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The Stormy Search for Self in Early Adulthood: Developmental Crisis and the Dissolution of Dysfunctional Personae

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ARTICLES

The Stormy Search for Self in Early Adulthood: Developmental Crisis and the Dissolution of Dysfunctional Personae

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This qualitative study investigated episodes of early adult crises and the impact of these on identity development. Six individuals were interviewed twice about an experience of formative crisis between the ages of 25 and 40. Results showed a common dynamic starting with a precrisis conformist persona, and an identity correspondingly divided into inner (true) and outer (false). Over the course of a stressful life transition, the person separates from the precrisis roles and relationships that nurtured this fragmented identity and searches for a more unified and integrated life structure. Postcrisis identity is sought through experimentation and trial-and-error. New jobs and relationships permit the expression of feelings, values and aspirations, which in turn brings a sense of autonomy and authenticity.

The persona or false self is a construct that can be found across the subdisciplines of psychology: in psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, abnormal psychology, developmental psychology, and social psychology. This literature review considers the descriptions and theoretical accounts

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of the persona from the different corners of psychology, extracting the common denominators of the construct and its counterpoint the authentic self. Theory on crisis in early adulthood will then also be outlined, and the relation of the persona and other facets of identity to crisis will be briefly discussed.

Jung (1966) described the persona as a social mask that an individual uses to maintain an acceptable public image and to adapt to the demands of others and the expectations of one's culture. The persona facilitates integration into peer groups and society (Hopcke, 1995; Hudson, 1978) while concealing the many drives, contradictions, and conflicts that lie within the psyche (Jung, 1968). In adolescence, young people strive to fit in to social groups and construct appropriate personae to aid this task (Sippola, Buchanan, & Kehoe, 2007). Come early adulthood, the persona must be adapted to the professional and/or domestic roles that a person takes on. Each profession has its own kind of persona, and early adulthood is a time when one must "polish up one's persona" (Stevens, 1991, p. 145) to find success in professions and social circles where eccentricity is not given much tolerance.

A persona develops to facilitate conformity with social norms, and thus promotes similarity while lessening individuality (Jung, 1966). Althougth this smoothes social interaction, it can lead to an identity that is merely an imposed cultural stereotype, a state that Jung (1966) referred to as "soullessness" (p. 155). A persona becomes problematic if it turns from an impression-management functionary into something that pertains to be the whole self, due to excessive and prolonged usage and the atrophy of a more autonomous and inwardly-felt sense of identity (Hudson, 1978; Sills, 2007). In such a condition, the persona leads not only to deception of others, which is its original function, but also to deception of oneself (Booker, 2005). In this state of *self-alienation*, actions do not reflect personal preferences, values, or desires, but rather reflect the demands or expectations of others. Jung felt that neuroses were inevitable in the case of such an all-consuming persona (Hollis, 1993).

Two later psychoanalytic theorists who are notable for their emphasis on the persona in their systems are Winnicott and Laing. Laing (1965) used the terms *persona* and *false self* to refer to the construct, and Winnicott (1960) preferred the terms *false self* and its counterpoint, the *true self*. Both considered the pathological false self to have its origins in early infancy. Winnicott stated, like Jung (1966), that there are healthy and unhealthy variants, and described levels of false self, from productive to pathological. The more severe the false self condition, the more unconscious its operation becomes. The healthy expression of the false self is described as a discrete, polite front that edits self-disclosure in sensitive social contexts. The next

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level is when the false self is employed most of the time, despite a search for conditions that will allow the expression of the true self. In the more severe false-self condition, the false self is consciously used but permanent, which may be adaptive if environmental conditions are extremely hostile to the values or ideals of the true self. The most severe false-self condition parallels the self-alienated condition that Jung described; the false self is set up as real and the true self is permanently concealed from conscious attention.

Laing (1965) researched the unhealthy manifestations of the false self, particularly in relation to the etiology and symptoms of psychosis. He found that a chronic split between a persona or false self and an inner private self can lead to schizoid personalities and even schizophrenia. In the false-self condition, a sense of true self is dissociated from the body and day-to-day bodily behavior; the body is felt to be a vehicle of concealment, rather than a medium of expression, and is experienced to be controlled by others, for it acts out behaviors in line with the demands of others. The inner self may lose a firm anchor in reality, and may start to take on a fantastic or delusory quality. Meanwhile, the false self becomes more and more engulfing, more and more sensed as other, to the point that thoughts and actions that are linked with the false self are experienced as *not me*.

Masterson (1988) developed a theory of borderline personality disorder based on the false self. He stated that the symptoms of the borderline patient, including emotional instability, difficult patterns of behavior, and dysfunctional relationships, are the result of a rigid persona and a dysfunctional false self. Emotional instability is explained as being due to suppressed feelings that are held back behind the false self; the imagined implications of expression of the inner self lead to intense anxiety. The rigid patterns of destructive behavior in borderline individuals are due to the fact that a false self does not permit identity exploration or experimentation for fear that it may lead to expression of abnormality and, therefore, abandonment by others. The result is a pattern of rigid defensive coping strategies, which prevent access to the anxiety-invoking inner self.

Although Laing and Masterson looked at pathological versions of the false self, it has been considered in its more general and benign manifestations by other psychologists. The social psychologist Gergen (1972) conducted a variety of experiments in which he found evidence that all individuals subtly modulate their personality depending on the social context they are in, and concluded, like Winnicott and Jung, that healthy individuals all have social masks. He warned against the view that the persona or false self is inherently unhealthy, and promoted the view that a healthy personality varies across social situations. For the humanistic psychologist Rowan (1988), the persona or false self is a normal part of one's subpersonalities. It is that which is based on a traditional gender role and the expectations of parents

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or significant others. If it prevents the other expressions of a person's naturally multiple-voiced self, it becomes an impediment to psychological growth (Rowan, 1988).

The persona tends toward a homogenous, stereotyped, and acceptable gender-appropriate identity; conversely, authentic action is characterized by spontaneity and creativity, for if an action is not being conducted with the aim of social approval, there is no need to pause to assess how impressive, appropriate, or acceptable one's behavior appears (Winnicott, 1960). This, in turn, allows a freer and less-planned range of behaviors (Mitchell, 1992; Phillips, 1998). Mitchell emphasizes that the state of authenticity is *a way of being*, and can only be judged relative to particular actions or interactions. He points out that the self exists in time, not in space, and it is authentic *moments* that we seek, rather than an authentic entity (Mitchell, 1992). Bugental (1980) emphasizes three key elements of authentic action: a sense of self-determination, an acceptance of responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, and a deep sense of connection to others.

Harter, Waters, & Whitesell (1997) found that *giving voice* to one's own thoughts, beliefs, and opinions is a key expression of authentic behavior, as individuals are less concerned about the social appropriateness of their attitudes, so have less reservation in discussing them. Kahn (1986) links the expression of emotions, the expression of sexual desires, and assertiveness to the authentic self. For Laing, *embodiment* is the key dimension of authenticity; the body is wholly a part of the self when actions are felt to be self-determined and expressive of one's inner state and personal feelings (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Laing, 1965). Authentic action allows the expression of many voices and open-ended identity development, in contrast to the more static and role-bound mode of living behind a socially dictated persona (Rowan, 1988). Rogers (1961) described authentic actions as those initiated without concern for the approval or disapproval of others, but, instead, being concerned with finding ways of living which are satisfying and expressive.

CRISIS: EPISODES OF FORMATIVE ADVERSITY

For Erikson (1950, 1968), psychological crises have a functional role in the ongoing maturation of identity and selfhood. He considered, like Jung, that human beings seek wholeness within and without. However, as environments change and the demands of life change, identities and ways-of-being that were once adaptive become deficient. If a life change is avoided for some time, and eventually manifests without relevant coping strategies in

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place, transition may well entail a crisis. Caplan (1964) developed Erikson's ideas and distinguished two distinct types of crisis: First, there are *accidental crises*, which are brought about by sudden external events such as bereavement or job loss; and, second, there are *developmental crises*, which are precipitated by changes associated with a transitional period (Caplan, 1964). He suggested that crises of both types follow a common dynamic: To begin with, there is a rise in tension, then attempts to cope with this, then the innovation of new problem-solving responses and coping strategies to handle the increasing tension, then either a breakdown or breakthrough to a new way of being. Caplan's model omits any consideration of how the self changes through the course of crisis (Slaikeu, 1990). Other theorists place the issue of identity at the heart of the crisis experience. Hollis (1993) found that the midlife crisis is fundamentally a "crisis of selfhood" and is initiated by a question that remains unanswered due to the predominance of the persona up until that point. The question is "Who am I, apart from my history and the roles I have played?" (Hollis, 1993, p. 19). For Hollis, the course of crisis is characterized by substantial revisions of selfhood away from the persona towards authenticity.

A phenomenological study of midlife crisis found that after crisis, the individuals experienced changes from a sense of being externally controlled to a more internal sense of personal control, and a more proactive and self-reliant approach to life. Acceptance of the less positive aspects of the self, and an opening to previously suppressed emotions and ideas were also found. Resolution of crisis led to a more balanced relation between inner sense of self and lifestyle (Denne & Thomson, 1991).

Winnicott, Laing, and Jung all considered that if the authentic self does emerge from behind a long-held public façade, it will bring radical shifts in social relations, a growing awareness of one's inner world, and a noncompliant attitude. Winnicott (1960) said that the renunciation of a compliant and socially valuable false self will appear irrational to others; Laing (1965) went further and said that the removal of the false self can lead to psychotic episodes, for when a veil of fake normality is lifted, eccentricities that have been hidden for years are expressed in a sudden and unstable manner. Jung (1971) wrote that a dissolution of a persona will lead to conflict with those who related to the person at that level, and that the often discussed midlife crisis emerges due to problems associated with the young adult persona.

The midlife crisis has been extensively researched (e.g., Hollis, 1993; Horton, 2002; O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987) as has crisis in adolescence (e.g., Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orolfsky, 1993), but the period between these two, which can be referred to as early adulthood, has been relatively neglected in relation to crisis episodes. This is surprising, given

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that Levinson (1978) suggested that crises were likely in early adulthood, given the profound transitions that occur within this period, including the initiation of a career, the commencement of long-term partnerships and the start of parenthood for some. The Age 30 Transition, which lasts approximately between age 28 and 33, was considered to be a crisis-prone time in particular, yet has been the focus of little to no published research since Levinson's exploratory work in the late 70 s.

THE STUDY

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This study was undertaken with the intention of studying developmental life crises in the early adult period, particularly in relation to identity transition, the persona, and authenticity. The research questions that focused the interviews and analysis were:

1. Is there a common dynamic underlying early adult crisis?
2. How is early adult crisis experienced and reflected on?
3. Do early adult crises involve changes and developments in early adult identity, particularly in relation to the persona/authentic self?

Methodological Approach

The analytical approach used in this study was a hybrid that employed techniques from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003) and Miles and Huberman's (1994) Interactive Model. For a detailed justification and description of this composite methodology, see Robinson and Smith (in press). The choice of the two source methods for the composite was based on their complementarity of focus and the researchers' familiarity with these methods from previous research and writing (e.g., Robinson & Griffiths, 2004; Smith & Osborne, 2003). IPA is a methodology that emphasizes the inductive process of moving from data and cases to theory, and the Interactive Model lays more emphasis on interpretive deduction based on guiding theory. The aim in the composite methodology used here is to combine techniques from these two methodologies, so that the analysis was both sensitive to themes that emerged inductively from specifics, and able to tentatively apply theoretical ideas from the outset. Some theorists have emphasized that the induction process relates to theory generation, yet deduction is associated with hypothesis-testing and theory validation (Rennie, 2000). Other writers have stressed the role of both of these inferential processes from the outset of a research endeavor (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998): A researcher starts

with background knowledge that shapes the interpretation of data—this meaning-making is a deductive inference from abstract to particular. At the same time, cross-case comparison of raw data leads inductively from particulars to generic schemes. These two processes can occur simultaneously and in complementary fashion.

An analytical approach that accepts such a dynamic and dialectical interplay between theory and particular, between induction and deduction, brings both sensitivity and rigor to the analytical process. To conduct such a balanced analysis effectively, a researcher must commit to the following:

1. To represent a participant's data in a way that does not distort their original narrative and language, which stays close to their words and experiences, and which is anchored in actual comments and data, not in lofty theoretical inferences that are divorced from the content of the data.
2. To use theory to guide interpretations of a participant's words and experiences, but to alter or abandon any theoretical precept that does not fit with the emerging data or distorts the data into a discourse that participants did not use and would not recognize.

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In this study, the theory described in the introduction provided an orientating structure for framing research questions and interpreting the data that are presented here. The utility of these ideas in relation to crisis was supposed due to a previous study on crisis in which participants had described the role of a persona/false self in the onset of crisis despite no a priori intentions to discuss this construct (Robinson & Smith, in press). We committed to revising or abandoning these ideas as guiding constructs, along with any other background theoretical knowledge that we possessed, in light of what emerged from the participants.

Participants

Six individuals participated in the study, 3 men and 3 women. Participants were recruited for the study through e-mail circulars within an adult education university and e-mails to a database of nonstudents held by the Psychology Department of the same university. A provisional definition of crisis was attempted to create inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation, based on existing theory (Caplan, 1964; Hoff, 1978; Lazarus, 2000; Murgatroyd & Woolfe, 1982; Parry, 1990; Slaikeu, 1990). First, crises were required to be developmental to have specific relevance to early adulthood, and accidental crises such as those that were a reaction to bereavement, chronic illness, or an accident, were excluded. Postnatal crises were excluded

as they are considered to have a partially biological basis (Kumar et al., 1997). A crisis episode had to involve chronic stress, significant negative emotion, a feeling of being out of control (Slaikeu, 1990), and the person involved also had to personally reflect on the period as one of crisis. Developmental crises typically upset home life and work life (Halpern, 1973; Perosa & Perosa, 1984), and so a crisis had to show both of these disruptions. The crisis period had to have lasted at least a month and show a time-limited nature by having concluded a year or more prior to the interview.

The ceiling of the age range was 37, to make sure that the crisis was not overlapping with the mid-adulthood phase (which commences age 40), and the minimum age was brought up to 25 from 20 to avoid those in full-time education.

Key details pertaining to the six participants are shown in Table 1. The table includes details such as age at onset of crisis, ethnicity/nationality, and information on profession and marital status pre and post crisis.

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Semistructured Interviews

Data collection was achieved through semistructured interviews. Each person was interviewed twice, in a location of their choosing, which included the option of a university room. The first of the two interviews focused on the experience of, and phase dynamics of, the crisis episode, and lasted around an hour. The interview guide used for first interviews was standard for all 6 respondents, and is shown in Appendix A.

The second interview was carried out around a week later to probe into areas of interest that emerged from Interview 1, and to focus on changes in identity. Interview guides for second interviews were designed individually for each person. These second interviews lasted between 30 min and 1 hr. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all names and identifying places were changed.

Analysis

To analyze interview transcripts, techniques from IPA were used to develop data-led themes from interview transcripts, and synthesis techniques for combining themes into processes and networks were taken from Miles and Huberman's (1994) more structured and theory-influenced approach. The first step for analysis of all interviews involved intensive marginal notation of, and immersion in, the transcript itself. The textual information was subdivided into themes, each of which corresponded to a part of text with a coherent center of meaning, and these themes were given a label—a word or short phrase that captured this meaning. The labeling

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TABLE 1
Information on the Six Participants

Age				*Profession*		*Marital Status*	
Pseudonym	*Interview*	*Onset of crisis*	*Ethnicity/nationality*	*Before crisis*	*After crisis*	*Before crisis*	*After crisis*
Frank	36	32	Mexican, raised in USA	Lawyer	Lawyer, part-time student	Married	Single
Rob	34	30	English, White	Marketing executive	Charity worker	Married	Single
Mark	43	36	English, White	Financial consultant	PhD student	Married	Married
Claire	50	30	English, White	Business consultant	Business consultant	Married	Single
Victoria	36	30	Italian, White	Hairdresser	Import/export, part-time student	In relationship	Single
Lily	29	26	English, White	Sports PR	Charity sponsorship	In relationship	Single

and unitizing of the themes occurred in a dialectical manner, each influencing the other reciprocally. Recurring and salient themes were then clustered into superordinate themes, and then superordinate themes were meaningfully linked into a pattern or system, when such links could be found. Initial themes were more atheoretical and descriptive, yet superordinate themes and relational codes were more analytical and theoretical. However, theory was applied at all stages in a tentative manner.

This thematizing process was first conducted on each participant's data individually, leading to a series of themes with supporting quotes for each case. Commonalities across participants were sought at the level of superordinate theme—first for men and women separately, then for the whole sample. The rationale for analyzing men and women as discrete groups before analyzing the whole sample in this study was to provide an interim level of cross-case analysis above the individual level but below the whole sample level. The analysis was not conducted with the intention of investigating sex differences; it was a step toward searching for the cross-gender similarities that previous research suggested may be present (Robinson, 2008).

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FINDINGS

The Six Crisis Episodes: Transition Events

Frank felt a strong desire to follow his youthful ambition of being a writer, and to get out of his oppressive marriage. He left both wife and job to start again, only to later return to law after an experimental period of self-exploration.

Rob found a growing disillusionment with his profession and a gradually deteriorating marriage, and so left both to start again. After working freelance for a while, searching spiritually and doing part of a psychology course, he ended up working for a children's charity.

Mark found that, despite his success, the work was unfulfilling and stifling. His marriage deteriorated while the job pressures intensified. At the peak of crisis, he left his job, and his marriage survived. He then went freelance in the same field, then started to train as a chef, then gave that up to study organizational behavior.

Victoria was working as a hairdresser and living with her mother in rural Italy, but was deeply dissatisfied. She fantasized of breaking away, to go to university and travel. She finally left home and moved, with her boyfriend, to England. She started university, broke up with boyfriend, and found a new job and a fulfilling relationship.

Lily described the emotional degeneration of a long-term relationship, her job, and her living conditions. She split up with her boyfriend and tried to take her own life. When she recovered, she left her job, moved to London to start again, found a new job, and embarked on a degree in psychology.

Claire described a two-peak episode of first leaving a career in management consultancy, then the breakdown of a marriage a year later. She was forced to go back to consultancy after the break up, to provide for her children, and this prevents any satisfactory resolution for many years, but eventually she finds a fulfilling relationship and does a degree with the intention of becoming an academic.

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"An Obedient Soldier:" Materialism and Conformism

Prior to the crisis, the three men had taken executive roles that served the conventional male aspirations of money and status. Mark said of his choice to go into financial consulting: "It was very conventional, it was about having this status and this reputation that came with money." He talked of the need for conformity, and the sense of claustrophobia that this induced:

> When you are going into a boardroom, there's an awful lot of acting up, from the trivial conformity with dress codes up to sounding impressive, I suppose. There was a certain claustrophobia to it, but I was the claustrophobic who wouldn't even attempt to open the door!"

Frank expressed a similar materialist motivation for his work: "I chose law because, at the time, frankly, I was impressed by the money you could make.... The quid pro quo was just material well-being, simply that." He also described his time at the law firm where conformism was essential:

> It was conformism. To be really good and to advance, you have to submit. You *absolutely* have to submit to the ways of doing things—the dress code and so on. It's military, almost. You have to be, in a sense, an obedient soldier and you progress up the ranks. Nobody tells you that you have to and you could deviate and people get away with deviations. If you get your hair cut in a certain way and wear your clothes in a certain way, that's the standard.

Frank had always prided himself on being different, on not simply benignly accepting authority and convention, and yet, as a "boring old lawyer," finds himself losing his sense of individuality.

Rob described his desire for conventional success before his crisis and he recalled the sense of pride he felt working late at night in his London office,

looking out of ceiling-to-floor windows. When he was asked what his aim was in business, he replied: ''Money. What else is business about? I actually have a very different answer to that now, but then it was all money.''

Victoria reflected that the culture of rural Northern Italy in which she was living was very conformist, and highlighted the uniformity of dress as a manifestation of this:

> Its like you have to conform to everybody else; you have to be like everybody else is, to wear the same kind of clothes, the fashion—everybody is dressed in the same way. ... If you are not, you feel almost out of place.

Victoria's life was orientated towards compliance with these cultural norms and with the demands of her mother, and she recollects that it felt like an act: ''It wasn't feeling me. It was playing a role to pretend to be nice, to conform to everybody else there.''

Lily recalled having values before the crisis that ''were kind of traditional, you know—do what you are supposed to do, middle-class thing really.'' Success was simply ''earning more money'' and climbing a career ladder. She suggests that, before the crisis, she was ''much more materially-orientated'' and was aiming at ''nice house, clever-sounding job, a 'catch'-type boyfriend, nice stereo, posh bars.''

Claire was a single mother throughout most of her 20 s. The motivation for her career as a businesswoman was to provide financially for her children, but she did not enjoy it and felt that conformism in terms of dress and demeanor was essential. She refers to this need for a conformist appearance as using a ''dressing-up box'': ''What I often refer to is a dressing-up box. I used to make sure that my appearance was top-notch, my personality was certainly different when dressed for work than when I was wearing jeans and t-shirt with the kids.''

''Living a Lie:'' The Dysfunctional False Self

Alongside the precrisis pattern of conformism and convention, all six describe developing adult identities based on a false public front that concealed their genuine feelings, thoughts, aspirations, and values. Rob described how he had built up a ''false image of self'' that suited his job as a marketing executive, but he was aware that it was an act, that ''it wasn't really me.'' He further describes how he *became* this act and identified with it completely: ''So the persona you build up becomes all of you, so it's completely consistent with marketing and false advertising. ... I chose a career that allowed me to create a completely false image of myself.''

Mark described having developed a ''façade'' at work that had become an entrenched habit. He further described this façade using a list of words

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that imply the false self: "external, narrowly defined, conventional, status, board room." He experienced this public image as "living a lie" and described his stereotypical demeanor at the time as "the city clone who sounds impressive."

Frank described feeling fake at work, and having emotional barriers around him at home and in relationships. He described feeling false due to the difference between how he saw himself inwardly and how he behaved outwardly:

> So I felt fake because I felt I am having to conform, and I had a conception of being a nonconformist. There was this huge dichotomy between what I was doing and what was in my head. I was pretty damn radical in my head. I was pro-Fidel communist, at the same time working at the heart of the capitalist establishment.

He also described the experience of having emotional barriers that separated him from other people. He used a metaphor of "walls of ice" to imply the all-pervasive and engulfing nature of these barriers:

> I think I learned to put up a lot of emotional barriers over that period. It's like walls of ice, and over the years they just build up thicker and thicker. So that's what it was, and then I didn't know how to get out of it, I didn't know how to get out of the walls of ice, because they were too thick. At that point it is just force of habit—you just don't know how to relate naturally to people.

Victoria referred to having developed a "façade of being nice" when living and working in a rural village in Italy. She described the sense of dissonance between her life at the time and her sense of self:

> I know a lot of people are content with living in a village, getting married, living near their mums. I don't know, at a certain point I realized it wasn't me, I was there doing that, but there was something in the back of my mind telling me this is not my life, this is not what I really want, its *not me*.

When she was asked what she was hiding behind this façade, she was clear that she was experiencing hiding a more authentic sense of self: "I was just hiding myself. I was just hiding myself, the real me."

Claire was working in business and developed an "artificial, hard-nosed personality," and a "façade of success and reliability" to get on in a world which was male-dominated and intolerant of weakness or vulnerability. She describes getting lost in this artificial persona, and not being able to relate to her children properly, due to her focus on work and living up to the expectations of her role.

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Lily also described a false public self. She reflected that she had developed a "shell" that was in line with her conventional goals, and "was trying to be normal, when I wasn't." She used a simile to describe this: "Its almost like beetles have shells. You can't just go; here you go, have all of this, until you know that they are not going to tread all over you. It's like . . . it's a self-protection thing." It was only her boyfriend who had seen past that façade to "the underneath bit."

"I Want to Check Out:" Separation and Escape

The central hub of the six crisis episodes is a change of life structure, and a relinquishing of the roles in which the false self emerged and thrived. This central period of change is an emotionally charged time, full of anxiety, anger, and guilt, as well as excitement and anticipation. Leaving job and/or partner frees up time and lessens pressures, so that a search for new forms of identification beyond the persona-level may be initiated.

Frank and Rob were 30 when they left their jobs; Mark was 36. Rob described the growing desire to leave his work environment in the following way: "I don't feel connected to the people at work; I don't feel a part of it, and it's an industry-wide thing. I don't feel that my heart is in the lie anymore; I want to check out of it."

Rob and Frank had both married individuals in the same profession as themselves. Rob was married to another marketing executive and Frank to another lawyer. Within several months of leaving their jobs, they both left their wives. Rob said that his wife was also hiding behind a false persona:

> The way I would describe her is very consistent with who I was and what my choice of career was, in terms of the façade, the falseness. She, herself, was hiding behind a head to foot mask. She was hiding from herself, so I can see that likes attracted each other.

The crises of Victoria and Claire reached their peak at age 30; Victoria left her job and her country, and Claire left her job as a management consultant, and soon after left her husband too, who had become violent and difficult. Lily's crisis peaked earlier at age 26; she left her boyfriend and her job during this time, but in a period of melancholy tried to take her own life by overdosing, but did not succeed and was rushed into hospital to make a full recovery.

After leaving the precrisis job and/or relationship, the persona in all cases is redundant, for it was designed for a set of roles that no long exists. After the separation period of the crisis. an experimental endeavor is gradually

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initiated to explore new activities and old interests, involving much trial-and-error, to find a new, more emotionally satisfying, way of being.

"Rescuing the Real Me:" Steps Toward Authentic Being

Although descriptions of the false self by the six respondents had clear parallel themes, identities that evolve after separation and the hub of the crisis are more individual. Four of the six described a period of open-ended, and at times chaotic, experimentation, as various interests, traits, or aspirations that had been closed off by the false self are given new expression.

After leaving the law, Frank set up his own business designing Web sites. He also found a new desire for creative expression, and so joined a poetry club. Through this poetry club, he met some creatively minded individuals with whom he explored drugs and sexual experimentation. He reflected on this as a time when he was finding out about emotions and aesthetics, having neglected them in his rationally-focused law career:

> At that time, I thought trust emotions and screw rationality, just trust emotions. It's all part of that opening up. But anyway that is what I was thinking, and I also really got into the idea of beauty and beautiful things—the connection between emotional openness and beauty.

He was searching for an identity that reflected his own wants and desires, and said of this postseparation period: "It's about becoming who *you* think you want to be." For, the essence of this was personal growth. To experience growth and to feel authentic, he found that having a number of different active outlets was important. He said that "a life of growth, with variety in it, is authentic."

After leaving the world of finance, Mark tried a number of career options. He first worked as a freelance consultant, which gave him more time but was not based on his own interests and aims. His next step was to go to chef school, and during his training he decided to put together business plans for opening up his own restaurant. At this point he was doing something that he enjoyed, and he felt he was expressing his sense of self in his actions. He then came to the difficult decision that a career in cookery and restaurants was, in fact, not for him, and so applied to do a Masters in organizational behavior, after which he went on to do a PhD in the same subject. He described the importance of now having time and space to explore, and to spontaneously experience small things:

> Now I have space to recognize things about myself and explore them, to have time for people, to come up and smell the roses and enjoy smelling the roses

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> for that particular sense, rather than smell them because that is part of one's job description.

After leaving his job and wife, Rob was depressed and passive for several months, but recovered to set up a freelance business and continued to do marketing on an ad hoc basis. He found himself searching for new meaning and for a new way of being, and so spent much time reading books on spirituality, enrolled in a psychotherapy course, went on a retreat, and started volunteer work. He experienced this postcrisis period of exploration as an "awakening" of his authentic self, and said that he "rescued the real me."

At the time of the interview, 18 months after his divorce and his resignation from full-time work in marketing, Rob was working for a children's charity. The new job was congruent with his self-concept, and he had an outlet for those aspects of himself that were dormant in his executive job—integrity, caring, helping, and purpose. A recent relationship was described as more authentic than anything he had had previously, including his marriage, and was more characterized by spontaneity, as illustrated in the following anecdote:

> We had fun, spontaneous fun and we laughed a lot. One Halloween we walked up to a graveyard in Hampstead with a bed sheet and pretended to be ghosts. It was really silly, but that night there was constant laughter. There was an energy and a *joie de vivre* about our time together that was so refreshing compared to what I had just been through. That was authentically me.

Victoria, upon leaving her job and family in Italy and moving to London, looked to find expressions for those interests that she had hid in her former life. She signs up for English courses, starts yoga, goes clubbing frequently, and goes travelling. She described the empowering experience of being able to follow her own aspirations and instincts, and the sense of harmony this imparts:

> I realized that I could do with these things, and this was an achievement, so yes it was like discovering a new part of me. I was thinking, "Wow I can do this, I can do that, I can do whatever I want. I don't have things controlling me and myself stopping me from doing these things. ... Now I give an harmonious aspect of myself." [*Interviewer: That's interesting. What do you mean by harmonious?*] Probably what I feel inside is showing outside. So there's a harmony within and without.

Lily's early aspiration was to become a psychologist, before she ended up in PR. After her crisis, she started a degree in psychology, with the aspiration of later working in psychology. Before the crisis, Lily's aims were

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traditional and materially focused, but after the crisis she described aiming at "work-life balance, intellectual stimulation, love and laughter," showing a substantial change in values.

Clare left her husband during the crux of her crisis, and due to the need to provide for her children, she went back to work in the same industry, and this required the reestablishing of the artificial "hard-nosed" persona that she had been so happy to leave behind. Years later, she followed her young dream of becoming an academic philosopher, and so eventually found the intrinsic motivation and an authentic expression she was looking for, but not within the period of the crisis transition. She described the enduring nature of her personal aspirations, even when hidden: "I had *always* been a frustrated academic, always."

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DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to establish if different descriptions of crisis in early adulthood had a common process and defining experiences. The six participants demonstrated thematic parallels that suggested that there was, indeed, a common dynamic to their crises and that this was integral in an identity transition away from a dysfunctional persona-based self towards a new, more authentic way of being. Across all cases, there were parallel precrisis descriptions of dissatisfying roles, followed by emotionally fraught separation from these roles, then an experimental exploration of new life avenues and activities, and, finally, renewed commitments and vocations, in which a private self was more publically manifest.

Winnicott (1960), Jung (1968), and Laing (1965) speculated on the possible origins of the dysfunctional false self, and all were in agreement that it stems from a dominant concern with compliance and conformity in the hope of social acceptance. In the six accounts of crisis, this pattern can be found in the precrisis state; the three men talked of the overriding importance of *money* and *status* in their precrisis life and job. Csikszentmihalyi (1999) and Kasser (2002) state that materialism is the West's dominant social ideology, and thus conformity to dominant social norms inevitably leads to materialistic values, particularly for men whose stereotypical role is one of breadwinner (Connell, Radican, & Martin, 1987; Hollis, 1993). For the three women, conformity was shown in some materialistic expressions, but also in a passive acquiescence to their life situation, and/or in their adoption of stereotyped ways of behaving.

The phenomenology of the persona condition was in evidence in this study, including experiences of being controlled, socially disconnected, disembodied, concealing, fake, static, emotionally dry, and focused on

impression over expression. The results showed many of these features within the context of crisis episodes. Lily showed the *concealing* function of the persona; she described trying to outwardly normalize a sense of inner abnormality to gain social acceptance. Frank described the experience of *fakeness* in seeing himself as a radical nonconformist, but working as a financial lawyer. Victoria described the *conformist* and *static* experience of the false self, as she felt the need to abide by the conventional rules of her culture, despite not believing in them. Rob described the social *disconnection* in his precrisis marketing job, and Mark emphasized the importance of *impression* as a "big swinging dick" in the city. Although the precrisis state is described using words implying constriction, concealment, and entrapment, the postcrisis descriptions emphasize openness and expansion, and show qualities of authenticity. There are descriptions of postcrisis spontaneity, honesty, creativity, charity, connectedness, openness, inner-outer harmony, and a focus on growth.

Claire demonstrates that the change from a persona-based identity to a more authentic lifestyle is contingent on circumstance and is not necessarily permanent, for she described regressing back to a false self state after the negative circumstances of a broken marriage. Furthermore, Victoria contacted the authors a year after her interviews to say that her relationship had broken down and she felt she was in another crisis. This illustrates the key fact that the postcrisis resolutions are *not* permanent, but, compared with the precrisis state, are preferable and less fragmented.

The personal changes over the course of the crises were not from fragmented inconsistency to solid consistency, but rather were moves away from an externally controlled self to an inwardly directed and relational self. The postcrisis experimental forays and developments are multiple, contradictory, and, at times, inconsistent. This supports those theories that cite the authentic person having multiple voices and manifesting contradictions, yet not being buffeted around by the requirements of social situations (Gergen, 1972; Rogers, 1961; Rowan, 1988).

Authenticity is consolidated after the crisis by way of building a new life structure around jobs and relationships that are found *interesting* and *enjoyable* and, therefore, spontaneously lead to persistence and exploration. What a person finds interesting is a sign of intrinsic motivation, and this in turn seems to be a strong sign of the authentic self (Ryan, 1982). Relationships after the crisis have more honesty, openness, and spontaneity than those experienced precrisis, permitted by more open self-disclosure and emotional honesty. Adams (2006) suggests that love requires "balanced, resonant, self-world communion" (p. 31), which stems from authentic action and mutual self-disclosure. This kind of balanced connection is more approximated by the descriptions of postcrisis relationships in this study.

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Therapeutic Implications

This study describes the crises of just 6 individuals, however further evidence has been presented elsewhere that points toward the same pattern in other cases of early adult crisis (Robinson, 2008; Robinson & Smith, 2009, in press). On the tentative assumption of generalizability, certain therapeutic suggestions can be made for clinicians who acknowledge the possibility of personal transformation through periods of crisis (e.g., Caplan, 1964; Erikson, 1968; Grof & Grof, 1992; Kegan, 1982). If a client is suspected to be entering or in a persona-related crisis, the therapist should be aware that aspects of identity will be hidden from public expression and may be out of conscious awareness. The therapist–client relationship should act as a corrective interpersonal experience to develop authentic interaction; to bring the inner self out into the body and into social spaces. Masterson (1988) said that the therapist should, at this point, be the ''guardian of the emerging real self'' (p. 191), and that emotional neutrality in the part of the therapist is important so that inner feelings are allowed outer expression without judgment, and the anxiety associated with expression of the inner self can gradually alleviate. This client–therapist relationship should provide a model for developing an interaction style that involves voicing inner opinions, feelings, fantasies, and desires. As the self-disclosure process proceeds, the fear associated with voicing secret wishes or beliefs will diminish and confidence will increase (Lind, 1973).

The therapist should be aware that an engulfing persona will have led to relationships and roles that reinforce or require its presence. Therefore, a person who is to relinquish a persona-focused identity and move towards a more authentic way of being will have to make substantial changes to their life, which will be difficult and distressing, but will add up to a positive developmental transition, a line in the sand in the life story, which will be reflected on as a metaphorical rebirth or awakening (McAdams, 2006). The transition, if successfully navigated, will permit a healthier, more balanced life structure that supports authentic expression.

After the crux of crisis, which involves separation and a peak of distress, exploration of intrinsically motivated or potentially expressive activities is essential to progress through a crisis transition (Marcia et al., 1993, Robinson & Smith, in press). The therapist should be aware that it is in *action* that authenticity may manifest (Mitchell, 1992), therefore new possibilities for action, in the way of activities, classes, hobbies, and forms of expression, are essential. Trial-and-error is inevitable at this point as new starts are made and rejected; support and encouragement through this time, and acknowledgement of the freedom to make mistakes, is a key role for the therapist.

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Limitations and Conclusions

It is well known that autobiographical memory is partial and often distorted (Neisser, 1994), therefore it is questionable how much of these accounts of crisis are constructed in retrospect. Concepts such as the persona and authenticity are prevalent in popular stories and the self-help literature, and it is possible that retrospective accounts of a false self are simply narrative forms placed onto ambiguous and amorphous experiences of change. In response to this valid criticism, it can be pointed out that descriptions of the false self/authentic self given in the study are more than just pastiche descriptions of ''not being myself'' or ''becoming myself.'' In all six narratives, a wide diversity of experiences and concepts were described that can all be accounted for by theory on the false self and persona, from precrisis inner–outer dissonance, interpersonal disconnection and conformism, to postcrisis spontaneity and growth after the personae were dissolved. It is improbable that participants would have spontaneously linked all these elements together so comprehensively. A more parsimonious explanation is that the features do relate to a fundamental identity transition away from persona-level identification (Hollis, 1993). This does not negate the possibility of a narrative gloss being given to events and experiences, and this could be explored in the future by methodologies that compare retrospective accounts of crisis with contemporaneous accounts (see Smith, 1994).

A further limitation relates to the mode of sampling and the ethnicity of the participants. The sample was recruited by way of contacts that were registered with, or had some connection with, an adult education psychology department. Four of the 6 were English, and there were no Asian or Black participants. The sample is clearly highly limited as a source of making generalisations. It is hoped that the study will act as a spur for further research in other ethnic and socioeconomic groups, so that the dynamics of crisis can be assessed more widely.

A further limitation of the study is the selectivity of reporting required to compress the data into a journal article. The interviews generated over 50,000 words of data, and to present this article, it was necessary to report only those themes that were common to all six participants and were relevant to the research questions. This form of reporting based on cross-case commonalities means that the idiosyncrasies of each crisis narrative are inevitably lost to a certain extent. This is a limitation can be best addressed by case study presentations based on the same data (e.g., Robinson & Smith, 2010).

In summary, this study demonstrates a relation between crisis episodes, the cessation of a fragmented persona-based identity, and the development of a more authentic, integrated way of being. The crisis narratives show how the restriction of a false persona and the distress brought on by it can be

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transmuted into experiences of expansion and transformation, by making real and substantial inward and outward changes that allow the pursuit of coherence, agency, and authenticity. Therefore, the path of these crisis episodes might suggest a therapeutic path for effectively navigating past a false, role-based, or socially imposed identity and the life structure that is built around it (Caplan, 1964; Hollis, 1993). The findings point toward the idea that crisis is common in a young adult's "stormy search for self" (Grof & Grof, 1992, p. XX).

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APPENDIX A – THE QUESTION GUIDE FOR OPENING INTERVIEW WITH PARTICIPANTS

Background

- How long ago did the episode occur?
- How long did it last?
- Could you tell me a bit about the events and circumstances in your life leading up to the specific incident that we are here to talk about, that set the scene for what happened?
- Probe for home life/relationships/jobs/social situation/moods/health/living arrangements.

The Episode in Narrative

- Could you tell me about events surrounding the crisis, starting at the beginning, as they unfolded.
- Use the following questions to help aid and probe into narrative (check time scale of occurrences as they are related).

Precrisis Job

- Can you tell me about your work life at the time?
  - Probe: pressure/easy, satisfying/not satisfying, stressful/unstressful
- Did the job suit you as a person?
- What was a typical day in your work life?
- How do you remember *feeling* in the office?
- Do you remember any specific incidents that stand out in that job as very good or very bad?
- What were you aiming for in that job?
- Did you have a perspective on your job and yourself?
- Did you feel at all trapped/held back/hindered at work?
- Did you ever consider leaving?
- How were you coping at the time?
- How do you think a work colleague might have described you at the time?
- How would you have described yourself at work at the time?
- How did your work life affect your home life?

Precrisis Relationships

- Were you in a relationship in the period leading up to the crisis?
- Were you married?
- How would you have described that relationship?
- What do you think you got out of the relationship?
- How did your relationship affect your work life?
- What sort of things did you do with your other half?
- What did you have in common?
- Why do you think you got into the relationship?
- How do you think your partner would have described you?

Precrisis Self and Identity

- Do you think you were being true to yourself?
- Do you think you knew yourself well at this point?
- Was there any aspect of your life that felt false?
- What were the values you lived your life by at the time?
- What your goals and aspirations?
- What were your priorities?
- How did you relax? Unwind? Holidays?
- Did you feel in control of your own life? Was it you making the decisions?

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Turning Point/Peak of Crisis

- Can you pinpoint the turning point in the whole story—the point where things really started to change . . . .
- Relationship: Who made the decision to separate? Why?
- Work: Who made the decision to leave work? Why?
- Which was made before? Did one lead into another?
- What emotions did you feel at this time? (at the point of separation)
- Can you relate how the emotions you experienced changed over time?
- Did you blame anyone?
- Did anyone help you in that condition?
- What were your next steps after you . . .
  - Left work—next steps
  - Left the relationship—next steps
  - How did this affect your sense of self?
- How was your self-esteem at the time?
- Did you feel your sense of self changing?
  - Probe for assertiveness and agency issues
- Did you feel any relief at the time of separation?

Late Crisis—Exploration

- *If* there is a period of exploration and experimentation, probe for:
  - Different avenues of exploration
  - Sense of self during experimental phase
  - How long it lasted for
  - Any therapy? Why?
  - Any further study? Why?
  - What new activities taken up? Why?
  - Any spiritual searching? What form—what hoping to get out of it?
- What were you searching for?
- Did it feel like a second adolescence?
- Did you take any time out?

Postcrisis

- When did the exploration come to an end? Why?
- New job/vocational role?
  - How would you describe your new job?
  - What does this one have that the previous job did not?
- New relationship?
- New activities?

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- In what ways is your life different now to what it might have been if you had not gone through the episode?
- How do you think you are different now to how you were before?
  - Probe for: authenticity, perspective, values (materialism)
  - What do you think the point of life is?

Sense of Personhood

- Did the experience change you as a person in any way?
  - If yes, was this change enduring or temporary?
- Did you take up anything new? Give up anything?
- Metamorphosis? Looking back, were you before the episode and you after different in any way?
- (if not mentioned spontaneously) Do you see yourself as "new person" since the crisis?
  - If yes, what do you understand by that?
- Did your goals change at all? What do you want out of life?
- What roles are most important to you now?

Self-Understanding

- In retrospect, did you learn anything about yourself from the episode?
- Do you think you know yourself any better now?
- What parts of you were you not free to express?
- What do you know about yourself that you did not know before?
- How did the way you perceive yourself change from during the episode to now?
- Do you think that the ideal life is a life without crisis?
- In sum, what part do you think this crisis played in your development as a person?

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