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# **The changing dialectics of early adulthood: Updating Erikson for the 21st Century**

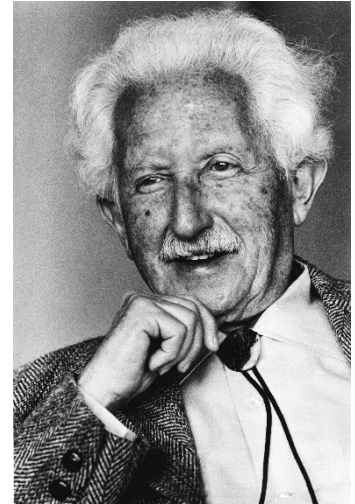


# Agenda

1. Erikson – dialectical lifespan theory
2. Arnett – emerging adulthood
3. Robinson – early adult ‘quarterlife’ crisis
4. Integration



# PART 1



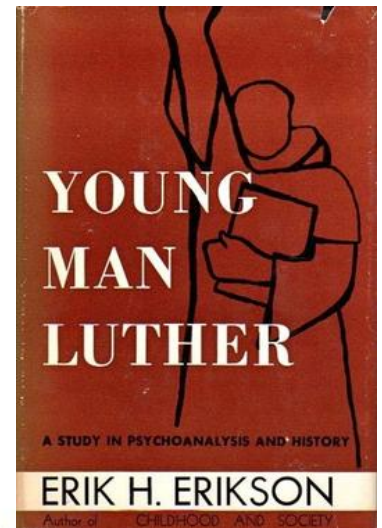
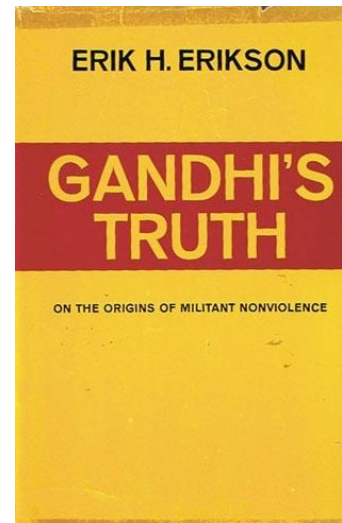
Erik Erikson

Dialectical lifespan theory



# Erikson's influences

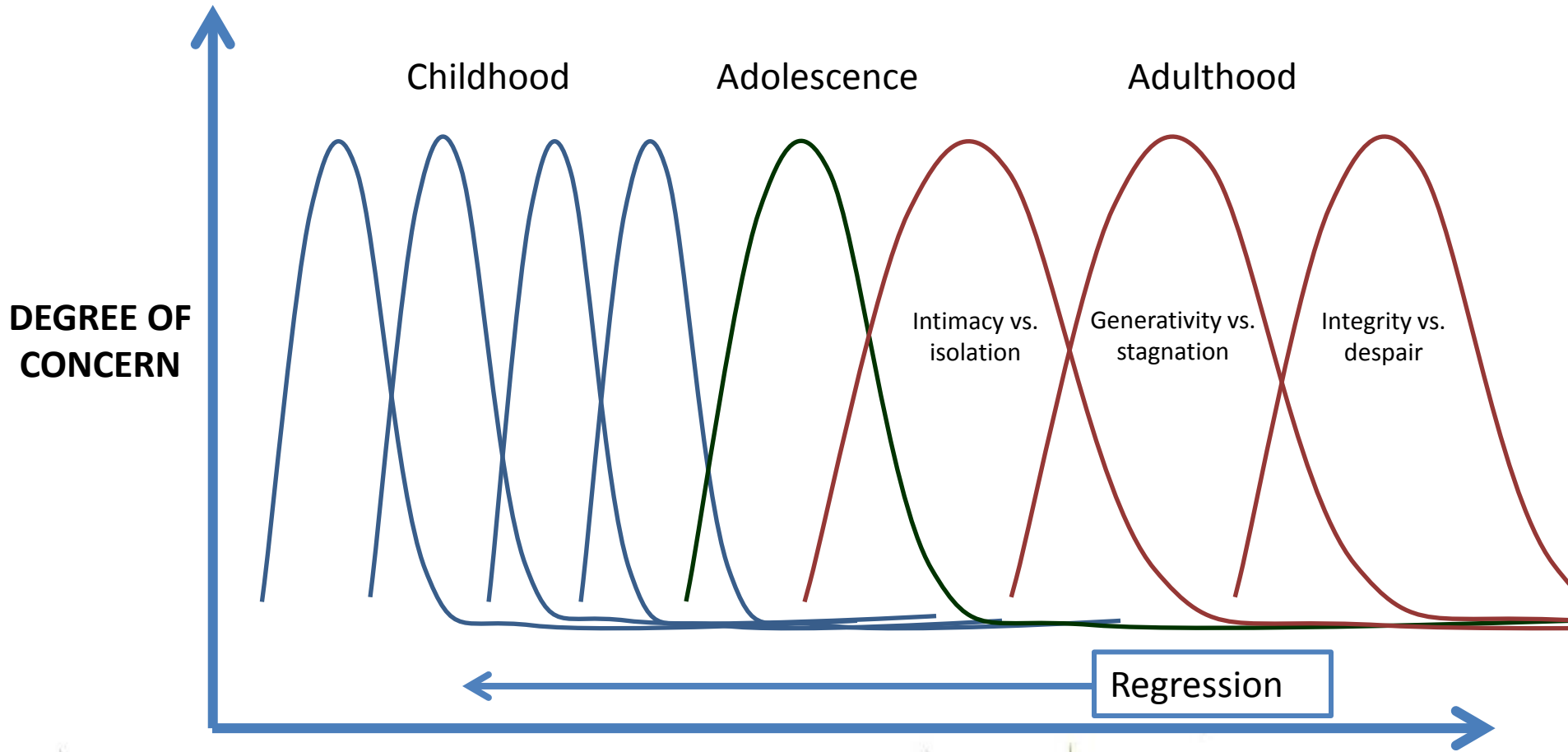
- Psychoanalytic psychology – particularly the concept of the ego
- Religion and history – wrote case studies of Luther and Gandhi
- Anthropology



# Erikson's dialectical phase scheme of ego development

	Age	Phase	Focal dialectic
1	0–1.5	Childhood	Basic trust vs. mistrust
2	1.5–3		Self-control vs. doubt / shame
3	3–6		Initiative vs. guilt
4	6–13		Capability vs. inferiority
5	13–18	Adolescence	Identity vs. identity confusion
6	18–40	Early adulthood	Intimacy vs. isolation
7	41–60	Midlife	Generativity vs. stagnation
8	60+	Later adulthood	Integrity vs. despair

# Phases like waves



All ego concerns present from toddlerhood onwards – they just peak at different times

AGE





# Syntonic vs. dystonic

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

**Basic trust** vs. mistrust

**Self-control** vs. doubt

**Initiative** vs. guilt

**Industriousness** vs. inferiority

**Identity** vs. identity confusion

**Intimacy** vs. isolation

**Generativity** vs. stagnation

**Integrity** vs. despair






# Balance of syntonic and dystonic

- e.g. Capability vs. inferiority dialectic

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





# Erikson on crisis

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

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

# Early adulthood dialectic

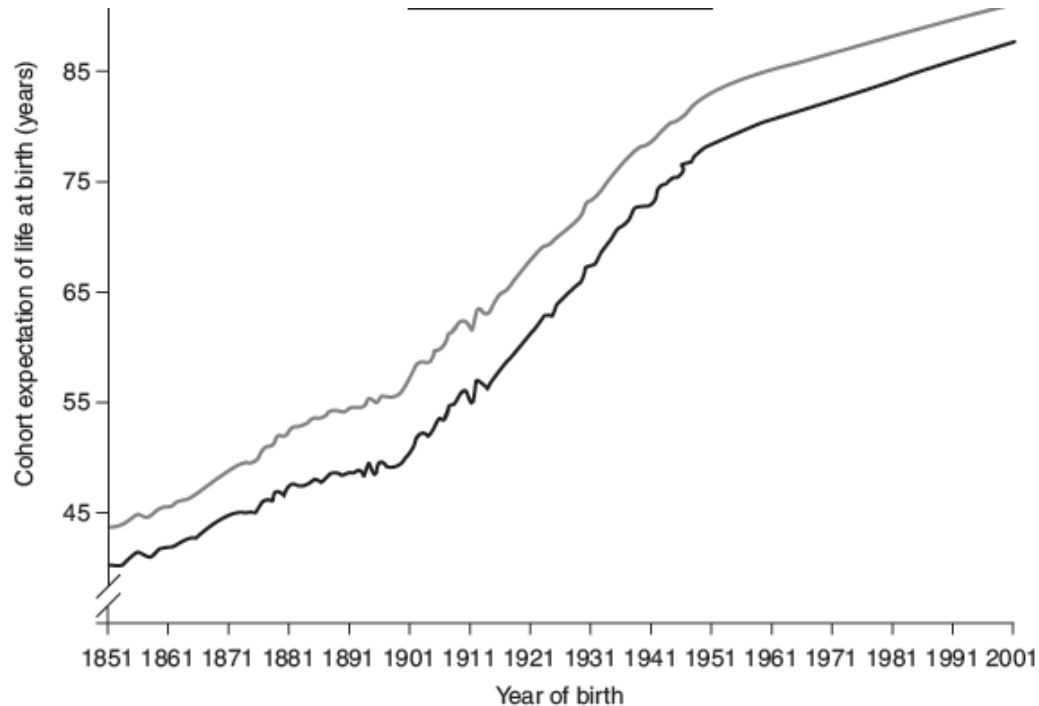
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# Since Erikson was writing...

- Young adults have changed their priorities and behaviour to allow much more time for exploration before settling down into parenthood and fixed career
- More young people go to university – extending the amount of time before fully entering the economy
- Early adulthood has divided in two, with a transitional period of possible crisis between the two
- Average life span has increased dramatically



# Life expectancy in UK over 20<sup>th</sup> century



**Figure 6.2** Average life expectancy – change between 1851 and 2001 for males and females in England and Wales

*Source:* Report, Decennial Life Tables (2000–2), Office for National Statistics licensed under the Open Government Licence v.1.0. Reprinted with permission.

# PART 2

## Arnett – Emerging Adulthood

### Emerging Adulthood

*A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties*

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett  
University of Maryland College Park

*Emerging adulthood is proposed as a new conception of development for the period from the late teens through the twenties, with a focus on ages 18–25. A theoretical background is presented. Then evidence is provided to support the idea that emerging adulthood is a distinct period demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity explorations. How emerging adulthood differs from adolescence and young adulthood is explained. Finally, a cultural context for the idea of emerging adulthood is outlined, and it is specified that emerging adulthood exists only in cultures that allow young people a prolonged period of independent role exploration during the late teens and twenties.*

it had risen to 25 for women and 27 for men (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). Age of first childbirth followed a similar pattern. Also, since midcentury the proportion of young Americans obtaining higher education after high school has risen steeply from 14% in 1940 to over 60% by the mid-1990s (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Bianchi & Spain, 1996). Similar changes have taken place in other industrialized countries (Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995; Noble, Cover, & Yanagishita, 1996).


These changes over the past half century have altered the nature of development in the late teens and early twenties for young people in industrialized societies. Be-

2000



# Emerging adulthood (18-25 approx)

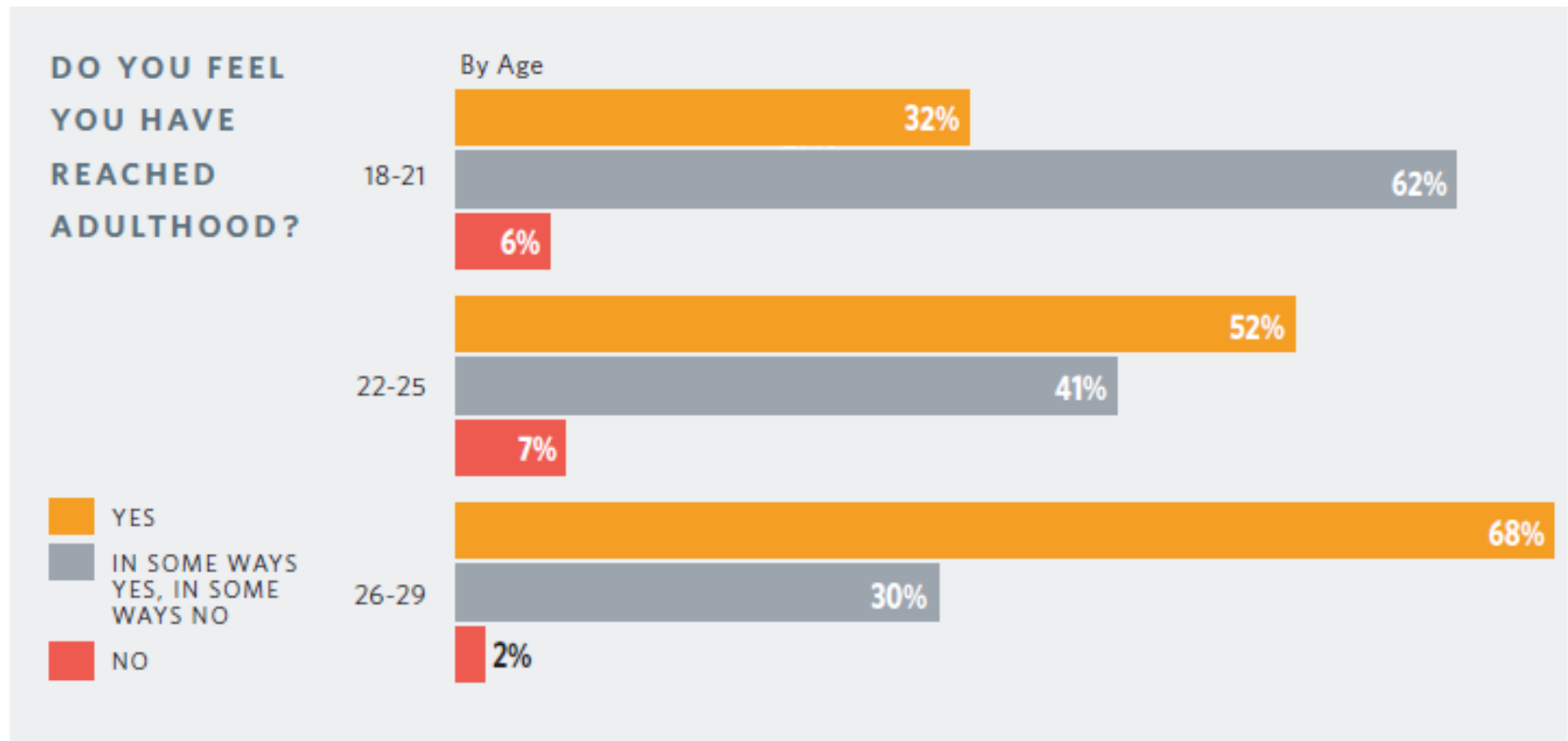
## FIVE CORE FEATURES

1. **Ambiguous, in-between status:** adult / not adult, dependent / independent?
  2. **Exploring identity** in career, love life, identity and recreational pursuits
  3. **Instability** in residence and relationships
  4. **Optimistic** and idealistic sense of future possibility
  5. **Self-focus** – what do I want out of life?
- 



# Emerging adulthood

## Ambiguity over adult status

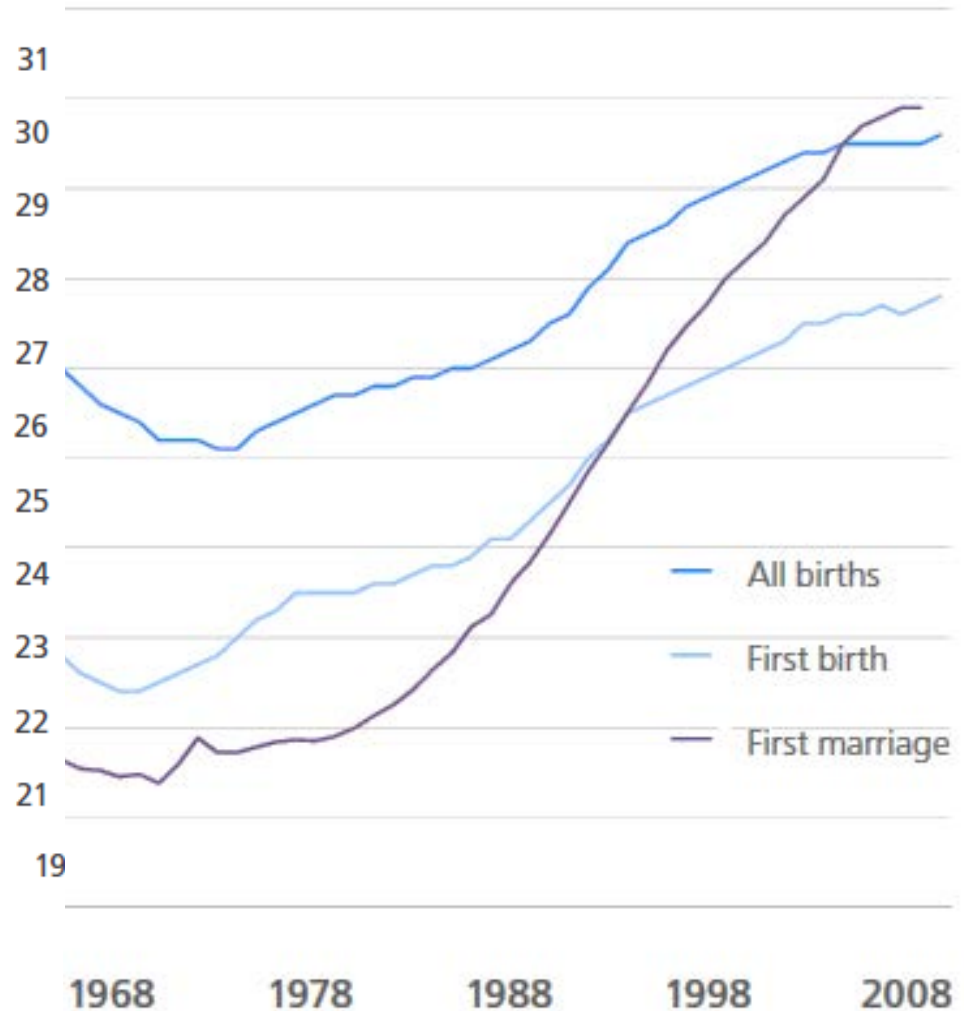


# Deferral of major commitments

- Exploration of self and life paths in Emerging Adulthood is reflected in statistics showing deferral of major commitments for ten years or more after becoming legally an adult
- This is compounded by more going to university
  - in 1950 only 3% of people went into higher education in the UK, and as of 2009, 43% of people did (BBC, 2009).
- This has been a major social change over the past forty years



# Average age first marriage, first child – women in UK





**MiniCOSM**  
SCIENCE AND  
DISCOVERY IN BRIEF

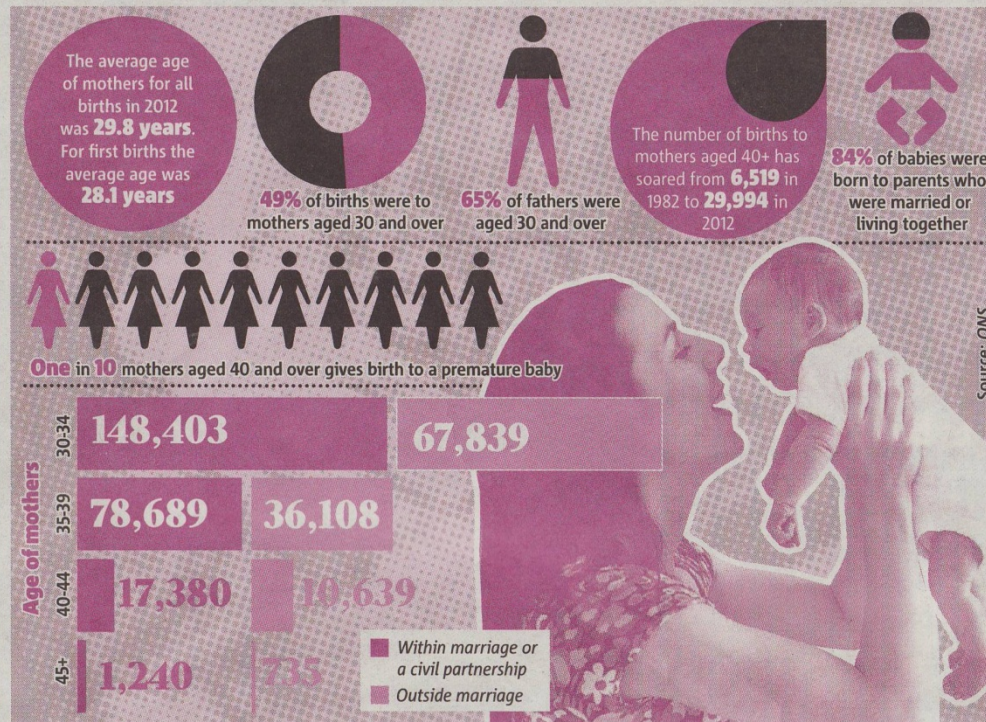
**ROOST BOOST:** We all know what it's like to feel like your voice isn't heard – and bats have a solution. They use trumpet-shaped nests to help amplify their calls. No other animal uses a similar structure to increase sound intensity, US scientists reported in a Royal Society publication.

**BREATHLESS WAIT:** A transplant patient is in good health after being fitted with lungs that were preserved using a machine for a record 11 hours. They also needed a new liver, which had to go in before the lungs, prompting surgeons in Belgium to try the experimental technique.

**BUDGET CUTS:** They may be the apple of their parents' eye but children put a massive dent in the family finances. Rising costs may have led to a surge of vasectomies after the 2008 financial crash. Men wanting one before had 3.1 children, falling to 2.3 post-crash, US researchers say.

If you have a story for MiniCosm, email us at [cosm@ukmetro.co.uk](mailto:cosm@ukmetro.co.uk)

# Starting a family delayed as half of mothers are 30+



by **AIDAN RADNEDGE**

**OLDER** mothers are on the march as new figures show almost half of all births in England and Wales are to women aged 30 and over.

The number of children born to those aged 40 and over has more than quadrupled over the last three decades and first-time mothers are also older than ever before at about 28.

Fathers are also getting longer in the tooth as 65 per cent were aged 30 and over in 2012, according to the Office for National Statistics.

But the emergence of the older mother is having an effect on maternity services in England and Wales.

Cathy Warwick, chief executive of the Royal College of Midwives, said: 'Older mothers tend to have more complications in their pregnancy and therefore often need additional care and attention from midwives and maternity services.'

As the number of births is at a record high she said it was 'vital' the government looked at the shortage of midwives.

One in ten mothers aged 40 and over gives birth to a premature baby and doctors have warned that women aged over 35 carry a greater risk of miscarriage.

Source: ONS



# Marriage age in various countries (Arnett, 2006)

**Table 1** Median marriage ages (years) in selected European countries, 1980 and 2000

Country	Men		Women	
	1980	2000	1980	2000
Austria	25.7	30.5	23.1	28.1
Belgium	24.6	29.1	22.2	26.8
Bulgaria	24.5	28.1	21.4	24.7
France	25.2	30.7	23.0	28.6
Germany	26.1	31.2	23.4	28.4
Hungary	24.0	27.2	21.3	24.7
The Netherlands	25.4	31.0	23.1	29.1
Portugal	25.4	27.5	23.3	25.7
Spain	26.1	29.2	23.7	27.1
Sweden	29.0	33.1	26.4	30.6
United Kingdom	25.3	30.4	23.0	28.3
USA	24.7	27.0	22.0	25.2

*Note:* All numbers except those from the USA are from United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2005). The 2000 numbers for Spain are from 1995, the latest year available. The US numbers are from Arnett (2004).

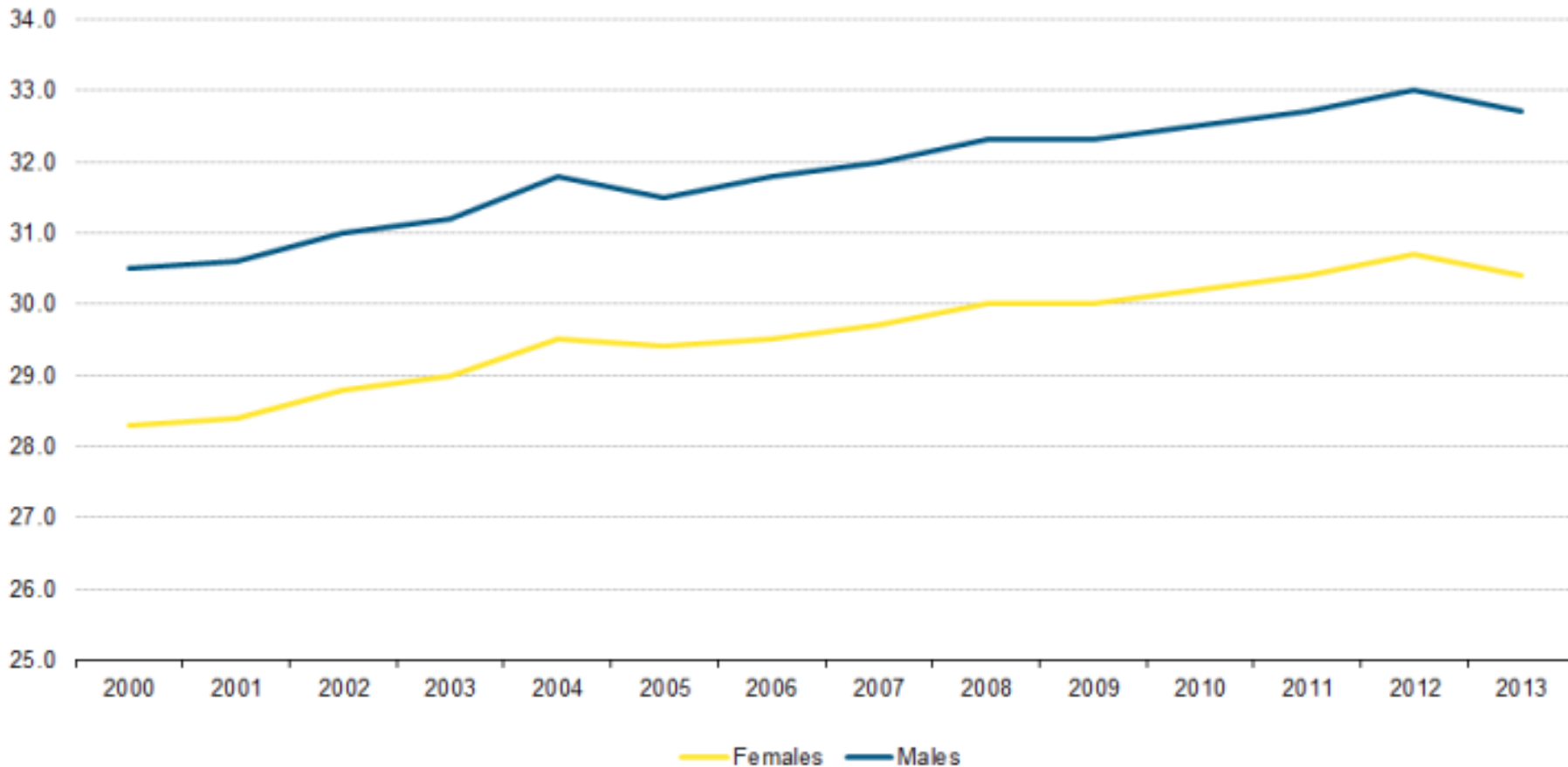
# Other social changes: Cohabitation

- Cohabitation prior to marriage, or as an alternative to marriage, has risen in popularity.
- In the 1960s and 1970s, cohabitation prior to marriage was a rare and unconventional option - Less than 10% of couples cohabited prior to marriage in the 1970s
- As of the year 2000, 80% of couples cohabit prior to marriage (Haskey, 2001).

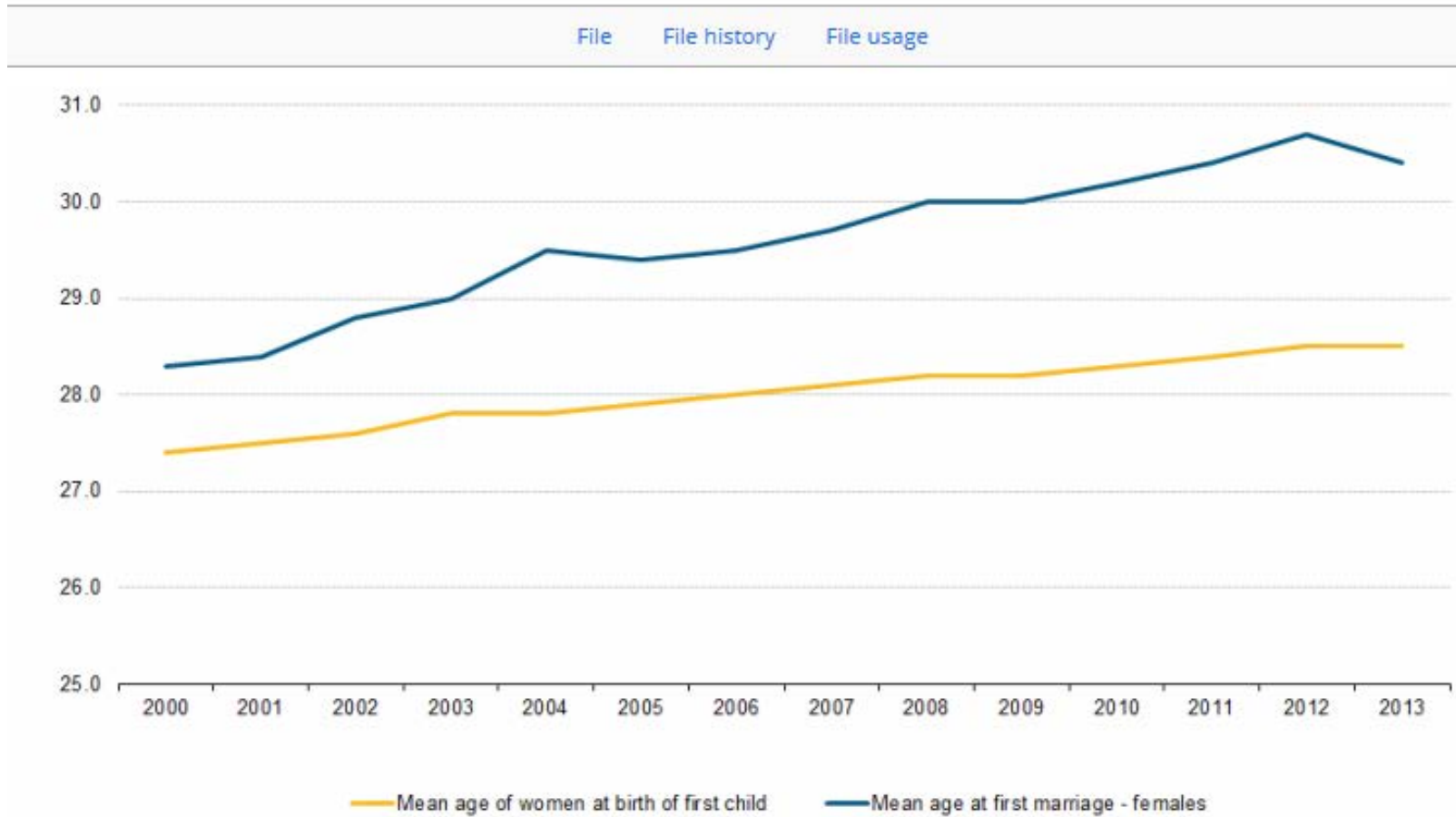




# Finland: Average age first marriage since 2000



# Finland: Age of woman at first child and first marriage, since year 2000

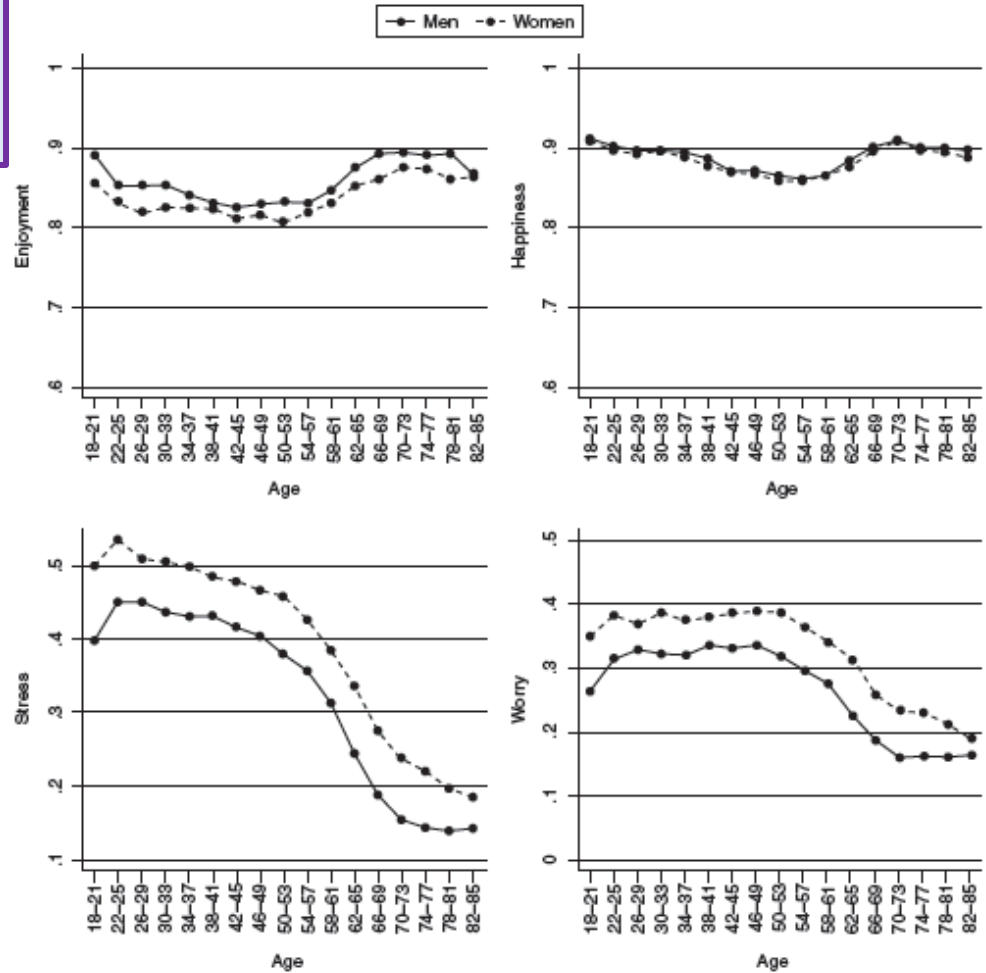


# Other social changes: Living with parents

- In 2013, 55% of men aged 20-25 and 38% of women aged 20-25 were living with their parents. Both of these figures showed an increase of 5% on the same data gained in 1996 (Chalabi, 2014)
- Men are more likely than women to live with their parents at every age between 20 and 34 (ONS, 2014)
- Two thirds of those who live with parents do so because they cannot afford to move out (NHF, 2013)

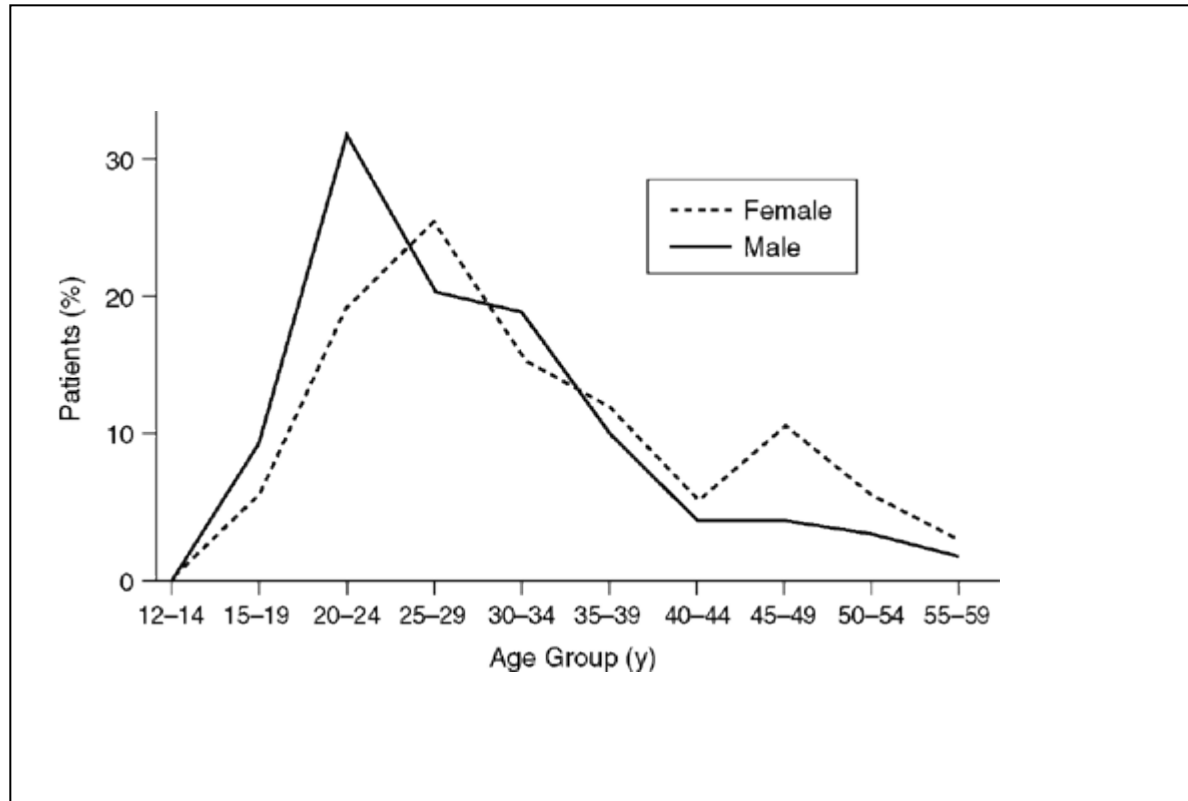
# A peak of stress in the lifespan?

- **Cross-sectional** questionnaire-based study
- Stone et al. (2010)
- Sample of 340,000 US adults



# High risk of mental illness?

## Schizophrenia - Age of onset distribution



Age at onset distribution of schizophrenia [from Hafner, H., Maurer, K., Loffler, W., & Riecher-Rossler, A. (1993). The influence of age and sex on the onset and early course of schizophrenia. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 162, 80-86

# Is emerging adulthood really a life stage?

- Depends on how you define stage
- If used as a heuristic device to define a part of life that is distinct from other parts in a number of ways, yes
  - like “adolescence”
- If you mean a formal developmental stage like Piaget, no
- Exceptions to the normative pattern?





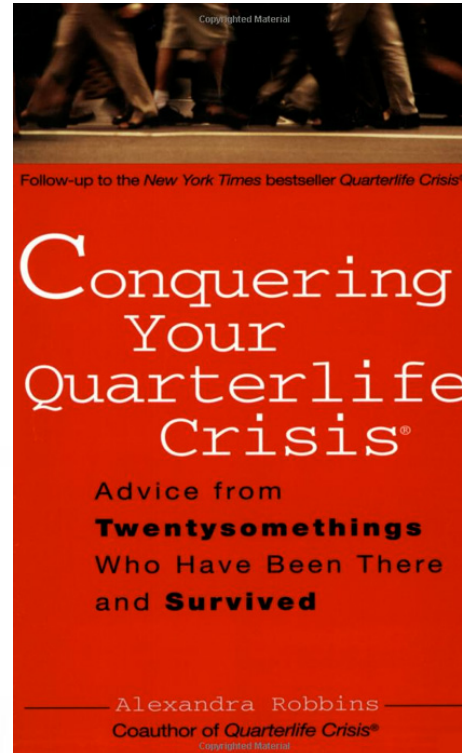
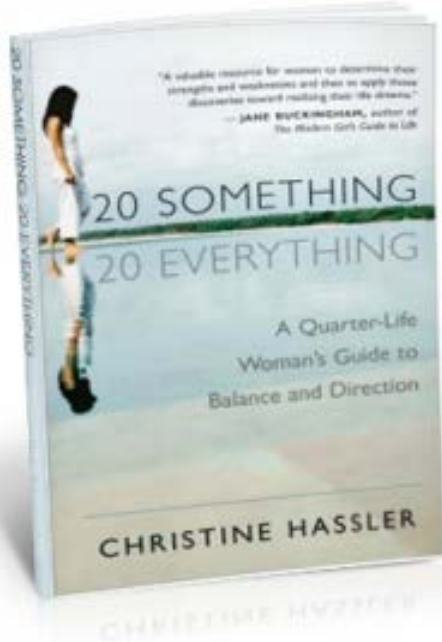
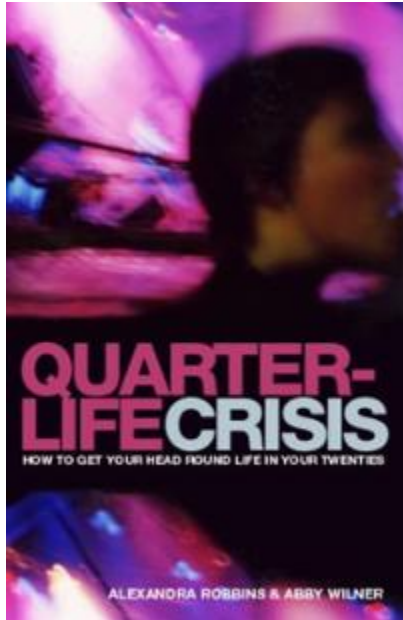
# PART 3

## Robinson - Quarter-life crisis

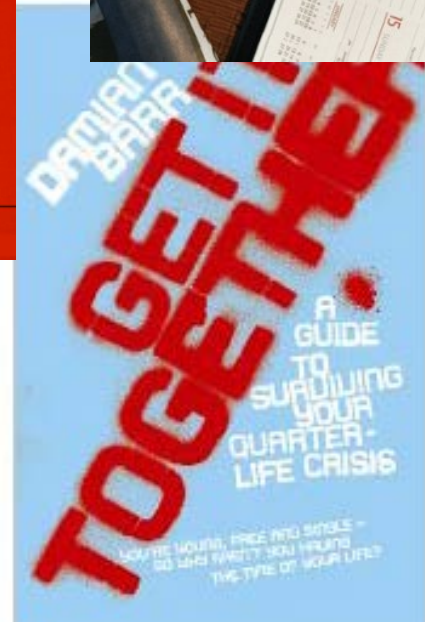
A crisis after emerging adulthood



# A popular idea in self-help books



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# The MEL eve

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

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

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

## Trend Spot

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



# London

## Are you having a QLC\*?

\*That's quarterlife crisis

### TRENDS

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

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

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

a QLC. "I have suddenly realised that time is running out and I don't have a career," she says. "When my parents were my age they were married and doing the jobs they wanted. I don't want to blame the baby boomers but now life seems more difficult. And according to Facebook I have 867 friends but I feel lonely."

She is one of many Londoners realising they are struggling with the QLC blues. With my 24th birthday approaching I too am aware that my time is running out. Now that 25-year-olds might live to be 100 years old, 25 really is a quarter of the way through.

Growing numbers of 25-year-olds are struggling with pressures previously felt by those in their mid-forties, says Damian Barr, author of *Get it Together: A Guide to Surviving Your Quarterlife Crisis*. "The truth is that our twenties are not as they were for our parents. Being twentysomething now is scary - fighting millions of other twentysomethings for a job, a house, a partner."



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October 22, 2011

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Comments

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

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viewed 50 people aged are now more footloose to

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# Quarterlife crisis theory: types and processes

From qualitative data



# For those interested in qualitative methods

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



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

OLIVER C. ROBINSON<sup>1</sup> AND JONATHAN A. SMITH<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Greenwich, London, UK

<sup>2</sup>Birkbeck College, London, UK

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

# A dual typology: Locked-in and locked-out



## 1. Locked-out crisis

*Typical age: 23-25*

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

*Resolved crisis:* Breaking *in* to major commitment



## 2. Locked-in crisis

*Typical age: 25-35*

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

*Resolved crisis :* Breaking *out* of major commitment



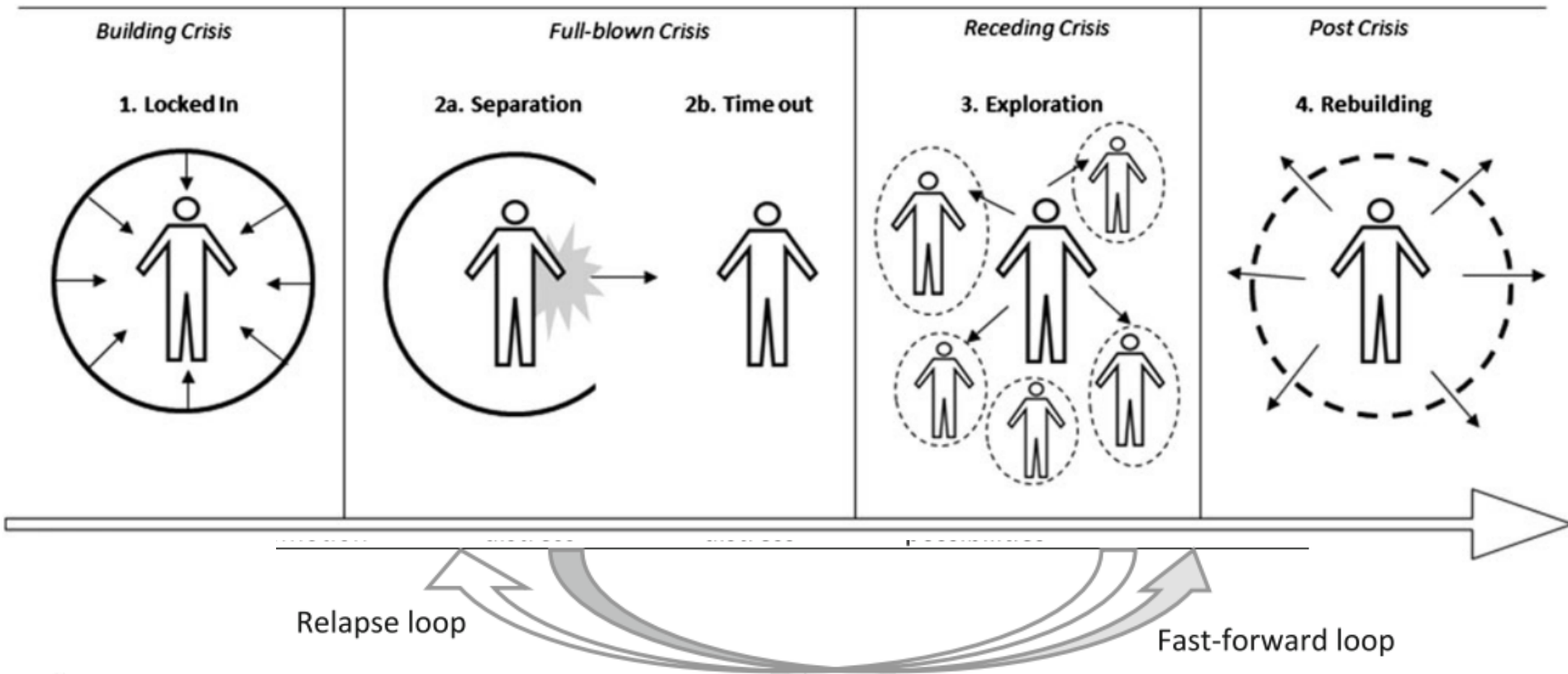


# Locked-in crisis: A crisis of unwanted commitment

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



# The phases of locked-in crisis – a systemic depiction



# Locked-out crisis: Example quotes

Study of university leavers

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

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

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

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

# Crisis Definition-Question (CDQ)

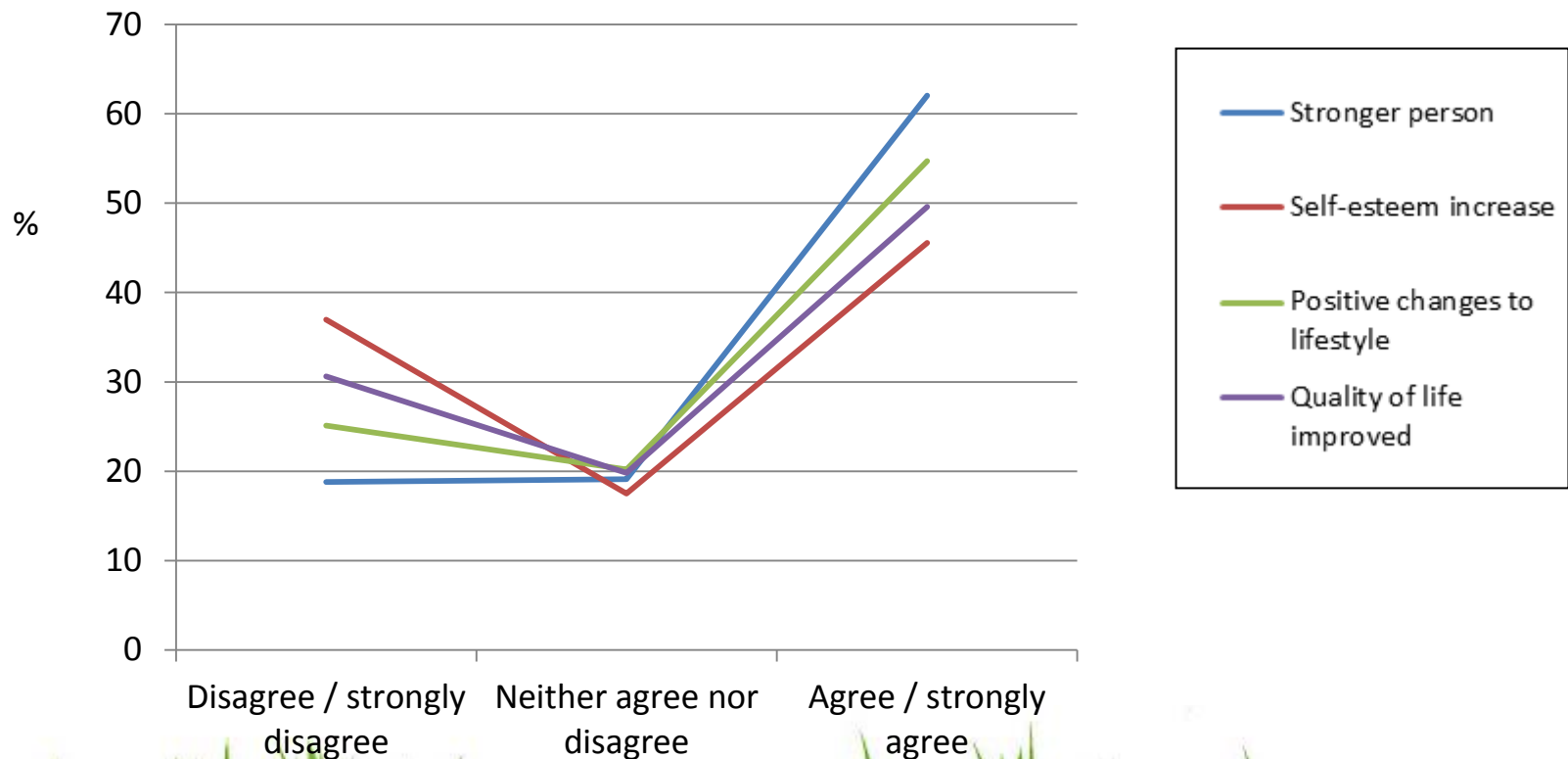
A **crisis episode** is a period in adult life that is noticeably more **difficult, stressful and unstable** than normal, during which you sometimes **struggle to cope**. A crisis is also an important turning point in your life due to **challenging changes** that occur during it. Crisis episodes typically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

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

# Post-crisis growth after quarterlife crisis

Respondents over age of 30 (N=922):

39% of men and 50% of women reported a crisis in their twenties





# PART 4

## Integration



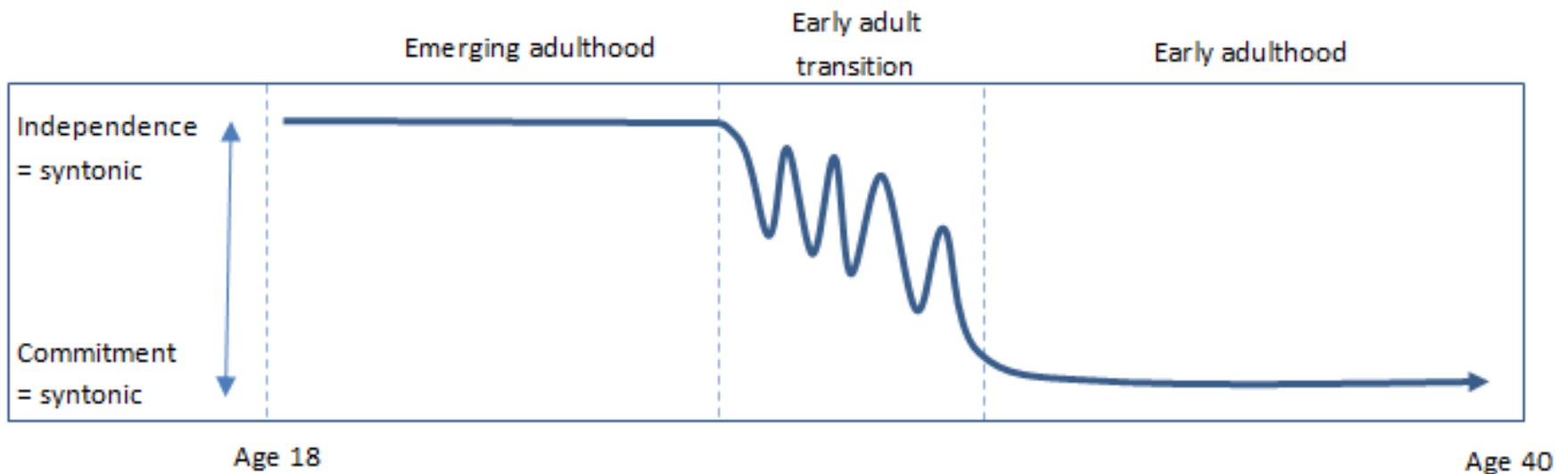
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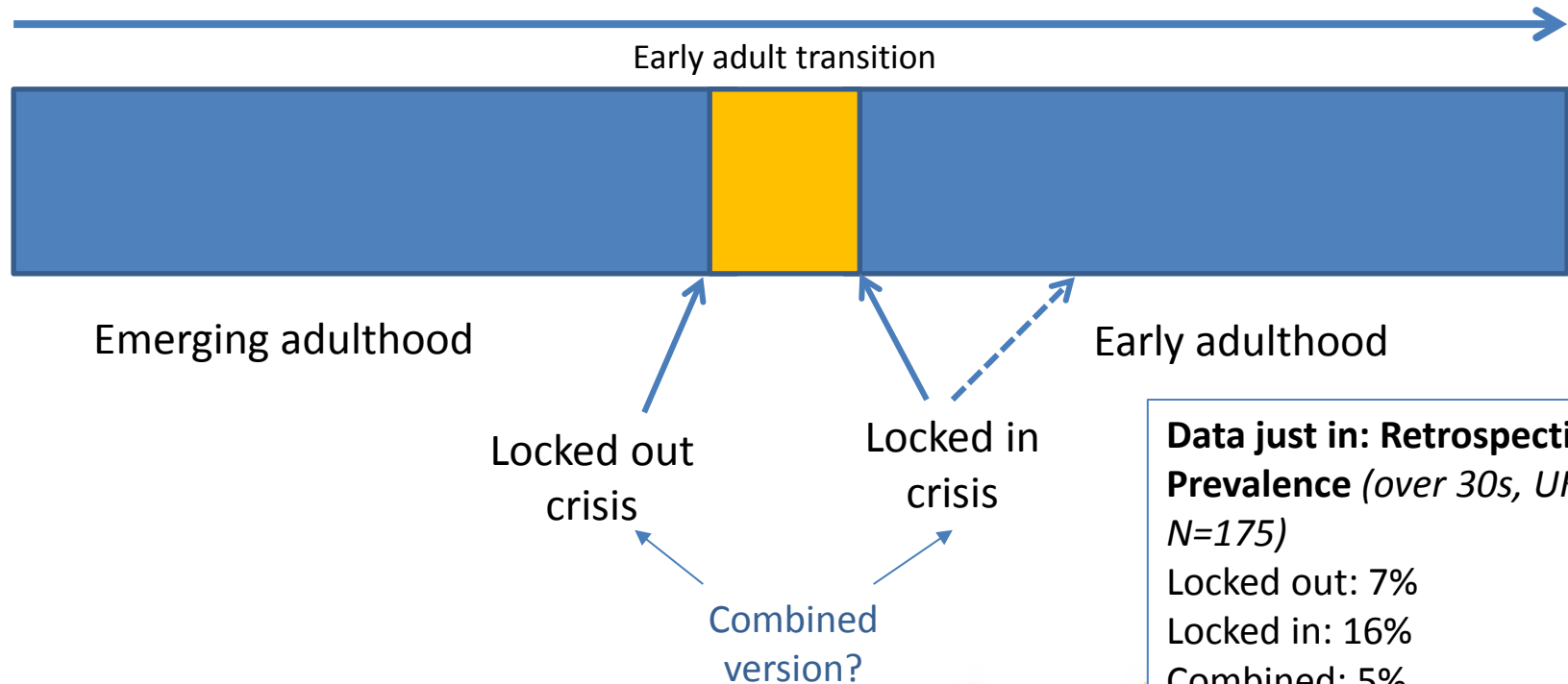
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# A switch in syntonic-dystonic polarity half way through early adulthood



# Crisis types in relation to emerging adulthood and early adulthood



**Data just in: Retrospective Prevalence** (over 30s, UK, N=175)

Locked out: 7%

Locked in: 16%

Combined: 5%

Other crisis: 22%

No crisis: 50%



# What next for research?

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



# Key Reference

- Robinson, O.C. (2015). Emerging adulthood, early adulthood and quarter-life crisis: Updating Erikson for the twenty-first century. In. R. Žukauskiene (Ed.) *Emerging adulthood in a European context* (pp.17-30). New York: Routledge.
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