

Dr Oliver C. Robinson



Quarter-life Crisis (QLC)

An overview of research and theory

Conference on Emerging Adulthood 2015



Collaborators

Dr Gordon Wright,
Goldsmiths College
University of London



Dr Jim Demetre
University of Greenwich



Prof Jonathan Smith
Birkbeck College,
University of London



Miss Roseanna Bridge
University of Greenwich



Dr Jordan Litman
Florida Institute for Human-Machine
Cognition



Lesley Hulmes
Birkbeck College
University of London



Outline

- Theoretical background: Erikson and Arnett

Quantitative studies and correlates:

- Prevalence and post-crisis growth
- QLC and curiosity
- QLC and reading
- QLC and authenticity
- QLC and resilience

Qualitative studies and theory:

- Theory: A dual typology of quarter-life crisis
- Type 1: Locked-out crisis
- Type 2: Locked-in crisis

Theoretical Context

Erikson, Arnett

Erikson's stage scheme of ego development

	Age	Stage	Focal dialectic
1	0-1.5	Childhood	Basic trust vs. mistrust
2	1.5-3		Self-control vs. doubt
3	3-6		Initiative vs. guilt
4	6-13		Capability vs. inferiority
5	13-21	Adolescence	Identity vs. identity confusion
6	21-40	Early adulthood	Intimacy vs. isolation
7	41-60	Midlife	Generativity vs. stagnation
8	60+	Later adulthood	Integrity vs. despair

Syntonic vs. dystonic

- In each dialectic, one end of the pole is more conducive to mental health and positive development than the other – this is the **SYNTONIC** pole
- The other is the **DYSTONIC**
- While the syntonic should be dominant, it should be balanced to some degree by the dystonic

Basic trust vs. mistrust

Self-control vs. doubt

Initiative vs. guilt

Industriousness vs. inferiority

Identity vs. identity confusion

Intimacy vs. isolation

Generativity vs. stagnation

Integrity vs. despair

Balance of syntonic and dystonic

- e.g. Capability vs. inferiority dialectic

“Industriousness [capability] is encouraged for the sake of the individual and the community. A sense of inferiority, which is its opposite, is adaptive and syntonic only insofar as it provides appropriate modification of any overestimation of capacities. Overestimation of competence can be as maladaptive as underestimation. What is required is accurately perceived capabilities, as judged by keen, trustworthy senses...An appropriate appraisal of incapacities leads to genuine humility, a prerequisite for teachability.” (Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick, p.277)

Early adulthood dialectic

	Age	Stage	Focal dialectic
1	0-1.5	Childhood	Basic trust vs. mistrust
2	1.5-3		Self-control vs. doubt
3	3-6		Initiative vs. guilt
4	6-13		Capability vs. inferiority
5	13-21	Adolescence	Identity vs. identity confusion
6	21-40	Early adulthood	Intimacy vs. isolation
7	41-60	Midlife	Generativity vs. stagnation
8	60+	Later adulthood	Integrity vs. despair

Early adulthood dialectic

	Age	Stage	Focal dialectic
1	0-1.5	Childhood	Basic trust vs. mistrust
2	1.5-3		Self-control vs. doubt
3	3-6		Initiative vs. guilt
4	6-13		Capability vs. inferiority
5	13-21	Adolescence	Identity vs. identity confusion
6	21-40	Early adulthood	Commitment vs. independence
7	41-60	Midlife	Generativity vs. stagnation
8	60+	Later adulthood	Integrity vs. despair

Erikson on crisis

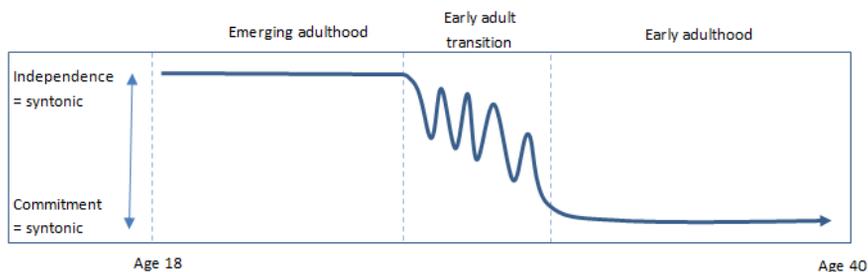
- Every developmental stage holds the potential for crisis
- Crisis, and the emotional disturbance that comes with it, is essential for development

“I shall present human growth from the point of view of the conflicts, inner and outer, which the vital personality weathers, **re-emerging from each crisis with an increased sense of inner unity**, with an increase of good judgment, and an increase in the capacity “to do well” according to his own standards and to the standards of those who are significant to him.” (Erikson, in Identity, Youth and Crisis)

Arnett - Emerging adulthood

- Arnett's emerging adulthood is in essence a new stage within the Eriksonian scheme
- But does it need a new dialectic?
 - Answer: No
- Syntonic-dystronic value of commitment-independence simply reverses polarity:
 - EA is a period during which **independence** and exploration has greater syntonic value to young adults
 - Then this switches, as the person transitions out of emerging adulthood into early adulthood and **commitment** becomes higher in syntonic value

Visual schematic of this shift

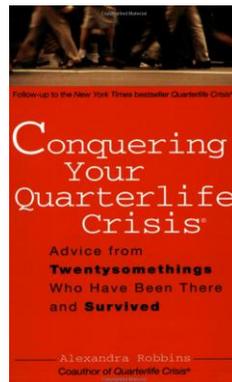
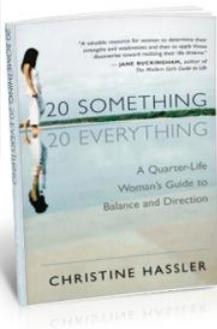
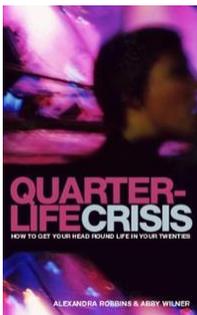


Quarter-life crisis (QLC)

A period of formative developmental crisis in one's twenties or early thirties



A popular idea in self-help books



SPH A SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDING

Evening Standard Tuesday 2 July 2013

Trend Spot
Don't let your phone get scurvy! Give it some juice with a USB adapter charger that can drain from any mains. £11.99 from firebox.com

London

The MEL
ere

was 28, fancy-free and about to graduate from drama school when my quarter-life crisis hit. And so it often happens it only took one small thing to tip me over the edge. Going to the airport one day, it refused to pay out the money I needed for my daily Mocha Frappuccino. "You have £8.65 in available funds," it told me. I cried again - no dice. I panicked. And then it dawned on me: this was a symbol. Everything in my life was wrong.

I was single, lived in a five-bed flatshare and was in debt. The career change from journalism to acting that I had embarked on a year earlier had yet to take off, and now even Starbucks was off-limits. Cue major tears. "My hair is split and greasy," I wrote in my diary. "My confidence is diminishing and my social life... well, where is it? As much as I'd like to think there's a way out, I can't see it."

If these feelings of doom sound familiar, you're not alone. The fact is, 86% of young women admit to feeling under pressure to make their relationships, finances and jobs a success, before they hit 30. And new research by Greenwich University has found that almost 75% of women aged

Are you having a QLC*?
*That's quarterlife crisis

TRENDS
Temp job become permanent? Skipping nights out for early yoga workouts? Got a wheat intolerance? Say hello to condition 25, says **Susannah Butter**

BACK in the lonely days of 2009 Charlotte Owen had a wonderful 21st birthday party at her nightclub in Camden. She had recently graduated with a 2:1 in English, and moved to London to try and find a job in the publishing industry. Everyone told her how well she had done and how many opportunities she had. All her friends and her lovely new boyfriend pooled their funds and bought her a necklace that she'd spotted in Spitalfields Market a few weeks before.

Four years later, she woke up in the same shared flat in Hackney Wick, which she has realised is too far from the Tube station and has damp. She discovered that her flatmate had eaten all her cereal, and dragged herself off to her job temping as a receptionist at a bank. She ended the day crying in the toilet of The Dolphin on Mare Street because she regretted breaking up with her

a QLC. "I have suddenly realised that time is running out and I don't have a career," she says. "When my parents were my age they were married and doing the jobs they wanted. I don't want to blame the babyboomers but now life seems more difficult. And according to Facebook I have lost friends but I feel lonely."

She is one of many Londoners realising they are struggling with the QLC blues. With my 28th birthday approaching I too am aware that my time is running out. Now that 25-year-olds might live to be 100 years old, 25 really is a quarter of the way through.

Growing numbers of 25-year-olds are struggling with pressures previously felt by those in their mid-forties, says Shantam Bari, author of *Get it Together: A Guide to Surviving Your Quarterlife Crisis*. "The truth is that our twenties are not as they were for our parents, being twenty something now is scary -

OBAMA
MBS
Discover the world
October 22, 2011
channel
happening in China

n a quarter-
Comments

young adults, their 20s and quarter-life crisis". Faced with tombs of a mid-life crisis

ions, driving them to feel to' a marriage or a job that

viewed 50 people aged are now more footlose to

In the most if a million life

Quantitative findings

Prevalence and correlates



Crisis Definition-Question (CDQ)

A **crisis episode** is a period in adult life that is noticeably more **difficult, stressful and unstable** than normal, during which you sometimes **struggle to cope**. A crisis is also an important turning point in your life due to **challenging changes** that occur during it. Crisis episodes typically last for a year or two, but may be shorter or longer.

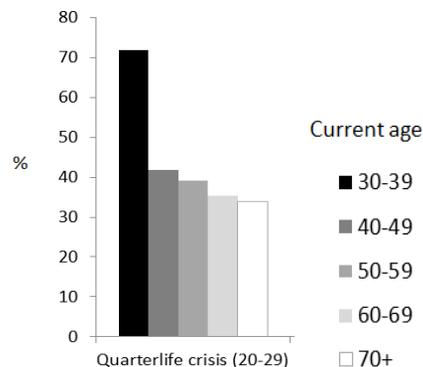
- **Current appraisal question:** Would you say that you are currently experiencing a crisis episode in your life?
OR
- **Past appraisal question:** Have you experience a crisis episode in your life previously between the ages of?

Past Appraisals of 20s QLC: Prevalence

Respondents over age of 30 (N=922):

- 24% of men and 27% of women reported a crisis in 20-24 age range
- 26% of men and 31% of women reported a crisis in 25-29 age range
- 39% of men and 50% of women reported a crisis in both or either age range

Prevalence rates by current reporting age



Robinson & Wright, 2013

Most prevalent crisis features – by gender

Male

Being locked into in a relationship that you no longer wanted to be in	16.88
A change of career	18.61
Uncertainty or confusion in your own beliefs or worldview	19.91
Family conflict or dispute	20.35
Death of a person close to you	23.38
Divorce or relationship break-up	26.84
Debt or financial difficulties	29.44
An unwanted period of unemployment	29.87
Experiencing a high level of stress and pressure in your job	30.30
Feeling trapped in a job you didn't want to be in any more	33.33

Female

Uncertainty or confusion in your own beliefs or worldview	15.76
Physical illness or injury to yourself	18.35
Experiencing a high level of stress and pressure in your job	21.71
Feeling trapped in a job you didn't want to be in any more	22.48
Being in an abusive relationship	23.26
Death of a person close to you	23.51
Family conflict or dispute	25.06
Being locked into in a relationship that you no longer wanted to be in	27.65
Debt or financial difficulties	29.20
Divorce or relationship break-up	31.27

Past appraisal of crisis and trait change

- 12 month longitudinal study of recent university graduates (184 completers)
- 3 data collection points
- At 12 months, given crisis definition+question
- Those who reported a crisis over previous year (33%) showed significant increase in Neuroticism and decrease in Conscientiousness compared with non-crisis group
- Also crisis group showed significantly higher depression scores

Current appraisal of QLC: Prevalence

- UK respondents aged 20-35 (N=241)
 - 21% students, 14% unemployed, 6% stay-at-home parent, 55% working

	TOTAL %	MALE %	FEMALE %
Yes – definitely	20	21	19
Yes – maybe	36	33	39
No	44	45	42

Robinson, Demetre & Litman, n.d.

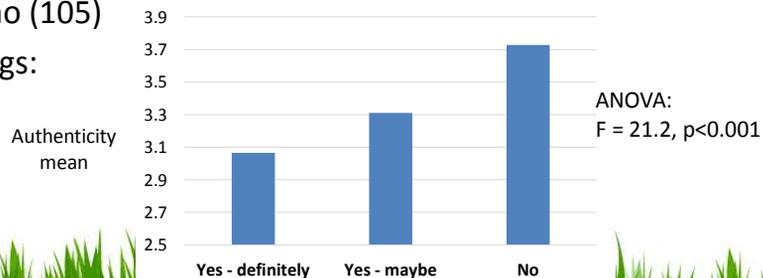
Quarter-life crisis and authenticity

Hypothesis: Those in QLC are struggling with developing a sense of authenticity and so will show lower levels than those not in QLC

N=241, ages 20 to 35

Current appraisal of crisis: Yes – definitely (49), yes – maybe (87), no (105)

Findings:



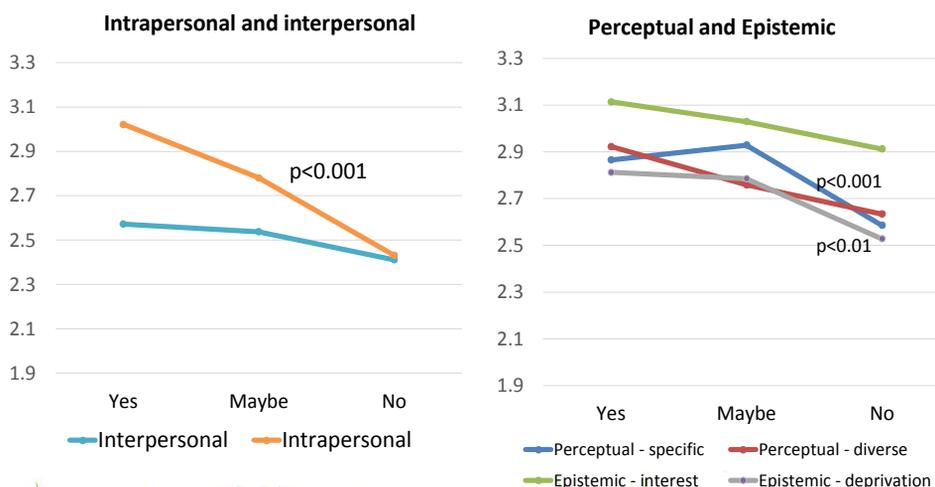
Curiosity and crisis

- **Hypothesis:** Crisis creates an increased questioning mentality towards self and world, thus those having a QLC will be more curious than those not of the same age range
- Sample analysed: 241, aged 20-35

Measures

- Crisis Definition-Question (current appraisal)
 - Yes – definitely, yes – maybe, no
- Forms of curiosity measured:
 - Interpersonal
 - Intrapersonal
 - Perceptual (specific and diverse)
 - Epistemic (interest and deprivation)

Curiosity and current QLC



QLC and Reading Interests

- In the study on crisis and curiosity, we asked people which of the following book genres they are currently interested in reading:
 - Novels, Food, Sci Fi, Biography, History, Science, Current Affairs, Art and Architecture, Self-Help, Spirituality and Religion
- For sample aged 20-35, reading **two** of these genres is associated with being in QLC – Which?
 1. **Self-help** ($\chi = 8.5$, $df=2$, $p<0.01$)
 2. **Spirituality and Religion** ($\chi = 14.5$, $df=2$, $p<0.001$)

Quantitative findings

Post-crisis growth

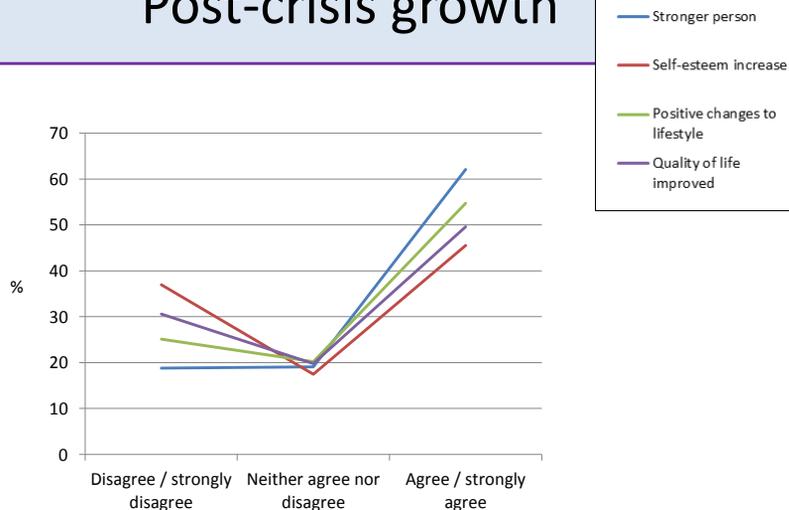
PCG-4: Post-crisis growth - 4 items

For use with **past** appraisal of QLC

1. As a result of this episode I became a stronger person in the long-term (self-efficacy)
2. As a result of this episode my self-esteem decreased in the long-term **REVERSED** (self-esteem)
3. The result of this episode was that my quality of life decreased in the long-term **REVERSED** (quality of life)
4. During this episode I made changes to my life that had a long-term positive effect (positive changes)

Scored on 5 point Likert
Scale: Strongly Disagree to
Strongly Agree

Post-crisis growth



(N=922)

Robinson & Wright, 2013

Robinson & Wright, 2013

QLC, PCG and resilience

- Sample: N=175 (63 male, 112 female)
 - aged 30 or older, mean age 39

Measures

- Connor-Davidson resilience scale
 - measures self-reported dispositional resilience
- Crisis Definition and Question (past appraisal)
- + PCG-4

Findings: PCG and resilience

Findings – multiple linear regression

- QLC post-crisis growth predicts current self-reported resilience
 - $R^2 = .316$, $F = 9.47$, $p < .001$
- Analysis of separate items in regression showed effect came from **one item only**:
 - **MADE POSITIVE CHANGES: During this episode I made changes to my life that had a long-term positive effect ($\beta = .298$, $p < .001$)**

Emerging QLC theory: process, structure and types

From qualitative data

For those interested in qualitative
methods

Qualitative Research in Psychology, 7:170-191, 2010
Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC
ISSN: 1478-0887 print/1478-0895 online
DOI: 10.1080/14780880802699084

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

Investigating the Form and Dynamics of Crisis Episodes in Early Adulthood: The Application of a Composite Qualitative Method

OLIVER C. ROBINSON¹ AND JONATHAN A. SMITH²

¹University of Greenwich, London, UK

²Birkbeck College, London, UK

This study investigates the experiences and processes that characterise crisis episodes occurring between the ages of 25 and 40. The methodology is a composite of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Eatough 2006) and Miles and Huberman's Interactive Model (1994). Analysis of interview data found a four-phase pattern in all the crisis episodes sampled, starting with a precrisis description of an externally controlled identity and being stuck in a domestic and/or vocational role that is no longer wanted but is maintained out of passivity or obligation. This is followed by the peak of the crisis, which is characterised by an emotional separation from that role and/or relationship and by a confused and undefined identity. The third phase involves exploration of new intrinsically motivated activities and an experimental search through alternative self-conceptions and activities. The fourth postcrisis phase brings a new

A dual typology: Locked-in and locked-out

1. Locked-out crisis

Typical age: 23-25

Key features: Feeling unable to enter adult commitments in relationship and/or career; loss of self-esteem; feelings of unwanted dependence on others; feelings of isolation

Resolved crisis: Breaking *in* to major commitment



2. Locked-in crisis

Typical age: 25-35

Key features: Feeling stuck or trapped in a career; relationship or life style that frustrates; emotionally traumatic separation from commitments; feelings of inauthenticity

Resolved crisis : Breaking *out* of major commitment



Locked-in crisis: A crisis of unwanted commitment

- During the transition out of emerging adulthood, decisions to embed oneself within a relationship, a place, a set of cultural norms, a religious group, an organisation and other institutions are made
- **Major commitment decisions (MCDs)** reduce autonomy, as one relinquishes being footloose and free in favour of being a **part** of something

What can go wrong with **major commitment decisions**?

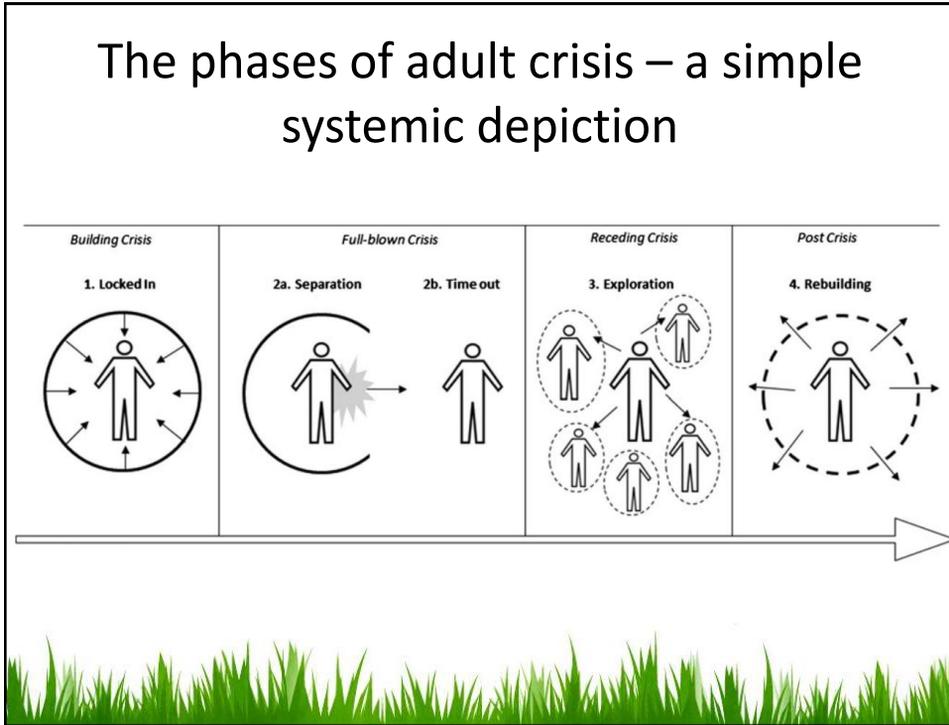
The decision

- Based on fear and anxiety about the future
- Introjected parental motives and expectations
- Lack of personal agency – ‘pushed in’ or ‘on autopilot’
- Extrinsic motives overriding intrinsic ones
- Based on concerns about being ‘off-time’

The follow up

- Feeling trapped and locked in
- Disappointment and frustration – not what you dreamed it would be
- Lack of day-to-day enjoyment or satisfaction
- Sense of loss - feeling depressed and miserable
- Inauthentic and outwardly false

The phases of adult crisis – a simple systemic depiction



Robinson, Wright and Smith (2010)

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

At the bottom of the table, two curved arrows indicate feedback loops: a 'Relapse loop' pointing back from the Receding Crisis to the Building Crisis, and a 'Fast-forward loop' pointing forward from the Receding Crisis to the Post Crisis.

Locked-out crisis: Example quotes

Study of university leavers

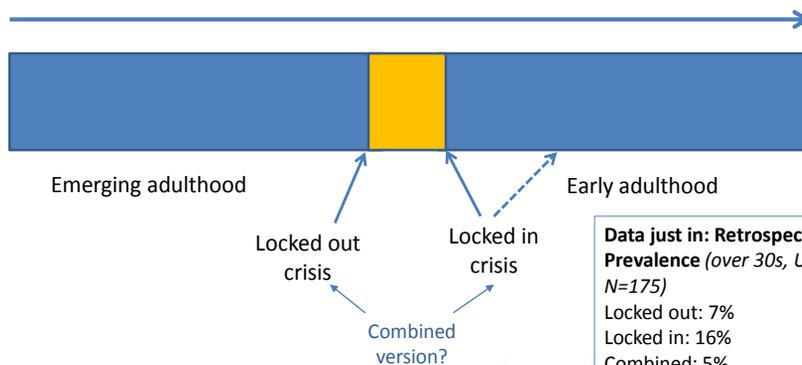
- Have done less work on this type
- Example verbatims from recent longitudinal study of university graduates:

"But it is hard because you're stuck in a position where, for me personally, I need a full-time job because I need to find my own place, I need to start enjoying life, living life how I want to. But I feel like I'm stuck. There's a barrier there and I can't get it down."

I struggled to find a secure job either related to what I studied or otherwise. I started questioning what my point in life was and wondered how I even managed to get a degree in something employers appeared to think I was no good in. My partner left for university as well which left me feeling very alone and the realisation that the little money I got from my part time job, which I finally managed to get would never be enough for me to become an independent adult. The realisation of that was crushing.

Searching for employment was extremely stressful, everyone want experience that I did not have. I suffered rejections after rejections, felt like I would never get anywhere in life. In the last year I have become unsure whether I have made correct decisions in my life so far. Being dependent and responsible for myself has been a challenge.

Crisis types in relation to emerging adulthood and early adulthood



Data just in: Retrospective Prevalence (over 30s, UK, N=175)
 Locked out: 7%
 Locked in: 16%
 Combined: 5%
 Other crisis: 22%
 No crisis: 50%

What next for research?

- Longitudinal study of young adults, starting in early 20s, exploring how prospective data relates to retrospective appraisals of QLC
- Explore personality trait fluctuations during crisis and after it
- Studies replicating UK findings in other cultures

Thanks for listening

My email: o.c.robinson@gre.ac.uk

Radio show about quarter-life crisis in the UK

- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01pz599>



Key References

- Robinson, O.C. (2015). Emerging adulthood, early adulthood and quarter-life crisis: Updating Erikson for the twenty-first century. In. R. Žukauskiene (Ed.) *Emerging adulthood in a European context* (pp.17-30). New York: Routledge.
- Robinson, O.C., Wright, G.R.T. & Smith, J.A. (2013). The holistic phase model of early adult crisis. *Journal of Adult Development*, 20, 27-37.
- Robinson, O.C. & Smith, J.A. (2010). Investigating the form and dynamics of crisis episodes in early adulthood: The application of a composite qualitative method. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 7, 170-191.
- Robinson, O.C. & Wright, G.R.T. (2013). The prevalence, types and perceived outcomes of crisis episodes in early adulthood and midlife: A structured retrospective-autobiographical study. *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, 37, 407-416.
- Robinson, O.C. Demetre, J.D. and Litman, J. (manuscript in preparation). *Curiosity, age and crisis*.

