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The Quarter-Life Crisis – Pilot Reports

Abstract: Emerging adulthood is a stage in human development characterised by instability and experimentation in undertaken roles. Young people entering adulthood undertaking developmental tasks may experience a quarter-life crisis.

The research aims to increase knowledge about the quarter-life crisis and to explore its features by analysing young people's behaviour. An online survey was conducted on 139 participants (121 females and 18 males) aged 18-36 years ($M=25.06$; $SD=3.56$). The study was a pilot project. The questionnaire used in the study was the Developmental Crisis Questionnaire (DCQ-12), Hopelessness Scale (HS), Stress and Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). The number of total categories analysed qualitatively using Quinlan's algorithm was 246.

The use of a decision tree made it possible to distinguish two groups of women and men differing in their experience of support and in understanding of the young person's problems. Women forming unsupported sub-models experience uncertainty, insecurity and a contradictory self-image, while the male sub-models experience a focus on the experienced emotions and a limitation of their activity. Women experiencing peer support build sub-models related to a positive vision of their own future, while men experience a lot of anxiety about their own future despite the support they receive.

The study indicates that young people in quarter life crisis differ in terms of the experienced support and the used adaptation strategies. Implementing support strategies, for those experiencing a crisis without external support, can improve the quality of their life and enhance their functioning in developmental tasks.

Keywords: *quarter life crisis, emerging adulthood, social support*

INTRODUCTION

Early adulthood is the period between the ages of 20–22 and 35–40 (Trempała, 2011). A young person at this stage of life undertakes tasks related to choosing a partner, starting a family, raising children, engaging in work responsibilities, and establishing social relationships (Havighurst, 1972; Levinson, 1986). During early adulthood, young people also experience risks associated with fulfilling certain roles, developing an identity, and achieving financial and psychological independence from their family of origin (Bee, 1998).

The introduction to this stage is the period of emerging adulthood, considered a transitional phase between adolescence and adulthood, falling between the

ages of 18 and 29 (Arnett, 2000). It is characterized by the making of certain choices in preparation for the realization of adult developmental tasks (Arnett, 2007, 2016). At this stage, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural changes take place that allow these tasks to be carried out, using the resources at hand (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Murphy et al., 2010). Thus, on the one hand, it becomes a period of great opportunities for a young person to explore themselves and their environment (Arnett, 2000, 2004); alternately, these changes can be a source of danger from engaging in risky behaviour (Bradley & Wildman, 2002), experimenting with sexual practices (Lam & Lefkowitz, 2013), or abusing alcohol and drugs (Andrews & Westling, 2016). There is also the phenomenon of an extended moratorium on self-identity formation (Baggio et al., 2017). This period is



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sometimes considered the peak time for experiencing mental health difficulties (Conley et al., 2020), especially after the age of 25 because of the transition from education to the labour market (Robinson, 2015).

The quarter-life crisis is a developmental and normative but not universal crisis (Robinson, 2015). Between 39% and 75% of respondents admitted to it (Balqis et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2013). According to Robinson (2015), the crisis is an opportunity but also a threat to development: About 50% experience positive changes after the crisis, while 30% experience negative changes. The crisis stages commitment versus independence. It is preceded by a sense of discomfort and uncertainty, resulting from questioning one's previous functioning in entering adulthood and seeking a change in life, which the young person cannot cope with by the means available to them (Balqis et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2013). Factors further destabilizing the situation of young people include: the health and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shigemura & Kurosawa, 2020), fear of the future due to the war in Ukraine (LBM UW, 2022), and reluctance to take on financial obligations in the face of uncertain market economics (Piszczatowska-Oleksiewicz, 2014) and global financial policies (LBM UW, 2022). According to Duara et al. (2021), the crisis is a consequence of 'forced adulthood.' The main difficulties arise in the areas of identity, autonomy, dependence, identity, responsibility, and demands from the environment (Borawski, 2018; Eriksson et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2021; Suchodolska, 2016). The solution to the crisis is a sense of greater autonomy (Robinson et al., 2017) and greater emotional maturity (Robinson & Smith, 2009).

Robinson (2015, 2019) distinguished two types of quarter-life crisis: *lock-out* (feeling unable to step into an adult role) and *lock-in* (feeling trapped in adult roles). The crisis proceeds in four phases. The lock-out type has the following stages: 1) commitment to new roles, 2) disappointment with failures, 3) blocked activity, and 4) finding new ways to achieve the goal. The lock-in type distinguishes between 1) a sense of confinement in an unsatisfactory role, 2) abandonment of commitments, 3) an exploratory moratorium, and 4) transformation – the choice of new, meaningful commitments (Robinson, 2019; Robinson & Smith, 2009). A *significant event* is a turning point that provides a new sense of freedom and a new understanding of one's place in the world (Robinson & Smith, 2009). It is finding a way out of confinement or blockage and also achieving a multifaceted and flexible identity (Borawski, 2018). The way of coping with a difficult situation is determined by psychosocial factors, among others: a sense of control, social support, *toughness* (experiencing emotional balance, interpreting events in a positive way), social competence, and *self-awareness* (a better understanding of resources) (Plopa, 1996).

The purpose of this study is to expand our knowledge of the issue of the quarter-life crisis. Important from the perspective of analysing the functioning of young people is

to determine the basic features of the crisis. A particular model of analysis was made – the transformation model of young people's functioning in difficult situations. It is also important to find the factors that condition/reinforce the experience of the quarter-life crisis. Our research questions were:

1. What are the perceived characteristics of the quarter-life crisis in young people?
2. What is the noticeable direction of the crisis?

METHOD

Participants and procedure

Participants

A total of 139 subjects participated in this study, including 121 women (87%) and 18 men (13%). The respondents were aged between 18 and 36 years ($M = 25.06$, $SD = 3.56$). They differed in terms of place of residence: rural areas (20%), cities with up to 50,000 inhabitants (11%), cities with 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants (8%), or cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants (24%). Most respondents had secondary education (50%), followed by higher education (48%), or vocational education (2%). Respondents also differed in terms of marital status: Most were in relationships (55%) and single (43%); the least were divorced (2%).

Tools

This study used the Developmental Crisis Questionnaire (DCQ-12; Petrov et al., 2022), the Hopelessness Scale (HS) (Oleś & Juros, 1985), the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger et al., 1970), and a personal questionnaire.

The DCQ-12 by Petrov et al. (2022) was translated with permission. It consists of 12 items which relate to experiences a person has had in the past 6 months. The HS by Oleś and Juros (1985) consists of 20 items relating to cognitive, emotional, and behavioural attitudes toward the future. The STAI by Spielberger et al. (1970), in Polish by Sosnowski et al. (2011), is a method for studying anxiety both as a state and trait. A method for the study of anxiety, consisting of two subscales: anxiety as a state and anxiety as a trait, each containing 20 items. High internal consistency of the inventory.

The study also used a self-administered interview consisting of questions on self-image, major life events, future plans, commitments undertaken, types and forms of support received, fears, anxieties and perceived problems in young people.

Procedure

This study received approval from the Ethics Committee at the Institute of Psychology of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (41/2022). The survey was conducted online using Lime Survey. Respondents were recruited using the snowball method. Information about the survey was also published on social networks, considering information about the age of the respondents. The instructions for the survey assured voluntariness,

anonymity, and the scientific purpose of the study. The results of 139 people who completed the survey completely were qualified for analysis.

Analysis of Results

To analyse the results obtained, Rzechowska's (2010, 2014) process transformation reconstruction (PTR) strategy was used. The analysis was carried out at two levels: individual cases (Level I) and a set of cases (Level II) (Rzechowska, 2010). The PTR strategy makes it possible to learn about the variability and diversity of the analysed phenomenon and to reconstruct its course. In each stage, the baseline characteristics of the entities under study are preserved (Rzechowska, 2014).

The purpose of the Level I analysis (single case analysis) was to identify relevant characteristics on the basis of items, questions, and categories for each of the studied subjects. The selected characteristics showed the characteristics of the subjects' functioning in difficult situations, including the young people's constructed self-image and perceptions of themselves, their own future, received support, and perceived problems. Selected data from the research methods made it possible to reconstruct a portrait of the subjects. Level I included: preliminary analysis of baseline data, selection of characteristics describing the subject, and recording of individual characteristics in the database:

1. Preliminary analysis of the initial data aimed at selecting from the methods (items) and interview and questionnaire data categories of description: self-image, including vision of their own future, perceptions of difficult situations, and experienced problems.
2. Selection of characteristics describing the subject: Based on the analysis of the content of method items and interview questions, characteristics were selected to describe each subject.
3. Recording of individual characteristics in the database: The record created in the following way constituted a kind of basic report describing the functioning of young people in difficult situations, including: constructed self-image, vision of their own future, received support, and the perceived problems of others (for a detailed description and explanation of the modifications made, see Dacka et al., 2022).

Conducted at Level II (analysis of a set of cases), the analysis was aimed at separating groups of cases with common characteristics. Quinlan's C4.5 algorithm was used for this purpose. A detailed internal analysis of each of the variants and the existing connections between them made it possible to create more general sub-model structures. The analysis of the connections between the sub-models became the basis for building a hypothetical model for the transformation of young people's functioning in difficult situations, the self-image created, the perception of the support received, and the perception of the problems of others. Level II included three stages sequentially:

1. The database and the emergence of a set of cases with common characteristics: Using Quinlan's C4.5 algo-

rithm, data sets with common characteristics were selected. The researcher's task was to prepare a database (i.e., 139 individuals using 246 attributes corresponding to self-image, vision of one's future, experienced difficulties of self and others, received support). The criterion underlying the construction of the decision tree was Young People's Problems, Lack of Support, and Understanding x Gender (survey question 9).

2. Decision tree and reconstruction of partial models of the phenomenon: The set of characteristics determined by the structure of the decision tree was supplemented with information from the database. The collected data formed the basis for reconstructing the ways in which young people function in difficult situations.
3. Constructing a hypothetical model for the transformation of the phenomenon: The detailed analysis of the internal structure of each variant carried out was the starting point for building more general structures (sub-models) that at a more general level reflected the specifics of the analysed phenomenon.

Securing the Value of the Research

At the level of case analysis, safeguarding the value of the research involved the development of the results by independent, competent judges. At the level of the case set analysis, the reliability of the research was assessed by the error to which the decision tree was subjected (7.9% with an acceptable 25% qualification level) and the internal consistency of a) each of the sub-models of young people's functioning and b) the organization of the model of young people's functioning in difficult situations.

RESULTS

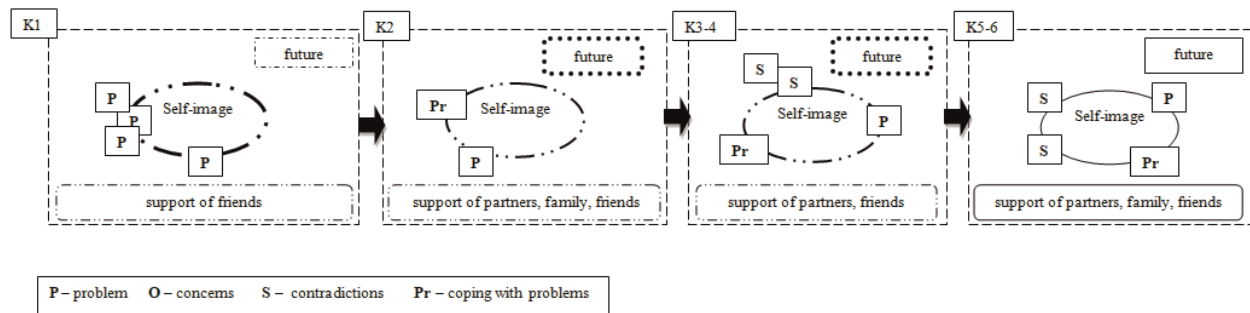
Our analyses yielded sub-models of women and men not experiencing support from others, not perceiving problems of young people's understanding by others (six sub-models created by 99 women; two sub-models created by 12 men), and sub-models of women and men experiencing support from others and noticing problems of young people (two sub-models of women by 22 people and one sub-model of men by six men).

The sub-models of women not experiencing support from those around them, noticing no problem in the understanding of young people by others, made it possible to perceive difficulties in the support received and the self-image created. In the analysed sub-models of women, transitions were discernible: from a sense of lack of external support, confusion, internal insecurity through lack of external security, struggling with health problems and building a contradictory self-image, to experiencing manifestations of security, with the lack of a coherent vision of the self in the present and future. The characteristics of sub-models are expressed in Figure 1.

Sub-Model K1: Apparent Support From Outside. Feelings of Uncertainty and Internal Confusion Despite Attempts to Take Action

Figure 1

Sub-models of women not experiencing background support, not recognising the lack of understanding as a problem for young people



General Characteristics

These women aged 23 to 25 years ($M = 24.33$) live in large cities, are unmarried and have an average financial situation, experience mental health difficulties, and take medication.

Difficult Situations vs. Support Received

The respondents are experiencing deterioration in their health. They declare receiving support from friends. However, there is a perceived inconsistency between declared and realized support.

Self-Perception in Difficult Situations

These respondents have a sense of control over their lives but are unable to indicate what they should do in a given problem situation - 'Sometimes I feel that I am misunderstood by others, that I cannot cope with the demands of everyday situations (K133). The women believe that they are going through a period of change, changing the way they think and function without, however, entering into new actions. The respondents believe that a change in a difficult situation can occur at any time.

Vision of One's Future

These respondents look to the future with hope, expecting many positive events. The women hope they will function better in the future in the various areas of activity they undertake.

Self-Image

These women form a contradictory self-image. At first, they perceive themselves as tense, embittered, and irritable. Conversely, they speak of contentment and relaxation. They tend to worry about unimportant things. They declare a sense of security, but there is a lot of anxiety. The women feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities of everyday life. Financial stability is important to them, which they try to maintain by taking courses, training, and engaging in self-development.

Sub-Model K2: Feeling of Insufficient Support in the Situation of Experienced Problems and Difficulties. A Self-Image Full of Contradictions

General Characteristics

These women aged 23 to 28 years ($M = 26.25$) are in relationships, have a university education, are professionally active, and have a good financial situation. Work is their main activity 'I take training related to my profession, I want to develop professionally' (K27).

Difficult Situations vs. Support Received

Recently, these women have struggled with difficult life experiences. Important then was and still is the support received from their partner. Some respondents receive support from parents or friends. The respondents define the support they receive as insufficient.

Self-Perception in Difficult Situations

These women have recently experienced difficult situations (for example, health difficulties detected with thyroid disease, struggling with addictions and balancing family and work responsibilities). In the face of crisis events, they have trouble seeing the meaning of life and defining and taking appropriate action.

Vision of One's Future

These women look to the future with hope, faith, and enthusiasm. They believe that a difficult situation will change over time. They create images of their family in 5 years. These women allocate the passing of time to realizing their dreams.

Self-Image

These respondents feel calm, secure, and joyful on the one hand and depression and anxiety on the other. They tend to torment themselves with unimportant things. They also dwell on failures and disappointments for a long time. Daily difficulties cause tension and disappointment. While the women feel they can control their lives, they also admit they often act on impulse.

Sub-Model K3: Insecurity, Experiencing Health Difficulties, and Negative Emotions. Conflicting Self-Image

General Characteristics

This sub-model consists of women aged 23 to 30 years ($M = 24.55$) who live in large or small cities. They

are engaged in study and/or work. Some of the subjects struggle with mental health difficulties (e.g., a past depressive episode).

Difficult Situations vs. Support Received

These women have recently experienced difficult situations in their lives that are upsetting to them, e.g. difficulty coping with responsibilities, pressure to be the best at what one does (K57), lack of a sense of meaning in life (K224). In problem situations they receive support from their partner or friends.

Self-Perception in Difficult Situations

In the face of difficult events, these women experience uncertainty and a loss of meaning and sense of control over their life. They feel unable to cope with life's challenges. They are convinced they are navigating a turning point in their lives.

Vision of One's Future

The respondents, on the one hand, look to the future with hope and enthusiasm, and expect more happiness and contentment; conversely, the future appears to them undefined, uncertain.

Self-Image

On the one hand, these women describe themselves as secure and calm; on the other hand, embittered, tense. They fear that nothing bad will happen to their loved ones. They tend to worry about unimportant things. They would like to undo past decisions. They tend to act on impulse.

Sub-Model K4: Insufficient Support From Loved Ones When Experiencing Anxiety. Tendency to Worry and Build a Self-Image Full of Contradictions

General Characteristics

This sub-model is made up of women aged 20 to 27 years ($M = 23.70$) who live in large or medium-sized cities with varying levels of education (higher, secondary, vocational). They are currently engaged in work and study, and some have experienced depressive episodes. A small group uses stimulants, mainly alcohol. The women perceive their material situation as average.

Difficult Situations vs. Support Received

These respondents declare that they receive help from their parents, partner, and friends. In problematic situations, the women experience negative emotions and numerous doubts despite the help they receive from others. They believe the help they receive from loved ones is insufficient.

Self-Perception in Difficult Situations

These respondents feel they have control over their lives. They perceive their lives as predictable and stable. When faced with difficulties, these women have the belief that they are in control of difficult events, but then they experience a lot of anxiety and a loss of control over their lives. These women believe they are currently traversing a difficult period in their lives.

Vision of One's Future

These respondents look to the future with hope and enthusiasm 'I would like to have a good job that I would at least reasonably enjoy and earn at least reasonably good money in it. Apart from that, I hope that I will have a second half and that we will be happy together, and that I will have good relationships with my family and friends' (K15). They have the conviction that their life situation will change over time. They create images of their future 10 years from now. They expect to succeed in whatever is most important to them.

Self-Image

They perceive themselves as being calm on the one hand and feeling tense on the other. These women fear that nothing bad will happen to their loved ones. The respondents feel they are in control of many things in their lives, but they are also aware of making decisions on impulse.

Sub-Model K5: Sense of Having a Support Network. Experiencing Difficulty in Creating Action Scenarios for the Problems Experienced. Conflicting Self-Image

General Characteristics

This sub-model consists of women aged between 20 and 31 years ($M = 24.72$) who are diverse in terms of place of residence (villages, small, medium, or large cities) and education (university and high school education predominate). These women are unmarried and are currently engaged in work and study. They are satisfied with their material situation. The women admit they use stimulants (alcohol, cigarettes).

Difficult Situations vs. Support Received

The subjects have recently experienced difficult events during which they received support from parents, friends, or a partner.

Self-Perception in Difficult Situations

In the actions they take, these women try to be confident in what they do. They believe that if things are going badly, this can change over time.

Vision of One's Future

These respondents hope to achieve what they dream of in the future. They expect to succeed in whatever is important to them. They are convinced that various experiences have prepared them well for the future.

Self-Image

These women feel they have control over their lives. They perceive a certain stability, predictability, and freedom of functioning in their current life situation 'I am growing professionally, family-wise and see new opportunities in the future' (K16). They note that they are currently going through a period of life change. The women think they are abandoning their former functioning and beginning to function differently. They also notice changes in their way of thinking.

Sub-Model K6: Women Experiencing Anxiety About Their Future and Current Functioning and Having a Sense of Insufficient Support From Significant Others. They Construct a Contradictory Self-Image

General Characteristics

Women belonging to this sub-model are aged 20 to 36 years ($M = 26.31$), diverse in terms of place of residence (rural, small town, medium town, or large town) and level of education (high school or college). The respondents are in relationships, working, and studying. They manifest concern for their own development. They are positive about their material situation. Some of the women have experienced an episode of depression.

Difficult Situations vs. Support Received

The main person supporting these respondents is their partner. The women especially appreciate the emotional support they receive. They also experience support from parents or friends, although it feels insufficient.

Self-Perception in Difficult Situations

The representatives of this sub-model describe their lives as predictable, stable, and controlled. They feel they are going through an important period of life change, passing a turning point. They notice changes in the way they think and behave.

Vision of One's Future

These respondents look to the future with hope and great enthusiasm. They believe that crisis situations will pass with time. They create images of themselves in 5 years. They are convinced they have enough time to realize their intentions. These respondents note that their past experiences have prepared them well for future challenges.

Self-Image

These respondents perceive themselves, on the one hand, as happy, secure, committed, responsible, at ease, and, on the other hand, as tense, impulsive, and worried about many things, 'Controlling work, a fast pace of life and constantly 'pleasing' someone can contribute to the development of addictions, health difficulties' (K50). They lack self-confidence in the endeavours they undertake.

The sub-models of men who do not experience sufficient support in situations of problems and do not

perceive difficulties in the understanding of young people by others revealed a discernible shift from declaring having received support from parents or friends, experiencing strong emotions causing inhibition in situations of difficulties towards avoiding perceiving difficulties in their lives and experiencing emotional support, to feeling seemingly in control of their own lives. The characteristics of these sub-models are expressed in Figure 2.

Sub-Model M1: Men Declaring Support From Parents and Friends. Experiencing Strong Emotions and Inhibition of Action in Situations of Difficulty

General Characteristics of Respondents

This sub-model is made up of men aged 22 to 26 years ($M = 24.33$), diverse in terms of education (higher, professional) and place of residence (rural, urban). They are unmarried and work. They use stimulants, mainly alcohol and drugs.

Difficult Situations vs. Support Received

These men have recently experienced a difficult situation in which, they declare, they received support from parents and friends. However, their declarations do not translate into the realization of support in the form of mental, emotional, or material support from others.

Self-Perception in Difficult Situations

When faced with difficulty, these men do not know what to do 'I would like to feel that my life has meaning, that I have someone to live for and that I can do something with my time' (M65). They struggle to determine whether they can or cannot control a situation. They have a sense that something is changing in their lives, but they are unable to determine what this change involves.

Vision of One's Future

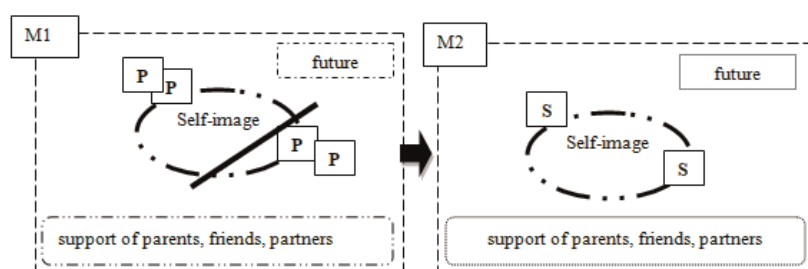
These respondents look to the future with hope and enthusiasm, but also with uncertainty and fear. They are convinced that the changes taking place will allow them to function better in the future. They wish to realize projects that are important to them.

Self-Image

These respondents see themselves as calm, content, at ease, and secure. However, they admit that in the busyness of things they cannot control themselves. They experience failures strongly and often cannot stop thinking about the

Figure 2

Sub-models of men not experiencing background support, not recognising the lack of understanding as a problem for young people



failures. These men have the belief that if they could only turn back time, they would change many decisions in their lives.

Sub-Model M2: Men Who Avoid Recognizing Difficulties in Their Lives. Experiencing Seemingly a Lot of Support From Others

General Characteristics

These men aged between 21 and 29 years (M = 24), living mostly in urban and rural areas, diverse in education (secondary and higher), are mostly unmarried and working. They positively assess their material and living situation.

Difficult Situations vs. Support Received

These respondents declare receiving a lot of support from their parents, friends, and partner. The dominant support they receive is emotional support.

Self-Perception in Difficult Situations

The respondents in the face of difficulties have a sense of control. However, when analysing their lives, they find it difficult to determine that their lives are stable and predictable ‘I see many difficulties bad education, poor work, difficulty in choosing a further career path’ (M 81).

Vision of One’s Future

The respondents view the future with hope and enthusiasm. They expect success in things that are important to them. They are convinced that they are more fortunate than others.

Self-Image

These respondents build a contradictory self-image: While they declare joy and contentment, they also feel anxiety and tension. The representatives of this sub-model face many things in their lives responsibly and seriously. However, they also happen to avoid problems and difficulties in their lives.

The sub-models of women experiencing environmental support, who perceive a problem with understanding young people by others, allow us to notice a change in the functioning of these women. The changes taking place range from perceiving real support from people close to them in a situation of multiple difficulties,

through a tendency to worry, to struggling with uncertainty and doubt during a period of change in one’s life. The graphic characteristics of the sub-models are shown in Figure 3.

Sub-Model K1W: Women Who Experience Real Support in Situations of Difficulty. They Notice Changes in Their Lives and the Way They Function. Showing a Tendency to Worry

General Characteristics

These respondents aged between 23 and 26 years (M = 23.62) are diverse in terms of place of residence (rural, medium-sized city, large city) and education (high school or higher). They are mostly in a relationship, work, study, and have a positive view of their finances. Some have experienced depressive episodes. They perceive young people’s problems related to a lack of employment or housing, overwork, and excessive responsibilities.

Difficult Situations vs. Support Received

Some of these women are currently experiencing a difficult situation. They receive help from their parents, friends, or partner for their problems. The help comes in the form of emotional support, especially during in-person conversations.

Self-Perception in Difficult Situations

Representatives of this sub-model are currently experiencing negative emotions more often than usual. They find it difficult to determine what they should do in given situations ‘I live in the here and now and don’t look so far into the future. I focus on what is now, not always knowing what I should do’ (K166). The women tend to focus on things that are unimportant under the circumstances.

Vision of One’s Future

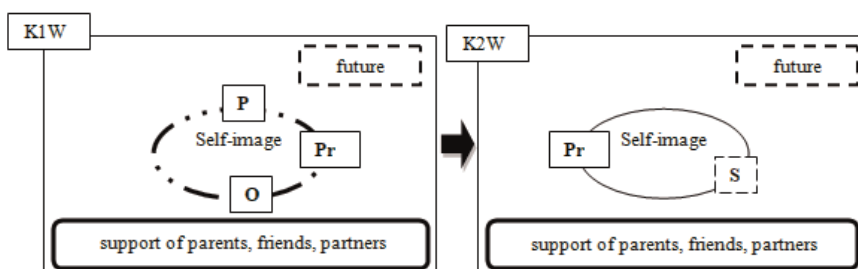
These women look to the future with hope and enthusiasm. However, they also see uncertainty and indeterminacy in it. The respondents create images of themselves in 10 years. They expect success in the future in undertakings that are important to them.

Self-Image

These women have no sense of control and do not experience coping with difficult situations. They currently

Figure 3

Sub-models of women experiencing background support, perceiving understanding of young people’s problems



believe they are experiencing an important period of life change, a certain turning point. They notice changes in their way of thinking. They report being overwhelmed by daily responsibilities. They perceive themselves as hard-working, committed, and just.

Sub-Model K2W: Women Experiencing Support From Close Surroundings but Struggling With Uncertainty and Doubts When Faced With Problems and Lack of determination to Reach Their Goals

General Characteristics

These respondents aged 18 to 30 years (M = 24.55) are diverse in terms of place of residence (rural vs. cities diverse in size). They mostly have a university education and are unmarried. They are working and studying. The women perceive the problems of young people related to a lack of work or experience and low wages as well as high insecurity ‘Uncertainty about the future, plans that can collapse in the blink of an eye’ (K161).

Difficult Situations vs. Support Received

These women experience support from their partner, parents, and friends in difficulties. The respondents evaluate the support positively ‘Great support, from friends, siblings and mum’ (K80). They especially appreciate conversations with loved ones and their presence in situations of difficulty.

Self-Perception in Difficult Situations

These women in difficult situations experience many doubts. They have the conviction that they will not cope with the difficulties that occur. They are convinced they lack effectiveness in acting and deciding well.

Vision of One’s Future

The respondents look to the future with hope and enthusiasm. When things do not go according to their expectations, they believe this will change in time. They want to be as happy as others in the future.

Self-Image

These women currently experience more negative than positive emotions. They feel they are going through a period of change. However, they do not notice changes in the way they think, function, or behave. They feel self-confident, but as they admit, they lack the determination to reach their goals. They perceive themselves as

committed, hard-working, and responsible. There is a sub-model of men experiencing support from those around them, and perceiving a problem with the understanding of young people by others is graphically depicted in Figure 4.

Sub-Model M1W: Experiencing Emotional Support From Partner and Parents. Lack of Self-Confidence, Feeling Anxious and Worried About the Future

General Characteristics

These surveyed men are aged 23 to 30 years (M = 26.33) and diverse in terms of place of residence (large cities and rural areas predominate), with a high school education. They are diverse in terms of marital status (single, in a relationship, or divorced). They are working and studying. Some have experienced depressive episodes. They admit to using stimulants (alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes). The respondents perceive problems for young people related to low wages, a lack of jobs, and housing difficulties.

Difficult Situations vs. Support Received

These men have not experienced difficulties in recent times. In situations of difficulty, they receive emotional support mainly from their partner and parents and less often from friends’ I am grateful for the people who have come into my life and stamped their presence on me’ (M 260).

Self-Perception in Difficult Situations

In a difficult situation, these respondents experience a loss of both meaning in life and the meaningfulness of their actions.

Vision of One’s Future

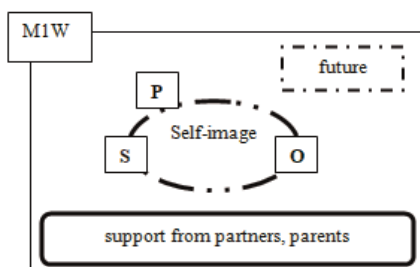
These respondents look to the future with anxiety and apprehension. They have a belief that their difficult situation will not change quickly. These men, however, are convinced that their past experiences have prepared them well for future events.

Self-Image

These respondents experience many doubts in their lives, but they sense they are in control. It is difficult for them to say unequivocally that they feel prepared to deal with difficult experiences. They are depressed and worried about their lives and the situations they experience. They

Figure 4

Sub-model of men experiencing background support, perceiving understanding of young people’s problems



often wish they could undo earlier decisions. They perceive themselves as balanced people, but it is common for them to act on impulse.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this article was to both qualitatively characterize the quarter-life crisis in young adults and chart its direction. The responses of 139 people, mostly women, were analysed. An awareness of 'being in the process' of change was observed in the respondents. Some noticed the area of crisis and identified it, others did not. Based on the criterion of assessing social support and the understanding of problems, two main groups were identified.

The first and largest group were those who do not identify difficulties in the lives of young people. In addition, they believed they were not experiencing support or judged it to be insufficient. Six sub-models of experiencing crisis in women and two sub-models in men were identified here. In women, insecurity and external insecurity, conflicting self-image, and the lack of a coherent vision for the future was observed. Men, conversely, focused on strong, difficult emotions that lead them to either inhibit activity or avoid it; they expressed dissatisfaction with some previous decisions and a false sense of control over their lives. With the changes experienced, they hoped to function better in the future.

The characteristics obtained are consistent with reports from studies devoted to analysing the functioning of young people in emerging and early adulthood (Klimkowska, 2016; Suchodolska, 2016), especially in procrastinators (Pisarska, 2020). Young people, conversely, postpone making important decisions and commitments and are not prepared to carry out the tasks that society expects of them as adults. The situation of forced adulthood was characterized by Duara et al. (2023) as one in which the young do not feel ready to take on the adult role expected by those around them. This event seems to underlie the experience of lacking social support. It is difficult to perceive positive reinforcement from someone in relation to whom a person wants to gain independence from. Klimkowska (2016) noted that there is also resistance to seeking specialized support when there is a sense of insufficient or inadequate support experienced from loved ones. According to Suchodolska (2016), the way young adults perceive and evaluate the support they receive is additionally related to different trajectories in the development of their independence, self-esteem, and attitudes toward failure and the future:

The most common form of support expected by young adults is understanding and willingness to help in any situation that is difficult for them, especially problem/crisis situations, at the stage of difficulty of making important life decisions, surpassing their social experience. Many young adults expect financial and emotional support at the same time. (p. 245)

The characteristics of one's functioning in a group also fit the description of the course of crisis in Robinson et al. (2013). The disintegration phase, in which there is a lot of confusion, uncertainty, and self-distancing from

previous choices, roles, and commitments and a 'tugging' at oneself and the environment, makes the individual feel suspended and impotent. Such a situation forces young people to take masking measures and move into a dis-adaptive-reactive phase.

Our second group consisted of people who are aware of the problems of young people and the support they receive. Here, two sub-models of women's functioning and one sub-model of men were identified. A common feature in women was a positive vision of the future despite fears about it and a sense of lack of control in life. In men, the characteristic was a deterioration of functioning related to fears about the future, a sense of loss of meaning in activities that are the source of difficulties, and ambivalence in the assessment of one's own resources that can be used in coping with these difficulties. The experience of support despite awareness of difficulties appeared to allow the women to look to the future with hope, while in men it aroused behaviors associated with a sense of low proficiency and discomfort from a fear of failure.

A sense of uncertainty was inherent in the experience of the transition process. It was associated with the approach of a new stage of development. The intolerance of uncertainty can result in difficulty with using one's resources and achieving a sense of life and poor mental well-being (Balqis et al., 2023). It can be ameliorated by a strategy of personal development, the so-called idea of oneself and one's life in the future, which can help direct a person's energy and resources. Klimkowska (2016) noted that the way forward is to precisely identify one's needs and their level of realization. Such a diagnosis of life's needs determines the autonomous decision to engage in personal development. In the crisis development model of Robinson (2015, 2019) and Robinson and Smith (2009), an important moment is the turning point, which most often involves the help of others. Thanks to these others (sometimes just a friendly presence), a transformation to a higher level can take place. Meanwhile, loneliness in a crowd of other young people is an increasingly common phenomenon (Wrótniak, 2020). In the tolerance of uncertainty and distress, social contacts play an important role, especially for women (Balqis et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2013). Here may also lie the reason for a positive attitude toward the future in women who experience support from loved ones. In men, it might be the experience of success that is most important in overcoming the crisis (Robinson & Smith, 2009). In the second group, thanks to an awareness of problems and support from loved ones, the respondents managed to turn stress relief into an exploration and search for new solutions.

Questionnaire research on a representative sample of Poles (Kulik et al., forthcoming) shows that about one-third of respondents experience a quarter-life crisis, similar to the UK (Robinson et al., 2021) and less than in Turkey (46%; Yeler et al., 2021), the Czech Republic (51%; Mollova & Svarovska, 2020) and Indonesia (60%; Jalal, 2023). The characteristics presented earlier seem to relate more to the content of the crisis experience than to its severity. In this context, the variation in narratives by

cultural circle can be noted (Duara et al., 2021). Comparing narratives about the difficulties of transition to adulthood between young people from England and Assam reveals a variation in their content, which is due to different cultural backgrounds regarding the ways in which men and women perform developmental tasks. Also, qualitative analyses of the statements done by Robinson in 2008 in England reveal slightly different clusters for men and women – women pointed mainly to crises originating in home and work life, while men referred to difficulties in marital and professional life and living under pressure, constraint, and a sense of disintegration. Case studies by Šipošová (2022) also identified analogous themes in young Czechs in transition.

Robinson and Smith (2009), in describing the difficulties of emerging adulthood, refer to metaphors in narratives about identity during different stages of the quarter-life crisis. They compare autobiographical data of people experiencing the crisis with fictional narratives that are related to the fate of the story's protagonists. According to them, especially the highlighted plot of rebirth of the protagonist of the fictional narrative shows analogy with the stages of the quarter-life crisis.

Overall, the collected material confirms the culturally universal ritual of transition from adolescence to adulthood, now extended in civilized countries to the stage of emerging adulthood (Lipska & Zagórska, 2011), from the separation of young people from their previous groups and roles, through the suspension and 'being in-between' stage, to an inclusion and integration under new rules.

LIMITATIONS

This study had limitations, including a lack of sample representativeness. Thus, our results have low generalizability compared to probability sampling, for instance. Also, there was a clear disproportion of females to male participants in this study. Finally, our online surveying made it impossible to collect complete statements on open-ended questions. Another limitation is the way the data was collected. The snowball method was used, which does not allow for generalizing the results.

CONCLUSION

The analyses conducted allowed us to see the anxiety and stress accompanying young people as they enter adulthood. Entering adulthood, they look for their place in the world and try to discover their own identity through the roles they take and tasks they perform. Simultaneously, they experience uncertainties, crises, and a sense of confusion in their implemented roles and tasks (Arnett, 2000; Robinson et al., 2013; Robinson & Smith, 2009). A sense of security played an important role and manifested in various forms of social support received by young people from their close environment. Also, important was a sound diagnosis of one's status quo and needs. Last, we observed different characteristics of the course of the crisis by gender.

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