. We recruited young people from one developed country - England – and a state in one developing country - Assam, India. Typical of the developed west, English culture emphasises individualism, autonomy, and independence while Assamese culture represents the more collectivist values prioritising common goals and aspirations (Hofstede, 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). We generated accounts of experience through semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation, and timelining. Semi-structured interviews allowed us to focus on theory-relevant topics, while being open to new information (Madill, 2012). A timeline provided structure for autobiographical events (Rhodes & Fitzgerald, 2006) and contextual details (Adriansen, 2012). Participants were asked to bring images to the interview to help tell their story, with the expectation that this would facilitate a participant-led process and help us generate new insights (Meo, 2010). We selected Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyse our data given its focus on how experiences are perceived and interpreted by the participants. Specifically, IPA requires the researcher “to identify, describe and understand two related aspects of a respondent’s account: the key ‘objects of concern’ in the participant’s world, and the ‘experiential claim’ made by the participant” (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006, p. 111). Hence, we considered this approach to have potential to illuminate how cultural meanings contribute to our participants’ understanding of their experiences as a crisis.

Method

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology, University of Leeds, UK. Signed informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Participants

Our inclusion criteria are that participants are between 22-30 years old, self-define as having experienced difficulties 'finding one's place in the world', British nationals (when recruited in England) or Indian nationals (when recruited in Assam). English participants were recruited via the university alumni website, posters on university campuses, and by word of mouth. The first-round sample consisted of 13 English participants, only one of whom had not attended university. Early analysis indicated that this participant's experience was distinct and appeared to relate in important ways to educational background. Hence, we recruited an additional three English participants who had not attended university in order to explore this potentially significant life difference. The first author is Assamese and, having progressed with the analysis of the English sample, observed interesting differences in her own experiences of transition to adulthood. We therefore took the opportunity to explore cultural differences and she recruited a further eight participants in Assam through personal contacts and word of mouth, making sure to sample those with and without a university education.

The final sample consisted of 16 English and 8 Assamese participants. The English sample was recruited from Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, London, Keighley and Lancaster. The Assamese sample was recruited from the city of Guwahati given the huge differences between rural and urban contexts and the particular economic disparities across the state (Deka, 2005). On the other hand, Assam does have greater cultural cohesion than many Indian states in terms of gender equality, for instance in not following practices such as dowry and child-marriage (Deka, 2013). The sample is a little larger than the 3-16 participants considered typical of IPA studies by Robinson (2014) but within the range able to provide depth of analysis suggested by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014). The English sample is twice that of the Assamese. This is because, as described above, the analysis of the original English sample alerted the first author to potentially interesting cultural differences. We therefore understand the Assamese sample to be analogous to a 'deviant' or 'negative' case analysis in which even one carefully selected instance can prove illuminating. That is, this technique can reveal relevant phenomena via comparison (Hanson, 2017) and has been described as "an ideal way to expand the content of a theory [or concept]" (Emigh, 1997, p. 659). Table 1 describes the sample based on culture, age, gender and education.

Table 1

Participants' distribution based on cultural background, gender, age and education

Cultural background (English/Assamese)	Age (mean) (SD=1.85)	Gender		Education	
		Male	Female	Attended university	Not attended university
English	24.31 (SD=1.85)	8	8	12 (6 males, 6 females)	4 (2 males, 2 females)
Assamese	27.25 (SD=2.31)	4	4	5 (2 males, 3 females)	3 (2 males, 1 female)

Data collection and analytical procedure

People showing interest in the study who possibly met the inclusion criteria were provided with the information sheet. They were asked a set of questions to establish eligibility: “Have you ever experienced difficulty establishing what ‘kind of person’ you are?”, “Have you ever felt stuck in life?”, “Have you ever felt anxious about choosing the next step in life?” If the person answered yes to one or more question, they were asked at which age they had this experience. If this was between the ages of 22 and 30 years, they were then invited to take part in the research. As is typical in photo elicitation studies, two weeks prior to interview, participants were asked to collect and send to the researcher photographs or images related to their difficulties ‘finding one’s place in the world’. Participants took part in an audio-recorded semi-structured interview with the first author. Each was asked to create a timeline on a piece of paper relevant to telling their story. The interview was driven by discussion of the timeline, each participant placing their images in an appropriate position and explaining its relevance in representing their experience (e.g., see Figure1). With permission, timelines were photographed for analysis.



Figure 1. Jack’s timeline (from 1995 to 2015)

Where appropriate, the interviewer drew in additional lines of enquiry such as feeling stuck, worries, relationship issues, responsibilities, regrets and coping strategies, indicated to be important in the literature on emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Robbins & Wilner, 2001; Setterson & Ray, 2010). The data was analysed using IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Transcripts were first coded individually with concepts and phrases assigned to portions of the text to identify and represent reported experiences. A cross-sample analysis was then conducted of codes in order to identify similarities and differences between cultures and between people with different educational background. Finally, codes with similar meaning were grouped to generate cross-sample conceptual themes and sub-themes.

Analysis

We present one key theme here – ‘forced adulthood’ – because it captures an important cross-cultural experience of ‘quarterlife crisis.’ We start by explicating the theme ‘forced adulthood’ before presenting its three sub-themes. Table 2 shows the distribution of sub-themes across participants.

Table 2

Participant demographic, interview length, number of photographs brought, and contribution to analytic sub-themes

Pseudonym*	Sex	Age (yrs)	Ethnicity (as indicated by participants in screening test)	Highest qualification#	Source of recruitment	Interview (mins)	Photos	Sub-theme		
								1	2	3
Mary	F	25	English	PhD scholar	Word of mouth	46	7			
Hannah	F	27	English	BSc	University of Leeds	80	33		✓	

					Alumni website				
Olivia	F	23	English	BA	University of Leeds Alumni website	54	10	✓	
Avril	F	28	English	BA (Hons)	Word of mouth	48	9	✓	
Erica	F	24	English	Currently BSc	University of Leeds Alumni website	74	13	✓	
Silvia	F	25	English	PhD Scholar	Word of mouth	37	7	✓	
Sarah	F	23	English	Diploma	Through acquaintance	39	9	✓	
Amy	F	26	English-Indian	GCSE	Through acquaintance	140	14	✓	
Bill	M	23	English	BA (Hons)	University of Leeds Alumni website	73	5		
Andrew	M	22	English	MA	Through acquaintance	128	6	✓	
Max	M	25	English	MA	Through acquaintance	70	5	✓	

Denver	M	22	English	Currently BA	Through acquaintance	49	5	✓	
Alex	M	23	English	Currently Masters	Through acquaintance	36	8		
Harry	M	26	English	BA	University of Leeds Alumni website	59	11	✓	
Aran	M	25	English	GCSE	Poster	54	5	✓	✓
Jack	M	22	English	GCSE	Through acquaintance	52	18		✓
Aman	M	29	Assamese Indian	MA	Through acquaintance	88	10		✓
Ravi	M	25	Assamese Indian	Currently BA	Through acquaintance	111	28		
Raj	M	24	Assamese Indian	A-levels	Word of mouth	41	8	✓	
Vikram	M	30	Assamese Indian	A-levels	Word of mouth	39	12	✓	✓
Ishita	F	26	Assamese Indian	MSc	Through acquaintance	28	10	✓	✓
Amrita	F	30	Assamese Indian	MA	Through acquaintance	103	6	✓	✓
Isha	F	26	Assamese Indian	MA	Word of mouth	79	6	✓	✓

Niti	F	28	Assamese Indian	A-levels	Word of mouth	of 48	5	✓
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**Note 1: Participants listed in order of ethnic group, gender and education (attended and not attended university within gender)*

#Note 2: Abbreviations, PhD (Doctorate), BA (Bachelor of Arts), BSc (Bachelor of Science), GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), MA (Master of Arts), MSc (Master of Science)

Theme: Forced Adulthood

Most participants felt pressurised to assume adult-like responsibilities, although they varied in terms of the age at which this was expected to occur. Some experienced this pressure due to culturally-recognised staging-posts and feared falling behind. Others found themselves catapulted into 'adulthood' by external events. However, in both scenarios, 'adulthood' was experienced as *forced*: that is, as necessary but unwelcome. Although there were similarities across the English and Assamese samples, there were also cultural differences in the way in which 'forced adulthood' manifested. English participants felt rushed towards financial self-sufficiency and/or described the expectation of being able to inhabit an adult role on their own in order to attain independence from their family. Assamese participants, in contrast, were more likely to assume adult roles and seek financial security within the context of fulfilling, often heavy, responsibilities to their family-of-origin. Educational background determined the kind of support available to build life skills necessary to assume adult roles and responsibilities.

Sub-theme 1: Rushed into financial self-sufficiency.

Most participants reported suffering from a pressure or drive to become financially self-sufficient, and that this was an intense struggle, often necessitating the sacrifice of personally meaningful and fulfilling interests. We therefore characterised their experience as 'rushed'. Some participants experienced an abrupt demand for financial independence. For example, Olivia (English) had been supported by her family during university and had expected ongoing support as she transited from education into a fulfilling job. She reported suffering a crisis when her family's financial support was no longer available:

“When I had some family problems I was basically left to be completely independent financially and everything, and I ended up in

a job that I felt was really unsuitable based on my expectations of where my career would be going” (*Olivia, female, university-educated*).

In contrast, some participants reported purposefully seeking increasing financial self-sufficiency post-university, but that this led to feeling trapped and somewhat in crisis. For example, Avril (English) chose to get a job to give her some financial independence even though she had an advantaged background, but she soon felt stuck in a job that did not draw upon her university education or ambition:

“I sort of noticed that financial administrators...there was like so many jobs going for that so I just thought I’ll get this job for now because there’s loads of them, I’ll just get this job and then I’ll find something else later. So it was just to have some money really, just that’s how I got into it” (*Avril, female, university-educated*).

At the time of interview, Avril’s job had reached a dead end where she felt she could not progress. She had previously imagined she would be a jewellery designer “cos that’s what I was doing a lot of when I was doing my foundation degree”. She brought a photograph (Figure 2) that expressed her current feeling of crisis characterised by entrapment (‘like it’s a prison [with] no change’) and pressure to escape before it’s too late:

“Mostly like now it’s because where I feel stuck at the minute is just ‘cos I feel like time’s running out ‘cos I’m getting older now and I feel like if I need to change my life around and make a decision I need to do it now...” (*Avril, female, university-educated*).



Figure 2. Avril’s photograph: ‘this is how I feel with my job at the minute’

Many English participants reported this sense of being at a dead end, either through uncontrollable circumstances or personal choices they had made in their attempt to attain financial independence. Their feeling stuck at a time when they 'should' have been progressing with their lives was central to their experience of a crisis. However, Assamese participants presented different experiences to the English sample around financial independence. As part of the Indian socio-economic and cultural context, Indian parents are entrusted with the responsibility to support and aid their children, at least till they are financially independent (Sinha, 1995). With this comes the responsibility for children to respect parental position and expectation (Hofstede, 2011; Sinha, 1995). Ishita, for example, was an Assamese participant who had parental support throughout her education but who then postponed pursuit of an interesting, meaningful career in order to become financially less dependent on her family and to 'pay them back':

“This is my first job I would say so right now finance does have a play [...] I want to be able to stand up on my own feet. Interest - there is interest but what I feel is that interest will take a big step once I reach the stage when I know I'm financially secured [...] I always wanted to be in the corporate world. Earn some penny for myself and being a support in small little way to my family and to all my near and dear ones” (*Ishita, Assamese, female, university-educated*).

For Ishita, crisis stemmed from postponing pursuit of an interesting career.

Participants not engaged in higher education appeared to face different challenges around limited options and the place of personal goals. Financial independence was more a necessity than a choice. For example, Raj (Assamese) had dropped out of university and was under pressure from his family to prove himself by building a business to establish a stable future. He had suffered financial losses in trying to do this. His father had imposed time restrictions to prove himself in business before he would be compelled to take a government job:

“I got losses in net café and game parlour so next time I don't want to lose because my age is going on and after that if I don't do anything

my father will force me to do a job” (*Raj, Assamese, male, non-university-educated*).

Raj’s account shows the intense pressure he felt under parental expectations and ultimatum. He was highly sensitised to the clock ticking (“my age is going on”) and so every loss in his business felt crippling, bringing him closer to the dead-end job he did not want. Just like in the case of Ishita, but with more imposition, we see reflection of compliance to authority in the Indian context, that can limit and frustrate personal options and choices.

Sub-theme 2: Train myself to be an adult.

This sub-theme had specific applicability to two English men and one English-Indian woman. These participants had not pursued a university education and had lived away from their parent/s without experiencing, what might be considered, a supported transition to adulthood. Assuming ‘adult’ responsibilities had been an urgent requirement for them. For example, Aran described life after leaving his home neighbourhood:

“There was nothing to do in the area so I moved out at 16 got me own place and just had to train myself to be an adult you know. Getting a proper education and getting myself out there. Get a job. It was an extremely hard struggle ‘cos I had to learn to cook and clean and you know pay bills. I didn’t have much help. I didn’t know where to go for help I didn’t know what decisions needed to be made first so it was such a struggle that I had to keep asking different agencies and basically work my way around to find out the support that I could get. And obviously that takes time and during that time not knowing that you’re, you know, fundamental adult skills that you need to survive. It was extremely hard. I became really depressed” (*Aran, English, male, non-university-educated*).

Aran’s experiences with the difficulties of day-to-day living gave rise to a sense that he needed to learn *how* to fulfil this new adult role, ‘to train [him]self to be an adult’. Aran needed to be self-sufficient yet ‘didn’t have much help’, ‘didn’t know where to go for help’ and ‘didn’t know what decisions needed to be taken’. His perceived lack of fundamental living skills meant that

Aran felt stranded with unmanageable responsibilities with effects on his mental health. Aran's description of 'training himself to be an adult' implies he assumed that, in normal circumstances, a young person learns how to be an adult, and develops competencies, over time and in a way that is less demanding and relatively subtle.

A similar experience was shared by Jack who was forced to leave home (at the age of 16) with very little awareness of the things he would have to handle:

“That's what this picture's about ((*places photo – Figure 3*)). I'd never lived on my own so I just steadily went into decline healthwise [...] like smoking and just eating crap like pasta every day. And then pasta became too expensive 'cos I was spending my money on other stuff and then like yeah, noodles, other people's food dust anything that I, as long as I didn't have to spend money on it” (*Jack, English, male, non-university-educated*).

The photograph that represented living away from home was an image of a tray full of cigarette butts (Figure 3). Jack attributed the cause of his decline in health to being unprepared and inexperienced in making good decisions for himself as “I'd never lived on my own”. The image (Figure 3) reflected his perception of failure in handling his own life. His crisis stemmed from not knowing how to take care of himself, and in a context where helpful resources and alternatives were unknown.



Figure 3. Jack's photograph: 'I just steadily went into decline healthwise'

At the point of interview, Jack's life had moved forward and, at the age of 22, he was about to have a child with his girlfriend:

“I think I’ve become a lot more responsible and you know ‘cos I’m having a kid and stuff. And that’s the next thing for me is having a kid and trying to be a dad which is daunting but in the same hand I kind of think you know I can do it...” (*Jack, English, male, non-university-educated*).

Although fatherhood was a “daunting” prospect, Jack was optimistic about his ability to manage: “I can do it”. Interestingly, there was an assumption in many participants’ accounts of chrononormativity, i.e. that life events ought to occur in a particular sequence. We see this in Jack’s descriptions of fatherhood as the “next thing for me”. However, Jack’s timeline (Figure 1) showed that he was experiencing overlapping challenges, not yet financially secure to fulfil his own needs while also trying to raise a child. There were non-linear and non-sequential milestones and events depicted in his timeline.

Amy’s difficulties in managing adult responsibilities started when she got married at the age of 20 and started living with her husband:

“And then came the responsibilities of rent and bills and all that kind of stuff and you know buying furniture ((giggles)). As dumb as it sounds - dishes. That’s when I started to really understand life without mum and dad and how difficult it is. That it’s not that easy especially when neither of you, not you nor your husband, have settled into life. We don’t have brilliantly well paid secure jobs [...] Neither of us had experience in financing and budgeting so we were still blowing money going out every Friday” (*Amy, English-Indian, female, non-university-educated*).

Amy’s account shows the challenges she faced in learning ‘on the job’ how to be an independent adult. Her description that neither she nor her husband had “settled into life” before facing life independently from their families suggests she felt she needed more time for a kind of interim maturing process. Contextually, the impact of a low income but new freedom, created a particularly dangerous mix which led to a relationship breakdown and a return, by Amy, to her family home.

Thus, across Aran, Jack and Amy, we understand that some English young people, in this case those without higher education and possibly from a low-income background, can feel unprepared, unskilled and unable to cope when living independently from their birth family, even when this independence is sought or expected. Each of these participants described their encounter with adulthood as extremely challenging: “an extremely hard struggle”, “just steadily went into decline”, “how difficult it is”.

Sub-theme 3: 'Man' of the house.

Just like our English participants, many of our Assamese participants dreamed of a fulfilling life but reported negating these in order to take on ‘adult’ roles to support their birth family, in line with cultural expectations. Moreover, contingent events, such as the death of the father (applicable to four of our Assamese participants) catapulted some into important family roles with little preparation. For example, by virtue of social norms, Aman’s position as eldest son in the family meant he was assigned considerable responsibilities which weighed on him during his transitional process:

“Being the eldest son, I have to do all the work. All the work, be it dropping my sister or picking my sister up from school... even that. Be it feeding my brother’s pam... pampering. I have to pamper him. Listen to his scolding, listen to his threats. And then do the work... meeting people, being... outside I’m the eldest son, you know S [mentions family name]. I had a moustache for god’s sakes man! (Interviewer laughs). I have to keep that. I don’t have a picture. I should have taken a picture because that was (*stresses on the last two words*) remarkable. I had a goddamn moustache man! I had handlebar moustache (*says in Hindi*). So... so yeah finding it very difficult to find my place” (*Aman, M, Assamese, attended university*).

Aman’s account paints a picture of relentless responsibilities, but as “I’m the eldest son you know”, he orients to a shared assumption that he would do this willingly. Although sporting a ‘handlebar moustache’ to appear more adult, he ‘struggled to find his place’ in this new adult arena. He later described that he had committed to his dying father (which he represented in Figure 4), that his place would be as the eldest son, carrying on his father’s legacy:

“I made a promise to him that ‘I will live with your ideologies. I’ll just sacrifice everything that was mine’. He passed away. I had to look after my business. My mom got insecure. Relatives poured in. That was again a time when I tried- actual- all this was training ((*gesturing to the timeline before the turning point*)). This was the actual job ((*gesturing to the rest of the part of the timeline yet to be marked*)). Finding my place in the world being the eldest son of the [names the company] empire. This is the eldest son and he’s going to be looking after it.”
(*Aman, Assamese, male, university-educated*)



Figure 4. Aman’s photographs: ‘I made a promise to him’ depicting a transfer of responsibilities

Such a commitment by Aman meant he would “just sacrifice everything”. Although brief, the comment points to a denial of his personal ambition and needs in order to take up his ‘ordained’ place in the family. Yet being catapulted into this position was overwhelming for Aman and he felt confusion, fragmentation and huge doubts across all parts of his life:

“I didn’t know if I was a, I was a son. I didn’t know whether I was a proprietor of [name of company]. I didn’t know whether I was a good boyfriend or where was I. I was nowhere. Seriously I was nowhere. I was not being able to be a good son. Not be a good brother- elder brother. Not be a good fiancé. Not be a good friend to her. And all these were affecting my work and god knows how I held on to my work”
(*Aman, Assamese, male, university-educated*).

Aman's crisis was characterised by a loss of identity and direction ("I was nowhere"). He questioned his ability, although not his motivation, to perform well and be a good son, a good brother, and good fiancé. At a time and age when one is typically developing personal identity, Aman was struggling to assume different identities all of which were based on demands from others rather than an outcome of his self-exploration. The imposing of adult responsibilities before he was ready had thus had wide-ranging impacts on his relationships, ability to work, and sense of confidence in who he was.

Coming from a less affluent background than Aman, and not university educated, when his father died, Vikram's main concern was to provide a steady income for his birth family. This meant putting their needs first:

"My education wasn't that much that I would get a good job. Family also - mother was alone. There will be problem that she's alone. So for my mom I used to come here and then work here. Then I took mom and went to [name of city] then [name of city]. There my mother couldn't adjust with the climate. Then we returned here and then continued to do this job" (*Vikram, Assamese, male, non-university-educated*).

Here, multiple contextual features impinged on what was possible for Vikram; his education level, the death of his father, the needs of his mother and the need to generate an income. Feeling the "tension all the time" in having few options but many responsibilities, Vikram's crisis was characterised by regret, lack of fulfilment and relentless manoeuvring to ensure others' well-being.

After her father's death, Amrita too had to assume family responsibilities and said, "after I lost my dad I had become the man of the house". She explained:

"When I lost my dad the basic thing was that like you know I could no longer afford to be little kiddish anymore. [...] I was approximately 22-23 at that point of time and I couldn't you know afford to be a child anymore. Not even child-like. So basically it kind of it was like ((*pause*)) boom you know. [*Interviewer: Taking on responsibility?*]

Yeah I was like - I have to irrespective of the fact whether I'm ready or not" (*Amrita, Assamese, female, university-educated*).

Amrita's reference to "ready or not" suggests that if she had more time, she would be more prepared to cope with the expected responsibilities. She experienced some resentment in no longer being able to be "kiddish" or "child-like". The need to look after her mother came as a shock and, in addition to her responsibilities at home, she was struggling to attain some financial stability through her career:

"So that is one dilemma which is kind of biting me in the ass ((*both laugh*)) because it is very pissing off you know. Once you cross 25 you want you know financial stability and as a guest faculty in a college it does not pay enough" (*Amrita, Assamese, female, university-educated*).

Amrita was dissatisfied with her family responsibilities, low pay, and faltering life trajectory. "Once you cross 25" demonstrates her implicit assumption of milestones, towards increasing security and stability, and her frustration that she was not attaining this. A further part of her crisis arose from the context of being the 'man of the house' but having a future which necessitated being fully feminine and without duties and she worried what would happen to her mother if she married:

"What do I do when I'm- if I get married? If I get married. I do worry about my mother that- will I take her along. If I take her along what will I do of this huge house? You know things like that. And- and when I have talked to a few guys who were like 'Your mo-' they have asked me 'What will you do with your mother because you're the sole support of your mum?'" (*Amrita, Assamese, female, university-educated*).

Here, Amrita plays out the many 'what-ifs' about her future, wherein her responsibilities are milestones for others. Feeling constrained in the present and the future, and seeking to do the right thing in both, gave rise to significant challenges and crisis for Amrita.

Discussion

The aim of our study was to elucidate central features of the 'quarterlife crisis' as experienced by young adults in two different cultural contexts and with reference to educational background. Although the transition to adulthood was perceived differently across, and within, the two cultural groups, a common feature was that participants felt unready for a particular version of adult roles that they were in, and therefore experienced adulthood as *forced*. By forced, we mean feeling one has to assume an adult role with little choice or preparedness.

The sub-theme, 'rushing into financial self-sufficiency', was relevant to most of our participants. Even when financial needs had been anticipated, they discovered the path to financial independence was not as smooth as expected and many felt trapped in unfulfilling, low-paid jobs. Commensurate with Pole's (2014) study of the Tongan community in New York, our findings support the broad difference between societies driven by individualist and collectivist values. The rush to financial self-sufficiency for the English young people had, at its core, the goal of being able to support oneself. Hence, 'adulthood' implicated separation from one's parents. On the other hand, Assamese participants described pressure to generate an income in order to support their family, or to meet their expectations, and felt accountable for their family's financial investment in them. Thus, the English and Assamese participants showed different cultural and contextual factors triggering and shaping their crisis.

'Train myself to be an adult', the next sub-theme, was specific to the non-university-educated English participants living away from their family-of-origin. Their experience of crisis stemmed from pressures for self-sufficiency from a relatively young age and with minimal support. The woman contributing to this theme was unusual in coming from a financially-secure, English-Indian family on whom she could lean. On the other hand, two young men contributing to this theme took the brunt of an individualistic culture which, while promising opportunities for personal fulfilment, can leave the vulnerable to struggle alone. Their experience of crisis was likely intensified by English working-class constructions of masculinity in which it is important to portray a sense of invulnerability, while this group of men are often disadvantaged in the job market (Dolan, 2011).

While the Assamese participants did not report being left to 'sink or swim' in the same way as the English participants, they faced alternative challenges captured in the sub-theme 'man of the house'. The Assamese participants demonstrated a strong connectedness with family that was, at the same time, saturated with responsibility. The Indian Constitution, under the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973, states that elderly people are entitled to assistance from

their children if they do not have resources to support themselves (Sonawat, 2001). However, there is a general community expectation that young Indian people take on responsibilities with respect to their family (Sinha, Sinha, Verma & Sinha, 2001) and, although traditionally vested in sons, is also becoming the responsibility of daughters (Sonawat, 2001). Being the 'man of the house' was also apparent in a poor Latino population studied by Sanchez, Esparza, Colon and Davis (2010). Such sentiments were not typical of our relatively disadvantaged English participants, suggesting that sociocultural, rather than economic factors per se, are implicated. The picture appears, however, increasingly complex for young Indian people who were trying to strike a balance between family obligations and more individualistic goals of attaining financial self-sufficiency and finding a fulfilling career.

According to Côté (2000), the demise of traditional cultures has made social markers of adulthood, such as marriage and parenthood, less important. Hence, in many ways, adulthood has become a psychological phenomenon achieved through striking a balance between one's own aspirations and care for others. However, life chances are still, for many people, linked strongly to social and cultural background (Roberts, 1997) and the tension between this and the wish for self-determination can create a feeling of crisis finding one's place in the world.

Our participants experienced many challenges during the transition to adulthood, a finding resonant with the proposals of Arnett. Keniston (1970) suggests a tension between society and the emergent self and, while this may be closer to our findings with regard to English participants, young people from collectivist culture may accept the need to balance, or even sacrifice, personal goals with family obligations. This is similar to the findings of Seiter and Nelson's (2010) study of young people in Coimbatore (in India). The authors found that 'Norm compliance, 'Family capacities' and 'Independence' were highly endorsed as markers of adulthood by their young participants, showing coexistence of both independence and interdependence in contemporary India as reflected in the present study.

Our research suggests that concepts of midlife and 'quarterlife' crisis may be more similar than initially thought. Robbins and Wilner (2001) state that "often for people experiencing midlife crisis, a sense of stagnancy sparks the need for change" (2001, p. 2). Our participants also displayed a sense of stagnancy and a need for change (see also Keniston, 1970), particularly when they felt ambivalent about the decisions they have made with regard to job and/or relationships. However, a major difference between the two crises lies in the degree of instability experienced at times of crisis. In one's twenties, people may experience

relatively high instability, as did our participants, for example with respect to balancing financial needs with personal aspirations. On the other hand, the 'midlife crisis' is associated with a deliberate change to a life structure found stifling rather than unstable (Levinson, 1978). Another major difference is that people in 'midlife crisis' tend to be confident recognising and utilising support, possibly because the phenomenon is widely acknowledged (Robbins & Wilner, 2001). On the other hand, none of the participants in the present study acknowledged the possibility of other young people suffering similar problems to their own and blamed themselves for their predicament.

Self-blame is a suicide risk factor (Yen & Siegler, 2003). According to the World Health Organisation (2016), the risk of suicide is high when people are faced with crisis and feel unable to cope with stress from such issues as financial problems, relationship breakdown and illness. Specifically, in the UK, suicide is one of the leading causes of death among young people aged between 20 to 34 years (Office of National Statistics, 2015). Similarly, in India in 2010, 40 percent of suicides among men and 56 percent of suicides among women were within people aged 15 to 29 years (Patel et al., 2012). Lack of problem recognition is one of the most prevalent reasons for not seeking help for suicidal ideation or mental health issues (Gould et al., 2012). Thus, improving public understanding – particularly in youth culture – of the kinds of normative challenges people face could assist young people to feel relatively normal, that they are not to blame, and to encourage help-seeking.

There are some limitations to our study. First, our data collection methods could be an obstacle for participants who are not 'visual' and one participant found it hard to juggle verbal and visual modes during interview. Second, there was an unequal number of participants between the two cultures (16 English; 8 Assamese) and between those with and without a university education (17 university educated; 7 non-university educated). In defence of this strategy, qualitative research is interested in the potential transferability of findings from in-depth analysis of small, carefully contextualised samples rather than making claims to generalisability from large samples (Horsburgh, 2003; Smith, 2018). Moreover, IPA stresses the idiographic and building knowledge through multiple case studies (Schweitzer & Steel, 2008; Smith, 2004). Assamese participants initially posed as a comparison sample, but became a distinct sample for analysis in themselves as we recognised how their experiences within a particular context led us to expand the content of the concept of 'quarterlife crisis'. For example, parental authority and family obligations were always on the horizon for the

Assamese participants in a way that was not the case for the English participants, and helped us to see how crisis can emerge from self-sacrifice.

Our study involved young people who recognised themselves as experiencing difficulties finding their place in the world. Future research could explore the transition to adulthood of those who did not suffer such difficulties in order to understand if they do not meet the same challenges or if they navigate them differently and, if so, how. While our study demonstrates that the concept of 'quarterlife crisis' has currency, we also show that it needs nuance with regard to culture, educational status and income background.

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