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9 Metaphors and Metamorphoses: Narratives of Identity During Times of Crisis

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Abstract

The narrative of transformative crisis appears in both autobiographical and fictional accounts of individual lives; it typically involves a difficult or traumatic episode and a period of self-questioning out of which a person emerges more able and more emotionally mature than before (Booker, 2005; Erikson, 1968; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995). The present study used interviews to elicit 22 narratives about crises experienced between the ages of 25 and 40, and about any developmental transformation and change that surrounded these crises. Analysis revealed a common four-phase process to the crisis episodes, common metaphors and recurrent descriptions of identity metamorphosis, ie. of 'becoming a new person'. Comparison of these findings with theory on fictional plots shows a clear parallel between the four-phase process of crisis found in the current study and the 'rebirth' plot described by Booker (2005). The theoretical significance of these findings and interpretations is discussed.

Introduction

Both autobiographical and fictional accounts of adult lives contain descriptions of personal transformation over the course of a crisis, trauma and/or period of stress. Crisis episodes are considered by many to be an integral part of development ever since Erikson (1968) placed a strong emphasis on their presence in adolescent and adult identity transitions. Levinson (1978) and Sheehy (1977) wrote that a person who avoids crises might be minimising discomfort but also avoiding the inevitability of change and development. Caplan (1964) distinguished between accidental and developmental crises, but out of all crises he saw the potential arising for development, as well as the potential for mental disorder:

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> Every crisis presents both an opportunity for psychological growth and the danger of psychological deterioration. It is a way station on a path leading away from or toward mental disorder. The outcome of the crisis depends on the resolution of a complex of conflicting forces during the period of the disequilibrium.
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> <div align="right">(Caplan, 1964, p.53)</div>

McAdams (2006) found in his research on life stories that the defining features of autobiographical narratives amongst American adults are 'redemptive' episodes during which suffering and crisis are transformed into a positive or generative outcome. He suggests that the ability to craft the positive from the negative promotes mental health and wellbeing (McAdams, 1993). Other theorists consider periods of distress to be challenges to leave behind self-defeating attitudes or defensive/destructive habits. Flach (2002) concluded that emotional disruption and then reintegration is the basis of psychological growth and can be enriching in itself, and that this is the 'secret strength' of depression. Taylor (1989) researched personal reflections on times of serious physical illness, and found that people frequently see illness in retrospect as a time during which development and positive change occurs. Smith (1991) investigated accounts of pregnancy and found that retrospective narratives emphasised the positive developments that occurred during pregnancy and as a result of the pregnancy period. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) researched the phenomenon of 'post-traumatic growth' and concluded that traumatic events are often considered retrospectively as positive turning points in the life narrative which bring greater understanding of self, more self-disclosure and increased appreciation for existence.

Fictional narratives show a similar form of transformative episode within their plotlines. Booker (2005) analysed fictional plots and concluded that seven plot forms underlie the majority of literary and dramatic storytelling. Five of these (*Voyage and Return, Rebirth, Rags to Riches, Overcoming the Monster* and *The Quest*) recount transformative experiences of a central character, with central crises and stresses proving to be the essential elements of that transformation process. *Rebirth* is the plot that is of particular interest to this article, as it is with this plot that autobiographical accounts of crisis have the closest parallels. In the rebirth plot, an individual starts off in an aversive, restricted and trapped state, due to ill fortune, evil force or curse. This situation seems irresolvable, and the person seems doomed to be in this state indefinitely. But a turning point comes when the person is led out or escapes daringly, goes through a series of close encounters, comes close to death, but is eventually 'reborn' with a new sense of freedom and new understanding. Classic stories such as Sleeping Beauty, A Christmas Carol, and Crime and Punishment all take this plot form. The Shawshank Redemption is a cinematic rendering of this plot; Andy DuFrein is firstly falsely imprisoned and is incarcerated for many years, during which time he is bullied and abused. Then,

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when others think Andy is about to commit suicide, they find that he has escaped. The film finishes with a symbolic scene of openness and liberation, as Andy and his friend Red are shown from a distance in the warm sunshine on a white sand beach with no barriers or boundaries around them.

Research Questions

This study did not, from the outset, explicitly aim to analyse the similarity and overlap between crisis episodes and fictional plot forms. The integration of findings and plot emerged only after the data was collected and thematically analysed. We were initially investigating the nature of crisis in early adulthood due to the relative neglect in the literature of crisis in this period relative to midlife and adolescence.

The three research questions that were posed at the outset of the study were:

1. What does early adult crisis involve as an experience, and how is this experience related in narrative?
2. Is there a common process underlying differing manifestations of early adult crisis? If so, what?
3. Do early adult crises have a formative role in development of the self? If so, why?

Method

Case Definition

A definition of crisis based on existing theory provided inclusion and exclusion criteria for recruitment. Firstly, crises were required to be 'developmental' in order to have specific relevance to early adulthood, while 'accidental' crises such as those that were a reaction to bereavement, birth, chronic illness or accident were excluded (Caplan, 1964). A crisis episode had to involve chronic stress (Lazarus, 2000; Murgatroyd and Woolfe, 1982), significant negative emotion (Parry, 1990), a feeling of being out of control (Hoff, 1978), domestic and/or work disruption (Slaikeu, 1990), and the person involved also had to personally reflect on the period as one of crisis. The crisis period had to have lasted at least a month and have concluded at least a year prior to the interview in order to provide time for reflection on the episode and its implications as a whole.

Participants and Interviews

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Participants were recruited for the study through email circulars within an adult education university and email to a database of non-students held by the psychology department of the same university. Twenty-two individuals were interviewed in total. The ceiling of the age range was 37, in order to make sure that the crisis was not overlapping with the mid-adulthood phase (commencing age 40), and the minimum age was 25 to avoid those in full-time education.

The contributing participants came from three phases of one research initiative, conducted over the course of several years as part of a doctoral thesis. Sixteen participants were part of the first data collection phase and were interviewed once for approximately 1 hour each. 1 of the initial 16 was re-interviewed, in order to develop a single case-study example of crisis in more detail. Then 6 new participants were interviewed twice in a separate follow-up study, with the first interview lasting approximately 1 hour and the second interview about 30 minutes. The final breakdown of genders and ages are shown in Table 1. All names and place names in this report were changed to protect anonymity.

Table 1   Age Band and Gender for the 22 Participants

Ages	Male	Female
25 – 32	5	6
33 – 40	6	5

Analysis

The analytical approach used in this study was a hybrid that employed 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). Interviews were first analysed individually, then each gender was analysed for cross-case themes and finally the whole sample was analysed. Themes and structures were developed by tentatively and iteratively integrating data with theoretical concepts. The interpretive framework evolved continuously over the process of conducting interviews, writing memos, extracting themes, integrating themes and creating a written report.

Results

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Analysis of data from the first 16 participants led to a four phase model. The model held for the further 6 individuals who were interviewed in the later data collection phase, and was modified and expanded in the process. Each phase of the 4-phase model is characterised by a specific *life situation*, a specific set of *experiences* and particular kind of *identity*.

Phase 1: Locked In

Phase 1 of the model is defined by commitments that have been made for extrinsic reasons and are no longer wanted, and from which there is no sensed possibility of separation due to feelings of obligation or passivity. There is a corresponding sense of being locked-in, trapped and constricted. Identity in Phase 1 feels externally controlled, role-defined and there is a dissonance between an inner self and outer identity. Metaphor are used to convey the experience of entrapment that defines Phase 1, such as the following examples:

> I thought what the hell am I doing here, what am I doing, this is my life, what am I doing. I would walk up the stairs into the office and I would think what am I doing with my life? It felt like a prison.   (Angela)

> The self that I remember back then was almost in a straightjacket, I felt very trapped, and rigid.   (George)

> I guess the image that comes to my mind is of a gerbil running around on a wheel endlessly. No escape. Constantly running.   (Rachel)

> I did feel a little bit dead, a bit like a ghost sometimes. I remember sometimes I would go for a walk around, or a little wander around, I wouldn't really be feeling anything, I wouldn't feel like I was even there.   (Jack)

> I really did feel that the lights were on but I was buried deep down inside there somewhere.   (Frances)

Phase 2: Traumatic Separation

Phase 2 involves a gradual realisation of the possibility of change, leading to a physical and mental separation from the Phase 1 life situation, by way of leaving job, partner or both. This is a traumatic and emotional time but is also experienced as liberating. There is a window of relief when separation is made, but it is soon clouded by anxiety and guilt. Metaphors in this phase emphasise a sense of annihilation, as the structures of identity and adult commitments that defined Phase 1 are shorn away and yet to be replaced:

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> I had to hit rock bottom and I had to have that crisis experience, in order for me almost to be debilitated and to be forced to take time for myself, to be reflective and to think gosh, I was very close there to things almost ending, and to recognise, so it was a huge slap, a huge explosion or implosion, and then it seemed to me that I could have gone two ways, and one could have been more self destruction but I gladly went the other way.   (George)

> 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 by which I could define myself. So I had effectively annihilated myself as I knew myself, and I had nothing that replaced it.   (Guy)

> Well I felt absolutely demolished. I never felt suicidal, I don't remember ever contemplating suicide, but I felt in a way like that, that my life was pretty worthless at that point. You know, I'd failed, it was the sense of failure.   (Ben)

Phase 3: Opening and Exploring

Phase 3 of the model is a time in which there is more open exploration and experimentation; there is no full-time job or relationship necessarily, but instead a feeling of restlessness and excitement that leads to reconceptualising identity in a way that feels more autonomous, more open to exploration and more authentic. Metaphors used to describe Phase 3 have the essence of a meaningful quest for answers, which contrasts sharply from the descriptions of stasis that defined Phase 1:

> And that's how I got through that muddled period of finding the direction I was going to take. It was very much trial and error, talking to people, allowing myself to perhaps be directed, and usually it was in the wrong direction, and I'd come back again.   (Gemma)

> I think I started to have a bit more of a quest really, in understanding other people and understanding myself, and studying, and I started to get much more involved.
>   (Jack)

> I could start to rebuild and reconstruct myself, create a new life for myself. This 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.   (Guy)

Phase 4: Transformative Resolution

In Phase 4 a resolution to crisis is found in new commitments, more open relationships, a sense of inner-outer balance and an altered identity. Phase 4

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metaphors typically describe a *metamorphosis of selfhood*; a reflection that the change in identity over the course of crisis has been a watershed between an old self and a new self:

> 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.   (Guy)

> However you prune a rosebush will to a greater or lesser extent dictate how the rosebush grows thereafter. There are certain organisms that don't flourish unless they are pruned quite radically, and I think there are certain elements of awareness, consciousness, strength, determination, that are not realised unless you are given enough of a hard time to wake up. There is a natural entropy in us that doesn't respond well to too easy a life.   (Claire)

> I would say that we are two completely different people, I've separated from that person. [referring to *herself* before and after the crisis]   (Gemma)

> It's been awesome. I have already used the term awakening. I have been rebirthed as a new me. Obviously still the same me, but my desires and my focuses have completely changed.   (Rob)

> The person of that period and the person now are different people and it was a tremendous learning experience.   (Rachel)

> I am the same person, just an expanded version with a different dimension to me. I think people would say the same thing of me, I'm the same Neil at my core, just reaching now into other parts of me, a fuller Neil perhaps.   (Neil)

Discussion

Crisis appears to have a particular process in early adulthood, during which phases progress in an overlapping but reliable sequence. The episode is experienced retrospectively as integral in the developing identities of the participants. The experiences and effects on identity were frequently recounted using metaphor. It is these metaphors that demonstrate a clear relationship between the structure of early adult crisis and the classic 'rebirth' plot (Booker, 2005). Booker describes many examples of the rebirth plot, and suggests that all show a basic structure: initially, the protagonist of the narrative is under a dark spell which has trapped them into some frozen, trapped state. Imagery, symbolism and metaphor that are used to give a graphic sense to this state include coldness, isolation, immobility, constriction, sleep, darkness, sickness,

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decay, isolation and despair. This culminates in the second part; a kind of "nightmare crisis" (Booker, 2005, p.203), which seems to bring imminent death. The third part is the 'act of redemption' in which the protagonist is liberated from the entrapping situation and the danger that surrounds them. After this act of liberation and change, the rebirth plot portrays being brought 'into the light', aided with depictions and symbolism of warmth, movement, awakening, health, growth, joining together, happiness, hope and love. Thus there are distinct phases in the chronology of the rebirth plot, with a clear 'before' and 'after', just as there are in autobiographical narratives of crisis episodes. The four phases of crisis and the phases of the rebirth plot are compared in Table 2. Both move from the same depictions of constricted stasis to a turning point and then to a period of expansive growth and resolution.

Table 2   Comparing Rebirth Plot with Crisis Model

Rebirth Plot Form	Crisis Model
1. Trapped: protagonist trapped them into some frozen state	1. Locked In: person feels trapped in a stultifying life role
2. Redemption: when all seems lost there is a hazardous escape, with the help of another key character	2. Traumatic Separation: emotional upheaval surrounds leaving the pre-crisis roles
3. Liberation: the person frees himself/herself from the place and mental space that defined Phase 1, and realises his/her better self	3. Opening and exploring: experimenting with new activities and sides of the self, to develop a more autonomous identity
4. From darkness into light: the protagonist finds a new and authentic way of being and fulfils central task or destiny	4. Transformative Resolution: the person finds a new fulfilling role and/or relationships, and a more authentic identity

The simple explanation for this similarity between retrospective accounts of crisis and fictional plot is that when crises are recounted from actual lives, memories are selectively recalled in plot form, so that the episode becomes a meaningful story that cast us in a positive or generative light and adds a dramatic tone to the life story (Smith, 1991; Taylor, 1989). However, there is also the possibility that the rebirth plot may map onto crisis episodes due to an opposing pathway of influence. Booker takes the position that the popularity of classic fictional plots is in their capacity to shine a mirror on the structures and

processes of real human development; he suggests that the protagonists in classic plots undergo experiences and challenges that reflect back to us in symbolic form key challenges of being human. This being the case, storytelling has an evolutionary function in preparing us as children and young adults for what may lie ahead in the life course. Thus the rebirth plot may map onto biographical accounts of crisis because it is designed to mirror formative episodes of identity transition in adult lives. So life episodes may not simply be emplotted, but plot itself may be fitted to life episodes given its origin in the symbolic encapsulation of real challenges of the human life story. A reciprocal influence is a possible integrative conclusion; storytelling has evolved to give us plot forms that fit to human lives and developmental challenges, but may then lead to a selective telling of life episodes, as individuals schematise an autobiographical memory in storied form. And therein lies the double-bind of narrative; it both facilitates and limits episodic memory and the telling of life episodes (Robinson, 2008).

This study provides a rare bridge between fictional narrative and autobiographical narrative, and suggests that the study of this link is fruitful for both sides (Albright, 1994). It is hoped that this may be a spur in the direction of further research that looks at the formative relation of fictional plot and human lives. The limitations of the method are that directional influences between fiction and human lives can only be indirectly inferred, so it is impossible to conclude with certainty about which has a more formative influence on narrative, the life episode or the plot, but the more data there is that looks at this relation, the more conclusions we will be able to draw and the more theory we will be able to extrapolate.

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