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# 11 A Case Study of Pre-Midlife Crisis: An Extraordinary Transformational Episode in an Ordinary Life

OLIVER C. ROBINSON AND JONATHAN A. SMITH

## **Abstract**

The current study is a case-study of crisis in pre-midlife adulthood. Previous research by the authors had shown a common process to cases of early adult crisis (Robinson and Smith, in press). This case study was intended to add idiographic depth to our ongoing investigation into the nature of developmental crisis. Data collection for the case study involved two semi-structured interviews followed by an email discussion. Analysis proceeded using a composite methodology that employed elements of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Miles and Huberman's Interactive Model. Findings showed four key developmental themes: *Unpeeling the Persona*, *Unlocking the Capacity for Self-Reflection*, *Reaching beyond Materialist Values* and *The Emerging Feminine*. These themes relate to an underlying shift over the course of the crisis towards a less conventional, more intrinsically motivated and more individuated mode of being.

## **Introduction**

The notion that personal transformation can result from a traumatic or troubling episode is an ancient idea that can be traced back in Western thought to the Stoics of ancient Greece. It was picked up in the psychology literature in the work of Erik Erikson (1968) and Carl Jung (1966). For Erikson, stable periods of development were inevitably punctuated by times of crisis instability in which previously held values and commitments were questioned and new alternatives considered. Jung's work particularly focused on the nature of *midlife* crisis. He coined this phrase to refer to crisis in the age range of 40 to 45, which he saw as a crucial time in the adult developmental trajectory, and a time during which a person may have to integrate parts of the personality that have been submerged under the requirements for a professional

persona or socially imposed identity in early adulthood (Hollis, 1993). Research on midlife has indeed shown it to be a crisis-prone era (O'Connor and Wolfe, 1987). An earlier period that is also crisis-prone is the age 30 transition (Levinson et al., 1976), particularly if choices made in one's 20s do not permit the expression of personal interests, aspirations or values.

Research into the nature and dynamics of crisis has found that different accounts of crisis have a similar underlying process. Robinson and Smith (2009; in press) conducted research into crisis episodes in early adulthood (ages 20 to 40) and found that episodes showed the following common 4-phase process:

- 1) The person feels locked into a life structure that they feel is imbalanced and stultifying, but to which they feel obligated or unable to change. They describe acting falsely and mechanically to adapt to this situation, and a sense of deep frustration and dissatisfaction.
- 2) A gradually increasing volume of internal dissatisfaction and need for change leads to an emotionally challenging time of separation from the work role and/or relationship that was the source of the feeling of entrapment in Phase 1. This leads to a confused and 'liminal' sense of identity.
- 3) Separation is followed by tentative experimentation, as new roles and/or relationships are tried in order to search for a more satisfying and integrated adult life structure. This period involves inner and outer exploration, and may involve therapy, spiritual searching and/or going back to study.
- 4) New commitments are eventually found and made, with a clearer inner locus of control and sense of agency. This brings a new sense of balance and stability, a new sense of self-awareness and a higher level of inner-outer harmony, so that the intrinsic self has public outlets for expression.

This process was found in both female and male participants, and while the phases often overlap and cycle around, they were present universally. This process tells us about the *structure* of crisis, however it focused on the cross-case commonalities of crisis, and in creating a common framework omitted a more focused consideration of the idiographic dynamics of crisis. The current paper brings the dynamics of a single crisis into view. In the process of describing a single case in detail, the 4 phase crisis structure is exemplified within a concrete instance. Furthermore, ideas that were described in summary in the model are considered at a higher level of detail in this study, and are linked together. Case studies such as this provide the opportunities to complement the *breadth* of cross-case analysis with *depth* of insight and thick description (Stake, 1995). They also provide an opportunity for the synthesis of

concepts within the envelope of an integrated, single, contextualised episode (McAdams and West, 1997). As this example will demonstrate clearly, the idiographic presentation of data complements and adds to the nomothetic phase-model. A single, individualised case and an abstract model of crisis can thus feed off and complement one another (Robinson, 2008).

### **Aims and Research Questions**

The aim of the study was to gain rich and detailed information on a single case of early adult crisis, to complement the aforementioned model that the authors developed with detailed dynamics of a single crisis episode and its contents. The research questions were simple and open-ended:

1. How is pre-midlife adult crisis experienced at the individual level?
2. What are the substantive changes involved over the course of such a crisis?
3. In what way are pre-midlife crises formative in the development of early adult identity?

### **Method**

#### *Design and Sample*

This study employed a single participant case-study design. Selection of the single participant was conducted using a “random purposeful” design (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This strategy involved selecting an information-rich subgroup of participants from a previous study and then selecting randomly within that. From the 8 men interviewed in a previous study on crisis, 4 were selected for giving full accounts of the inner and outer dimensions of a crisis episode, and therefore most likely to give the kind of in-depth information that was required in this case study. From the 4 men considered appropriate, the individual was then selected randomly. Guy was 46 at the time of interview, and 36 at the time of the onset of crisis.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

In order to gain sufficient in-depth information for the case study, the participant was interviewed twice, for 45 minutes each time, using a semi-structured format with an interview guide of key questions. The second

interview was followed by a series of questions and answers relating to information from the interviews, conducted by email.

Analysis of the data employed a hybrid of techniques from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2003) and Miles and Huberman's Interactive Model (1994). For a detailed justification and description of this composite methodology, see Robinson and Smith (in press). Themes and thematic relations were developed by tentatively and iteratively integrating data with theoretical concepts on crisis and self. The thematic results evolved continuously over the process of conducting interviews, writing memos, extracting themes, integrating themes and creating written reports.

## **Results**

### *The Crisis Episode in Summary*

At the age of 36, Guy was successfully established as global network manager for a major bank, with a wife and two young children. He often spent fourteen hours a day at work, saw his wife and children very little, and often had to work through weekends. He didn't notice his wife's sense of neglect, until she asked him to come with her to a counsellor and then told him she wanted a divorce. Guy took six weeks off work, in order to try to come to terms with his confusion, grief and anger. When he returned to work, he found that he had been moved to a new sector within the company, with much less responsibility than he had before. He then finds himself in a period of self-reflection, self-doubt and depression, and instigates a search for new ways of coping with life and new modes of self-discovery. The outcome is a new job (working as a consultant on how to apply spirituality in the workplace), a new set of values, new habits, a new relationship and an increased sense of purpose and wellbeing.

### *Unpeeling the Dysfunctional Persona*

Guy developed a work persona over the many years of his intensive "pressure cooker" work life as a banker. He said there was "a façade that I had been cloaking myself in." (p.12). He linked this experience of concealing himself to being oriented towards conformity:

My life before the crisis was about conforming to the rules and what was expected of me by my wife, children, parents, work colleagues etc. There was little space for me to be who I truly was. (Emails, p.1)

He described an experience of his self being overtaken by this, and being “hijacked” by the demands of others (Interview 2, p.10). When his wife asks for a divorce and he is demoted at work, he finds himself experiencing a “total annihilation” of this sense of self:

I defined myself by what I did and what I did really didn't matter. When I realised that it didn't matter, I effectively didn't exist. I didn't have a model of myself by which I could define myself. So I had effectively annihilated myself as I knew myself, and I had nothing that replaced it. (Interview 2, p.7)

Over the course of losing his job and his wife, Guy becomes depressed and withdrawn. As this period abates over a matter of months, he embarks on a period of exploration of new activities and behaviours. These involve interests from Guy's past, such as science, and entirely new endeavours such as expressive dance and poetry. Guy describes this phase as an “uncorking”, and as an “unpeeling” (Interview 2, p.12), suggesting the emergence of suppressed or repressed dimensions of self. Three areas of *dance, reading science and exploring spirituality* connect Guy with his own interests again, and provide a focus for new elements of self and life structure:

So I was being active in those three critical areas, which allowed me to put the pieces of the jigsaw back together again, but constructed in the way that I wanted it constructed, and not the official, smarmy, chocolate box picture that was on the box originally. (Interview 2, p.8)

The *official, smarmy, chocolate box picture* mentioned in the above quote seems to refer to his old work persona, with its conventional, impression-focused and unoriginal nature. The transformation over the period of crisis leads to a new sense of identity. After the crisis Guy no longer feels role-defined, and so can explore his sense of self fluidly, without the need for an institutional role to define it. This *evolving* sense of self is the keystone of the identity that emerges out of the crisis:

The new Guy is constantly evolving, I know that I am not defined by what I do...I was putting the pieces together and was happy being in this exploratory mode. To a certain extent that is the definition of myself, because I am an explorer. (Interview 1, p.8)

Guy further stated that as a result of the crisis he stopped allowing himself to be hijacked by the expectations of others, and that this leads to a feeling that he is in control again, because he is acting in accordance with his own motives, not those of others:

I've stopped allowing myself to be hijacked, so I feel in control of what's going on. (Interview 2, p.10)

### *Unlocking the Capacity for Self-Reflection*

Concurrent with the above change in identity is a change in mindset from a narrow, automatic, task-focused mindset, in which daily tasks are accepted unquestioningly, to a more reflective and open mindset. There is evidence that before the crisis Guy felt he had lost the use of this reflective faculty. He describes his pre-crisis mindset as being "locked in to my mental picture of how life is and how it should be" (p.10). He used a number of verbs and adjectives to describe his pre-crisis actions that suggest a mechanistic, automatic form of functioning. For example he described a number of times that he was *programmed* to act:

I think it was just the way I had been programmed. (Interview 1, p.2)

As I mentioned before, I was programmed and executing the instructions day in and day out. (Interview 2, p.14)

I think looking back on it now I can give a perspective, but at that stage as I mentioned in there it was almost as if I had been programmed. (Interview 2, p.1)

He also uses the metaphor of being on "autopilot", to emphasise a sense of not consciously deliberating on his actions:

Every step that I took seemed like stepping stones that were placed in front of me, and that this was the way to go. I don't think there was ever a conscious thought about the implications and consequences of what I was doing at the time. So I was on autopilot. (Interview 1, p.2)

At the centre of the crisis, when Guy's wife tells him she wants a divorce and he takes six weeks out of work, he says he was forced to question the choices he had made and the decisions he had taken for the first time in many years. He was forced to actually reflect on his own behaviour, and so engage the self-reflection process:

It was just trying to make sense of what happened, and the question underneath it all was – how could I have been so wrong? How could I have believed that what I was doing was the right thing? (Interview 1, p.7)

This reflective process continues with his exploration of meditation and mystical spirituality, with more time spent on his own away from the demands

of his work colleagues and family, and a corresponding sense of improved self-awareness and personal control.

### *Reaching Beyond Materialist Values*

Guy implicated the influence of culture in his crisis predicament by suggesting that his intense pre-occupation with work and money was due to “cultural issues that were pushing upon me that this was success.” (p.2). He stated that he had been living according to a materialist ideology:

I would say for a period of about fifteen, sixteen years, no, longer than that, for twenty plus years, I was running a career that was about being successful, it was about getting power and doing those things... I was making more money, I had more position, more power, I was being able to influence what was going on and to me that is how I had been programmed. (Interview 2, p.1)

Guy calls his pre-crisis approach to life the “escalator theory of life” (Emails, p.2). This was to describe his belief that acquisition of more money, higher position and more status was the key to a good life. He justified this to himself by the material benefits his family were gaining, not realising the emotional losses they were also experiencing. This materialistic mindset is one of the key areas of change over the duration of crisis and transition. Guy refers to the transformation in his values over the crisis period, particularly highlighting the lessening importance of materialistic values:

The way that I approach life and embrace life is very, very different. I am not motivated by money, I am not driven by money, I don't have to have large houses...I seek out people far more than I did beforehand. (Interview 1, p.9-10)

### *The Emerging Feminine*

In his pre-crisis job, Guy describes himself abiding by the “Attila the Hun” school of management, a turn of phrase that portrays an aggressive, macho and forceful approach to his job. He uses the belligerent language of “fighting” and of “retaliation”:

A lot of people who worked for me, who weren't within that inner cordon, were frightened of me. There is no doubt about it. I came from Attila the Hun school of management, I didn't suffer fools gladly. I would fight hard, it was an environment in which you had to fight hard, and I knew that that wasn't me. (Interview 2, p.9)

Guy relates this behaviour to social conditioning that specified a macho masculine agenda. He says:

Pre-crisis, I acted the way that I had been conditioned to think that "real men" act.  
(Emails, p.3)

During the crisis, at the most difficult and most emotional time, he finally breaks down to the point where this macho resilience no longer works, and his suffering leads him to ask for help from a work counsellor, a therapist and his rabbi. He said he had never asked for help before. When the interviewer asked why he had not asked for help before, he answered:

Because men don't do that. That's a sign of weakness! And the whole environment that I'd come up through was that if you demonstrate any form of weakness, then somebody is going to attack you for it. (Interview 2, p.6)

During Guy's exploratory period, one of the first activities that he takes up is a particular form of expressive, freeform dancing called *Five Rhythms*. He said that before the crisis he would *never* dance. Dancing is a new activity that is completely out of character with his prior persona and gender identity. Through this activity he finds a new group of female friends. He says that it gave his feminine side a chance to come to the fore, released from behind the banker persona:

I would never have discovered dancing if the feminine side wasn't so present at that time. (Emails, p.3)

As a metaphor for the overall experience of transformation over the course of crisis, Guy described the following:

The new me started to emerge. It's like how the acorn drops from the oak but then turns to mulch and just when it looks like its destroyed, then something blossoms out of it, that to me seems like a very strong metaphor, because everything had to break away, everything had to be washed away and then the new me could emerge out of it. (p.7)

## **Discussion**

Guy's crisis showed four inter-related strands of developmental transformation over the course of the crisis episode. These were termed: *Unpeeling the Persona*, *Unlocking the Capacity for Self-Reflection*, *Reaching beyond Materialist Values* and *The Emerging Feminine*. These themes will now be considered briefly through the lens of theory, and relations between them considered. The two themes of *Unpeeling the Persona* and *Dismantling Attila the Hun: the emerging feminine* have a relation to Jungian theory. In Jungian

psychology, a persona is a standard development in adolescence and early adulthood, and emerges in response to societal requirements for conformity. Jung (1959) uses terminology such as a *barricade*, a *mask* or *false wrappings* to refer to the persona. The goal of the professional persona is to look socially appropriate, to 'fit in' and to impress others (Jung, 1959). Guy's description of hiding behind "a façade" was linked to the same aims. His persona, borne of the need to adapt to his professional role and the pressures he was experiencing at work, had become all-consuming and false. There is evidence that Guy came to over-identify with his work role to the point where the job was no longer something he *had*, but something he *was*.

In Jung's theory, the persona is an inherently masculine part of the mind, constructed along criteria of impressiveness, successfulness and strength (Jung, 1966). The anima, on the other hand, is a category that subsumes all those motives, interests and preferences that are considered female in a conventionally accepted sense. Qualities that Jung associated with the anima are spontaneity, sensitivity, emotional awareness, caring, a sense of gentleness and a sense of intuition (Jung, 1959; Jung, 1966). If a man's anima is kept behind a masculine persona into midlife, the result is "premature rigidity, crustiness, stereotypy, fanatical one-sidedness, obstinacy, pedantry, or else resignation, weariness, sloppiness, irresponsibility, and finally a childish petulance with a tendency to alcohol" (Jung, 1959, p.146). Jung placed a high developmental value on incorporating the feminine into the self during male adult development, and research on gender identity since has shown that a balance of male and female characteristics is associated with a number of positive outcomes in adulthood (Bem, 1974). A renegotiation and reconsideration of gender identity was a clear part of Guy's developmental transition – his story unfolded in a direction away from a rigid and aggressive masculine persona, described as aggressive, macho, intolerant and pushy, towards a self that incorporated the values of caring, expressiveness, sensitivity and openness. This is reflected in a new focus on dancing and parental caring.

Laing's theory of the false self was a development of persona theory to account for mental health problems stemming from a self divided into an inner hidden self and an outer *false self* that is experienced as chronically concealing (Laing, 1965). Several metaphors used in Guy's narrative relate to Laing's theory of the pathological persona/false self. Firstly, the metaphor of the self being "hijacked" is exactly the kind of phrase that Laing suggested would be used to describe the experience of a pathological false self/persona. A false self is constructed in accordance with the demands of others, therefore it is experienced as being under the control of others, leading to the strange experience of feeling as if the self has been invaded or taken over by others (Laing, 1965).

The theme that links Guy's crisis into a cultural meta-narrative is his growing critique of materialist values. Materialism is arguably the dominant cultural ideology of our age (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). It places the acquisition of material gain as the pinnacle of life and the benchmark by which human quality is measured. Kasser and Ryan call materialism "the dark side of the American dream" (Kasser and Ryan, 1993, p.410), as they conclude that it paradoxically seems to lessen, not augment, wellbeing. Kasser (2002) summarised research which suggests that materialistic values can lead to fragile self-worth, poorer interpersonal relationships, lack of intrinsic interest in life and ultimately anxiety and insecurity.

Materialistic aspirations are a form of "extrinsic" motivation (Kasser, 2002). The problems associated with materialistic goals and values were found in Guy's story. Time with family and friends had depleted before the crisis, while his ability to find fulfilment in his family and non-work activities had lessened. Extrinsically motivated actions are not in themselves rewarding, indeed may be considered onerous, boring or stressful, but are undertaken for later gain.

The opposite of extrinsic motivation is intrinsic motivation, which is action that is fulfilling and enjoyable in itself, therefore is its own reward. Intrinsic motivation is shown by the presence of interest in the activity (Deci and Ryan, 1991). Over the period of crisis there is a clear shift away from an extrinsic orientation towards intrinsically motivated activities. After relaxing his materialistic pre-crisis values, the activities that Guy took up in the latter stages of the crisis transition, such as dancing, reading, walking and spending time with his children, are enjoyable and rewarding in themselves and are intrinsically motivated. When intrinsic motivation is strong, it is expressed as a "passion" for an activity (Amiot, Vallerand and Blanchard, 2006) and may lead to "passionate involvement" (Waterman et al., 2003). Guy correspondingly describes pursuing his new career of applying spiritual principles in the workplace "with a passion".

#### *Evaluative Reflections on Case-Study Method*

The data collection strategy used in the study involved two interviews and a discursive email exchange in order to develop a more detailed picture of crisis and development within a single case. While this strategy did manage to gain a level of deep information, there was still much scope for added depth and alternative forms of data collection. Another interview would have been useful, however circumstances did not permit it – Guy was leaving the UK after the second interview. It would also have been informative to have spoken to third parties in Guy's crisis, such as his ex-wife or ex-colleagues, in order to compare their perspectives on the episode. This would have been a way of

assessing the validity of his memories of key events, as well as potentially unearthing important pieces of extra information.

The material that was gained in this case-study brings invaluable data to the empirical investigation of pre-midlife crisis. Case-study methodology used in this manner is not merely an illustrative or descriptive tool, but is a way of developing and refining theory by uncovering the deep dynamics of a phenomenon. It is important to acknowledge the difference between an 'intrinsic' case study (which is studied for its own sake) and an 'instrumental case study' (which contributes to theory development and testing) (Stake, 1995). The current study is an example of an instrumental case study.

### Summary and Conclusions

The four strands of Guy's crisis all relate to a shift away from conventional, conformist values and behaviour towards a more individuated and idiosyncratic way of being. This transformation provides for greater experience of authenticity and empowerment, and less compulsion to hide elements of the self that do not 'fit in' with conventional expectations. Guy's transition is perhaps an example of a shift that Hollis (1993) refers to as commencement of the 'second adulthood', described as the rejection of others' demands and cultural expectations as the principal force shaping personality and decisions and the discovery of personal agency and an 'inner voice'. If this is the case, then this single instance is an example of a far larger phenomenon of relevance to all those who take an interest in the holistic dynamics of adult development and mental health.

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