

**Understanding and Supporting Young Adults through the  
'Quarterlife Crisis'**

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## Preface

I started my PhD when I was 25, going through the transition towards ‘adulthood’ myself. Before I get into the whole story behind how I landed up choosing my research topic, I would like briefly to introduce my background: geographical, social and cultural.

I come from a small, yet developing and growing, city in the northeastern region of India called Guwahati. This city is part of Assam: a region most would know for growing tea! From birth to completing my A-levels (called ‘12<sup>th</sup> standard’ in India), I lived in Guwahati city. It was for my undergraduate course that I moved to Bangalore - a city in the south of India - a four hour flight from home. This did not necessarily mean ‘new freedom’ for me like mostly talked of when one leaves home. I have felt that there were never too many restrictions imposed upon me and my parents always said, ‘Do what you please, but with responsibility’. The way I was brought up, and the environment to which I was exposed, had considerable influence on my transition to adulthood. The reason I am saying this here is because my thesis has a lot to do with contextual influences in a young person’s journey towards ‘adulthood’. Raised in an Indian family, the stress of acting responsibly and caring for others, meant that most of my decisions throughout my education were based on how happy and satisfied my family would be with my choices and performance. And I often turned to my family to help steer me through the critical junctions of my life. They would reflect back to me what I’m good at and what I could, possibly, work on more. I trusted them, acknowledged that they were experienced, and treated them as my mentors. Coming from a family of academics, it happened that I, too, followed the same path. When I got a 98 in Psychology in my A-levels, it was like my fate was sealed and I followed the Psychology track since. In my undergraduate degree, I chose a combination of three subjects – Psychology, Sociology and Economics - and these subjects made a big difference to how I see the world. In hindsight, I could say that, from there, started my interest in a multidisciplinary approach.

I chose a Masters programme in Clinical Psychology and this exposed me to diagnosing and treating patients with mental health problems ranging from depression and anxiety to addiction. Moreover, during my hospital internships, I provided mental health support to young people who had attempted suicide. Bangalore is known as the suicide capital of India and I explored the protective factors against suicide in young people for my Masters dissertation. When I was interviewing my participants, they were often more keen on explaining *why* they had considered suicide than speaking about what had stopped them from acting on these impulses, and conveyed a sense of desperation and a need to justify their self-destructive thoughts. This furthered my interest in understanding the stresses young people are exposed to, sometimes, in their transition to ‘adulthood’.

Another turning point that led me to my interest in young people in crisis is the time when I felt that I, too, was going through a period of feeling stuck. Just after my Masters, I got a job as a Project Manager in Mumbai. I was quick to accept this job and I shifted my base from Bangalore to Mumbai. However, after meeting face-to-face with my employer, I realised that he was aiming to carry out a massive project which needed to be built right from scratch. It was a project to develop a centre for children with psychological disorders and, to my surprise, he expected me to work on the entire project starting from budgeting to building the centre and gathering all the required physical and human resources. At first I felt that it was a great opportunity, but soon started to realise that this was beyond my skill capacity and, unexpectedly, there was very little support from my employer in assisting me through this process. I had to make a bold decision and told my employer that I wanted to quit. Jumping into this job was one of the major mistakes I made because soon followed a period (one to two months) where I had considerable doubts about my own capabilities and questioned the world of work. At the time I was not actively seeking a job and only procrastinating about my future prospects based on just one experience.

A few of my friends helped me immensely during this time. There was especially one friend who saw through me and realised that I was not doing anything actively to change my situation. She pushed me to apply for jobs and, to my surprise, there were a few jobs that she even applied to on my behalf! I gradually got myself together and started contemplating jobs that would be suitable for me and applied to a few places. I was accepted to work on two places as a part-time school counsellor and then gradually worked towards full-time employment for one of the reputed residential schools in Mumbai.

Given my personal experience of crisis and the exposure I had had to the reflections of my participants while undertaking my Masters dissertation, I started forming a deeper interest in understanding the feeling of being stuck and ‘falling into a rut’ during transition to adulthood. I even noticed that many of my friends in Assam and Mumbai were going through similar experiences. Whilst working as a counsellor in Mumbai, I conducted research on young people’s experience of difficulties that could grow sometimes into a feeling of crisis. It was then that I came across the term ‘quarterlife crisis’ introduced by two journalists: Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner. With my enthusiasm for this important topic assured, I prepared a research proposal which was accepted as the basis of a PhD by the School of Psychology, University of Leeds and I was fortunate to be awarded an International Scholarship by the University. The reason I chose to explore this topic in a different country is because I was curious to understand how culture and context impact young people’s transition to adulthood and the kind of crisis, if any, they experienced during this period of their lives. I felt that getting to know the challenges of ‘growing up’ in another culture would be vital to expanding my worldview and developing my personal knowledge.

## Acknowledgements

‘Doing a doctoral research could be a very lonely experience’—so I have heard. Being an international student and living away from my home country for three years was indeed challenging. But in this process I have learnt ample from the people around, both directly and indirectly involved with my PhD. Here, I would like to thank all the people who have been part of my three years’ journey.

At the onset, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisors, Prof. Anna Madill and Dr. Siobhan Hugh-Jones. Their expertise in research and years of experience reflected vibrantly in the way they had contributed towards my PhD. At a personal level, given my almost regular state of anxiety and worry, they were always there to assure and comfort me in every possible way. They gave me the time whenever I needed and I honestly don’t know how they did it taking into account the amount of work they are always immersed in. Thank you so much for being excellent guides and supporting me throughout my work and stay in the UK. It is definitely more than you needed to do as supervisors for a student. You have both been excellent mentors throughout these years.

Secondly, I would like to thank each and every one of my participants without who this study would not have been possible. They trusted me and did a wonderful job collecting the photos and communicating their experiences in the interviews. I shall always be indebted to them for the time they had spared and the effort they had made for my study.

I would also like to thank all my colleagues, especially Jihane Ghorayeb, Ruth Baxter, Amy Smith and Jack Graveson for the help, support and being available to listen to all my worries, and of course for being part of the good times too. I would also like to thank all my other friends in the UK (especially Dom, Sarah, Seb, Arjov and Anna) and in India (very special thanks to Kaustuv, Rima, Aryaman, Brittanta and Shivani) for being there by my side, assuring and supporting me through this journey.

My family has always been my backbone. Research works of my grandfather, grandmother and my mother have always been an inspiration to me. Both my parents have supported me immensely throughout my time away in Leeds. I am greatly thankful to them for being there by my side through all the highs and lows.

Last, but not the least, I would like to thank Leeds International Research Scholarship for funding my research and making this entire venture possible.

I was indeed not alone in this journey and I thank everyone who has been part of this.

## Abstract

**Introduction:** Transitions to adulthood typically involve searching for a life partner, settling on an occupation, and discovering ‘who one is’. Some find this transition difficult and experiences panic, loss, and uncertainty. The term ‘quarterlife crisis’ has been applied to such experiences.

**Aim:** This thesis aimed to understand the experience of ‘quarterlife crisis’ among young people from two cultural groups: UK and India. The objectives were to identify the triggers for, and forms of, ‘quarterlife crisis’, responses and coping strategies to crisis; and how we may prevent ‘quarterlife crises’ and / or lessen its burden on young people.

**Methods:** Young people aged 22-30 years from India (n=8) and the UK (n=16), who identified with experiencing challenges making their ‘transitions to adulthood’, were recruited. Data generation was highly participant-led, supported through a novel combination of photo-elicitation and time-line interviewing. Data was subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, supported through use of participant generated images.

**Findings:** Four themes were generated explicating the crisis experience - *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment*, *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*, *Becoming and knowing oneself* and *Forced ‘adulthood’/independence*. Participants’ expectations about the transition to adulthood were often not met. At the crux of the crisis experience was feeling stagnant, unprepared and overwhelmed, experienced differently based on cultural and educational background. People deployed both personal and social resources in response to their crisis. Getting reassurance about their personal capabilities or skills and developing new perspective of their transitional experiences appeared particularly helpful.

**Conclusion:** Findings appeal for greater sensitivity to social, cultural, economic and political contexts that influence the ‘quarterlife crisis’, and call for rethinking of development theories which propose a linear progression to adulthood. How we can best support young people in their transition should be the responsibilities of policy-makers, educational institutions, families and young people themselves.

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## Introduction

*It's not difficult to observe the manifestations of our generation's (nicknamed Generation Me) obsession with individualism, which, if left unchecked, can lead to some very blatant demonstrations of self-absorption. (Zarka, 2013<sup>1</sup>)*

Such kind of portrayals of the new generation youth has become common place in many blogs and magazines. These articles tag this generation of youth as 'Generation Me' because of the selfish attitudes that they associate with this section of population. This accusation of focus on self raises a few questions. Firstly, are these accusations based on understanding of the experiences of young people themselves? Secondly (and yet closely linked to the previous question), are they considering the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century context (accompanied by economic, political and social changes) while throwing their spotlights on the attitudinal changes in this generation? One of the popular accusations about these young people is that they are reluctant to take adult roles and responsibilities. These are commonly portrayed in online magazines and newspapers. For example, the following was taken from the magazine, *Forbes* published on September, 2014.

*We have twentysomethings living at home, holding off on marriage and families, relying on their parents for financial handouts and job interview support, eschewing unfulfilling jobs, favoring public transit over cars and not showing much interest in building up their credit scores. In short, they're shrugging off many of the markers that have traditionally defined American adulthood. In some cases, Millennial lifestyle choices are constrained by monetary realities (student loan repayments vs. a new Subaru is no contest), but, more broadly, there's an attitudinal sea change evident here. (Henderson, 2014<sup>1</sup>)*

Is it really reluctance or circumstantial conditions that have caused this delay in assuming 'adulthood' and 'adult-like' responsibilities? This is not to entirely support or refute such accusations, but a call for a holistic understanding of lived experiences of young people. Such an attempt was made by Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner in 2001 to elucidate experiences of young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They wrote a book based on interviews conducted with young people: 'Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties'. This book gave birth to the term 'quarterlife crisis' which was subsequently used by the public as well as criticized in many research articles. According to the authors, 'quarterlife crisis' is in some ways opposite to midlife crisis. While the latter is associated with boredom and stagnancy, the former is a consequence of instability and unpredictability. The term, 'quarterlife crisis' was developed based on the interviews conducted with young people of the new generation. The start age for this phase experience was quoted by the authors to be 22 years. In fact, at many places in the book, the authors used the quote 'catch 22' to indicate the hardships that young people face in the process of transition to adulthood.

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<sup>1</sup> Extracts taken from online magazines. No page numbers available.

This book highlights some of the key problems that young people experience in their lives and how they perceive and cope with these problems. The major point that they wanted to convey was commonality of experiences; and making the public aware of it so that the young people know that they are not alone; and to enable older people to empathize with their challenges. According to the authors, 'quarterlife crisis' is a "state of panic sparked by a feeling of loss and uncertainty" (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p. 7). Although there is a negative portrayal reflected again in this book, they have not gone to the extent of blaming the young people for their conditions. This book may not be a completely comprehensive picture of conditions in a holistic way, but it does serve its purpose of giving useful insight for the public. A recurring theme running through the book regards the way in which young people have to make important decisions without much guidance and support and which shall also have long term permanent influence in their lives. These could be in terms of moving to college, moving out from parents' home, choosing a life partner, choosing a job and career, marriage and parenthood. Another trend that was evident in the book was the focus on self where interview quotes seemed to direct attention to coming to terms with oneself and trying to figure out who one is and what are one's interests.

Financial independence was held as a key component of growing up by most of the young adults in the interviews. Apart from this, there were different other criteria held by individuals about being and feeling like an adult, such as moving from cohabitation to marriage, parenthood and own living arrangements. According to the authors, young adulthood is associated with the feeling of 'evolving' with twists and turns. Young people have to deal with various aspects of life, like job and relationships, before they take up complete adult roles with financial independence. As far as social relationships are concerned, they tend to change during one's 20s because friends from school get dispersed and busy with building their life and career. As such, feelings of loneliness and depression are a common phenomenon among young people (Robbins & Wilner, 2001).

The authors consistently highlighted the transition from a structured life in college to the unguided life beyond education. In many parts of the book they raised the question of the transition from educational institutions into work and whether young people are being prepared for the challenge and the book mainly addressed individuals who had the opportunity to attend higher education. Moreover, freedom and choice were often exaggerated in the book while the job market and its constraints only received passing reference. Other contextual aspects (social, cultural and economic backgrounds) were also missing from the write up which would have given a broader idea and more detailed understanding of the conditions of the transition to adulthood. These gaps in the conceptualisation of 'quarterlife crisis' raise questions about the existence and universality of such a phenomenon, especially among young people from different backgrounds. In order to get a better understanding of 'quarterlife crisis', the current



study starts with a discussion of theories of human development and then elaborates the contextual elements in which young people are embedded.

The current study aims to understand the lived experiences of crisis among young adults and in doing so it takes into consideration two broad cultural groups: British and Indian. Although the UK has areas of deprivation, it is one of the developed world's wealthiest countries. With a fast-growing economy, mass education, and political influence on the world-stage, India can be characterised as a *developing* country. Both the UK and India are diverse, complex, and multicultural with a long history of mutual influence. However, the two countries make an interesting comparison in that British culture is, broadly, considered 'Western' and 'individualistic' and Indian culture as 'Eastern' and 'collectivist' (Hui & Triandis, 1986; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). While the former is said to focus on autonomy and personal goal (Veehoven, 1998), the latter is said to be more characteristic of traditional societies in which value is placed on cooperation, family hierarchies, and social interdependence (Chadda & Deb, 2013)<sup>2</sup>.

The approach in this research is to generate accounts of the experience of crisis in early adulthood from young people themselves. The aim of the research is to understand the experience of 'quarterlife crisis' of young people from UK and India. The objectives are to identify: (1) the different forms which the 'quarterlife crisis' takes; (2) coping strategies young people use; (3) resources – both personal and social – that help support young people as they journey through this crisis; and (4) to develop an understanding of how to prevent severely traumatic 'quarterlife crises' and to lessen its burden when young adults seek help. The overarching research question is: How do young adults negotiate the 'quarterlife crisis'?

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<sup>2</sup> These differences will be debated and discussed further in Chapter 1b (section 1b.2)

## Chapter 1: Literature review

In order to understand the crisis experiences of young people in UK and India, I first visit some of the previous theories and new research on young people and then throw light on the specific context of UK and India.

The first part of the literature review (Chapter 1a) will discuss the mental health problems of young people, developmental theories (mainly those by Erik Erikson, Kenneth Keniston, Daniel Levinson and Jeffrey Arnett) and the concept of ‘quarterlife crisis’ while breaking the term and understanding the connotation of ‘crisis’ in this proposed phenomenon. Whilst being sensitive and mindful of specific context influencing individual experiences, the next part of this chapter (Chapter 1b) will attempt to contextualise the experience of young people by throwing light on culture and society, education and employment scenario, and gender differences existing in UK and India. In doing so, I start by explicating Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development and then discuss and debate the ideologies of ‘individualism’ and ‘collectivism’. These two sections lay the foreground for discussing the British and Indian contexts.

The following are the broad topics that are covered in this chapter:

- Developmental tasks and psychological problems in young people
  - o Mental health problems of young people
  - o Theories and philosophies
  - o ‘Quarterlife crisis’
- Contextualising young people’s experiences
  - o Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model of Human development
  - o Individualistic and collectivistic culture
  - o Background: UK and India

## **Chapter 1a: Developmental tasks and psychological problems in young people**

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2016), the risk of suicide is high when people are faced with crisis, unable to cope with stress such as financial problems, relationship breakdown, and illness, and statistics show that suicide is the second leading cause of death among people between 15-29 years of age. In the UK, one of the leading causes of death among young people between 20 to 34 years of age is suicide, accounting for 12 percent of deaths in this demographic in 2013 (Office of National Statistics, 2015). Similarly, in India in 2010, 40 percent of suicides among men and 56 percent of suicides among women were within the population of young people between 15 to 29 years of age (Patel et al., 2012). Such statistics highlight the need to understand the situations and circumstances young people face that could potentially lead to distress, poor psychological wellbeing, and mental health problems, for some leading to a serious crisis experience.

### **1a.1 Mental health problems of young people**

Much contemporary research has been directed to the study of depression and anxiety among young people (e.g., Aseltine Jr & Gore, 2005; Kuwabara, Voorhees, Gollan & Alexander, 2007; McGee & Thompson, 2015; Mossakowski, 2011; Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust & Golberstein, 2009). This rising concern is in response to the high rates of mental health problems noted among individuals between 18 to 25 years of age (Bittner et al., 2004; Kessler & Walters, 1998). Moreover, the reduced psychological wellbeing observed among young people was found to be associated with decrease in social connectedness (Twenge, 2000) and rising youth unemployment (Galambos, Barker & Krahn, 2006; McGee & Thompson, 2015; Taylor et al., 2012).

Research is directed at understanding the relation between young people's psychological wellbeing and the typical developmental tasks during this period such as employment and marriage (Arnett, 2000; Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth & Tellegen, 2004). For instance, McGee and Thompson (2015) investigated the relation between depression and employment and found that there was three times more likelihood of depression among young people (18 to 25 years) who are unemployed compared to those who are employed. Similarly, Aseltine and Gore (2005) found that enrolment in college and having full time work was associated with lower levels of depression and positive quality of life. A sense of direction appears to be important for young people and Aseltine and Gore found that less psychological problems were reported when young people had a sense of structure in their daily life, especially in terms of job. The authors suggested that autonomy in jobs did not necessarily mean better functioning for these young people: rather it was the employment continuity that was crucial in determining general

satisfaction and positive mental health. However, this might not be true for some young people who have different expectations related to their transition to adulthood. For instance, some may want greater scope to explore options before settling into a stable job. Thus, young people's expectations around education and employment could be a potential influence on psychological wellbeing.

A longitudinal study was conducted by Mossakowski (2011) in North America that offers some insight into how unfulfilled expectations could potentially impact young people's (19 to 27 years) mental health. Mossakowski examined whether unfulfilled expectations related to education, work, marriage and parenthood had any implications in causing depression. It was found that lower levels of education than expected, unexpected unemployment, and unexpected parenthood were associated with, and predicted, depression among young people. In addition, expectations with regard to the timing of achieving projected milestones could protect or damage mental health. The author posed that education, employment, marriage and parenthood are closely linked to young people's identity and it was when such expectations associated with identity were unfulfilled that there was a diminishing sense of control with the potential of negative impact on the mental health of young people. This finding raises serious concern for this demographic because other studies found that less than half of young people achieve what they initially expected to by the age of 30 (e.g., Rindfuss, Cooksey & Sutterlin, 1999) and, at the same time, support-seeking is the lowest among this group of people, especially when problems are related to mental health (Kuwabara et al., 2007; Zivin et al., 2009).

Kuwabara et al. (2007) examined the lived experiences of 15 young people (18 to 25 years) in North America: specifically their help-seeking behaviour, and the developmental and social context of their psychological problems, using in-depth interviews. The authors posed that "impairment of developmental progress through young adulthood exacerbates concerns about identity and worsens depressed mood" (Kuwabara et al., 2007, p. 5). At the same time, young people are reluctant to seek support and treatment because they assume their condition to be unique and are uncertain that anyone will understand their problems. This also caused loneliness and, although they considered social support to be essential, they often refrained from sharing their concerns. Another reason reported by these young people for their reluctance to seek help is the fear of appearing to be a failure in the eyes of friends and family. However, the young people in Kuwabara et al.'s study also felt exhausted from suppressing their emotional and psychological problems. Similar findings were reported by Zivin et al. (2009) where they observed high prevalence of mental health problems among college students that persisted over the two years of the study with little help-seeking behaviour over the same period.

Many studies were directed at understanding mental health problems among college students in the UK (Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa & Barkham, 2010; Macaskill, 2013; Tinklin,

Riddell & Wilson, 2005; Zivin et al., 2009). Macaskill (2013) conducted a cross-sectional study in the UK with students who were just entering university and those who were in their first, second and third year of their undergraduate degree. Prevalence of depression was found to significantly increase from before entering university to the final year of study and peak in anxiety was found among the second year students. Macaskill argued that there is high concentration on first year students to provide support in making friends and settling down, when on the other hand data from his study found that support and counselling is also essential throughout the degree course. Because of the changing financial support available for students, there is an additional risk to the mental health of young people who have to transition to an independent life whilst navigating to adulthood.

In universities, students are often expected to form their own structure and routines and allocate and manage the work load (Tinklin et al., 2005). This is a relatively new experience for young people especially for those who have just come out from parental home to pursue their higher education. Tinklin et al. (2005) called for better academic support and more individual support for learning. However, the latter is especially problematic in current circumstances because there is an increase in the number of students with a disproportionate increase in staff members to support them (Bewick et al., 2013; Tinklin et al., 2005).

A longitudinal study by Bewick et al. (2013) was conducted in the UK and spanned across the three years of students studying in university. The authors found that there was more strain on psychological well-being of the students throughout the three years compared to the pre-registration time. Anxiety was found to be common during the whole time period, but depression was found to be the highest in the final year of study. Authors recognised the need for support and interventions especially during the time when graduates start looking for jobs, trying to find their place in the highly competitive labour market.

The impact of developmental tasks on the mental health of individuals transitioning from adolescence to adulthood was also discussed by Schulenberg, Sameroff and Cicchetti (2004). According to them, there are apparent continuities and discontinuities (typically turning points) in young people's transition to adulthood. Some of the discontinuities may only lead to momentary disturbances, but there are others, like movement away from parental home that could have a substantial influence on the health and wellbeing of young people. In addition *proximal influences*: that is, those occurring during the time of transition could have impact on the *distal influences* (those during childhood) in changing future trajectory, thus leading to discontinuity. The authors were also sensitive to the person-context interaction where match between individual needs and context could determine mental health functioning of those in transition, even influencing the continuity and discontinuity of psychological problems. With these propositions, Schulenberg et al., (2004) argued that:

*...several conceptual and methodological themes related to continuity and discontinuity in person–context interactions, distal and proximal influences, individual differences and similarities in intraindividual change, and the unique nature of the transition to adulthood ... represent foundations for understanding psychopathology and mental health across the life course. (p. 803)*

Thus, research reports a high prevalence of mental health problems and low help-seeking behaviour amongst young people, for some even interrupting the transition to adulthood and making milestones achievement even more difficult. This could potentially lead to a vicious cycle of psychological problems and poor outcomes (Kuwabara et al., 2007). This brings me to the next topic of discussion, that is, theories and philosophies related to developmental tasks of young adults. This could potentially provide a useful ground to understand crisis experience of young people transitioning to adulthood.

### **1a.2 Theories and philosophies**

Youth is identified as a period of transition to adulthood with identity development as the most prominent aspect that guides all transitional necessities (Arnett, 2000). In the following section I discuss four theories related to young adults, those given by Erikson (1950, 1968), Keniston (1970), Levinson (1978) and Arnett (1997, 2000).

#### ***Erik Erikson's theory of Identity Formation***

Erikson (1950,1968) gave eight stages of psychosocial development where he considers development as a lifelong process. According to Erikson, the conflict of identity and role confusion occurs during the age of 12 to 18 years (adolescence) when individuals have to resolve a sense of self and personal identity. If successful, an individual during this stage will develop a self or otherwise land in a state of confusion, potentially leading to 'identity crisis'. The primary task, as given by Erikson (1950, 1968), is to fit oneself into society and develop a role suitable to requirements of one's social context. It is often considered to be a difficult task as adolescents are pressurized to commit before an identity is crystallized. In addition to this he considered young adulthood as the time when individuals have to resolve the crisis of intimacy vs isolation. According to him, only when one is able to develop a sense of identity is one capable of forming intimate relationships. This task of developing a sense of identity during adolescence as posed by Erikson has now been recognized as a significant feature of young adulthood between 18 to 25 years (Arnett, 2000). The age of marriage has also increased in many parts of the world. For instance, in America in 1950, women would get married around 20 years of age and men at around 22 years of age. This age only slightly rose in 1970. However, after 1970 there was a change in the average age of marriage which by the 21<sup>st</sup> century rose to 25 for women and 27 for men (Arnett, 2003). Similarly the age of marriage in the UK has increased by eight years since 1972 to 2012 with the mean age for men being 36.5 and that of women 34.0 (Office for National Statistics, 2012b).

According to Arnett (2000, 2003), one of the main reasons for this shift in age of marriage in America is the ‘sexual revolution’ that took place in the 1960s and early 1970s catalysed in part by the “invention of birth control pills and less stringent standards of sexual morality” (Arnett, 2003, p. 5). Another reason given by Arnett (2003) for this shift in marriage trends was that more people entered higher education and at the same time exposed to a wide range of career options. With high value given to individuality and independence, especially in urban settings (Kagitçibasi, 1996) and typically more in Western culture (Markus & Kitayami, 1991), people explored more before they settle down with a particular career option and embrace adulthood. This could also be related to Giddens’s work (1991) where he argued that:

*Modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices and, because it is non-foundational, at the same time offers little help as to which options should be selected. Various consequences tend to follow. (p. 80)*

As a result of such widening range of options, the possibility of developing a stable sense of identity as early as adolescence and basing career and relationship decisions on it has become less. Thus, ‘identity crisis’ can persist far beyond the period of adolescence and even to the mid-twenties before individuals can start making relatively stable choices with regard to career and relationship.

### ***Kenneth Keniston’s theory about Youth***

Kenneth Keniston gave an interesting background to the development of a new, and presumably an optional, stage that lies between the periods of adolescence and adulthood called youth (1970). The same primary reasons for the development of the stage of adolescence were also said to lead to the development of this new stage. Education system is argued to play an important role in the moulding of this stage, in collaboration with other factors like legal, political and social changes. According to Keniston (1970), in 1900 less North Americans completed high school as compared to 70 years later when the number rose drastically from 6.4 percent to 80 percent, about half of who attended college. Students going to college increased from around 238,000 in 1900 to seven million in 1970 in North America (Keniston, 1970). The glorification of the education system and the fast growing influence can be seen distinctively in North America, especially among the middle and the upper classes. This change was accompanied by an increasing number of people who willingly or unwillingly do not settle down into an adult life after completion of their school and college education and often challenged the social order. This led to concerns among the general population, which Keniston termed as “public anxiety” (1970, p.633).

According to Keniston, the reason why young people do not want to take adult roles is because of the association they make between adulthood and stasis. Youth is characterized by change and this view of adulthood as representing monotony and stasis, does not seem to entertain and

motivate them towards it. This leads to the prolongation of this stage as argued by Keniston (1970).

Keniston proposed that the main theme underlying the stage called 'youth' is the tension between self and society and there is no natural congruence between the two. Similar to Erikson's theory (1950, 1968), that differentiated adolescence and young adulthood, Keniston made a distinction between adolescence and youth on the premise of the aforementioned tension. According to Keniston, while adolescence is the period when one tries to grasp an understanding of self, youth is the time when one starts to understand self and try to integrate it with the social order. In this sense, the self is not fully developed when one reaches the period of youth, rather one is still in the process of moulding a stable sense of identity whilst also attempting to merge it with the society. Because of the lack of a natural congruence between self and society, as posed by Keniston, the youth could either change the self or try to bring major changes in the other, while at other times, experience a feeling of restlessness with excessive experimentation. This could lead to a continuous panicked sense of wanting change that can often transpire into a feeling of "getting nowhere", of 'being stuck in the rut' or of 'not moving'" (Keniston, 1970, p. 639).

Keniston also discussed moral, intellectual and cognitive development of youth. He referred to Kohlberg's theory and assigned the post-conventional level of moral development to youth. According to him, during this stage moral and social orders tend to be challenged the most. The underlying reason takes us back to the theme of tension between self and society when the young are frequently questioning moral judgments. As far as intellectual development is concerned, there is no right or wrong for this group as the answers to questions become a complex web of relative causes and consequences. Keniston referred to Jean Piaget's works to understand cognitive development in youth. According to him, most young people experience a complex form of cognitive function where he/she indulges in "thinking about thinking", a "hyperawareness of inner processes" (1970, p. 647). These three developmental processes, moral, intellectual and cognitive, may not always be experienced in synchrony and might be working at different levels during different periods of time (Keniston, 1970).

Keniston attempted to give a holistic understanding of the concept of youth. However, he posed that youth is not a universal stage and there is no specific age range or culture to which it is typical. It is, rather, an 'optional' stage presumed to be experienced by some in their lifetime. Youth "constitute but a minority of their age group. But those who are in this stage of life today largely determine the public image of their generation" (1970, p. 650). It is often those who are skewed from 'normalcy' that grab public attention.

Youth, according to Keniston, is a preparation for adulthood, rather than a completion. For instance although work and job are crucial to a youth, they do not develop fully until adulthood.



It is a phase of transformational instances and is worth attending to the fact that transformations are not just typical of youth. These transformations occur throughout the lifetime of an individual and this is elaborated extensively by Levinson (1978) in his theory related to life cycle.

Although, Keniston presented an interesting approach to the understanding of the period between adolescence and adulthood, his theory was proposed during the time when there were several youth movements in North America associated with the country's involvement in the Vietnam war (Arnett, 2000). Thus, his theory could be a reflection of the historical influence of change and unrest in the lives of this particular generation. Furthermore, although Keniston acknowledged this stage to be 'optional', his assumptions were based on a Western society that typically values independence and individuality with little obstacles faced in the process of exercising autonomy (Kagitçibasi, 1996; Killen & Wainryb, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This questions whether the path to negotiating between self and society is the same in a culture that gives primacy to interdependence and connectedness, such as that typical of the East (Chadda & Deb, 2013; Hui & Triandis, 1986).

#### ***Levinson's contribution on transitions***

Levinson (1978) gave an interesting conceptualization of the transitional phases throughout an individual's lifetime. His study was based on 40 men who were in their 35-40s and used a biographical method constituting a series of interviews. Taking both nature and nurture into perspective, he gave six transitional phases that are considered important for adult development. These phases are: "Leaving the Family", "Getting into the Adult World", "Settling Down", "Becoming One's Own Man", "Mid-Life Transition" and "Rehabilitation and the Beginning of Middle Adulthood" (Levinson et al., 1976; p. 22-25). He highlighted various features typical of each transitional phase. The stages considered relevant to the current research are discussed in this section although, of course, this discussion is limited to just one gender and a specific cultural context.

During the stage of 'Leaving the Family', a man is presented as trying to dive into the adult world by separating from family and reducing dependence on the support and authority extended by the family. According to Levinson, this stage extends from 16-18 and lasts till around 20-24. However, he did consider the age range extending beyond the stated limits. He gave a lot of importance to college as an important shaping mechanism in this transitional phase of leaving family. Men who did not attend college were considered to be unable to leave their family and adopt a fully shaped masculine adult life. This view could be contested on the ground of universality across social classes and cultural backgrounds, even if delimited also to men. Men from deprived groups may not be able to attend college and yet leave family in their transitional period whilst taking other routes towards independence. In addition, Levinson's

conceptualization of leaving family could be a reflection of the high priority given to independence that is typical of men in a Western society, whereas men from non-Western society often have a different relation shared with the family of origin, based on the values given to interdependence and collective goal (Hui & Triandis, 1986; Sonawat, 2001), which may subsequently have its impact on how men make their transitions and negotiations in their early twenties. .

The stage of ‘Getting Into the Adult World’ is quite relevant to the context of men in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This period was said to start in the early 20s and extending roughly to 27-29. Levinson et al. (1976, p. 22) stated:

*...it is the time of exploration and provisional commitment to adult roles, memberships, responsibilities, and relationships. The young man tries to establish an occupation, or an occupational direction, consistent with his interests, values, and sense of self. He begins to engage in more adult relationships and sexual relationships, and to work on what Erikson has termed the ego stage of Intimacy vs Aloneness*

This finding is consistent with research done by Arnett (1997, 2007), where he highlighted the similar age group of 20s who are exploring and committing in work, love and worldviews. Arnett (1997) also researched about the subjective feeling of being an adult which was found to constitute a major part of adult development. Levinson too acknowledged different perceptions of what constitutes adulthood. From this emerged the concept of life structure given by Levinson (1986) where he defined it as a pattern that underlies a man’s life. According to him, it is the “pillar” of what constitutes an adult development and the conceptualization of the question “What is my life like now?” (Levinson, 1986, p. 6)

Levinson (1978) developed three patterns that are typical to the stage for men of ‘Getting Into the Adult World’, they are (a) first making a commitment and then questioning about the provisional commitment and exploring further, (b) changing occupation because of incongruence to the self, and (c) exploring without making a commitment (moratorium). The first two patterns seem almost the same, except that the former starts with a provisional commitment and then exploring, and the latter starts with a fixed commitment and then questioning it when realizing its incongruence with their “dream”. The ‘Settling Down’ period is when men develop concrete patterns and life structures which occur, according to Levinson, in early 30s. Although these concepts provide general insight into transitional patterns between adolescence and adulthood, there could be differences in decisions and choices made by men that could potentially reflect a skewed transitional pattern. Furthermore, Levinson’s theory was highly criticised on the ground that it was only based on male participants and those aged 40 and beyond.

Jefferey Jensen Arnett, on the other hand, did extensive work on individuals (both male and female) in the age range between 18 to 29 years addressing the dynamics associated with the

young population of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. He established a theoretical background based on the new concept that he proposed ‘emerging adulthood’ to address the issues in transitioning to adulthood and new trends associated with this process. In the following section I discuss his theory in an elaborate manner focusing on young people in their twenties making their transition to adulthood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Arnett’s theory of Emerging Adulthood*

Arnett conducted several studies on individuals in their twenties before he developed the concept of ‘emerging adulthood’. According to him, the new context in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century led to a shift in demographic features of young people. A distinctive shift has been in the age of taking adult roles (Arnett, 2000). He used statistics from the US Bureau of the Census, 1997 to show the shift in the age of marriage among young people. From median age of 21 for women and 23 for men in 1970, the age of marriage had shifted to 25 for women and 27 for men in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Arnett’s study revealed that traditionally defined adult criteria like completing education, having a full-time job, marriage and parenthood were rejected by many participants (18 to 28 years) in his study (1997). Most of the participants viewed responsibility and independence as important criteria for attaining adulthood. These two characteristics were central to many other criteria that were seen as important. For example, establishing equality with parents as having similar level of maturity (equal adults) was also found to be an important marker of adulthood. The study also found that participants gave a high endorsement to adulthood defined by accepting responsibilities for the consequences of one’s own action (Arnett, 1997)

It is important to note that this study (by Arnett, 1997) was based on a limited variety of sample constituting only North American Whites mostly from college education. The exclusion of those who have not attended college could lead to a question of whether his findings apply to those who choose different trajectories in their transition to adulthood. The issue of basing his findings on one ethnic group was addressed by the author in his article, ‘Conceptions of the Transition to Adulthood among the Emerging Adults in American Ethnic Groups’ (2003). In this study he included sample of Asian Americans, Latinos and African Americans along with American Whites for the purpose of comparison. It was found that various items under the subscale of independence (like “accepting responsibility for the consequences of your own actions”) were rated the highest among all the ethnic groups as compared to other subscales of interdependence (like establishing equal relationship with parents and being financially independent from them), role transitions (transition to adulthood associated with entering work, marriage and parenthood), norm compliance (like “avoid becoming drunk”), biological transitions (bodily changes like capability of bearing children) and chronological transitions (age-related transitions/ legal markers).

It is noteworthy that the number of responses for role transition subscale was among the lowest in all ethnic groups suggesting that the traditional markers of adulthood do not hold much significance for these young people, rather qualities of independence and responsibility were of greater importance in determining adult status. This calls for the need to adopt new approaches and perspectives in understanding transition to adulthood for young people in the new cohort (21<sup>st</sup> century). However, Arnett's study also showed significant differences between the Whites and the non-Whites in the subscales of Family capacities (like capability to run a household or financially support family), Norm Compliance and Role transitions where the non-Whites rated them higher than the Whites. The disparity could potentially be a result of the high value given to independence and individuality in a typical Western culture which might not be the same for those coming from a different cultural background.

Arnett stated that: "The criteria they believe to be most important in marking the transition to adulthood are generally intangible, gradual, psychological and individualistic" (1997, p. 15). According to him, independence and individualism is a new defining characteristic of the transition to adulthood. He also acknowledged that this transition is, to a large extent, socially determining and hence differs from culture to culture. However, Arnett, in his studies, attempted to go beyond the socially constructed 'institutionalized' pattern of life course transition, to address individualized subjective perception of such transitions and what it means to be an adult. Consequently, he developed the concept of 'emerging adulthood' and a theory supporting this concept.

According to Arnett (2000), emerging adulthood is distinct demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity exploration. By *demographic distinctiveness*, the author meant that emerging adulthood is characterized by instability and variety. There is no linear transition in this phase; it is rather an uncertain movement in terms of education and work, as well as living arrangements. Emerging adulthood is also said to be distinct subjectively in the sense that people in this phase have different perceptions about 'adulthood' and their own adult status (Arnett, 2000). This was demonstrated in his studies done on Whites (Arnett, 1997) as well as non-White Americans (Arnett, 1997, 2003). In terms of identity exploration, according to Arnett (2000), emerging adults tend to explore three primary aspects of life "love, work and worldviews" (p. 473) extensively. The nature of such exploration, according to Arnett, is different from that in adolescence. In terms of love, emerging adults tend to indulge in a more serious and intimate relationship than adolescents, where romantic relationship tends to be longer, at times involving cohabitation, whereas adolescents tend to "be tentative and transient; the implicit question being: Who would I enjoy being with, here and now?" (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). Similarly, work is viewed differently by adolescents and emerging adults. According to the author, while most adolescents work in service sector jobs like in restaurants and retail shops, emerging adults involve themselves in jobs which would involve knowledge, skills and

future benefit rather than small immediate gains (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults also start having new sets of beliefs, often breaking away from those held in childhood and those induced by the family (Arnett, 2000).

Arnett placed the phase of 'emerging adulthood' between adolescence and young adulthood and highlighted that these stages are in a continuum with overlaps at the ends and beginnings of each stage. Furthermore, he argued its distinctiveness from terms like young adulthood (Erikson, 1968), youth (Keniston, 1970), novice phase (Levinson, 1978), late adolescence and transition to adults. According to Arnett (2007), young adulthood is a term used to signify individuals between the age of 18 and 40 in Erikson's works. He argues that the features associated with emerging adulthood would often not apply beyond the age of 30, especially not late 30s (Arnett, 2000, 2007). Thus, it would be inappropriate to use the term 'young adulthood' to signify the phase of life during emerging adulthood when individuals are still exploring work and relationships without necessarily taking an adult position. Keniston's concept of 'youth' was proposed during the time when there was considerable tension in society with youth movements taking place in the United States regarding the country's involvement in the Vietnam War (Arnett, 2000) and his theory focused mostly on the tension between self and society among the youth population. Such ideologies, according to Arnett, were applicable during the time Keniston theorized this concept, but to look at young people today under the same term may be inappropriate because of the differential historical times and events influencing young people's lives (Arnett, 2007).

Levinson (1978), too, touched upon this period of transition and exploration calling it a novice phase, but kept it very brief with not much emphasis on its significance in adult development. The term, transition to adulthood, only focuses on this period as one moving towards adulthood rather than recognizing it as a phase in itself with its various elements and features (Arnett, 2000). Arnett rejected the term late adolescence under the grounds of all the distinction that he had given between adolescence and emerging adulthood. Moreover, the typical biological marker of the phase of adolescence has no significance in emerging adults (Arnett, 2007). In this way, Arnett established the relevance of the term emerging adulthood to the 21<sup>st</sup> century while distinguishing it from other terms proposed in the past.

According to Arnett (2007), emerging adulthood may be experienced differently by different individuals wherein some may experience it as enlightening and full of freedom while others may be lost in the vastness of options. The delay in reaching adulthood often provokes blame, considering the new generation of young people to be slow and irresponsible, but Arnett looked at it as an opportunity to get the best out of each individual. At the same time, he acknowledged that high aspirations and expectations held by emerging adults can, at times, be a mismatch to the existing reality.

Overall, according to Arnett (2007), emerging adults are young people with “longer and more widespread participation in post-secondary education and training, greater tolerance of pre-marital sex and cohabitation, and later ages of marriage and parenthood” (p. 70). Such a narrow description of a phase of life could raise doubts on its applicability to others who may follow different trajectories in their transition to adulthood and hold different beliefs regarding marriage and parenthood. Furthermore, his study was highly restricted to only the North American population and mostly to those belonging to the middle to upper class. The question arises then: Does emerging adulthood and its associated exploration apply for those in the lower classes where financial resources are limited? Can they invest the time and money to explore various possibilities? Does it apply to those societies that value interdependence over independence where young people might have to endeavour different struggles to exercise autonomy?

The above theories have given useful insight into the developmental tasks proposed to be typical of the young adults as studied in this thesis. For instance, developing a sense of identity, attaining a stable job and romantic relationship, integrating self with society and eventually entering the adult world with different roles and responsibilities. Given the link established between developmental tasks and mental health (Schulenberg et al., 2004), these theories provide a useful basis to understand and examine crisis experiences among young people transitioning to adulthood. In the following section, I discuss ‘quarterlife crisis’ and previous research showing its association with transition to adulthood.

### **1a.3 ‘Quarterlife Crisis’**

#### ***What is ‘Quarterlife crisis’?***

What does one mean by ‘quarterlife crisis’ and how did the term come into prominence in popular culture and even in research studies? As mentioned earlier, the term was first coined by two journalists, Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, in the book, ‘Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in your Twenties’. According to the authors, quarterlife crisis is “a response to overwhelming instability, constant change, too many choices, and a panicked sense of helplessness” (p. 3). Other words attached to the feelings associated with this proposed phenomenon are ‘hopelessness’, ‘lost’, ‘indecision’ and ‘disappointment’. The main intention of the book, as posed by the authors, was to create awareness about the commonality of experiences of young people and make it legitimate for them to discuss their issues and experiences openly. Thus, the term, ‘quarterlife crisis’, was introduced to give a name to the experiences of young people so as to allow easier communication.

Quarterlife crisis was proposed and explained by Robbins and Wilner (2001) in analogy with midlife crisis, given not just the differences, but also a commonality between the two. They

share commonality in the sense that they both imply a “major life change” (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p. 2). However, the difference proposed by the authors is: midlife crisis is associated with the feeling of monotony and stagnancy, whereas ‘quarterlife crisis’ is the feeling of being lost in the multiplicity of options and choices.

In order to better understand and evaluate the term ‘quarterlife crisis’, this section is divided into sub-headings that facilitate critical thinking about the phenomenon. The term shall also be constantly discussed in relation to midlife crisis. This is done for two reasons: first, because the term seemed to have been coined in relation to it and secondly, it brings a comparison from which to investigate the various features ascribed to this ‘phase of life’.

### ***Breaking-up the term***

‘Quarterlife crisis’ is a term made of two words, both of which can be discussed and critiqued. The word ‘quarterlife’ seems to be an indication of a phase of life ascribed in relation to midlife. If life expectancy is averaged around 80 years, midlife would mean ~40 years and quarterlife would mean ~20 years. This is consistent with ‘quarterlife’ being associated with ‘twenty somethings’, not just in popular books and magazine articles, but also research-based books (e.g., Setterson & Ray, 2010). However, it is only in the last decade that such references are commonly found and have become a topic of interest for intensive research.

Arnett (1997) has popularized this ‘phase of life’ as ‘emerging adulthood’: a period characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focused time of life, feeling in-between and age of possibilities. ‘Quarterlife’ as an identifiable period of life gained traction with the broadening of the gap between adolescence and adulthood (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008). A new set of norms and values came to be commonly held by young people, especially among the *post-modern* societies, which were quite different from those held by the generations before them. This seems to have led into a period of life typified by confusion and uncertainty during which there is no direct movement from “point A to point B, regardless of whether the points are related to a career, financial situation, home or social life” (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p.3). However, this might not be true for all young people for whom transition to adulthood might be straightforward and smooth. Nevertheless, others may experience blurred navigation, especially when young people leave educational institutions and previously well-defined structures give way to a multiplicity of pathways. Thus, ‘quarterlife’ is ascribed to the time period between adolescence and adulthood, usually between the ages of 18 to 30 years (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008).

The second half of the term is ‘crisis’. This needs particular attention because it is this half of the term most likely to make the idea of ‘quarterlife crisis’ sensitive and open to critique. According to Hermann (1972), crisis involves a considerable threat to goals, time pressure to

decide and an element of surprise. In other words, a situation becomes a crisis when an individual or organization is not able to achieve its goal due to threat posed to it and the pressure of time makes it even more difficult for resolution of the problem. An element of surprise is a further ingredient added to the idea of 'crisis' which gives attention to unpreparedness and unawareness on the part of the concerned person or organization making it finally a 'crisis'.

If this model is seen in the light of difficulties faced by young people in the transition to adulthood, it seems to apply in certain ways. There is a threat seen in attaining a desirable goal, although the threat may not be easily identifiable, and various contextual conditions like psychological, social, historical, economic, political or cultural can be associated with the threat. There also seems to be a pressure of time within which there is often a societal expectation to resolve these problems and derive a 'settled life' taking up an 'adult' identity and responsibility (Arnett, 1998). The third element prescribed in this model is surprise which implies a "lack of awareness by the decision makers that the crisis situation is likely to occur" (Billings, Milburn & Schaalman, 1980, p. 301). This would relate to the unpreparedness and unexpectedness felt by young people during 'quarterlife crisis' leading to the feeling of disappointment (Robbins & Wilner, 2001).

All the elements given by Hermann in his model of crisis seem to fit quite comfortably in the overall idea of 'quarterlife crisis' as proposed by Robbins and Wilner. However, the problem stems from the question of intensity of the first element of crisis proposed by Hermann (1972), that is, threat. Can one really objectify what constitutes 'threat' and give a universal claim that all young people facing a particular situation in their life will see this as 'threat'? This brings attention to a revised model to include perception as an essential part of the meaning of 'crisis' (Billings et al., 1980).

Billings et al. (1980) offered a revision of Hermann's model while stressing the importance of subjective understandings and meanings. According to the authors, "the triggering event must be perceived, attended to, and evaluated against some standard or measure of how things should be, in order for a problem to be sensed" (p. 302). The definition does not stop at identifying a gap between the perceived standard and the existing condition, but also involves evaluating the probable loss involved. This would mean foreseeing the future prospect for the resolution of the problem as well as identifying the degree of uncertainty felt about the problem. If the answer to the problem is readily available, it becomes less threatening than if the problem does not seem to give a ready answer. Moreover, the perception of the time pressure, according to the new model, would be another determining factor. For instance, a situation would be seen more negatively if the time period available to resolve the issue is perceived to be short. Thus, the perceived intensity of the problem along with the time pressure felt by an individual or



organization can mould it into a ‘crisis’ situation. As such, the element of surprise can only be held as a defining aspect of crisis based on the perception of the problem and the value given to the loss associated with it. Overall, according to Billings et al., the revised version of crisis perception “is useful...in identifying individual differences which might be antecedents of the extent of perceived crisis” (1980, p. 313).

This revised model can be usefully applied to young adults’ experience of problems faced during the transition to adulthood as their perception of the problem could play a key role in their experience of the transition. A problem can be perceived with different intensity by different people and this would be an important consideration to be kept in mind while exploring the individual pathways of young people through transition to adulthood.

Another topic of concern for the use of the term ‘crisis’ applies to the understanding that crisis could be accidental or developmental (Caplan, 1964). Accidental crises are those that appear suddenly which often go beyond the control of an individual, such as natural disaster or bereavement, and are not related to life stages. Developmental crises, on the other hand, are associated with the human life stages and which may appear gradually as a result of life changes associated with varied choices and commitments made by an individual. When referring to ‘quarterlife crisis’, it is the latter that applies because it is predicted to be brought about as a result of entering into a specific phase of life, like leaving an education system or the parental home or entering into a first job. In other words, it is a set of problems associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood (quarterlife). This leads into the next sub-section of conceptualizing ‘quarterlife crisis’: that is, crisis versus transition.

#### ***‘Quarterlife crisis’ versus ‘Quarterlife transition’***

If it is only individual perception that makes a crisis, would the ‘quarterlife crisis’ become merely a ‘transition’ for those who do not experience challenges or threats? The same question was raised by Stumpf (2012) in relation to midlife crisis in the article ‘Empirical Midlife Studies and the Backlash against Midlife Crisis’. According to the author, midlife crisis is commonly viewed as pathological or problematic and as a result, those who do not experience it with equal intensity are denied the experience of the crisis and do not get the equal attention with regard to their experience.

This brings attention back to the previous discussion about the perception of the value of the problem and the loss associated with it. The current study acknowledges this relativity in experience and attempts to explore experiences of those people who have felt that they have encountered challenges during their transition to adulthood. Hence, the term ‘quarterlife crisis’ would be preferably used over ‘quarterlife transition’ for the present study because it focuses on

young people's difficulties as experienced during this time when they felt stuck and unable to progress towards 'adulthood'.

In the following section I highlight a few studies done on 'quarterlife crisis', examining stages (Robinson & Smith, 2010) and applicability of this experience to different social groups (Pole, 2014).

Robinson and Smith (2010) attempted to explore phases of crisis experiences that early adults (25 to 40 years) go through in the transitional period to adulthood. Based on a qualitative study, the authors derived four phases of crisis transition: locked in, separation, exploration and resolution. *Locked in* is characterized by extrinsic motivation of role like materialism and conformism in which early adults adopt a 'foreclosed' self with little internal satisfaction with their position, role or identity. This is a phase which could be thought of as similar to being stuck in a position which is not necessarily personally gratifying. The second phase is *separation* when an individual starts questioning their current roles or positions, say, in terms of jobs, relationship or living condition. This phase is characterized by assertiveness and desperation associated with moving out of their previous role and integrating a more self-fulfilling role or identity. The third phase is *exploration* when an individual actively seeks for a new role or identity and thus aspires to a new life structure that would be congruent to their desires and aspirations. The fourth phase is *resolution* when a new life structure is formed which is perceived as more self-fulfilling and satisfying than the previous. There are different life experiences and emotions associated with each of these phases: for example, dissatisfaction and constriction during the first phase, anger and depression during the second, restlessness, curiosity and excitement during *exploration*; and enjoyment and self-fulfilment in the last phase (Robinson & Smith, 2010).

Reflecting on Robinson and Smith (2010), it cannot be ascertained that every individual experiencing crisis during early adulthood would go through all the aforementioned phases. Moreover, the sample used for the study was quite restricted in terms of demography (obtained higher education, employed and middle to high socio-economic status) and size (n=16). However, despite the limitations, it offers useful insight into the patterns that one could possibly go through in experiencing crisis during early adulthood.

There were other authors who raised doubts and concerns over the term 'quarterlife crisis'. For instance, Rossi and Mebert (2011) raised questions whether such a crisis exists and whether this could be specifically ascribed to an age group ('twentysomething'). In order to investigate this they conducted research on young people (North American) divided into four groups: transitions from high school to work, high school to college, college to work and college to graduate school. It was a quantitative study with sets of predictor variables (ego identity development, future time perspective, social support and coping) and dependent variables

(depression symptomology, anxiety, job satisfaction and life satisfaction). The major finding of the study is that anxiety was higher among the high school graduates than college graduates in their transition to work. This was attributed to the fact that college graduates may have more familiarity with work settings than the high school students. Most of the findings were based on the comparison of the four groups of participants with regard to the different scales used to measure the dependent variables. The authors refuted the existence of ‘quarterlife crisis’ because they posed that such problems (as derived from the words used by Robbins and Wilner, 2001) did not seem to be pertinent for the college graduates. Such analysis of ‘quarterlife crisis’ is based on the assumption that it is an experience only common to college graduates and thus, pinning the experience of this phenomenon only to the problems related to transition from graduation to work. This provokes further research to focus on young people who follow different education to work trajectories and identify other issues related to transition to adulthood that could cause crisis: for instance, unable to establish financial stability or to find a suitable partner for marriage (aspects that are commonly identified as conventional markers of adulthood).

In addition, there are limitations to Rossi and Mebert’s (2011) philosophical assumptions. Firstly, general scales were used to measure the variables like anxiety, depression and ego identity. The form and connotation of these experiences could differ between individuals of different groups as well as within group. For instance, the levels of anxiety were quantitatively measured, but do we know about the specific cause and form of anxiety across the four groups (four samples in the research)? In other words, the authors picked variables for their study based on words used in Robbins and Wilner’s work, but these may not have the same meaning for different individuals. This is not to support or refute the idea of ‘quarterlife crisis’ but a call for further investigation focusing on the lived experiences of young adults and the context within which these experiences occur. It may not always be the quantification of anxiety, stress and depression, but the nature of these experiences that require further understanding.

A qualitative study was conducted by Pole (2014) with young people (postgraduates from 20-29 years of age) from Tongan community settled in New Zealand. The author used a phenomenological approach to explore whether this population fits into the idea of ‘quarterlife crisis’. Before going further in describing the findings, it is essential to know about the context of this community. In the Tongan community, family is the basic social unit and the resources are shared among the family members. Tertiary education is given great importance and also considered to be a ‘collective effort’ of the family and level of education achieved was linked to family status. In addition, family also poses as the “source of personal identity and security” (Pole, 2014, p. 38). This indicates the high value placed on interdependence and collective goal in the Tongan community. Focus on parents and the pressure of fulfilling their dreams and aspirations were evident in the findings of Pole’s study. This is especially true because as

migrants living in New Zealand they had a specific interest of economic benefit for their young people.

Pole (2014) also found that participants exhibited lack of insight into the nature of employment. Some chose to take jobs (whatever available) and fell into a loop of being stuck because they were scared to quit and risk unemployment. On being unemployed, young people exhibited self-blame and doubts over their qualifications. In addition, they perceived a lowered status that was accompanied by anxiety and hopelessness. Participants in her study recognised themselves as fitting into 'quarterlife crisis' but with different levels of severity. However, the collective element of the Tongan community set these young people apart from the mainstream idea of 'quarterlife crisis'. Instead of being an individual journey, it was rather a collective attempt with family and community support. Although Pole's study was not aimed at investigating the markers of adulthood, the findings suggested that young people from the Tongan community equated successful transition with the ability to support their family, and fulfil family expectations and responsibilities, whilst acquiring family status through their noteworthy achievements.

Such findings raise interesting questions about the forms of 'quarterlife crisis' as experienced by young people in different social and cultural contexts. Pole's study was based on postgraduates of the Tongan community and as such it was focused on young people with a specific and high level of education. This calls for further attention to how crisis could be potentially experienced across young people from different economic, social, and educational backgrounds.

There are also potential differences between the experiences of 'quarterlife crisis' for men as compared to women given that problems are situated mostly in terms of transition to work and intimate relationships/marriage. For instance, it was found that women gave more importance to intrinsic, altruistic and social values of work than do men (Johnson, 2001; Krahn & Galambos, 2014). In relation to marriage and parenthood, Wolbers (2007) found that women with insecure jobs were more likely to opt for marriage and parenthood than were men. Along the same lines, it was also found that women in part-time jobs gave more importance to marriage and parenthood than men. These findings suggest a link between work and marriage in which decisions about work could be related to marriage and vice versa: at least for women. Thus, the differing attitudes and decisions about marriage and parenthood could influence the experience of young people juggling between work and family life. It was found that men with children are more likely to work than those without, whereas women are more likely to work when they do not have children (Office of National Statistics, September, 2013). This highlights the still divided role of men and women in the home front, especially when they enter parenthood, and the differing decisions about labour market participation. In addition, although parenthood may

not be considered to be a marker of adulthood by both men and women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women are more likely than men to consider it as a turning point of their lives (Aronson, 2008).

In terms of intimate relationships, it was found that women tend to become involved in romantic relationships earlier than men (Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark & Gordon, 2003). This is, yet again, an indication of differing priorities and preferences between the genders that hints towards the variation in experiences of men and women in transition to adulthood. These differences highlight the importance of gender consideration in the understanding of crisis experience among young adults.

Thus, while exploring the lived experiences of young people and examining the phenomenon of 'quarterlife crisis', the study remains sensitive to social, cultural, educational and economic background while also considering the possibility of gender differences in the experience of 'quarterlife crisis'. Hence, in the next chapter (Chapter 1b) I discuss culture and society, education and employment scenario, and gender differences, existing in UK and India (explicated in two different sections). The chapter begins with discussion of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development and then discuss 'individualism' and 'collectivism' before visiting the British and Indian contexts.

In addition to this, the present study remains cautious of the term 'crisis' whilst considering the three elements discussed earlier: threat, time pressure and surprise.

## Chapter 1b: Contextualising young people's experiences

### 1b.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human development

Already brought out in the section discussing 'quarterlife crisis', but more elaborately explained in Bronfenbrenner's model, is the importance of studying the context and circumstances influencing the development of the individual.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development conceptualizes the individual and the environment, as well as the relations between them, in terms of systems and subsystems. His model is an analysis and integration of empirical studies in various disciplines. His position developed from limitations he perceived in experimental methods carried out in settings that were both artificial and unfamiliar. These experiments that claim to lead to an understanding of human development were highly criticised by Bronfenbrenner (1975, 1977). He argued: "contemporary developmental psychology is the science of the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time" (1977, p. 513). He poses that study of human development should go beyond just observation of interaction between two people in one setting, to include multiple systems of interactions in multiple settings governed by one or more sets of values and beliefs. His model proposes different systems and subsystems within which human development can be better understood. These systems and subsystems are explained in the following section.

The smallest system in this structure, as given by Bronfenbrenner, represents the microsystem which involves a direct, complex, two-way interaction between an individual and the immediate environment in a single context defined by place, role and time: for example, the interaction between a child and the father at home during a particular period of time. However, this interaction can be influenced by various factors apart from the immediate environment and this brings attention to the next system: the mesosystem. The mesosystem involves the interaction between an individual and various settings of which the individual is a part. This could include family, friends, workplace. According to Bronfenbrenner, interaction and events in one social setting could influence the kind of social process and interaction in another, thus leading to a joint effect of which the individual is a part. For instance, a child could be part of the family, school or peer group and these settings together could influence the behaviour and development of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1975). These settings can, in turn, take place in relation to each other and this comprises the exosystem in which the individual is part of one or more of the settings with at least one of which the individual is not a part. An example for this could be a peer group in which a member could belong to a certain neighbourhood where the other members of the peer group are not directly involved. Thus, although an individual may not be

part of a particular setting, but in virtue of interacting with another person belonging to that setting, it gives a new value to the interaction taking place between two people.

Furthermore, these settings do not exist in a vacuum and have institutions, formal and/or informal, that directly affect the immediate environment and various settings surrounding it, but not always the individual directly. For instance, the belief and value system of a culture or sub-culture could influence the family system, workplace rules and regulation and even characteristics of a neighbourhood. This overarching system of beliefs and values constitute the macrosystem which, in turn, could determine individual action in the immediate environment. Alongside from the micro-, meso-, exo- and the macro- systems, there is another system - the chronosystem. The chronosystem constitutes the historical context in which all other systems are embedded. This system directs attention to the change and consistency that occurs, not just in the individual, but also the environment, micro and macro structures that envelop the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1975, 1994).

This model gives a broad perspective in the study of human development, giving importance to context: psychological, social, economic, cultural, political and historical. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), one of the challenges for researchers studying human development is the need to investigate “environmental structures, and the process taking place within and between them...viewed as interdependent and...analysed in systems terms” (p. 518). Since the present study is concerned with crisis experienced in transition of young people moving through a certain ‘developmental phase’, it is worth considering these multiple dimensions that could influence their experiences in a given context. These are discussed in terms of changing trends in education, employment and gender differences that could directly or indirectly influence the lives of young people, the decisions they make and their crisis experiences. Bronfenbrenner (1977) also laid importance on individual perception and meanings ascribed to the environment. According to him, the adaptability of species in different ecological structures cannot be ignored in the study of human development. As such the present study involves a hermeneutic approach in which the focus is both on understanding an individual’s perception of, as well as adaptation to, the various issues faced during their transition. Moreover, the researcher, too, is part of the whole system (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) within which the study or interaction occurred and hence, reflexivity is maintained in the present study.

Although Bronfenbrenner’s model is helpful and relevant for the present study given my focus on two different cultures, it is essential to be aware of the criticisms of this model. The major criticism of the model is the lack of attention to ‘resilience’ (Christensen, 2010). In other words, little attention is given to the individual’s ability to withstand challenges in the environment. According to Christensen (2010), ‘resilience’ should be included in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model to allow it to explain better the ways in which people navigate negative, or

even traumatic, experiences. Moreover, the model lacks understanding of what inspires and motivates learning processes which could further stimulate positive change and transformation. In summary, attention to individual capacities and differences has been found to be lacking in Bronfenbrenner's model of human development.

Overall, Bronfenbrenner (1975, 1977, 1994) brought attention to a much wider perspective in the study of human development and attempt shall be made to integrate his insights in developing the background, method and analysis of the current study. The current study involves exploring crisis experiences of young people from two countries: the UK and India. Broadly, the UK can be considered a country whose official culture consists of a cluster of historically-situated values, meanings, practices and outlook captured by the geographical concept of 'the West'. Similarly, India can be considered a country whose official culture consists of historically-situated values, meanings, practices and outlook captured by the geographical concept of 'the East'. There are many studies and discussions related to the difference between these two regions of the world, especially in terms of the concepts of 'individualism' and 'collectivism' (the latter sometimes termed 'traditional' cultures) which is considered by many researchers as a key distinction between the cultures typically considered 'Western' and 'Eastern' respectively (Dwairy & Achoui, 2010; Hui & Triandis, 1986; Kagitçibasi, 1996; Killen & Wainryb, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Mines, 1988). Given the influence of macrosystem (e.g. beliefs and values typical of a culture/sub-culture) (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) on people's lives, in the following section I provide a critical discussion of the UK and India as representative of individualistic and collectivist culture respectively.

### **1b.2 Individualistic and Collectivist cultures**

Simply put, a central distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures is the relative emphasis on the personal as opposed to the group. Hence, individualistic culture is one in which self-fulfilment is highly valued and personal responsibility and independence encouraged; collectivist culture is one in which group goals tend to be prioritised and fulfilling one's responsibility to others, particularly to one's family of origin, is part of the social fabric (Hui & Triandis, 1986). However, the distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures as enacted in specific societies has been hotly contested by several researchers (Kagitçibasi, 1996; Killen & Wainryb, 2000; Mines, 1988). These researchers propose, rather, that societies fall on a continuum of individualistic-collectivist given that personal independence and social interdependence co-exist in most cultures.

An interesting study by Mines (1988) in India (specifically in a southern state of India- Tamil Nadu) substantiated a critique that collectivism is, in fact, better thought of as an ideological stance than as a social practice. His study, based on 23 life histories of men and women between the ages of 23 to 83 years, showed that, with age, there is growing awareness of *personal*



responsibility. All of the interviewees described having personal goals, most of which were to some extent in conflict with local social and cultural expectations. Personal goals developed at an early age, but tended to be suppressed under the pressure of family and social obligations. It was only in their late 20s and early 30s that most interviewees described rebelling against social and cultural norms in order to pursue their personal goals, although there were some who continued sacrificing their personal aspirations to fulfil social expectations. This suggests that, even in a typical ‘collectivist culture’, pursuit of personal goals can be strong. However, even so, the over-arching ‘collectivist’ context is likely to have an impact on the kinds of struggles involved and challenges encountered (Killen & Wainryb, 2000).

Killen and Wainryb (2000) proposed that “concerns with autonomy are not absent from traditional societies, but are played out differently for individuals in different roles and positions, resulting in a complex interweaving of independence and interdependence” (p. 16). The authors acknowledged the difference between individualistic and collectivist societies, but are sensitive also to different social interactions and arrangements within a culture that influence behaviour and beliefs. Hence, personal goals can be in harmony, or in conflict, with the over-arching values of one’s immediate social context. This is true also of ‘individualistic’ societies where young children are socialised to understand moral obligations, showing concern for the welfare of others: attributes considered typical of a ‘collectivist’ society and Killen and Wainryb (2000) posed that even in an ‘individualistic’ culture, children “develop independent concerns with roles, authority and conventions” (p. 10).

Furthermore, with modernisation, individualism has become prominent in ‘the East’ leading to increase in youth aspirations for personal choice and determination. However, “the process of modernisation is not uniform across cultures” (Hamamura, 2012, p. 6). Inglehart and Baker (2000) proposed a revision of the modernisation theory that assumes change in traditional value system with economic development. According to the authors, cultural and religious values still persist along with economic development and the path to change is far from linear or predictable. In addition, despite modernisation and accompanying economic growth, strong relationships shared with family and friends (both in the West and the East) have little changed. However, ties to family have become less obligatory and more voluntary than they had been in previous decades (Hamamura, 2012).

*Different societies follow different trajectories even when they are subjected to the same forces of economic development, in part because situation-specific factors, such as cultural heritage, also shape how a particular society develops (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p. 22).*

Thus, although ‘modernisation’ has had its impact in the developing countries in the East with a push towards ‘individualism’, culture mores and traditions has not altered drastically, leading to a coexistence of both economic development and ‘collectivist’ values.

In the present study, for convenience, I use the terms ‘individualistic’ and ‘collectivist’ to characterise the UK and India respectively. I used these terms interpreted as over-arching ideologies and with cognisance of the debates and critiques these terms provoke and I remain cautious and sensitive to social and cultural norms that could influence the experience of crisis whilst transitioning to adulthood.

### **1b.3 Background: UK and India**

#### ***UK background: Culture and society, education and employment, and gender differences***

The United Kingdom constitutes four countries- England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - with a total population of 64,596,800 in 2014 (Office for National Statistics, June, 2015). The following section will highlight the cultural background, education and employment, and gender differences prevailing in the UK.

#### *Culture and Society*

UK represents a Western culture where “intergenerational independence is valued, and child rearing is oriented toward engendering self-reliance and autonomy in the child” more typical of the middle class families (Kagitçibasi, 1996, p. 183). Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed that, in understanding and defining self, those from a collectivist society tends to include others within the boundaries of self-definition. On the other hand, in an individualistic society, although self can change with social context, it tends to be defined less in relation to others and more as an independent whole. Although in the UK the emphasis is on autonomy, this does not necessarily mean a complete separateness from others. Kagitçibasi proposed that “autonomy should be recognised for what it is, as agency, not as separateness. The agency dimension should not be confused with the interpersonal distance dimension” (1996, p. 185). Furthermore, the influence of context in determining individual experiences cannot be negated. Social contexts set structural constraints that determine what is possible and functional within given circumstances and/or the struggles that an individual might meet in order to exercise certain rights and freedoms. Thus, although individualistic cultures (like that in the UK) are considered to emphasise independence and autonomy, the social context needs to be borne in mind whilst understanding individuals’ lived experiences. For instance, one’s socio economic status (SES) can influence opportunities that are available in education as well as in the labour market.

With regard to family systems, currently the traditional nuclear family in the UK is going through changes in terms of composition and variety. They include lone parents, cohabiting couples, same sex couples and adult children staying at home with parents (The Social Issues Research Centre, 2008). From 1996 to 2006, the number of married couples in the UK decreased by 4% and that of cohabitation increased by 14%, meaning that cohabitation before marriage has become almost a normative institution (Jenkins, Pereira & Evans, 2009). There has

also been a rising trend in young people (between 20-34 years) returning to live with their parents. In 2013, 26% of this age group lived with parents compared to 21% in 1996 (a rise from 2.7 million to 3.3 million). However, dividing this group into two cohorts, it is seen that 21% of 20-29 year olds and 8% of 30-34 year olds lived with their parents in 2013. This shows that, with increase in age, the likelihood of young adults living with their parents does decrease (Office of National Statistics, January, 2014).

The current demographic composition of the UK indicates a multicultural society. There has been rise in ethnic diversity in the UK since at least 1991, with London being the most ethnically diverse area (Office of National Statistics, December, 2012). Specifically, the non-White population of the UK has almost doubled since 1991 from 3 to 7 million (ESRC Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity, December, 2012). This is the result of the long tradition of migration to the UK from different parts of the world and indicates the diverse range of cultures and customs prevalent in the UK. With this ethnic diversity, there is also a wide range of family structures in the UK with a mix of both ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ family patterns (Berthoud, 2005). For instance, the British-born Caribbean population show both low marriage and high separation rates and, hence, a high level of single parenthood. On the other hand, family patterns of the South Asian population (Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Indians and African Americans) in the UK vary considerably but, collectively, are closer to the traditional family system. Interestingly, the British South Asian population has the highest marriage rates of all ethnic minority groups. Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are close to the traditional family structure (i.e., women working at home and relatively high numbers of children), while Indians and African Asians are closer to modern family patterns (i.e., working mothers and relative low numbers of children). However, there is high rate of families with co-resident paternal grandmothers among the four groups of South Asian population living in Britain (Berthoud, 2005), which is atypical of White British families.

Thus, there are a variety of cultures in the UK as a result of increasing migration of people from different parts of the world.

### *Education and employment*

#### Education system

The education system in the UK includes five stages from early years, primary, secondary, further education and higher education (“Education system in”, 2012). The starting age of early years school is 5 years old (4 years old in Northern Ireland) and there is compulsory education till the age of 18. Primary school is divided often into infant school and junior school. Infant school includes Year 1 to Year 2 (age between 5-7 years) and junior school includes Year 3 to Year 6 (age 7-11 years). Secondary school starts from Year 7 (age 11-12 years), and Year 11

marks the completion of GCSE exams (at age 16). Secondary education also includes A-levels (Year 12-13). Further education is based on skill training and vocational education which can be entered after the completion of compulsory education. Higher education involves degree qualifications at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. There are differences in the higher education system between England and Wales (typically, a 3-year undergraduate degree) as compared to Scotland (typically, a 4-year undergraduate degree).

#### Class differences in education

One of the most researched areas in the field of education in the UK is class differences (Archer, Hutchings & Ross, 2003; Bolton, 2010; Blanden & Machin, 2004; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010). There has been continuous attempts post-1992 to widen participation in higher education, especially to reach out to less privileged sections of society (Archer et al., 2003). Higher education was not equally distributed between the richer and poorer sections of society (Blanden & Machin, 2004), and the gap in education participation between classes continue to be wide along with the expansion of higher education (see also Archer et al., 2003; Bolton, 2010). There are many factors worth taking into consideration in the understanding of class differences in education.

Through interviews, Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002) found that, among those from low SES, some made the attempt at university education and this was influenced by family expectations other than just available funds from parents. The authors found that social class was also a predictor of GCSE attainment and in turn participation in higher education. However, for those belonging to low SES, compared to those from middle-class families, the decision to go to university tended to be more active, well-planned, and deliberate (Ball et al., 2002). Thus, Ball et al. argued that, for those young people from low SES, going to university was not a natural progression culturally.

Changes in funding in the UK have added further pressure and stress on students, especially those from low SES (Thomas, 2002). Apart from financial considerations, there was also the location factor that determined choice to go to university. Most students from low SES were found to attend universities within their locality and to stay at home whilst completing their studies. This made some feel secure and more self-assured while attending university (Reay et al., 2010). The choice of university was also polarised in which some universities typically attract people from low to middle SES while others were specifically attracting students from middle to high SES (Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2010).

#### Relationship between education and employment

There is a complicated relationship between education and employment in the UK and here I discuss three factors that make it so: (i) increasing number of people in education in recent

years; (ii) competition with older employees; (iii) employers' attitude towards hiring new employees; and (iv) underplaying youth aspirations.

(i) Participation in full-time education has increased considerably from 1950 to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the UK. 88 percent of the 16 year olds and 76 percent of the 17 year olds were in full-time education in 2010 compared to 14 percent of 16 year olds and 7 percent of 17 year olds in 1950 (Bolton, 2012). Participation in higher education has also increased from 3.4 percent in 1950 to 33 percent in 2000 (Bolton, 2012).

Under the UK government policy, five GCSEs Grades A-C was considered a success, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century more than half secondary school students achieve this benchmark (Roberts, 2009). This has pushed young people to opt for university education to compete in the job market. This race for qualifications has outpaced the job opportunities available causing surplus of labour, on one hand, and limited job positions (demand) on the other: "A job that was once within the reach of a school-leaver with A-levels is now likely to require a university degree. A-levels can now be demanded for entry to jobs for which GCSEs were once sufficient" (Roberts, 2009; p. 359). Youth Credits was introduced in 1991 by the UK government on the rationale that young people needed more motivation to excel in order to be able to attain jobs. These credits in terms of finance were provided to young people of 16 years of age, which could only be spent on education and training. However, this scheme, along with career services failed because of less attention given to the demand side of employment (needs of the employers) (Roberts, 2009).

Vocational training was introduced to provide skill specific training to individuals so that they would be better equipped with the demands in the job market (Scherer, 2005). In this respect, apprenticeships helped mould skills based on employment requirements, also saving employers' time and training costs. Participation age for apprenticeships was 18 but another sector called 'Youth Apprenticeships' was made available for the 16 year olds. Along with apprenticeships, vocational diplomas were popular in 2005, and following 2007, opportunities for academic diplomas also became widespread (Roberts, 2009).

In order for such training programmes to succeed in bridging education and employment, it is essential that they are well structured (Roberts, 2009). The British government introduced a scheme in the 1990s to assist young people in the transition from education to work (Youth Training Scheme), but it failed to gain recognition among employers and those involved in the scheme were stigmatised as low achievers (Heinz, 2009). Moreover, the training programmes in the UK were lacking in variety, thus reducing the opportunities for young people with different interests (Heinz, 2009; Muller, 2005; Scherer, 2005). Furthermore, although occupational specific training programmes were seen as advantageous, they could not compete with the large number of university qualified people (Roberts, 2009). According to Roberts (2009), there was

also a change in parents' attitudes, characterized by expectation and ambition that their children would gain higher education qualifications and, consequently expect a better level of graduate employment. Before 1970, leaving school without qualification was considered acceptable and they would easily join the labour market without shame or doubt. Today, such youth, would often be tagged as having unacceptably low aspirations and ambition (Roberts, 2009). This could potentially cause pressure among young people to obtain higher education qualifications and enter a good graduate level job. Moreover, "school leavers with general upper secondary qualifications, on average, obtain jobs of slightly higher occupational status than school leavers with vocational qualifications or those who have served on apprenticeship" (Muller, 2005, p. 468). However, in addition to competing with other graduates, they also face competition with the existing skilled labour that makes securing jobs furthermore difficult for young people who are recently out of education (O'Higgins, 2001). This brings me to the next point of why there is a complex association between education and employment, that is, competition with existing employees.

(ii) Employers often demand work experience which young people just out of education do not possess, consequently leaving them unemployed or with temporary low-paid jobs (Keep, 2012). There has been increasing number of part-time, contractual and temporary jobs in the new era (Krahn & Galambos, 2014; Wyn & Woodman, 2006) and more people from recent generations participate in it in comparison to the older generation (Wyn & Woodman, 2006). Young people have very little choice in this respect as they have to compete with adults who have already established their skills in the labour market and who are preferred over inexperienced, 'just out of education' young people (Keep, 2012; O'Higgins, 2001). Furthermore, young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century suffered the consequences of the economic recession and the impact was felt most by those just out of education. For instance, the recession has caused many firms to stop recruiting new employees and since young people constitute most of these job seekers, they have been affected the most (O'Higgins, 2001).

(iii) Another important contributing factor to youth unemployment is employer's attitude. A few authors (Marsden & Ryan, 1990; Payne, 2000; Roberts, 2009; Scherer, 2005) have suggested the need of the government to concentrate on the demand side of employment rather than just the labour supply. According to Roberts (2009), UK government failed in many of its schemes to reduce youth unemployment because of the unwillingness of the employers to recruit young people in many occasions. Thus, preference of employers have major role to play in the success and failure of government policies. In a survey of employers done by UK Commission for Employment and Skills in 2011, it was found that employers hire young people based on their experience more than just their educational qualification (Keep, 2012). However, not many employers are willing to take the 'risk' and use the company resources to train and

hire young job-seekers. Despite the efforts of Human Resource Management to tackle this issue since mid-1980s, there has not been much change in the attitudes of the employers to allow young people gain work experience (Keep, 2012).

In an attempt to increase youth employment, there were policies directed to encourage employers to recruit those just out of education. One such policy was reduction in youth wages and social security and increasing contractual and fixed period jobs in a hope that it would make employers recruit them on the basis of it being a source of cheap labour (Marsden & Ryan, 1990; O'Higgins, 2001). There are many reasons why these turned out unsuccessful. Firstly, labour surplus led to creation of only menial jobs that were made available for the surplus (Roberts, 2009). Secondly, such policies would be effective for occupational markets, but not so much for internal markets where pay is non-negotiable (Marsden & Ryan, 1990). Thirdly, although such policies led to marginal improvement, the improvement was based on lower wages and not the quality of skills (O'Higgins, 2001). Apart from the concern regarding the quality of skills, the decision of employers to recruit young people is also based on various factors in the market such as the labour regulation policies that aim at protecting older employees from being fired from the job (Wolbers, 2007) and demand for increase pay for current employees (Baranowska & Gebel, 2010).

Employment Protection policy (labour market regulation) had indirect consequence on youth employment (O'Higgins, 2001; Scherer, 2005). According to this policy, employers are given restrictions on firing employees who have been working for many years in their organisation. The new comers easily lose their jobs when the company requires clearing out (Wolbers, 2007). The employers would also be sceptical about giving full-time permanent jobs to new comers because that would mean making firing further difficult as per the regulation requirements. Hence, most of the new young job seekers have to settle for contractual, part-time and temporary jobs as these expire on their own (Baranowska & Gebel, 2010). The unions also have their role in this condition of young job seekers and employees. According to Baranowska and Gebel (2010), the unions tend to cater to the insiders in the firms demanding higher wages for those who are usually experienced adult workers in their prime age in the labour market. This causes employers to give out more contractual jobs rather than permanent ones to escape from the cost involved in keeping them in the organization.

(iv) Youth aspiration is another element that often go unacknowledged in the government's attempts to deal with youth unemployment (Payne, 2000; Scherer, 2005). It was found that most young people, irrespective of age, expect an 'ideal' job that they look forward to achieving. But not many are sure what pathway would lead them to it or whether such a job exist (British Youth Council, 2009). Based on an online survey of 500 young people in the UK between 12 to 26 years of age, it was found that formal career services had very little influence on young

people's decisions about their career. Of the 73 percent of young people who attended career services, 80.2 percent said that they were of no to very little help. In fact, when asked about the key influences in their career decisions, 65.3 percent of young people mentioned parents followed by jobs and career websites (60.8 percent) while 59.9 percent endorsed friends and 58.2 percent endorsed teachers. There was not much gender difference found in these ratings, however, girls were found to give higher endorsement to websites than boys (British Youth Council, 2009). It was also found that some young people have broad and varied aspirations which call for a need to have career guidance services that would be equally wide ranged (British Youth Council, 2009).

Thus, both – fulfilling aspirations and desire for financial independence could be crucial in determining employment status of young people and external conditions could support or limit their progression. These conditions need to be borne in mind whilst exploring young people's experiences of transition to adulthood and the difficulties that they may encounter in the process.

The employment status of young people also has influence on other decisions like marriage and parenthood. A study by Wolbers (2007) based on 11 European countries (including UK) investigated the impact of employment status on independence (leaving parental home and starting an independent living arrangement), marriage (married or unmarried cohabitation) and parenthood (having any child). Statistical analysis was done on the data collected from 'Careers after Higher Education: a European Research Study' (CHEERS, 1998). The central research question of Wolbers's study was "whether employment insecurity...has a negative impact on potential home leaving and family formation" (2007, p. 482). The employment statuses considered for this study were: unemployed, working part-time, working full-time temporary and working full-time permanent. The former three of these types were associated with employment insecurity by the author. Results of this study showed that independence, marriage and parenthood are more likely to occur with secured employment position: that is, working full-time permanent. These results did not differ substantially between males and females but women with insecure jobs were found to opt for marriage and parenthood earlier than men. Thus, there is a close relationship, demonstrated by Wolbers, between employment status, independence, marriage and parenthood.

Similarly Heinz (2009) argued that young people need to alternate and work closely with various other aspects in their lives like entering into romantic relationship, living arrangements and starting a family. In this way, Heinz brought attention to the crises situations which could be demanding on young people's time horizon. Moreover, the time horizon available for those in an advantaged position often allows relatively more exploration and use of agency as a way of attaining future goals than those in a disadvantaged position (Heinz, 2009). The choices a



young adult makes are based on the ‘next best’ and are not always about being open to infinite options. This implies that transition to adulthood and the experience of crisis could be substantially influenced by social and economic conditions. The heterogeneity in transition (as proposed by Arnett, 2000) might be a result of such differing contextual factors determining progression to adulthood. The present study shall consider different conditions in which young people navigate their way to adulthood while being mindful of external factors determining their crisis experience.

### *Gender differences*

Gender differences in the UK are seen in different spheres like education, work and pay. In terms of educational qualifications, participation in higher education has increased for both males and females from 1992/93 to 2013/14. For males the rate has increased from 23.7% to 35.8% and for females it has increased from 28.2% to 48.1% (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2015, July). It was found that in 1996, there was a higher proportion of females (31.3%) without qualifications than males (27.9%), and this position gradually reversed to a lower proportion of females without qualifications (16.1%) than males (18.9%) in 2013. In 2013/14 there was only a small difference in the enrolment to further education between males (36.5%) and females (34.2%) (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2015, July).

Through comparison of percentages of employment between men and women from 1971 to 2013, it was found that there was a reverse trend in the employment rates. Women’s participation in work was found to have increased from 53% to 67% from 1971 to 2013, whereas employment of men decreased from 92% in 1971 to 76% in 2013 (Office of National Statistics, 2013, September). According to the Office of National Statistics (2013, September), there were gender differences in the participation in the labour market. Men had a higher employment rate than women after the age of 22, but there was a declining trend in employment after age of 40 for men and rising trend for women.

Certain traditional norms and values surrounding gender roles still stand true even in the modern times in the UK. For instance, it was found that men are more likely to work when they have children, and women are more likely to work when they have no dependent children. It was found that 89.5% of graduate women without any dependent children were participating in the labour market (Office of National Statistics, 2015, March). Moreover, women in part-time work were more in number than men (41% and 11% respectively) (Office for National Statistics, 2015, November).

There are also differences noted in the pay obtained from work. In terms of full-time gross weekly earnings, it was found that there was a gap of £55.20 (mean) in 2014 (Office of the First

Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2015, July). However, this gender gap in pay has been lowest since 1997 when this kind of survey began. There has not been much change in this percentage in the last four years (Office of National statistics, 2015, November).

***India: Culture and society, education and employment, and gender differences***

*Culture and society*

The Indian sub-continent is a diverse nation with amalgamation of several cultures and traditions. The vast population of 1,210,854,977 (Census Organisation of India, 2011) is composed of people of multiple creeds and customs. For example, India's languages, religions, dance, music, architecture, and food vary across the country. Culture is said to be a way of living (Panda & Gupta, 2004) and the diverse traditions in India indicate the varied individual experiences embedded in social and cultural contexts across the nation. In fact, because India is culturally so varied, one state cannot be taken as representative of India as a whole and Panda and Gupta (2004) posited:

*Most cross-cultural researchers are based on the assumption of 'homogeneity of values' across India. Or else, it seems that researchers base their studies on one or a few locations. The findings are later interpreted as the characteristic of Indian culture, which could in reality be location-specific cultural characteristics.*(p. 34)

However, Panda and Gupta have also identified a common characteristic of Indian society across all states: that is, interdependence. Thus, an underlying similarity between different states in India is the importance given to family ties and social connectedness (Chadda & Deb, 2013; Dwairy & Achoui, 2010; Hui & Triandis, 1986). In order to maintain some level of homogeneity in cultural background, the Indian sample for the current study includes participants only from Assam, one of the 'eight sisters' of India's northeast. The following section situates Assam in its wider context and elucidates the lifestyles of this region.

India's northeast comprises eight states- Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Assam, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura- known as the 'eight sisters'. However diversities are also apparent among these states in terms of race, language and religion (Singh, 1987) and dress, food habits, marriage rituals, customs and way of life. Ethnic diversity in northeast India is immense and widespread with a long tradition of settlers forming different groups in this region (Ali & Das, 2003; Das, 2015).

*In Assam's context one thing must be borne in mind that Assam's society is a poly-cultural society and hence the cultural traits found in Assam are very difficult to be located in any stereotype uniform culture-frame* (Ashokvardhan, 2004, p. 17).

There is an extensive merge of different tribes and cultures in Assam because of the long history of migration from different parts of the country as well as from other parts of the world (such as from Southeast Asia). The way of life and culture of Assam is influenced by this amalgamation of customs and tradition from different regions (Das, 2015).

The values, beliefs and norms of Assam went through further change with the coming of British rule in Assam in 1876. With the advent of the British Raj and the advancement of technology, customs and traditions narrowed and altered, and families have changed from 'joint; to 'nuclear' (Kumar, 1995), especially in the town areas (like Guwahati city). A common definition of a joint family is that it consists where two or more married couples live under the same roof with their unmarried children (Kolenda, 2007). In recent times, young people tend to move out of their parents' home after marriage and establish their own family. However, this does not mean that they no-longer have responsibilities and duties towards their family of origin. Elderly people are still strongly reliant on their children and expect them to take care of them post-retirement, but the traditional practice in which the elders had authority over the rest of the family has waned in Assam as in the rest of India (Kumar, 1995).

Independent choices and goals, set apart from the group (family or society at large), were less dominant prior to the advent of English education in Assam (through British rule). With the spread of English education came a variety of new ideas (Sarma, 1990). According to Kagitçibasi (1996), although family connectedness is an important aspect of Eastern culture, family interdependence reduces with increase in socio-economic development. This does not necessarily mean that family connectedness becomes non-existent. Instead it is the material dependence that tends to reduce while emotional connectedness continues to remain significant (Kagitçibasi, 1996). Miller, Bersoff and Harwood (1990) argued that most Indians consider it a moral obligation to attend to social responsibilities and this continues to be prevalent in Assam (Das, 2015).

Caste system in Assam is more flexible than the rest of the country (Ashokvardhan, 2004). This is worth taking into consideration because caste division was traditionally a basis of determining one's occupational opportunities. Based on the family that one is born into, one's occupation was defined with specific roles and responsibilities. Before the colonial period, caste system was rigid and people had no avenue for social and economic mobility. This division of society based on caste has been very much relaxed in Assam (Das, 1978; Smith, 2007). Although changes have taken place in India with regard to the rigidity of such systems, there are still conflicts and issues based on such divisions (especially in the rural areas of India). To uplift their conditions, 'reservation' policies in the form of fixed quotas for Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Castes (OBC) were implemented with regard to educational and employment opportunities where certain percentage of positions are allocated for less privileged groups in different sectors of the economy (Deshpande, 2010; Jangir, 2013).

Overall, Assam (although part of India) has a distinct lifestyle, customs and preferences. Although considered somewhat slow in development compared to the rest of the urban centres across the country, it is making marked progression in various fields. However, there has been

an increasing trend of young people from the northeastern states migrating to different metropolitan cities (like Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai). This was mainly because of the high political unrest in some states in the northeast like Assam, Nagaland and Manipur (especially in the past). Other reasons for migration include search for better educational and employment opportunities (Remesh, 2012).

### *Education and employment*

#### Educational system

The education system in India is somewhat different from that in the UK. However, equivalence in education levels between India and the UK can be easily drawn. Schools in Assam are either affiliated to the state or to the central board. At the school level, there are four stages of education, that is, primary (called classes I-IV and starts at the age of 5-6+), middle (classes V-VII), secondary (classes VIII-X) and senior secondary (classes XI-XII). Tenth standard is equivalent to the completion of GCSEs in the UK and eleventh and twelfth standards are the A-levels. It is in the eleventh and twelfth standards that students choose their stream of subjects broadly categorised into Science, Commerce, and Arts.

Currently in Assam, English is the medium of education in most of the primary to secondary schools, with some schools that still impart teaching and learning through local language (Assamese). However, for all higher education throughout Assam, English is the only medium of education (ur Rahman, 2012). Thus, English is considered compulsory if students want to pursue higher education. This resulted in wide variation in English proficiency among students in the colleges and universities because they have either had English or Assamese as a medium of instruction in school (Gogoi, 2014).

#### Literacy rates

In the year 2009, the government introduced compulsory and free education up to the age of 14. This was enforced to ensure the right to education for all children (6-14 years of age). As per the Assam government census data (2011), Assam has a literacy rate of 73.18% with males at 78.81% and females at 67.27%. As per 2009-10, there were 1207 PhD students of which males and females were of almost equal in number (612 and 595 respectively). There was also a high enrolment of degree courses in Assam (Rajkhowa, 2014). A wide range of higher education institutions have been established with varied subject areas allowing students to choose from diverse educational opportunities (ur Rahman, 2012). However, although there has been expansion of educational institutions in Assam, the job market in this region is not sufficient to capture the wide range of educational fields (Remesh, 2012).

### Relationship between education and employment (India)

The number of colleges and universities in India has increased drastically from 1950 to 2013-14. From 20 in 1950, the number of universities has increased to 677 in 2014, which is 34 times from that in 1950. Similarly, the number of colleges has increased 74 times from 500 in 1950 to 37,204 in March 2013 (Brar & Amandeep, 2015). The number of illiterate workers has decreased from 57.5 percent in 1983 to 38.8 percent in 2004-05. On the other hand, the number of graduates and those with further education has increased from 23.6 million in 2001 to 50.5 million in 2010. Despite the growth of colleges and universities, India is facing a large shortage of skilled labour (Brar & Amandeep, 2015; Saini, 2015). Because of lack of hard and soft skills, and low employability of young people, employers in India are finding it hard to fill the jobs (Brar & Amandeep, 2015). Ironically, India has a greater proportion of working population compared to many countries in the western hemisphere and there is high qualification in demand in the labour market, but there is still a rise in educated job seekers by 8.79 percent in a period of four years from 2004-08 (Khare, 2014). Just like in the case of UK, those with GCSEs (known as 10<sup>th</sup> standard in India) comprise the majority of those who are unable to get jobs (Khare, 2014).

One of the major problems in bridging the gap between education and employment in India is the mismatch between skill demand and people suitable (or employable) to fit the labour market. There are various reasons for this shortage of skill demand: “outdated curriculum, institutional apathy, faculty resistance to change and adapt, poor governance and quality control and infrastructural bottlenecks” (Khare, 2014, p. 52). One of the reasons for outdated curriculum is the lack of common platform where industries and government agencies could discuss curriculum up-gradation (Khare, 2014; Saini, 2015). Furthermore, in many educational institutions the infrastructure is poor. This is especially problematic when machines and tools used for training are outdated leading young graduates poorly prepared and ill-equipped to work in real settings. There is also a shortage of training faculties to deal with the large inflow of trainees (Khare, 2014). Overall, the training capacity of India (4.3 million) is lower than the number of people expected to join workforce every year (12 million) (Saini, 2015).

In terms of vocational training, India has the lowest percentage with only 2 percent receiving formal vocational training (Saini, 2015). Those with vocational training are perceived to be low-achievers (Saini, 2015) and it is considered to be meant for those who have failed to receive formal education. One of the other reasons for low enrolment in vocational training is the lack of awareness of skill demands in the market and the broad range of vocational training courses available to prepare one to fill these positions. Other reasons for low enrolment in vocational training is the low compensation and long duration courses (1 to 2 years) compared to other countries like China where they have short modular courses (Saini, 2015).

Saini (2015), in her study of skill capacities of India, laid down some of the challenges faced by skill development system. It was found that there are more people available for low skilled jobs than the number of job opportunities for the same. On the other hand, for high skilled jobs, there is more demand, but less people available. This creates a mismatch between demand and supply of workers in the labour market. There is different economic growth in different regions of the country that has also contributed to this mismatch between demand and supply. Those places in India where there is low economic growth, the population rate is high with very little job opportunities available, whereas those parts of the region where there is relatively high economic growth with more job opportunities, the population growth rate is low (Saini, 2015). Saini posed that:

*...despite making considerable progress in terms of literacy, high incidence of illiteracy cripples the Indian workforce even today... a stark reminder that India's demographic dividend can rapidly convert into a demographic nightmare if skills are not provided to both new and existing workforce. (2015, p. 3)*

Those from disadvantaged and rural settings are in a worse position with respect to skill development and youth unemployment (Saini, 2015). Eighty-two percent of those from the relevant age group do not have access to higher education (Khare, 2014) and there is a high cost involved in, not just attaining higher education, but also travelling from rural to urban settings to gain quality education.

The Government of India (GOI) initiated several programmes for skill development to cater to the large labour market demands. For instance, the GOI set up the National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC) in 2009 to facilitate skill enhancement aiming to train 500 million youth by 2022 (Brar & Amandeep, 2015; Khare, 2014) and funds has been doubled under National Skill Development Fund (NSDF) in 2012-13. Furthermore, amendments have been made to an existing act – Apprentices (Amendment) Bill, 2014 – to raise workers' skills and enable flexibility for the industries hiring apprentices and increase the stipends available. Another scheme was included under Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) to provide practical experiences to engineering students, A-level students and diploma holders. There has also been attempt to expand vocational training in schools and, at the same time, making them affordable by exempting the institutes from paying service tax. The private sector has also started playing an active role in vocational training whilst employing the trainees in their organisations. In this way, various steps have been taken recently to cater to the shortage of skill demand in India. However, given the fast increasing rate of working population growth, these schemes too will soon fall short (Brar & Amandeep, 2015). There is a call for more attention to skill development and quality education that is at the same time affordable. As Brar and Amandeep (2015) have posed: “right monitoring and striving for impact-based implementation” (p. 130) of various schemes is the need of the hour in a country like India.

### *Gender differences*

It is commonly presumed that there is gender equality in the northeast of India and, relatively speaking, there is more gender equality in this region of India compared to the rest. Common practices, like dowry (goods, cash and/or other properties given from bride's family to the groom), female foeticide (killing a female foetus outside the legal norms of abortion) and female infanticides (discriminating/killing female infants) are much less in the northeast of India than in the rest of the country (Bareh, 2001), and non-existent in Meghalaya, Mizoram and Manipur where there is greatest gender equality (Mahanta & Nayak, 2013). The dowry system is almost practised reverse in Assam in which it is customary for the groom's family to gift the bride with goods (mainly clothes and jewellery) as part of wedding custom (Sarma, 1990). Before the intermingling of the northeastern culture with the rest of India, women's position was more or less equal with that of men, in which women actively took part in the workforce that included selling in the market, weaving and other socio-economic activities. It is only after the British opened channels between the northeastern region and the rest of India that some of the gender differences were adopted in the northeastern region (Bhuyan, 2007), but still practices like dowry is less visible in this region.

In terms of education, there is high enrolment of women in the educational system in the northeast of India. In Assam, there were educational institutions opened for girls (ur Rahman, 2012) and female literacy rate is higher in the northeast compared to the national female literacy rate by 2% (Rajkhowa, 2014). In addition, women's participation at work is also comparatively higher in the northeast region. However, women's literacy level is lower in the state of Assam as compared to the rest of the northeastern states. This could be attributed to the excessive intermingling of culture and tradition from different parts of the neighbouring areas, especially Bangladesh (Mahanta & Nayak, 2013).

### Summary

Having laid down the backdrop of the regions from which the samples for the current study were taken, the study remains sensitive to these contextual elements in understanding experiences of young people. Although the term 'quarterlife crisis' has recently gained prominence and has been popularly used in magazine and newspaper articles, songs and drama, not much research has been done on how this is applicable to a wider group of people from different educational, social and cultural backgrounds. The present study shall attempt to investigate the phenomenon of 'quarterlife crisis' in the transitional experience of young people to 'adulthood' through particular attention to lived experiences of young people in the two samples of British and Indian (Assamese) nationality.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

The present study makes use of qualitative methods of inquiry. It is in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that qualitative methods have become more focused although its use have been evident long before this time (Al-Busaidi, 2008). Qualitative methods are highly diverse but a central aim of many approaches is to elucidate perspectives of participants or their ‘lived experience’ (Madill & Gough, 2008). It aims at investigating what is important for the target population, their experiences and how they interpret the social environment. Qualitative methods are also useful in understanding the social and cultural influences on experiences and views (Pope, van Royen & Baker, 2002). One of the strengths of qualitative methods is that complex issues can be addressed in research while maintaining the participants’ frame of reference as far as possible. As stated by Al-Busaidi (2008), qualitative research methods are “considered to be well suited for locating the meanings that people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and their perceptions, presuppositions and assumptions” (p. 12).

The current study seeks to understand how young adults experience and negotiate the ‘quarter-life crisis’. In addition to this, the experience of crisis is investigated across two cultures, British and Indian. In doing so, the main focus is on participants’ lived experiences in specific social and cultural contexts. It is important for the study to know how participants’ interpret their situations and assign them meaning. Hence, the current study adopts a phenomenological approach:

*Different researchers refer to phenomenology differently. It can refer to an inquiry paradigm, an interpretive theory, a philosophy, an analytical perspective, a major qualitative research tradition or a research method framework (Al-Busaidi, 2008, p. 13).*

The current study utilises phenomenology as its guiding principle for both data collection as well as analysis. These shall be described and discussed in this chapter.

### 2.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The research paradigm for the current study adopts a phenomenological approach. Specifically, for the purpose of analysis, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used. There are three philosophies of knowledge that are important to understand the basis of IPA: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

“Phenomenology is the study of phenomena, the appearance of things” (Cohen, 1987, p. 31). In other words, phenomenology studies how things appear rather than what they are as ‘facts’.

“Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation” (Smith et al., 2009) and idiography is the focus on the particular. These three bases of IPA shall be elaborated in this section.

It was Franz Brentano who first gave importance to inner perception: “awareness of our own psychic phenomena, as opposed to unreliable introspection” (Cohen, 1987, p. 32). Two



important figures are worth mentioning in the understanding of this approach: Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Husserl is often called the founder of 'phenomenology'. Husserl wanted psychology to move away from physical science and focus on human experience with equal weightage. According to him, if science should explore rational knowledge, it must consider human encounter with equal rigour. According to him, an object cannot exist in independence of the subject and vice versa. The object and the subject are always interrelated with each other where one could only be understood in the relation with the other: what is 'present' is consciously moulded into something which becomes an 'existence' (Giorgi, 1997; Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). Husserl focused on inter-subjectivity looking at multiplicity of perceptions and bringing them under a common understanding. Specifically, understanding individual perception to unravel lived experience has been the primary focus of Husserl. Thus, "Husserl saw science as a second order knowledge system, which depends ultimately upon first-order personal experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 15). He focused entirely on consciousness and this reduction as approached by Husserl is often called as 'transcendental reduction'. According to him, consciousness is the basic element of experiences and meaning is generated from what appears in it (which is the phenomenon). "It is called transcendental because it moves beyond the everyday to the pure ego in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34).

Although, Husserl's work has its limitations, he laid the ground for research that emphasized lived experience. Heidegger, who was Husserl's assistant, further worked on phenomenology and had a somewhat different approach. He focused on the interpretative aspect of the experiences over the descriptive one. According to him, nothing can exist in reality for humans unless it is encountered, and once it is encountered it inevitably goes through the meaning-making process by humans. In other words, he posits that there is nothing that can exist independently either inside (mentally) or out there in the world (Larkin et al., 2006). Heidegger emphasised the importance of understanding a person in the context in which experiences are encountered, thus advocating a holistic understanding of individual perception. Thus, Heidegger takes a hermeneutic-existential stance where he gives weightage to interpretation over description.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty expanded further the phenomenological approach. According to him, every perception produced by someone reveals something about him/her. He posits, "it implies that our experiences have a structure that spreads [or extends] across time that can be communicated to others through appropriate expression" (as cited by Larkin et al., 2006, p. 109). Thus, IPA focuses on the person who in a context, and understanding how, why and other possible/necessary questions associated with his/her perception. It also says something about the object concerned by taking into account participants' engagement with a particular object or events and IPA requires the researcher "to identify, describe and understand two related aspects

of a respondent's account: the key 'objects of concern' in the participant's world, and the 'experiential claim' made by the participant" (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 111).

IPA goes beyond the simple description of the data given by the participant. The researcher has to bring an interpretative element to such descriptions in order to understand participant perception within a greater context, thus developing a theoretical framework. This involves, what is commonly called, the double hermeneutic wherein, on one hand, the participant makes a reflection/interpretation of his/her experiences and, on the other, the researcher tries to interpret these participant reflections. While it is important to value the participant's perception, it also becomes the responsibility of the researcher to create understanding of this perception in a larger context, most often relating it to the research question of concern. At times this may require, what is called, the 'hermeneutic of suspicion' wherein the researcher engages in a critical evaluation of the data which may not always be seen and accepted by the participant (Smith, 2004).

The third area, idiography, plays an important role in IPA wherein every particular individual case is brought under thorough speculation. This reflects IPA's commitment to each person's perspective and their particular contexts. IPA moves from analysis of single cases to making more general claims while being cautious about generalizations (Smith et al., 2009). In Schweitzer and Steel's (2008) words:

*The IPA approach aims to explore in detail the experiences of how people make sense of their personal experience and can thus address research question seeking an understanding of personal experience, values and meanings and can then be extended from an idiographic approach to a nomothetic approach... The approach is idiographic in that it starts with the detailed explication of one case until the explication is exhausted, and then moves to a new case and in this way, it is incremental in its approach. Material is later combined but the methodology maintains a focus upon small samples. (p. 92)*

According to Smith (2004), through deeper understanding of individual cases, one can grasp the unique as well as shared experiences of individuals.

While adopting these three philosophical approaches to knowledge (phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography), IPA also shares underpinnings with social cognition in which it focuses on "unravelling the relationship between what people think (cognition), say (account) and do (behaviour)" (Eatough & Smith, 2006). These philosophical backdrops and underpinnings of IPA were deemed effective for the current study's purpose.

## **2.2 Relevance of IPA to the current study**

The current study adopted IPA in the understanding of young people's experience of crisis through their transition to adulthood. From the literature review, it was evident that there is paucity of research on 'quarterlife crisis' and especially the experience of crisis across distinct cultures. IPA's approach makes it possible to investigate these experiences that are quite new in

the field of research (McCann & Lubman, 2012). Specifically, IPA gives attention to subjective experiences of crisis and the meanings assigned to these experiences in the light of young people's transition to adulthood.

Many studies have used IPA in research with young people, exploring topics such as suicide by adolescents and young adults (Orri et al., 2014), social relationships in early psychosis (MacDonald, Sauer, Howie & Albiston, 2005), young carers' wellbeing (Bolas, Wersch & Flynn, 2007), depression and access to care services (McCann & Lubman, 2012), young men's alcohol consumption and its association with masculinity (De Visser & Smith, 2007) and others. In all these studies, there was focus on participants' experiences and rather than plainly looking at what the experiences were, the emphasis was on why and how of these experiences. In doing so, it was essential for the researcher to understand their process of meaning-making. It is through the use of IPA that such an investigation is made possible (Smith et al, 2009). As stated above, both the researcher and the researched are active in the process of meaning-making and interpretation (double hermeneutics) wherein first the researcher seeks for access into the participants' meaning-making and then makes an interpretation of that meaning-making in the light of the research purpose.

In understanding young people's experience of 'quarterlife crisis', the study emphasizes how this is experienced and what connotation do these young people give to different experiences that cause it to be perceived as a problem or issue or even a crisis.

*IPA acknowledges that it is not possible to access an individual's lifeworld directly because there is no clear and unmediated window into that life (Eatough & Smith, 2006, p.485).*

This is where the role of double hermeneutics comes into play (Eatough & Smith, 2006) where I, as the researcher, can actively engage in the interpretation of the meanings that participants assign to the crisis experienced in their transition. In addition, IPA's concern with individual experiences (idiography) allows me to explore each case study with richness and depth, and give weightage to their subjective experience of crisis and meaning making. In doing so, the study also aims to investigate this experience across two cultural groups. Thus, the social and cultural context is of relevance for the current study. IPA provides access to examine such personal and social contexts (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith, 1996). This is deemed useful in understanding both shared experiences of crisis among different participants and also investigate the similarities and differences of this experience across social, cultural and economic groups. In this way it focuses on subjective experience, but at the same time on the context within which the experience is embedded.

## 2.3 Data collection methods

The data collection in the current study is a combination of semi-structured interviews, photo elicitation and time-lining. These three methods were combined to provide rich data that is centred on participant experiences and perceptions and at the same time exploring the research topic with flexibility and rigour. The relevance of these methods to the current study, as well as their advantages and disadvantages, shall be discussed in this chapter.

### 2.3.1 *Semi-structured interview (SSI)*

Interviewing is one of the most common data collection methods in qualitative research. There are different types of interviews adopted in research based on the disciplinary perspective and the purpose of the research. The depth of the data required is one of the predominant basis through which interviews are differentiated (Di-Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews are mainly divided into structured, semi-structured and unstructured.

Structured interviews are used when there is a defined set of questions and restricted responses required from participants (Madill, 2012). As such there is little scope for elaboration and not useful when depth is required in the data gathered. In unstructured interview, extremely open-ended questions are used with the intention of provoking a wide array of responses which has the potential to diversify and include a varied set of topics. Here the participants are least guided and unstructured interviews are used when there is very little known about the topic area. This form of interviewing provides great depth and the subject area could be potentially explored to all corners irrespective of the main topic concerned (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008).

The current study focuses on a specific topic, that is, ‘quarterlife crisis’, but aims to explore the many ways through which this is individually experienced in a given social environment. Thus, for the current study, SSI was deemed appropriate. SSIs adopt a flexible interview guide or schedule and the interviewer can also use probes where further exploration is needed. New findings could be attained that add to the bulk of knowledge established about the topic under concern. It also facilitates the generation of new follow-up questions that could give further insight into the subject area (Gill et al., 2008).

*‘The SSI is designed to ascertain subjective responses from persons regarding a particular situation or phenomenon they have experienced’.* (McIntosh & Morse, 2015, p. 1).

SSI seeks to give voice to the participants guided by open-ended questions about their experiences (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). This kind of interview is useful for gaining information about the “perspectives, understandings and meanings constructed by people regarding the events and experiences of their lives” (Al-Busaidi, 2008, p. 14). The current study seeks to understand the experience of crisis of young people across two cultural groups, and the context in which this experience is placed, while also giving weightage to their perceptions and

meaning-making. SSI has the potential to provide the ground to capture such varied experiences of participants within and across social and cultural groups (Pope et al., 2002). SSI's can accommodate multiple disciplines and philosophical paradigms and, hence is quite versatile and flexible in its application (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The current study takes a phenomenological approach in which each participant's experiences and perceptions are the focus of the research. SSI accommodates this kind of approach allowing "the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the research team" (Gill et al., 2008, p. 291). This helps in addressing and revealing issues that may not have been anticipated by the researcher (Pope et al., 2002). The how and why questions (Aleandri & Russo, 2015; Pope et al., 2002) of a particular phenomenon can be well investigated, especially those that allow more flexibility and expanse of expression. In other words, it allows unravelling the meaning of a phenomenon through elaboration and description (Al-Busaidi, 2008). Instead of looking at the frequency of a particular experience, it aims at looking more into the complex experiences and perceptions within the phenomena under investigation.

#### *Types and techniques of SSI*

SSI could be of different types based on the purpose of the study. They can be categorised into descriptive/confirmative, descriptive/corrective, descriptive/interpretive and descriptive/divergent (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). While confirmative and corrective are based on verifying and refuting (respectively) previous assumptions, the interpretive and divergent categories are based on attaining knowledge about participant experiences where the participant poses as informant (as against respondent or collaborator in confirmative and corrective, respectively). In the descriptive/divergent type, SSIs are directed at obtaining knowledge from different groups using the same interview guide. It is along the lines of both interpretive and divergent on which the current study is based. On one hand it seeks to explore and understand the experience of 'quarterlife crisis' among young people of the new generation; on the other it aims to investigate this experience across two cultural groups.

According to Barriball and While (1994) and Gill et al. (2008), the interview guide or schedule should be such that it gives enough room to explore the perceptions and experiences of the participants and at the same time adhere to the research question. And, as is the usual procedure, in this present study, suggestions were gathered from previous research to help create an effective SSI guide. On the other hand, while interviewing, it is essential that the researcher tries his/her best to set aside any presumptions or judgements about the phenomena under investigation (Al-Busaidi, 2008). Interviews are started with more general and easy questions in order to put the participant at ease and to build rapport (Gills et al., 2008). An internal testing or

a pilot study (Barriball & While, 1994; Gills et al., 2008) helps create an interview schedule that would fulfil the aforementioned quality of the interview.

SSIs can be conducted in various ways, for example, face-to-face, on the telephone, and over the internet such as via Skype or through e-mails. They may also be conducted one-to-one or in a group. In the current study the interviews were conducted face-to-face giving the advantage of capturing both verbal and non-verbal cues. In addition, face-to-face interviews are considered, in some circumstances, to be more ethically appropriate as the presence of the interviewer may be reassuring and necessary in situations in which participants might become distressed (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Hence, face-to-face interviews are specifically useful when the study explores sensitive areas, such as in the present study. This was why one-to-one interviews were chosen given that a group setting could feel intimidating and discourage revelation of personal experiences (Gill et al., 2008). In addition, SSI conducted on a face-to-face manner could allow interviewers to access some important social and personal material from the participant (Di Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

#### *Strengths of SSI*

SSI is a kind of interview that allows deep and rich information to be gathered from the participants while allowing the researcher a certain steer on its course and content. It also helps in evoking thoughts and feelings of the respondents through careful use of words and skills of the interviewer while having built a good rapport. Such kind of interview helps build a strong interpersonal relationship through which sensitive and emotional aspects of the phenomena of interest could be explored (Aleandri & Russo, 2015). Moreover, probes used in SSI could be a useful tool in helping participants remember or recall information, explore topics in depth and clarify responses in the interview. The freedom to probe also helps explore sensitive topics and gain insight into the vivid perceptions and experiences of the participants (Barriball & While, 1994). Flexibility in the ordering of questions also allows the interview to follow the participant's story with little overlay from the researcher. SSI also enables tackling language barriers, especially when the mode of the interview is not the first language of the participant (Barriball & While, 1994; Marshall & While, 1994). This is because, unlike the structured interview, the wording of questions can be adapted in order to be clear to the interviewee (Marshall & While, 1994). In the current study two culturally and linguistically different groups are represented and as such using SSI was deemed useful in raising prompts in the interview process or rephrasing questions in order for the participants from the two groups to understand and express.

In addition, the accommodating nature of SSI makes it “mouldable and adaptable to different empirical contexts and different personalities of respondents” (Aleandri & Russo, 2015, p. 519). The flexibility provided by SSI allows changing words in the questions based on the suitability

of the interview process and the participants. Words in the interview may not provide the same meaning to different people and as such the flexibility allows the accommodation of the interview question with different participants (Treece & Treece, 1986).

### *Limitations of SSI*

SSI has its disadvantages as well. The interviewer can influence the responses of the participants and this may lead to socially desirable responses and to responses that converge with the apparent worldview of the researcher (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Specifically, a central critique of interviewing per se is that the material is co-constructed rather than ‘naturalistic’. Most pertinently, Potter and Hepburn (2005) raised questions about the ‘naturalism’ of interview data. Interaction in interviews, most often than not, takes place in settings different from where the phenomenon under study is experienced. Even if the interview takes place in the natural setting, the presence of the interviewer itself brings the question of how natural is the data that is generated from an interaction between two people coming from two different settings (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). According to Wooffitt and Widdicombe (2006), SSI has the capability to generate a more naturalistic interview data than other forms, such as structured interviews. However, the kind of interview could be of a specific interaction type, namely a “communication between friends” (Madill, 2011, p. 349). Hence there needs to be careful use of interview data and its analysis must take into account that it was generated in a specific context for a specific purpose.

Overall, SSI was deemed suitable for the current study as it provides the flexibility to allow exploration and understanding of perceptions and experiences of participants. In addition, since the present study targets two culturally distinct groups of young people, such kind of interview facilitates to some extent the bridging of the social worlds of the researcher and the researched. Along with SSI, two other methods were used to generate rich data and to compensate some of the shortcomings of the interview method. These are discussed below.

### **2.3.2 Photo-elicitation**

In the realm of social sciences, there has been shift in the way children and young people are viewed in research. They have been focused as social actors exercising agency in developing knowledge and understanding of their lived experiences. Hence, rather than seeking information *about* them, there has been focus in seeking information *from* them (Drew, Duncan & Sawyer, 2010).

*...seeking to empower young people, the question is not how might power relations be evened out- but how can research be designed in ways that offer young people more opportunities to critically examine their conditions of possibility? (Allen, 2008, p. 575)*

For the current study, participants' voice is the central focus in order to understand their personal experience of crisis. This requires that the participants are provided with avenues through which to express what is important to them about their transitional experience and to realise agency in the process of data collection. Photo-elicitation is a method that enables and empowers participants to share their experiences in the light of their own meaning-making (Morrow, 2001). It is a method in which photos are used in the data collection process, especially in tandem with interview method (Hatten, Forin & Adams, 2013).

#### *Types and techniques of photo-elicitation*

Photo-elicitation involves using photos to gather information and the differences in techniques are based on who creates or finds these images. Broadly there are two types: one in which the researcher selects the images, and the other, where the participants select the images and share their interpretations and experiences based on them. Participants can select from already existing photos or can generate the photographs themselves (Hatten et al., 2013). According to Samuels (2004), although photos selected by the researcher could also stimulate useful responses and reactions from the participants, photos selected by the participants themselves "gives primacy to their world" (p. 1530). The latter probably facilitates better reflection and descriptions about experiences because the photos provoke recollections associated with personally meaningful images. That is, it is not just the viewing process that is significant in generation of meanings, but also the personal selection of the photos that is influential in the meaning-making process of the participants (Samuels, 2004).

In the current study, it is the participants who were given the liberty to select their own images to express their crisis experiences and how they coped with it. Given that this study gives primacy to subjective experiences and perceptions, it was deemed suitable to allow participants to capture images or collect photos that represent their social world and their experiences within it.

Gibson et al. (2013) suggested exercising caution in limiting the number of photos to be brought to the interview setting and advice setting an upper and lower limit of the number of photos to click/collect. This avoids participants generating too many photos representing the same reflection, and at the same time, promotes thoughtful selectivity on the part of the participants. The environment in which a photo elicitation interview takes place could also be an important consideration. This should aim at facilitating a further balance between the researcher and the researched (Coad, 2007). On one hand, it should be free from too many distractions and disturbances and on the other hand, it should not be too formal to cause any discomfort.



### *Strengths of photo-elicitation*

*Photographs can trigger responses that might lie submerged in verbal interviewing. Visual reminders can shatter the composure of a guarded reply and cause the informant to blurt out submerged feelings or to reveal his emotional state by embarrassed silence, either of which can be eloquent to the sensitive field worker (Collier, 1957, p. 854).*

The possibility of getting only socially desirable response through guarded replies in word-only interviews (as mentioned earlier) might be mitigated to some extent through the use of photo-elicitation. One of the early attempts of using photo-elicitation was by Collier (1957) in which he used this method to study mental health in Canada. He suggested that interviews using photos provided concrete information and at the same time reduced the chances of any misunderstandings between the researcher and the researched through “emphatic expressions” (Collier, 1957, p. 849). He also argued that this kind of interview also helped reduce the stress of being questioned in the interview setting. Our understanding of qualitative data collection has developed since Collier made these reflections and we are more sceptical with regard to the transparency of communication. However, it is interesting to consider the way in which participant selected and generated photographs may, indeed, help ground participant meanings outside the immediate interview interaction and provide interviewees with a greater sense of agency than might otherwise have been possible.

Through photo elicitation, participants have the potential to exercise power through generating their own material (Coad, 2007; Harper, 2002), assigning meanings to their images, possibly ‘bending the rules’ a little (Allen, 2008), and determining the direction of the interview (Allen, 2009; Drew et al., 2010). Moreover, participants exercise agency when they choose specific images (at times recreating scenes, manipulating and modifying tasks) and assign meaning to them (Prosser, 2007). For example, the interviewer often asks the participant to pick a photo to start the discussion. In this way participants, to a large extent, shape the discussion and control the generation of data (Allen, 2009). Young people are considered as social agents while they actively engage in the creation and perception of the social world in which they live. In this whole process of generating data, participants become researchers of their own experiences.

*The use of photography requires that participants distance themselves somewhat from embodied experience, taking on the role of contemplative “quasi outsider”, which in turn invites deeper reflection and more meaningful interpretation of events and circumstances (Dennis, Gaulocher, Carpiano & Brown, 2009, p. 468)*

Researchers access the experiences of the participants through the lens of those living in specific environment and their representations of the same that could provide rich information about their lived experiences. Through the use of photos participants themselves realise and visualise things that are important to them, rendering them a bird’s eye view (Drew et al., 2010).

Visual methods provide a glance at the general from the particular and vice versa. This leads to “what Mills referred to –in what was intended in a non-disciplinary-specific sense – as the ‘sociological imagination’” (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004, p. 7) which links the macro with the micro through the images (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004). This sociological imagination was grasped in Allen’s study (2009) where students captured interesting aspects of social environment to express the sexual culture experienced by these young people. In other words, the particulars in the photos shared by participants brought attention to the general, informing about the social environment and the context in which the perceptions and experiences are shaped (Allen, 2009). This information may lie latent during the photo-elicitation interview, but could be excavated in the analysis phase. Bringing to attention the hidden meaning and assumptions in the photos captured by the participants could potentially depict the social and cultural world, (Harper, 2002), particularly where the researcher and participants may be from distinct backgrounds (Samuels, 2004). Moreover, rather than answering questions based on researcher’s preconception, photos help bring attention to what was important for the participants (Morrow, 2001). In this way it adds to the richness of the verbal data, even though the photos may not always be the central focus of the data collection or analysis process (Drew et al., 2010).

Photo-elicitation provides a “fertile ground for further explorations and inquiries” (Meo, 2010). This is especially suitable for the current study as it seeks to explore the varied experiences of crises among young people. Furthermore, research with young people could be challenging especially when it entails sensitive topics like sexual behaviour, substance use, or violence (Drew et al., 2010). In the process of transition to adulthood, young people could potentially have experiences that might have caused stress and worry in their lives (especially considering the fact that participants in the current study identify themselves as having experienced difficulty in transition). These may or may not be as sensitive per se but they are nonetheless problems and issues that they have been facing and are likely to be sensitive to them. Drew et al. (2010) found that using photos in interviews allowed raising sensitive topics and expanding and conversing about it.

Through some of the comparative studies between word-only and photo-elicitation interviewing, some of the benefits of using photo-elicitation over word-only interviews shall be elucidated.

#### *Comparison between word-only interviews and photo-elicitation interviewing*

Comparative studies between word-only interviews and photo-elicitation interviewing had shown that the latter tapped more emotional content (Harper, 2002; Meo, 2010; Samuels, 2004). Harper (2002) brought an interesting difference between interview using photos and those that

are guided by words only. In this difference Harper visited the physiological aspect of the difference between the visual and the verbal information.

*...the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information. Thus images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words (p. 13).*

This way Harper poses that visual data not only gives more information but also produces a different kind of information.

Meo (2010) investigated the difference between interviewing with and without the use of photos. She based this on a study on social class inequalities and secondary schooling. The interview process (with photos) had more jokes and laughter and, at the same time, allowed the interviewer to freely ask questions. Greater control was seen being exercised by the participants in Meo's (2010) study in which students showed more authority over the use of the photos rather than the use of the words. Photographs also provided Meo with rich data about students' environment like housing conditions, family relations and other aspects of their everyday lives. Social and material elements of their lives were well reflected through the photos and "(s)ome images showed the nature of what was described by the students with an intensity that only images could convey" (p. 156). Meo highlighted some of the evident differences in the expressions and communication of physical spaces.

Images showed the intensity in interactions and affections between significant people, also providing richness to the data. It provides a glance at what is significant for the participants (Meo, 2010) and allowed participants to "ask themselves about their lives in their own terms" (p. 160). Some of the information may not be accessed through oral interviews, but photos provided the additional information like living conditions and nature of relationships. It also motivated participants to add information by using photos as props.

Just like Meo, Samuels (2004) conducted a comparative study (of word-only and photo-elicitation interviewing) involving Buddhist monks. These two studies were set apart with a three years gap. Samuel found that using photos led to the generation of more information in quantity as well as quality than interview alone. Interview (word-only) generated rather abstract and short answers to the questions raised by the researcher. When the same questions were posed in relation to photos, he found that it provoked elaborate explanations

With the interview alone method of data collection, the researchers have to be conscious that their questions are not too far from what is experienced by the participants. The validity and relevance of the questions need to be constantly kept on check while collecting data (Samuels, 2004). This could be especially hard when the targeted population share a relatively different social, cultural and economic context from that of the researcher and also when the topic

concerned is exploratory with the lack of much documented research or theory on the concerned topic. In Samuels's study of Buddhist monks, he found that his Western ideas and background has led him to ask specific questions which elicited desirable responses rather than candid experiences of the participants. In the current study, I, as the researcher/interviewer, am from Indian background interviewing sample from both British and Indian background. Apart from this, there are various other differences shared between me and the interviewee like gender, class and/or race and most importantly overall experiences. Using photos in interviews which are selected by the participants themselves has the potential to not only reduce culturally situated questions by the researcher, but also to support the challenging of such assumptions by participants through reference to their own frame in and through the photos.

#### *Limitations of photo-elicitation*

Having discussed the advantages of photo-elicitation, there are some disadvantages worth bringing to light. Meo (2010) highlighted the fact that sometimes participants assumed that photos would speak for themselves and did not narrate much about the experiences surrounding these photos. It was difficult for the researcher to juggle between what she wanted to ask and what was presented to her. This is the downside of agency exercised by participants, to the extent that the information could diverge from the topic of investigation. On a more practical side, photo-elicitation method was found expensive and time-consuming (Coad, 2007; Meo, 2010). A different set of skills were also required in the analysis process and difficulty was identified in remembering which photo was being talked about at what point in the interview. With respect to the current study, video recording was used for this purpose in order to keep track of the verbal communication along with the photos. Transcription was also found to be much more complicated than traditional interviews (Meo, 2010).

Dennis et al. (2009) found that one of the problems associated with the use of photos was that a few participants took pictures of illicit or illegal activities. This concern was dealt in the current study through specific instructions to the participants to avoid these kinds of images and informing them that taking such photos would have to be reported to the concerned authorities. Given the few shortcomings of photo-elicitation method, it was still posed by Meo (2010) as a technique that generated rich and valuable data.

Given the exploratory nature of the current study, photo elicitation was deemed as a useful tool in reaching far corners of crisis experiences of young people in transition. It is through the artificial lens between the objects and participants' perceptions that the researcher seeks to understand individual experiences in the social world.

*The camera is an automative device which can permanently engrave the visual impression of an instant and can also compensate in various ways for the shortcomings attributed to human impression. The mechanical eye of the lens and the automatic*

*memory of film are the camera's assets for accurate reportage. This automatic documentation appears to go beyond the literal image of environment. Photographs also catch many elements of the emotional currents within situations that are involved in a man's reactions to his cultural circumstance (Collier, 1957, p. 844).*

The third method used for collecting data for the current study is time-lining. This is discussed below along with the advantages and disadvantages.

### **2.3.3 Timeline**

*'Time and narrative are inextricably woven together, in that narrative almost always involves time and requires a temporal component to be meaningful. Time is organized through narrative and narrative humanizes time.'* (Sheridan, Chamberlain & Dupuis, 2011, p. 554)

The current study explores crisis experiences in young people's transition to adulthood. This leads to a focus on a specific period in participants' life where various events could potentially cause, or be associated with, a 'crisis'. This entails telling a story, a tale that comprises of events experienced in their transition to adulthood as well as providing avenue for me, as the researcher, to understand their perceptions and lived experiences. Through life stories, the social world could be unravelled in ways that structured questions or simple observation cannot elucidate (Adriansen, 2012; Bagnoli, 2009). In order to understand participants' perception of their problems and issues, it is essential to understand their life world and the social and cultural context in which they are placed. Timeline interviews provide a ground through which interviewers can see the wider context in which the experiences are lived (Adriansen, 2012). It is one of the visual methods (specifically graphic-elicitation methods) in which a chart/paper is used in the interview to lay out events experienced by the participants, primarily in some order. Such kind of life story approach using timelines allows understanding connections between different structures and individual experiences. At the same time provides a flow of events through which there is potential to ascertain how participants created meaning and associated different events through their timeline (Kolar, Ahmad, Chan & Erickson, 2015; Rhodes & Fitzgerald, 2006).

#### *Strengths of time-lining*

Timeline interviews allow the interviewer to raise context associated questions giving a ground to understand their experiences within a given social environment. Timelines hence provide a 'contextual depth' (p. 24) to the in-depth and open ended interview (Kolar, et al., 2015).

Timelines also provide ease in making associations between events as the visuals available through the timeline allows the participant and the interviewer to go back and forth over events. Events are knitted together through understanding of the causes and effects along the experiences laid down in the timeline (Adriansen, 2012; Bagnoli, 2009). This is made possible

through the collaborative efforts of the interviewer and the interviewee. The timeline is co-constructed in the interview process providing a meeting ground for both the worlds and opening up perceptions and experiences unique to the participants (Adriansen, 2010). In this way, participants also exercise some degree of agency in the data collection process.

*'Reflection, recall, and break down of life events through timelines allowed the participants to create a sense of direction of what they wanted to share when asked the interview questions' (Kolar et al., 2015, p. 24).*

Participants create the timeline, a boundary or space within which they place their life story. They make a conscious decision to choose a specific period and bring that to surface through the use of the timeline. Thus participants are allowed the flexibility of that choice and hence some degree of ownership in the generation of data (Adriansen, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2011). In this way they also take the liberty to choose what is important to them in their experiences through time (Kolar et al., 2015). The current study focuses on the experience of crisis. This could be met by the participants in different points of their lives through their transition. It is left to the participants to pick a period that was important in their crisis while, at the same time, providing links to other events that could potentially contribute to their perception and experience of their problems. It is through the process of storytelling within the drafted timeline that I, as a researcher, could get access to various events experienced in their transition.

The timeline also allows greater storytelling in case the participants are too specific or, on the other hand, not giving enough details about their experiences (Sheridan et al., 2011). In the process, they could also become researchers of their own experiences while linking events and analysing them through their evaluation based on their lived experiences (Adriansen, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2011). While doing so, the timeline provides a visual aid through which they lay their life stories while also filling missing gaps in recall (Adriansen, 2010; Berends, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2011). In this way a continuous de- and re-construction of events take place through the use of the timeline.

The current study looks at young adults' experience of crisis through their transitional period to adulthood. Allowing a visual layout through the use of timeline provides a channel through which interviewees can revisit events that they have talked about before and fill in missing parts that could be significant to them. Thus, the timeline provides a productive medium through which interviewees can recall and reconnect through the visual prop. This also enables me to revisit parts of the timeline and ask questions and raise further discussion associated with them. There is an ease of doing this through the use of timeline over word-only interviews.

In this context, Adriansen (2010) brought an interesting difference between timeline interviewing and word-only interviews:

*The visualisation along the timeline can become like a painting where you can refine different fields in any order you like, add new layers. In a 'conventional'*

*interview, on the other hand, the interview has a tendency to become more linear because it is more controlled by words – the linearity of a story line, of a written text (p. 49).*

Using other ways of collecting data to supplement the word-only interviews has potential to add layers to the data that provide new ways of viewing and interrogating (Bagnoli, 2009). Such form of art-based tools of research are open to psychoanalytic interpretations, but it is based on the research approach of specific studies as to how these data are used for generating information. For instance, Bagnoli (2009) used such visual methods to get more insights into the experiences of the participants. She used art-based techniques with young people in Leeds to explore identity and relationships. This is a longitudinal study and is still ongoing. Based on this research, she highlighted some of the usefulness of the tools implemented.

In Bagnoli's use of the timeline for young people, there was reflection on the past, present and the future, also providing useful information about hopes, dreams and aspirations over a period of time. Age expectations were also surfaced through the use of timeline in which young people exemplified various milestones to be achieved over a period of time. Central aspects of young peoples' experience could be reflected through the timeline. What was important and significant throughout the timeline could potentially provide useful information about what lay central for the participants during the course of their transition. This is a useful approach for the current study which is also based on young people and specifically their experience of crisis throughout their transitional process. There is potential for capturing details about their experiences also relating to their milestones (as perceived by the participants) and the ways they cope with the crisis situation.

Through the flow of events, participants get the opportunity to share both positive and negative events, thus providing a therapeutic experience for the participants. The addition of future parts in the timeline allows a scope to express positive aspects of their lives, hopes, dreams and aspirations, thus reducing the chances of the interview to be solely about negative experiences (Kolar et al., 2015).

Other advantages include the practicalities of using such a method within the data gathering process. The interviewer could use the timeline to point to specific events to raise questions about how they coped with them. This allows the interviewer to raise questions around sensitive events without articulating it and bringing the whole event to the surface with details for the participants (Kolar et al., 2015). The current study focuses on crisis events and the way they coped with them, and as such this technique could potentially provide this advantage of not having to constantly touch upon sensitive events through details of the experience.

Time-lining shifts the focus of the interview from being entirely on the participant to that of the chart in which the events and experiences are visually displayed. This has the potential to reduce the discomfort that the participants often come with in an interview setting. It bridges the gap

between the researcher and the interviewee physically and emotionally during the time of the interview (Sheridan et al., 2011).

Apart from this, timeline is found to be a useful medium for triangulation where the interviewers could use the representation of events in the timeline to cross-check their own descriptions and interpretations in the analysis process (Kolar et al., 2015).

#### *Limitations of time-lining*

There is tendency for timeline method to create a closer and emotionally heavy discussion between the interviewer and the interviewee about various life events. Such closeness established in interview setting raises ethical issues which demands interviewer to be cautious, alert and able in handling issues when participants touch upon emotionally heavy and sensitive aspects of their lives (Adriansen, 2012). In addition, Bagnoli (2009) raised another concern with the use of the timeline. Timeline is drawn in a directional manner (linearity in the depiction). However, time is subjectively experienced and may not always be linear in their perception. They may experience more of repetitions than progressions (Bagnoli, 2009). This requires the researcher to be careful in the depiction of time (and the experiences within it) through the use of timeline and the analysis of the same.

Another suggestion taken from Kolar et al. (2015) was with regard to the interview process using timeline. It was found more useful to construct the timeline whilst the interview questions were raised instead of making the timeline before it. The former makes it more interactive where both the participant and the researcher are actively engaged in the generation of information whilst referring to the timeline. Participants referred less to the timeline when the questions were only raised after completing the timeline.

Overall it was ascertained that the timeline could be a useful aid in the data collection for the current study, assisting the understanding of events and the perceptions of the same while providing room to grasp the social and cultural context of the individual experiences.

#### **2.4 Coherence of the three methods**

*The inclusion of non-linguistic dimensions in research, which rely on other expressive possibilities, may allow us to access and represent different levels of experience* (Bagnoli, 2009, p. 547).

Latham (2003) asserted that instead of completely refuting traditional methods, there is a necessity to work with them to obtain information that is more creative and pragmatic. Kohlar et al. (2015) investigated how visual timelines assist semi-structured interview. This study researched participants from divergent groups that is, South-Asian immigrant women (32-57 years old) and street-involved youth (19-26 years old). In this way their article attempted to elucidate the use of timeline along with semi-structured interview as a method of data collection



with marginalised group. By ensuring that the participants are engaged in the data collection and reciprocating in a manner that leads to their active involvement, the risk of causing distress through the interview is negated by the researchers. This is especially an important consideration for the current study as it seeks to delve into rather negative experiences in participants' transition to adulthood ('quarterlife crisis'). In Bagnoli's study, the timelines were used by the participants in different ways by manipulating parts of it using different symbols and creative use of the way the flow of events were depicted. This creativity stimulated by such innovative methods could engage participants and create enthusiasm in generating data.

Using photos along with interview techniques gives the advantage of dealing with participants of varied experiences. Some may be more comfortable with verbal expression than visual, while others may find visuals as useful props to express their lived experiences (Meo, 2010). In addition, a combination of semi-structured interview along with photo-elicitation allows a more detailed and deeper insight into perceptions of the participants. Different photos have the potential to open doors to unique questions or details and as such semi-structured interview could allow photos to be used to its fullest potential (Morrow, 2001).

Semi-structured interview, photo-elicitation and timeline methods taken together have the potential to create rich, culturally distinct and in-depth insight into the experiences of young people in transition. They supplement and complement each other by providing a channel for both visual and verbal means of data collection. Sheridan et al. (2011) have aptly said:

*'When musical instruments play together each makes a contribution to the music produced, and different instruments create different harmonies. Equally, the instruments of timelining- talk, the timeline, photographs, objects, notes, participants and researchers- all contribute to the process of timelining and the facilitation of storytelling' (p. 565).*

## **2.5 Summary and research questions**

Photo-elicitation is based on the same realm as IPA that seeks to obtain data that would inform the researcher of the lived experiences of the participants giving particular attention to their perceptions and interpretations of the social world. Use of photo-elicitation is based on the understanding that it is not possible to simply walk into an environment and understand a person's lived experiences. It is only through the lenses of the people living in particular environment and their representations of the same that could provide researchers with rich information (Dennis et al., 2009). While photos and timeline provide rich data about participant perceptions, they could be communicated best through interviews and specifically with the analysis using IPA. This renders justification to what was perceived by the participants and what meanings were generated through such captured images. The double hermeneutic can be practised in such an approach where both the researcher and the researched engage in the analysis of the lived experiences.

A combination of all the three methods, semi-structured interview, photo-elicitation and time-lining, has the capacity to generate rich (emotionally, socially and culturally) data that was deemed useful for the current study. The focus of the current study is to understand young people's lived experiences of crisis across the two cultural groups (British and Indian). In doing so, semi-structured interview with photo-elicitation and time-lining provides a suitable basis to explore context based (social, cultural and economic) experiences of the participants. While the data collection is conducted using these three methods, the analysis utilises Interpretative phenomenological analysis through which each interview data is given weightage in understanding the experiences of 'crisis' within a given context.

## Chapter 3: Method

This chapter explicates how the methods mentioned in the previous chapter shape the current study. The pilot studies will be discussed along with reflections on the use of the methods, namely my participation experience in the self-pilot and the interviewee experience in the participant pilot. Strengths, weaknesses and subsequent amendments based on these pilot studies will also be explained. This chapter then details the method and analytic procedures of the main study.

### 3.1 Ethical consideration and approval

Initial ethical approval for the pilot and main study was obtained from the School of Psychology Ethics Committee of the University of Leeds on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November, 2013 (Ethics no. 13-0236). Further approval was attained at a later stage when the Indian sample was included in the study (30<sup>th</sup> of January, 2015, Ethics no. 15-0020). The primary ethical considerations in this study were as follows.

#### *3.1.1 Respect for the participants' anonymity*

Interview audio-recordings were kept on a secure University of Leeds shared drive designed for the confidential storage of research data. Any computer on which data was stored for analysis was locked with a username and password. All stored participant data (except original audio-recordings) were anonymised and the different elements (transcripts, and two sets of questionnaire data) were linked only through the use of participant identifiers in the form of a pseudonym. Signed informed consent forms (Appendix A) from participants were given to the lead supervisor for safe and confidential storage. Care was taken so that individuals are highly unlikely to be identifiable in normal circumstance through this stored data. In particular, transcripts were carefully anonymised with any identifying details removed or changed. Consent was obtained from participants to use quotes from their interview in reports of the research on the understanding that their anonymity would be maintained. Anonymising was done at the time that transcripts were checked against audio-recordings for accuracy. A transcription company was employed that was known and trusted by the lead supervisor and which confirmed the confidentiality of material and that it is destroyed once transcription has been relayed to the research team.

#### *3.1.2 Providing transparent information about the study and participant role*

The participants were provided with a detailed information sheet (Appendix B) about the study and what their participation involved so that they were informed before they decided to take part in the study. Information was given to those interested in taking part which addressed:

- What is the purpose of the study?
- Why have they been invited to take part?
- Do they have to take part?
- What does the study involve?
- Where will the research be done?
- What about anonymity and confidentiality?
- Are there any risks in taking part?
- Are there any benefits in taking part?

They were informed about the minimal risks involved (e.g., being questioned about possibly emotional topics) and the fact that they could leave the study at any time without giving a reason. They were also assured with regard to anonymity. Signed informed consent was obtained from the participants for:

- video and audio recording the interview wherein the video-recording was focused on the timeline and placing of the photos, keeping the interviewee's face out of view of the camera;
- extracts from the interview (transcript, audio, and video) to be used in reports of the research on the understanding that their anonymity will be maintained (e.g., use of pseudonyms, editing out words, face blurred);
- keeping a copy of the photos to be used for the research reports on the understanding that they are anonymised by blurring the faces in the photos or/and things around that could be indicative of the person involved in the photo.

### ***3.1.3 Use of photographs***

A separate instruction sheet was provided for the photographs to be used for the interview (Appendix C). Participants were asked to avoid taking photographs of illegal activities and to avoid taking photographs of children below 16 years to reduce the task burden on the participant of consent seeking from a child / young person. Participants were asked to gain verbal consent from any over 16s involved in their photographs. Signed informed consent was obtained from participants to use their photographs (and their created timeline) in reports, presentations and publications on the condition that faces and any other possibly identifying details would be blurred.

### ***3.1.4 Risk to vulnerable participants***

Pre-interview, I used my skills in psychological assessment (Masters Degree in Clinical Psychology, interned in three hospitals and experience as a professional School Counsellor) to screen potential participants for those currently in crisis and/or who appeared to be particularly psychologically vulnerable. In addition, scoring of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Appendix D) acted as a screen because it includes subscales indirectly tapping vulnerability to distress (high neuroticism). EPQ is a personality test which is quite widely used in order to

assess two major dimensions in personality namely Extraversion-Introversion and Neuroticism-Stability. The measure also has a falsification scale (lie score). A particularly high score (above 12 out of 24) on Neuroticism alerted the possibility of a highly vulnerable individual. This is done to avoid any kind of risk or harm to the participant like, distress caused to the participant as a result of the interview. There was no participant who had to be excluded based on scores in the EPQ (neuroticism scores of the participants ranged from 7 to 12). There were a few participants who reported receiving mental health support in the past, but they both self-reported and were deemed to be safe to be interviewed, following a review of the EPQ scores and in discussion with the study supervisors. The study information sheet included a list of free sources of support.

### **3.2 Developing the eligibility test and interview schedule**

The eligibility checklist (Appendix E) to identify participants who felt they had experienced crisis and the interview schedule (Appendix F) were developed by me and my supervisors based on the literature on ‘emerging adulthood’ as derived from Arnett’s (2000) studies, and also from popular culture that provides a broad idea about people in the transitioning period. For instance, the term ‘quarterlife crisis’ was given by two authors, Robbins and Wilner (2001) where the various conceptions about young people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were discussed with examples and henceforth this term became quite popularly used. Another book entitled ‘Not Quite Adults’, written by two researchers Setterson and Ray (2010), provided some insight into the understanding of people in the transitioning period. The eligibility checklist was especially informed by these works of Arnett (2000), Robbins and Wilner (2001), and Setterson and Ray (2010). For instance, questions on identity (Have you ever experienced difficulty establishing what ‘kind of person’ you are?), feelings of being stuck (Have you ever felt ‘stuck’ in your life?), lost (Have you ever felt lost in the multiplicity of options on life?), anxiety (Have you ever felt anxious about choosing the next step in life?) and apprehension (Have you ever felt apprehensive after having made a major life decision?), and desire for change (Have you ever craved for a change in direction of life?) were included in the screening form for the present study.

In addition to the aforementioned works (Arnett, 2000; Robbins & Wilner, 2001; Setterson & Ray, 2010), the literature reviews (as discussed in Chapter 1) informed the interview schedule. That body of literature suggests that crucial changes occur over the course of transition from adolescence to adulthood, especially with regards to relationships and positions in the society. Arnett (2000) argued that the task of ‘emerging adults’ was to find a sense of identity while also establishing intimate relationships. Thus, the interview schedule aimed to understand changes in relationships and any tensions that might have stemmed from these changes which might have contributed to the experience of crisis. The interview included exploration of responsibility

towards others, based on Oinonen's (2003) argument that young adulthood is a position between 'being taken care of' and 'taking care of' whereby young adults are said to take increasingly independent responsibility for themselves.

A question on regret was included based on the understanding that different decisions are made in the period of transition, often in the form of trial and error (Robbins & Wilner, 2001). This may entail points in their lives when they might have developed regrets over certain decisions that continued to impact their current state, even moulding into a crisis experience. Questions were also included on the topic of feeling stuck, argued as a point of crisis by Robbins and Wilner (2001). Towards the end of the interview, additional questions were planned around coping and advice to others. Understanding how they responded to their experience of crisis was essential in gaining insight into what worked and what did not in their attempts to overcome their stress and worry.

The various examples explicated in the two books mentioned above (by Setterson and Ray, 2010 and Robbins and Wilner, 2001), suggest that young people go through varied experiences, details of which could be vital in capturing the essence and depth of their crisis experiences. Recognising this variability in experiences, the interview schedule was weaved into the events presented by the participants during the interview process.

In terms of the photographs, based on what participants brought to the interview, different directions were adopted in the process of interview while asking questions associated with the specific images included in the timeline. Thus, the first part of the interview where the participants discussed their photos, the questions were moulded according to the specific information given by the participants. For instance: Can you tell me more about this photo? What does this image mean to you in relation to your transitional experience?

The final questions were about their interview experiences, how they felt about participating, from collecting the photos to the interview. This provided important insight into the effectiveness of the method used.

### **3.3 Self-pilot**

#### ***3.3.1 Aim of the self-pilot***

The aim of the self-pilot was to test the interview schedule, experience the process of the interview from a participant's perspective and to test the procedure for data collection, aiming to identify its strengths and weaknesses.

The following section outlines the full, photo-elicitation self-pilot which was undertaken. A fellow postgraduate student (SP) conducted the interview who was briefed about the study and his role in the self-pilot. He was experienced in photo-elicitation method and had himself done

self-piloting for his study. However, care was taken to brief him with vital information about the research topic so that as an interviewer he knew what I sought to explore with my participants.

### ***3.3.2 Experience***

Being in my twenties and fitting the criteria for the actual sample (22-30 years, having experienced crisis in the past and not sought professional support or intervention for mental health difficulties), the pilot study was conducted exactly as intended, using the same interview schedule as prepared and also using timeline and photos as part of the data collection. The reflections of my experience as a participant in this pilot study is divided into two parts: collecting the photos, and the experience of being interviewed. Data analysis was not completed for the self-pilot.

#### *Reflections on collecting the photos*

Following Meeting 1, that is, after briefing about the study and explicating my interviewer's role in the self-pilot, I began to take photographs in response to the research task: 'Take as many pictures as you like which have significance to you in relation to your crisis'. I felt some kind of enthusiasm in collecting the photos that had significance to me. As an initial step, I made a list of things associated with my experience of crisis and coping. I took some time to do so in order to make sure I did not miss out important events, as some occurred a couple of years back. I looked for relevant photos based on my list. Since most of the points in the list were related to things, places and persons from India, I obtained photos from Facebook or from my collection of photos on my laptop. The few that I selected were either metaphorical or actual depictions of crisis and coping.

Gathering photographs was quite a venture as I had to explore my memories to recollect significant events, some of which were from a distant past. Although there were some rough patches and difficult times that had to be recollected, it gave me a rather secure feeling as it constantly reminded me of what I learnt from it and how I grew out of it. I collected quite a few photos of significant people, who I had to contact in order to obtain their verbal consent. This was a small concern that came up during the photo collection process. I was also, at times, unsure whether I would be able to communicate to the interviewer what I experienced, as I was aware that my nationality and ethnicity were different from the interviewer. However, the fact that the interviewer was naïve about my background meant that I could think of more elaborate ways to explain my experiences and probably use photos to shed light on the context of my experiences. With this in mind, I ended up taking and collating a lot of photos (25) hoping that they would help me with my expression of the context of my problems and not just the problems and coping per se.

Overall, I think I could make more sense of it when I looked back to those moments through the photos. It was like bringing all the events under one perspective and reflecting on what I learnt from it. Thus, as a participant I had a mixed experience in the course of photo collection, but a rather enlightening one.

#### *Reflections on experience of being interviewed*

The interview was conducted in the School of Psychology (University of Leeds). In order to keep the experience as close as possible to that of the real data collection, the two consent forms (Appendix A) were completed, one in the first meeting and the other just before the interview. The EPQ questionnaire was also filled at the first meeting. The interview was also audio-recorded. The interview experience shall be discussed in the following section under the categories of: reflections on use of photographs, interviewer skills support, timeline support and finally, level of disclosure

#### *Reflections on use of photographs*

During the course of the interview, the photos were of great help in my expression, not just as a visual aid for the conversation, but also as a mediator between me and the interviewer. This is in line with the visual methods literature discussed in Chapter 2 that highlighted the advantage of using photo-elicitation in bridging the gap between the interviewer and the interviewee. There were times during the interview when I was concerned about being judged about my life events and the interpretations that I held about experiences within my transition. It is through the photos that I found a way of expressing my experiences without having to make any eye contact. I could feel myself expressing more freely and openly through the photos although I was aware that I was opening up my past to a person whom I hardly knew.

Through the course of the interview, I realised that I have taken quite a lot of overlapping photos expressing the same thing. However, taking all of them helped me express more elaborately, being hopeful that the interviewer would get some idea about what I was trying to express.

#### *Reflections on interviewer skills and support*

At times I felt that I was not saying anything different from what any other person feels or thinks and that I was not giving anything new and unique. This insecurity made me conscious at times and reduced my enthusiasm. However, the interviewer's expression of interest whilst talking about the photos and my experiences of transition helped me regain the confidence. When the interviewer echoed what I was saying, it actually helped me reflect more on the events that occurred in my transition. The bringing together of events and the summarizing that the interviewer did after each photo gave me a way of looking and reflecting on experiences that



I shared with the interviewer. Furthermore, I even happened to realise how I usually dealt with difficult times. For example, travelling seemed to be something that I often used as a way of getting out of things and so was painting. I had never thought of this before as I spontaneously did things that pleased me during the hard times. However, when it was brought up from someone else's perspective, I realized a pattern in my coping behaviour.

### *Reflections on time-lining*

Events in my transition were interlinked and so were the photos that I collected for the interview. As I kept placing the photos in the timeline, I could refer back to them whenever I talked about some other photographs which were linked to what I talked about before. Although, I was not always sure where the photos fitted, placing them at the approximately relevant time point helped me knit together various events and talk about the photos with ease. In other words, the few photographs laid out in the timeline in the beginning gave me a ground to talk about the subsequent photographs. Figure 1 shows the timeline as produced through the self-pilot.



*Figure 1. Self-pilot timeline*

### *Reflections on level of disclosure*

As the interview proceeded, I could openly talk about the various events and how I coped with the issues that I faced in my transition. I was not as nervous and self-conscious as I had been before the interview. Considering that I was disclosing aspects of my life to someone who I barely knew, I did not expect to say so much about my life events and experiences as I did in the interview. I was surprised at how much I could speak about each photograph and express my feelings and emotions attached to them.

However, I think it was a little overwhelming and, at times, I had my guard up. I think it is expected to initially be a little concerned about laying out so much about one's life to a stranger. But the interviewer's enthusiasm and interest, as well as the fact that the communication was through the photographs that were taken by me, meant that I felt I had some control over the situation. The whole process of the interview started with me drawing the timeline and using my

photos which gave me comfort, a sense that I would be deciding what I wanted to speak about without feeling the pressure of saying more than I wanted. By the end of the interview, I was at ease and the interviewer thanked me for opening up so much and assured me that all the information would be stored under confidential conditions and not be discussed unprofessionally. This was an important part of the interview even though it was all in the information sheet and consent form.

Overall, there were a number of insights gained through this interview. It provided useful points of strengths as well as weaknesses (that could be amended as best as possible with the given constraints). In the following section I shall discuss some of the amendments subsequent to the self-pilot.

### ***3.3.3 Amendments to method of data collection following the self-pilot***

Amendments were made in the information sheet and in the use of the timeline and the post-its.

#### *Information sheet*

Amendments were required to the information sheet. Firstly, it stated ‘items’ instead of ‘photos’ and did not specify my interest in ‘coping’. Because, as the researcher, I was aware of the relevance of coping for the study, I took photos reflecting both coping as well as crisis. Secondly, it also needed to be mentioned in the information sheet that the photos had to be printed. There was a possibility that some participants might just take and display the photos in their smartphone devices and this would be incompatible with the use of timeline along with the photos. Placing the photos in the timeline was found to be a good way of carrying out the interview as it helped in expressing the events and the links between them. Thus, based on this requirement it was decided that the participants would be asked to send their digital photos through e-mail which I would print prior to the interview.

#### *Use of the timeline*

The photos were placed along the timeline and towards the end removed from its position and packed separately. The initial intention of using the timeline along with the photos was to provide ease in communication during the interview. Through the self-piloting, it was found that it was essential that the composite layout of the timeline (with the photos) was available to facilitate the analysis of the interview since the conversation in the interview was embedded in this visual depiction of experiences across time. When I tried to analyse the data from the self-pilot, there was a lot of missing information with just what was available from the audio recording. Because I collected the photos, I could listen to the audio-recording and understand which photo was referred to and when, but with interviews in the main study, it was recognised that the timeline with the photos needed to be available. Hence, it was decided that a snapshot of

the completed timeline layout would be taken at the end of the interview in case the participant wanted to take possession of the timeline. It was also found essential to use a video camera to record the placing of the photos in the timeline during the interview as these recordings needed to be considered along with the transcripts in analysis.

#### *Use of memos and post-its*

Prior to the self-piloting, it was assumed that post-its could be useful during the interview in tagging important moments, experiences and turning points. However, it was found that use of post-its and memos during the interview could potentially pause or disrupt the flow of the conversation. Although they could be used if the participant desired, it was decided that this would not be emphasized as part of the interview.

#### **3.3.4 Reflections on interview skills obtained**

I also learnt a lot from an interviewer point of view through the self-piloting, not only through the advice of my fellow research student who posed as the interviewer, but also through my position as a participant. During the interview, the interviewer constantly showed interest and used relevant probes to keep me focused on the topic concerned. The words were carefully chosen in order to keep me comfortable and not feeling judged. I think from the participant's point of view this is very important as the topic itself could be intense and there are quite a lot of personal elements involved in the conversation. At the end of the interview it helped to receive an assurance verbally about confidentiality and anonymity. Although, photos and the timeline would be used, there was an identified need to reiterate that his/her identity would not be revealed and that the photos would be manipulated by distorting faces making it unidentifiable.

#### **3.3.5 Summary**

Self-piloting helped to gain insight into the place of the participant as well as to know the researcher's work and involvement from an outsider's perspective as well as an insider's. As a participant, and not the interviewer, it provided some outsider's perspective of the skills required in interviewing, as also the interviewer for the self-pilot, my fellow postgraduate student (SP), provided me with some useful information from his own experience. As I posed as a participant, I could understand the various feelings and emotions that are involved in the process, although it cannot be denied that there could be some difference involved in being a participant in one's own research and someone else's. Overall, this experience as a participant in the self-piloting provided useful information about crucial elements in the process of data collection. It also helped in making important amendments to the method which was incorporated in the actual data collection after ethical approval was obtained regarding the

changes. The primary change that was made was the addition of video camera to record the timeline as the interview proceeded.

### **3.4 Participant pilot**

#### ***3.4.1 Aim of the pilot study***

The participant pilot study was initiated to check the practicality of the methods and researcher capability to conduct and analyse an interview. The pilot interview also sought to establish how much information can be obtained and whether there was a need to amend the method to obtain more or different information.

#### ***3.4.2 Recruitment and participant description***

The participant for the pilot study was recruited through emails sent out to the Psychology doctoral students' group and through word of mouth to a few acquaintances known to me. The willing participant demonstrated that she met the criteria for the study and was ready to discuss her transitional experience of crisis and coping. She was 25 years of age and was pursuing her postgraduate research degree at the time of the interview.

#### ***3.4.3 Procedure***

As soon as a willing participant emailed, a date and time was fixed to start the process and conduct the two sessions involved in the study. The first meeting was held in a room in the Psychology Department. This meeting was held to brief her about the study, fill in the required consent form, and complete the EPQ and answer any questions. On this occasion, her questions were mostly related to the kinds of photos that she could take and whether she could / should talk about her future concerns. After this meeting, the participant was given two weeks to gather the photos (old and new) and to email me as soon as she was ready for interview.

On obtaining the photos through email, they were printed out to use for the interview. Apart from this, other materials required for the interview were gathered (like a plain chart of 841mm\*297mm for the timeline, blue tac for sticking the photos, and a video camera). The date and time for the interview were scheduled through emails. The interview was conducted in a research room in the Psychology Department.

At the beginning of the interview, the participant drew a timeline on the paper provided and marked ages on it. It was based on these marked ages that she started talking about the issues that she faced and how she felt in different times in her transition and how she dealt with them. As she was talking, she placed the relevant photos on the timeline. She covered almost all the questions that were prepared for the interview. The whole interview was audio- and video-recorded for the purpose of analysis. The interview lasted for 46 minutes and at the end of the

interview she shared some feedback about her experience as a participant of the study. She expressed feeling excited when she started collecting the photos and had no difficulty taking and collecting photos. She also expressed that it was a “great experience” and that she was sure anyone would love doing it. She felt her whole life come into view in the course of collecting and taking photos and also while preparing what to talk about in the interview. Overall, she had a positive experience being a participant of the study.

#### ***3.4.4 Strengths, weaknesses and amendments***

The participant was enthusiastic, open and prepared. The interview was conducted without difficulty with most of the questions prepared for the interview covered by her without having to ask. However, the very strength of a quiet research setting could be a limitation for a personalized interview. Although it was not the case for the pilot study, depending on the person, the setting can influence the amount of information that the participant makes available to the researcher (Myers & Newman, 2007). Overall, the pilot study was a successful experience and boosted my confidence in further data collection. This pilot was therefore included in the main study with the data collected included in the analysis presented here.

##### *Amendments*

There were no major amendments required following this pilot study. The interview schedule was found to be useful and no changes were made. However, the interviews were conducted in different locations for some participants, like café, home and the study section in the library. In terms of the visual materials used for the interview, at the practical level, the only concern raised was the size of the timeline and the photos. The participants were advised to take between 5-20 photos for the interview. However, it was found that if the photos were printed in the usual postcard size, it would congest the timeline and cause obstructions during the interview and later in the analysis stage. The pilot study had seven photos and only just fitted the timeline (Figure 2). Hence, it was decided that the photos should be printed smaller (2 x 3 inches), and given the new photo dimensions, there was also a change made to the size of the paper for the timeline (changed to 841mm\*198mm) to enable a compact and yet uncongested layout of the timeline.

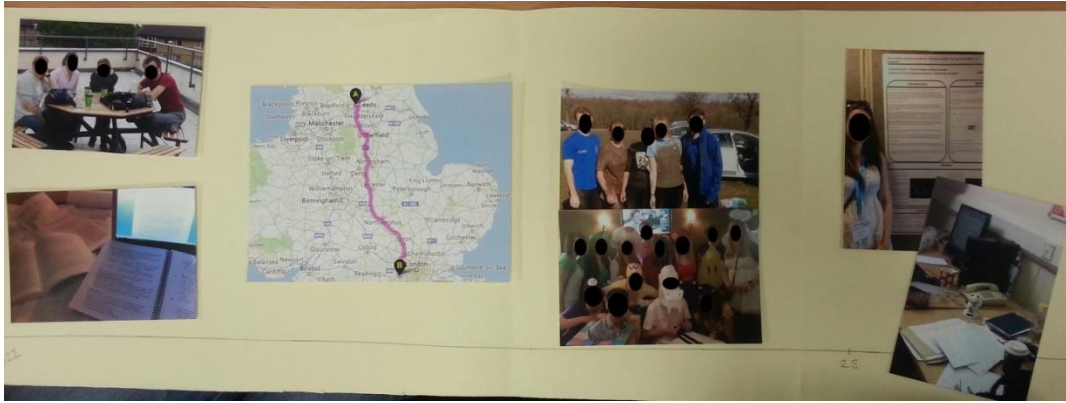


Figure 2. Timeline obtained from the pilot study

### 3.4.5 Reflections on interview experience (participant pilot)

The participant pilot being my first interview experience for the current study, I was a bit apprehensive about it, unsure of how the participant was going to make use of the timeline and the photos in the interview and whether my interview skills would enable generating rich and in-depth information about transitional experiences. This interview was with a participant who was known to me (as part of a larger group that I belong), which in turn had its advantages and disadvantages. There is always some advantage in practising skills with someone known. Being the first interview for the study, it seemed to be a good platform to not just test the methodologies, but also come to terms with my own interview skills and recognise potential difficulties that I might encounter in the process. In addition, there was a possibility of getting valuable feedback from the participant after the interview.

Although the interviewee was known to me and we shared the same workplace, we were not so close as to share life stories on a casual day. This made me wonder how much she would be able to open up in the interview and talk about her crisis. However, considering she showed her interest and willingness to participate and talk about her transition and crisis experiences, I thought I would give this a chance. Furthermore I discussed my concerns with my supervisors before going ahead with this pilot study. I also double checked with the participant making sure she was comfortable to take part in the study.

Before the interview, I arranged all the things required, like timeline chart, photos, pens, post-its and set up the video camera and the audio-recording device before she arrived for the interview. At the beginning of the interview, I gave a brief description of the study and interview process and made sure she got a clear idea of it. The interview started with her choosing one of the photos and placing it in the timeline and speaking about it in relation to her experience. She did not confine her description to the photo alone, but used it as a support to begin with what she wanted to share about a particular experience in her transition. The photos were systematically used and merged well with the shared experiences. They provided depth in terms of feelings and emotions attached to different experiences across her transition and allowed me a channel

through which I could empathise and understand what she was experiencing at different points. The timeline also provided me with the comfort of referring back to different points when asking further questions.

Initially I was concerned whether the participant would understand and follow how the study proposed to use the photos and the timeline in the interview process. She used the photos just like I did in the self-pilot, but with fewer photos and more information and depth in each of the seven photos she brought to the table. The interview grasped my complete attention and the focus shifted from concerns over my interview skills to the actual content of the interview that was rich with information about her crisis experience during her transition. It was like a conversation where she shared different events and experiences right from the time when she was in school to her current position and even future concerns. This turned out to be a productive interview and despite my fears, she shared detailed experiences through her transition and her feelings and emotions attached to different events encountered in the transitional process.

At one point in the interview, she talked about how she felt when she first moved to Leeds and she used the word 'isolated', but said that it helped her. I did not want to be provocative, but I wanted to ask why she used the word 'isolated'. I managed to raise this doubt without alarming her and she responded saying, "That's a good point" and went on further to explain her feelings attached to this event. This resulted in an elaborate discussion of how she felt when she first moved to Leeds and why this eventually turned into a crisis experience. This gave me the confidence to raise questions when need be and at the same time practice caution while doing so in order not to cause any tensions in the interview. As the interview continued, I realised that my questions were becoming more and more contextual. They were moulded based on the experiences that she shared with me. In this way, although I used the interview schedule, they were merged with the story revealed by the participant.

There was one point in the interview where the participant became emotional when she spoke about her mother - that in order to pursue her career, she had to leave her mother by herself back home. Her voice shook as she spoke about it and she quickly grabbed her coffee mug to take a sip. I was a bit unsure of what to say to her at the time but I gave her a moment before continuing with the interview. It was not a major setback, but at that point I realised that I should be prepared for similar experiences in subsequent interviews for the study. The participant gained her composure and continued with her story.

There was also a question of cultural difference between me and the interviewee. However, this did not act as a barrier, but helped me keep my personal story of transition aside and be open to new insights and knowledge about how transition to adulthood could be experienced in a

different setting. Thus, my place as an Indian interviewing someone from the UK did not seem to be a concern in the interview process.

Towards the end of the interview, I asked my participant about her experience of taking part in the study and she said,

*It's a lot of fun. You would too be interested in the research and you will get a lot of interesting stories.*

It turned out to be a 'fun' exercise for both of us and I was eager to hear more stories from different people about their transitional experiences. Her enthusiasm boosted my confidence. Furthermore, her positive feedback on the interview process (being smooth and hassle-free) gave me a sense of comfort and confidence for future interviews.

### **3.5 Method and Analytical Procedure: Main study**

This part of the chapter discusses the main study in terms of recruitment, data collection and reflections on interview experience. It also discusses the process of theme generation using IPA protocols and the process used in analysing the photos. Some pictorial demonstrations were also created to facilitate the understanding of crisis in their transitional experiences and generation of final themes and sub-themes which shall also be explained in this chapter.

#### ***3.5.1 Sampling and participants***

The target sample size was kept small as per the protocol for IPA studies, although there is no sample size rule and target numbers could be based on the intended depth of analysis and richness of the cases as well as the extent of comparison between cases and other practical limitations (like time and money) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The present study had a bigger sample than the 3-16 sample size considered typical for IPA studies (Robinson, 2014). The final sample for this study consisted of 16 British (8 male and 8 female) and 8 Indian participants (4 male and 4 female).

Convenience sampling was carried out initially to recruit British participants and this secured 13 people, one of whom had not attended university. After identifying that this participant appeared somewhat distinct from the others, it was felt important to include more participants with a non-university background. Thus, theoretical sampling was carried out targeting inclusion of British participants who had not attended university, and a further three were recruited. This led to a final sample of 16 British participants, 4 of whom did not attend university.

When I reflected on the self-pilot, and realised that my crisis experience was somewhat different from the British participants (see Box 1 for a reflexive note on the comparison), although there were many similarities too, a decision was made that extending the study to include a sample of Indian young people experiencing crisis could give extra depth to the influence of context in determining such experiences. The eight extra participants (other than the 16 upper limit) were



included later (through theoretical and purposive sampling). The recruitment first started with convenience sampling and then, within the Indian sample, purposive sampling was carried out to obtain both male and female participants and those who have and have not attended university.

**Box 1. Reflexive note on the comparison of my self-pilot with British participants' interviews**

After conducting quite a few interviews with British participants experiencing crisis, I started to identify commonalities, but also differences in experiences. This led me to question whether the concept of, and description pertaining to, 'quarterlife crisis' (as proposed by Robbins and Wilner) addressed those young people who are engaged in different social interactions and arrangements.

I experienced crisis too, but they were centred on aspects that were not widely expressed as concerns by the British participants. For instance, in my self-pilot I shared a lot about what I felt my parents wanted me to achieve and how these assumptions moulded a few of my decisions regarding my studies and work. When I felt that I failed to live up to their expectations, I experienced feeling helpless and desperate for change. I noticed that none of the British participants emphasized as much of their family's role in their decisions and a few attributed this as a basis of their crisis experience.

There was also a difference in terms of the photos I gathered for my self-pilot compared to the ones collected by the British participants. I had plenty that were representative of significant others who were part of my transition to adulthood. Furthermore, I placed the photo of my parents at the beginning of the timeline because I did not know where else to put it to emphasize that most of my decisions throughout my transition were in consideration with what would make them happy and content. However, I felt none of my British participants talked about family in the same manner, and/or with the same kind of emphasis, as I did.

I assume that the responsibility and accountability that most young Indian people could feel towards their parents are also associated with the legal and political system in India apart from just social and cultural values. In India, the government does not take responsibility for a child's upbringing and education in the same way as in the UK. Instead it's the parents who are made responsible for, or obligated to, support their children till the time they are independent financially. At the same time, children are not obligated to repay their parents monetarily. It was only when I came to UK that I realised this difference. A few of my English friends spoke about paying back loans to parents (however, I do understand that this may not be the case for all British young people) and a few of my British participants even expressed concerns stemming from the pressure they felt to repay the money their parents spent on them. I would never dare to mention to my parents about monetary repayment! They would not take it well if I said I wanted to do that! However, I always feel accountable to them for their time, effort and money spent in my upbringing (monetarily and otherwise).

This could only be a reflection of individual difference (unique to me) and this led to my curiosity of whether other Indian young people relate to others' (especially family) expectations the same way that I do and how the context of being brought up in an Indian society may influence their transitional experience (or even crisis). I shared my curiosity with my supervisors and with their support and enthusiasm, I was further convinced to make this part of my research. After having done most of the analyses of the interviews with the British participants, I took a few days' time from my vacation back home to interview some Indian young people.

The following states the inclusion and exclusion criteria used for both the samples.

Inclusion criteria:

- aged 22-30 years (age range used by Robbins and Wilner (2001) in relation to the term 'quarterlife crisis');
- self-define as having overcome, or are currently coping successfully with, substantial challenges 'finding your place in the world';
- not currently in contact with any mental health support service (criterion included to mitigate the problem of involving vulnerable young people);
- British national (this criterion was chosen to maintain homogeneity considering literature shows the significance of cultural differences in experiences) and Indian national (specifically from Assam) for the Indian sample.

Exclusion criteria:

- vulnerable individuals as assessed by me through the counselling skills obtained with work experience, and also using the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire.

#### *British sample recruitment*

Posters (see Appendix G) and other promotional methods (like talking about my research face-to-face with a group of people in gatherings, adverts in the university alumni site and department magazines) were used to recruit.

Table 1 shows the demographics of the British participants, source of recruitment, and number of photos brought for the interview and interview length.

Table 1. *British participant demographic, source of recruitment, interview length and number of photographs brought*

Pseudonym*	Sex	Age (yrs)	Highest qualification#	Source of Recruitment	Interview (mins)	Photos
Mary	F	25	Currently PhD	Word of mouth	46	7
Hannah	F	27	BSc	University of Leeds Alumni website	80	33
Olivia	F	23	BA	University of Leeds Alumni website	54	10
Avril	F	28	BA (Hons)	Word of mouth	48	9
Erica	F	24	Currently BSc	University of Leeds Alumni website	74	13
Silvia	F	25	Currently PhD	Word of mouth	37	7
Sarah	F	23	Diploma	Through acquaintance	39	9
Amy	F	26	GCSE	Through acquaintance	140	14
Bill	M	23	BA (Hons)	University of Leeds Alumni website	73	5
Andrew	M	22	MA	Through acquaintance	128	6
Max	M	25	MA	Through acquaintance	70	5
Denver	M	22	Currently BA	Through acquaintance	49	5
Alex	M	23	Currently Masters	Through acquaintance	36	8
Harry	M	26	BA	University of Leeds Alumni website	59	11
Aran	M	25	GCSE	Poster	54	5
Jack	M	22	GCSE	Through acquaintance	52	18

\*Note 1: Participants listed in order of gender and education (attended and not attended university within gender)

#Note 2: Abbreviations, PhD (Doctorate), BA (Bachelor of Arts), BSc (Bachelor of Science), GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), MA (Master of Arts), MSc (Master of Science)

#### *Indian sample recruitment*

The Indian sample consisted of young people from Guwahati city (Assam, India). This city was chosen based on the practicalities of conducting data collection in a place familiar to me (being my home city), while taking advantage of the ease of establishing contacts for participant

recruitment. Thus, the Indian participants were recruited either through acquaintances (contacted through people known) or word of mouth (contacted by talking to a group of people in a setting). Other practicalities of doing the study in Guwahati involved convenience of finding and agreeing to a place for the two meetings (as part of the data collection procedure) and travelling between places. This recruitment was conducted over one month, and given the time constraint the aforementioned factors facilitated and promoted the collection of data for the Indian sample. Table 2 presents the distribution of participants in the Indian sample in terms of gender, age and educational qualification, also showing the source of recruitment, interview length and the number of photos brought by the participants.

Table 2. *Indian Participant demographic, source of recruitment, interview length and number of photographs brought*

Pseudonym*	Sex	Age (yrs)	Highest qualification#	Source of Recruitment	Interview (mins)	Photos
Ishita	F	26	MSc	Through acquaintance	28	10
Amrita	F	30	MA	Through acquaintance	103	6
Isha	F	26	MA	Word of mouth	79	6
Niti	F	28	A-levels	Word of mouth	48	5
Aman	M	29	MA	Through acquaintance	88	10
Ravi	M	25	Currently BA	Through acquaintance	111	28
Raj	M	24	A-levels	Word of mouth	41	8
Vikram	M	30	A-levels	Word of mouth	39	12

\*Note 1: Participants listed in order of gender and education (attended and not attended university within gender)

#Note 2: Abbreviations, MSc (Master of Science), MA (Master of Arts), BA (Bachelor of Arts),.

Although all of the participants from the Indian sample were from Guwahati, there was geographical mobility among a few participants that is worth taking into consideration. Table 3 shows the age, gender and distribution of participants in terms of living in Guwahati city (never moved out), living in Guwahati city (moved out and returned) and currently living away.

Table 3. *Additional demographic information for the Indian participants*

Participants	Age (years)	Gender (M/F)	Living in Guwahati city (never moved out)	Living in Guwahati city (moved out and returned)	Currently living away
Ishita	26	F			✓
Amrita	30	F		✓	
Isha	26	F	✓		
Niti	28	F	✓		
Aman	29	M		✓	
Ravi	25	M			✓
Raj	24	M	✓		
Vikram	30	M		✓	

### 3.5.2 Data collection

Participants who recognised experiencing crisis and were willing to participate were emailed with the information sheet. If they still showed interest, I met to discuss the research and to screen for vulnerability using my prior clinical experience and the EPQ (Table 4 shows the number of participants who withdrew at different points after showing initial willingness to participate).

Table 4. *Willing participants who discontinued*

Discontinuation point	Reasons	No. of participants
Before sending information sheet	Showed interest, but were in contact with mental health support	2
After sending information sheet	Mostly unknown (one dropped out because of time constraint)	5
After the first meeting	Discomfort with the use of photos Time constraint Other reasons (unknown)	4

The eligibility test discussed earlier in this chapter was administered to identify people who had experienced difficulties during the transition to adulthood. Questions were: “Have you ever experienced difficulty establishing what ‘kind of person’ you are?”, “Have you ever felt ‘stuck’ in life?”, “Have you ever felt anxious about choosing the next step in life?”, “Have you ever craved for a change in direction of life?”, “Have you ever felt lost in the multiplicity of options in life?”, “Have you ever felt apprehensive after having made a major life decision?” If they answered yes to any of the questions, potential participants were also asked to indicate the age when they experienced any difficulties. Participants were included in the study if they answered

yes to any of the questions and if the age specified was anywhere between 18 to 30 years. Along with this, two other questions were asked to allow screening of mental health concerns: “Are you currently in contact with any mental health support service?” and “Do you self-define as being mentally healthy at the moment?”

Participant vulnerability is an important concern for this study and hence Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Form A) was used as an additional tool to assess neuroticism. If they qualified (fit the criteria and did not have a high Neuroticism score on the EPQ), the participant was briefed and informed consent was obtained.

Data collection involved the semi-structured interview (see Appendix F for interview schedule) along with the photos and the timeline layout of each participant (Appendix H shows the timelines produced by each participant).

The interview began with the participants explicating their experiences over a course of time as marked by them in the timeline, allowing me to grasp aspects that were relevant to each individual participant before raising questions from the interview schedule. The interview schedule was used as probes during the interview (mostly after having discussed the photos) with questions centred on feelings of being stuck, points of worries, relationship dynamics, responsibilities, regrets and coping responses. The questions were not structured, instead they were dictated by the direction of the conversation led by the participants through their discussion of experiences and the photos they brought.

### ***3.5.3 Reflections on interview experience (main study)***

As the main study progressed, I started getting exposed to a myriad of stories and different interview circumstances. I wrote reflexive notes after every British participant interview. As the interviews in India were conducted in a very short span of time, some had to be held consecutively on the same day. Thus, one reflexive note was written for the Indian participants (as presented in Box 2).

Box 2. Reflexive note written after interviewing Indian participants

Whilst visiting my family I gathered the data for the Indian participants. There was a time constraint involved, but the interviews went well and I got to hear different life stories of young Assamese people who experienced crisis. My comfort level and the interview approach for the Indian participants remained the same as for the British participants. In the course of these interviews, I identified a few similarities as well as differences between my self-pilot and their stories, as well as, the interviews with the British and Indian participants.

I noticed one big similarity between the self-pilot and the Indian participants: just like in my self-pilot timeline, 3 of the 8 Indian participants placed the photo of their parents right at the beginning of the timeline and kept referring to it throughout the interview indicating their importance in the decisions they made. On the other hand, only 2 of the 16 British participants did the same, where one participant placed the photo of his father in the beginning to relate to his childhood experience and the second participant related the photo of her mother to her coping responses and dragged it throughout the timeline to indicate times when her presence helped her deal with her crisis. Thus, there were differences in how these Indian and British participants related the photo of their parents with their experience of crisis.

The difference between the self-pilot and my Indian participants was more apparent for those who had not attended university. There seemed to be a different form and degree of struggles and sacrifices that the non-university Indian sample went through in their transition. Mostly because of shortage of financial support, they experienced crisis when they had to look after their family's financial needs as well as their own. On the other hand, I never imagined repaying my parents for the money they spent on me, let alone earning for them. This has, of course, to do more with socio-economic background than culture.

Most of my Indian participants talked exclusively about social and family expectations right from the start of the interview and for some I had to provoke to talk about their transition in terms of career. This is somewhat opposite to the experiences I had with some British participants where I had to instigate conversations related to matters, if any, with regard to family, friends and romantic relationships. Career/education seemed equally important for the Indian participants, but five of the participants initially just made a passing reference to this transition and emphasized romantic relationships, family responsibilities and obligations and only started talking about the difficulties faced in terms of career when I asked about it. For some, the opportunity of exploring and fulfilling personal goals was overshadowed by societal responsibilities and obligations and further by lack of financial support in the case of the non-university sample.

I could relate to, and understand, the aspects of social responsibilities and expectations, but not always in a similar way. For instance, four participants expressed the pressure they felt from the family to pursue a career in their chosen direction, leaving very little scope for themselves to choose. I have never experienced such explicit pressure from my family, but only took their opinions as options and my parents also made it clear to me that I should make my own career decision. The pressure I felt in terms of my decisions were mostly related to my own assumptions of what would make them happy. For instance, although I wanted to take a break after my post-graduation, I did not do so because I felt that it would be too selfish to continue to take money from my parents after they had spent so much on my education. I realised that experiences of social pressure and responsibilities could vary among young people depending not just on cultural background, but also family upbringing and SES. However, I felt that the transition to adulthood for most of the Indian participants, was complicated by the social and cultural values. They not only had to strive to pursue what they want (that is, if they get a chance), they also felt the need to consult their parents for approval and/or consider what they desired of them.

Most participants actively engaged in the interview without much effort from my end to probe for more. Quite often they started the conversation by taking possession of the timeline and using it to their own will, marking year/age and writing down events in the timeline. However, there were a few participants who assumed that there was a prescribed way of using the timeline with the photos and waited for me to spell out the rules. In case the participants were hesitant or unsure, it was a good practice to give them a sense of authority over the timeline. I often told them, "This is your timeline and these are your photos. You can place them as and when you speak about your story. You can use the timeline as you wish to help communicate your story to me". This even led some participants to use the timeline to draw things, mark important events with bold writing and even move photos around the timeline.

Most participants were very open right from the beginning, unhesitatingly explaining details of their story, elaborating and adding layers of important details to their stories. However, there were a few participants who were only prepared to talk briefly about the photos, giving a flow chart of events, and expected the interview to be more question-led. After setting the tone of the interview, most found their way into expressing more than they probably presumed before coming for the interview. Some participants even mentioned at the end of the interview that they said more than what they thought they would.

While mostly the interviews started with a formal tone, they gradually turned into an informative conversation and participants shared more and more as the interview progressed. Some even moved back in the timeline to fill gaps and add more as they became more comfortable with the interview process. It was essential to sometimes maintain some degree of informality in order to make participants feel comfortable and not as if they were sitting to be examined. In the first few interviews I did not try much to be casual with the participants, but when I started being more comfortable and understanding what worked in the interview, I realised that some amount of light-mood tone was essential in making the participants feel at ease. This is different from what I have practised and experienced in my past in a clinical setting, but similar to my counselling experiences with young school students. This did not mean that I was posing as an advisor or counsellor for my participants, but only attempted to make participants feel comfortable to talk about their experiences. For instance, before starting the interview, while I set the camera and the recording device, I often chatted with the participant and asked him/her about his/her day and talked about other things unrelated to the study. This part of rapport building subsequently helped putting participants at ease.

While participants were engaged in the flow of their narration, there were times when I had questions related to different events. It was a challenge to raise these questions while the participant was narrating their story because I felt that I might end up disrupting their thoughts in the process. In this situation the timeline served as a productive medium providing me a



ground to refer back at a later point. I had to keep a mental note of the questions I wanted to ask and raise them at an appropriate time. In this way keeping in tune with the story of the participants while at the same time being mindful of the questions to be raised in relation to study interest, was a challenging task at the beginning. As I interviewed more participants, this became a habitual part of my role as an interviewer and I could continuously engage with their story as well as attend to the study interest with less effort. There were times when participants repeated a story with extensive details and kept going in loops emphasizing intricate aspects of the stories, at times drifting away from their narration about transition. This is when I had to come in and lead the conversation ahead.

The place I found that I struggled the most was the question associated with being responsible. This is perhaps where my background as an Indian played its part and I unintentionally asked the question framed as ‘Do you feel responsible towards someone?’ instead of ‘Do you feel responsible?’ Some of the British participants found it hard to understand this question, but interestingly the Indian participants were more spontaneous in replying to the same. Instead of changing my question to just asking if they felt responsible, I continued to frame my question: whether they felt responsible towards someone. This gave me insightful responses, some stating that they felt only responsible towards themselves while others (even British participants) expressed feeling accountable and answerable to someone else for the decisions they took in their transitional process.

The interviews with the Indian participants were quite interesting considering I had both a position as an insider and an outsider in their life stories. As the participants were from my hometown, I could relate to many things that they spoke about, not just in terms of the city and the culture within it but also as a society with specific values and norms. However, there were also substantial differences in how these young people experienced society and culture, some with more rigidity than others. There were aspects of societal responsibilities and obligations that were alien to me, giving me an outsider’s perspective of a person raised in a different socio-economic condition.

Overall, both the British and Indian samples gave stories that were unique in their own ways and as an interviewer I had the opportunity of being introduced and exposed to details of the many lives that were set in distinct social and cultural milieu. Towards the end of the interviews, I communicated to the participants how much their contribution mattered and that their anonymity would be maintained in analysis and write up.

#### ***3.5.4 Analytical procedures – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis***

This section describes the stages involved in analysis from data organisation to preliminary coding through to theme generation with explanations of how images and timelines were used

to support the analysis. Figure 3 shows the layout of these stages in a flow chart explicating the analytical procedure. The seven stages of analysis were:

Stage 1: Transcription and data preparation

Stage 2: Descriptions and codes

Stage 3: Tabulation of individual themes

Stage 4: Developing cross-cutting themes

Stage 5: Pictorial representation of transition

Stage 6: Analysis of photos

Stage 7: Theme generation

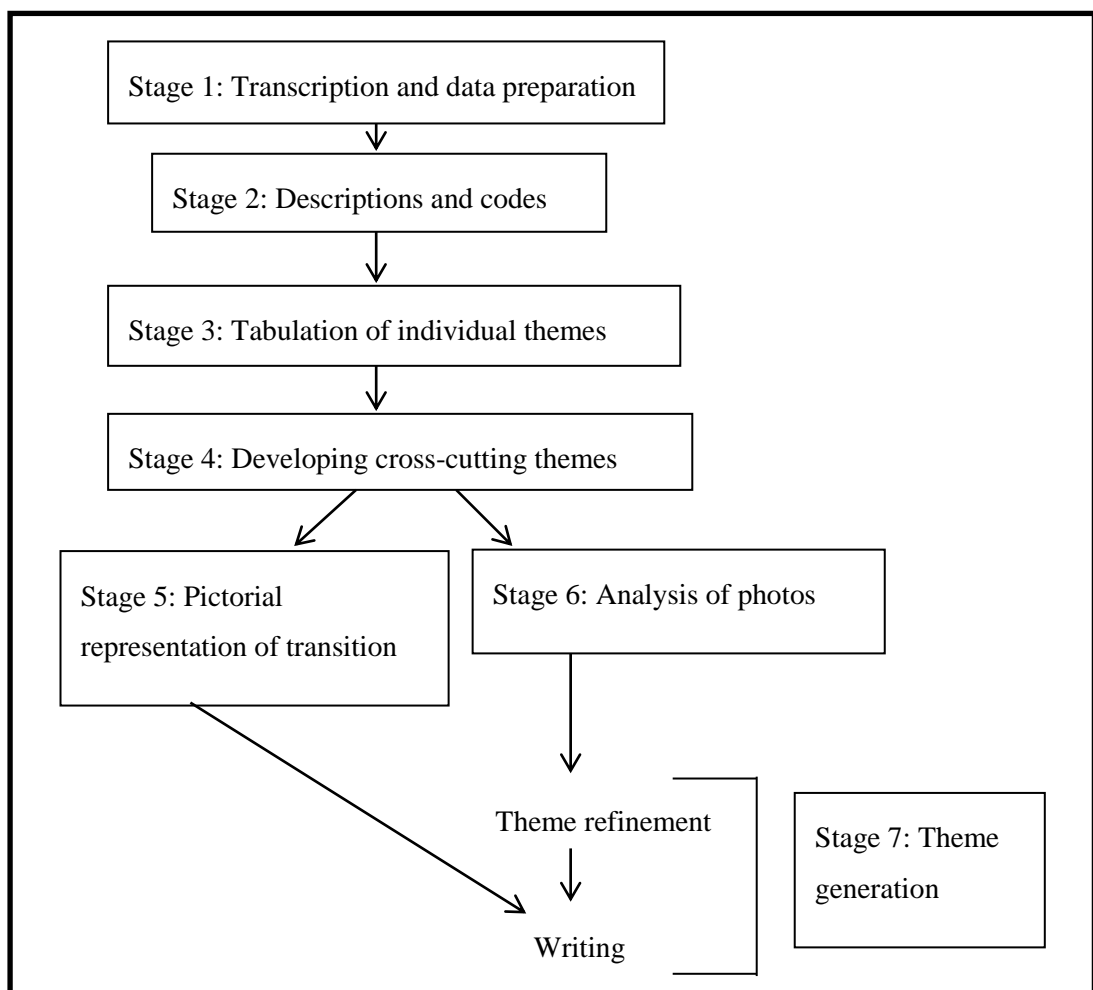


Figure 3. Analytical procedure in a flow chart

#### *Stage 1: Transcription and data preparation*

IPA requires careful transcription in order not to miss expression that could assist analysis. Orthographic transcription is commonly used for IPA studies and delivers a transcript in the form of a playscript (Forrester, 2010). The pilot study interview was transcribed by me (9

pages) and subsequent interviews were transcribed by a professional company. I checked the transcripts against the audio for accuracy; at this stage, some paralinguistic features were also integrated (e.g. pauses and emphases where they were felt to be significant to understanding the participant's account). After this, the video-recordings were reviewed and notes of gestures towards the images and / or timeline were added to the transcripts. As shown in Figure 4, each transcript was then organised into four columns to accommodate the line numbers, the transcript, descriptions and codes.

118	fun, hoping it would kind of be like in an apartment in		
119	university but it didn't really kind of work out like I wanted		
120	to so I actually found them quite difficult to live with and	However, things didn't quite work out the way he expected and he wasn't enjoying their company.	Disappointment (compared to his expectation)
121	for the first time in my life really I found I'd moved into a		
122	house that I actually wasn't really enjoying and I didn't		
123	really...		

*Figure 4.* Demonstration of the organisation of the transcripts from line numbers, to transcripts, to descriptions to codes.

#### *Stage 2: Descriptions and codes*

Transcripts were read and re-read to establish familiarity. Next, brief descriptions were made for segments of text which were reducible to meaning units (i.e. smallest unit of text that can be understood to be representing something discrete from the next segment). These descriptions represented the first level of interpretation of the data, although they remained highly descriptive of the text segment. This process involved the articulation of general meaning without specifically attending to the research question. According to Hycner (1985), this is a “process of getting at the essence of the meaning expressed in a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph or significant non-verbal communication” (p. 282) whilst condensing and crystallizing the content of the transcripts. One example is offered in Figure 4.

Once each meaning unit in the transcript had been assigned a description, the next analytic step was to develop codes. Codes represented a level of interpretative activity in that I sought to represent a likely meaning or experience implied by the text. Wherever helpful, in vivo codes were used to stay close to the data. As also recommended by Hycner (1985) and done in Fade's (2004) study, important emotions and expressions exhibited by the participants were carefully noted in order to keep with the essence of the meanings of words, phrases and sentences. Figure 5 shows a few codes developed for one of the participants. This activity was done for each participant separately. Alongside each code, line numbers were noted to keep track of the part in the transcript that it represents.

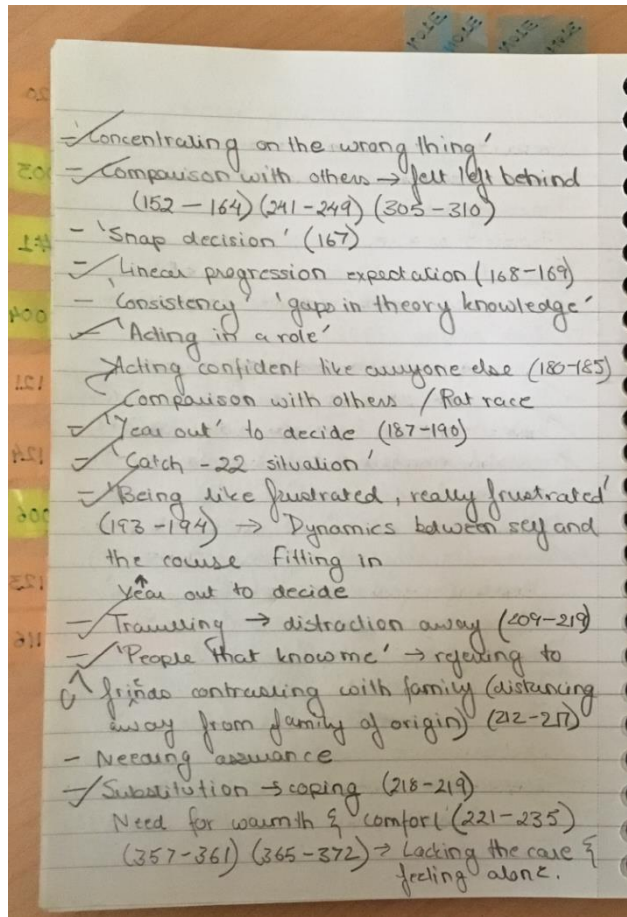


Figure 5. A few codes developed for one of the participants

In line with usual IPA practice, each transcript was analysed separately and wholly before analysis on a next transcript began. Whilst it can be challenging to erase the effect of each transcript analysis on subsequent analysis, attempts were made to leave some time between analytic activities.

### Stage 3: Tabulation of individual themes

At this stage, individual themes were prepared, driven by the preliminary analytic engagement in the form of codes. The process involved marking relevant codes (based on the research question) in the list generated in Stage 2 and then refining them to form individual themes (that is, set of themes for each participant). These individual themes were then put in a tabular format with line numbers and descriptions. The individual themes helped in recording specific experiences of the participants (later analysed further and interpreted to develop the cross-cutting themes). At the beginning of each table, the participant's demographics, timeline produced and the sequence of milestones followed were noted. This was done to keep the context in perspective and looking at the crisis experience in relation to the milestones achieved and the specific demographics of the concerned participant, for example, age, gender, cultural background and educational qualification. Furthermore, the timelines helped in the reproduction of the transitional experiences in graphical/pictorial representation in the later stage.

#### Stage 4: Developing cross-cutting themes

It is at this stage that the analysis moved from individual to group. The individual themes noted separately for each participant facilitated the generation of possible themes across different participants. In other words, the individual themes were clustered around topics associated with the research question that provided a structure to draw attention in developing the final themes. These cross-cutting themes were then inserted into the first column of the tables generated in Stage 3. This was only a preliminary attempt of facilitating the generation of themes for all the transcripts by organising the individual themes under the cross-cutting themes and mapping them in the form of a table. Table 5 shows a part example of such a document prepared.

Appendix I shows the full length of one transcript tabulation of individual and cross-cutting themes. At the end of each table, brief notes were made that were of interest to the generation of themes outside the broad themes developed.

*Table 5. Example of first step in generation of themes that includes cross-cutting themes, individual themes, line numbers and descriptions*

<b>Cross-cutting themes</b>	<b>Individual themes</b>	<b>Line nos.</b>	<b>Descriptions</b>
<b>Perpetuation of pressure</b>	Need for someone	43-57	There is a need for constant someone to walk with through the transition path. Although he takes his individual decision, it is always weighed against what others are doing. In the situation where he decided to go to Spain for a year, he persuaded his friends to do the same because there is a constant need for that support through the whole process of change.
		192-199	He expressed that he was happier when he heard that his friends got through the same programme than when he got through it himself.  He expressed that it was essential for him that on returning he has some of the known faces around him with similar experiences to carry on in the course.
	Comparison with others	5-10 196-202	He compares himself with others who he feels are more determined about their future and doing different things like internships and other applications to pave their way to the future career. He expressed that he 'wasn't plugged into that kind of thinking'.

The cross-cutting themes were: new challenges, perpetuation of pressure, self-perception, factors considered in making decisions, change with time and coping responses. It needs to be noted that at this stage the images used by the participants were not brought to analysis.

The tables for each participant were saved in associated documents.

*Stage 5: Pictorial representation of transition*

Whilst analysing the data through theme generation, it was recognised that participants had certain ‘ideals’ about how transition from education to work is ‘supposed’ to be. Recognising the vital role of these ideals in their actual transitional experience, it was decided to make pictorial representations of this transition marked by different milestones whilst navigating from education to work. The milestone representations used in the beginning of each transcript summary (as mentioned above and shown in Appendix I) set the ground for the development of these pictorial representations. Figure 6 is an example of these pictorial representations of transitions.

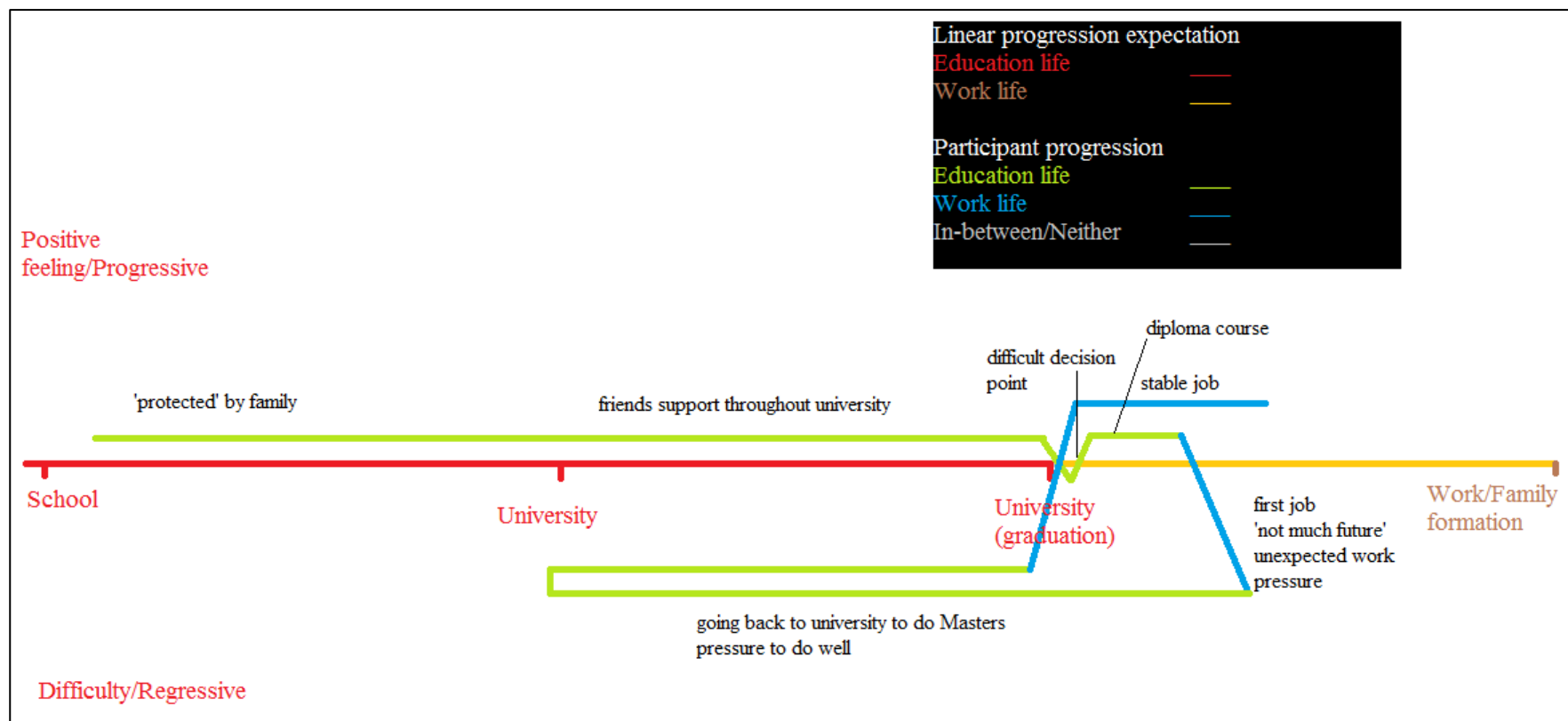


Figure 6. An example of pictorial representation of transition

Disclaimer: not scaled and no statistics used, only a depiction of transition that provides a bird's eye view of movements and patterns across time

In this graphical/pictorial representation (Figure 6), the red line represents the time in education and the yellow, work. Together these were drawn as a straight line because most participants spoke about the expected linearity in transition from education to work (*'just a straight line'*). This is discussed further in the chapter, *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment*. While the part above the red and yellow line represented feeling of progression and optimism, the part below represented feeling of regression and/or other negative feelings emanated from their transitional experience. The green line represents the participant's actual educational life and the blue, the actual work life. The green and blue line was drawn based on how the participants felt at different points in their transition. There was a non-linear pattern (circular, backward and forward movements) in this line as depicted by different participants in their expressions of how they felt in different points in their transition as compared to the expected linear line (represented by the red and yellow line). The feeling state (as articulated through the interview) was recorded in places where relevant to explicate the basis of the movement of this line. For instance, *difficult decision point* marking the trough in the figure, *pressure to do well* was a period of difficulty experienced by the participant when she moved back from work to education. Some direct expressions from the interview were also annotated in this pictorial representation as a cue for drawing the line depicting the actual transition. In Figure 6, *'not much future'* was recorded, a phrase used by the participant when she realised that she was moving in a wrong direction incompatible to her needs and expectations.

Such pictorial representations were done for all the participants in the study (two examples in Appendix J). Although these pictorial representations were not scaled, they served as a helpful guide in understanding transition from education to work and were most useful in understanding the theme, *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment* (discussed in Chapter 4a).

#### *Stage 6: Analysis of photos*

Photos were used as part of the data collection for this study, but there were different elements of this method that came to play whilst analysing and reporting the data. This section on photo analysis is divided into four parts:

- Initial intention of the use of photos
- Participants' use of the photos
- Aid for analysis
- Presenting to the reader

#### Initial intention of the use of photos

The study intended to use photos in the data collection process to provide participants with a channel through which they could express themselves and exercise some degree of control over the interview. Given that they had the liberty to choose the photos, they essentially had the time



and space to plan what they wanted to talk about and at the same time lead the interview. In this way, photos were also presumed to pose as a bridge between the interviewer and the interviewee in which the visual materials could potentially provide a platform or medium of expression. Furthermore, previous studies have shown the advantage of using photos in studies with young people, creating enthusiasm and ‘fun’ in study participation (Coad, 2007; Drew et al., 2010; Meo, 2010; Morrow, 2001). Having recognised these advantages from previous studies (as also discussed in Chapter 2), it was deemed useful to include photos in the interview process for the present study. Thus, the use of photos in this study was initially intended to help in the data collection process.

#### Participants’ use of the photos

Participants used photos effectively and systematically in the interview process. They seemed to have thought it through well enough over the course of time while they collected the photos. Most of them even emailed the photos with captions on them. In the interview, the photos and the timeline were used as a platform to express their crisis experiences while actively engaging with the task of knitting the photos and the timeline together while communicating their experiences.

Photos brought by the participants varied considerably - some were used as metaphors and simile, and others were of significant people and events. Some brought downloaded images, although they were instructed to ‘use any photos, recent or from past or click new photos’.

Not only did they exercise control over the type of photos, but also how they used them in the interview to express their crises and coping. In most instances, photos were used to express events and the feelings associated with these events. Some participants verbally expressed the event encountered and used the visual aid to depict the feeling state associated with the event. For instance, Aman used a sketch that he made at a time when he was living alone (in a different country) and felt stuck in his misery, wanting to scream out. He used the photo of his sketch to represent what he felt during the time (Figure 7) and said,

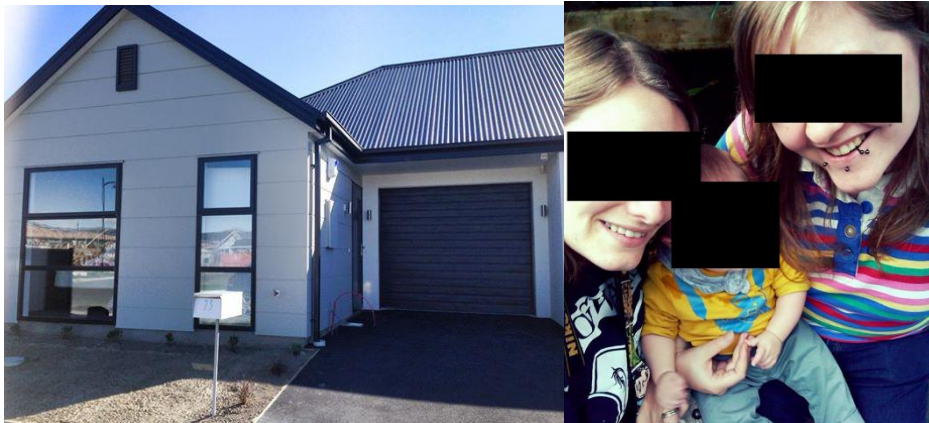
*Because there I was alone. I had no one to make happy. There I got in touch with myself and got to know how sad I am. I always used to make paintings like these (pointing to two photos). Like the guy by the sea side throwing... this is actually a story... like you see he’s clenching a stone. It’s like going to the sea and just screaming out, taking out the frustration. Finally tired, just lying down and let the sea calm you down. (Line no. 300-308)*



*Figure 7.* Participant photo mentioned in the extract above (from Aman’s account), depicting ‘frustration’

There were other participants who used photos to depict the event and used verbal expression to communicate the feelings associated with the event. For instance, Avril used a photo of her friend’s house (Figure 8, left) and another of her two friends with their baby (Figure 8, right) and placed them in her timeline of events. It was her feelings associated with these events that she wanted to communicate through these photos. Although the photos were simple images of a house and her friends, for her it was something that represented her ‘failure’ in comparison to her friends. After placing the photos in the timeline, she said:

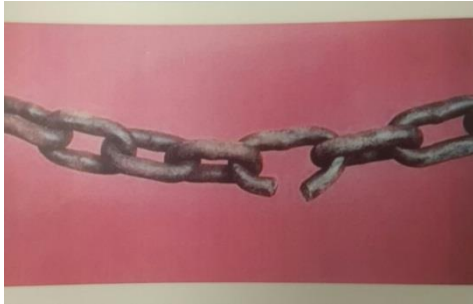
*...she got married and then they’ve just had this house built (points to photo 6), and like all my friends seem to be having babies at the moment and this is just like (points to photo 7), like one of my gay couple friends and they’ve had a baby as well and it’s just like, ‘oh my god, even my gay friends are having babies’, it’s just, yeah. (Line no. 199-206)*



*Figure 8.* Photo 6 (left) and photo 7 (right) mentioned in Avril’s extract

In this way photos were effectively used to communicate not just the event, but also their reflection of the experience of the event and also their feeling state. There were some participants who used metaphorical photos. For instance, Denver used a metaphorical image (Figure 9) representing how he felt about himself in relation to his family. He placed the photo in the timeline and said:

*it makes me feel like, when it comes to the family it makes me feel weak (places photo 3 in the timeline), it makes me like feel like I'm not doing what I should be doing to help them out because it's different... (Line no. 369-373)*



*Figure 9.* Photo 3 mentioned in Denver's account

Denver used a photo of a broken link in a chain to represent his feeling of being 'weak', wanting to help his family but unable to do so.

There were also participants who took the liberty to move photos around the timeline while they spoke about their experiences. For instance, Bill shifted the second and the fourth photo in his timeline (Figure 10) to express his regret of making the wrong decision in his career path:

*It had nothing to do with the sort of complexity that I was interested in, okay, so, chances are, if I'd have picked the mathematics routes, if I'd have taken that all the way there (sliding the fourth photo to the point in the timeline where the second photo is placed), that would have looked a lot different. But, because I didn't (taking the fourth photo back to where it was), it is what it is. (Line no. 613-621)*



*Figure 10.* Bill's timeline

There were also participants who shifted photos along the timeline to signify its importance in different periods of time in their transition. For instance, Sarah moved the photo of her mother across the timeline while expressing how she coped at different points of difficulty in her transition, when she felt lost and indecisive. Throughout her transition, it was her mother who always stood as a strong source of support helping her deal with her crises experiences.



Thus, the visual and verbal elements of the interviews formed a well-coordinated medium through which participants expressed their crisis experiences. They creatively used the photos and timeline, whilst exercising control over what photos were brought for the interview and how they were used in the interview. It enabled an ease in communication between the interviewer and interviewee, also providing contextual depth through the effective use of the timeline along with the photos.

Aid for analysis

Although photos brought by the participants were not the initial focus for analysing the data, they proved to be useful supplements in explicating the essence of the interview content. In addition, they were considered vital in understanding what mattered to the participants and with what intention they were added to the discussion of crisis and coping. This helped me tune in as closely as possible to the experiences of the participants, also supporting the phenomenological stance of the present study. Recognising the depth of information revealed through the photos, I decided to pay particular attention to each photo brought by the participants.

As the initial step in analysing the photos, they were treated individually (instead of grouping together based on participants) and codes were generated from each photo (similar to the procedure adopted for developing themes from extracts). Three columns were made - first being the photo itself, the second column was used for a descriptive summary of the photo based on participant’s discussion of the same and the third was used for interpretation of the descriptions. Table 6 shows a part of such an arrangement used for the purpose of analysis.

Table 6. *Demonstrating a part of the photo analysis process*

<p>Photo 7</p> 	<p>-self-portrayal of being socially unacceptable</p> <p>- ‘I was a bit rebellious in quotation marks’</p> <p>- ‘always been annoyed by people’</p>	<p>Photo portraying everything socially undesirable: gun, smoking and an angry look</p> <p>Metaphorical image</p> <p>Conscious moulding</p>
<p>Photo 12</p> 	<p>-self-portrayal of being in a vicious circle of undesirable circumstances</p> <p>- feeling stuck</p> <p>-externalising cause of problems</p> <p>- ‘it’s all black and white’</p>	<p>Metaphorical image</p> <p>Helplessness</p> <p>Representing his environment</p> <p>Indication of problems set outside himself</p>

This organisation of the photos enabled the generation of categories of interests and concerns depicted by different participants. The themes generated through this process were useful in understanding what participants tried to communicate through these photos and how they fitted their experience of crisis. The following is the list of broad/common themes generated through the analysis of the photos:

- Comparison with others
- Coping
- Inspiration
- Friendship

- Romantic relationship
- Self-portrayal
- Helplessness
- Holding optimism
- Family reference

There was contextual depth added to each of the above categories that contributed to the understanding of the experience of crisis. What was particularly interesting in this list of themes is the extensive use of photos depicting portrayal of self. These images represented a deliberate evaluation of self through reproduction of self-image and identification of personal characteristics, interests and preferences. Table 6 (used earlier to show the layout for analysis) also gives two examples of self-portrayal depicted through photos brought by a participant.

Two other themes that were generated from these photos were inspiration and optimism. Participants were asked to bring photos associated with crisis and coping, but within these two topic areas, some felt it to be essential to depict their feeling of optimism in the midst of the chaos felt in their transition. Denver was one such participant who used a photo (Figure 11) to depict hope and positive outlook, placed at a future point in the timeline. This photo was not a representation of a career goal, but a connection derived from his childhood experiences and linked to what he expected from his future. When the interviewer asked Denver what the photo meant to him, he said:

*I don't know, it just relates to what inspires me, whether, I don't know how to explain it properly, I think it's the scale of it like what it means and what there is in it like, I wanted to be an, here's a good way of linking it in, when I was little I wanted to be an architect, because I think buildings and all that, that provides like if I see a nice building or see a nice city I take inspiration from that, when I was little all I wanted to be was an architect, I used to draw buildings all the time [...]when I was doing all that drawing, I know you're naive when you're a kid but I'd have been like, "yeah, definitely, I can do that, that's easy", so perhaps as I've got older I've become more pessimistic and that has changed my, changed which way I'm heading (Line no. 489-496)*

He was struggling to get inspiration, a motivation to 'get up and go' and not give in to the failures he was encountering in his transition. He wanted to change his pessimistic self and hold some hope for a positive future. This photo gave him the connectivity with his past - when he was optimistic and full of passion and drive towards becoming an architect.



Figure 11. Photo used by Denver to represent optimism

This brought to light personal elements of Denver's life that gave the interviewer an empathic understanding of his experience of crisis.

Similarly, there were participants who brought photos depicting inspiration to move in specific directions in their transition. This information would have been presumably hidden had it not been for the photos generated by the participants. Thus, these photos added layers of information for the present study enabling the understanding of aspects in transition that are of significance to the participants in their transitional experience.

Furthermore, these themes were separately investigated for the British and the Indian sample. Table 7 shows the themes as developed by both the sample, explicating what was more prevalent in the two sample.

Table 7. *Distribution of themes across the British and Indian participants*

Broad themes	British sample No. of participants (out of 16)	Indian sample No. of participants (out of 8)
Inspiration	5	1
Comparison with others	5	-
Coping	8	1
Friendship	5	4
Romantic relationship	7	4
Self-portrayal	9	1
Helplessness	4	1
Holding optimism	3	2
Family reference	5	5

It can be seen from Table 7 that none of the Indian participants brought photos depicting comparison with others (explored further in the chapter: *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*).

#### Presenting to the reader

From the initial aim of just using photos for data collection, the use of photos had come a long way - to be used additionally for analysing the data and also presenting to the reader. As mentioned earlier, photos were not used on their own in analysing the data for the present study, rather used in conjunction to the verbal data generated through the interview. Wherever relevant, photos are used along with the extracts in presenting the themes and sub-themes in the following chapters, giving an empathic view of the crisis experience of the participants. For instance, some participants used photos depicting feeling of entrapment (Figure 12 is an example) in their transitional experience.



Figure 12. Avril's photograph: 'this is how I feel with my job at the minute'

Avril used this photo to express how she felt in her current job. Although, it was her deliberate choice to work in that position, she started feeling suffocated by the job and felt like she was trapped in it, unable to take the leap into changing her career route. This was used to explicate the sub-theme, *Rushing into financial self-sufficiency* in the chapter, *Forced 'adulthood'/independence*. Similarly, other photos have been used across the analysis chapters to provide readers with access to visual materials brought by the participants that were significant in understanding particular experiences shared verbatim.

#### Stage 7: Theme generation

The process of theme generation involved three parts: (i) pictorial representation supporting writing, (ii) analysis of photos leading to theme refinement and supporting writing and (iii) individual and cross-cutting themes refined to form final set of themes and sub-themes. The use of pictorial representation of transitions was already discussed in Stage 5. This directly assisted presenting and writing of some of the final themes, like *Coping responses* (used in the sub-theme *Acceptance of non-linear progression*) and *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment* (used in the sub-theme *Betrayal of the 'ideal'*).

The analysis of photos further assisted in theme refinement and writing. For instance, photos brought by participants depicting comparison with others helped draw attention to a vital source of crisis, that is, testing their worth when they saw others doing better than them. Similarly photos of inspiration and optimism illuminated some of the important ways through which participants dealt with their experience of crisis (also explained in Stage 6) adding to the final theme of *Coping responses*. In this way, analysis and interpretation of the photos helped in filling missing gaps and illuminating some of the important concerns leading to the experience of crisis.

The process of theme generation from individual and cross-cutting themes to the final themes and sub-themes has been explicated in Figure 13.

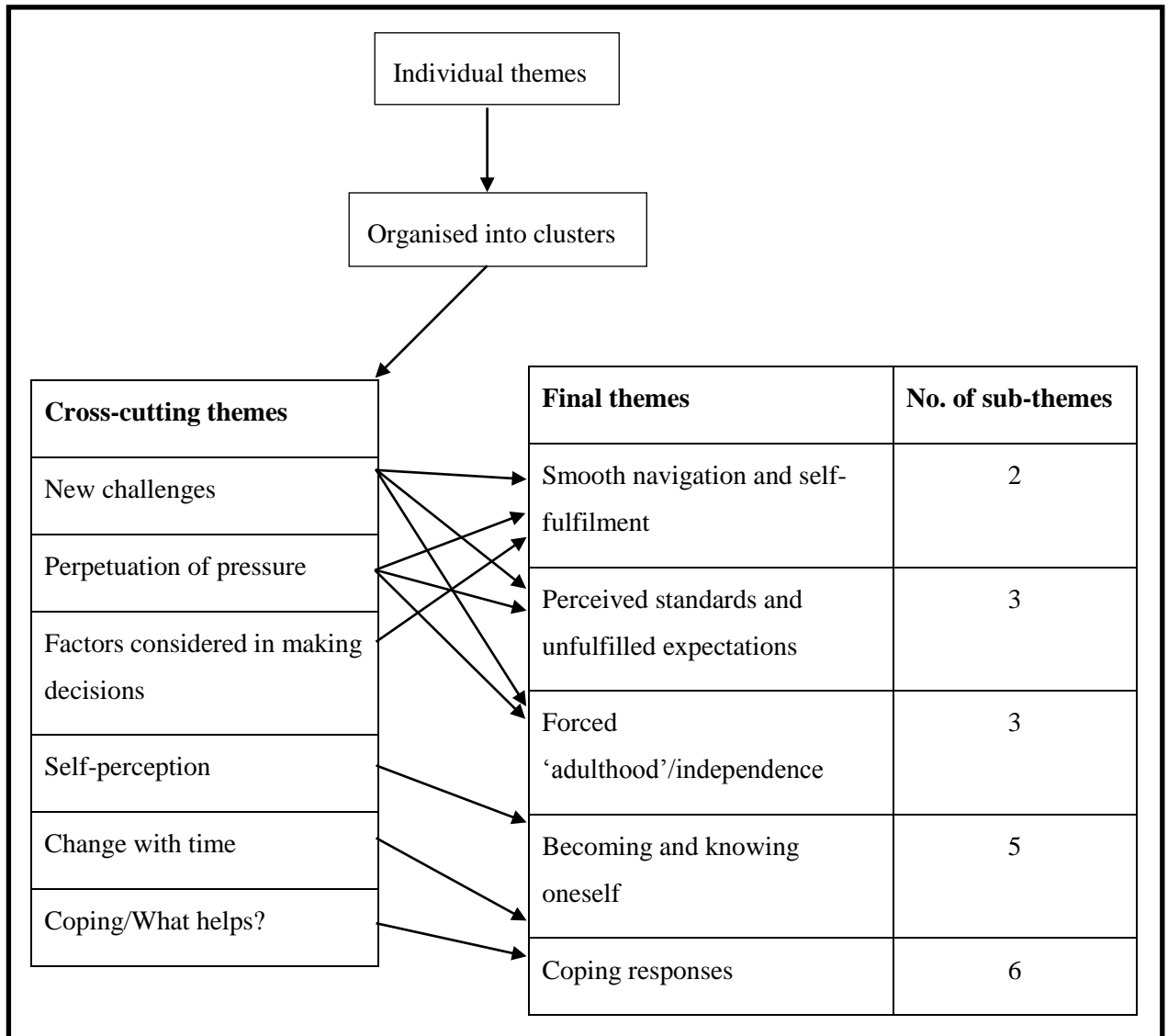


Figure 13. Flow chart from individual and cross-cutting themes to final themes

In the following section, the cross-cutting themes will be discussed, that subsequently led to the development of the final set of themes and sub-themes. Appendix K shows the connection between these cross-cutting themes with the final set of themes and sub-themes.

### New challenges

New challenges represented the difficulties encountered by participants that were not anticipated or expected, perceived typically relevant to their transitional experience and a source of crisis. Individual themes include acquainting to work environment, finding ‘what I want’ and financial independence which were common among different participants, and others like helping with family business, making relationship commitment and being a father were specific to a few participants. Some of the final sub-themes developed from this broad category were *Question of ‘what I want’* and *Betrayal of the ‘ideal’*.



### Perpetuation of pressure

Perpetuation of pressure depicted aspects in transition that were perceived as an additional source of tension that made the new challenges furthermore difficult to tackle. Some of the individual themes under this include comparison with others, negative self-evaluation and answerability towards others. Individual themes that were particular to participants varied largely depending on their specific experiences. These included individual themes like family issues, body image issues and conflict of desires. Some of the sub-themes in the final themes, *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations* and *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment* were obtained from this category. For instance, comparison with others represented the sub-theme *Playing catch up* in which participants attempted to derive some structure and framework in transition by weighing what others were achieving in their transition whilst feeling the pressure to prove their capabilities and worth. Some of the social and cultural expectations were also informed through this category of Perpetuation of pressure that led to the sub-theme *Living up to social and cultural expectations* in the theme *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*.

### Self-perception

The cross-cutting theme of self-perception represented participants' understanding about their capabilities, interests and personal characteristics gathered over the course of time through their transition. Some of the attributes that they assigned to themselves were logically connected to their perceptions of problems and ways they dealt with the same. For instance, a participant perceived herself to be a 'Hamlet' depicting her indecisive nature that made her transitional experience furthermore difficult. This theme was later annotated as *Becoming and knowing oneself*, a theme that discusses these perceptions and understandings of self that translated into an experience of crisis, often a negative self-evaluation gathered from different experiences in their transition.

### Factors considered in making decisions

Factors considered in making decisions was a category included to annotate what participants took into consideration whilst taking various steps in the fast changing and demanding environment encountered in their transition. These were included only where factors were apparent and identifiable from the transcripts. Some of the common factors were economic condition, following friends and parental influence. This broad category was more specific to individual summaries. It helped in grasping a better understanding of what aspects were taken into consideration at various turning points in their transition, and how these factors were injected into the overall crisis experience.

### Change with time

Change with time was a theme in which participants expressed shifts in conditions during their transition or active involvement in dealing with their crisis experiences that overall changed their circumstances through time. These mainly entailed the new frameworks of perception that had a calming effect, changing from negative to positive outlook, new desires and changing relationships and responsibilities. This cross-cutting theme contributed to the final theme of *Coping responses*.

### Coping/What helps?

The final cross-cutting theme was the coping responses, most articulated when raised with the question (in the interview) of what helped in their difficult times. Holding onto optimism, assurance from others, distracting and venting were some of the common coping responses identified from the transcripts. Others that were specific to participants included ‘humour...the best medicine’, whilst auto-pilot and comparison with the worse. These helped directly in developing the final set of themes for *Coping responses* in Chapter 4e.

Overall, stage 4 provided an overview of the important and relevant aspects of transitional experiences that contributed to the feeling of crisis. These tables consisting of individual and cross-cutting themes also facilitated the identification of commonalities and differences in crisis experiences of different participants and across the two cultural groups of Indian and British background and posed as useful guide in forming the final set of themes and sub-themes that describe participant experiences of crisis and coping within their transitional process to ‘adulthood’. For instance, the final themes, *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment* and *Forced ‘adulthood’/independence*, were derived from the combination of two cross-cutting themes mentioned above, New challenges and Perpetuation of pressure. Similarly *Coping responses* were obtained from the two cross-cutting themes, Change with time and Coping/What helps?. The final set of themes and sub-themes shall be discussed in Chapter 4. The distribution of participants across the final set of themes and sub-themes is given in Appendix L, categorically distributed based on cultural background and within each category divided based on gender and education.

## Chapter 4: Analysis

This chapter is divided into five sub-chapters of which the first four are the themes covering the crisis experiences of the participants and the fifth sub-chapter involves the coping responses and strategies used by the participants. At the end of each of the five sub-chapters, there is a summary and a mini-discussion, all of which are then integrated with broader issues in the final chapter, that is, *Discussion*. The first analysis sub-chapter, *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment*, elucidates crisis experiences of participants when they were faced with transitional realities that were different from what they expected and/or preferred. With the absence of concrete measures of their success through transition, participants were struggling to verify their capabilities and worth through comparison with others and attempting to meet standards assumed through family and social expectations. This formed the second sub-chapter, *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*. The theme *Becoming and knowing oneself* shows how participants developed self-understanding and attempted to merge this with society in order to ensure smooth functioning and successful transition. The difficulty experienced by the participants in bringing a consensus between internal and external demands was captured in this theme. *Forced 'adulthood'/independence* is the fourth sub-chapter that exemplifies participants' experiences with demands to assume adult roles and responsibilities and attain financial independence that led them to experience crisis as they felt unprepared and intimidated by these demands. The last theme, *Coping responses*, captures what helped participants deal with their crisis experiences in different times in their transition. Table 8 lists the themes and sub-themes:

Table 8. *Themes and sub-themes generated from the data*

Chapter	Themes	Sub-themes
4a	Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment	Betrayal of the 'ideal' Question of 'what I want?'
4b	Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations	Playing catch up Feeling responsible Living up to social and cultural expectations
4c	Becoming and knowing oneself	Mirrored and re-positioned Suggested and compared Incompetent and conflicting Prompted and carved 'Dropped into'
4d	Forced 'adulthood'/independence	Rushing into financial self-sufficiency 'Train myself to be an adult' 'Man of the house'
4e	Coping responses	Acceptance of non-linear progression Optimism and momentum Productivity and Escapism 'Triaholic' Venting and Letting it out Reassurance and Inspiration

## Chapter 4a: Smooth Navigation and Self-fulfilment

The transition process, as suggested by the data, reflects a very interesting navigation from the 'ideal' to the 'real' transitional experience. For these young people, 'ideal' was a representation of what was assumed before they came to terms with the demands of the transitional process, and 'real' was a realisation of the non-existence of the 'ideal' that in turn led to the experience of crisis, where participants expressed feeling stuck with little idea of how to deal with the 'real'.

Most participants expected that there would be a smooth path from education to work, where there would be natural momentum, structured in a way that one event followed the other and at the same time would be satisfying and self-fulfilling. In actuality, they found that there was no smooth pathway to a 'settled life'. Betrayal was felt when events did not go as planned or when they encountered a point where they felt lost and unsure of the next step. For Harry, it was mostly the former that created concerns, especially after he completed education:

*... you know would it be the right decision to leave and be single again or was it the right decision to stay with [ex-girlfriend] or was it, was I being, you know was it something that I was thinking and I needed to relax a bit and that kind of opened up kind of all like a world of uncertainty in my mind which I'd never really thought of or dealt with before because it was, you know, GCSE, A-levels, university, find a job and then as soon as you've found a job that kind of structured approach to going forward kind of disappears and that level of uncertainty for the things that I wanted to achieve in life I found very, very stressful... (Harry, M, British, attended university)*

Harry set out the events from GCSE to a job which he expected to naturally unfold without anxiety. Tensions arose when his relationship disturbed his planned route to work life. His feeling of crisis stemmed from the perceived 'world of uncertainty' and the absence of clarity. In addition, he expressed doubt about achieving what he wanted from life. On one hand he was concerned about a smooth progression from education to work, but on the other, he realised that the progression did not reflect his personal wants and interests. Harry reflected on events with lingering questions, prompted by the revealing of new ways of living that had not been apparent to him before. Thus, structure and freedom generated distinct pressures.

Alex similarly reflected on whether to follow the 'well-trodden' path and join the rat race or to follow a novel and unknown career path that could be more self-fulfilling. Although he expressed preference for the latter, his transition shows an inclination towards the 'well-trodden' road. He expressed the feeling of being pressurised 'to keep up' with others and to be satisfied with his career:

*...you can actually do whatever you want, [...] I suddenly started thinking, oh actually I really love going to new places and meeting new people and travelling around, everything like that, so why can't I do that for a living, as a job or something like that and I didn't really put much more thought into that, but I just kept on going around and then it kind of hit me that going back, again there were lots of people talking about*

*internships and everything, I managed to apply to an accountancy firm and I got a summer internship for when I was coming back for that just to get some experience... (Alex, M, British, attended university)*

Alex talked with passion about what he discovered about himself and what he ‘really loved’ and it ignited a possibility of living a life connected to that passion, yet he felt uncertain about reneging on the well-trodden path. His perceptions of security appeared heavily influenced by perceptions of the norm.

In such ways, for many participants, the experience of crisis emerged from the decisions about potentially risky choices that might, or might not, lead into a satisfying career vs. the lure of a familiar but dull career pathway. In doing so, the ‘ideal’ outcome and pathway were interrogated by participants but they often felt stranded in knowing how to proceed, fuelling a sense of crisis.

This theme, *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment*, includes two sub-themes:

- Betrayal of the ‘ideal’
- Question of ‘what I want’

#### **4a.1 Betrayal of the ‘ideal’**

Participants reported different ideas and expectations of the ‘ideal’ transitional pathway to a successful ‘settled life’. However, on encountering experiences that were different to what they had envisaged, they reported feeling betrayed. In particular, they felt stuck, lost and unsure on leaving education and being unable to secure their next step into work. Andrew’s account exemplifies this sub-theme, surfacing his sense of causes and effects in his crisis.

Andrew expressed expectations that his transition after university would follow a linear, smooth and certain route to a job:

*...so the attitude in the school was very much you went to uni, you maybe went on to do further education after that and then you’d go into a big job like lawyer, doctor, that sort of thing and nobody ever told me like that it would be difficult to find a job after uni and I was so naive in that respect because what I found was that you have a very natural progression until you leave uni and then it’s all up to you so from sixteen, you know, at fourteen you choose your GCSEs, at sixteen you choose your A Levels and then at seventeen to eighteen you choose uni and it’s all very structured and your school helps you to choose and the path is very much laid out in front of you, it’s very linear, there’s no break off apart from you know, if you want to leave school or whatever but yeah, it’s just a, you start here, you finish here and it’s just a straight line but... (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

Andrew’s visualisation of having ‘a big job’ started in school, reflecting an ‘ideal’ that was created and strongly held from an early time. Until university, he felt that everything happened naturally (‘natural progression until you leave uni’), without any particular effort to carve his way (‘the path is very much laid out in front of you’). The linearity of the path was anticipated on the basis that everyone does the same thing at the same age in the education system (‘you

*start here, you finish here and it's just a straight line'*), highlighting assumptions of a generalised and universal structure that would lead him into a desired job. In its absence Andrew faced a crisis situation. Struggling to find a job, Andrew felt unprepared and that he had been either poorly, or never, advised about how to face this: *'nobody ever told me...it would be difficult'*. His assumptions about getting a job were generated from what *'people had always told [him]'* and if he did everything he was told, outcomes were certain:

*I'd spent about three months there before, like during university holidays so I'd done three internships with them by the end of summer after graduation so I really thought after that I'd probably get into the civil service really easily and I applied for loads of jobs and I didn't get any of them and that was really demoralising because I thought, at the time like people had always told me if you go to uni and you do well and you get work experience and you go to societies at uni, you know, you've covered all the bases and people will employ you... (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

When the anticipated outcomes did not emerge, Andrew was demoralised and crisis stemmed from a sense of failure and of being betrayed by 'the system'. Andrew was also highly attuned to norms that suggested a connection between achievements in education and the likelihood of a 'good' job. In being unable to secure a job, Andrew felt like an outlier to these norms, and experienced confusion and self-doubt.

*...and then when I didn't get offered a job at [names a company] and I couldn't get into any other civil service positions I'd applied for it really, really dented my confidence again because I was like what more can I do, you know, I've got a First from a top 20 university in what I thought was a decent subject, I've got five months of work experience while [...] I was like I really don't know what more I can do to get a job. (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

Andrew's account both buys into and critiques the cultural stories of how life will turn out if you do certain things and perform well. On one hand, he doubted his own potential (*'really dented my confidence'*), but at the same time he questioned these norms (*'what more can I do'*). Andrew's crisis was also situated in the perceived *'backward step'* given that he did not experience 'progress' as he had anticipated from education to work. He said:

*So I left [names a company] in September after graduating, this was 2013 so last year and I was just applying for jobs non-stop for about two months and got maybe five interviews out of about two hundred applications and it's really, when you're at that stage it's very demoralising because half the time they don't even email you back to say thanks for applying and that sort of thing. So that really took a dent to my confidence and then in December I applied at [names a grocery store] as a Christmas temp because my mum works there and she basically got me a job which again, although it was a job, it was like what graduate wants to get a job at [names the grocery store] because his mum works there? It's very much a... It felt like a massive step backwards for me because, you know, I felt like that was a job I easily could have done at sixteen before I'd done my A Levels, before I'd done my GCSEs and I hated it... (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

His perception of a backward step made him feel stuck and was associated with the perceived waste of years invested in becoming qualified for better jobs. The experiences he had whilst applying for jobs were entirely unanticipated (*'got maybe five interviews of about two hundred*

*applications*, *'they don't even email you back to say thanks for applying'*). There was a sense of unpreparedness to deal with such rejection that demoralised him and affected his confidence. Andrew's transitional experience was also demonstrated in the pictorial representation of his expected transition in contrast to his actual transition (Figure 14). His time after graduation was defined by him as a period of 'crisis of confidence' where he failed to get a job worthy of his qualifications. It was only when he started working in a more technical section of the job that he started feeling slightly better about his work. When he eventually got a 'graduate job' he felt that he was back to where he expected to be and there was a consequent 'real boost to [his] confidence'. Thus, Andrew suggested linear progression as the only 'natural' way of moving from education to work and his success and failure was measured on this 'ideal' (represented in Figure 14 with the red and yellow line). Andrew's account emphasised cultural norms that define success in terms of hassle-free and immediate progression from education to work reflective of educational qualifications.

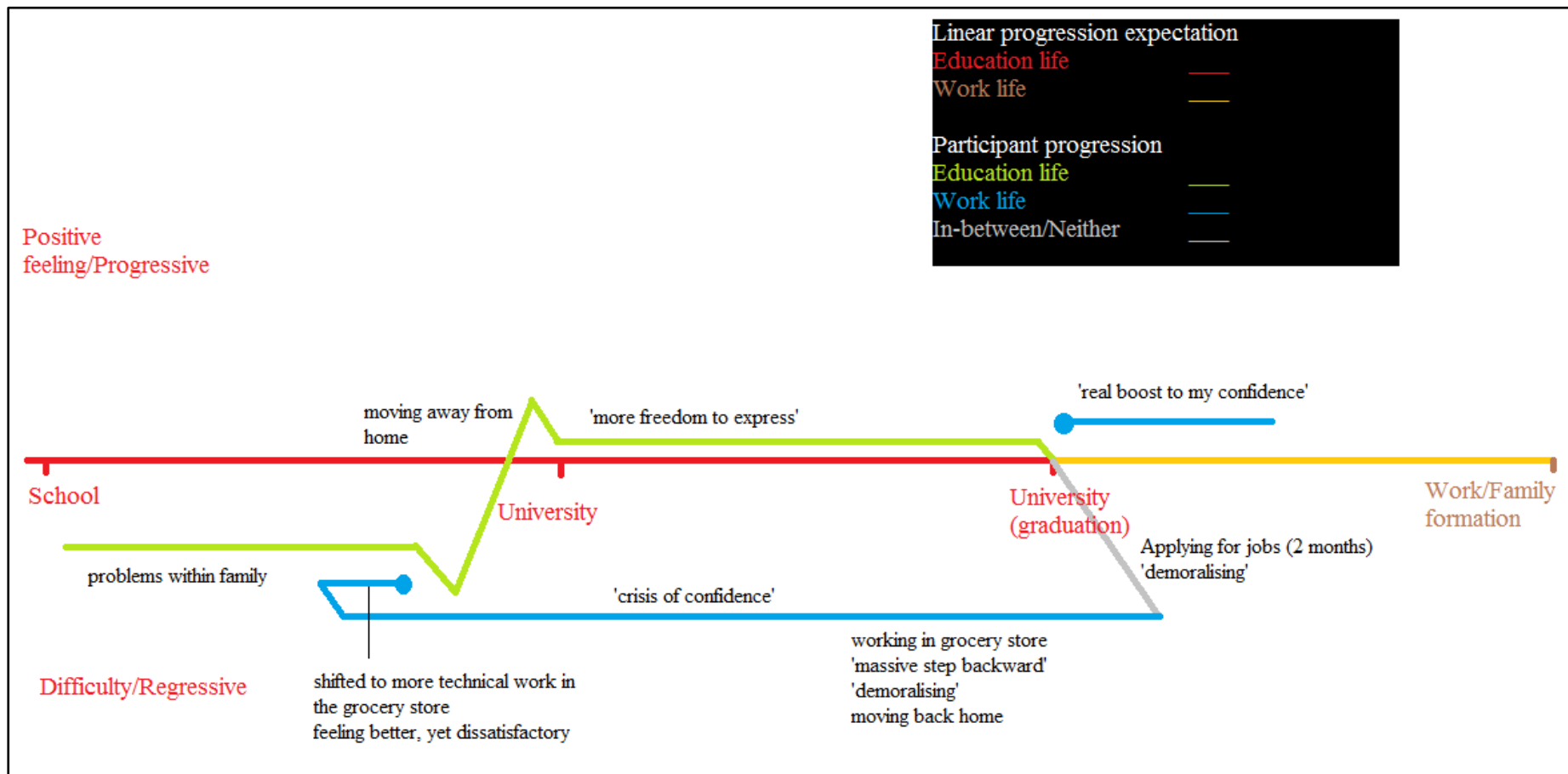


Figure 14. Pictorial demonstration of Andrew's transition in relation to his expectation



Silvia expressed a similar experience to Andrew, but for her, even getting a temporary job, rather than one which was a step towards a secure career, led her to feel overwhelmed. She said,

*I wasn't applying for like proper jobs really, so you're applying for things that you're way over qualified for and just getting no response and you're like, 'come on', why can't I get a job, I've got a degree, I've got a good degree, I've got experience in like waitressing and bar work and like some climbing experience and I just couldn't get a job for a month... (Silvia, F, British, attended university)*

This experience was a setback for Silvia and raised questions for her about the system that defied the assumptions about what a good degree should be able to secure. There was a plea for fairness ('come on, why can't I get a job'), questioning why her efforts did not pay off. There was a sense of frustration where on one hand she felt capable and equipped, but the real world did not play by the rules and hence felt *betrayed*. Rarely, if ever, did participants anticipate the challenge of getting a job nor the competition in the labour market. Not gaining employment was a shock, leading some participants to even question their worth and capabilities. Although Silvia felt she had the degree and experiences that should potentially gain her a job, there was a sense that she also doubted her capabilities ('why can't I get a job', 'I just couldn't get a job for a month') that led to a feeling of crisis. Later when she applied for jobs in her area of expertise, she was faced with similar disappointments:

*I knew I wanted to stay in psychology so I applied for quite a lot of research assistant posts and didn't get through to interviews, didn't even hear back from a lot of them, which was quite demoralising... (Silvia, F, British, attended university)*

Silvia knew what she wanted and thus, knowing her goal was not the problem, but it was the rejection that she felt unprepared to cope with, just like Andrew. Her continuous disappointments in her career aspirations transpired into a 'demoralising' experience. Her struggle to establish her worth in the job market developed into a crisis experience – but one solely based on what she had assumed would be a given for her. Thus, at various junctions in her transitional process, she was faced with challenges that were entirely unanticipated.

#### *Analysis of the Indian participants: Betrayal of the 'ideal'*

Just like the British participants, three of the Indian participants also expressed concerns over following an 'ideal' linear route from education to work. However, their crisis was less concentrated on this and more on other aspects of their transition, like answerability towards others and balancing personal interests with others' expectations (covered later in the sub-theme *Question of 'what I want'*, and also in the chapter *Forced 'adulthood'/independence*). The amalgamation of both concerns, that is, following a smooth route and feeling answerable, was evident in Ishita's account:

*And I felt stuck because I didn't know... I was like... if I did my Masters, I'm supposed to find a job for myself and start working... and this is how if I see my future, then I don't know (tone of concern) [...] Yes, it was scary because I felt helpless. For a moment I actually felt helpless... because I didn't know... my ... my parents have invested so*

*much on me for this... this particular thing and ... and end result isn't good then... I felt little...umm... helpless. (Ishita, F, Indian, attended university)*

Ishita's feeling of being stuck was associated with the discrepancy between what she envisioned ('supposed to find a job') and the reality that she encountered. This led to strong emotions of fear ('scary') and helplessness, especially when she tried to imagine a future based on the new circumstances she was facing, and did not know what to expect from it ('this is how if I see my future, then I don't know'). Ishita had to go back to pursue further studies after being unable to establish stability from the job she took after her undergraduate degree. She was concerned about linear progression from education to work, but the crisis stemmed from the feeling of responsibility towards her parents to prove her capabilities to attain work soon after completing her further education and making their investment in her education worthwhile.

All the above accounts exemplify the lure for a linear progression, a need to follow a smooth and a hassle-free route from education to work. However, participants also raised concerns of having a self-fulfilling future career at the same time. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter there was a dilemma experienced by most participants between following the 'well-trodden', linear and secure progression, and fulfilling personal interest, which in turn led to the feeling of being lost and unsure. The following sub-theme, *Question of 'what I want'*, will exemplify the concerns associated with attaining a self-fulfilling future career.

#### **4a.2 Question of 'what I want'**

The question of 'what I want', addressed in this section, is associated with career objectives rather than relationship or other concerns. In fact, having yet to find/create their personal interests and unable to do so in the right time formed the crux of the crisis through the transitional process for many. Whilst oblivious of the specific direction to take for attaining a self-fulfilling career goal, they felt stranded and that they had to follow whatever career route seemed accessible at the time. On the other hand, for some, knowing what they wanted from their future career provided meaning, motivation, and an overall positive experience through their transition. Furthermore, finding an answer to the 'what do I want?' question was harder when extreme specialisation required an early narrowing down of interests. In addition to this, there was a significance attached to the timing of when the question appeared for individuals that seemed important in its fulfilment.

The challenges of fulfilling what one wanted started from the struggle of discovery of interests to the point of dealing with situational constraints (like financial needs, family expectations) that refrains from its fulfilment. Thus, challenges to knowing and fulfilling their interests/goals could stem from intrinsic factors (within the person concerned) or extrinsic factors (outside the person concerned). The intrinsic challenges begin with the internal resolution of the question of 'what I want', expressed by sixteen of the twenty-four participants. On the other hand, the

extrinsic challenges were the financial constraints and family expectations that stood in the way towards fulfilment of personal interests, most often beyond the control of the participants. Thus, the concerns over reaching a self-fulfilled goal is not just related to the difficulty in ‘knowing’ what they want, but also in handling ways to fulfil the same once ‘known’.

This sub-theme, *Question of ‘what I want’*, is divided into five categories, namely:

- Knowing ‘what I want’
- Late realisation
- Multiplicity of options
- Financial consideration
- Pressure from the family

***Question of ‘what I want?’: Knowing ‘what I want’***

Most participants struggled with knowing what they wanted in order to have a self-fulfilling end to the process of transition. Many participants were confronted with this question of what they want at unexpected times in their transition that led to a feeling of anxiety and crisis, accompanied by the feeling of being lost and uncertain about the future.

Being vague and unaware of her passion and interest, Hannah felt lost as to what to do next after her graduation:

*... despite that I managed to graduate, somehow! [Laughs] That’s supposed to be... That’s me, how I actually felt at the graduation (points to photo 3 already placed in the timeline before starting), I think I look a bit awkward, just like what am I supposed to be doing now? That’s how I should have been feeling (refers to photo 4, photo 3 and 4 placed together in the timeline), I should have been all excited and I was just more nervous about like starting the job and that sort of thing. (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*



*Figure 15.* Photo 3 (left) and Photo 4 (right) as mentioned in the extract above

Hannah did not perceive there to be scope for exploration after education. Instead, it was as if she had little time to make a decision about her future career interest, in turn leading to panic and crisis. The consequences of a rushed decision after her graduation were felt on her work life when she joined as a doctor trainee. There was dissatisfaction and discomfort experienced at work for which she hid herself and avoided going to work. She was experiencing periods of helplessness and hopelessness that even led her to depression.

*Yeah, after graduation so during, yeah, during my junior doctor years and I felt like I didn't know what I was doing (points at photo 6), like I was like hmm! And I felt like everyone else was like this (points at photo 5) that felt like how I should be [...]but I'm actually like this. A lot of things I didn't, I couldn't tell people about, I... Hiding, that's my hiding (photo 7). So I hid a lot of the time and just started, you know, ignoring problems and then I just started not going into work and I wasn't answering phone calls or anything from work so they ended getting quite worried about me. You know, you just feel like a failure or you feel like you're not... (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*



Figure 16. Photo 5 (left), photo 6 (right)

Hannah could not recognise in herself the same passion and zeal that she saw others have who were doing the same work as her. The pairs of photos (shown in Figure 15 and 16) reflected her dissatisfaction. 'Knowing' what one wants was associated with happiness and confidence (depicted in photo 4 and 5), showing the importance of developing a meaning in their transition rather than blindly following the education to work route. It was only later that she discovered her passion, but not for the job that she chose soon after her graduation,

*...like it's very conveyor belt and very sciencey and you don't actually spend that long, much with the patients at all because you're like prescribing someone and moving on and it's the nurses that do the caring part and you know, she (referring to her friend) was like, 'well you know, I think you're more of a people person' and she said, 'you know, I think you'd be much better at being a teacher because that's more to do with people and you know, you're there with better work ethics, there's more, you know, people in the same situation as you, you know, you can actually make a real difference' and yeah, that's what's reassuring me about this (hovers over photo 28 and 29) at the moment, reassuring me about, you know, hopefully I'll be a good teacher (Hannah, F, British, attended university).*

Hannah drew a contrast between perceived mechanical work ('conveyor belt and very sciencey') and work involving connections and interactions with people ('more to do with people'). It was only when she got the time to analyse her options that she seemed to be more certain and sure of what she wanted. The felt pressure to make a quick decision and the consequent state of panic after her graduation did not give her enough time to make a mindful decision. There was a sense that one ought to have a concrete plan whilst navigating from education to work so that no extra time is spent in contemplating options for the future.

This question of 'what I want' appeared at different points in people's transition. Some participants expressed it as a concern from the beginning of college while others realised that this was an issue only when they had to make a choice about university and the subject or course to choose. Sarah was unsure about going to college but attended under the pressure of

expectation. However, she constantly questioned what she wanted and, in the extract below, expressed ‘*the first big problem*’ that she faced in terms of her career.

*The first big problem for me would have been career wise, so that was kind of like in school and I started college because I kind of felt pressurised into doing it. I didn’t have any idea what I wanted to do but it was kind of like the expectation that we had to go to college so I did, um, I went for a year and absolutely hated it... (Sarah, F, British, not attended university)*

Sarah experienced being stranded between doing what she hated and lack of knowledge of what she could do to change her situation to make it more fulfilling. Implicit in this is the idea that one should keep moving despite not knowing what you want. Just like Hannah, Sarah did not feel there was time to figure out what she wanted. In this, she is a good example of there being a battle, sometimes, between the idea of ‘secure progression’/linear progression and of following what one desires. This was the first crisis point that Sarah reached in her transitional process. She experienced apprehension in taking either of the two routes (*Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment*) that led to a feeling of being lost.

A few participants appeared to give themselves the time and space to figure out what they wanted, indeed, many reflected on whether they could afford to take time to ponder and make decisions for their next steps. The question of what one wants was a rather lingering aspect of transition which came to be a concern at different times in different participants’ transitional process, often at unexpected and unanticipated times for most. As such it is difficult to identify a universal time when young people could work on what they want from their future career.

Andrew expressed this concern of knowing ‘what I want’ while he was selecting his course for university:

*As in everything I was doing, yet I still believed that I wouldn’t get good enough grades to do a decent degree so I was applying for sports science courses that needed like E-C-C and C-C-D grades to get into the uni and you know, looking back on it, it was very much, it was a... I just didn’t know what I wanted to do with myself and I was considering leaving school and joining the police because I thought I’d struggle too much at uni and... (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

Just like Sarah, Andrew experienced apprehension about his future, unable to ascertain what he ‘*wanted to do with [him]self*’. It was as if the lack of insight about what he wanted that made Andrew underestimate his capabilities. Indeed, across many participants, there appeared to be a need to be certain about their future goals at a time when they had hardly begun to explore their interests. For instance, self-blame is hinted in Andrew’s account where he assumed that ‘not knowing’ is equated with failure. For Andrew a large part of this confusion about ‘what I want’ stemmed from his lack of confidence when he was doing his A-levels:

*I was in a bit of a malaise, I just didn’t know where my life was going, it was scary and I was, I was doubting my ability to get... There wasn’t a like defined goal, it wasn’t like I wanted to be a lawyer but I feel like I’m not capable, I just didn’t know what I wanted to do and I guess that kind of... It not only made me feel like I didn’t know what I was*

*aiming for so it made the work seem kind of not pointless but didn't have a direction or a focus and I think that extended into making me feel like I was... Well not... Yeah, no, incapable of actually doing well enough to meet whatever my vague goals were at the time... (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

Knowing where his interests lay and pursuing a trajectory towards them was presumed to add meaning and, without this knowledge, the transition could be experienced as robotic movement from A to B without satisfaction or self-fulfilment. Andrew's experience of crisis had two parts—one in which he perceived himself incapable of 'knowing what [he] wanted' leading to a feeling of meaninglessly drifting, and on the other, he felt that he did not have the potential to reach any goal even if he had one.

While Andrew faced the question of 'what I want' while choosing his course for university, Harry faced the same question when he was working for a company that he joined soon after graduating:

*And I was still in work figuring out what I wanted to really do so yes, [names a company] is good but do I want to be in [name of city]? You know where else could I be? What else can I be doing so that is still why nothing really changed then, this was then pretty much a full year of being anxious then, there had been no change if anything, you know, building up more. (Harry, M, British, attended university)*

Harry's concern not only revolved around the question of what he wanted from his career, but also whether he would continue to work in a city miles away from his home. Both questions led to Harry feeling apprehensive about his trajectory, suggesting a loss of control over the flow of his transition and experiencing monotony: 'had been no change'. Harry's crisis stemmed from lack of direction without experiencing any real change that could lead him to the answers of his questions – what and where.

Across these accounts, participants often used phrases such as 'figuring out what I wanted' and 'didn't know what I wanted', suggesting there is something waiting to be discovered about themselves. Most participants talked in ways akin to being archaeologists excavating their interests, wants, or purpose of life. They did not, in contrast, talk about themselves as fabricating, creating and generating meaning, aims and directions.

In addition, these accounts brought to the fore the different time periods in which participants had faced the question of 'what I want'. Sarah experienced it during college, Andrew choosing a course for university, Hannah when she was graduating and Harry when he was working. Hence, there was no apparent universal time when the young people started questioning their wants. There appeared to be a gradual realisation of 'not knowing' that triggered concerns over their future career, a feeling of being stuck and being in crisis.

*Analysis of the Indian participants: Knowing 'what I want' (Question of 'what I want')*

Interestingly, not many Indian participants talked explicitly about the struggle of knowing what they wanted to do in terms of career (3 of the 8 Indian participants as against 12 of the 16 British

participants). This does not necessarily mean that they did not face any problems in knowing their personal interests, but for them the external challenges were far more significant in causing a feeling of crisis than the internal endeavour of knowing what they wanted. For instance, Aman talked about his struggle to know what he wanted, but this was overshadowed by the external constraint of family expectations:

*And I didn't know what to do. MBA because 'Okay my father has a business'. My father said that do MBA. I wanted to be a doctor once and then do an MBA and sometimes I wanted to go... because I was in the theatre and direction and all that because I always liked directing, plays and all. So I thought I will get into direction. But then I know that 'No, the level of maintenance that I have kept that I have to be here'... and everyone... everything was regarding to make people happy. I regret that today. (Aman, M, Indian, attended university)*

Thinking of various options was seen among most participants, both British and Indian, but for the Indian participants knowing and fulfilling the same had an additional layer of difficulty when it stood in conflict with family and social expectations. Just like the British participants, they exercised autonomy in exploring and developing personal interest, but the route to its fulfilment was made challenging especially when it required defying others' expectations of them. It was in the knowing and letting it go that most Indian participants recognised their experience of crisis. This shall be further discussed in the category, 'Pressure from the family'.

Further to the crisis of 'not knowing', there was also crisis associated with the 'knowing' that came for some at odd times. The next sub-theme shall discuss crisis that emerged for some due to late realisation, making it a struggle towards achieving what they wanted.

#### ***Question of 'what I want': Late realisation***

The timing of the realisation of one's interests appeared crucial in shaping participants' transitional experience (i.e. having a sense of direction) but also in triggering crisis (i.e. that one may not be able to pursue interests).

Alex realised a misfit between his degree and personal interest while he was in the university, as explained here:

*... basically improve the standard of living for these people that are living in these developing countries, and that is something that is really exciting at the moment that I'm really like motivated to do and it's just I can't get the experience, you know, I've been applying left right and centre to these things and I can't get any, you know, I've been going to all these career events and these talks and everything and I mean it's fantastic here, you get so much information, and it's just a struggle at the moment to kind of like keep on persevering, so that I know that I can do it (Alex, M, British, attended university)*

Alex developed a meaning to his transition and was internally motivated to struggle and achieve his personal goal, but there were obstacles that caused him worry about the possibilities of fulfilling the same. Adding meaning to transition gave zeal and enthusiasm to participants' experiences, something that gave a purpose to keep moving. For Alex, his purpose was throttled

by external factors and despite his perseverance, he was unable to balance his internal and external demands. There was an added burden in that Alex felt a time constraint in making a decision:

*...it's just I don't want to have to go home at the end of the year with nothing else to do and I want to feel like I'm keeping on moving forward. Also to do with the kind of, it's a little bit daunting going into something that I'm really motivated to do but I've not been given any strict education in, I've never done development studies or anything like that, I haven't really been to any developing countries before, and so I just, I'm not kind of the best candidate for these things and it's kind of, it's a little daunting but I really want to kind of keep motivated and keep pushing it. (Alex, M, British, attended university)*

Alex's 'daunting' experience was associated with the fact that the linear and smooth progression from education to work did not cater to his personal interest, while at the same time he felt that there was limited time in setting up a way to bring congruence between the two. There was a general assumption among the participants that they ought to navigate along a continuous trajectory towards betterment ('keep on moving forward') and it was when threats were perceived in this route that participants felt stuck and experienced crisis.

Avril's problem was similar to that of Alex; just before starting university Avril had a broad idea about what she wanted from her future career:

*That was basically because I couldn't decide on what I wanted to specialise in so I thought, oh, seeing as I can't decide right now it's kind of like putting it off a little bit and I would just choose like something that's a bit, very broad, and I thought maybe like in the third year or something there'd be a choice to narrow it down a little bit, so it was always like the course was so you had to keep broad throughout the whole course, and never specialise in anything, so yeah I chose that before because I didn't know what to do and then afterwards it was like, 'oh I still don't know what to do'. (Avril, F, British, attended university)*

There is a sense of being in a passive discovery journey where she hoped that her first logical step would gradually lead her to a specific field of interest. It was when Avril reached the end of that journey, she discovered that she was at the same place as when she started university ('oh I still don't know what to do'). This led to a feeling of crisis when there was a shock on reaching nowhere despite the investment of time in the journey she undertook in a hope to unravel her interests.

The extract below was taken from the response that Avril gave when she was asked whether she had any regret from the past:

*Yeah, I think the regret would be right back here, with choosing a degree, I would have like... looking back now I would have chosen one that specialised in something, and like I'd quite like to do pattern design, and I think that's where I should have gone back then, that's the regret there... (Avril, F, British, attended university)*

The early pressure of choice was difficult for Avril. There was a sense that the three years of her degree would have been more meaningful to her if she made a decision about her interest right from the start. However, realising this late led her to regret her investment of time in university.



This assumption of being late was based on the time frame from education to work in which participants expected a smooth linear progression from discovery of interests to education and then to work. However, as mentioned earlier there were different times when participants realised what they wanted from their future career and this did not always precede university education and/or work.

There was comfort in doing the right thing at the right time and when this got dishevelled or delayed, participants experienced stress and worry. Hence there was a felt need for early realisation of these interests in order to allow preparedness and smooth transition to interest fulfilment.

*Analysis of the Indian participants: Late realisation (Question of 'what I want')*

None of the Indian participants talked about late realisation of interest. However, this does not necessarily mean that they never experienced disparity between smooth navigation and personal interest, but their experience of crisis was centred on external constraints in the form of social expectations or financial constraints that refrained or limited their scope of fulfilling personal interests. This suggests that for Indian participants dealing with external constraints could be far more significant in causing crisis than their internal dissatisfaction from following a non-linear route.

***Question of 'what I want': Multiplicity of options***

Just because participants had times of realising their interests, did not mean that their next steps were free of dilemmas or difficulties. The breath of choice available to them, even while narrowing it down, was seen as a point of confusion rather than a privilege.

Max faced a dilemma when there were many options available to him:

*...and I was relatively fortunate, I was relatively able across a pretty wide array of subjects, and maybe, apart from anything else that sort of meant that I was, I never knew exactly what I wanted, what it was I wanted to do, perhaps almost because I had a lot of options available. (Max, M, British, attended university)*

Being able to excel in many subjects does not necessarily fulfil requirements for work life.

Although it is considered to be an achievement to excel in many fields, one often faces with the demand of narrowing down and building specific interest in which to pursue a future career.

Max experienced pressure and a feeling of being lost with a sudden realisation that he '*never knew exactly what [he] wanted*', in turn leading to crisis. There was an underlying sense that without knowledge of themselves and their passion, participants could not have a productive and meaningful transition. Similarly, Sarah faced the dilemma of choices after she started work as a nurse:

*Ah 20 and that's when I started work on MAU. So choosing where I wanted to work was a big problem because obviously throughout my training I went on many different*

*wards but I didn't know where I wanted to be and I knew I quite liked A&E but there was no jobs at the time so I had to go for my interview and it was kind of wherever there were the jobs. (Sarah, F, British, not attended university)*

Sarah was unsure as to which ward would best suit her interests and this, in turn, was perceived by her as a 'big problem'. Even after having made a tentative decision ('I knew I quite liked A&E'), there was a question of opportunity and availability that could challenge the fulfilment of choices made. Thus, on one hand, there was a demand to narrow down choices to specific field of interest and on the other, they had to analyse whether the available circumstances allowed the fulfilment of their choice. At the same time there was still the pressure to keep moving which forced Sarah to go for 'wherever there were the jobs'. Thus, it is not always convenient or even possible to strike a balance between choice, opportunity, availability and time and in these circumstances some participants like Sarah felt stuck and experienced crisis.

*Analysis of the Indian participants: Multiplicity of options (Question of 'what I want')*

Only three of the Indian participants talked about multiple choices, but their concern was not related to choosing one among the many, rather it was the possibility of pursuing any of the options that caused feeling of crisis. Due to family and social expectations and/or financial constraints, some of the Indian participants expressed having to give up dreams of pursuing a career of their choice. Aman talked of the wide possibilities for his future career – being a doctor or directing plays in theatres. However, he added, 'My father said that do MBA [...]the level of maintenance that I have kept that I have to be here... and everyone... everything was regarding to make people happy. I regret that today'. Aman expressed the pressure of his family's expectation for which he had to sacrifice all the career options that he had in mind. Such constraints caused considerable stress and tensions in which most Indian participants were unable to fulfil personal interests. These constraints shall be discussed in the next section.

***Question of 'what I want': Financial consideration***

Just like in all other periods in an individual's life, financial constraints played a part in various ways during the participants' transition to 'adulthood', especially in the extent to which it facilitated or limited exploration and the fulfilment of their personal interests. As participants moved from a dependent to an independent life, concerns about monetary stability grew.

Avril had an interest in doing jewellery designing, but she could not make that as a choice for future career because of the calculated financial risks involved in doing such a job:

*I thought maybe I wanted to be a jewellery designer 'cos that's what I was doing a lot of when I was doing my foundation degree, so I thought, oh maybe I want to do that, but then I knew that not a lot of people make it successful with a lot of like struggling, silver smiths, and they just have to take up teaching jobs because they don't make enough money making jewellery so I already saw that side of things and I didn't want to be one of those people that was struggling and spending lots of money trying to make it and not making it... (Avril, F, British, attended university)*

Whilst many participants talked about the importance of following their passion and developing a meaningful transition, there were practical concerns that were equally important. Avril was aware of her interests, but forecasted her future in a particular career and saw the pitfalls in it. There was some amount of compromising because of the economic aspect of the transition that did not particularly lead to distress but still a sacrifice of personal interests for financial security. For some participants, there was more desperation for financial stability and limitations to how much they could explore during their transition. With limited resources, participants like Olivia (with a history of family abuse) and Aran (from a deprived neighbourhood) were left with serious financial demands.

Olivia had to cut off from her family because of the abuses that she experienced. She did very well while in university, but when she graduated, she had to think about her financial situation because of the absence of family support. She had to compromise on the ‘ideal’ job that she had in her mind and settle with something that would just provide her with the essential finances.

*Okay, so before 2014 I was a student in Leeds and I had a scholarship and I undertook a couple of years of research and it was really successful and I started my own conference and everything so everyone really had like a lot of faith in me and everything and as a student I felt like I really took the most that I could out of my time at university but when I had some family problems I was basically left to be completely independent financially and everything and I ended up in a job that I felt was really unsuitable based on my expectations of where my career would be going... (Olivia, F, British, attended university)*

Olivia made a contrast between her conditions when there was and was no financial support, highlighting the significance of money in shaping experience. Olivia had a constraining experience and any potential exploration after her graduation was limited. This point was the start of her crisis where she had to give up her hopes of a career based on personal interest. While there were participants who were struggling to ‘know’ what they wanted to pursue as a career, Olivia’s struggle was that of ‘knowing’ but letting go.

Aran went through similar difficulties. He experienced abuse and came from a low SES background and a rough neighbourhood. He gradually decided to build his career away from his family and the locality in which he grew up. He expressed desire to do something in Physics or Psychology, but before he could explore and pave his way into these, he had to manage the basic requirements of day-to-day living that included financial demands:

*Yeah, so quite a lot of things started, ‘cos when you don’t know how to pay your bills and your finances immediately you get these bailiffs and you get letters and threatening letters and it’s just carries on and on and on, and it affects your credit rating and you can’t pay your food ‘cos you’re scared you’re going to get more bills, might have more, it’s just it’s just... one consequence after another, but I just thought, right, forget everything else, I’ve got to get my bills sorted out quickly, so I did [laughs], and then it was a real struggle to even eat most days so I just get take aways. (Aran, M, British, not attended university)*

Aran expressed being threatened by the system to fulfil the essential requirements that pended his quest for personal interest fulfilment. The lack of financial support created testing and ‘bread line’ experiences for participants like Olivia and Aran, wherein dreams and aspirations were compromised to fulfil practical requirements of day-to-day living. There is also an age related expectation from the welfare system that demands some self-sufficiency and financial responsibility at the age of 18 irrespective of preparedness.

It is seen in both the cases of Olivia and Aran that low SES, lack of family support and the pressure to be independent and self-sufficient had created a different crisis situation for these young people. They were left to their own devices to make a living and pave their way into ‘adulthood’. Aran started this difficult journey by dealing with his monetary problems before starting to develop a specific career path (extract below).

*So I thought, I realised that the financial situation, once I get that sorted I will get an income, you know, get my bills paid, get a... save as much money as I can by getting the best deal, cutting down on my consumption, cutting down on electric and water and all that, once that's all done then I can kind of get a lot ease into life so I can start doing that... (Aran, M, British, not attended university)*

Aran had a different transitional timeline projected based on his unique circumstances. For him building an independent life came before ‘settling down’ to a stable and self-fulfilling future career. Although he might have been close to figuring out his interests, he had to focus on his financial situation which shaped his transition. Thus, for those from low SES, finding what they want was not a concern that caused crisis, but it was the financial constraint that led them to feel stuck. For instance, Aran too wanted to derive meaning from his transition, but he could not afford to do so and instead follow a dull transition that entailed an ‘extreme struggle’ with financial demands causing crisis.

*Analysis of the Indian participants: Financial consideration (Question of ‘what I want’)*

With regard to the Indian participants, in addition to concerns establishing their own financial stability, they had to also provide for their family. For some it was a moral obligation rather than a necessity triggered by financial shortage. Indian parents are more likely to finance their children well into young adulthood and young people are not usually obliged to financially reimburse their parents. On the other hand, young adults are typically expected to acknowledge this parental investment by assuming responsibilities with respect to their family and remaining answerable to them. Ishita was one such participant. She was supported throughout her education by her parents and took her first job on the basis of money rather than the potential to be personally fulfilled at work:

*See this is my first job I would say so right now finance does have a play - does have a huge role to play because I want to stand up - I want to be able to stand up on my own feet. Interest - there is interest but what I feel is that interest will take a big step once I*

*reach the stage when I know I'm financially secured... (Ishita, F, Indian, attended university)*

Just like Aran, Ishita's personal interests were subverted and financial requirements promoted. She came from a background where she was always been cared and 'protected' (a term she used in the interview) by her parents. Ishita talked of having a need from within to prove her worth and she attempted to do so through financial independence ('I want to be able to stand up on my own feet') but this in itself brought crisis. In addition, although Ishita had no urgent need to look after her family, she had an inclination to do something for them before she could consider taking a job based on her own desires:

*...once I have become more independent that's the time when I have had a fair picture of what exactly I want. I always wanted to be in the corporate world. Earn some penny for myself and being a support in small little way to my family and to all my near and dear ones... (Ishita, F, Indian, attended university)*

Ishita's depiction of financial independence was also linked to the ability to provide for her family and she prioritised this over her interest fulfilment. The responsibility that she felt towards her family was crucial in making her decisions about her transitional route.

Financial consideration played its part for participants from different SES, even for those who had parental support (like Ishita). However, there was more desperation and urgency to address financial needs for those who were short of it. Just like the British participants, Aran and Olivia, Vikram (Indian participant) wanted to pursue a career in chartered accountancy, but could not do so because he had to work to provide for himself and for his family (of origin). In order to earn some money he started giving private tuition right from the time when he was in school himself:

*Yes, studies were going on... then 7- 8 years I continued... I joined tuitions... there was financial problem... after dad retired, financial problems started... then we are 3 brothers... we don't have sister... three brothers... then younger brothers... they also started having problems... like papa didn't stop drinking... when there is financial problem and drinking, then there would be problems... so then... they also... my younger brothers also started taking tuitions... (Vikram, M, Indian, not attended university)*

Vikram's family was under financial pressure which demanded attention even from the young ones from the family where he and his brothers had to take private tuitions to help their parents with the finances. Here there is a sense of collective effort to deal with financial crisis, but in this process Vikram was going through his own personal crisis of having to sacrifice his interest in order to help his family. Different conditions hinted at different forms of crisis based on the environment and experiences of the participants. Most felt the need to sacrifice their interests for financial stability, but the crisis associated with it was of different degree and variety.

Vikram spent a lot of time tutoring and his studies began to be compromised (shown in extract below).

*...like that I used to take tuitions and because of that my studies started getting hampered. I did 10th (equivalent to GCSE) and 12th (equivalent to A-levels) and also tuitions... tuitions and also study for my ownself... so like that I did... slowly, slowly I started forgetting my own education... started having less time for my own education... so... tuitions were going good... I would work hard... it went well... but my education started going bad... (Vikram, M, Indian, not attended university)*

There was a collective cause to this step wherein Vikram and his siblings were working to bring some income to the family, especially after the rising difficulties from his father's alcohol problems. This is yet again a unique condition, different from that of Aran and Ishita. Aran (British participant), like Vikram, came from a family of low SES, but his story of crisis entailed leaving home and having to establish financial independence before catering to his personal interests. Ishita earned in order to attain financial independence but also to provide for her family. However, Ishita was not under any immediate pressure to financially support her family. Vikram, on the other hand, felt that he had no option but to take immediate financial responsibility for his family as well as himself, and in this quest he had to sacrifice his passion and interest.

Just like Vikram, Aran and Olivia, people in low SES may experience a long transitional process because of financial constraints standing in the way of fulfilling their personal interest. Vikram highlighted the importance of money and the helplessness that he felt because of the lack of it (*'there is not much money and then problems start getting created... that's why main is money'*). There is a reflection of a dilemma that he felt about the value of money, a feeling of not being so important and yet a crucial factor in one's life (*'money is not everything, but still everything in one way'*). Vikram felt that he had to continue doing his current job (*'there is no other way...have to do the job'*) because in the absence of financial stability and security, he had to build his own safety net at the cost of his dreams and aspirations.

All the above examples suggest the importance of financial consideration in the transition process. It posed as a notable constraint in personal interest fulfilment for participants from all SES and family backgrounds. However, the degree to which it contributed to the feeling of crisis varied depending mostly on participant background. There was a suggestion that having and pursuing personal interest is a luxury, but participants from different economic, social and cultural backgrounds had the shared assumption that interests and passions might have to be set aside in order to manage risks and responsibilities.

Diverse experiences and conditions have caused variation in personal timelines where priorities differed based on their circumstances. Participants experienced crisis as a result of these circumstances that refrained them from moving towards a more meaningful and rewarding transitional process.

***Question of 'what I want': Pressure from the family***

Family expectations did not always favour interest fulfilment, but supported more of a 'secure progression' that entailed movement from education to work in a straight path, irrespective of whether this was based on participant's personal interests. It is worth noting here that this was especially significant for the Indian participants and less of a problem for the British sample. Only two of the British participants talked about the pressure felt from family, one of which was British but with Indian ethnicity. It was also the choices and responses that participants made to these demands that distinguished the Indian and the British sample. There were potentially three plausible choices that they could make: (i) fulfil family expectations; (ii) avoid expectations and follow personal needs; or, (iii) convince family and make them understand about the chosen direction. All of these routes were difficult choices for the participants and contributed to the feeling of crisis associated with decision-making about future goals and aspirations.

Hannah is a British participant who expressed the difficulties she faced when dealing with her family's expectations of her. In the extract below, she talked about trying to convince her parents about her decisions and the debate that arose from it:

*Um, yeah, I'd say a month ago I spoke to my dad and said, you know, I'm thinking of doing this teacher training, what do you think? And you know, everyone's first thought, both my parents were 'well that's a waste', you know, you've done five years at uni to be a doctor and you don't want to be a doctor anymore'. I'm well, when I explained it more, there's no point... I think it took a lot for them to come to terms with it to be honest, which is probably why I was under so much stress at that time because there was all that expectation, expectation again (pointing to photo 27). (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*

The five years that she spent doing a medical course was considered by her parents as an important factor for the decisions for future career. It was hard for them to understand Hannah's changing interests. It can be seen how two different standpoints from different sets of experiences have caused the clash of interests. Towards the end of the extract, Hannah expressed the level of stress that she felt as a consequence ('I was under so much stress'). This suggests that, in the quest to be independent, there is often a need to be assured and proved rational. Hannah made a life changing career decision and needed to be assured that she had made an informed and responsible decision. Disapproval from her parents was doing just the opposite for Hannah wherein her decision was seen as illogical in her parents' perspective, consequently leading to stress and worry.

Despite the excessive tension between differing interests with her family, Hannah expressed handling it in favour of her interests (as shown in the extract below)

*Weirdly with family not so much, like you know, very, very different, there's a lot of pressure really on, well like big expectations and things (points to photo 27) and you should be a doctor not a teacher (gesturing to photo 5 and 6) and obviously like I felt that there was pressure from the family to try and maintain the doctor stuff (gestures*

*from 2011 to 2012) and whatever but not so much anymore, I've kind of got over that, you know... (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*

Although it would have been assuring if her parents accepted her decision to change career trajectory, she chose to still follow what she assumed essential for her self-fulfilment. With time Hannah even recovered from these expectations ('got over that').

Such a negotiation with parents as reflected from Hannah's account was contrary to what Amy experienced, the only other British participant who expressed pressure from family that posed as an obstacle in her interest fulfilment. Amy came from a Muslim background with Indian ethnicity, born and brought up in the UK. Her background reflected a different context from the other British participants in the sample, a context similar to the Indian participants with respect to family expectations. She faced pressure from family both in her educational decisions and work front:

*I had applied for uni, I had got my place at both [names a university] University and [names another university] for doing drama and English but I didn't go ahead and do it because drama and English wouldn't have got me far, according to my elder sisters, so they convinced my parents to make me stay at home. (Amy, F, British-Asian, not attended university)*

Not only were her parents involved in her decisions about her career, her sisters too played a role in determining her options. Amy knew what she wanted to do, but just like Olivia, her crisis entailed knowing and letting go. She could not go against the wishes of her family and hence decided to drop the idea of attending university. Abiding by the family's decisions was a cultural imprinting in which Amy did not consider the possibility of going against their will to pursue something of her interest. She encountered similar experience with regard to work:

*My parents forced me to leave my job.*

*Interviewer: Okay.*

*Bearing in mind a job that I loved, I made friends, I met the love of my life, more importantly I became responsible, I learned so many skills, and they made me leave my job. I was depressed, I think I went through a lot of depression [sounds upset]. (Amy, F, British national, not attended university)*

There was a continuous battle to fulfil her personal interests through her transitional process and in this, family pressure and expectations played a part in leading to crisis. It was hard for Amy to strike a balance between independence and interdependence, where, unlike Hannah, Amy saw no scope of defying her parents' decisions whilst navigating her way to an independent adult life.

*Analysis of the Indian participants: Pressure from the family (Question of 'what I want')*

Interestingly, Hannah and Amy were the only British participants (among the 16) who talked about feeling pressure from their family to follow different paths to what was personally desired. Not only were there more participants from the Indian sample who talked about such pressure (five out of eight), there was also a substantial difference in the way they responded to



these expectations. Family expectation had different significance for these Indian participants, some of who had to relinquish their personal interests in order to fulfil their parents' prospect about their future (just like Amy).

Aman talked of his difficulties in adjusting to his parent's expectations and the compulsion that he felt to follow what they planned for his future:

*And I didn't know what to do. MBA because 'Okay my father has a business'. My father said that do MBA. I wanted to be a doctor once and then do an MBA and sometimes I wanted to go... because I was in the theatre and direction and all that because I always liked directing, plays and all. So I thought I will get into direction. But then I know that 'No, the level of maintenance that I have kept that I have to be here'... and everyone... everything was regarding to make people happy. I regret that today. (Aman, M, Indian, attended university)*

Aman was still juggling with different options when he was interrupted with the need to fulfil his father's expectations from his future career. His reference to 'the level of maintenance' was with regard to the fact that he had always portrayed and posed himself as an 'ideal son' and it was important for him that he continued to maintain that impression. He expressed how he did everything for the sole reason to 'make people happy', suggesting that being accepted by others was more important for him than being a successful individual through self-fulfilment. This further brings to attention the change through transition in which Indian participants had to, or felt that they had to, take responsibility for their family's happiness. In this process some participants like Aman had to sacrifice his own interest for that of others':

*And my dad wanted me here. That you know 'I'm getting old... you know... come here... know the market here. Get a... try the...' There was an opening in [names a company]. So 'Try here. If you get it, you could stay here. Spend time with us and slowly you'll get to know the business and all that'. I left my girlfriend... I left my life... these... when I say this, these are the regrets that I have today. (Aman, M, Indian, attended university)*

Aman stressed the fact that he 'left [his] girlfriend', 'left [his] life', a dramatic portrayal of the sacrifices that he had to make for the good of others, especially his father. There is a sense that he had already started creating a personal timeline, but needed to be compromised. There was a helplessness reflected in his experience where his sacrifice was perceived as an inevitable. The constraining experience bound within the expectations and hopes from his parents made him feel stuck in crisis with few perceived avenues to change in the direction of a fulfilling future.

A similar experience was shared by Isha where she had to give up her dream job and follow what her father expected and desired of her. She talked of an indoctrinated route which was fully decided and guided by her parents:

*Initially, before doing my Masters, after my graduation, I had a desire to do my Masters in journalism. Okay, I wanted to do MassCom and I wanted to go to... umm... umm... the field of journalism. Okay, I had a liking for that. Always. Umm... reporting then umm... news reading, news editing. All those things, I liked. I had a liking for that, but then I appeared for an interview. I umm... I was called for the personal interview, but*

*then my father didn't allow me to go because he said that 'You can't stay away from home like this'. And he also loved us a lot. So he... he couldn't let us stay away from him. So it's solely for him that I gave up that idea and I decided to do my Masters in Literature here. (Isha, F, Indian, attended university)*

Isha's movement towards interest fulfilment was interrupted by her father. There is a sense of authority on the part of her parents and the respect that Isha had of their views that led her to quit the personally chosen meaning of her transition and replace it with their decisions. Aman and Isha's accounts reflect possible cultural differences between the Indian and the British sample in the differing impacts family's hopes and expectations held in their lives. Isha used phrases, like 'didn't allow', 'you can't', highlighting the level of authority exercised by her family. A form of crisis evolved from such sacrifices made both by Aman and Isha in which they were obligated to pursue family's decision about their future career.

However, not all Indian participants had shown this inclination to meet their family's expectations, rather showed some resistance. In the extract below, Raj expressed the battle between his personal interests and his father's plan for his future:

*According to my father, he told that get a government job and settle down but I don't want a government job... nowadays it's not possible also to get... my aim is... as I told you that... by doing some small business and then have to make bigger and like that like that so I want to settle down that way... my mother also agreed that take some help from uncle or something... like that you can settle it down... but father wants the job only... so that's only... so my... through business... if not business, then that only... job only... (Raj, M, Indian, not attended university)*

The difference in interests between his father and his own was clear from the first line of the above extract. Like Hannah, Raj showed resistance to his father's opinions and suggestions, but unlike her, he did not have the independence of time and space to pursue his goal. If he failed to achieve success soon, he knew that he would have to unquestionably follow what his father envisaged from him:

*Now I did not think but I'm trying to talk with my friends and uncle about what to do because what business is going means what is wanted in market... I want to ask because in previous also I got losses in net café and game parlour... so next time I don't want to lose... because my age is going on and after that if I don't do anything, my father will force me to do a job only (Giggles)... (Raj, M, Indian, not attended university)*

The element of 'force' from his father was explicitly stated in this account. Raj's crisis was moulded from this clash of interests and the limited time that suffocated and pressurised him to make a quick move towards his goal achievement. Having failed twice previously to run a successful business, he was also under financial pressure to make a well-prepared and calculated move in fulfilling his interest. Time pressure along with financial risks involved in his quest to fulfil his goal caused him significant stress and worry.

A noteworthy observation in the above accounts of Aman, Isha, and Raj is the focus on the father figure in expectations. Being a patrilineal society, the head of the family had some authority over the decisions made in the family. This does not necessarily mean that the

mother had no say in their decisions. For instance, Raj talked about how he managed to convince his mother of his plans for future. However, there was a constant reference to a father figure in the participants' accounts suggesting the particular significance of fathers' expectations in influencing their decisions.

It is intriguing how culture played its part in the influence of family expectation on participants' crisis experience. There were only two British participants who talked about the pressure felt from the family to sacrifice personal interest, of which one was from Indian ethnicity who shared similar experience as that of the Indian sample in dealing with this pressure. Furthermore, the British participant (Hannah) who expressed pressure from her family negotiated with it quite differently from the Indian participants. Although Raj showed similar resistance like Hannah with regard to family expectations, he did not feel that he could completely disregard their opinions to follow his own interests. He was given limited time to prove that his interest would lead to a fruitful end.

This difference in negotiation was also evident in the words and phrases used by the participants whilst expressing parental expectations and pressure. While Hannah used words like *'got over that'*, *'took a lot for them to come to terms with it'*, participants from the Indian sample used phrases like *'my father will force me'* (Raj) and *'my father didn't allow me'* (Isha). Based on priorities set by participants from different social context, the experience of family pressure varied. Being accepted by others (especially parents) was more important than attaining a self-fulfilling future for the Indian sample. Just like the British sample, they talked about personal interests and passion, but the experience of pressure from family to do otherwise was significant in the cause of stress leading to experience of crisis.

Differing priorities and considerations also led to varied experiences of decision-making and risk management in their transition to adulthood and independence. For instance, Raj had to be careful while planning and starting a business because he was under pressure from his family to do a government job in case he failed. For him, risk was not just associated with the monetary loss, but also with the loss of chance to pursue his interest. On the other hand, Hannah's perspective on risk management was centred on the ability and scope to change career trajectory based on available funds. Although Hannah too articulated pressure felt from her family, this had no implication to the risks that she had taken in her transition.

Overall, family expectation was an important consideration that made fulfilling personal interest a challenge for some participants.

#### **4a.3 Summary (Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment)**

Participants often started the interview by articulating how their transition to adulthood (or the next stage of their lives) was 'supposed to' progress. Quite often, participants had felt that if

they did everything in the right order and achieved excellence in education and other activities, they would walk smoothly into a settled life and satisfying job. At the same time, the drive to fulfil their personal interests and passions was significant in bringing meaning, a purpose and direction making their effort feel worthwhile. In these representations of experience, there was an implicit assumption that there is a truth about themselves and their purpose that is waiting to be found (*'get access to what... you really want out of life'*) and the task for young people is to excavate what it is that they are *'meant to do'*. However, most experiences resembled stumbling over what might be fulfilling interests at various times in their transition to work life, sometimes requiring them to compromise the smooth/linear navigation to cater to their newfound interest. Smooth navigation was perceived as a condition when one derives an interest (or purpose) based on which they choose their education and then use the training to pursue a career without facing external hurdles of social expectations and financial constraints. It was when participants faced challenges to follow such a navigation that they experienced being stuck.

There were differences among participants in which of the five aspects (knowing *'what I want'*, late realisation, multiplicity of options, financial consideration and *'pressure from the family'*) caused most strain. For some, crisis was fuelled by the unanswered questions of one's purpose and direction in transition and for others by the limited possibility of fulfilling *'what they want'*. There were also differences in experience based on the social and demographic status of participants. Financial consideration was a more substantive problem for those from low SES who had little to no help from family, whilst family expectations were a graver concern for the Indian participants than the British.

#### **4a.4 Discussion (Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment)**

Freund and Ritter (2009), in their attempt to theorize a less strict version of midlife crisis, defined it as the difference between one's own position and the ideal position (based on social expectations). The same can be used to understand *'quarterlife crisis'* through the theme *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment* where participants were faced with discrepancies between expectations and experiences. . This disparity was more prominent in the transition from education to career than in other areas, like romantic relationships and living arrangements. There was also often a discrepancy between what participants personally desired and what was pre-given and considered acceptable.

The discussion of the theme *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment* shall cover four key points: (i) productivity vs self-satisfaction; (ii) disparity between education and employment; (iii) the model of Early Adult Crisis; and (iv) differences in young people's experiences based on culture, educational background and gender.

(i) Productivity vs self-satisfaction: Participants often interpreted settling down with internal satisfaction (non-monetary) and fulfilment of personal interests. Most of the time, when participants were asked about what advice they would give other young people, they spoke about ‘finding out what they want’ highlighting the expectations that young people have about an adult life based on personal interests, values and preferences rather than just stability and security. However, policy makers focus less on youth aspirations and more on the value their work adds to the economy (Payne, 2000) ensuring they do not become a drain on society. Thus, young people live in a socio-economic setting where productivity is highly regarded and doing something that is not economically beneficial can be deemed illogical or ‘alternative’. Most often than not, the realisation of these conflicting personal vs societal / economic values only come to the fore whilst in their crucial transitional period to adulthood, mostly during the time when they start contemplating self-satisfaction and well-being. This is where we can draw similarities with midlife crisis when individuals question what they have achieved and whether that has provided contentment. According to Levinson et al. (1976), it is at this midlife junction when they have followed a normative life structure but some experience disparity between this and what they actually want, that they start experiencing a crisis. This aspect of self-satisfaction and well-being shall be further explored in the *Discussion* chapter.

(ii) Disparity between education and employment: The changing trends in education and employment hint further at the need for acceptance of non-linear trends in navigation from education to work. As discussed in the literature review chapter, there has been a reduced value of education in employment attainment (Muller, 2005). However, the assumption remains that the higher the level of education, the higher the chances of better employment and status, with little regard for the economic conditions that has a profound influence on this link. Muller (2005) has suggested that although it is true that those with higher education tend to attain jobs quicker than those with lower level education, there are economic conditions that determine the strength of this link. And, as Keep (2012) has argued, employment agendas are quite often focused on the supply more than the demand. It is these conditions that the participants were not well attuned to when they left education. Whilst in the educational system, success was equated with educational achievement and qualifications, and they believed the same would be mirrored in job achievement.

Many UK government policies are directed towards increasing educational opportunities and motivating young people to pursue higher education through the offer of funding. On the other hand, employer attitudes and their reduced preference for young people (who have just come out of education) go less noticed and targeted (Keep, 2012; Payne, 2000). A number of employers tend to value work experience more than educational qualifications (Keep, 2012) resulting in young people temporarily settling for jobs just after education to attain work experience and financial stability rather than career goal fulfilment.

These disparities suggest complications in the transition from education to work where a linear and smooth transition from education to a self-fulfilling career has become less common and more challenging. Looker and Dwyer (1998) stated:

*While complexity has always been intrinsic to the process of student transition, in the past it would be viewed as a subordinate concern because the process was more predictable or straightforward. The important point here is that, whatever the past, unpredictability and complexity can no longer be overlooked in research on educational transitions. (p. 14)*

Thus, there is a need to view these complexities as normative rather than alien or undesirable aspects of young people's lives, indicative of dysfunctional people rather than dysfunctional systems. These complexities were experienced by the young people in the present study, especially after coming out of the educational system and experiencing discontinuity from education to work. The expectation of a linear transition is implicit in policies governing the education system and hence the use of the term, 'pathway' in the discourses around youth transition (Looker & Dwyer, 1998; te Riele, 2004). With the use of the term 'pathway', there is an implicit expectation of linearity from education to work, considered two end points of transition rather than "overlaps, zigzags and shuffles that are now far too common to be accounted for by the notions of linearity" (Looker & Dwyer, 1998, p. 8). Young people in the present study have demonstrated these backward and forward movements in transition, but with a negative connotation to these movements, sometimes blaming themselves for the perceived failure to move in a linear way.

iii. The model of Early Adult Crisis: The 'locked-in' and 'separation' phase of the model of Early Adult Crisis (Robinson & Smith, 2010) could be used to understand the crisis experience here. Young people experienced confusion and doubt when they realised meaninglessness, not knowing what they were moving towards and what they wanted from the end point of their transition. The consequence of this was an internal dissatisfaction with their current position, role and identity (typical of the locked-in stage proposed by Robinson and Smith). Participants often found themselves paralysed (or trapped) in an undesirable position whilst following a 'secure progression', yet an unfulfilling one. They persuaded themselves to follow a presumed linear route typically to conform to the normative values of transition from education to work and/or catering to financial requirements. In this process, they often lost a sense of meaning. This brings me back to the use of the term 'pathway' in policies "which would have us believe that for young people the world of work 'comes after' and is the normal end-term of their years as students" (Looker & Dwyer, 1998, p. 9), and "young people who get lost on the way to adulthood only have themselves to blame" (te Riele, 2004, p. 245).

There were others who identified the need to follow the unconventional route, yet found themselves feeling obligated or pulled to follow the 'normal' or linear route to adulthood that simply entailed navigation from education to work with the capability to self-sustain and be

independent, without necessarily being self-fulfilled. The policies are structured in ways that facilitate some transitional ‘pathways’ and hinder other routes from education to work (te Riele, 2004), and young people who feel the necessity to follow different routes in order to cater to their personal interests feel unsupported in their decisions. Looker and Dwyer (1998) argued that educational policies have an underlying assumption of a defined and presupposed route to adulthood in which there is no room for a backward or circular movement. For instance, educational policies are age defined, say in terms of compulsory education to the age of 18 which are matched with specific expected educational qualifications.

Although some participants in my study seemed to be in the third stage of ‘exploration’ (Robinson & Smith, 2010) where they seek meaning in their transition rather than following a straightforward route, finding a new life structure was a challenge. Some experienced crisis when their quest to fulfilling their interest seemed bound by multiple obstacles say in the form of *Late realisation*, *Multiplicity of options* and *Pressure from the family*. The category, *Late realisation*, can also be linked with linear and smooth transitions from education-to-work stressed in education and employment policies. When they gradually start forming ideas about what they want to pursue as their future career, they might not be in the ideal condition to allow a smooth linear progression to its fulfilment. For instance, Alex realised his interest whilst doing his university degree which did not link with his new found interests. If he had to follow a route to his interest fulfilment, he would have to find alternative routes that would mean deflecting from the linearity that is commonly emphasized in policies.

This brings back attention to limited exploration that Heinz (2009) highlighted where young people find themselves looking for the ‘next best’ rather than having a wide array of unlimited choices (see also te Riele, 2004). This is especially true for those in disadvantaged positions and those bound by strong social expectations. There were others who, even though from an economically supportive environment, found it hard to make the bold decision to move ‘backward’ to explore and try new routes. The ‘complexity’ in transition, typical of young people’s experiences in the newer century (Looker & Dwyer, 1998), goes unaccepted by young people themselves. Looker and Dwyer (1998) argued that complexity in educational transitions has become an integral part of young people’s lives. However, young people continue to be heavily influenced by the conventions and consider themselves as ‘failure’ when they deflect from the smooth linear trajectory to adulthood. In order to be able to follow the conventional route and yet be satisfied with their transition there is a demand for an early realisation of interests and preferences. However, in reality young people can develop their interests in different points in their life. Hannah added in the last part of the interview,

*I think especially when you’re younger, you know, people expect you to know what you want to do from the age of fifteen because you’re picking GCSEs and then you’re picking your A Levels and then you’re going to uni and people want you to know what*

*you want to do from such a young age and how on earth are you supposed to know at fifteen what you want to do when you're twenty-five, you change so much, you know...(Hannah, F, British, attended university)*

This reflects the pressure of choice at an early age in order to enable congruence between linear progression and personal interest fulfilment. Like Hannah, there were participants in difficult positions when they realised their interests too late to be made conventionally or otherwise achievable (discussed in the category, *Late realisation*). In addition to this, Illeris (2003) argued that young people are exposed to a myriad of information and choices in different aspects like relationship, music, way of living, interests and activities and chances are that choices and opportunities keep changing with time as they get exposed to this information through, say, the internet or even travelling. For instance, Alex initially chose economics for his university course because he enjoyed the field, but after being exposed to a new culture through his travelling experience, he had come to a realisation that he wanted to work on something that would be centred on social work and moving to different places. He raised concerns about the meaninglessness of his transition if he did not follow his new found interest. At the same time, he was unable to accept the non-linearity in transition for him to be able to fulfil his interests.

Looker and Dwyer (1998) identified the need for multiple transitional positions to be recognised by policy-makers that would “reflect more truly the experience and choices of the young generation of today” (p. 14). This is not to imply just apprenticeships and work experience as alternative routes to work life. These transitions may take different forms, some that involve changing directions through transitional process and others that involve emphasizing different activities and interests as sharing equal value in moving through transition. This recognition of multiple transitional routes in policies could potentially provide room for exploration of personal interests in which young people can strive for attaining a self-fulfilling future career.

iv. Differences in young people’s experiences based on culture, educational background and gender: For the Indian participants, the quest for interest fulfilment was made more challenging because of the pressure of family expectations than knowing what they want. As mentioned earlier, this does not necessarily mean that they did not face problems realising and forming their future goals, but for them, the problem lay in knowing and letting it go because of priorities given to family decisions and duties. Interdependence and adherence to family values and decisions are highly regarded in the Indian society (Chadda & Deb, 2013; Hui & Triandis, 1986). Sonawat (2001) stated: “Right from ancient times, family, caste, and community have dominated the entire texture of Indian society. Family has been a dominating institution both in the life of the individual and the life of the community” (p. 178).

Even in the changing society governing the Indian context in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, elders continue to exercise control and authority over the younger members, with possibly less dictatorship than in the past (Sonawat, 2001). Attachment to family is also seen in terms of working to provide for



them (Agarwala, 2008). This was also seen in the present study where some Indian participants (like Vikram) sacrificed the fulfilment of personal interests in order to earn for the family. Thus, pressure felt by the Indian participants in fulfilling their parents' expectations can be understood in this social and cultural context where parents play a significant role in the choices and decisions of the young members in the family. Knowing their interests and desires was an individual goal, but letting go of the same because of difference in opinion with family is a reflection of the value given to interdependence and prioritising family's wellbeing. Here both culture and perception come into play in the point of crisis.

While the Indian participants in the present study had only made a passing comment about the difficulty '*finding what [they] want*', their crisis was strongly situated in social barriers that impeded them from fulfilling their personal interests. Thus, autonomy existed in determining personal goals, but fulfilment of the same can be challenging for the Indian participants when they stand in conflict with the social expectations. Thus, for young Indians the quest of pursuing their interest could vary depending on whether they are in conflict or in harmony with the social and cultural expectations (Killen and Wainryb, 2000). In the present study, some recognised the need to sacrifice their goal for the interest of the family and/or society (like Aman), others chose to struggle to achieve their goal in a given context (like Raj).

Cultural aspects determined what was perceived to be a graver problem. Since the British young people perceived and experienced family expectations differently, they did not consider family expectations to be as big of an obstacle in their quest to fulfil personal interests. Young British adults tend to seek advice from their parents, but without any direct pressure with regard to their decisions (Bergen, 2006), while on the other hand, co-operation is highly regarded in the Indian society where interconnectedness with family members is very evident with decisions mostly taken in a collective sense (Chadha, 1999). These differences in the social and cultural contexts where the British and Indian participants were situated, could be a plausible reason why Indian participants stressed more on family pressure than their British counterparts in posing as barriers to their interest fulfilment. With regard to educational background and gender, no substantial difference was seen among the participants in the present study.

The discussion of this theme, *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment*, suggests the need for normalising non-linear and complex transitions whilst giving importance also to youth aspirations in order to reach a satisfying end to their transition to adulthood. Without this self-satisfaction and fulfilment of personal interests, young people may not perceive themselves as reaching a settled life with stable career, thus, giving a sense of prolonged period of moratorium and delay in reaching adult status. These aspects of prolonged moratorium experienced by young people and the consequent delay in attaining adulthood are further discussed in the final chapter.

## Chapter 4b: Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations

Young people were attaining different milestones at different points of time in their transition (demographically distinct as Arnett had also posed in his theory of emerging adulthood). This also meant that there was little standard available for the participants through which they could measure their progress. However, whilst in transition, participants expressed the need to prove their capabilities and potential in relation to others' achievements, family expectations and general social measures of success. There were two domains that participants focused on in proving their capabilities: (a) independence and pursuing a career goal; and/or (b) romantic relationships. Self and other-imposed pressures in these domains were experienced as testing and challenging.

The pressures experienced in these domains are represented within the following three sub-themes, each of which captures a different aspect of proving their personal capabilities.

- Playing catch up
- Feeling responsible
- Living up to social and cultural expectations

### 4b.1 Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations: Playing catch up

There was variability in milestone achievements of young people with regard to age of work, marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 2000) and with the disappearance of a universal, post-education framework that would demarcate what 'secure progression' looked like, participants created their own structure for progression, while at the same time attempting to balance it with their personal interests (as also discussed in the chapter, *Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment*). Most participants perceived their contemporaries as 'moving forward', 'progressing', or as having achieved a mature position in terms of career, marriage or living arrangements. Such observations were a source of worry, apprehension and frustration to many participants, as they felt their own relative lack of 'progress' was potentially indicative of inadequacy. For many, this built into a feeling of crisis.

For example, Bill described his friends as moving forward to do what they wanted and pursuing further education, while he was yet to find a passion for something that could build into a future career:

*but it's just seeing people do the thing that they absolutely love, and it almost seems effortless, I'm not saying that it is, but it almost seems like they just do it because it was what they were, you know, intending to do, as it were, not living in some sort of, you know, fairy world, I'm just saying that, you know, they, friends that I had that are interested in politics are so interested in it that, you know, oh, it's all there is. It's all they think about. And I could never be like that, although I recognised that I'd seen people have that passion and, it's not just passion, because it's like they had a flair for it, you know, they absolutely were masters of what they were doing. Like my friends now are doing PhD programmes and stuff like that because they're, you know, really*

*focussed. Now, because I've had all of that, it just meant that I, I don't know, I couldn't really open myself up as a person. I couldn't really, you know, it inhibited all sorts of things. (Bill, M, British, attended university)*

Bill equated a successful career transition with moving from education to work, based on one's passions. Yet he felt that, in this transitional movement he was lacking that passion he saw in others ('*I could never be like that*'). There is a reference to two time frames in the above extract – when he was studying politics at university and when he decided to return to secondary education and undertake different A-levels based on his interests. When studying at university, he felt disinterested and distant from his subject area, while perceived his friends as confident and experts in what they were doing ('*masters of what they were doing*'). This gave rise to his feeling of difference. He 'knew' there was some amount of difficulty associated with the process of fulfilling their interests ('*not living in some...fairy world*'), but he felt that it was worth the effort for it provided personal satisfaction. In the second time frame, when he started to re-take his A-levels, he saw his friends moving ahead in their educational timeline. He felt he was the only one who was struggling to progress towards a satisfying career. He added, '*I think that I have become more self-conscious, but, you know, it's because I can't sort of [laughs], I feel like I've not done things the normal way*'. Bill's assumption of what was normal seemed to emerge from the passion and smooth progression he saw in others' transition and unable to have the same, made him feel like an exception to the norm. He said:

*I feel like, like not that there's anything against the people who, you know, who are going out and doing exactly what it is that they want to do, but I feel like I've never had that and that like, and that it's almost too late for me to do that now. (Bill, M, British, attended university)*

Compared to others, he felt that he was lagging behind in the time frame to achieve a successful satisfactory career, which led to a feeling of crisis. He also cited this 'lag' as one of the causes of social anxiety ('*because I've had all of that, it just meant that....I couldn't really open myself up as a person*').

A similar comparison with peers was expressed by many other participants in the study. Max said:

*It's just a very different scenario, it's a different, different context, and, I mean, I don't know, to some extent the whole unemployment thing probably doesn't help, but that's a, you know, that's a, I suspect that it's, it is just a whole, you know, you go back into the same routines, but the routines are slightly kind of different because no one's got much of time because they've all got jobs. They've all got proper lives to lead, whereas, whereas some of us are still studying [laughs]. (Max, M, British, attended university)*

Max perceived his friends' lives as being '*proper*', while he was '*still studying*' suggesting that, at his age, having a job is the only '*proper*' thing to do, while studying should be completed. Given that Max was unemployed during that time, he felt uncomfortable around his friends. Max experienced a crisis when he was unable to progress towards work, while his friends

seemed to him as ‘*real people with real jobs*’. He experienced this as challenge of his capabilities to reach adulthood with job stability.

Just as Max and Bill judged their own position by comparing themselves with their contemporaries, Avril observed the changes in her peers’ lives and took these changes to represent normative milestones that people her age should be achieving. She described feeling ‘*panicky*’ when she considered her position in relation to her peers:

*...so I went from job-to-job again, deciding what I want to do with myself and this is like still kind of where I am at the minute, it does feel like a bit more panicky though ‘cos everyone... all my friends are getting married (points to the fifth photo), buying houses (points to the sixth photo), having babies (points to the far end of the timeline) and I’m just like kind of where I am, I am (points to the timeline between fourth and fifth photos) now where I am just back then as well. (Avril, F, British, attended university)*

Avril brought photos of different friends and positioned them as representing milestones in a timeline. She felt that her current situation was similar to how it was when she first started her job six years ago, unable to decide what she wanted to do, whereas she perceived her friends as making significant life changes and encountering new experiences. This raised serious questions about her position suggesting a sense of unexpectedly being lost, delayed or confused in her path since leaving school.

Avril also talked about ageing and the added stress that brought to her in terms of ‘*progressing*’ her life:

*Mostly like now it’s because where I feel stuck at the minute is just ‘cos I feel like time’s running out ‘cos I’m getting older now and I feel like if I need to change my life around and make a decision I need to do it now and like especially like with everybody having babies (pointing to the 7th photo), it’s just like I feel like it’s me realising how old I’m getting, and that’s... yeah, I need to make a decision about what to do next. (Avril, F, British, attended university)*

Others’ timelines posed as a norm and challenged her potential to make a timely progression to adulthood. Avril was 28 and she felt like she was behind age-related expectations, yet not too late for her to catch up with others. However, unable to make crucial decisions impeded her progression and led to a feeling of being stuck in the midst of a perceived rush, causing her to experience crisis.

Just like Avril, Hannah spoke about time and the felt urgency to achieve normative age-related milestones:

*Yeah, I think earlier it was a lot more, you know, like a top twenty-five here, you know, like I’m twenty-five, you know, like a quarter of my life or whatever, it’s like I should have this by now and you know, you still look sometimes at what other people (points to photo 22) have done or got and then you think, you know, at twenty-five, you know, when you’re a doctor, you think I would have bought a house by now and I’d have a career set and a position, it’s like it’s just a year, you know, when you’re little, a year’s a long time, when you’re a grown-up it’s not. (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*

Hannah expressed sensitivity to perceived ‘shoulds’ about her life (*‘I should have this by now’*), based on what she saw *‘other people have done or got’*. Feeling she had not achieved these ‘shoulds’, she felt anxious about being behind others. Hannah felt that time perception and value keep changing: as one grows up time seems to feel increasingly limited. Her experience of crisis stemmed from feeling behind normative markers of adulthood and running out of time to achieve those. As an example for this sense of underachievement, Hannah brought downloaded images to the interview to represent a comparison of her state with that of others and she added:

*Yeah, after graduation so during, yeah, during my junior doctor years and I felt like I didn’t know what I was doing (points at photo 6), like I was like hmm! And I felt like everyone else was like this (points at photo 5) that felt like how I should be then a lot of like, you know, I should be like this (points at photo 4 and back to photo 5) but I’m actually like this... (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*



Figure 17. Hannah’s Photo 5 (left), photo 6 (right)

Observing other people at work, Hannah felt that everyone was confident in what they were doing. The pair of photos (photo 5 and 6 in Figure 17) brought by Hannah showcased her perception of how she ‘should’ feel (confident and happy, photo 5) in comparison to what she actually felt, that is, clueless and out of place (*‘I was like hmm!’*). Her perception of what she ‘should’ feel developed through comparisons with those around her and she felt pressurised to be similar. The experience of crisis built from the perceived limited time and the rush to catch up with others who seemed to be in a better, more confident position in their life.

Just like Hannah compared herself with others at work, Mary made similar judgements about her own status in relation to others that led to a *‘bitter sweet experience’*. She realized that her friends on her course were doing better than her at maintaining a work life balance:

*...and I started my PhD and I kind of thought...it would be a bit of... umm... bit of... it will be an experience where people like me who I’d be doing the PhD with...they would have made the sacrifices that I made.. they might be a little socially awkward and they might have worked really hard to get where they were... it was kind of... when I met the people I would be sharing an office for the next three years...it’s a bit of a bitter sweet experience...ummm... because somehow they have managed to still achieve everything that I have achieved but maintain a life as well.., so they had interests outside and they maintained a social life.. It was bit like...well. . if they can do that, why can’t I ... I mean why did I have to focus so hard on my work and sacrifice everything for it when these people seem to have like a work life balance and much more relaxed about it... (Mary, F, British, attended university)*

Although Mary managed to pursue a PhD degree, she did so with larger sacrifices than others who appeared to have maintained a better work life balance, pursuing interest outside academics. Proving personal capabilities whilst comparing herself with others was not just situated in *what* others were doing, but also in *how* they were pursuing it. It was in the latter where Mary situated doubts about her potential to be as efficient as she saw others to be. Although Mary attempted to secure a work life balance, she felt that she could not succeed in this and saw herself falling back to the same pattern of work with no leisure time. She said, '*so I think I'm ageing towards being overworked rather than actually having a good balance*'. Mary's failed attempt led to questioning her capabilities to maintain a healthy lifestyle and her study participation was based mostly on this concern, articulated by her as a point of crisis.

In the absence of standards by which to judge their own success, participants were often seen to use others' achievements as a measure of their own progression. Thus, proving one's personal capabilities whilst comparing with others and attempting to catch up led to substantial pressure, and was, for some UK participants, a central point of crisis in their transition.

*Analysis of the Indian participants: Playing catch up*

There were no substantial differences found in the Indian sample with regard to this sub-theme. However, it is worth noting that only one Indian participant compared himself with others in terms of achievements on the education to career pathway (whereas eight of the British participants did this) and two compared themselves to others in terms of romantic relationships and marriage (whereas three of the British sample did this).

Although Vikram compared himself with others in relation to career achievements, he laid his shortcomings solely on financial constraints. He saw others progressing to do what he actually wanted for himself, but this did not raise doubts about his personal capabilities, but did create a feeling of being left behind in his transition from education to fulfilling work:

*I want to in CA. I did for two years but I couldn't complete... because of financial background. I think my friends completed it now... so even I want to... even if later in age... some people get early success, some later... even if I get success later, I have no issues... but I want the success... (Vikram, M, Indian, not attended university)*

Vikram's desire was not just based on seeing others' achievements, rather he was intrinsically motivated to pursue a career in Chartered Accountancy. However, observing others who reached the goal that he aspired for himself concerned him and he had a strong desire to catch up with them ('*I think my friends completed it now... so even I want to*'). The pressure to '*get success*' was significant, at the same time he felt unable to progress due to financial shortage in turn causing him to experience crisis:

*I was very interested in education... did CA and left... means my teachers used to say I will do really well... but situation was such that I couldn't complete... I want to do it later... but God knows what will happen... (Vikram, M, Indian, not attended university)*

Although in the previous extract he expressed strong determination and zeal to fulfil his dream job, in this extract, there is a sense of helplessness and diminishing hope (*'but God knows what will happen'*). Thus, seeing other people progress while he struggled to reach his goal caused him to experience crisis, oppressed in his circumstances and having to rely heavily on faith to fulfil his goal.

Just like Avril, Amrita talked about her position relative to others in terms of marriage and motherhood. Amrita was 30 and single, but she wanted to be settled with a partner:

*So one problem like I said, I would like to be in a relationship and I think that's a problem because it's very difficult to find you know, genuine people, you know. And another thing is that, now, since we have Facebook, you know, the pictures of women... junior school... flooded with pictures of them and their kinds you know... it kind of you know hints to you, right. Like I have juniors 2-3 years younger who are pregnant with or have kids. It feels a little weird sometimes. I don't know if weird is the right word, but... umm... you know... (Amrita, F, Indian, attended university)*

On one hand, Amrita was struggling to find a suitable partner and on the other she saw those younger to her getting married and having children. In this way, the social world sent her messages of what was expected from her. Being an exception in the crowd, she felt *'weird'* and that her transition was skewed from what she perceived as a normal progression. As a result, she felt stuck, immobilised in the midst of a perceived rush to attain specific milestone causing her to experience crisis.

Similar concerns were shared by Isha where she felt the need to have her own family solely on the basis that others were *'having a family of [their] own'*:

*It has to happen and somewhere in my... in my mind I also felt that 'Okay everyone, every friend of mine is having a family of her own. I also have to have a family of my own'. Nothing more than that. (Isha, F, Indian, attended university)*

In the above extract, Isha conveyed that the need to start her own family was not internally located. The strong influence of these comparisons in determining norms of progression can be seen in this account. It was a demanding and provoking experience where just like Amrita, Isha felt the pressure to catch up with other people who achieved some of the conventional milestones of adulthood.

Comparisons with other people were mostly made with those who were perceived to be doing better (or reaching more milestones) in their transitions than they were in their timeline of events. There were rarely, if any, comparisons where participants perceived themselves to be in a better position than others, i.e. in better jobs or in more stable relationships. In addition to this it was seen that participants of similar age were in different points in their transition and as such making different comparisons. For instance, while Avril (28 years) and Hannah (27 years) were almost of the same age, they had different basis of worry depending on the comparisons they did with other people. Avril made comparisons with respect to getting married and having babies, Hannah calibrated with others in relation to work progress. Thus, participants were

substantially influenced by what they perceived others to be achieving and it was this that led to a crisis experience rather than an internal sense of void or dissatisfaction.

#### **4b.2 Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations: Feeling responsible**

This sub-theme, *Feeling responsible*, captures family expectations and participants' felt responsibility to fulfil the same and how this could influence their own evaluations of success or failure. Participants felt accountable to their parents and wanted to make them proud through their achievements. They expressed a personal desire to repay what their families had provided, or sacrificed for them and this showcased a drive to prove their capabilities in meeting standards and fulfilling their expectations. It was when they felt unable to fulfil parents' expectations that they reported experiencing crisis, sensing failure and feeling helpless.

It was when the interviewer raised the question of whether they felt answerable and accountable to someone, that some UK participants expressed the pressure to repay their family by fulfilling their expectations. For instance, the extract below was Andrew's response when he was asked whether he felt responsible towards anyone during his transition:

*So I kind of feel under pressure from my family to do well actually because no-one else in my family has ever been to university so I'm like the first one that's gone and my brother hasn't and I kind of feel like I have to keep doing well or I'll disappoint them. I know that's not the case, my parents, well my mum and my granddad have always said to me, as long as you're happy we're happy, do what you like but at the same time it's really nice when they're proud of me, like graduation and that sort of thing and I like that feeling, I want to keep doing it... (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

Here the pressure was in relation to pursuing career goals and this was not directly imposed by his family members, but a need from within to make them proud and avoid disappointment.

Being the only one in the family who had the opportunity to go to university, there was a felt pressure to prove himself worthy of it and fulfil what they might have expected from him. The crisis emerged when he had to work in a grocery store after his graduation, making him doubt his ability to fulfil the standards that need to be met as a graduate from a reputed university.

Just like Andrew, Alex (in the extract below) wanted to make his parents proud:

*Yeah, a little bit, I'd say like my parents probably, like they've put so much time and effort into me and my brother, you know, bringing us up and giving us this like stable upbringing, I certainly feel responsible to them in trying to be as successful as possible and working as hard as I can. I mean I kind of know that whatever I do they'll be proud of me, but I kind of, I don't want to, I want to give them something maybe to boast about something like that, I want to kind of I suppose reward them for kind of giving me some great support and everything. And so perhaps it's, you know, one of the things, I don't want to go home and do nothing because then that will disappoint them, you know, they wouldn't like that if I just went home and did nothing so I need to kind of figure out what I want to do. Yeah, a lot for them as much as myself, so yeah. (Alex, M, British, attended university)*

Alex wanted to do well in his career so as to make his parents proud. But he did not know what he wanted to pursue as his future career, creating some time pressure to figure that out so as to



avoid disappointing his parents. Here there is a suggestion of how others' approval could play a crucial role in bringing contentment and happiness. Thus, the combination of a desire to make their parents proud, a felt responsibility to do this by achieving, and their relative lack of progress towards this contributed to a crisis experience for some participants.

Olivia showed this need to fulfil expectations of her family although she had not been in contact with them for the past few years. The extract below shows the response that she gave when the question was raised as to whether she ever felt responsible towards someone:

*Um, a little bit, I sometimes, I somehow subconsciously sort of feel that even though if I'm not in touch with my parents that they would be judging whatever move I make or what jobs I take or what I'm doing which is strange because I've not spoken to them for a couple of years now but I feel like if I did suddenly meet my mother and she said "What are you doing? Oh you're only working in the university, why aren't you doing this or earning this much?" And that's always kind of in the back of my mind even though I enjoy the job in itself I still feel that way. (Olivia, F, British, attended university)*

Even though Olivia had experienced abuse in her family home, she nonetheless felt sensitive to their judgement of her. As she took stock of her life, it was the perception that her mother would make of her that was 'always in the back of [her] mind'. Her personal experience of attaining a stable job was problematized by the potential judgment of her mother of the job as paltry. In such ways, the data shows again the powerful influence that significant others, especially parents, have on the young people's assessments of their lives and on whether they feel they are living up to the standard expectations of progression.

Erica expressed similar concern about her family's view of her and the standards she felt falling behind. She was upset and disappointed when she could not get admission into a university, and in the extract below, made a reference to the disappointment that she felt she had caused her family.

*I ended up with an A and two Bs in my A' Levels but I needed two As and a B to go to the course that I wanted to do which was medicine. By that point I'd already kind of convinced myself I didn't want to do it anyway and I'm kind of glad now that I didn't do it but that was just so hard, like such a blow, I felt like my whole family was disappointed in me and I didn't really know what to do... (Erica, F, British, attended university)*

Notably, it was not her own, but her parents' disappointment that was 'hard' to deal with that caused a 'blow'. Erica did not know how to cope with her family's disappointment. The experience of crisis was further escalated when she thought of what her family expected of her:

*So it was okay, I could tell that they were like, that they were disappointed, my parents they didn't go to university themselves, they always wanted me, they recognized that I had the potential to do things and they just saw it as throwing it away. (Erica, F, British, attended university)*

Her parents' wish for a university education was projected on to her and Erica felt the need to fulfil their dreams. On failing to do so, she felt embarrassed, portraying her failure as a break of

trust and a cause of disappointment to her parents. There is fuzziness as to whose ambitions are being talked of here, whether it was her own need to fulfil standards of success or her parents', either way Erica experienced crisis unable to fulfil the perceived expectations. The extract below shows the feelings that she had when she saw herself failing in the eyes of her family:

*My brother is two years younger than me so obviously when I was getting to sort of this kind of point (points to photo 5) my brother was going off to uni and I found that really, really tough, like when he left I felt even more that I was like the black sheep, that I'd done something wrong because my parents were so proud of him and so happy that he was going away and like following a dream and all that sort of stuff and they were worried about him and my mum would talk about him all the time and I know that was just because she was worried about him at university by himself and he didn't have a great time, like especially in the first year, but like I was always like "It should have been me" like all the time and I just felt that they were just way prouder of him than they were of me and I was just like leeching off them at home and I just felt awful.  
(Erica, F, British, attended university)*

Erica expressed feelings of inadequacy, jealousy ('they were way prouder of him'), and self-blame ('done something wrong'). She stressed the words, 'it should have been me' expressing her frustration and desperation to gain back her position as worthy of what her parents thought her to be. Unable to do so, she felt she was 'leeching off' her parents and like the 'black sheep' of the family. Her sense of value was diminished by her incapability to follow the anticipated pathway and all of these were attached to the feeling of crisis when she was unable to bring changes in her life in order to live up to the standards of success implicitly set by her parents.

#### *Analysis of the Indian participants: Feeling responsible*

Six of the sixteen British participants expressed concerns over causing disappointment to, and failure to fulfil expectations of, their parents. On the other hand, family expectations played a major role for all the eight participants in the Indian sample. Moreover, in the British sample, most only talked about responsibilities towards parents when asked, whereas most of the Indian participants expressed accountability and responsibility towards their family of their own accord. Their decisions, to a great extent, were influenced by what was expected of them in their careers. They not only had to live up to their parents' expectations, but because of the significance family held for them, they showed a *fear* of disappointment that their decisions and actions could potentially cause.

Making her family proud and avoiding disappointment was taken seriously by Amrita. The extract below shows the mixture of implicit and explicit family pressures that had a considerable implication in Amrita's life.

*...that's why first year I didn't do so well... so well in the sense that you know I had 58 percent, 2 percent less of first class... 60 percent ... and I was a little scared what would my dad say... you know... because dad had a very high expectations of me... and I was scared that he would be pissed... you know... kind of maybe yell at me or whatever... and then when I came home and I told Abba, 'Abba, I got a 58 percent, didn't get the first class', he just told me... he didn't tell me anything... I think 2 or 3*

*days later, we were going somewhere and in the car he tells... like all the members of my family were there and he tells in the car... A [mentions her name] is my pet name... he said (in Assamese) 'Is A a kind of girl who would get a second class?' ... you know he just said that... you know... it just reflected the amount of confidence he has in me... you know... so anyways... so in my grad I just had first class second position... and in my masters I topped with a first class first position... I was a gold medalist... (Amrita, F, Indian, attended university)*

The first few lines of the extract reflected worry that her father would be angry with her academic performance. However, the second part of the extract turned to the significance of her father's expectation. Instead of being a fear of facing her father's anger, it turned into a fear of falling behind set standards, essentially based on her father's assumptions of her capabilities. As well as feeling direct pressure from her father to do well academically there was also a sense of determination to win his confidence back by maintaining the expected standards. Amrita assumed that I, as the interviewer, would understand the impact her failure had on her by saying at the end that she '*was a gold medalist*' portraying the struggle she put herself through to reclaim security of her potential.

The mix of implicit and explicit pressure can also be seen in Ravi's account:

*I think like... the... I don't know because whatever happens it again gets back to the society. And... and right now I'm not that kind of guy who can talk and like who can be... for example like who can explain things to someone. Right now I will just give it up... like 'okay, if... if you're accusing me or something, I'm sorry for it, I can't do anything... really sorry about the past, I can't change the past right now' like yeah... right now I want to do something that... because if I work somewhere if I get a job, my family will be happy...and there will be a reflection to the society right... okay...*

*I'm responsible for my own actions. (Ravi, M, Indian, attended university)*

Because of his past irresponsible behaviour, Ravi felt he had created a bad impression of himself in his community (here articulated as '*the society*'). In this account, there is a significance attached not just to the impression one's action leaves on their parents, but also the '*society*' at large, although the latter was less important to Ravi. In the last lines he expressed the pressure he felt to attain a job in order to bring contentment to his family and at the same time meet standards of success posed by both his family and '*the society*'. He also showed intrinsic motivation to succeed. Just like Erica, there was fuzziness as to whose expectations he felt compelled to fulfil. Nevertheless, establishing a career and settling in a job was crucial for him at the time and Ravi was struggling to attain this causing a feeling of being stuck in his old impression of a failure in the eyes of his parents, the community and his own.

Similarly Aman (Indian participant) expressed feeling responsible to his parents and he said '*I will do everything that is in the book for a son, [...] rules of being an ideal son, I'll do everything. Even the last bit [...] you know the barcode, I will do that too*'. His parents' expectations were '*rules*' to him that posed as measures of his success and failure. He reported feeling pressured to keep up to these expectations that at times required him to take various

roles and positions he felt unprepared for. He said, '*I didn't know if I was a... I was a son. I didn't know whether I was a proprietor of R (names the family company). I didn't know whether I was a good boyfriend (with a confused tone) or where was I. I was nowhere. Seriously I was nowhere. I was not being able to be a good son, not be a good brother, elder brother, not be a good fiancé, not be a good friend to her (Says the whole sentence in a loud, almost frustrated tone)*'. In these lines there was a sense of being lost, unable to perform satisfactory roles while also feeling the pressure of responsibility imposed upon him.

There were both internal and external sources of pressure to live up to the perceived standards to which participants feared falling behind. All of these extracts showed the accountability that the participants felt towards their families that added pressure during their transition making it a challenging, demanding and testing experience. The feeling of crisis stemmed from the cumulative set of implicit and explicit pressures that they found hard to cope with, while also feeling paralysed in the quest to fulfil family expectations.

#### **4b.3 Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations: Living up to social and cultural expectations**

While participants directly expressed the pressure to bring pride to their family while fulfilling their expectations, there were also references to cultural expectations that shaped their need to prove their capabilities. These expectations were general values and norms that suggested ideal ways to become an adult, and/or specific milestones to be reached in order to be deemed 'normal'.

In the extract below, Hannah talked about the pressure she felt in terms of romantic relationships given the perceived association between marriage and success.

*Going to put that one there, was we understand you are forty and still not married, so that's a cat (points to photo 27). You know, a lot of people measure success on whether you have a partner or not and I don't agree with that. (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*

Hannah used an analogy to depict the pressure she felt from 'people' who measured success in ways that she disagreed with (Figure 18 showing the image used for this depiction). Hannah was 27 years of age and she used this photo as a sarcastic depiction of the social pressure she experienced.



Figure 18. Photo 27 brought by Hannah

Hannah referred earlier to her two cats, who were her companions during the time when she needed someone to care for. She revealed how she replaced the need to show affection and love towards someone by redirecting it to her two cats. It was for that reason she used cats in this photo to show that they ‘understand’ her situation and they are there to fill that void.

With these perceptions of how society valued marriage, Hannah was uncomfortable with her own position. Although she expressed disagreeing with these stories about success, there were other parts of the interview that revealed her concern over living up to those values. While she was talking about photo 27 (Figure 18), she also mentioned how she was affected by the fact that she did not have a partner:

*...you compare yourself to them and they were in relationships and getting married and stuff and doing really well in their jobs and my friend [mentioned the name] was still doing that and it was like, well I don't have any of that and family especially, 'oh are you seeing anyone' (hovering over photo 27) and it's like, why is my success being measured from whether I have a partner or not? So yeah, that one (points to photo 27 again) (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*

There were two contrasting messages that Hannah conveyed in the above extract. In the first part, she shared her disappointment at not being able to live up to the standards of success as seen through the evaluation of her friends' positions (in relationship or marriage along with a good job) and in the second, she questioned the validity of standards that measure success through one's relationship status. The frequent pointing at photo 27 (Figure 18) throughout this extract further supports her dilemma where on one hand, she was accepting the social expectations and struggling to live up to it and on the other, she expressed disagreement, either way she was not able to escape the popular norms of success.

In the extract below, Andrew reflected on the time when he had to take a job that he felt was unsuitable for a graduate, making him feel that he was taking a ‘massive step backwards’.

*...although it was a job, it was like what graduate wants to get a job at [names a grocery store] because his mum works there? It's very much a... It felt like a massive step backwards for me because, you know, I felt like that was a job I easily could have done at sixteen before I'd done my A Levels, before I'd done my GCSEs and I hated it... (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

Andrew referred to a close association established between job status and educational qualification and felt he was not living up to that, and therefore was regressing. The extract below points to how Andrew's self-esteem was affected by this.

*I'm not moving forward with my life, I'm going backwards and working at [names a grocery store] was just awful, I was so, I had no self-esteem while I was there, I was just very much... I couldn't... I think I was very much tying up my own sense of self-worth with the job and where I was, I wasn't thinking, look, I've gone to uni, I've got a good degree, I've got a first, I'm clearly capable of doing more, I was thinking, I'm not doing more, I'm here, this is what I'm doing and I was tying that up with my ability which is obviously not true... (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

The above extract suggests a close link developed between work and his sense of self-worth. There was an assumption of personal capability based on his performances whilst in the educational system, but that which did not reflect in his job status. Andrew constantly referred to forward or backward movements in his transitional process leading him to experience crisis, which was associated with his assumed norm that one is supposed to progress in a linear fashion towards a 'settled' life. He also brought two photos related to these points, one of his graduation and the other of the grocery store, placed right next to each other in the timeline, as if to showcase the incongruence between them (Figure 19).

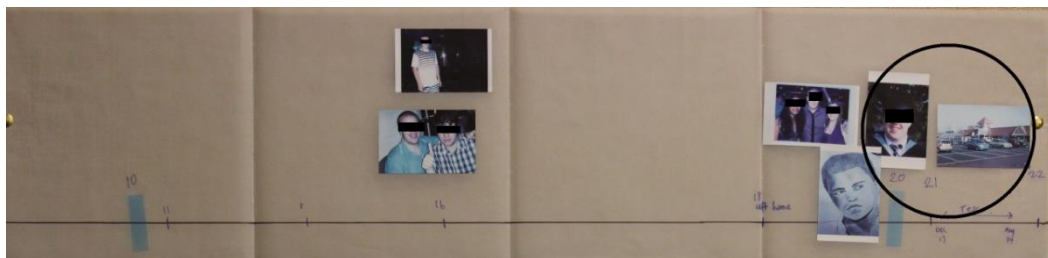


Figure 19. Andrew's timeline, circled are the two photos of graduation and job at the grocery store

There are various ways that social and cultural expectations were seen to play apart in influencing participants' sense of success and failure. Avril attached her worth to the fact that she was 28 and still living with her parents. There was an assumed social expectation about moving away from parents' home (especially after graduation) to mark their linear progression in transition. In the extract below, Avril made a reference to people who reacted in particular ways ('whoa') when they found out she was still living with her parents:

*Yeah, I don't actually mind living at home, but it's like how other people see it, like when I say I'm still living at home, people are like, 'whoa', like it's really weird or something, so even like I don't mind living at home, it's still a bit like embarrassing to say you live at home when you get to my age. (Avril, F, British, attended university)*

Avril was living with her parents because she saw it as a convenience during the time when she was short of money. However, she was affected by people's expectations that reflected to her some norms of where she 'should' be. Avril experienced crisis when she was unable to change her condition to prove her capabilities for a successful transition to adulthood.

*Analysis of the Indian participants: Living up to social and cultural expectations*

For the Indian participants, these social and cultural expectations were expressed as more direct than implicit pressure from people around like family, relatives and peers. In the following extract Aman expressed the pressure he felt to fulfil family duties and responsibilities:

*Relatives poured in. That was again a time when I tried actual (stresses on the word)... all this was training (gesturing to the timeline before the turning point)... this was the actual job (gesturing to the rest of the part of the timeline yet to be marked) finding my place in the world... being the eldest son of the R (names the company) empire...this is the eldest son and he's going to be looking after it... 'Came after finishing MBA and job, how will he do?' (says this in Hindi). Every... everyone knows that I'm the good son and a good teen record. When my dad was passing away, last moments, I didn't cry. I was thinking 'Okay, this is what I have got to do... this is what I have got to do...' I was... I was making calls to the managers... making calls to the managers... calls to the people who's going to be working with me that I'm going to come this time. I'm going to have a meeting... this that this that... (Aman, M, Indian, attended university)*

Aman had two brothers, but because he was the eldest there was an automatic assumption of responsibilities imposed through social and cultural expectations, and he felt he had to prove his worthiness by performing well and maintaining his image of a 'good son'. This involved responsibilities towards the family and the business. Thus, expectations grew and pressure built in testing his capabilities, not just from his family but the society at large. Crisis emerged from the challenge involved in taking such a huge responsibility (taking care of the family and the business) while left with very little option of time and space to prepare for the same.

Social values imparted through 'people' or assumed through observation posed as measures of success and failure for the participants. A crisis emerged when they felt incapable of fulfilling these standards while recognising the urgency to live up to them and prove their potential to successfully transition to adulthood.

All of the above extracts show how participants were trying to establish a sense of their own position in their transition by comparing themselves with peers, fulfilling responsibilities towards family and/or attempting to meet the perceived social and cultural requirements of adulthood. These were challenging experiences and they struggled and persevered, some of them feeling stuck. The experience of crisis stemmed from a perceived immobility in tension with the need to prove their worth and demonstrate their 'progress' to adulthood.

#### **4b.4 Summary (Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations)**

In the previous chapter (*Smooth navigation and personal interest*), it was seen how participants were shocked and/or affected by the sudden discontinuity and non-linearity of their transition to 'adulthood'. The defined structure that existed before started fading as they navigated their way through transition to adulthood, and there were very few markers by which to measure their progress. In this void, the progress of their contemporaries and family and social expectations offered important gauges of progress, and by implication, their capabilities. Tensions arose

when they saw their worth challenged in different forms, like someone perceived as performing better, fear of causing disappointment to their parents, and inability to live up to the social and cultural expectations.

This suggests that in the absence of a structure or a measure of their progress towards adulthood, participants were entangled in various messages sent through observation of, and expectations from, others. A feeling of crisis especially emerged when they recognised unfulfilled expectations based on popular norms and falling behind the perceived standards.

#### **4b.5 Discussion (Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations)**

The first point of discussion prompted by the theme, *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*, regards the anxiety provoked for participants when they compared themselves with other people in transition who were perceived to be doing ‘better’ than them. This led to concerns over their relative success and failure. Participants of similar ages reported drawing comparisons with people who were at different milestones (e.g. marriage and parenthood or career achievement). This variability among participants in the perception of falling behind standards and expectations leading to crisis brings us to the proposition of Billings et al. (1980) who gave a revised version of Hermann’s (1972) model of crisis stressing that crisis is built on perceptions rather than an objective reality. In the present study, participants reported drawing comparisons with people who were perceived to be more advanced, and they rarely made comparisons with people who were ‘behind’ them in terms of transitioning to adulthood. From this stance, ‘quarterlife crisis’ can be seen as an experience of anxiety provoked by comparisons where other people in transition posed as markers of success and their own relative ‘failure’.

Thus, the ‘quarterlife crisis’ can also be seen as a time when young people (irrespective of personal characteristics) are more prone to upward comparisons that can lead to self-criticism and/or a feeling of being stuck. According to Festinger (1954), social comparisons are mostly made in circumstances lacking structure or standards by which to determine one’s personal value, opinions and capabilities. Young people in the present study reported feeling lost, especially when they encountered experiences in transitioning to adulthood that they had not anticipated. Several researchers have investigated the cause and effects of upward comparison (Brown et al., 2007; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Brown et al. (2007) found that job dissatisfaction was associated with upward comparisons and job satisfaction with downward comparisons. There are potential parallels here with the comparisons the young people made with peers who appeared to have secured, or to be moving towards securing, a satisfying career. Similarly, Wheeler and Miyake (1992) in their study on freshmen college students found that low subjective well-being and negative mood led to more upward than downward social comparison. It was the pre-comparison state that determined the direction of comparison and in the present study, participants reported both low mood during their crisis and they perhaps made



upward comparisons that confirmed their sense of not being good enough. Furthermore, Wheeler and Miyake found that upward comparisons led to more negative affect than downward comparisons. Thus, upward comparisons could potentially lead to loops of negative affect and the continuous comparisons made by young people across the different domains of their lives could perpetually lead to, or consolidate, their crisis experience.

The second discussion point concerns perceptions of freedom and flexibility whilst transitioning to adulthood. According to Arnett (2000), emerging adulthood is characterised by ‘age of identity exploration’ when young people have considerable scope to explore their personal interests in order to carve out their future. However, participants did not talk of complete freedom of choice and time to explore their options but were largely concerned with proving their worth by *Living up to social and cultural expectations* and fulfilling family expectations and responsibilities (*Feeling responsible*). The extent to which they did these well was used by participants as markers of success or failure. Thus, participants’ experiences in the present study fit more aptly with Keniston’s (1970) proposal of youth being a period of tension between self and society. Participants reported struggling to merge with the society at large while recognising personal needs on the one hand and social and cultural expectations on the other (as seen from the two sub-themes: *Feeling responsible* and *Living up to social and cultural expectations*), attempting to mould themselves into a peg that would fit into society. As described in the literature review (Chapter 1), Keniston (1970) also identified youth as a period of constant change and becoming in the transition to adulthood. This was reflected in the present study where participants showed desperation and urgency to change their circumstances in order to take up a legitimate place in society via stable work and relationships. Feelings of being stuck and paralysed in moving towards this legitimate position in such a period was perceived as a crisis, something that ‘ought not’ to happen in their transitional process. Thus, lagging behind others in both career development and forming romantic relationship fed into the phenomenon of ‘quarterlife crisis’.

The final point of discussion associated with this theme, *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*, regards group differences based on culture, educational level and gender.

Although five British participants brought photos related to how they made comparisons with their peers, no Indian participant brought similar images. Neither in the interview, did Indian participants report engaging in much comparison with their peers; rather it was their family’s expectations that caused them graver concerns. Although some of the British participants also expressed concerns over fulfilling family expectations, they were only brought up when the question – ‘Do you feel responsible towards anyone’—was raised in the interview, suggesting that there were other aspects that were more significant to the British participants in causing crisis than the concern over fulfilling family’s expectations. This finding perhaps reflects the ideology of ‘individualism’ and ‘collectivism’ in UK and India respectively. In a typical Indian

society family expectations tend to play a crucial role (Chadda & Deb, 2013) and some, if not all, may feel obligated to fulfil responsibilities towards them (Killen & Wainryb, 2000). The pressure might be a difficult one to cope or deal with, leading to crisis for some when they are unable to fulfil or cooperate with family demands. The severity of the consequences of not fulfilling family expectations was also seen to be more in the Indian sample. For instance, Amrita's father explicitly expressed his disappointment when she failed to get a first in one of the semesters which in turn led her to struggle intensively to regain her worth in the eyes of her family. Furthermore, the pressure of fulfilling family and social standards of success was one of the central elements for the Indian participants that determined their transitional experience to adulthood and for some led to the feeling of crisis. For instance, Aman considered fulfilling social expectations of his roles and responsibilities as his '*actual job*' in '*finding [his] place in the world*' and unable to cope well with the pressure of good performance caused him to experience crisis. Pole (2014) similarly reported crisis triggered by unfulfilled family expectations. However, Pole's study in New Zealand found that family expectations were gendered, where greater importance was given to the education of men and their family obligations. Such gender difference was absent in the present study as both men and women expressed similar concerns over family expectations: for instance, the above example of Amrita depicts the pressure of good academic performance despite being a daughter in the family.

In terms of educational qualifications, no difference was found in this theme suggesting that the pressure of expectations and fulfilling standards (of progressing towards a successful and stable career and established relationship) may equally impact crisis experiences of young people irrespective of university education.

In conclusion, this theme provides a more nuanced understanding of 'quarterlife crisis' that includes the impact of familial, sociocultural expectations, that is, external factors of motivation and goals that could have profound influence on how young people view and experience their transitional process to adulthood. The perceived responsibility to meet family responsibilities and social expectations appeared to catalyse the emergence of crisis for most participants, and was consolidated, for some, through upwards comparisons with peers who seemed to be managing all of this much better than them (e.g. attaining high educational qualifications, getting a stable job, having a romantic partner, getting married and having children). The discussion of this theme also calls for further investigation into how this crisis experience could be better understood in the light of previous theories and research. These shall be taken up in the larger discussion in our final chapter.

## Chapter 4c: Becoming and knowing oneself

Participants appeared to go through a process of ‘discovering’ or ‘moulding’ to develop a comprehensive understanding of themselves, considered essential to reach self-fulfilment. However, there was no specific timepoint at which they arrived at such self-awareness. This sought-after understanding was in reference to personal characteristics and ways of dealing with difficulties. As self-understanding emerged, it appeared to pave the way to discovery of personal desires, the fulfilment of which required deliberate and effortful attempts to succeed. These new self-understandings were not always a positive experience, for example some participants were reflected as unsatisfactory (e.g. Denver saw himself as ‘stubborn’ and ‘selfish’) or incompatible with the future apparently awaiting (e.g. Aran perceived himself to be ‘intelligent’ compared to his peers in his neighbourhood).

‘Feeling stuck’ is a phenomenon most participants associated with their self-understanding and this motivated urgency for change, especially when there was a disparity recognised between the self and environment. This disparity stood as an obstacle in navigating their way through their transition to a ‘settled life’, consequently leading to an experience of crisis (demonstrated in a flow chart in Figure 20). The ways in which self-understandings are embedded in different contexts are examined in the following sub-themes which constitute the theme of this chapter, *‘Becoming and Knowing Oneself’: Mirrored and Re-positioned* (family), *Suggested and Compared* (peer group), *Incompetent and Conflicting* (workplace), *Prompted and Carved* (educational institutions) and *‘Dropped Into’* (social and cultural values). These layers of contexts need considerable attention in the understanding of young people’s experiences through transition where they try to locate themselves in the world as they meet increasingly wider contexts: from family of birth to the workplace and culture at large<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>These layers of contexts leading to self-understanding could be represented in concentric circles starting from family to peers and wider context of the cultural and social values. However, I would like to leave this to the interpretation of the readers. In the sub-themes of this chapter, I will concentrate on how the different contexts have individually influenced participants’ interpretations of personal characteristics, interests and passion.

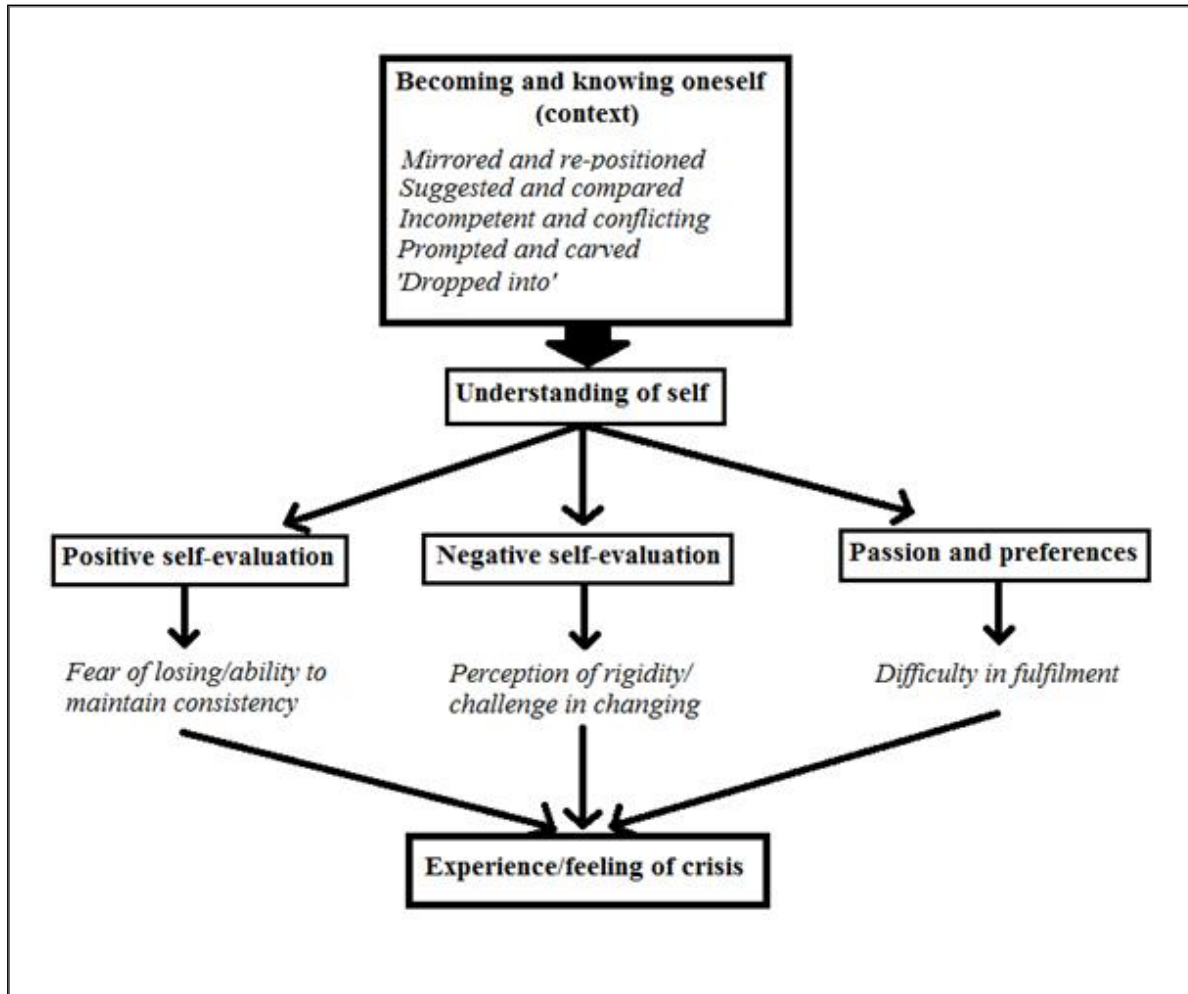


Figure 20. Experience of crisis linked with self-understanding

#### 4c.1 Becoming and knowing oneself: Mirrored and re-positioned

In this sub-theme, I discuss the ways in which families influenced participants' perception of themselves. First, they informed participants of how they appeared to others, and thus mirrored a version of the participants back to themselves. Second, through mirroring and other means, participants gathered a sense of their position in the family and aspired to make changes to suit the requirements of their transition (re-positioned). The following analysis illuminates some of the processes through which participants developed an understanding of aspects of themselves within their unique familial context, and the consequences experienced. I commence with the British participants and then consider differences identified in the Indian sample.

Denver's account of his experiences with his mother is an example of how familial relationships could increase self-understanding through mirroring. In the extract below Denver talked about a rather negative self-evaluation based on his identification with his mother:

*I think my mum, apparently we're very similar and in some ways I agree with that... We're both very stubborn, in my opinion we're both very selfish, but she won't have anything other than what she wants, if it's not, if she doesn't like what I'm doing she will go out of her way to make that known, and I suppose that's how it's supposed to work between child and parent, the parent telling the child what to do, I was having*

*none of that, and because of that that just increased her capacity to go at me and try and get me to do what she wanted me to do, and we used to argue about anything, everything and neither of us would back down and it just resulted in a massive amount of tension built up and a little thing could spark off things that'd been building up over weeks, and yeah, when I was sixteen I moved out, it did come to the point where my mum said, "either he goes or I go". (Denver, M, British, attended university)*

In describing a tense relationship with his mother, Denver notes the similarities that he saw between his mother and himself and uses this to explain how two people with similar characteristics can be in conflict. However, he also links these shared characteristics of stubbornness and selfishness to problems in his transitional process:

*Yeah. I regret my stubbornness (gesturing towards the timeline where he marked 13), I've missed a lot of opportunities, I've taken advantage of a lot of people who tried to help me. I've not worked when I should have worked and it would have led to something... (Denver, M, British, attended university)*

By simply gesturing to the timeline where he talked about the negative characteristics he shares with his mother, he made a link between his current life, and behaviours he 'inherited' from his mother which he believes had lost him opportunities to succeed. More positively, Denver expressed a desire to change himself - that is to re-position -which needed time and effort. Specifically, his crisis was built from this need to change but at the same time realising the challenge. This formed an important part of the timeline and he was uncertain how long it would take him to reach his anticipated future success (shown in Figure 21).

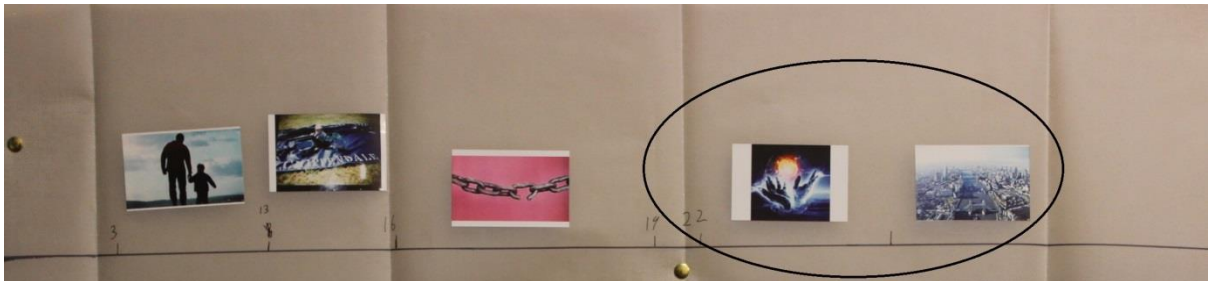


Figure 21. Denver's timeline

In the above figure, the circle shows the part in the timeline where Denver expressed this uncertainty about when success might come to fruition. He placed two photos after marking his present age (22). Interestingly, the last photo shows hope in that it represents a positive future based on self-fulfilment, the one before revealing how he aspired to change himself in order to make this happen.

One of the most typical and illuminating examples of this sub-theme of 'mirrored and re-positioned', is that of Amy: a British participant from a Muslim family background with, from her descriptions, rather rigid and conservative values. There was a constant reference to 'we' and 'I' throughout the interview as she tried to place herself within this familial context. For example, she started the interview by saying, 'so I come from quite a traditional, heavily cultured, religious, Muslim background'. She explains:

*Our life was quite different to I think most people, we weren't allowed basic things like television in the house and even reading a book would be wrong because you know, you'd rather pray than read, we didn't do much, we didn't go out much so we had quite a conserved kind of a hidden away life... (Amy, F, British national, not attended university)*

In these lines, Amy conveys a sense of disagreement with the values and beliefs of her family, for example where she suggests that facilities such as having a 'television' to be 'basic things'. From a description based on the collective whole of the family beliefs, she shifted to 'I' statements, saying:

*...so I started to realise that actually the life that mum and dad wanted for me isn't what I want for me. And that is basically from around 2005 to about 2007, it was not just about getting through college, it was about finding myself and I think that was one of the most difficult things I had to do... (Amy, F, British national, not attended university)*

Shifts between her family's values and what she, herself, might want could be found throughout the interview with Amy. In an illuminating example, she described how her parents made her leave her job because they felt that it changed her too much and she was becoming 'too modern, too westernised'. Hence, Amy's transition involved negotiating some kind of middle ground between independence and conformity to family decisions and trying to establish her identity within these two contrasting positions. Her feeling of crisis stemmed from this battle of finding her individuality whilst making her transition to adulthood and mirroring – how she was reflected back to herself by her family - and re-positioning – finding her own middle ground between cultures - was a central challenge.

#### *Analysis of the Indian participants: Mirrored and Re-positioned*

Just like Amy, the Indian participants conveyed the need to submit to family decisions, often causing a clash between what they desired and what their parents expected from them. The importance of mirroring for the Indian participants is demonstrated in that seven of the eight contributed to this sub-theme as against five of the sixteen British participants. Most importantly, this clash formed the crux of their crisis experience for most of the Indian participants. This is typified by Aman.

Aman's evolving understanding of himself appeared within a familial context shaped by significant responsibility. As the eldest son in the family, he had responsibility for the family business as well as for his parents. His account implicates a cultural tradition of responsibility towards family that appeared important to him in that he mirrored this value in his decisions during his transition. However, the burden of these responsibilities and the negative impact on his sense of self is suggested by the way he 'felt like a puppet'. Hence, there was a negative connotation attached to this interpretation of self that instigated a desire to change:

*Felt like a puppet, literally. Felt like a puppet. Do this okay, do that. Mom used to cry... yeah, it was hard for her... 'don't go there', 'okay, won't go'. My brother... my younger brother used to have affairs after dad passed... you know abuse, substance abuse blah*

*blah blah. And I used to the... always home... he hardly stayed home. My mom used to be home and I used to be at home. No birthday parties, no Diwalis, hardly any celebrations, no friends... just a puppet. 'M [names himself] do this'... 'Okay'. I made everything. I thought I would transfer every respect that I had for my dad to my mom... so whatever she said, I'd just follow that. Even in business... including everything, including my chequebook... anything. I'll always keep it to her. (Aman, M, Indian, attended university)*

Aman cited many things that he could not do as a young person because of his responsibilities. He was 30 years of age at the time of interview and, although he had responsibility for the family business and was married, he did not feel like he was 'settled' or that he had '[found his] place in the world', and that he was only just beginning to get a sense of who he was.

*This floor, still trying to find my place in the world and slowly... I'm developing my own individuality, better late than never. (Aman, M, Indian, attended university)*

In this extract he highlighted one of the meanings that he associated with finding his place in the world. His reference to the 'floor' was the part in his parental home where he set up his own place in one of the levels in the house, attempting to develop independence through physical distancing from his parents. This could also be linked to the sub-theme of *Question of 'what I want'* where 'settling down' was often associated with personal fulfilment. However, his experience of feeling like a 'puppet' did not allow him to fulfil any of his personal interests and enjoy even the simplest of pleasures from day to day life. This mirroring of self as a 'puppet' led him to have experience of imprisonment, in which progress towards his 'own individuality' was hard and slow.

Aman's account also suggests that his relationship with his father was different from that with his mother. Specifically, he highlighted the fact that he redirected the respect that he had for his father to his mother, after his father passed away in order to fulfil the essentials of an 'ideal son'.

*So marriage happened and my mom, as usual, has always been influenced by my relatives and she... See, I'm the kind of a person... because since I'm very detached. I don't attach with someone very... and similarly I'm not very attached to my mom, but I will do everything that is in the book for a son, you know...rules of being an ideal son, I'll do everything. Even the last bit... umm... umm... you know the barcode, I will do that too! (both giggle) I would go to that even. But I started seeing my mom as a lady rather than mom...because now... now my notion 'I think blood relations are overrated in India'. I don't know about anywhere in this world... because ultimately what matters is your personality, your character. (Aman, M, Indian, attended university)*

In the first few lines, Aman points to the influence of relatives beyond the immediate family, expressing his frustration by saying 'blood relations are overrated in India'. However, he perceived himself to be a person who would always go by the book (of which he is not an author) that defined what an 'ideal son' should be. His reference to the 'barcode' of the book was an expression of his loyalty to the cultural norm in India that defined certain responsibilities by default rather than choice: that is, his need to be mirrored back to himself by his extended

family and culture in positive ways. The downside was that he was engulfed by a feeling of helplessness and immobility, unable to defy powerful societal norms even those that jarred with him. There was a disparity between what he wanted to be and what he felt obligated to be and this led to the realisation that he had done everything in his life in a dutiful manner. There was a tone of regret in this and the beginning of a search for perhaps small ways in which he could re-position himself to gain a sense of individuality. For example, when asked whether he felt answerable or responsible to someone, he said,

*Always, Raginie, always. That is why my wife asks me not to be, you know. And it's not just answerable, I was always conditioned to justify every action. Even if I have to go to my neighbours' place, I'd justify that I'm going there. I'm going for one hour. So that became a habit. So even right now... I'm trying to undo that. To find your individuality, you have to undo that. You have to not compel yourself to be answerable to someone all the time. (Aman, M, Indian, attended university)*

Just like Amy, Aman was fighting a battle between his personal need for individuality and others' demand for compliance but was able to express his need to 'undo that' in an attempt to re-position himself in a way that would help him break out of his role as a 'puppet'.

Similar to Aman, Ravi derived some understanding of himself through interactions with his family, specifically through his father's expectation for his future career, as shown in extract below.

*Dad wanted me to be like... to be part of IIT and stuff. He was an ex-IITian. But I wasn't like him. I was totally different. That way. Even during childhood I was more like into playing tennis and cricket a lot and it has been going on like side by side... simultaneously from class 2, tennis and cricket. I left tennis when I was in class 5 or something. I continued with cricket. (Ravi, M, Indian, attended university)*

IIT is the abbreviation for Indian Institute of Technology which is one of the reputed institutes in India for engineering. Ravi's father had been a student in that institute and, hence, had an expectation that Ravi, too, would be able to get admission. This family expectation about his future and interests demonstrated to Ravi how his family saw him and, unsettlingly, underscored the way in which he positioned himself differently. For example, in the interview, he described how he was almost talked into doing a particular stream of subjects because of his father's expectation that he would carry the family legacy.

*I wanted to do Commerce and then my family said, my dad and my mom said that 'what you'll do with commerce? You'll become accountant like... this thing this thing... do science'. Then he asked me like 'what do you like?'. I told like 'physics and maths' out of all! (smiles). Then 'okay you should do science'. I told 'okay, fine'. (Ravi, M, Indian, attended university)*

Ravi had come to a discovery that, since childhood, he had interests that were 'totally different' from those of his father. However, even with this self-knowledge, he still compromised his own



interests and this led to a feeling of being stuck and experiencing crisis.<sup>4</sup> Having committed to an educational path he, like Aman, felt helpless to fully re-position himself and that the situation was largely irreversible. He felt burdened by the ‘mirrored self’ having compromised the fulfilment of his personal interests. The realisation brought to the fore the disparity between what ought to be (self-fulfilling future career) and what actually was (compromised personal interest).

In summary, family relationships, communications and interactions presented a mirror in which participants gained an understanding of how significant others saw them and/or expected them to be. And the family is one of the most important micro-contexts through which cultural norms are conveyed. However, participants did not always recognise themselves in this family mirror and experienced feelings of crisis associated with the disparity. Most understood the need to adapt in order to do well and make a transition through to a ‘settled’ life. However, the gap between meeting the expectations of others and finding a modicum of self-fulfilment could feel huge and some struggled with this enormous challenge of finding a way to re-position themselves.

#### **4c.2 Becoming and knowing oneself: Suggested and compared**

This sub-theme, *Suggested and Compared*, highlights the context involving the peer groups that informed aspects of self through interactions and comparisons with them. As discussed in the theme, *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*, comparisons and calibration with fellow young people was commonly seen in participants’ accounts of their experiences during their transition. These comparisons provided a basis on which to determine their relative position. Peer interaction also led to the realisation of certain personal characteristics, either through direct suggestion or through comparisons. This entailed a struggle that turned into a crisis when they felt desperate to change their circumstances in order to integrate these personal characteristics into their life.

Andrew called himself a ‘*person of extremes*’ indicating the need for perfection and a competitive attitude. In extract below, Andrew expressed a need for change:

*And it’s just finding the coping mechanisms that work for you, like for me now it’s about remembering to be moderate, like because I’m very much a person of extremes, as I was saying like everything I’ve kind of said has been extreme, like if I don’t get a first I’ve failed, if I’m not perfect at things I’ve failed, you know, it’s been the biggest transitional thing for me as I’m saying is not taking things to extreme... (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

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<sup>4</sup>This experience of family expectations impeding the fulfilment of personal interests was discussed extensively in the sub-theme *Question of ‘what I want’*. In this theme (*Becoming and Knowing Oneself*) I focus on the aspect of ‘becoming’ or moulding of interests through the course of transition, whereas in *Question of ‘what I want’* I specifically focused on personal interest questions and the associated barriers to its fulfilment.

Trying to be perfect in everything was causing stress and leading him, at times, to doubt his potential and capabilities. However, changing this attitude was a difficult task, articulated by him as *'the biggest transitional thing'*. It was his friends who made him realise that he could change and enjoy what he does, rather than always competing to be the best:

*... I think learning about how insignificant the things I'm doing are really helped actually, it sounds like it shouldn't but like when my friend was just like, so what, you lost a friendly, you didn't even lose, you just hit a few bad shots in a friendly game of badminton with your housemate, when she was like, so what if you didn't hit every shot perfectly and I'm just like, actually that is true, so what, the world won't stop turning because I hit a few shots into the net or [Mumbles] or anything and I think it mellowed me out a lot and I was very...(Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

Although his friends *'really helped'* him understand how things could be different, he struggled to bring this change and attain contentment without perfection:

*I've definitely come a long way in the last three years in terms of how I kind of see myself and I still, I still have flashes of it where I'm like, you know, where I feel like... I'm not, I've always been like a jack of all trades, master of none, like I've tried everything, dabbled in all of it and I've been like about average at everything but there's never been anything I've excelled at and like I've always thought, well, I've really envied people who have been like, oh you know, I've got grade eight piano or I played cricket for the like regional team and it's like, well that's great for them but really and truly it doesn't really affect me, it doesn't make me any less, any worse because other people have achieved more. (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

On one hand, Andrew was trying his best to accept himself without comparing his achievements with others but, on the other, he expressed having *'flashes of'* falling back to self-criticism based on his performance. And his inability to change accumulated into a crisis that added to his difficulty in making a successful transition.

Not all participants enjoyed peer interaction. Aran came from a low socio-economic background and drew attention to the differences between him and those in his neighbourhood (especially his peers):

*I wanted a better life for myself and I'd just had enough of the same type of women, the same type of men, and just keeping having the same friends and same kind of situations, and I thought, I've got to be responsible for this, I must be causing these problems myself, you know, people always wanting to fight me because I was more intelligent than some of these guys, just caused trouble for me all the time so I thought, right, I've had enough, I'm moving away. (Aran, M, British, not attended university)*

Aran compared himself with others in his neighbourhood, people he perceived to be superficial and causing him trouble. He saw himself as *'more intelligent'* than them and this stimulated his desire to build his life elsewhere. This escape from his old lifestyle was not without consequences. He had to find a way of sustaining himself in a new environment and, in the extract below, he described the difficulties he had as a result of this change.

*...so when I was 16, kind of a new world, I decided to just move out 'cos I'd just had enough of being around there and being in that area and being around the friends, 'cos they were all such bad friends, there was nothing to do on the area so I moved out at 16,*

*got me own place and just had to train myself to be an adult, you know, getting a proper education and getting myself out there, get a job. It was an extremely hard struggle 'cos I had to learn to cook and clean and, you know, pay bills, I didn't have much help... (Aran, M, British, not attended university)*

Having to sustain himself at an early age with little support and limited skills and knowledge – even of how to deal with basic requirements of life - meant that he had to adapt to roles and responsibilities for which he was not prepared (discussed further in the theme *Forced 'adulthood'/independence*). At the time of interview, Aran's crisis was on-going, and the recognition of his differences with his childhood friends led to a drastic change entailing an 'extremely hard struggle'.

*Analysis of the Indian participants: Suggested and compared*

There was no difference among the Indian participants with regard to this sub-theme. Six of the eight Indian participants shared similar experiences of attaining self-understanding through interactions with peers. Isha is one such example:

*I did my HS. I did well... I scored very well in Economics and I wanted to take Economics as my subject, but then I was very afraid of Maths. (Interviewer smiles). I hated Maths. I knew that in Economics, I will have Maths, but my teachers said that 'If you put your efforts, we can help you. You can do well.' Umm... but then I couldn't. I couldn't take the risk. I was always... I kind of... one of my friends... one of my good friends, she describes me as Hamlet (Both smile). Here is that Hamlet somewhere inside me. I can't decide. (Isha, Indian, attended university)*

Isha had assurance and support, but without any certainty of outcomes she felt muddled about her options. Her self-doubt and confusion was likened by her friend to the character Hamlet. She had internalised this suggestion and it continued to form a basis of her self-understanding. For example, Isha again mentioned being a 'Hamlet', but in a different context:

*But I don't know. It's like... it's like mechanical... it's like maybe... maybe this man that I'm not liking at all... maybe... maybe he's in my destiny... maybe destiny has chosen him. But I don't know umm... 99 percent of me doesn't want to take this... carry the matter... on. One percent is saying that okay. So I'm always the Hamlet! (Both laugh). So it ends up like this. (Isha, F, Indian, attended university)*

During transition some of the major decisions mentioned by participants were associated with career and intimate relationships. In both these areas of life, Isha felt stuck and stranded at the junction where a critical choice needed to be made which would influence her future. Although she was '99 percent' sure of her decision, that one percent was enough to cause her confusion. This suggests the need for certainty and assurance before participants could make important decisions which they felt would impact the rest of their lives. Here Isha again felt like 'the Hamlet', unable to take a concrete decision to move into a 'settled life', a concern that haunted her through her transition and she presumed that this was a characteristic that was 'stuck' and unchangeable.

Characteristics participants identified with through comparison with others and through their peers' direct suggestion, was a big influence on their realisation of a need for change. For instance, Andrew and Isha's accounts revealed negative self-evaluation leading to desperation for change. However, Aran was confident of his intelligence and this realisation catalysed his desire to improve his environment and to move away from a rough neighbourhood along with 'bad friends'. The experience of crisis stemmed from the inconvenience and challenge associated with reducing the gap between self and the environmental demands.

#### **4c.3 Becoming and knowing oneself: Incompetent and conflicting**

Just like in the case of peer interaction, workplace settings also led participants to develop ideas about themselves and personal interests that instigated urgent need for change. This urgency led to a feeling of suffocation where they recognised a level of personal incompetency or the conflict between their newly found/realised self and the work environment.

In the extract below, Andrew expressed his concerns over his work experience which he found to be in conflict with what he discovered about himself in the process.

*...like I'm not a particularly, I'm not a people person, I don't enjoy environments where I'm like facing the public, I mean I'm not like a... I don't hate people, I'm not like a misandrist(?) or anything but I just, I don't get the same sense of satisfaction that some people do by being in a public role. So I was on checkouts for about three or four months and I just hated every minute of it, I was dreading going to work every day but I just felt like having any job was better than none so I kept doing it. (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

Andrew made an association between the work demands on him and his characteristic derivation ('not a people person'). This reference was not brought up anywhere else in the interview, but only in relation to the work he did in the grocery store. Whilst working there, he had come to a realisation that he did not enjoy engaging with the public. With this realisation, he felt 'stuck' in his job, experiencing a conflict between his perceived personal characteristics and the work demands. Andrew perceived this as one of his crisis situations because there was very little he felt he could do. On the one hand, he felt alienated in his work, and on the other, he needed to be occupied with some job following the end of his education ('having any job is better than none'). He had to live with this conflict between self and work until he could find a more compatible job.

Similarly, Erica had a desire to change her job because she felt that she was working below her capacity.

*So while I was at the company that I worked at here (points to the timeline) relatively happy for some of it, was earning quite good money and being able to make some savings [...] So I was probably like relatively happy work wise, I had quite a good routine, I could do things like going to the gym, I could afford nice clothes, but I knew that it wasn't what I was supposed to be doing, it didn't fulfil me, it didn't make me*

*happy the way that I thought that I should be, I always felt like I could do more, like I was more, worth more than just being there. (Erica, F, British, attended university)*

Erica exhibited a desire for change with respect to her job because she felt she was ‘worth more’ indicating the comparison she generated from her work situation and analysing her capabilities for ‘more’. However, like Andrew, she was stuck in the job for a long time (from 2009 to 2011, building into a period of crisis) before she could find work more fitting to her capabilities and interests. Her task of finding a more suitable job was just as hard as it was for Andrew when he wanted to discontinue his work in the grocery store.

Denver discovered the extent to which he was ‘financially irresponsible’ through his experience of dealing with wages he got from his job. This is reflected from the extract below:

*What I'd say another big problem for me is I'm completely like financially irresponsible, I have no idea of how to manage money and all that, I get my money, I get my wages or whatever it is, I'll spend it straight away, I have no concept of saving or anything like that, and that's something I really, really want to get better at because I'm twenty-two now and I feel if I do end up working for my dad or doing something like that I need to be able to understand how to save, when to save, what to spend, things like that, and at the moment I'm clueless, and that worries me a little bit... (Denver, M, British, attended university)*

With the self-discovery of being ‘financially irresponsible’ came a realisation of a ‘big problem’ that he could potentially face in the future. Although he was just 22 years of age and only doing his undergraduate, he wanted to prepare himself for his future work life. Denver identified a gap between personal capabilities and external demand. This led to a feeling of crisis where his incompetency was a concern which he did not know how to deal with, but at the same time recognised the urgent need for remedy. There is a sense that at a very early age, participants start forecasting their future needs and attempt to mould themselves based on the perceived requirements. Crisis emerges when they feel rushed to prepare for the future at the time when they also feel short of resources or capabilities to bring immediate positive change.

#### *Analysis of the Indian participants: Incompetent and conflicting*

There was no difference between the British and Indian sample in the way work was associated with conflict and a self-evaluation of incompetence, wherein three of the eight Indian participants expressed this association (as against 13 of the 16 British participants).

Ravi was one such participant who shared the hard times he faced while working for a company that led him to feel incompetent at work. In the extract below, Ravi expressed the lack of basic technological knowledge that made him conclude he ‘was blank about life’. It was as if one situation was magnified to reach all aspects of his life:

*...when I was working there, I wanted to be someone because I saw... saw everything was going so fast there. That too it's a dev... not even a developing country... it's underdeveloped country... happening so much... like I didn't .... I think like there was one reason that happened. Once the MD like he told me to xerox and I didn't know how to xerox it. I was in... in that... in that knowledge... like I didn't know how to do*

*anything. I was so blank about life. So... so I think like all these like... yea... because if you have to survive like you have to do... you have to do a good job somewhere...you have to be graduate, you have to do something out of your life. (Ravi, M, Indian, attended university)*

At a time when participants were in the process of developing some self-understanding, an insignificant event could send a negative message that is generalised (*'I was so blank about life'*) to influence their course of transition. Ravi felt discordant to the requirements of job (*'saw everything was going so fast there'*) and, as an example, he talked about the incident with photocopying where he failed to do a simple basic task. This sense of incompetence catalysed a need for change to make his transition more satisfactory. It was this urgency that led to feeling of crisis in which he also struggled to make a quick decision and take the next step. He was stranded between his own perceived shortcomings and the need to establish himself in terms of career which required competence that he did not think he possessed.

It can be seen how new self-understandings were accompanied by a need for change and Ravi, Andrew, Denver and Erica's accounts show how participants felt stuck in the course of their transition when they started discovering aspects of themselves at work.

#### **4c.4 Becoming and knowing oneself: Prompted and carved**

This sub-theme captures the participants' experiences of being moulded in educational settings: a process in which they learned a lot about themselves – or at least how others perceived them. These 'self-understandings' influenced their decisions about their future and, for some, caused feelings of helplessness and hopelessness contributing to their crisis.

Some participants made assumptions about themselves based on their educational performance. Bill was one such participant who portrayed himself as an *'intelligent'* person because of his GCSE results(demonstrated in the extract below). When he reached college, he decided to explore his interests and took up a course in music which he ended-up disliking. As a result, he did not perform well in college, in turn leaving him with fewer options for university education.

*I've never really met my potential in a lot of ways, because, of course, you've got to remember that I, you know, did really well out of my GCSEs and things, and I was, you know, far and away, well, I was just very intelligent at what I did and, you know, other people recognised that, and I recognised it, and I did this (indicating his poor performance in A-levels), and so when it came to university, I didn't have a massive pick of universities. (Bill, M, British, attended university)*

Bill was not feeling stuck because of his academic ability, but because he strayed away from his central interest (established as something that is *'complex'* like Maths) to explore areas that he later realised were not a good choice for him. Bill thought he had not met his potential in university because of this and had the need to have his intelligence recognised. He added,

*... here (pointing to the timeline) there's a massive insecurity thing on me being able to prove myself, there's a massive onus on me to try and sort of shake that (continues to point at the timeline) and, you know, try and, you know, to prove to people that I'm, you*

*know, that I'm actually good at something, I'm actually an intelligent person. (Bill, M, British, attended university)*

The reason for Bill's 'massive insecurity' was because first, he could not find passion in his current subject area (Politics) and secondly, having to move back to do his A-levels (in order to pursue a course related to his passion) meant that all his other friends moved ahead in their academic career. His crisis stemmed from his desperate need to prove himself and others of his intellectual capabilities and he carried this burden throughout his educational trajectory.

Participants were often provoked into self-understanding when they had to make a life-changing decision. They felt stuck and it was sometimes only through experiences in different times that they gained enough self-knowledge to make important decisions aligned with an authentic sense of self. A good example is Alex who also derived his passion through experiences in the educational system. In the extract below, Alex describes the contrasting experiences he had between two environments that led to realisations about his self:

*And just had, proceeded to have the best year of my life and just so much fun, you know, I love the Spanish culture as well, I just love being in a different environment I think 'cos in second year I felt like I was almost stagnating really, and then all of a sudden there was this fresh new culture and this fresh vibrancy and it was just so invigorating... (Alex, M, British, attended university)*

Alex's time in the educational system provided opportunities to study abroad. This led to a novel experience that even came to mould his passion. He expressed himself as someone who 'loves being in a different environment' but this realisation only came while he was in Spain doing an exchange programme. This stimulated his desire to pursue a career that would allow him to experience vibrancy in his work rather than face the monotony of the typical office job:

*I could see myself long-term working behind a desk but as long as that desk involved moving to different countries... (Alex, M, British, attended university)*

Ironically, this criterion for 'long-term working' had also become a crisis because there were few options that would allow him to pursue a career in his broad interest. His degree was in Economics but he wanted to pursue a career in social work and visit different developing countries. However, he did not have the qualification and experiences. He said, 'it's a little bit daunting going into something that I'm really motivated to do but I've not been given any strict education in'. Alex shared his experience of dilemmas and critical decision-making points where he was stranded on his course with few opportunities to change his career trajectory to cater to his newly-found passion.

#### *Analysis of non-university participants: Prompted and Carved*

While the above participants generated some self-understanding through the education system (directly or indirectly), there were others for whom *lack* of a supportive educational context was most relevant. For example, Jack came from a low socio-economic background and an

environment that did not allow him to pursue higher educational qualifications. This led to an experience of crisis where he felt stuck in a vicious circle. He said,

*But I left school in like Year 10 and didn't go back for two years, and I did the like the last three months or whatever in that horrible, crap place, so I didn't really, not very, I'm not full of knowledge but I've got, you know, I've got the hardware, I just don't have all of the information, sit me down, tell me all about this if you want and I'll probably learn it in about an hour, but it's 'cos my head's already so empty! (Jack, M, British, not attended university)*

Jack blamed his circumstances for his lack of conventional educational knowledge. He used the metaphor of himself as computer hardware which is empty on its own, but capable of absorbing a lot of information. His self-evaluation was based on the comparisons that he made with people who had better educational qualification than him. His experience was that of being handicapped by his limited exposure to educational opportunities and that, given a chance, he could learn a lot in a short period of time. Hence, it is both the presence and absence of educational qualifications that could prompt self-searching and, in both circumstances, it is the limited opportunities for change that can cause the feeling of crisis.

In summary, educational experience - and the lack of it as seen in Jack's case - can be an important influence in prompting and carving self-understanding particularly when what one has appears unsatisfactory for, or incompatible with, a self-fulfilling future goal.

#### *Analysis of the Indian participants: Prompted and Carved*

This aspect of forming self-understanding through experiences in the educational system was not as dominant among the Indian participants. There were only a few associations, but those did not link to the experience of crisis as perceived by the Indian participants. For instance, Amrita expressed herself as a 'very, very studious' person and there was some pressure to maintain consistency of this image (just like Bill). However, Amrita did not see this as a crisis point. Rather it was *maintaining* the image of an academically brilliant daughter that built into an experience of crisis. She expressed feeling stuck and helpless when she did not do well in one of the terms on her Masters degree causing disappointment in her father and demeaning her in his eyes (also discussed in the sub-theme *Feeling responsible* in the theme *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*).

#### **4c.5 Becoming and knowing oneself: 'Dropped into'**

Participants were born, brought up, and were living (articulated as 'dropped into' by one participant) in different social environments defined by specific values and norms. This sub-theme highlights the influence of participants' interpretations of these values and beliefs in developing self-understanding and experiencing crisis.

Mary made a rather negative self-evaluation based on her perception and beliefs about how people with certain educational qualifications should be like:



*Alright, so I think I will choose a crisis. Essentially I think when I was finishing up university, undergrad degree and also for my masters and I kind of just got the feeling that I was very overworked and I think this stems from a feeling that I was a bit of a fraud. I thought I was a bit like a fraud because technically someone who does well in their undergrad degree and goes on with the masters degree is post-conventionally intelligent. I didn't particularly feel that way... (Mary, F, British, attended university)*

Mary's fit into the academic environment was challenged when she got low scores on her A-levels. This was a turning point for her when she started doubting her potential, even perceiving herself as a 'fraud'. This tag was derived from social norms that suggest a link between educational qualifications and intelligence. Her performance in A-levels made her feel unworthy of an academic career and to compensate for this shortcoming, she 'overworked' hoping that spending longer hours studying and 'shut[ting] everything out so all [she] would do is work' would help her. A crisis stemmed from the difficulty in taking such an approach:

*I didn't really feel like an intelligent person anymore as such so I thought in order to kind of combat that I would have to just work insanely hard and this is what I did and I kind of shut everything out so all I would do is work. So I would get up kind of nine, by eleven I will be working and I won't be stopping until maybe midnight!? And I would just do that again and again every day, particularly in my third year at the university...like I would shut out my friends, the only people I would see will be my classmates really and the only kind of social activity we would have is to get together and study and if they suggest we do anything else like a dinner or a cinema I would like excuse myself from those situations so all I would have to do is work because I felt like if I didn't get a first or if I didn't get distinction in my masters then I wasn't really worthy and people will see through me and I was a fraud essentially. (Mary, F, British, attended university)*

Mary strongly believed that she was a 'fraud' and she wanted to keep this hidden from others by 'overworking' and performing exceptionally well in her Masters degree. There was a sense of a burden, a secret she needed to keep concealed so that she could continue her academic life. There was considerable amount of sacrifices involved in this process that entailed, for instance, keeping herself away from anything that would be pleasurable but not academically productive. The experience of crisis stemmed not just from her negative self-evaluation but also from the over-compensation that she continued to practice throughout university.

*Analysis of non-university educated participant (from low SES): 'Dropped into'*

Coming from a low SES, some of the participants were specifically sensitive to their perceived shortcomings, expressing the influence of their background in shaping them. For instance, Jack came from a low socio-economic status and his environment made him feel like a 'hardcore pawn', someone who is rebellious towards everything. The extract below shows traces of self-reflection based on his direct interaction with and interpretation of social values and norms:

*I didn't really go to school for the last two years, that's what the next picture's for, like it's hardcore pawn but as in a chess pawn, not like... Yeah, so, 'cos you know, I didn't really like being told what to do and stuff, I've always been annoyed by people presuming that I'm either not intelligent enough to understand why I'm being told to do something or not intelligent enough to do it and they just, they don't explain anything,*

*they just demand that you do things, so I kind of broke out a little bit and was a bit, I say 'a bit', I was a lot rebellious in quotation marks... (Jack, M, British, not attended university)*

Jack did not like to follow instructions that lacked logical explanations (in his words – ‘*they don’t explain anything, they just demand*’), but he felt others interpreted this as his lack of intelligence to understand or do what he is told. Compared to what the social norms suggest, he felt that he was ‘*rebellious*’: a perception based on others’ interpretation rather than on his own self-assessment. He also brought a picture portraying this self-image developed with experience of interaction with his social environment (Figure 22 shown below).



Figure 22. Photo brought by Jack to represent his self-image of ‘hardcore pawn’

The social environment is fed with the popular norms of how things ‘should be’ as against what is defined as unacceptable. In the photograph above, he portrayed himself as a person possessing everything that the society would be disconcerted with. There is a gun, a cigarette and a look in the eyes that displays anger. Jack used another, very different, image to communicate his feeling of being stuck. (Figure 23).



Figure 23. Photo showing a metaphorical image of self brought by Jack

In conjunction to this photo (Figure 23 above), Jack said,

*...that’s from a game called Limbo and it’s basically about this like little, it’s a 2D game and it’s all black and white and it’s like completely silent and it’s basically about this kid gets dropped into limbo and you don’t, he doesn’t really know what he’s doing, he just solves all the puzzles that get put in front of him and then he’s looking for, you don’t really know what he’s looking for but in the end you find out it’s this girl and then like it’s either his sister or his, I don’t know, you don’t really find out and then this big fucking spider comes and eats him, and that’s it and that’s the whole game [laughs], do you know what I mean, that’s kind of what I’ve felt like every sort of thing was I get*

*dropped into this like blank, boring, horrible inhospitable place, don't really know what I'm doing, I solve puzzles as they come and then a spider fucking eats me, I don't really, it just gets squashed, so it doesn't matter how hard I try, do you know what I mean, everything just breaks down, so I just kind of stop trying [laughs].(Jack, M, British, not attended university)*

This extract highlights a lot of metaphorical meanings gathered through a character in a game. The fact that he related his life to a game where everything was '2D', 'black and white' and 'completely silent', suggests a dull and non-stimulating environment that he felt 'dropped into'. In addition, the main character of this game was shown to be always stuck in a vicious circle of problems. Jack related this to his own life circumstances. There was a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness conveyed in the extract, as if nothing he does would result in something productive or fruitful. He clearly externalised the cause of his difficulties and saw himself as a victim of circumstances. Jack felt oppressed and his struggle and resistance seemed to be futile. He even gave an impression of cluelessness in relation to circumstances he was 'dropped into', and brought a photo of himself to represent this (Figure 24). Interestingly, he did not place this photo in any specific part in the timeline but used it to depict how he felt throughout his life.



Figure 24. Photo 18 brought by Jack

In relation to this photo (Figure 24 above), Jack said,

*Jack: That's mostly just like, that I think go right at the top, that's just how I see me in my entire life (places photo 18 on the table, not the timeline).*

*Interviewer: Why's that?*

*Jack: And me underneath a duvet going [shouts] 'what is going on', like just really confused, that's like a whole thing, do you know what I mean, yeah. (Jack, M, British, not attended university)*

It was a daunting and challenging world that Jack perceived and wanted to avoid and escape, but had to force himself to face despite the intimidation. A feeling of crisis stemmed from his inability to cope with his circumstances while trying to move ahead in his transition.

#### *Analysis of the Indian participants: 'Dropped into'*

Just like the British participants (6 of the 16), five of the eight Indian participants expressed self-understanding through interaction with the social norms and values that they felt 'dropped into'. For example, Isha thought of herself as a dependent person as gleaned from the social values of the people around.

*But then I felt that 'Okay, no maybe I need someone to rely on'. Okay. That desire was not felt so far. But suddenly when people began to talk, people began to say things... and even my mom said that 'Okay, I'm here, but after a few years, I won't be there. Your sister will have her own life. What will you do then? For whom will you live? Okay. You will need someone to live for'. Then I felt that okay. Is it that? Then I have to think and when that thing came to my mind, then I looked at this chair and then I felt that this chair is empty. There is a void there. (Isha, F, Indian, attended university)*

In the initial part of the interview, Isha portrayed herself as a person who had very little interest in getting romantically involved, but with time and suggestions from others, she started experiencing a change in her attitude. Coming from a society where interdependence is a social norm, it was only natural for her mother (and even other people) to socialise such beliefs in dependence and living for others. In Isha's expression, '*is it that?*', there was a sense of being struck with this social reality, as if she was suddenly 'dropped into' an environment with a set of values, experiencing and confronting a new truth. In the last part of the extract, Isha talked about an empty chair, a place left unoccupied after her father passed away. This emptiness of the chair was metaphorically associated with the void she felt in his absence. It can be seen how Isha started making sense of important aspects of her life based on the values imparted to her. Her participation in the study was centred on the feeling of crisis looming from the inability to find someone to fill the void. Isha struggled with unanswered questions, some which were her own ('*maybe I need someone to rely on*') and some which belonged to others ('*for whom will you live?*'). These questions suggest both dependence on others as well as availability for others, and appear to have been foundational dilemmas with which Isha grappled. Her reflection on the '*empty*' chair illuminates the added complexity to Isha's experience in that she was unsure of her stance on dependence and independence, resulting in a confused self with fuzzy ideas about which direction to take.

Hence, cultural values were brought to surface through these experiences shared by the participants that influenced their expectations and choices available to them and, in turn, moulding their understandings of self. It needs to be kept in mind that different settings, processes and systems worked in conjunction that led to a development of ideas about self during their transition, as also informed through the interview data. In other words, these varied processes, contexts and settings quite often function in collaboration with each other rather than in isolation in forming such ideas and perceptions about self.

#### **4c.6 Summary (Becoming and knowing oneself)**

Participants' reflections on both significant and mundane social experiences were used as a way to make sense of, and explain both their past and current selves. Some, if not all, of these attained self-understandings were perceived as requiring moulding or changing in order to suit transitional requirements. If and when participants showed dissatisfaction with elements of self and/or environment, encountered or re-perceived through time, they exhibited a need for change

that would allow suitability to the requirements of the transitional demands. Most participants were actively attempting to, or successfully making changes to self and/or environment in order to make these fit together in a more conducive way. While participants, like Aran, were making changes to both self and environment, others, like Andrew, directed change towards self alone in order to be able to make a more satisfactory end to his transitional period.

It is noteworthy that there is often an active involvement on the part of the participants in generating ideas about self wherein they picked certain information from the environment and relayed it to form an understanding of self. Often, participants justified their newly derived self-description through the contextual information relayed to me during the interviews. With the knowledge that participants were actively deriving these perceptions of self, it needs to be remembered that they are only reflections of participants' beliefs about themselves and their environment. Never the less, these perceptions had dynamic influence on their crisis experiences, most of who were actively engaged in bringing changes to self and/or environment to suit the requirements of a fruitful transition to a 'settled life'.

#### **4c.7 Discussion (Becoming and knowing oneself)**

*Young people must at one and the same time develop a reasonably stable and sustainable core identity and simultaneously be able, practically and mentally, to handle an enormous variability, a risk society in which one can never be sure of anything. (Illeris, 2003, p. 371)*

Whilst in transition, young people try to mould some kind of certainty into their life, often in the form of stability in career and relationships. However, they can be confronted with a complex environment in which they receive different messages about themselves and the world in which they live. In the attempt to gain certainty and security, they must form ideas about themselves in relation to the environment while at the same time try to fit into the requirements of society in order to complete their transition to 'adulthood'. What is evident here is a process of becoming, forming and moulding directed towards successful transition. This moulding experience was reported by the participants in relation to its potential to enable a smoother navigation to adult status.

Similar connotations can be found in the writings of Worth (2009), in which she stressed the "focus on the future" (p. 1054) in the process of 'becoming' in youth transition. We find that "while young people hoped and dreamed of many possible becomings, they created future plans based on the actualities of the present" (Worth, 2009, p. 1056). This process of becoming involved shaping and altering different aspects of the present self to facilitate the process of transition. Participants' interpretations of themselves and their personal interests were grounded on the probable manifestation of its usefulness in creating a fruitful 'adulthood'. In making these interpretations, quite often they made comparison between the old and a new desirable self.

There were different contexts that led to the development of new self-understandings, those that are encountered right from birth, like family, and those that one finds themselves in as they move into adulthood, like peers, education institutions and workplace. Participants also made interpretations of social norms and values that have in turn influenced their perceptions of themselves. These contexts are emphasised in Bronfenbrenner's (1975, 1977) ecological model of human development discussed in the literature review (Chapter 1b). My findings are commensurate with this model which reflects the active influence of the microsystem (family, peers and workplace), exosystem (educational system) and macrosystem (social and cultural norms) that played its part in young people's developing sense of self.

My findings in this chapter demonstrate the interconnections between these systems in influencing the conclusions that participants came to in relation to themselves. For instance, Jack, Bill, Aran and Mary made different interpretations of the term 'intelligence' based on their experiences in different settings. Jack felt that 'people' thought he was '*not intelligent enough*' to understand them. Bill and Mary defined intelligence in terms of educational performances and Aran was sure of being '*more intelligent*' than his peers, gathered through social connotations surrounding how an intelligent person is supposed to behave. However, Jack showed 'resilience' (Christensen, 2010) to this interpretation of intelligence. According to him, people perceived him to be dull because he did not follow instructions, but he believed that intelligence is not just about being able to follow others' instructions. He demanded logical explanations before he could confirm to people's expectations. This brings us back to the common criticism of Bronfenbrenner's model, accusing it of underplaying the individual's role in selecting information from the environment and even being able to overcome negative encounters from interaction in different settings.

Identity is understood to be fluid and changeable over time, also altering between social contexts and the circumstances encountered. This is not to negate the proposal of a 'core identity' that according to Daniel Stern (1985) develops as a child, in turn having "crucial significance for further personality development" (p. 370, cited by Illeris, 2003). However, flexibility may be recognised in the light of "constant reconstruction" (p. 370) rather than connoting it as 'identity confusion' per se (Illeris, 2003). Hence, young people in the present study reported experiences in different settings that moulded their perception of themselves, although specifically reported here are those that have led to the experience of crisis. However, this crisis did not always stem from identity *confusion*, but often from the inability to reconstruct self in order to fit imposed social requirements for successful transition. And others experienced crisis when their positive self-identity (for example, being 'intelligent') was challenged by circumstances, situations, peers and employers.

According to Illeris (2003), instead of using the term ‘identity confusion’, the conditions of the 21st century would better fit by understanding self as fluid and versatile. It seems unreasonable to expect a totally consistent identity to be developed in the fast changing, ‘risk society’ in which young people live. Illeris proposed that, while young people develop understanding of self, their core identity gets built-up based on what they orient themselves with, in terms of “finding oneself, one’s opinions, ways of functioning and preferences” (2003, p. 372). This process is termed ‘self-orientation’ by Illeris. Participants in the present study were seen to develop such self-understanding in their transitional process that included personality, passion and interest. However, in addition, this self-understanding was also seen to cause an experience of crisis when they perceived a gap between the self and the environment. The continuously changing environment (for instance, changing workplace) that young people are exposed to could make it difficult to maintain a constant fit between the self and environment. This is where ‘identity confusion’ finds its place among young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As Bruner (1991) had also mentioned, “self-making is powerfully affected not only by your own interpretations of yourself, but by the interpretations others offer to your version” (p. 76). These ‘others’ are situated in different settings and impact important messages that inform young people about themselves. It is in these messages that participants have recognised turning points and change where two parts of self, the old and the desirable new, appeared in conflict and they perceive the necessity of moulding a new self to enable a successful transition (Bruner, 1991). The experience of crisis was embedded in this confrontation with self when they recognised the difficulty in integrating new qualities and there was urgency to change or to maintain and nurture a newly identified desirable self. For instance, Bill interpreted himself as ‘*intelligent*’ based on his GCSE results, but he felt the need to prove this to himself and others throughout his transitional process, making wise decisions and choosing courses that are ‘*complex*’ and challenging.

This experience of crisis associated with understanding and integrating new self can be linked with Illeris’s (2003) work. Illeris associated identity with ‘transformative learning’ meaning to say that a crisis-like situation experienced from challenges faced might necessitate a change in self in order to move forward. Learning, that demands transformation for successful transition, is palpable in the reports of the participants. Crisis was experienced when this change was perceived as unattainable, uncontrollable, and/or urgent. For instance, Isha’s interpretation of self as ‘*Hamlet*’ led her to feel stuck in her plight where she recognised decision-making to be an important part of her transition, yet feeling like a person who can never make a confident choice.

Such a process, in which the young people try to make a fitting association between self and environment, was apparent in Keniston’s (1970) writing. Although Keniston derived this theory

during a time when there was a lot of instability in society led by social movements, this could be aptly used in understanding how young people, even in the 21st century, continue to struggle to become part of society while moulding different aspects of themselves (characteristics, interests and preferences). Moreover, Keniston proposed youth to be a period of an intensely changing self, and the young people in the present study indeed were in a process of continual self-moulding in order to make a transition to adulthood with characteristics, interests and preferences that would direct them to a more settled life.

There is a close association between understanding self and the interests and passion that were connected with career goals. Participants reported extensively about developing ideas of themselves in relation to how that would impede or promote their future career prospects and it is when they identified aspects of themselves non-conducive to these goals that they felt stuck and experienced crisis. For instance, Denver recognised his incompetency in managing finances, a skill he felt would be essential for his future work life. This brings us to the ‘locked-in’ phase proposed by Robinson and Smith (2010) which is said to be a time in crisis experience when there is an internal dissatisfaction associated with the current role and identity. Participants reported what they did not want to do with their lives, informed by the environment and interactions in different settings. There was also some amount of questioning of their current positions and roles typical of the ‘separation’ phase proposed by Robinson and Smith (2010). For instance, Erica questioned her compatibility with the work she was doing when she recognised her capabilities to do ‘more’ than what the job entailed.

From the present study, it is seen that, not only do young people engage in changing self, but also the environment when perceived non-conducive to their transitional requirements. Worth (2009) wrote: “becoming is also a process that engages with the social world – in a sense there are two kinds of becoming, the individual and the social, which young people must constantly reconcile – dealing with pressures of social conformity, while striking out one’s own place as an individual” (p. 1053). Young people are seen to make such negotiations in which they actively seek changes in the environment when they perceive it to be non-conducive to the requirements of their successful transition. For instance, Aran changed his environment when he realised that his neighbourhood was posing an obstacle to his personal growth where he situated himself to be ‘*more intelligent*’ than his peers.

Overall, *Becoming and Knowing Oneself* surfaced some of the sources through which participants gathered information about what parts of self needed to be changed or maintained in order to support their quest to adulthood. In addition, this theme explicates agency in transitional experience wherein young people actively engage in self-understanding and identifying areas of change. However, the scope of this change could be still limited and



challenging, which is when some young people seek to change the environment in a hope to nurture a positive self that would enable personal growth.

With regard to group differences it was found that Indian participants stressed and relied heavily on family whilst developing self-understanding. 7 out of 8 Indian participants expressed crisis developing from such perception of self, derived from mirroring through interaction with the family (as against 5 of the 16 in British sample). On the other hand, self-understanding was dominantly influenced by education, work and peers among the British participants. There was less association of self-understanding in relation to work (*Incompetent and Conflicted*) among the Indian participants (3 out of 8) compared to British participants (11 out of 16). This directs attention to the probable cultural influences in young people's perception of self that is predominantly guided by specific settings based on the differing importance and relevance to their lives. The high emphasis on interdependence in a typical Eastern culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Sonawat, 2001; Tuli & Chaudhary, 2010) could make Indian young people closely associate with family in developing self-understanding while the high importance given to independence in a Western culture like UK (Kagitçibasi, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) could potentially lead to more connection with work (personal goal) than family whilst developing perception of self. There were no substantial differences found in this theme among participants on the basis of gender and educational backgrounds.

## Chapter 4d: Forced ‘adulthood’/independence

‘Adulthood’ in this section is associated with participants’ reference to: (i) attaining financial independence or assuming ‘adult like’ responsibilities (like taking care of, or responsibility for, significant others); or (ii) skills considered essential to live independently. For some, the apparent need to assume adult-like responsibilities was triggered by the internalisation of culturally-recognised staging-posts against which they feared falling behind. Others found themselves catapulted into ‘adulthood’ by external events. There were both personal decisions and circumstances palpable in participants’ accounts that reflected the element of *force* towards ‘adulthood’.

There was wide variability among the participants as to when they started feeling the pressure and urgency to take ‘adult’ positions with financial and role responsibilities. While most alluded to this as a necessity after completing their studies, or when commencing paid employment, others had already contemplated how they might be able to assume these responsibilities while still in education. For some, there was a particular turning point which meant having to take on ‘adult’ roles before they felt ready. What was apparent, however, was that assuming adult-like responsibilities was intimidating and participants felt that they were poorly prepared to meet this challenge. ‘Adulthood’ was, therefore experienced as *forced*.

Three sub-themes shall be discussed in this section, divided on the basis of: (a) a recognized need for financial stability: *Rushing into financial self-sufficiency*; (b) ‘adult’ like responsibilities and roles taken in order to be able to live independently: *‘Train myself to be an adult’*; and (c) an obligation for family responsibility: *‘Man of the house’*. This theme of *Forced ‘adulthood’/independence* captures typical differences in crisis experiences of the participants based on their social, cultural and economic background. While the first sub-theme -*Rushing into financial self-sufficiency* -applies to both British and Indian participants, the third sub-theme -*‘Man of the house’*- specifically captures the experiences of the Indian participants. The second sub-theme -*Train myself to be an adult* - directs attention to the crisis experiences of those British participants who have not attended university and stayed away from their family whilst having to develop their position as an ‘adult’.

### 4d.1 Forced ‘adulthood’/independence: Rushing into financial self-sufficiency

The need for financial self-sufficiency was expressed by the participants in different ways, like desire to shake off reliance on others or even sacrificing personal interests for financial gains. For some, financial independence was a contingent and urgent need. Either way, many participants felt that they had to sacrifice personally-fulfilling interests in their attempt to achieve financial stability quickly and, in this way, this sub-theme characterises their aim for financial self-sufficiency as *rushed*.

In the extract below, Avril expressed how she ended up in the job that she was at the time of the interview:

*That was when I first got back from travelling, I'd done some temporary work before and I was looking for like a full-time job, I sort of noticed that financial administrators, there was like so many jobs going for that so I just thought I'll get this job for now because there's loads of them, I'll just get this job and then I'll find something else later, so was just to have some money really, just that's how I got into it, just to get a job [laughs], yeah. (Avril, F, British, attended university)*

Avril's decision about her job was purely based on its availability, providing an easily accessible and less effortful way of attaining some financial gains. However, this factor of easy availability lured her away from what she was qualified as part of her university degree (Design): a course she had chosen based on her interest and future career plan. She explained to the interviewer how she '*forgot about doing anything to do with art*' when she started to look for a job, mainly because at the time she felt rushed to attend to her financial needs rather than cater to her interests.

It can be seen how participants have tried to accelerate through their transition towards adulthood defined by attainment of job and fulfilling financial needs. Participants like Avril assumed that one should be earning money soon after completion of education even if that meant doing something that was not entirely satisfactory. With time Avril experienced job dissatisfaction leading her to a crisis because she could not easily change her job to make it stimulating and exciting:

*With my job, so this one's a bit like a dead-end to me, this job, there's... like I can't really progress much more, I could become an office manager but I don't like managing people so this is the only next step up to my job so it's kind of this is it and now that I'm getting bored of this, it's kind of like the end of the road. And then I just feel like maybe if I went back to doing something to do with my degree I might like hold my attention for a bit longer... (Avril, F, British, attended university)*

Avril was imprisoned in her own decision (as also depicted in a photo that she brought to express her feeling of crisis, shown in box 3) leaving her with a feeling of helplessness and lack of power to change things. She was in a difficult position: a dilemma of whether she should go back to do something related to her degree or continue with the '*dead end*' job that nevertheless earned her some money. There was a sense of cul-de-sac in many of the participants' accounts of their experience through transition where they perceived a '*dead end*', either through circumstances or personal choice, in their rush to attain adult positions, in turn causing a feeling of crisis.

Box 3. Photo brought by Avril to depict feeling of being stuck in her job

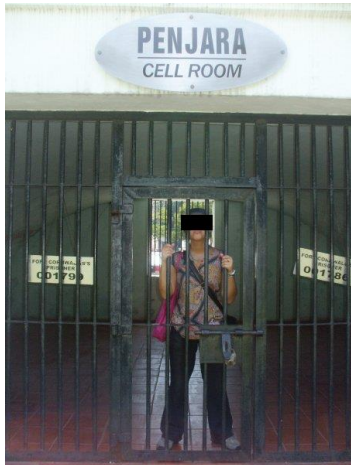


Figure 25. Image Avril brought to represent her feelings at work

In relation to the above photo, Avril said

*So this is the picture from when we were travelling, but I was just like this is how I feel with my job at the minute, like it's a prison, like there's no change, it's just like here I am, that's it. (Avril, F, British, attended university)*

Just like Avril, Denver showed desire to be financially independent:

*I want to feel only responsible to myself for doing it because I don't owe anyone anything, now that might be unrealistic because I'm going to have to sort out my money and all that and I'm going to have to pay my parents back, but eventually I want to be, I want to be at the stage where I'm responsible only to myself rather than relying on other people. (Denver, M, British, attended university)*

Denver translated adult life as capacity to live devoid of answerability and responsibility towards others, with independence and freedom of choices, which would subsequently demarcate him from being a child. However, because he was financially tied to his parents, it caused tensions within him as he recognised the urgency to attain financial independence. Just like Avril, this need for financial stability was a personal choice and perceived requisite to independence. Unable to attend to this need, Denver felt constrained with shortcomings whilst feeling desperate to break through the obstacles that lie in the path of independence and self-sufficiency. This feeling of being stranded in their situations, unable to attain the desired financial self-sufficiency, added to the feeling of crisis during their transition.

For those participants who lacked financial support from the family, monetary needs were urgent and required their immediate attention. Olivia and Aran were two participants who not only lacked financial support from the family, but also had to distance from them for reasons like family abuse and lack of supportive environment.

In the extract below, Olivia explained the circumstances in which she sought financial independence:

*Okay, so before 2014 I was a student in [names a city in UK] and I had a scholarship and I undertook a couple of years of research and it was really successful and I started my own conference and everything so everyone really had like a lot of faith in me and everything and as a student I felt like I really took the most that I could out of my time at university but when I had some family problems I was basically left to be completely independent financially and everything and I ended up in a job that I felt was really unsuitable based on my expectations of where my career would be going... (Olivia, F, British, attended university)*

Olivia could not afford the gradual transition from education to self-fulfilling work. Having suddenly cut off from her family, she was accelerated in her transitional process to ‘adulthood’. This was a difficult experience, not only because she had to establish financial stability, but also because she had to take up jobs that she felt ‘*unsuitable based on [her] expectations*’. Her experience was characterised by challenge marked by a lack of expectation and preparation. She was completely left by herself (‘*I was basically left to be completely independent financially*’) in her transitional process throwing her abruptly into a yet another non-supportive environment, also creating an isolating feeling. The common assumption of having family as back up for young people in their transition to ‘adulthood’ does not hold true for some people like Olivia and Aran. With the absence of a safety net in the form of family support, their quest for attaining financial stability was made furthermore challenging.

Aran left his family-of-origin as a very young man and started living on his own with no intention of returning. However, Aran struggled to cover his most basic financial needs:

*...when you don't know how to pay your bills and your finances immediately you get these bailiffs and you get letters and threatening letters and it just carries on and on and on and it affects your credit rating and you can't pay your food 'cos you're scared you're going to get more bills... (Aran, M, British, not attended university)*

Although Aran left his family and neighbourhood to attain independence and build his life elsewhere, he again found himself in a position where his freedom was restricted and he had to go through an ‘*extremely hard struggle*’ to establish himself in a new environment. Coming from a challenged economic background and lack of family support, just like Olivia, he had no safety-net and having to establish financial independence was forced upon him as a matter of survival.

#### *Analysis of the Indian participants: Rushing into financial self-sufficiency*

All of the above participants expressed the need to generate an income, particularly to be independent financially. This was not the case for most of the Indian participants who viewed ‘adulthood’ as taking up responsibilities within, and for, their wider families. Indian parents are more likely to finance their children until they are independent enough to make their own living and they are not usually obliged to financially reimburse their parents. On the other hand, young

adults are typically expected to acknowledge this parental investment by assuming responsibilities with respect to their family and remaining answerable to them. For instance, although from a family with no financial shortage, Ishita earned not just to attain independence, but to be of ‘*support in small little way to [her] family and to all[her] near and dear ones*’.

Vikram, on the other hand, experienced financial tensions within the family for which he and his siblings had to work to bring income to the family:

*...like that I used to take tuitions and because of that my studies started getting hampered. I did 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> and also tuitions and also study for my ownself... so like that I did... slowly, slowly I started forgetting my own education... started having less time for my own education [...] I would work hard... it went well... but my education started going bad (Vikram, M, Indian, not attended university)*

Vikram’s education life was compromised and his transition was paced by the circumstances existing in his family. He wanted to develop his career in Chartered Accountancy but, because of the challenges he started facing early in his life, he was forced to take responsibilities typical of an ‘adult’ – taking care of, and earning for his family. His circumstances left him with the motivation but not the time and space to gradually transition to adulthood and pursue his personal goal, in turn causing a feeling of entrapment and crisis.

For participants like Vikram who did not pursue higher education, there appeared to be a different set of challenges around limited options and the place of personal goals. In particular, financial independence was less a choice than a necessity and had to be prioritised over the pursuit of aspirations. For example, Raj had to focus on paying off debts before he could invest in his career goals. He had incurred losses trying to build his own business and had limited time to pursue this aspiration. His father imposed time restrictions on him within which he had to prove he was capable of successfully starting and running a business, or otherwise submit to taking up a government job:

*I got losses in net café and game parlour so next time I don’t want to lose because my age is going on and after that if I don’t do anything my father will force me to do a job... (Raj, M, Indian, not attended university)*

Time, along with monetary constraints, was causing stress in his goal achievement. His current seek for money was to allow him to attend to the debts quickly so that he could work on fulfilling his personal interests within the limited time set by his father. He experienced crisis compressed between these two pressures where, on one hand, he had ‘*many credits*’ to repay for which he was stuck in his current job (‘*I have the job so that to refund the credits*’) and, on the other, a limited time to repay his debts and start his business.

There was difference noted in how the rush towards financial self-sufficiency varied between the Indian and British sample – in that there was an added element of family obligation and responsibility in the case of the Indian participants.

#### 4d.2 Forced ‘adulthood’/independence: ‘Train myself to be an adult’

A few participants were faced with situational demands that required them to adopt ‘adult’ roles and responsibilities. This was not a matter of choice, and they did not have the liberty of time and space to adjust to the new demands for ‘adult’ roles. Interestingly, these participants had not pursued a university education and they lived away from their family-of-origin without experiencing, what might be considered to be, a cushioned, emergent adult transitional phase. Assuming ‘adult’ responsibilities was therefore an urgent requirement and this sub-theme offers important detail with regard to challenges faced by some young British people.

In the extract below, Aran talked about his experiences when he decided to leave his neighbourhood home because of the problems he was facing there. He was just 16 years of age when he decided to take this leap into ‘*a new world*’ of responsibility and independence and he had a long struggle since through his transitional process to ‘adulthood’:

*...so when I was 16, kind of a new world, I decided to just move out ‘cos I’d just had enough of being around there and being in that area and being around the friends, ‘cos they were all such bad friends, there was nothing to do on the area so I moved out at 16, got me own place and just had to train myself to be an adult, you know, getting a proper education and getting myself out there, get a job. It was an extremely hard struggle ‘cos I had to learn to cook and clean and, you know, pay bills, I didn’t have much help, I didn’t know where to go for help, I didn’t know what decisions needed to be made first, so it was such a struggle that I had to keep asking different agencies and basically work my way around to find out the support that I could get and obviously that takes time and during that time not knowing that you’re, you know, fundamental adult skills that you need to survive, it was extremely hard, I became really depressed, yeah. (Aran, M, British, not attended university)*

Aran’s use of the term ‘*new world*’ was not just with reference to age, but also a combination of changes in the environment and a milestone achievement of moving out of parents house. Such a step was a very adult-like decision on the part of Aran and was the result of his analysis of the social environment (where he was born) and his probable future. This points to the surfacing of forward thinking crucial for a fruitful future. Moreover, Aran associated this act of moving out with the requirement ‘*to train [him]self to be an adult*’: an automatic interpretation and linking of ‘adulthood’ with living by yourself. It is in the execution of this decision to move out where Aran faced extreme difficulty and a consequent ‘*hard struggle*’. Not knowing how ‘adulthood’ is ‘done’ is one of the dominant features of Aran’s account: ‘*didn’t have much help*’, ‘*didn’t know where to go for help*’ and ‘*didn’t know what decisions needed to be taken*’. The lack of ‘*fundamental adult skills*’ along with the situational demand to assume independence in its entirety, led him to a challenging and gruelling experience where he was stranded with unmanageable responsibilities and tasks. There was an element of pressure in his tone of expression where he ‘*had to train [him]self to be an adult*’ as if in normal circumstances one is expected to make a smoother and less demanding transition to ‘adulthood’. In addition to this, there was an implicit understanding that one does not naturally want to be adult-like, rather one

is pushed into ‘adulthood’, as if this role has to be deliberately taken-up based on assumed social norms. In Aran’s case, this demand for changes proved to be testing and taxing. He ended up being ‘*really depressed*’ as a consequence of the hard struggle carried out in isolation, without anyone’s support and company through his difficult times in transitioning to ‘adulthood’. This built-up into a crisis situation where his own decision to move out of his neighbourhood and family was posing to be a challenge that was hard to tackle given the very little preparedness for taking up full responsibilities in the ‘*new world*’.

A similar experience was shared by Jack (extract below) who left his home with least preparation and awareness of the things he would have to handle.

*...like me mum kicked me out, she wasn't like completely uncaring, she didn't just go 'get on the street', do you know what I mean like, she hooked me up in a hostel and stuff which I was eternally grateful for 'cos it was good, a really good hostel like, it wasn't full of horrible people like they were nice and I met some friends and it was good, but because I'd never lived on my own, that's what this picture's about (places photo 9), I'd never lived on my own so I just steadily went into decline, health-wise, like took, you know, yeah, and then, yeah, and then like smoking and just eating crap, like pasta every day, and then pasta became too expensive 'cos I was spending my money on other stuff and then like, yeah, noodles, other people's food, dust, anything that I, as long as I didn't have to spend money on it, because of that. (Jack, M, British, not attended university)*

Jack was not particularly successful at the time in handling his life separate from his family. He attributed the cause of the decline in his health to the fact that he was completely on his own and unprepared for such an unguided and unsupportive environment. What is noteworthy here is that the simple act of taking care of basic requirements for survival like feeding oneself and maintaining a healthy life, seemed to be difficult tasks for both Jack and Aran whilst alone. Such tasks were portrayed as something close to being undoable and complex, requiring skill demand as a part of living by oneself. The element of force and struggle in Jack’s newly attained independence was quite evident, which is reflected through the self-reported unpreparedness and poor management of money and freedom. The photo (Figure 26 showing photo 9 that was mentioned in the extract above) that represented his first time being away from home was a rather negative and unsettling image (a tray full of cigarette butts) showing his perceived lack of responsibility in handling a life on his own.





Figure 26. Photo 9 mentioned in Jack's account.

At the point of interview, and at the age of 22, Jack was about to have a child with his girlfriend. In the extract below he shared the urgent need to fulfil his responsibility as a father:

*I think I've become a lot more responsible and, you know, 'cos I'm having a kid and stuff and that's the next thing for me is having a kid and trying to be a dad, which is daunting but in the same hand I kind of think, you know, I can do it... (Jack, M, British, not attended university)*

While he took the interviewer through his timeline of events in his transition, he talked about the problem of being on his own and living irresponsibly, and soon followed the concern of having a family of his own ('next is me having a family'). Without resolution of previous problems, he was faced with new concerns and issues during his transition. This accumulation of tasks in Jack's experience of his transition led to a crisis situation. Furthermore, it is interesting how Jack's timeline only consisted of social and interpersonal issues rather than career transition. However, it needs to be kept in mind that Jack was only 22 at the time of the interview and this meant that there is potentiality of such association to career transition to set in at a later time during his transition. For Jack, living independently and being a father came before he could concern himself with job or financial security and stability. This brings attention to the varied ways through which participants had interpreted 'adulthood' and the routes they had taken in their transition. As such, the crisis experienced by the participants could also vary in its form and degree.

Amy's difficulties managing adult responsibilities started when she got married at the age of 20 and started living with her husband:

*And then came the responsibilities of rent and bills and all that kind of stuff and you know buying furniture ((giggles)). As dumb as it sounds - dishes. That's when I started to really understand life without mum and dad and how difficult it is. That it's not that easy especially when neither of you, not you nor your husband, have settled into life. We don't have brilliantly well paid secure jobs. He was working at the factory where I met him. I was working at [company] for minimum wage. So it's not a lot of money at the end of the month. Neither of us had experience in financing and budgeting so we were still blowing money going out every Friday... (Amy, F, British-Asian, not attended university)*

Amy married at a relatively young age and felt unprepared to manage her new ‘adult’ domestic and financial life. She described starting to ‘*really understand life*’, seeing that ‘*it’s not that easy*’, suggesting that encountering these previously invisible realities had forced her to see adult life in a whole new way. That neither she nor her husband had ‘*settled into life*’ hints at a transitional process towards competence and maturity, but one along which she had been rushed, prohibiting the development of the skills necessary to take up adult responsibilities. Contextually, the impact of a low income but new freedom created a particularly dangerous mix which eventually led to a relationship breakdown and the return of Amy to her family home.

Thus, across Aran, Jack and Amy, it can be seen how a young person can feel unprepared, unskilled and unable to cope when living independently from their birth family, even when this independence is sought or expected. Importantly, while, like Aran and Jack, Amy floundered in a situation making adult demands over-and-above her current capacity, she alone had the advantage of being able to return to her parents. This points to the importance of one’s local context in shaping possible responses to challenge.

What is also noticeable in these accounts is the connotation assigned to ‘adulthood’ requirements, mainly consisting of dealing with basic skills like feeding oneself, cleaning and taking care of bills, seen as pre-requisites to their adjustment to an adult life with which participants were struggling. There was also an implicit assumption that transition to ‘adulthood’ ought to occur smoothly and gradually (while acquiring skills and knowledge essential to become an adult) without substantial effort. The feeling of crisis (especially for Jack and Aran) stemmed from the fact that they were thrown into situations where they had to put in a lot of effort and energy to start an adult life which, from their perspectives, did not occur under normal circumstances. A mere change in the environment and circumstances encountered in the process of their transition had led to a feeling of forced ‘adulthood’ with responsibilities that they were not prepared to assume. This was quite a strenuous and demanding experience for these participants who were left with very little choice but to tackle and deal with the challenge of becoming an ‘adult’. This is where the element of force came into play in the whole experience of the transition to ‘adulthood’ building up into a feeling of crisis.

#### **4d.3 Forced ‘adulthood’/independence: ‘Man of the house’**

Some participants had to adopt ‘adult’ roles whilst having to take care of their birth family. This theme was only found among the Indian participants where they showed complete responsibility towards their family-of-origin. Family is a highly significant part of the lives of the Indian population. This was reflected among the Indian participants in the present study wherein they showed a natural inclination to indoctrinate family responsibilities as something that is normative and, to a large extent, expected and assumed. However, this did not come easily to them and they faced a number of challenges. Just like the British participants, they too were

making their transition to a personally self-fulfilling ‘adult’ life, but with additional family responsibilities to be undertaken during their transition. Moreover, contingent events, such as the death of the father (applicable to four of the participants), catapulted some into important family roles with little preparation.

In the extract below, Amrita shared her worries associated with taking responsibilities for which she felt unprepared. She was already supporting her parents financially and otherwise whilst living in the same house with them, but when her father passed away she had to take additional responsibilities – taking care of her mother (who was dependent) and the house. She was oppressed by her circumstances as a result of which she could not ‘afford’ the experience of a gradual transition to ‘adulthood’:

*Amrita: But when I lost my dad, the basic thing was that like you know... I could no longer afford to be little kiddish anymore... whatever... whatever little kid was left in me... you know... I was approximately 22-23 at that point of time and... I couldn't you know afford to be a child anymore... not even child-like... so basically it kind of... it was like... (pause) boom... you know...*

*Interviewer: Taking on responsibility?*

*Amrita: Yeah... I was like... I have to ... irrespective of the fact whether I'm ready or not... (Amrita, F, Indian, attended university)*

There was a clear line drawn between childishness and being an ‘adult’, as if there is no possibility of overlapping behaviour between the two and Amrita felt abruptly thrown from one to the other. Given the unforeseen event, she was burdened with responsibilities to establish a stable job and take care of her mother, both demanding equal attention and prioritisation. As against her expectation, the responsibilities came suddenly giving her little time for preparation, leaving her helpless and paralysed in the midst of the situational demands. She said she had become ‘*the man of the house*’ having to take care of her mother and the house, but without the financial stability and job that someone in such a position would typically need. This led to an experience of crisis where demands were high whereas physical and mental preparedness to fulfil them was low.

In addition to this, as a woman and coming from a patrilineal society, being the ‘*man of the house*’ was only a temporary arrangement for Amrita. She mentioned in the interview that she worried about her mother when she would be married and moving away from the house.

*I do have this thing in my head that how do I... what do I do when I'm... if I get married if (stresses on the word) I get married, I do worry about my mother. That will I take her along. If I take her along, what will I do of this huge house, you know, things like that.... And... and... when I have talked to a few guys who were like... your mo... they have asked me ‘What will you do with your mother because you're the sole support of your mum?’ (Amrita, F, Indian, attended university)*

Amrita had to find a way to cater to her mother’s needs alongside being married and having a job. She even considered alternatives where she would take her mother along with her after she gets married and this would be part of the whole deal while finding a suitable partner. Worries

about the house and her mother were already causing crisis in her transitional process but, with the additional concern of getting married and moving away, she was in a dilemma and felt indecisive about how she would strike a balance between performing the role of the caretaker of her birth family and starting a new family after marriage.

A similar experience was shared by Aman who had to take up duties and responsibilities before he could reach a self-fulfilling future career. By virtue of socially recognised norms, Aman's position in the family alone (as the eldest son) was enough to entrust him with considerable responsibilities. In the extract below, Aman shared his experience of shouldering the excessive responsibilities that bogged him down during his transitional process.

*Being the eldest son, I have to do all the work. All the work, be it dropping my sister or picking my sister up from school... even that. Be it feeding my brother's pam...pampering. I have to pamper him. Listen to his scolding, listen to his threats. And then do the work... meeting people, being... outside I'm the eldest son, you know S [mentions family name]. I had a moustache for god's sakes man! (Interviewer laughs). I have to keep that. I don't have a picture. I should have taken a picture because that was (stresses on the last two words) remarkable. I had a goddamn moustache man! I had handlebar moustache (says in Hindi). So... so yeah finding it very difficult to find my place. (Aman, M, Indian, attended university)*

Aman was burdened with responsibilities that entailed work (running the family business) as well as taking care of his family members (mother and his siblings). He grew a 'handlebar moustache', as if he was forcing physical changes in him to adapt to the new roles in the family. This physical appearance seemed to be a symbol of the gap between what he ideally wanted and what was actually occurring in his life during his transition. In the last line of the extract Aman said, 'so yeah finding it very difficult to find my place' expressing the sense of limbo and the desire to feel that one is doing what one is meant to in life. In the extract below, Aman expressed the sense of identity confusion he had as result of the burden of family responsibilities.

*I didn't know if I was a... I was a son. I didn't know whether I was a proprietor of R [names the family company]. I didn't know whether I was a good boyfriend (with a confused tone) or where was I. I was nowhere. Seriously I was nowhere. I was not being able to be a good son, not be a good brother, elder brother, not be a good fiancé, not be a good friend to her (Says the whole sentence in a loud, almost frustrated tone). And all these were affecting my work and god knows how I held on to my work. (Aman, M, Indian, attended university)*

Aman's confusion was not just about his position (as a son or a proprietor of his family business), but also about his performance in these varied roles that he was playing during his transition (as a 'boyfriend', 'son', 'brother', 'fiancé' and a 'friend'). For Aman, carrying out these roles to good effect seemed important to him. That he could not adequately perform the roles, given the extent of his responsibilities, made him question his abilities and consequently his 'place' in this context. He experienced crisis when he felt stranded in these responsibilities while feeling the pressure and urgency to demonstrate efficiency in performing his duties both

in home and work front. He feared failing in both his role as a caretaker and a business proprietor.

Coming from a less affluent background than Aman, and not university educated, when Vikram's father died, his main concern was to provide a steady income for his family-of-origin. This meant putting their needs before his own:

*There wasn't any satisfaction with the job. One gets jobs according to education. My education wasn't that much that I would get a good job. Family also - mother was alone. There will be problem that she's alone. So for my mom I used to come here and then work here. Then I took mom and went to [name of city] then [name of city]. There my mother couldn't adjust with the climate. Then we returned here and then continued to do this job. That's what - taking tension all the time... (Vikram, M, Indian, not attended university)*

Here, multiple contextual features impinged on what was possible for Vikram: his education level, the death of his father, the needs of his mother and the requirements to generate an income created a narrow set of possibilities. Feeling the '*tension all the time*' in having a few options but many responsibilities, Vikram's crisis was characterised by regret, lack of fulfilment and relentless manoeuvring to ensure others' well-being. This burden of financially supporting his family existed even before his father's death, wherein he compromised his education and personal goal to cater to the needs of his family (discussed earlier in the category *Financial consideration* in the sub-theme *Question of 'what I want'*).

These accounts from Amrita, Aman and Vikram throw light on how adult responsibilities could be assumed and practised by young Indians differently from that of the British young adults. Although these Indian participants were also navigating their way to a stable future career, they had responsibilities towards significant others that needed special consideration whilst making their transition.

#### **4d.4 Summary (Forced 'adulthood'/independence)**

Overall both the British and Indian participants experienced a force acting upon them that accelerated the transitional process to 'adulthood'. There was a feeling of unpreparedness whilst taking on these adult roles and responsibilities and an element of shock as if such 'adult' positions were not expected to be as hard as they were experiencing. In addition, the sacrifices that they made as a result of the need to take on adult positions were unanticipated. The feeling of crisis was apparent in this experience of forced 'adulthood' because participants quite often felt the overwhelming responsibilities that came with independence and 'adult' roles.

An interesting difference was observed between the Indian and the British sample in which the former changed position in the family-of-origin as part of their new responsibilities, whilst the latter tried to attain some independence from the family-of-origin as part of the quest towards adulthood. For instance, seeking financial independence was common in both cultural groups

but there was a suggested difference in the purpose and/or the experience of this rush towards financial stability and security. This difference lay in the involvement of the birth family wherein young Indians were obliged to repay past financial investment from their family, not necessarily monetarily, but by assuming long term responsibilities. On the other hand, in the case of the British participants the rush towards financial stability was solely for attaining independence. For the British young people, interpretation of the transition to adulthood entailed moving away and separating from the birth family whilst assuming responsibilities for themselves.

#### **4d.5 Discussion (Forced ‘adulthood’/independence)**

A common feature across both cultural groups was that they felt trapped and unready for the task of ‘adulthood’, as characterised by social norms and values, and, in this sense, felt that adulthood was *forced*. This contradicts Arnett’s (2000) proposition of emerging adulthood as the time when they experience wide possibilities of exploration and freedom of choice. The present study shows that despite the anticipated freedom, young people felt the pressure to perform adult roles and duties, attain financial stability and even take care of others (typical of family responsibilities). This is commensurate with Heinz’s (2009) argument that young adults confront limited choices, rather than unlimited options and space to explore. Thus, the aspect of *force* can be seen in the light of an obligatory need to fulfil adulthood requirements irrespective of their preparedness, will and wish.

The participants experienced many challenges during their transition to adulthood, a finding resonant with the proposals of Arnett (1997). However, Arnett (2000) focused on Western cultures where challenges consisted of securing an occupation, a life partner and a strong sense of identity. The present study demonstrates a greater variety of challenges in the transition to adulthood both within and across cultures. These shall be discussed in the following section separated into the sub-themes of *Forced ‘adulthood’/independence*.

The sub-theme *Rushing into financial self-sufficiency* was relevant to most participants. This aspect of forced adulthood involved having to sacrifice personal interests in order to have financial security. Even when financial needs had been anticipated, participants found that the path to financial independence was not as smooth as expected and many felt trapped in unfulfilling, low-paid jobs. Moreover, for those from challenging economic backgrounds, the rush to financial self-sufficiency was a necessity rather than a desire. For example, while most participants struggled to adapt to social necessities, particularly financial self-sufficiency, those from economically-deprived communities may fight to survive with very little support whilst struggling to attain financial stability. The absence of the safety net in the form of parental financial support made their struggle to fulfil financial needs even more testing and challenging. In addition, for those from Indian society, there might be an extra layer of difficulty when they

are from low SES because they also have to take care of the financial requirements of the family. For instance, while Vikram was struggling to attain financial self-sufficiency, being Indian and coming from low SES meant that he had to also ensure financial stability for the rest of his family members. There is often a moral obligation rather than a personal choice to attend to social responsibilities in a typical Eastern culture (Miller et al., 1990). Vikram felt the pressure to take care of his family and in this process sacrificed his personal desire to pursue a career in his field of interest.

In addition, commensurate with Pole's (2014) study of the Tongan community in New Zealand, the present study's findings support the broad difference between Western and non-Western societies. Pole found that young adults from the Tongan community described a form of 'quarterlife crisis' upon leaving education, but one that differed from the Western models of development, which emphasise personal development. For the young people in Pole's study, 'quarterlife crisis' emerged from a sense of failing to contribute to community rather than failing to achieve personal goals. This difference in the Western notions was also evident in the present study. The rush to financial self-sufficiency for the British young people had, at its core, the goal of being able to support oneself. 'Adulthood' was thus connoted to involve separation from one's birth family and attaining financial independence. On the other hand, Indian participants described pressure to generate an income in order to support their extended family, or to meet their expectations, and they felt accountable for their family's financial investment in them. However, this does not mean that attaining financial stability was solely to fulfil expectations of, and support the family. There was a mixture of moral obligation towards others in fulfilling responsibilities (Miller et al., 1990), but at the same time a personal responsibility of attaining financial stability for oneself. Thus, striving for financial self-sufficiency had different connotations in terms of direction and motive, not just based on individual circumstances faced by the young people, but also on the social and cultural milieu in which young people were situated. These additional responsibilities were anticipated by virtue of their cultural background, but the intensive struggle involved in balancing personal goals with social responsibilities were not expected by these young people. As a result they were overwhelmed and felt unprepared to take these responsibilities and make the necessary sacrifices, turning it into a crisis experience.

*'Train myself to be an adult'* was specific to non-university-educated British men and one woman in the present study, living away from their family-of-origin. Their experience of crisis was distinct because they were required to look after themselves from a relatively young age and with minimal support. The woman contributing to this theme was unusual in coming from a financially-secure, British-Indian family on whom she could lean. On the other hand, the two young men took the brunt of a Western culture which, while promising opportunities for personal fulfilment, can leave the vulnerable to struggle alone. Their experience of crisis was

likely intensified by British working-class constructions of masculinity. Through qualitative interview data, Dolan (2011) found that a working class man was typically talked of as someone who ought to be strong and self-sustaining, thus undermining their healthcare needs (perceived as a reflection of weakness). They are less likely to seek for support when they are in their difficult times. This incorporates reticence to seek support, ignoring health problems, and the expectation of invulnerability by themselves and others while, in fact, also being disadvantaged in the job market (Dolan, 2011). This could be one of the reasons why the two British men in this sub-theme, despite their '*extremely hard struggle*', did not go back to seek support from their family.

While the Indian participants did not report being left to sink or swim in the same way, they faced alternative challenges captured in the sub-theme '*Man of the house*'. They described obligations towards their family-of-origin which was not stressed by the British young people. The photographs Indian participants brought to interview demonstrated their strong connectedness with family that was, at the same time, saturated with responsibilities. Even the Indian Constitution, under the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, recognises the obligation children should have towards their parents (specifically the elderly) whereby older people are entitled to take assistance from their children if they do not have any resources to support themselves (Sonawat, 2001). However, irrespective of this law there is a general community expectation that young Indian people take on responsibilities with respect to their family (Sinha, Sinha, Verma & Sinha, 2001). This obligation, which was traditionally vested in male children, is becoming the responsibility of daughters as well (Sonawat, 2001), reflected in the present study in that the phrase - '*man of the house*' - was used by an Indian woman to express her obligations to her parents. Contrary to Levinson's (1976) proposal that transition entails leaving the family, here the Indian participants have instead changed position in the family with more responsibilities and duties towards their birth family. Being the '*man of the house*' was also apparent in the Latino population from a low SES population studied by Sanchez, Esparza, Colon and Davis (2010). They found that feeling responsible towards their birth family was typical and that they considered putting themselves before the family as an indication of selfishness. Such connotations were not typical of our British participants who came from a low SES background. Thus, culture and social factors, rather than economic positions per se, were influential in the responsibilities felt by young people in the present study.

We also see Western influences in that the Indian participants were experiencing crisis whilst trying to strike a balance between their family obligations and personal goals of fulfilling financial needs and attaining a self-fulfilling career. This is of particular interest to this study in that transition to adulthood has been described as a movement from '*being taken care of*' to '*taking care of*' others and, according to Oinonen (2003), between these states lies a phase during which young people want to be independent. This did not appear to be true of my Indian



participants in that they had *concurrent* obligations to self and family. However, for the British participants, there was an exclusive concern for self apparent in their account and none of them spoke about responsibilities of taking care of their family or other significant people as part of their transitional requirement. Thus, both Oinonen (2003) and Arnett's (2000) proposition of young adulthood being the time when they are focused on self fits with the British participants in the present study, but not entirely with the Indian.

The term forced adulthood was used to highlight the transitional experiences of young people where adulthood is not always seen as a gradual process of development, but rather felt forced as a result of cultural and contextual factors. Thus, exploration could be limited given these social and cultural expectations and in addition, economic factors could have considerable influence especially for those from low SES. As Heinz has also noted, exploration can be seen more optimistically for those from advantaged societies (2009), while those from low SES may not have this privilege, rather an elongated period characterised by quest for financial stability till they truly get the chance to explore, if at all. For instance, Vikram, who was 30 years of age, expected a long period of time till he actually reaches his goal and feel settled and fulfilled, because at the moment he was only struggling to attain some financial security for himself and his family.

Overall, this theme *Forced 'adulthood'/independence* captured the confining experiences that the young people had in their transitional process wherein exploration and navigation seemed to be bounded by social, cultural and economic constraints that shaped their experience of crisis. Further to this, participants in the present study displayed feeling of unpreparedness and/or unwillingness to take the roles and responsibilities that they felt obligated to assume. This feeling of obligation could be placed in a wider context and the invisible underlying societal expectations, discussed further in my final chapter (Chapter 5).

## Chapter 4e: Coping responses

Participants described different ways in which they tried to adapt to and cope with their crisis.

This chapter will focus on these coping responses divided into the following sub-themes:

4e.1 Acceptance of Non-Linear Progression

4e.2 Optimism and Momentum

4e.3 Productivity and Escapism

4e.4 ‘Triaholic’

4e.5 Letting it out and Venting

4e.6 Reassurance and Inspiration

### **4e.1 Coping responses: Acceptance of Non-Linear Progression**

Most participants expressed the expectation of a smooth transition from education to work. However, this was rarely experienced, as discussed in the chapter, *Smooth navigation and interest fulfilment*. In addition, identifying and trying to pursue one’s personal interests posed a challenge. Participants talked about different ways in which they dealt with these new understandings of what their transition was really going to be like. This sub-theme covers the first vital step towards dealing with this new understanding: that is, acceptance of the non-linearity of progression.

In the extract below, Bill talked of his concerns about following an unconventional route through his transition. In order to cater to his personal interests, he decided to take a detour from the traditional linear route through education by taking additional A-levels after gaining his degree. Figure 27 gives a pictorial demonstration of what he initially expected from his transition (red and yellow line representing the linear progression from education to work) and his actual progression (green line).

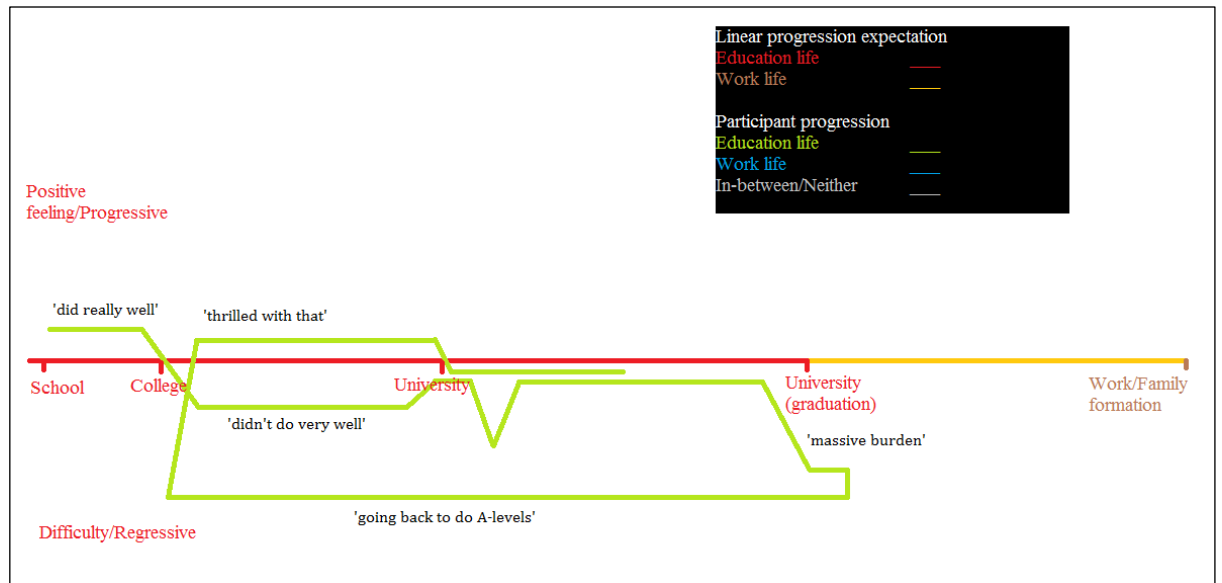


Figure 27. Pictorial representation of Bill's ideal and actual transition.

There were backward, circular and forward movements in his transition moulded by different experiences he had and decisions he made on his way. When Bill graduated, instead of feeling accomplished, he considered his degree to be a *'massive burden'*. He needed to rectify this and hence decided to take additional A-levels, this time in his preferred area of interest. He was initially *'thrilled with that'*, but also faced some anxiety having to go through university once again. He said,

*Because, I don't know, I like the idea of doing things properly and, you know, I don't think I'm the only who likes, you know, that, takes some sort of small comfort from it. I've just sort of got to reconcile myself with the fact that, you know, the world doesn't work out that way sometimes, and you've just got to go with whatever, you know, you've got. (Bill, M, British, attended university)*

Here, although Bill showed preference for a straight route from education to work (*'like the idea of doing things properly'*), he connoted this as a *'small comfort'* suggesting a change in attitude, accepting a more convoluted route but one that need not indicate failure. His response to the challenge was to *'reconcile [him]self with the fact'* that one has to work with whatever is available in order to ensure some personal satisfaction and contentment. Essentially Bill's coping response involved considering both what he desired and what is possible, but accepting that sometimes one has to mould the former to develop the latter. In this way, by accepting non-linear progression and seeing this as *'fact'* - the way that the world actually works - he could cope with the disappointment of having to start again. Hence, Bill recognised the flexibility of time in achieving his goal and this relaxed him from the pressure to make a specific age-related progression from education to work.

Hannah similarly expressed a change in her perception of time over the years. Initially she felt time pressure suffocating and compelling her to follow a progression that was defined by other

people's achievements. However, just like Bill, she adopted new ways of looking at 'progression'.

*Yeah, I think earlier it was a lot more, you know, like a top twenty-five here, you know, like I'm twenty-five, you know, like a quarter of my life or whatever, it's like I should have this by now and you know, you still look sometimes at what other people (points at photo 22) have done or got and then you think, you know, at twenty-five, you know, when you're a doctor, you think I would have bought a house by now and I'd have a career set and a position, it's like it's just a year, you know, when you're little a year's a long time, when you're a grown-up it's not... So yeah that's the difference. When you grow up you realise if it's another year it's another year, so what. (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*

It is interesting how she reflected the idea of time. The lines, 'at twenty-five, you know, when you're a doctor, you think I would have bought a house by now and I'd have a career set and a position', and 'when you're little, a year's a long time, when you're a grown-up, it's not' indicate the pressure to achieve milestones in a certain timeframe and to work towards settling down. However, towards the end of the extract, these two lines lost their negative connotation. She perceived 'another year' as yet another chance to achieve what she wanted. In this way Hannah adopted a new way of making sense of time that motivated and inspired her to fulfil her personal interests whilst allowing her to break away from the value given to linear progression that initially caused her to experience crisis. Hence, by adopting an alternative time perception, she could reconcile with her transitional process which she perceived to be different from others who had successfully achieved important milestones.

Just like Hannah, Andrew initially had strong expectations about a straight and smooth transition from education to work. These expectations changed with time and he started perceiving detours and bumps as learning experiences rather than misfortunes.

*Looking back on it with hindsight I'm very much appreciating how, how it's benefitted me positively rather than thinking, oh I did this and this but then I still, I did university and graduated but I still couldn't get a job, I'm thinking you know, I did university and graduated and that's fantastic and it's a big achievement and you know, it's helped me to take the positives because again, as I was saying, it's like the achievement that's there is the positives that I'm taking with me, the fact that afterwards I didn't walk into a good job, it's not so much a big thing for me anymore, I'm not feeling like, you know, because I spent nine months at [names a grocery store] I've somehow failed, I'm just feeling like, you know, I had a difficult circumstance for a while and I overcame it and I learnt to, you know, I learnt to let go of that and kind of push on from it rather than let it define me... (Andrew, M, British, attended university)*

There is an association of worth with Andrew's apparently backward movement and he seems aware of the risk of letting this pattern of transition 'define' him in a negative light. This shows the extent to which transitional patterns and the notions behind a 'normal' progression could influence one's self-perception, particularly if one's transition is not linear. Hence, it was crucial for Andrew to make a new interpretation of his experience to avoid damaging self-criticism. It was when he managed to be in a better position that he reappraised his past experiences and

started perceiving ‘*failure*’ as a moulding experience. This in turn helped him recover his sense of self-worth, although it meant navigating through a rough patch. In this way Andrew was able to reconcile with the fact that following a non-linear progression did not necessarily mean defining himself as a failure.

A similar kind of coping via acceptance was presented in Alex’s interview. He developed interest in fields that required him to defy the conventional and secure route from education to work and explore new spaces: both physically and psychologically. However, this led to tensions, indecisiveness and apprehension about future steps. One of the ways he coped with this crisis was through reconciliation with the fact that there were routes apart from those followed by the crowd, which could be productive in leading him to a self-fulfilling future career:

*...it’s actually quite surprising when I actually think about what I actually want, like you know, sit down and take my time that it gives me a much clearer sense, so that’s why I try to do as much as possible and I try to kind of, you know, keep it slow and steady, work at my own pace and try not to get caught up in the rush. (Alex, M, British, attended university)*

Alex realised that if he continued to allow himself to follow the crowd and ‘*get caught up in the rush*’, he would not be able to make sense of what he wanted from his future career. The crowd here represented other people who had done the same course and who pursued a job along the same lines. On the other hand, having established new and unique goals from what he initially thought, Alex had to reconcile himself with the fact that not only is he free to be unique but, in order to pursue a career based on his newly established interests, he would have to accept non-linearity in his transition. In the above extract, Alex gave a negative connotation to following the conventional route defined by other people’s progression. This way of re-perceiving career routes helped him cope.

Just like Andrew and Alex, Ishita initially envisaged settling with a desirable job as soon as she graduated. She said,

*It was tough. Yeah. And I felt stuck because I didn’t know... I was like... if I did my Masters, I’m supposed to find a job for myself and start working... and this is how if I see my future, then I don’t know (tone of concern) ... (Ishita, F, Indian, attended university)*

She recalled how difficult it was for her to accept the events that occurred in her transition. She assumed that one is ‘*supposed to find a job*’ soon after completion of a postgraduate degree, suggesting her expectation of a linear and smooth progression from education to work. Her feeling of crisis stemmed from not being able to achieve this. The gradual feeling of uncertainty and the betrayal of the ‘*ideal*’ progression led her to change her perspective about her career route. Her coping and adaptation involved opening up to change and detours:

*So depending upon the opportunities that I would get in the future...yeah... maybe I will change and look for some better opportunities... not like I want to stick to it*

*forever...but if I get some better opportunities, I would step ahead. (Ishita, F, Indian, attended university)*

The above extract suggests a change in attitude towards progression from rigid equation of linear progression, to progression as a process of change and opportunities. She brought a few images of quotes for the interview. One of them stated: ‘Keep going. Everything you will need will come to you at the perfect time’ and Ishita explained, ‘*this is what I feel right now... this best suits me [...] there are a whole lot of [...] my bucket list is very long and I feel this is what [...] you know motivates me*’. There was a sense of acceptance that, although there were various things in her bucket list, she was willing to give the time and space for its fulfilment. This image of the quote placed in the middle of her transitional experience (in the timeline) is a reflection of reconciliation with the fact that transition to a settled life cannot always be planned and presupposed, instead it involves encountering change and new possibilities.

This sub-theme highlights the various ways through which participants have managed to come to terms with unexpected events in their transition. After their previously held ideals were challenged, they had the vital task of establishing their self-worth through an alternative, non-linear pathway to adulthood. To do so, they re-evaluated their circumstances and re-appraised its meaning. This new perspective helped them overcome their crisis of being stuck and falling into a rut.

#### **4e.2 Coping responses: Optimism and Momentum**

Some participants coped with their crisis by holding onto optimism enabling them to break free from the feeling of being stuck and give a sense of momentum towards a successful future. Although it was difficult to specify a definite plan about how to reach their desired goal, many participants spoke about holding a positive outlook regardless.

In the following extract, Denver expressed his perception of his future which incorporated a forward momentum, which helped him cope with the feeling of crisis stemming from his past. These lines were taken from Denver’s explanation of a photo (Figure 28) that he placed in the timeline against his present age:

*It means I look forward to something positive. I think despite what I’ve told you, that’s quite a negative picture (points to the third photo of the broken chain), I think it’s, even though I’ve sounded quite pessimistic for a lot of it there is this general optimism for the future (gestures towards the timeline after where he marked his present age), I can’t explain it, I can’t tell you how it’s going to happen or why it’s going to happen... (Denver, M, British, attended university)*



Figure 28. Photo being explained in the above extract of Denver

Denver made a gesture towards the timeline, an unknown and empty space after his current age where he anticipated positive experiences to emerge. It was this hope for a better experience in the future that gave Denver his momentum. This does not necessarily mean that he had a plan to reach this, but ‘not knowing’ was used to his advantage in turning it into a hope. With reference to the above photo, he explained that it represented holding onto a positive loop of thinking. He feared that getting into negative ideas would mean going into a ‘swirl’ where he would ‘keep thinking more and more negative thoughts’ pulling him down and stopping him from progressing. Hence, his way of dealing with uncertainty was to hold onto optimism.

For participants like Aran and Jack, who were from low SES and appeared to have less family support than other participants, optimism about the future was crucial in giving them forward momentum. Aran cut ties with his family and was attempting to make a living on his own.

When he was asked what helped him the most in coping with his problems, he said:

*... having all these realisations about what I'd grown up to become and what I'd been taught, and just knowing that there's a better life out there, in fact [laughs] so much options, so many options out there and you can choose, you know, it's amazing what you can do when you put your mind to it, focus on it, set the goals and try and make a plan, if not make another plan... (Aran, M, British, not attended university)*

Aran had trust in a positive future where he perceived the world as full of possibilities from which to choose, focus on, and work towards. He did not negate the chances of failure, but believed that one could always keep trying. This world of possibilities was hidden from him in his past where he was only exposed to a closed, one-track kind of future.

*... 'cos I'd always been taught that I'd be in prison, you know, or I'd be in some dead end job, I'd just be a product of my upbringing like the rest of the people were, but it didn't turn out like that 'cos I understood all this stuff from what the teachers were telling me and now I'm a free person, you know, free thinker, so I enjoy all these types of lives that you can, be thinking about I could have been this place, I could have been that place, just gives me some freedom in that sense that I'm not trapped in one particular area, in one particular life for the rest of my life 'cos that's what my dad did and he killed himself and if you're looking into suicide rates, it's unbelievable how many people kill themselves for the same reasons. It's all about discovering hope. (Aran, M, British, not attended university)*

Through time Aran found hope and started seeing himself as a ‘free thinker’ with a bright future rather than just ‘a product of [his] upbringing’. He did not have a plan of how he was going to

achieve success in his transition, but he could at least see the wide space within which he could navigate and find a way to live a better life as a ‘*free person*’. This new perception of extensive possibilities, and his flexible position within it, gave him the momentum to move beyond his crisis of feeling stuck in a rigid faith defined by his past.

Jack was another participant who came from low SES and felt he had limited opportunities to reach his full potential. This feeling of deprivation was perceived to be the root of his crisis experience wherein he felt stuck in his circumstances that defined and determined the problems that he was facing in his transition. He was due to become a father and, in these circumstances, this was a big challenge for him. His way of coping was to hold onto a strong determination that he would somehow ‘*wing it*’:

*I'll work it out as I go along, I'll wing it and I'll just try and be the best I can be, so that's what's next is me having a family and stuff, which is kind of weird 'cos this was the next picture's about (places photo 17) 'cos that seems to me like I'm being reborn, like I had a second chance, do you know what I mean... (Jack, M, British, not attended university)*



Figure 29. Photo 17 as mentioned in the above extract by Jack

In the first line of the above extract, there is a sense of optimism in which Jack expressed confidence that he will make it through his difficulties. In addition, Jack envisaged social and economic conditions for his child better than what he experienced. Having been deprived of opportunities and exposed to restricted privileges to build his future life, he looked out for ‘*a second chance*’. Jack brought a photo signifying rebirth (Figure 29): a new chance for him to make a more positive future. Hope was expressed in this extract where Jack reported having faith in his capabilities to deal with his challenging circumstances and, at the same time, he looked forward to a positive future raising his child.

Optimism helped participants deal with various uncertainties and problems in their transition. Harry’s account is an example of how optimism played its part in dealing with romantic relationship concerns. After breaking up with his partner, he felt lonely and feared being so for the rest of his life. With time, and without any triggers of change (unlike Aran and Jack), he found a new way of perceiving his future opportunities. This suggests that hope can develop through the passing of time instead of requiring a specific change of circumstances. Hence,



Harry's initial distress was turned into hope, although he was not yet able to find a romantic partner. He said:

*I don't like the fact that, you know, I'm single and everyone else is moving on but almost like assuring yourself that it's short term, your worries are not necessarily true, that being able to manage your own worries in a more effective way and I found that really effective thing to do. (Harry, M, British, attended university)*

Towards the latter half of the interview, Harry spoke extensively about effective management of his problems. After having experienced a prolonged period of anxiety and apprehension about his future, he started practising mindfulness which helped him appreciate and live in the present rather than ponder over his past and potential future problems. In relation to his concerns over having a romantic partner, he started assuring himself that being single was only 'short term'. This new perspective on the temporary nature of his problem helped him to shift from a feeling of being stuck and, in this way, he managed to convince himself to be more optimistic.

This coping response in which participants spoke of a positive future (without necessarily having a plan for it) helped them to break free of feeling stuck in their transition. Thus, hope posed as a catalyst in providing the momentum to keep moving in their transition towards a settled life.

#### **4e.3 Coping responses: Productivity and Escapism**

Many participants occupied themselves with activities as a way of taking their mind off their stress and worry. These activities did not necessarily resolve their issues directly, but provided escapism and they reported being calmed, even if for a short time.

Hannah was one such participant who used to engage in activities to keep her distracted from the feeling of being stuck in her transition:

*In terms of coping, like all the way from the beginning to, to there really, [refers to 2013 in the timeline] I mean I'd shop, [laughs] (places photo 10) and spend money, that's the way I'd use to sort of try not stressing. Baking (places photo 11 in 2010, Moving up and down the timeline) was another one, so that one... (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*

Hannah brought different photos that she placed at various points in the timeline to represent how she coped with her crisis experience. 6 of the 33 photos she brought were representative of coping through engagement in activities. When I asked, 'So how would these things really help you?', she said:

*Distraction more than anything else, so yeah, it was kind of because I'd ruminate quite a lot, I would sit there and think over and over and over things whereas if I was away with the baking, like if I was baking (points to the baking photo 11) then it's something to do and you get something nice at the end of it, you know, if you're really stressed you don't really eat properly but you know, if you're baking and there's a cake at the end of it and that makes you feel better and you've wasted three hours when you've not been thinking about work then that's a good thing. (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*

Hannah was facing problems in her transition where she found herself disconnected from her job to the point that she consistently avoided going to work, finally leading to termination. When constant rumination did not give her a solution, she resorted to engaging in distracting activities. It is striking that she used the words ‘wasted’ and ‘a good thing’, and it mattered to her that she was being productive in some way. While these activities might have given her a sense of escaping her problems, it also helped her demonstrate her productiveness. Similar purposes were served by online shopping:

*I suppose it's kind of a distraction in a way but also just because then you'd get something in the post, so it would be like you're getting little presents, like little things that you'd almost not forget you ordered them but like you wouldn't know when it would arrive so it would be like, you know, a little nice surprise, if you got in and you'd had a bad day and there was something you'd ordered waiting for you, like that's nice... (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*

Here an emotional distraction is apparent where negative mood was replaced by the happiness of getting her parcels delivered. Through these activities of baking and shopping, she could manage to make herself ‘feel better’ in a period when she felt loss of control over her work and career. Thus there is a sense that through distraction Hannah was dealing with her feelings and emotions rather than the problem per se.

Just like Hannah, Sarah used distracting activities as a way to defocus from her worries related to career and family problems:

*Yeah, I've got a Kindle, I've probably read about 200 books so far, I can read a book like, in like a day easily so if I'm ever, sometimes if things are getting a bit on top of me or if I've, with all the shift work you know I can get tired out and so I'll literally just get my Kindle open and just go in my own world, just day dream [...] at the time you just can float away and you know, day dream away and just forget about everything.[...] I'd much rather read the book than watch the film just because like the film tells you in like such a set way you feel it's like this is what they're doing, this is where we are going... whereas in a book you can, yeah, I've got a good imagination I have [laughs]. (Sarah, F, British, not attended university)*

Reading books gave Sarah a calming effect (‘you just can float away’). Furthermore, it was not just reading for the sake of getting to know the content, but the active engagement of her imagination that occupied her thoughts that helped her escape her problems by shifting to a different state of mind. Using distraction to cope with problems was also evident in other instances shared by Sarah, especially when she faced persistent problems with her romantic partner. When she first mentioned him in the interview, she placed a photo of herself on a motorbike (Figure 30) and she said:

*Okay, so midway through my training I would have been, well 19 I got a delightful boyfriend (picks the photo of herself in a bike), I was with him for two years, we got on really, really well, kind of met him through friends, it was like, meet like Go Cart and doing that, a few of my friends got together and started and I remember going on the first date, coming back and I was like talking to my mum, “I don't like him, I can't see it going anywhere”, and she was like “Just see how it goes, you know it's the first proper*

*relationship, just see, give it some time". So I did and two years later mum threw out, mum again (drags the picture of her mom in the timeline), she was, she kind of told me, she said "I don't think you're fully happy when you're with him, you're not fully yourself, you're not fully relaxed", and it took me two years to realise that he definitely wasn't the right one... (Sarah, F, British, not attended university)*



Figure 30. Photo referred to by Sarah while talking about her relationship

When she placed the photo in the timeline, I assumed it was a photo of her boyfriend on a bike because she placed it simultaneously while speaking about him. She later added,

*...so I got out, broke up with him (drags the photo further) and decided that I'd had enough moping about, that I was going to do what I'd always wanted to do so I did my bike training. (Sarah, F, British, not attended university)*

Sarah's break up led her to pursue bike training, an activity she reported she had 'always wanted to do'. She decided to stop 'moping about' and do something of genuine interest. It was a way of escaping from an emotionally tense and stressful event by replacing it with an activity that guaranteed a feeling of joy and contentment. Just like Hannah, Sarah coped by replacing negative feelings with positive experiences.

Similarly, Amrita indulged in mundane activities to 'divert [her]self'. She had constant worries about career and finding a romantic partner, both of which she felt were slipping beyond her control. The following extract shows how she coped with the feeling of being stuck.

*When it comes to coping, I don't, you know, I divert myself. Because if I continuously think and linger on a subject, it's not going to help because it's going to only resolve itself when it's meant to be. So I ... I divert myself. I indulge myself in fickle things like retail therapy (Both smile). I go out with my friends, you know. And I ... I ... maybe I have to say this. I am quite a bit of a shopaholic so you know I enjoy doing that. It diverts my mind. I... what about... 2-3 years back I learnt driving. I got a car... like I disposed my father's car like last year. Not last year, sorry, this year and I got a new car for myself. So sometimes I go out alone like... (in Assamese) take my car and go out. I don't know, it's just like playing music in my car and driving, I just feel a little bit... it's just the me time that I need, you know. (Amrita, F, Indian, attended university)*

The first two lines show Amrita's feeling of helplessness. There is a sense of loss of control and problems perceived as irresolvable irrespective of her efforts. This left her to hold on to destiny: forming new beliefs and ideas that things ought to be resolved 'when it's meant to be'. In this way she perceived situations and circumstances as determining of her faith in her transition. Although she left it to destiny to mend her problems through time, in order to keep her mind

distracted she indulged in ‘*fickle things*’. She used driving and music as a way to escape her reality. It was also the physical movement away from the space that reminded her of her problems that helped her in defocusing and calming. In this way she physically and psychologically distanced herself from her issues while substituting them with things of interest that would be more pleasing and stress-free.

Jack had a different standpoint in relation to how distraction worked for him in coping with his worries. He said:

*Basically I play a lot of Xbox [laughs], that’s all I do, like I meditate mostly because like I don’t see meditating as like being like a Buddhist monk or whatever going umm, but meditating is like focussing the mind on like a mundane task so like the rest of your mind can, works it out, so I do a lot of repetitive Xbox gaming ... (Jack, M, British, not attended university)*

Jack’s engagement in other activities provided him with the space to think about important aspects of his life. He termed this as ‘*meditating*’: a way of defocusing from active engagement in problem solving and providing the space in which he could contemplate and reflect on his concerns, but with less intensity and exhaustion.

The above extracts demonstrate the varied ways through which participants tried to escape from pondering over problems, especially when they perceived them to be irresolvable. This escape was in the form of disengaging, defocusing and substituting the problems with pleasurable and unrelated activities. In this way they created time and space to relax and calm themselves in times of crisis, although this might have been only a temporary fix. Some participants even felt the need to demonstrate productivity through these activities, especially when their self-worth was challenged. These activities were a means through which they could feel accomplished and content in times when other events caused ‘*demoralisation*’ and questioned their capabilities and potential to make a successful transition to adulthood.

#### **4e.4 Coping responses: ‘Triaholic’**

All participants persevered through their issues and reported having attempted to maintain their composure whilst dealing with the problems in their transition. However, there were a few who talked about perseverance as an exclusive way of coping. It was articulated by these participants as an effortful task of persisting, especially at times when they felt that their problems were beyond their capacity to resolve.

Aran, at a very early age, decided to leave his family and neighbourhood and start making a living elsewhere. This step brought substantial struggles and obstacles in his transition and in the following extract, Aran reported how he coped with them:

*This is when I was younger, but it also came apparent when I moved on my own after a while as well, so I just thought, right, that’s it, I’m going to [Mumbles], ramp it up, so look at as many solutions as I can, try everything out that I can so I just decided to get*

*some money and I just went on a complete triaholic, trying to go to therapy... (Aran, M, British, not attended university)*

Aran came to a realisation that he was a ‘complete triaholic’ and given that he perceived availability of multiple professional help, he continued to try different ways to resolve his problems. Aran’s patience and his belief in his capabilities to persevere through his problems gave him the momentum to keep moving in his transition. Given that he went for therapy also, suggests that he was not only seeking to improve his economic conditions but also his psychological health. Being able to talk to someone knowing that they would listen and not expose his vulnerabilities to others gave him a sense of wellbeing. (Coping that involved speaking to someone is further discussed in the sub-theme, *Letting it out and venting.*)

A similar story was provided by Vikram, an Indian participant from low socio-economic status who was trying to fulfil responsibilities for his family. When asked how he best dealt with his problems, he said,

*I just do... I struggle... I try to overcome. I give my best in dealing with the problems... put effort... get broken down when losing... tears roll out... but I keep trying... more time will be required... feels there is more time needed... I will work hard... one day I will move forward... (Vikram, M, Indian, not attended university)*

Given the monetary difficulties faced by Vikram’s family, it was on his shoulder to provide for them and ensure financial security. This burden of responsibility, coupled with the fact that he could not fulfil his dreams to pursue higher education, often made him break down. In the first line of the above extract, Vikram identified personal characteristics defined by strong determination and capabilities to navigate through his problems. He further added, ‘*I will work hard... one day I will move forward*’, again giving a sense that, despite all the problems, he is not the kind of person who would give up and, like Aran, he showed motivation to keep trying. Unlike accounts under the sub-theme *Productivity and Escapism*, in ‘Triaholic’ participants held a different philosophical stance where they considered themselves as playing an active role in shaping and influencing their lives instead of leaving it to destiny or escaping from problems. In this way, participants’ philosophical stance and their assumptions about life were partially revealed through their coping responses.

In order to persevere, these participants had to have faith that things would work out. This is similar to the sub-theme, *Optimism and Momentum*, but they articulated their coping response as perseverance: a quality they attributed to themselves using it as their strength whilst in their difficult times. Similarly, Alex was having difficulty pursuing his career of interest. Because his career goal was not related to his degree qualification, and he did not have relevant work experience, he could see very few avenues by which to reach his goal. The following extract highlights Alex’s response to his problems:

*Yeah, it’s all about grabbing the opportunity I think, and just, I mean obviously there’s two parts to it, there’s you can’t just sit back and wait, you have to create the*

*opportunities, you know, but also there is an element of luck in there, you know, that you have to be in the right place at the right time, and at the moment I don't feel like I've been in the right place at the right time, certainly being, you know, deciding what I'm going to do in the future. But I know that if I keep on working and keep on persevering it will happen, you know, luck comes to people who are prepared... (Alex, M, British, attended university)*

According to Alex, there are two parts that could bring one success and they need to be aligned in a perfect equation. First, one needs to keep seeking for opportunities reflecting on the value of perseverance and second, '*there is an element of luck*' specifically referred to here in terms of the timing when opportunities become available. Thus, Alex's coping response involved a sense of hope and belief in destiny but, at the same time, he would '*keep on persevering*' and preparing himself to grab transient opportunities.

It was the belief in their patience and capabilities to reach their goal that helped some participants move ahead in their transitional process. In such a coping response, the focus is on self and the strong determination of the individual to reach their goal whilst holding faith in the future, and trust in their potential to reach their desirable goal eventually.

#### **4e.5 Coping responses: Venting and Letting it out**

The subtle differences between *Venting* and *Letting it out* are distinguished in this section. While *Venting* is understood as attempting to release negative emotions (like anger and frustration), *Letting it out* involves the articulation of problems and issues (also emotions related to it) - either to others or in a written form – and does not necessarily involve anger or aggression. Both *Venting* and *Letting it out* involve facing problems, but the former is primarily related to emotional expression and the latter involves laying out of problems and is often a relatively mild expression of worries.

##### *Venting*

For some, engaging in certain activities was a way of venting rather than a distracting mechanism (as described earlier in the chapter). Inventing, participants ruminated on their problems, while distracting mechanisms served to defocus and escape from them. Venting was perceived by participants as a productive coping response that helped them release negative emotions.

In the following lines, Sarah explained how venting helped her cope with difficult times:

*And the same now, like if I have a really bad day I just can go to the gym, can take all my anger out on the treadmill or whatever, and come back and feel a lot better... (Sarah, F, British, not attended university)*

Such coping responses did not involve dealing with the actual problem, but this did not mean that they were escaping from them either. Through venting, Sarah was attending to the emotions evoked from her crisis and she reported feeling better after doing so. This suggests that

confronting negative emotions may not resolve their issues but could bring temporary relief, perceived by some participants as a productive coping response.

Another example is Amy who used to vent through aggressive expression of frustration in the form of text messages. However, she had insight that this was only her way of releasing negative emotions with no intention of causing harm to the other person.

*I kept them to myself, I did, I kept them to myself. I told you, it turned me into an angry, selfish, cruel person. Now I deal with it, I know it sounds terrible but I have learnt that when I rant I offload so I have an agreement with [names her husband], that if ever I feel down or depressed or frustrated, ignore my messages, but I send him a million insults [Laughs]. (Amy, F, British-Indian, not attended university)*

Amy realised that suppressing her negative emotions only made her an ‘*angry, selfish, cruel person*’. So she decided to ‘*offload*’ by sending aggressive messages to her husband, at the same time informing him to ignore them. Negative emotions from crisis experiences were a burden with which most participants found it difficult to deal and, in this sense, needed a channel through which to release them through venting.

Different participants had different ways of releasing tensions. Niti was one who spoke about emotional release through crying:

*I first cry... I cry alone. Just today I cried in front of you otherwise I don't cry so easily (she smiles). I first cry alone... when I get scared, I feel weird in the stomach, then I cry and after I cry, I feel calm and then I say 'All right. Whatever happens, will face'. (Niti, F, Indian, not attended university)*

Crying is often seen as a sign of weakness which is possibly one of the reasons why Niti cried alone. However, after venting out the negative emotions, she felt brave and ready to go out and face whatever is thrown at her. There is a sense that the calming effect that came after crying helped Niti face her problems without feeling overwhelmed by them. The same release was mentioned by Isha who said that her initial way of coping with her problems was to cry:

*...initially I used to cry... I didn't show my mom... but I used to cry hard, very hard. And when I cried out, I felt relieved. I felt very much relieved. (Isha, F, Indian, attended university)*

Just like Niti, Isha found her release through emotional expression. She said, ‘*I used to cry hard, very hard*’, this description conveying the strong emotions and distress she felt in her times of crisis and the dire need to let it out. Both Niti and Isha did not cry to communicate distress to others (‘*I first cry alone*’, ‘*I didn't show my mom*’). Crying only served to release negative emotions and to make them feel better. Thus, such emotional expression through venting posed as a coping response whenever they felt particularly stressed and worried, for some even helping to face their problems without feeling too threatened and overwhelmed by them.

Different participants found a release of stress in different ways, but it was the need to let the emotions out which seemingly helped them cope with their tensions. For instance, Niti and Isha

found their release through crying while Sarah and Amy found their release through direct expression of aggression.

*Letting it out*

There were others for whom the release of tension was more verbal (or in written form) with an intention to articulate the details of their issues rather than focusing on the expression of emotions. Amrita expressed her delight on being able to speak of her problems to her friends even though they did not necessarily solve them.

*And umm... umm... about my friends they make me feel good, they make me feel happy and we have similar issues and similar problems. So when we meet, it's a good de-stressing process. (Amrita, F, Indian, attended university)*

Speaking out her concerns worked in two ways: first it was a way through which she faced and spoke explicitly about her problems and second, knowing that other people were also facing similar problems allowed her to de-stress. It was the understanding that she was not the only person having such issues in transition that gave this the added advantage, and in this way normalisation and the sharing of burden appeared helpful to Amrita.

Similarly, Sarah spoke about how talking to someone and just having the person to listen patiently helped her deal with her problems:

*I mean I look at my mum and I couldn't have wished for anyone better and she's always been there no matter like what problems she's always been there and I think that's the key is just to support other people, be there, just listen. But sometimes you can't say anything, I mean the things with, you know, with my dad truly sucks, there's nothing, you can't get away from that, nothing's going to magically cure it but sometimes it's nice just being able to tell somebody and they'll listen and not, you know, judge you for it, yeah. (Sarah, F, British, not attended university)*

Sarah brought a photo of her mother, dragged it across the whole timeline while talking about her issues in different points of time, and kept saying, 'mom again'. For Sarah it was her mother's presence - someone who would patiently listen to her - that helped her cope with difficulties: especially those difficulties that seemed irresolvable. She did not expect the listener to give advice or to help her out of the difficult situation. It was just a space in which to describe her problems and let others know what she was going through in order to release stress to someone who would not be judgemental. It seemed that she needed a safe zone in which to lay out her problems while assigning a passive role to the person who was listening.

Hannah was another such participant who spoke to others of her problems or wrote about her worries and emotions on 'one long big piece of paper' to cope with her crisis experience:

*...like distraction is all very good in the short-term but in the long-term it doesn't actually deal with the problem, it was only when I actually sat down with someone... I haven't actually put it here, I did used to sort of... I sat and wrote once and I just started typing and then like everything just came out in one long big piece of paper. (Hannah, F, British, attended university)*



The above extract was taken from Hannah's response when I asked what helped her most in coping with her difficult times. Before asking this question, Hannah mentioned the various distraction techniques that she had used in the past to cope with her problems (also mentioned in the sub-theme, *Productivity and Escapism*). She was aware of the fact that this offered her only temporary relief and, hence, considered it a 'wasted' time. It was when she started speaking to her friends and writing her concerns down that she realised that this gave her a better grip of her problems. In this way she felt that letting her problems out helped her 'deal with the problem' rather than escaping from it. Through Hannah's account it is possible to see the varying effects and roles of different coping responses. For some, temporary relief played an important role in de-stressing irrespective of it being short-term. However, when comparing different means of coping, Hannah found that expressing her problems by letting it out worked better than distracting and defocusing from her problems.

Jack, too, found his relief through writing. He was interested in rap music and writing lyrics. He used this to his advantage and allowed his emotions to flow through lyrical expression.

*I write lyrics, I express, I write lyrics and just, I over accentuate, that's, over exaggerate, that's how I mainly express, like for example, if somebody says you know, 'you shouldn't really be smoking, [uses his own name]' or whatever, then I'll be like [shouting] 'oh she came in and she said you don't do anything, you don't do anything, just sit in a circle, sit in a cupboard with some spinach, don't go out' ... (Jack, M, British, not attended university)*

This way of expression could also be seen as venting in which he 'exaggerate[d]' the situation but, at the same time, articulated it in a way that made sense to him. The use of simile in his lyrical expression was a channel through which he described his problems in written form, but not necessarily for others to see, and understand its relevance in his life. In this way he established his own safe zone in which to let his problems out which, in turn, helped him cope.

In all these ways of coping where participants articulated their problems, there was a safety element associated with the space in which they expressed their problems. People to whom they spoke were those they trusted and the written form of expression was a personal zone of laying out their problems. In addition, they did not expect a solution to come from this act of expressing their problems, but found it helpful none the same.

These ways of expressing feelings and thoughts were used by participants as coping responses even though they did not directly resolve their issues. It helped provide a channel to release their stress which, in turn, could potentially help them to deal with the impact of their problems on them. This suggests that experience of crisis in transition to 'adulthood' can be burdensome and emotionally taxing but need not always be hidden and suffered alone.

#### 4e.6 Coping responses: Reassurance and Inspiration

Just like *Letting it out*, *Reassurance* required the involvement of other people. However, in *Reassurance* the listener played an active part whilst engaging and giving feedback rather than just being a passive recipient of the shared information. Here the listener performed the role of reflecting back, rephrasing/agreeing, and/or sometimes even boosting the participant's confidence to take a desirable step. It is the outsider's perspective that was crucial for these participants to move beyond their current issues.

Olivia was struggling to fulfil her financial needs whilst living in a condition where she was cut off from her family. Her job at the time was causing her distress, but she felt stuck in it because she feared being left without any money to support her living. She felt confused about what to do but her friends extended their support:

*So a lot of my friends did offer me that support but also just allowed me to think or even entertain the idea of resigning which was such a relief in itself, like my friend who's one of, I regard her to be one of the most sensible people ever, just said to me "You know what, hand in your notice" and I was like "I don't have any money", and she said "I don't care, you just can't not prioritise your health because that's the most important thing". And a lot of my friends supported me in other ways just telling me that, reminding me how many great things I've achieved already and how easy it will be for me to get another job and that they felt that I really needed to go for something better than this... (Olivia, F, British, attended university)*

It was a difficult decision for Olivia whether or not to risk leaving her job. Not only did her friends extend their support financially, they also boosted her self-esteem by making her realise her worth and reassuring her of her capabilities. This reassurance from her friends was a push to break off from being stuck in an unfulfilling job which was contributing to the feeling of 'crisis'. The same kind of reassurance was mentioned by Erica that played a role in de-stressing her in her difficult times.

*I didn't think that he would be able to help me in any way but like now I can tell him pretty much anything and he is brilliant, if I'm stressed about uni, it's like "[names herself] you'll be fine, like you're very clever, you know what you're doing, like you're going to be fine" and then if say like a placement's been stressful I can talk through any situations with him. (Erica, F, British, attended university)*

Erica would express her stress to her boyfriend and, in turn, get reassurance about her capabilities and potential to handle it. In this way, just like Olivia, Erica could deal with her hard times when being reminded of her strengths and potential. Thus, the experience of crisis could challenge one's sense of self-worth and self-esteem but, through reassurance from others, participants could potentially regain their lost confidence and trust in their capabilities. By boosting their confidence other people also provided the momentum to move past difficult times in their transition. It was not the direct involvement of others in resolving their issues, but the mere presence of someone who believed in them and confirmed their capabilities in handling a stressful situation that helped participants to take a big step when necessary.

Raj (Indian participant) faced disappointments in terms of romantic relationships and this depressed him and made him feel like a failure. His friends helped bring new light to his future expectations by saying, *'what you have done in the past forget it and make your new life... make it new and enjoyment... life is only one time so... every minute make it an enjoyment and it will be okay'*. It was adopting a more positive outlook that helped Raj deal with his worries. The sub-theme, *Optimism and Momentum*, demonstrated how participants formed beliefs and hopes for a better future that gave them the drive to move past their more stressful and difficult times. For Raj, it worked in a similar way, but it was other people who provided him with this optimistic way of thinking about life possibilities.

This kind of reassurance from others helped participants handle difficulties when they had lost hope and had given in to the stressful situation. It was the altered way of thinking provided by others that gave them a new perspective that was positively charged, providing them with the energy and momentum to move past the hard phase and handle it with courage and confidence.

For Niti, reassurance about her capabilities was not intended to help deal with specific issues, but a coincidental situation which led to realisation of her capabilities in a specific area:

*Then the principal... the principal met me and told me 'whatever you taught, it was really good. The kid who didn't know language, you taught her and she topped'. So I felt that I have the quality and I should do it. I felt that in future maybe I will do that. (Niti, F, Indian, not attended university)*

Niti helped her niece overcome language difficulties when she was in school. The 'pat on the back' was a boost to her self-esteem and, in addition, a source of inspiration. She was stuck in a job that did not give her the satisfaction that she desired and a feeling of crisis stemmed from not being able to find a better option through which to pursue a career. Before this incident she had not contemplated teaching to be a career option, but the principal inspired her and created a new possibility for her to explore in her transition.

For some participants, others proved to be a source of inspiration, not necessarily through direct interaction or exchange of ideas, but by motivating them to do something that they probably otherwise would not imagine or think feasible. Avril expressed such inspiration derived from people she met through an international group:

*Like since I met [mentions boyfriend] we just like joined like an international group and this is (points to the last photo of the group of people) one of the reasons why I'm thinking about going back to uni to do a Masters because pretty much everybody in this group (continues to point at the last photo) is in like doing a PhD or they've got really good jobs, like a surgeon and everyone's like studying as well, so this is like everyone's like making themselves better educated, so they've been like influence to me to go back to uni. (Amrita, F, British, attended university)*

Avril felt stuck in work in which she experienced no progress and perceived no avenue for creativity or good use of her strengths. She had disregarded her educational qualification in choosing this job (*'I think I was just desperate to get a job and I just forgot about the*

*degree*) and this led to dissatisfaction and regret. She wanted to go back to university and do a Masters degree in order to establish a better link between her qualifications and potential career. The group of people that she mentioned in this extract offered a source of inspiration and the way in which education can provide a route into satisfying work.

Avril added another source of inspiration to go back to university. This time she mentioned a friend who was as dissatisfied as herself but who had taken the leap to change her career route and graduate in a different course.

*But one of my best friends actually she decided to go back to uni last year which was also another thing that made me think, [mentions her friend] can do it, I might do it as well [laughs], but like she was bored, also bored with her regular life and the boring nine to five jobs so she's deciding to go into radiology, so she's retraining and that's what she's doing so I think, oh I could go down the like taking up your dream, even though we're getting old [laughs]. (Avril, F, British, attended university)*

Avril was 28 at the time of the interview. Her age was a big factor that stressed her and led to the feeling of crisis. She emphasized growing old and racing against time to meet the achievements that she saw others having. While she met people who had postgraduate research degrees and were into 'good jobs', she felt that it might be too late for her. Towards the end of the above extract she used the phrase 'even though we're getting old' to relate to her friend who was the same age but who had taken the leap to start over at university. Avril wanted to trace her steps and knowing that someone had already done so gave her confidence that she too could do it. In this way, her friend posed as a role model and source of inspiration to break free from the feeling of being stuck in a non-stimulating job. This inspiration was a way through which she coped with her dissatisfaction keeping herself open to change, and hope to start over from university to get a more satisfying job.

Aran received hope and inspiration from motivational programmes. He cut off ties with his family and his neighbourhood and was building a new life on his own. In such circumstances, he had very little direct support from others and these programmes provided him with the inspiration to move past his problems and gave him hope for 'another life'.

*I would say early, earliest one was [laughs] Tony Robbins (refers to photo 1), I saw his motivation programme and I just felt inspired, I thought this is not an education I've had, this is not what I've been taught by anybody, even all these teachers that claim to be great at school, actually they're ridiculous, so I watched some of his videos and I became really inspired, I thought, actually there is hope, there is another life out there so I started questioning things about taking more action, you know, recording my progress and slowly I became organised. (Aran, M, British, not attended university)*

Having been raised in an environment where he was made to believe that he would never have a better life, he was losing hope of the possibility of a positive future. It was these motivational talks that changed his perspective and aspired him to 'progress', with hope that he would successfully build a satisfactory life in the future. Four of the five photos that he brought to the interview were associated with motivation and inspiration. They represented people who had

inspired him to think positively and generate new perspectives that gave him a foundation to move ahead in his life. Even in situations where there was no direct support to reassure and inspire him, Aran found a channel through which he could inspire and motivate himself. This brings attention to the importance and relevance of external support in providing self-belief in times when one has lost hope and feels stuck in a miserable and stressful situation.

When participants felt stuck at a junction where they had to manage risks on the one hand and felt the need to 'progress' on the other, they sometimes needed an outsider's view to push ahead towards a satisfactory 'adulthood'. For instance, at the point when they felt stuck in a dissatisfactory job, they needed to make bold decisions for change and execute the same. It was at such critical periods that participants looked for confidence and reassurance about their capabilities to take these steps.

#### **4e.7 Summary (Coping responses)**

Participants responded to crisis in different ways: focusing on the problem itself, or on the emotions evoked from them, and sometimes on both. Some coping responses aimed at escaping and calming themselves and others aimed at changing their perception of the problem in order to see things more positively. For some, there was a strong belief in their ability to mould their transition into a more satisfactory direction, at times needing others to support and reassure them of these capabilities. In all these coping responses, there was a reliance on oneself to actively resolve the issues. Although they may lean on someone to express their problems and emotions, they did not expect direct assistance. Others posed as good listeners or provided the needed reassurance of their potential. Participants focused on their personal capabilities to make their way through difficult times and find a route to a 'settled life'. Thus, awareness of personal skills and potential played a crucial role in overcoming obstacles and 'finding a place in the world'.

In a period of such uncertainty and change, requiring crucial decisions to be made in the process of transition, participants required self-belief and faith in the future. They needed to feel that they were capable of making the right decisions and were a worthy person. Thus, coping with 'quarterlife crisis' involved a crisis of the self and a subsequent need to be reassured of their capabilities and value. This focus on personal capabilities is also reflected in Andrew's advice: '*you are more than individual issues*'. Through his advice, Andrew was affirming people that they are capable and that problems should not define who they are.

A few participants advised talking to others, such as through counselling services or simply speaking to someone informally about their issues. This, at times, provided exposure to a different perspective to the problem which could lead to effective coping. For instance, Olivia advised:

*... talk to your friends or the people that, whose opinions matter to you because I always feel that you can't really judge the situation from inside your own head because you're overwhelmed by all the pressures that only you know and stuff and you just need to hear an external voice of reason... (Olivia, British, attended university)*

In a concoction of various issues and novel experiences in transition, especially when a participant is continuously facing disappointments and obstacles on the way to becoming an adult, it is possible for one to feel lost and fall into negative thinking. Many participants reported self-blame or self-doubt when things were not going according to expectations and they tended to perceive themselves as the only person experiencing this sort of crisis (reflected in the sub-category, *Playing catch up*, in earlier chapter, *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*) and that they were uniquely unable to overcome it. Talking to others about their experiences helped boost their confidence and reassure them that such experiences are normal, and that they have the capability to handle them. The sub-themes in this chapter suggest that a large part of dealing with crisis in transition related to the conflict between self-doubt and self-belief in their personal capabilities, skills and potential and feeling worthy of a successful future.

There were no cultural differences found in the coping responses. Both Indian and British participants of both genders (male and female) used one or more coping responses mentioned in the sub-themes. In addition, there was no specific pattern of coping responses seen between participants who did and who did not attend university.

#### **4e.8 Discussion (Coping responses)**

The summary above explicated the centrality of reassurance about one's personal capabilities to deal with crisis experiences. This was in the form of self-assurance and/or reassurance by others. Either way, being confirmed of one's skills and potential was crucial in coping with crises in the transition to adulthood. This is commensurate with Stapleton's (2012) empirical research where it was found that self-confidence plays a dominant role in dealing with 'quarterlife crisis' experienced by young people (18-30 years of age). Similar to my study, young people in Stapleton's research had high expectations with regard to how they would make a transition into their career and held a, possibly over-optimistic, vision of their future life. Crisis was experienced when they failed to attain what they and/or others expected from them. Coaches involved with these young people reported lack of confidence as one of the important elements of such crises.

Stapleton (2012) also highlighted the importance of self-awareness in building confidence among young people experiencing 'quarterlife crisis'. In the present study it was found that being aware of their personal skills and potential gave participants the confidence to move past the difficult times in their transition. In this way, the link between self-awareness and confidence is also established from the accounts in the present study. Similarly, Abouserie

(1994) in his UK study with young people from college, found that believing in their abilities and having a sense of control led to better coping than having an external locus of control (e.g., believing in luck). The present study is in line with this finding. In addition, I showed how, when faced with difficult situations, young people can feel lost, unsure of their ability to deal with the problems, and stuck in a bad situation. It is at these points that they desperately needed the self-confidence to be able to move ahead in their transitional process. Having someone vouch for their personal skills and capabilities played an important role in boosting their confidence and providing the momentum to progress.

The following section will explore each sub-theme of *Coping Responses* in relation to existing work. At the outset, it is worth discussing the two forms of coping proposed by Folkman and Lazarus (1980), namely emotion focused coping and problem focused coping. Emotion focused coping involves dealing with the affect and feelings associated with the stress, and problem focused coping involves dealing with the issues or source of the stress more directly. The latter is said to be more readily taken up when there is a perceived solution to the problem. These two types of strategies are useful for understanding the coping responses used by participants in the present study.

The first sub-theme, *'Acceptance of Non-Linear Progression'*, was a way of self-assurance in which participants tried to accept that apparent back-tracks could be a positive learning experience and had the potential to lead them to their career goal. They also started forming new perspectives about what is meant by 'success' and 'failure' in transition. This can be understood as both emotion focused and problem focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980): on one hand they were attempting to move beyond the feeling of being stuck by changing the way in which they evaluated their progress while, on the other, opening-up to new practical possibilities such as returning to university. Understanding and accepting varied routes to success offer an important and positive change in the process of transition.

Optimism and hope were also important elements in dealing with their problems. With the lack of a concrete plan to reach their goal, the expectations that formed their optimistic outlook was 'very general'. Scheier, Weintraub and Carver (1986) posed from their study on undergraduates that a general belief in positive outcome (dispositional optimism) could play a buffering role in stressful events, especially when the probable outcome is unknown. This applies to the participants in the current study who expressed optimism for their future with little knowledge about the ways in which this could come about. Scheier et al. (1986) found that optimism was associated with problem focused coping that involves using elaborate plans and disengaging themselves from unrelated activities while, in situations perceived as uncontrollable, optimism could lead to seeking social support. In this way, optimism could lead to positive coping in both controllable and uncontrollable circumstances. This could be especially crucial for those from

low SES backgrounds who have limited family support in times of crisis. As seen from the present study, coming from low SES, for both Aran and Jack, optimism formed an important coping response that gave them the momentum to keep moving in their transition. Thus, optimism held by participants in the present study could be seen in the positive light as a coping response that could potentially help them engage in ‘planning’ and ‘active coping’. According to Carver et al. (1989), ‘planning’ involves setting the steps to resolve a problem and ‘active coping’ is when there is execution of steps in an attempt to resolve a problem. Such productive coping behaviour could be induced through optimism.

*Productivity and Escapism* provided a temporary space to disengage from problems. This is similar to ‘mental disengagement’ as proposed by Carver et al. (1989) which involves using distraction in order to avoid facing problems especially when one feels helpless. In the present study, these coping responses involved moving away from their problems psychologically and/or physically. This did not necessarily resolve their issues directly, but were considered productive by participants as it brought some temporary peace of mind. Such response seems similar to an avoidant coping style. According to Roth and Cohen (1986), avoidance is associated with emotional reaction to a problem and can be considered dysfunctional (e.g., Carver et al., 1989). In the present study, it was seen that participants often engaged in leisure activities in order to disengage from the source of their problems. This gave distraction an additional purpose, wherein participants felt calm and productive whilst using their energy on activities of interest. Similarly, Connor-Smith et al. (2000) drew attention to the distinction between avoidance and distraction, where the former is seen as a maladaptive and the latter a positive coping strategy. The functionality of leisure activities in coping with problems was also highlighted by Iwasaki, McTavish and McKay (2005). Through empirical research using qualitative method Iwasaki et al. (2005) found that:

*...many people intentionally create a leisure space, which is considered an oasis to recharge themselves physically, psychologically and/or emotionally, which facilitates a sense of balance, survival and/or resilience to cope proactively with or counteract stress. (p. 97)*

Thus, leisure activities were considered to have palliative value with the potential also to create a balance in life. However, too much engagement in such activities, whilst ignoring the problem, could lead to undesirable consequences (Patry, Blanchard & Mask, 2007). For instance, in the present study, Hannah kept engaging herself in other activities whilst avoiding her problem at work that led to her termination from the job. And many participants in the present study seemed to have responded to their crisis by moving away from their problems, especially when these were perceived to be irresolvable. For some, such responses gave peace of mind without any price paid, while there were others (like Hannah) for whom this strategy had destructive implications. In contrast, Aman engaged in leisure activities to distract himself from family problems that were impeding his work life and Erica, Sarah and Amrita engaged in



other activities when they perceived their problem to be uncontrollable and irresolvable but this did not necessarily mean that such coping responses were dysfunctional. As acknowledged by Iwasaki et al. (2005), such activities provided them the space for positive experience during low points. In this way, engaging in leisure activities could potentially protect young people from mental health problems and difficulties related to crisis experience. Thus, my study highlights two possible factors in determining whether ‘mental disengagement’ (Carver et al., 1989) could be considered functional in coping among young adults. The extent to which *Productivity and Escapism* is functional in dealing with crisis experiences depends on the time spent on such distracting activities and the degree of urgency required to resolve the problem.

Some participants held onto a belief in their capability to reach their goals. These participants attributed personal characteristics of determination and capabilities as their strength in times when they saw few avenues for positive change in their circumstances. Here, being a ‘triaholic’ whilst persevering through their problems was their coping response in times when they felt helpless and lost. This could be associated with Arnett’s proposal of emerging adulthood as an ‘age of possibilities’: that is, “no matter what their lives are like now, nearly everyone believes that... eventually life will smile on them and they will achieve the adult life they envision” (Arnett, 2011, p. 257). Being a ‘triaholic’ is similar to being optimistic, but also focuses on their patience and resilience, sometimes overworking to reach their goal causing exhaustion. There is also an element of ‘planning’ and ‘active coping’ (Carver et al., 1989) but the emphasis is on self-belief bringing with it also some reliance on the fantasy of ‘destiny’. Hence, the present study reveals how optimism can incorporate an external locus of control (e.g., belief in luck and destiny) along with internal locus of control (e.g., belief in one’s own personal strengths). Thus, this sub-theme, ‘*Triaholic*’, merges the two components of internal and external locus of control in coping with crisis experience in transition among young people.

In the coping responses in which participants spoke about *Venting and Letting it out*, there is a sense of the need to express, either the problem itself and/or the emotions attached to them. This was not to find a solution, but a way to share or to externalise their problems. Bushman (2002) argued that venting anger is a dysfunctional coping strategy as it tends to intensify negative emotions rather than reduce them. Similarly Carver et al. (1989) considered venting dysfunctional as it could distract one from ‘active coping’, but argued that it could be useful if it helps people to confront feelings associated with a problem. The participants in the current study who used venting as a means to cope found it effective in dealing with negative emotions arising from their experience of crisis. This contradictory finding could be explained on the ground that the anger provoked from their crisis may not be the same kind of anger as a reaction to someone’s criticism (as used in Bushman’s study). Thus, the source of frustration could be a determinant of whether venting is a productive or destructive way of coping. While the process of venting seems to be an emotion-focused coping, there is potential that one can get clearer

perspective of the problem with the release of emotions. This could help one to view the problem in a new light and deal with it in more efficient and fruitful manner. For instance, after venting, Niti felt more confident to face her problem.

*Letting it out* is another way through which one could find new perspective on the problem allowing a better handling of their crisis experience. This could work in a similar way as narrative therapy which is based on the premise that when a person separates the story from him/herself, there is potential for change through creation of new narrative accompanied by behavioural changes (White & Epsom, 1990, cited by Etchison & Kleist, 2000). Similarly, expressing one's problems in writing and, in this way gaining some distance, could potentially lead to better adjustment and Spera, Buhrfeind and Pennebaker (1994) argued that through expressive writing one attains "closure on the loss, thus achieving a new perspective" (p. 731; see also Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). Thus, the functionality of such a coping response could be in its potential to lead to an 'active coping' (Carver et al., 1989) once a new perspective is obtained.

As discussed earlier, confirming their capabilities and potential in a period filled with confusion and uncertainty was crucial in dealing with crisis experiences among young people. Transitional periods are known to be times of rapid change (Arnett, 2000; Keniston, 1970) and this may challenge people's ability to trust in themselves and their ability to deal with problems. It is at such a junction that other people can provide important reassurance to rebuild confidence and offer inspiration to take the next steps into an uncertain future. Thus, *Reassurance and Inspiration* played an important role in dealing with crises in transition to adulthood either through direct interaction with other people or by observing other people's success.

I would also like to acknowledge that, unfortunately, not all young people will fulfil their aspirations. However, in this chapter, I have highlighted at least some of the coping responses through which they responded to disappointments and difficulties associated with the experience of crisis in transition to adulthood. Some may require giving up or modifying their goals and others adjust their sails to alter their direction of travel. For instance, in the first sub-theme, *Acceptance of non-linear progression*, participants were seen to reconcile with the fact that they might not follow a smooth and linear progression as they had expected yet found and pursued alternative routes to self-satisfaction. In this way young people may find in themselves the strength and resilience to compromise and adjust to their circumstances when their former goals and aspirations seem unattainable.

Overall two elements were seen as crucial in dealing with crisis experience among young people – (i) assurance of one's capabilities, skills and potential, and (ii) attaining a new perspective on the problem.



## Chapter 5: Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand the lived experiences of crisis among young people from two cultural groups: British and Indian. The broad research question is: How do young adults negotiate the ‘quarterlife crisis’? In addressing this question, the study sought to identify:

- (1) the different forms the ‘quarterlife crisis’ takes;
- (2) coping strategies young people use;
- (3) resources – both personal and social – that help support young people as they journey through this crisis; and
- (4) an understanding of how to prevent severely traumatic ‘quarterlife crises’ and to lessen its burden when young adults seek help.

To recap in relation to these objectives: first, the analysis of the interviews gathered in this study demonstrate some commonalities of experience but with interesting and possibly systematic, differences between the two cultural groups and between participants of lower and higher SES related to the situations they face. Second, the chapter on coping responses exemplified the different ways through which young people attempted to deal with their crisis experiences. Third, the chapter on coping responses has also helped to identify some of the personal and social resources that could help young people in navigating through their crisis experience. For instance, while some resorted to personal ways of coping, like indulging in activities that led to positive affect, there were others who discussed their problems with someone else as a way of venting. Fourth, identifying the commonality of this crisis experience among young people, and understanding their perceptions and experiences over the transitional period, gives an avenue for counsellors and policy makers to understand the complexities of experience and recognise diversity in transition from education to work. In addition, a universal recognition of difficulties faced by some young people might help them feel more comfortable to seek help when experiencing a traumatic crisis in their transition.

In this chapter, I shall place the experience of ‘quarterlife crisis’ in the social, economic and political climate, thus shifting from individual to social concerns that perpetuate the crisis experience. The following are the sections that will be covered:

- 5.1 What does this research tell us about the lived experience of ‘quarterlife crisis’?
- 5.2 What is the relationship between ‘quarterlife crisis’ and ‘midlife crisis’?
- 5.3 What does this research add to understanding ‘quarterlife crisis’ in the light of previous theories?
  - 5.3.1 ‘Quarterlife crisis’ in the light of developmental stages and phases of crisis
  - 5.3.2 Critical developmental perspectives in understanding ‘quarterlife crisis’
- 5.4 What does this research add to placing ‘quarterlife crisis’ in the wider social, economic and political context?

5.4.1 What does this research add to our understanding of ‘quarterlife crisis’ based on the two cultural groups and differing educational background?

5.5 What are the strengths and limitation of this research?

5.6 Quality assessment of the present study

5.7 What are the practical implications and scope for future research?

5.8 Conclusions

### **5.1 What does this research tell us about the lived experience of ‘quarterlife crisis’?**

The themes covered in the previous chapters give a sense of the individual events laid in specific contexts that have led young people to feel stuck and paralysed in their transitional experience. In the theme *Smooth navigation and Self-fulfilment* participants were found to be experiencing crisis when their experience with realities of transition from education to work, romantic relationships and/or work life turned to be different from their expectations and preferences. The subtheme *Question of ‘what I want’* (in *Smooth navigation and Self-fulfilment*) shows how participants have struggled to attain a career goal that would at the same time cater to their personal interests and preferences. Moreover, in the absence of a concrete measure of success, participants were seen to struggle with verifying their capabilities to meet standards that were developed by, and assumed through, comparison with others in transition (often involving upward comparisons), and family and cultural expectations, exemplified in the theme *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*. The theme *Becoming and knowing oneself* informed how participants experienced crisis when they felt stuck with the need to develop self-understanding and merge the same in different social settings. The avenues available to bring a consensus between the internal and external demands were seen to be limited. *Forced ‘adulthood’/independence* exemplified participants’ confrontation with demands to assume adult roles and responsibilities and/or attain financial stability whilst feeling unprepared for these tasks. This feeling of unpreparedness coupled with a sense of urgency led to an experience of crisis. At the crux of these events lay the movement from expectations to the actual experiences of transition wherein young people find themselves struggling to deal with the transitional realities, in contrast to what they had previously envisaged.

In my *Literature review* chapter, I discussed Hermann (1972) and Billings et al.’s (1980) description of crisis. In Hermann’s theory, there are three elements to crisis: a threat to goal achievement; time constraint in resolving the threat; and an element of surprise. In the present study, I have demonstrated how my participants experienced changes in values, possibilities, and circumstances that prompted a re-evaluation or re-structuring - but without easy resolution - of the purpose and direction of their lives. This was accompanied by a sense of urgency to resolve their issues. In the light of previous theories and descriptions of crisis (Billings et al., 1980; Hermann, 1972), the experiences of young people in the present study demonstrated

‘quarterlife crisis’ as associated with how well they felt they were fulfilling tasks considered typical of the requirements of transitioning successfully to adulthood. With regard to these tasks, although there were some that were perceived commonly by most participants, there were, however, other tasks that were unique to participants from specific backgrounds.

I posit that there needs to be a more nuanced understanding of the term ‘quarterlife crisis’. Robbins and Wilner (2001), who proposed this term, focused on young university graduates who experienced a gap between the expected and the real. By excluding young people from non-university backgrounds, the crisis is narrowed down to that associated with the movement from university to work life. The present study has generated a broader understanding of ‘quarterlife crisis’ which involves young peoples’ concerns with proving their worth, fulfilling personal interest, establishing self-understanding, and coming to terms with the social order and the adult roles demanded of them. The themes discussed in the previous chapters explicated these experiences of young people that led to the feeling of crisis. In addition to this, it is essential to understand how this crisis could be experienced among different cultural groups. In the present study two broad cultural groups – British and Indian – were taken into consideration. These groups make an interesting comparison, with British culture typically considered ‘individualistic’ and Indian culture ‘collectivist’. While being mindful of the debates associated with these terms, the present study explicated how young people from these two groups experienced crisis similarly and/or differently.

The mini-discussions in the previous chapters have elucidated some of the differences in experiences across the groups. The present study found that the experience of crisis entailed a feeling of stagnancy: paralysis at a junction when the transitional realities turned out to be different from what had been expected. There is also a feeling of being unprepared for the roles and responsibilities that are demanded as part of being an ‘adult’. This feeling was similar across the two cultural groups, but the situations and circumstances that perpetuated this feeling were varied. This shows that there is an underlying process in which the task of sustaining a stable job and relationship is commonly recognised across different social, economic and cultural groups. However the hardships faced in this process could be influenced by different internal and external, cultural demands. For instance, it was found that the Indian participants often mentioned how family expectations had a large influence on their transitional experience. Some experienced crisis when they had to sacrifice their personal goal when it was in conflict with family and/or social expectations (like Aman). There were others who strived to achieve their personal goal whilst attempting to negotiate with others’ expectations (like Raj). Some Indian participants even merged family expectations with their personal goals and experienced crisis when they were unable to fulfil them (like Amrita). Such emphasis on family and social expectations were atypical in the interviews with British participants. There were some British participants (like Andrew and Alex) who expressed the need to make their family proud, but

only mentioned it as secondary to their personal goals. As mentioned in the literature review, such difference between the two groups could be associated with different emphasis placed in a typical 'individualistic' and 'collectivist' culture (Killen & Wairyb, 2000; Mines, 1988). Personal goals could be important for all irrespective of social and cultural background, but the possibility of, or the route to, its fulfilment could be different based on the structural constraints embedded in specific social and cultural setting (Mines, 1988). This could be the reason why most young Indian participants expressed crisis that was closely associated with others' expectations (especially family), which was atypical of British participants who instead talked extensively about the concern over following a linear and smooth route to a self-fulfilled adulthood.

With regard to young people from university and non-university backgrounds, I found that the major difference was in their expectations of 'progression'. 7 of the 24 participants did not place their crisis in the *Betrayal of the 'ideal'* and, of these, four were non-university educated. There is a sense that these non-university educated young people were more concerned with the possibility of achieving their personal goals, even if later in their life, as opposed to feeling the need to fulfil their personal interest immediately. Instead, all but one of the non-university educated participants were mainly concerned with attaining financial stability and gradually fulfilling their interests rather than being worried about doing both at the same time. The one participant who did not talk about these concerns, showed other crisis points mainly associated with the development of self-understanding and problems living away from home.

In summary this section highlighted the relevance of crisis experience among young people transitioning to adulthood. In addition to this, the crisis experience, although share similarity of feelings, has differences based on varied situations and circumstances faced by young people. These differences in experiences based on social, economic and cultural background are discussed elaborately in a later section of this chapter.

## **5.2 What is the relationship between 'quarterlife crisis' and 'midlife crisis'?**

Robbins and Wilner (2001), who proposed the term 'quarterlife crisis', started by explicating the meaning of the crisis by drawing a contrast with midlife crisis. With regard to midlife crisis they wrote:

*Often for people experiencing midlife crisis, a sense of stagnancy sparks the need for change. During this period, the middle-aged person tends to reflect on his past, in part to see if his life to date measures up to the life he had envisioned as a child (or as a twenty-something) (2001, p. 2)*

This sense of stagnancy and need for change was also apparent among young people in the present study (as discussed in the previous section). Contrary to the propositions by Robbins and Wilner, the present study shows that there is, in fact, a close similarity between midlife crisis and 'quarterlife crisis'. Participants in the present study displayed a feeling of being stuck,

paralysed and panicked whilst perceiving everything and everyone else to be moving on and developing in the right direction. There is a 'sense of stagnancy' wherein the 'need for change' is evident in their accounts. Keniston (1970), too, discussed this urgent need for change among 'youth' that creates a state of panic and restlessness. And, just like that in midlife crisis, young people in the present study were seen to make comparisons between what they envisioned and aspired to prior to their transitional experience with what they were experiencing in their actual transition (also discussed in the theme, *Smooth navigation and Self-fulfilment*). This comparison, and the gap recognised, led young people to feel lost in terms of goals and direction, with a consequent experience of crisis.

Just as midlife crisis is associated with a desire and need for a change in life structure (Levinson, 1978), young people experiencing 'quarterlife crisis' are also seen to feel the same need. This is particularly so when they have already made decisions with regard to job and relationship but, at the same time, recognise a need for modification. In the present study, I showed how participants often reappraised their achievements at different points whilst in their transition and recognised the need for change and redirection. This is commensurate with Levinson's (1978) proposal of Entering the Adult World (22-28 years) and Age 30 Transition (28-33 years). The former is said to be the time when initial choices are made with regard to career and relationship and the latter when there is an evoked need to make changes and develop a new life structure (often based on intrinsic motivation). It is during this Age 30 Transition that Levinson proposed a stress period that could even develop into a crisis. A similar experience is noted by Levinson in his proposal of Midlife Crisis when people start raising questions about their choices of life structure, re-evaluating and identifying need for change in order to make it more suiting to their personal interests and desires. He used the term de-illusionment for this experience in midlife. Parallels can be drawn here between 'quarterlife crisis' and midlife crisis based on the accounts in the present study. The theme *Smooth navigation and Self-fulfilment* captures this experience among young people when they reach a point where they realise that their past beliefs and expectations about their transition and how the world works are not true and they are faced with the task of shedding their ideals in order to deal with the real. At this junction they feel the need to form a new life structure based on revised beliefs, values and expectations.

This raises the possibility that such form of crisis connoted as 'quarterlife crisis' might not be a unique experience specific to young people in their twenties. However, even given the similarities of both the crises phases, we cannot downplay the differential situations and circumstances at which they are thought to occur and the consequent differences in risks and impact of 'quarterlife crisis' and midlife crisis. Whilst developing a contrast between midlife crisis and 'quarterlife crisis', Robbins and Wilner (2001) proposed that 'quarterlife crisis' is when there is "none of that predictable stability that drives middle-aged people to do



unpredictable things” (p. 2-3). The major difference between the two could potentially lie in the degree of stability experienced at the time when they encounter crisis. During the twenties there is usually less financial stability and my research showed young people struggling to balance financial needs with personal interests and preferences while trying to establish a life structure. On the other hand, midlife crisis is associated with change in life structure, but not typically concerned with stability (Levinson, 1978). Thus, the experience of instability and uncertainty during the twenties are the elements that can be used in understanding the difference between the two forms of crises situated in different phases of life. The risk of establishing and/or changing life structure could be consequently different during the twenties compared to midlife.

Another interesting difference between ‘quarterlife crisis’ and midlife crisis that can be drawn from Robbins and Wilner’s (2001) proposition is the difference in recognition of the phenomena that leads to different impacts. According to these authors, people going through midlife crisis are more confident with going to and utilising different sources of help because the phenomenon is widely acknowledged given its strong theoretical and empirical underpinning. On the other hand, similar experiences during the twenties are not so widely recognised:

*The slam is particularly painful because today’s twentysomethings believe that they are alone and that they are having a much more difficult transition period than their peers—because the twenties are supposed to be “easy”, because no one talks about these problems, and because the difficulties are therefore so unexpected. (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p. 4)*

Similarly, the present study has shown that participants often compared themselves with others and seemed as if they were the only one to ‘lag behind’ and felt stuck in their transition. None of the participants acknowledged the possibility of other young people experiencing the same. This could consequently lead to self-blame, as also seen in the theme, *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations* and henceforth suggests possibility of a different impact than midlife crisis.

In this way, although there is some commonality in the feeling state associated with both the crises, the risks and impacts of ‘quarterlife crisis’ and midlife crisis differentiate them from each other. This calls for specific attention that needs to be given to this experience of ‘quarterlife crisis’, recognising it as common experience influenced by both internal and external demands, rather than underplaying it with terms like ‘Generation Me’ or ‘Generation Y’ whilst blaming the young people for their delayed transition (also discussed in the *Introduction* of the thesis).

In the present study, some participants shared the feeling of urgency in developing a stable career and romantic relationship, while at the same time feeling stuck and unable to do so for various reasons. Thus, the delay in attaining ‘adulthood’ is not always a personal choice, but a phenomenon influenced by the wider context. This prolongation could be because of higher skill demand (Brar & Amandeep, 2015; Keep, 2012; Roberts, 2009; Saini, 2015; Scherer, 2005)

extending the period of education and training, and limited employment opportunities for young people just out of education, among other reasons (Keep, 2012; O'Higgins, 2001). Thus, the conditions of young people need to be understood in the light of social and economic context rather than viewing it as a simple generational shift leading to attitudinal change (Wyn & Woodman, 2006). In the following section, I discuss the nature of 'quarterlife crisis' experience in the light of previous theories and research.

### **5.3 What does this research add to understanding 'quarterlife crisis' in the light of previous theories?**

Commensurate with Robbins and Wilner's writings, I have demonstrated how the 'quarterlife crisis' evoked a "sense of helplessness and cluelessness, of indecision and apprehension" (2001, p. 4). In addition, the present study shows how young people feel paralysed in their positions, and unprepared and unable to take the requisite step to move ahead in their transition. This experience of being paralysed can be understood in the light of Keniston's (1970) model of 'youth' where he proposed this period to be the time when the need for change could be so intensive that it leads to a state of panic, feeling of not moving, and of falling into a rut. Thus, young people may be in a period of *moratorium* where there is exploration of options and contemplating future possible steps, but without making a commitment. Marcia (1980) described 'moratorium' to be a state in which there is an active struggle to make commitments and connoted it to be an 'identity crisis'. It is a time when people are exploring options but have not yet made a commitment to occupation or ideology (values and beliefs). In explaining moratorium, Marcia posited:

*Although his parents' wishes are still important to him, he is attempting a compromise among them, society's demands, and his own capabilities. His sometimes bewildered appearance stems from his vital concern and internal preoccupation with what occasionally appear to him to be unresolvable questions. (1966, p. 552)*

Participants in the present study shared accounts of struggling to meet social standards and expectations while, at the same time, catering to their personal interests and desires. This in itself becomes a test of their personal capabilities and skills. In addition to this, the values and beliefs that they previously held about work and relationship were challenged and they were faced with transitional realities that required them to negotiate with the ideals and create a new basis of understanding the transitional requirements. In this process they reported feeling stuck whilst making compromises and settlements between internal and external demands. There is a negative connotation associated with the process of moratorium as if this ought not to happen in their transition – perceiving themselves as failures.

Moratorium needs to be recognised as a commonly experienced point in transition in order to avoid marginalising young people who (through imposition or personal choice) feel stuck or 'lagging behind' others. Côté (2006) proposed a moratorium period to be a relatively common

experience among young people in the 21st century, which is perpetuated more by external factors than evoked from internal qualities. For instance, participation in higher education with a hope of getting better opportunities in the labour market is one of the reasons why moratorium has become more institutionalised than before. Côté argued that 50 years ago Erikson discussed moratorium as “a context within which the identity crisis was resolved, especially as individuals needed it to rework unconscious conflicts” (2006, p. 92). This places moratorium as an internal issue, but Côté proposes that the reasons for being in moratorium has become more varied in the new century. With this recognition, Côté even went to the extent of proposing an additional period of transition called ‘youthhood’ when some young people experience prolonged ‘emerging adulthood’ and moratorium.

This suggests that moratorium, which was associated with the period of adolescence (Marcia, 1966, 1980), is also a concern and could be a central element of experience among young adults in transition, even in their late 20s. Often young people associate this period of moratorium with a crisis experience when they feel that they are the only ones who are unable to ‘progress’ in their transition. This is very similar to the ‘Age Thirty Crisis’ proposed by Levinson (1978) where he explained this feeling in terms of a metaphor:

*One suggestive metaphor for a developmental crisis is a man alone on a body of water trying to get from Island Past to Island Future. He fears that he will not reach Future. He feels that he can move neither forward nor backward, that he is on the verge of drowning. A man may experience himself as swimming alone, as rowing on a leaky boat, or as captain of a luxurious but defective ship caught in a storm. (p. 86)*

Levinson (1978) recognised two crisis experiences before middle age. The first is in the early twenties (22-28 years) when young people have to build a life structure (composed of specific occupation and stable romantic relationship). The second is in the late twenties (between 28-33 years) when they re-evaluate and recognise a sense of urgency to develop a more serious and rigid life structure. Levinson called these two periods taken together ‘Age Thirty Transition’. In the present study, it was seen that some young people described this urgency even in their early twenties, feeling the pressure to make the right choice with regard to their career and romantic relationship. This pressure for the right choice was often recognised because of its potentiality in carving their future prospects of a self-fulfilling adulthood. In the process of transition, participants were struggling to shed their ideals and deal with the actual transitional experience. In doing so they quite often felt helpless and stuck with the feeling of ‘not progressing’ or not performing as well as others in their transition. As implicated in Levinson’s metaphor, young people in the present study felt that they were moving ‘neither forward nor backward’. On one hand they felt unprepared to take adult roles and, on the other, they felt that they cannot ‘*afford to be a child anymore*’ (phrase used by one of the participants in the present study).

Given this crisis experience where some young people are said to struggle with developing a life structure, there is a sense that young people experience, what could be called, a *deficit of*

*eudaimonic wellbeing*. Eudaimonic wellbeing or eudaimonia is associated with happiness, that which is not just the presence of positive affect and the absence of negative affect (as in the case of hedonic wellbeing), but also a sense of good functioning with satisfactory quality of life (Keyes & Annas, 2009) and personal growth towards attainment of full potential (Deci & Ryan, 2008). This involves knowing one's personal goals and purpose in life and working towards their fulfilment (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 2006), success of which is influenced both by internal and external factors (Ryff & Singer, 2006). Waterman (1993) equated eudaimonia with personal expressiveness that involves:

... (a) an unusually intense involvement in an undertaking, (b) a feeling of special fit or meshing with an activity that is not characteristic of most daily tasks, (c) a feeling of intensely being alive, (d) a feeling of being complete or fulfilled while engaged in an activity, (e) an impression that this is what the person was meant to do, and (f) a feeling that this is who one really is. (p. 679)

Young people in the present study were engaged in this task of 'finding' what they want and working towards its fulfilment. The experience of crisis was catalysed by being unable to derive a purpose in life and, consequently, they felt lost and confused (discussed in the subtheme, *Question of 'what I want'*). Those who seemed to have found a goal in life expressed the difficulties faced in its attainment (discussed in the categories, *Late realisation, Multiplicity of options, Financial consideration* and *'Pressure from the family'*). Although eudaimonic wellbeing might be a continuous process of becoming and knowing with no end point (Ryff & Singer, 2006), it is during the period of young adulthood that individuals can feel that they ought to have a relatively stable purpose and direction in life that will guide them into adulthood and into feeling settled. In the present study, participants constantly stressed on '*finding what [they] want*', a purpose that they perceived essential in order to 'progress' in life. Here again I would like to emphasize subjective perception in identifying the absence of eudaimonic wellbeing. Only when one perceives the absence of meaning and direction of life does one experience a crisis that entails a *deficit of eudaimonic wellbeing*. This subjective element in eudaimonic wellbeing is emphasized by Keyes and Annas (2009) who refuted claims of eudaimonia being primarily an objective wellbeing determined by external observers. According to Keyes and Annas, such claims were misinterpretations of the term eudaimonia as given by Aristotle.

Many philosophers, empirical researchers and theorists have debated similarities and differences between eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Keyes & Annas, 2009; Lee & Carey, 2013; Tiberius & Hall, 2010; Waterman, 1993). Hedonic wellbeing is a feeling state which is not necessarily associated with a satisfaction of life functioning, on the other hand, eudaimonic wellbeing is associated with subjective perception of good life functioning (Keyes & Annas, 2009). Thus, activities associated with eudaimonic wellbeing leads to hedonic wellbeing, but the reverse is not always true (Waterman, 1993). Some researchers propose that

both eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing are essential for an overall feeling of wellness (Henderson & Knight, 2012; Huta & Ryan, 2010).

In the present study it was seen that participants often replaced eudaimonic with hedonic wellbeing in order to attain some kind of temporary satisfaction or relief through positive affect, especially when they felt helpless. Hedonic wellbeing is associated with pleasure which could be from social, physical or intellectual activities (Waterman, 1993). This was seen in the coping responses discussed in Chapter 4e where participants engaged in different activities (discussed in the sub-theme, *Productivity and Escapism*) to take their mind off problems. This could be useful in the short term or as a temporary arrangement to create a positive mood which could also help deal with seeing problems in a new light. But prolonged involvement in such activities could cause the main problems or issues to aggravate (as already discussed in the chapter of *Coping Responses*).

Through empirical work on undergraduate students and graduates, Waterman (1993) found that activities associated with personal expressiveness or eudaimonia have higher importance than those associated with hedonic wellbeing. There is a sense that young people (even in the present study) actively engage and persevere in deriving self-acceptance (that starts with self-understanding), personal growth (working towards attaining one's full potential), purpose in life (having a meaning and hence the motivation for life), environmental mastery (ability to influence environment to suit personal needs), positive relationship with others (especially establishing stable romantic relationship) and autonomy (following one's own principles rather than norms and standards externally determined). These are the six components of eudaimonia given by Ryff and Singer (2006). From the present study it can be seen that the experience of crisis is situated in the event that they struggle attaining the aforementioned components of eudaimonia. This suggests that a lack or *deficit of eudaimonic wellbeing* could be a philosophical basis of understanding the experience of 'quarterlife crisis'.

In the following sub-section, I discuss 'quarterlife crisis' in the light of developmental stages and phases of crisis given by different theorists and researchers. In this process I will be revisiting the theories that were mentioned in the *Literature review* chapter.

### ***5.3.1 'Quarterlife crisis' in the light of developmental stages and phases of crisis***

I discussed four theories in my *Literature review* chapter in relation to the development of young people: those that were given by Erikson (1950, 1968), Keniston (1970), Levinson (1978, 1986) and Arnett (1997, 2000). These are primarily stage theories. In this section, I shall first highlight the extent to which these theories are applicable in understanding crisis experience among young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the light of the present study. I shall also visit a more recent theory of stages of crisis by Robinson and Smith (2010). Second, I shall discuss critical

developmental perspectives that could be used in understanding varied experiences of young people in transition.

With regard to Erikson's (1950, 1968) theory of psychosocial development, relevant to this study are the two stages of 'adolescence' and 'young adulthood'. According to Erikson, 'identity versus role confusion' is typical of the adolescence period, and 'intimacy versus isolation', the main concern of the period of young adulthood. However, in the present study it was found that there is a concoction of both these concerns in the crisis experiences of the participants. The theme expounded in the Chapter *Becoming and Knowing Oneself* shows the way participants continued to make sense of themselves whilst relating to education and work settings, relationships (family and peer), and the social and cultural environment in which they were situated. In addition to this, they were also seen to seek a stable intimate relationship and, if unable to attain this, felt lonely and feared being so for the rest of their life. Although Erikson's theory somewhat fits the experiences of young people in the present generation (specifically the emphasis on intimacy versus isolation during young adulthood), identity confusion may still be carried on to young adulthood. According to Côté, the reason behind this prolongation of time spent in identity formation is because of two main reasons:

*(a) The changed education-to-work transition whereby large numbers of youth are now required to postpone aspects of identity formation, and (b) the diminished normative structure governing the transition to adulthood.* (2006, p. 86)

Heinz (2002) argued that employment settings in the new century do not provide the scope for a consistent narrative of the self. The temporary nature of jobs has led to a condition where a person is indulged in a constant construction and reconstruction of self based on the demands of the social settings. As also seen from the sub-theme *Incompetent and conflicted*, participants in the present study were seen to be making sense of their self in relation to the current job status. However, these jobs were not seen as a permanent work setting to continue till later in their life. Thus, a change in one's job could lead to a further self-evaluation and possibly a development of new self-understanding based on the new environment that one is exposed to. In addition to this, when encountered with transitional realities different from what they expected, there is a demand for a reconstruction and adaptation of self that would suit the requirements of their actual transition. Thus, the changing nature of education-to-work transition and the disintegrated institutions governing transition render a fluid nature of self-understanding. Given these historical contexts, identity confusion in young adulthood could be more common than atypical of the new century. This identified commonality hints towards the need of a new perspective wherein, rather than considering identity confusion as symbolic of failure during adolescence before moving to young adulthood, this crisis needs to be considered also as part of the transitioning period to adulthood. This is commensurate with Côté's (2006) proposal that young people in the new century commonly experience a prolonged period of moratorium. According

to him, decisions made during teens need to be considered tentative as they tend to be re-evaluated and often changed whilst in their twenties. Further to this, the present study shows that re-evaluation and change in oneself could be continuously experienced throughout one's transition to adulthood at different periods of time, and the constant re-adjustment that is demanded of young people may lead them to experience crisis, especially when demands for change outweigh their capabilities for change in order to fit in a given setting.

This coexistence of identity crisis along with feeling of isolation could perpetuate the experience of crisis among some young people. In the present study, I have demonstrated how the young people interviewed felt overwhelmed with different tasks at hand, wherein they had to make decisions about career and romantic relationship while at the same time 'find out' who they are and what they wanted from their future.

Keniston's (1970) theory about the period of 'youth' is found to be quite fitting to the experiences of the participants in the present study. This theory was proposed at a time in history when there were several youth movements in the United States concerning the country's involvement in the Vietnam War and other such issues (Arnett, 2000). Although this theory was proposed at the time when there were many societal tensions, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we find some young people grappling with the difficult task of merging self-understanding with the social order. Here, society entails both the micro and macro environmental contexts that impose norms and values. In the present study, I found that young people were making sense of, and evaluating, social, cultural and economic demands while, at the same time, attempting to mould a self that could live up to social expectations and find space for personal preferences. Tensions arose when they felt unable to bring a consensus between self and society. However, unlike Keniston's proposal, most young people in my study were not making a choice between self and the society. Rather, they were trying to bring some congruence, which Keniston thought was impossible to attain. For the Indian participants, there were a few who had to make personal sacrifices to a large extent in order to incorporate social expectations and norms into their decisions. Thus, culture is likely a huge influence on the extent to which Keniston's proposal of 'youth' fits the experiences of young people in the new century.

Levinson's (1978, 1986) proposal of life structure is very similar to Keniston's (1970) theory of 'youth'. According to Levinson, life structure involves a person's relationship with the external world and in this process a person tries to make sense of life in terms of interests, preferences, values, relationships and meanings (1986). In addition to this, Levinson proposed the existence of different phases of life each requiring a period of transition in terms of life structure. While he recognised an Early Life Structure in early adulthood (between 22-28 years), there was another transitional phase proposed soon after this – Age 30 Transition (28-33 years) – when there is a call for reconsideration and modification of the previous life structure. These two are

particularly interesting in the light of the present study because, commensurate with his proposal, it was seen that participants (22-30 years) were stressing the need for change, sometimes soon after forming a life structure. There was a sense of instability and uncertainty that was also explicated through their accounts. Participants were often questioning their interests and their relationship status whilst in their twenties (but not necessarily in their late twenties).

There is applicability of Levinson's theory evident in the lives of young people in the new century, but at the same time further consideration is needed of whether Levinson's stages of transitions could be universally recognised. The stages of 'Leaving the family' (between 16-18 years and extending until 20-24 years) and 'Getting into the Adult World' (starting from early 20s and extending to 27-29 years) as proposed by Levinson et al. (1976) implies emotionally and/or physically distancing from the birth family as part of young people's transition to adulthood. These stages may apply for the British participants in the present study, but not for my Indian participants who, at the time, were instead expected (socially and culturally) to shift positions within the birth family whilst taking on roles, responsibilities and duties towards them. It was observed that for most Indian participants (like Aman and Amrita), crisis was experienced when they were unable to cope with the family roles and responsibilities during their transition to adulthood. On the other hand, for most British participants (like Erica and Avril), crisis emerged when they were unable to leave their family and establish an independent life.

However, there were some commonalities of experiences among young people from both the cultures which could be related to Levinson's (1978) proposal of the stage of Getting into the Adult World. This is said to be the time when individuals explore self while at the same time forming an initial life structure based on the information gathered from the adult world. They are also meant to start evaluating their conditions at work and their position in the society as a whole and make decisions to either continue with the same or change. In the present study, I demonstrated how young people can raise questions and doubts about their success in their transition, mainly associated with work and intimate relationship. They started analysing their present conditions and contemplating changes in order to pave their way into a self-fulfilling future career. The experience of crisis was situated during this time when they felt paralysed whilst identifying a need for change.

Having discussed theories given by Erikson (1950; 1968), Keniston (1970) and Levinson (1978; 1986), I shall now move on to more recent theories – Arnett's (2000) theory of 'emerging adulthood' and Robinson and Smith's (2010) proposal of stages of crisis experience among young adults.



Arnett's (1997, 2000) theory of 'emerging adulthood' is useful in understanding contemporary situations and circumstances in which young people transition to adulthood. Arnett proposes five key features in the stage he calls 'emerging adulthood': identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, anticipation of possibilities (also discussed in literature review). Some of these characteristics fit the young people from both cultural groups in the present study. However, there are others that could be contested based on the extent of applicability among young people (especially those experiencing crisis) from within and between different backgrounds.

The first characteristic, 'age of identity exploration', is said to be the time when young people are making choices at work and relationships based on personal interests and preferences whilst analysing its available possibilities. The present study has shown that the extent to which one is able to cater to one's interests may be quite limited. In fact, in some cases, the limitations, in the form of social, cultural and economic constraints, were predominant in guiding interests and preferences. The crisis, to a large extent, was due to the existence of a perceived highly limited horizon of choice, thus making the transition an experience of constraints. The second characteristic, 'age of instability', was found to be typical of the participants in the present study. The crisis stemmed from the instability and uncertainty experienced at work and in relationships.

The third characteristic, 'self-focused age', could be developed into a more nuanced understanding based on the analysis of the present study. Arnett proposed this to be the time when there are "fewest daily role obligations and thus the greatest scope for independent decision-making" (2011, p. 257). However, some participants (those in the sub-themes: *'Train myself to be an adult'* and *'Man of the house'*) were preoccupied with daily requirements associated with living on their own, or even taking care of the family of origin, thus giving little room for independent decisions. Young people from both cultural groups were concerned about their success in transitioning to adulthood and showed desire to attain a self-fulfilling future which attunes to the self-focus identified by Arnett. However, the extent to which they could afford to do this was governed by structural constraints which are different for young people from different familial, social, economic and cultural backgrounds. By including participants from both 'individualistic' and 'collectivist' oriented societies along with different educational levels, the present study is able to demonstrate variability in the feature of self-focus. Arnett (2000) acknowledged these possible variations in experiences, but his work on 'emerging adulthood' was primarily based on young individuals residing in the United States.

The present study cannot comment on the fourth characteristic of 'feeling in-between' because there were no specific comments with regard to this in their accounts. However, participants did perceive themselves as not yet settled but working towards 'finding a place in the world' in

terms of developing their work life and a stable romantic relationship. They felt unprepared to take up adult roles and responsibilities while also realising that they cannot remain a child. The fifth characteristic of ‘age of possibilities’ is applicable to a large extent to the participants in the present study. Towards the end of the interview, most participants expressed a sense of hope that things would fall into place at the right time. The sub-theme, *Optimism and momentum*, covered in the chapter on coping responses gives a sense of this positive outlook and hope for a bright future. This is commensurate to Arnett’s (2011) proposal of ‘emerging adulthood’ as a time when, despite the instability and uncertainty, young people believe that they will reach their goal of a self-fulfilled adult life.

In the light of Arnett’s theory, the crisis could be associated with the experience of instability and uncertainty, but in addition to this there was a sense of bounded freedom that most young people did not expect to encounter in their transition, in turn leading to crisis. This theory of ‘emerging adulthood’ overlooks structural constraints in favour of personal choices and decisions. These constraints could be, not just in terms of direct family pressure (as mostly experienced by the Indian participants in the present study), but also governed by the norms that suggest a certain ‘right’ way of transitioning to adulthood (Looker & Dwyer, 1998; te Riele, 2004). These structural constraints shall be discussed further below in the section where I place the understanding of ‘quarterlife crisis’ in the wider social, economic and political climate.

Additional recent research that is worth highlighting is the model of Early Adult Crisis by Robinson and Smith (2010). The stages of crisis given in this model were discussed in the *Literature review* chapter in the sub-section of ‘Quarterlife crisis’. I have also discussed this model in the mini-discussion of the themes *Smooth navigation and Self-fulfilment*, and *Becoming and Knowing Oneself*. In this section I shall discuss to what extent this model can be used in understanding the overall ‘quarterlife crisis’ experience.

The ‘locked-in phase’ is proposed to be the first stage in which young people find themselves in a life structure that is not desirable, applicable both in terms of career and relationship (Robinson, Wright & Smith, 2013). This experience of being ‘locked-in’ was evident among the young people in the present study where they showed dissatisfaction with their current career and/or relationship. The reason why some young people enter this phase was unclear from this model of Early Adult Crisis. Robinson and Smith (2010) posited that the crisis starts from a life structure that they end up with “for the wrong reasons and has become stressful” (p. 179). The reason for this dissatisfaction could be explained from participants’ accounts in the present study where they talked extensively about the difference between what they expected and what they were experiencing in their transitional process. The themes *Smooth navigation and Self-fulfilment*, *Forced ‘adulthood’/independence* and *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*, could be identified as triggers that lead some young people into a ‘locked-in’ stage

where they find themselves following a life structure that is unexpected, forced and dissatisfactory. In the present study it was seen that there was a realisation of the gap between the expected and the real that posed as the starting point of the locked-in phase when young people started experiencing a crisis, unable to attain a life structure that would be more self-fulfilling and manageable.

Furthermore, Robinson (2015) added another possible alternative starting point of crisis along with being 'locked-in': that is, being 'locked-out'. While locked-in is when young people find themselves in adult roles (or life structure) that they are dissatisfied with and at the same time unable to change, locked-out is when young people are not able to enter into adult roles (or form a life structure). These two terms provide a useful basis of understanding the crisis experience of young people. In the present study, some felt that they were unable to attain the financial stability to take adult positions and/or unable to manage adult skills (both highlighting situations of being locked-out), while others felt trapped in adult roles that they felt unprepared for or dissatisfied with (locked-in). The feeling of being stuck and paralysed in transition could be associated with these two crises points of being locked-in and locked-out as proposed by Robinson (2015), but also preceded by the recognised gap between the expected and the actual transitional experience.

Robinson and Smith (2010) proposed the second stage to be one in which young people recognise the need to move towards a satisfying life structure with a "sense of desperation" (p. 182) to make the necessary changes. This was also found in the present study where young people expressed the need for change but were often unable to do so and felt stuck. According to Robinson et al. (2013), young people may travel or change physical location in this second stage, taking time away "to reflect on their transitional situation, to resolve painful emotions and to develop a new foundation for their adult identity" (p. 31). Only a few participants in the present study (e.g., Alex and Avril) took time away to contemplate and think about their future steps. The extent to which one can afford to take time-out depends on social and/or economic demands. Some young people in the present study were in positions where they had to cater to urgent financial needs and/or were captured within family expectations (especially for the Indian participants) that did not allow them the scope for taking time away. Moreover, some participants were constantly comparing themselves with others and were caught up in a race to attain specific milestones in their transition. Taking time away would typically mean falling behind in their own estimation. These could be reasons why a few people in the present study took time-out to stop or move away as a strategy to attempt to resolve some of their problems while others felt bounded with structural constraints limiting their opportunities to take time-out and reflect on their transition.

From this sense of restlessness and desperation in the second stage, follows the third stage when, according to Robinson and Smith (2010), one starts to explore different options. In the present study, a few participants had the scope for personal choice. Most were constantly speculating on different options for commitments, but yet bounded by structural constraints limiting the extent of exploration. There were some who felt the pressure of social and cultural expectations to follow a certain life structure and/or to attain particular economic conditions that did not render the freedom to fully explore and choose a different, possibly more satisfying lifecourse.

The fourth stage in this model of Early Adult Crisis is when there is a resolution, an adaptation to a new life structure (Robinson & Smith, 2010). A very few participants in the present study seem to have reached this stage and some expressed having no scope to form a self-satisfactory new life structure in the near future. The possibility of reaching this stage could be, again, based on social, economic and cultural background that influences the extent to which an individual can explore, or even settle with, a self-fulfilling 'adulthood'. As mentioned earlier, the limited scope and extent of exploration could leave young people with only a few options of resolution, where they might recognise the need to settle with whatever was available and attain some self-satisfaction from it. For instance, Aman had to leave his aspirations and cater to family responsibilities, but at the same time he was attempting to attain some satisfaction with whatever was available. He immersed himself in the family business that gave him a sense of gratification when he attained success in running the business.

The above theories and models provide a grounding on which to understand young adulthood and the tasks and experiences typical of this period of life. However, there is a universality implied in these theories that needs more consideration with regard to the lived experiences of young people from different social, cultural and economic contexts. In fact, these developmental theories have been highly criticised by several researchers (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1986; Burman, 1994; Morss, 1996) who raised questions about the idea of 'development' being an appropriate framework for conceptualising phases of life. The following section shall throw some light on these more critical perspectives and consider if an understanding of 'quarterlife crisis' is possible within an alternative approach.

### ***5.3.2 Critical developmental perspective in understanding 'quarterlife crisis'***

Critical developmentalists argue that theories of human development cater to capitalism and natural science (Burman, 1994; Morss, 1996) whilst creating standards and structures that are deemed as the only 'natural' way to exist in different phases of life. Traditional psychology presupposes this generalisation as scientific knowledge, or absolute knowledge, with little regard to the few who do not fall into the averages in the process of generating this knowledge. Moreover, generalisations are usually based on Western notions, undermining those from

developing countries and other cultures that are left to the mercy of standards based on a culture different from their own (Burman, 1994). Such standards, in turn, create a sense of pathology, victimising and marginalising those who may not be fulfilling prescribed tasks at the ‘right point’. At the same time, an illusion of freedom is created where individual agency is recognised (Morss, 1996). Thus, on one hand, there is a prescription about what ought to happen at a specific time and, on the other, there is a sense of agency created as if individuals can choose and pave their way along their lives. Thus, there are two sets of social expectations: one that expects young people to be productive and the other that equates this success with self-satisfaction.

The experience of ‘quarterlife crisis’, as seen through the accounts generated in the present study, gives a sense of this contradictory message where young people scrutinise standards in order to derive an understanding of their success or failure while, at the same time, feel that they can choose to make certain decisions in order to attain self-fulfilment. When they recognised that their personal choices were not leading to what ‘ought to’ happen at a specific time (connoted as ‘secure progression’ in the theme *Smooth navigation and Self-fulfilment* and ‘standards’ in the theme *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*), they felt paralysed and uncertain with what to do. Sometimes they even blamed themselves for not being able to fulfil perceived standards (through evaluation of others’ achievements and family and social expectations) and/or follow a smooth linear progression that is, at the same time, self-fulfilling.

Furthermore, giving age specifications in human development runs the risk of putting individuals in positions where a delusion of expectations are formed (Burman, 1994). The same was seen in the accounts of many participants in the present study where they have used age as the criterion on which to determine what ‘ought’ to be their position (in terms of milestones) in a given period of time. When they saw themselves differing from these standards, they blamed themselves for their perceived failure. In fact, sometimes participants even perceived themselves to be moving ‘backwards’ in their transitional process. There is an assumption of ‘progress’ equated with a constant movement in a smooth linear ‘pathway’ from education to work and stable romantic relationship. This leads us to our second point of critical developmental perspective, that is, the focus on ‘progression’.

Burman (1994) contested the idea of ‘progression’ as emphasised in developmental theories. The term ‘progress’ is liberally used in relation to developmental psychology – bringing the individual and the society together along with national development. Burman states:

*The investment in portraying development as progress works to deny our histories of the personal costs in ‘growing up’. More than this, turning the complex disorder of individual development into orderly steps to maturity reflects explicit social interests in maintaining social control within and between social groups and nations. (1994, p. 19)*

Young people fall victim to such social standards of ‘growing up’ that reduce individual choice to social prescription of specific milestones to be achieved in order for one to ‘develop’. Thus, when young people perceive themselves falling short of milestones, particularly in relation to career and relationships, based on prescribed expectations, they can experience crisis and often doubt their capabilities to ‘progress’.

Here I would like to draw attention to the idea of the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’ in determining human lives and standards. William Kessen suggested that child psychology was prominent during industrialisation: separating the ‘home’ from ‘work’ and also perpetuating gender-based division of responsibilities (Burman, 1994). As a consequence of late nineteenth century social unrest occurring all over the world and especially in Europe, scientists and political bodies directed their attention to controlling the rapid reproduction and crime that was thought to be occurring among the poor and the disadvantaged. In this venture, there was large documentation of compulsory education in England with the purpose of engaging children and developing ‘good’ habits. Scientific interventions were made, studying children gauging into their psychological elements. Developmental psychology played its part by establishing norms through experiments on, and observations of, children and deriving results based on averages, in turn producing a basis for making comparisons. This led to the creation of standards of normalisation which allowed seemingly objective decisions to be made about ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ development. Clinics were then created to treat those seeming to fall short (Burman, 1994). The solution to this victimization of people based on standards of ‘normality’ is not just upgrading to current historical context in determining ‘progress’ and standards, but also identify complexities and differences within the same historical time, across and within social and cultural groups. Alternative approaches need to be adopted that would cater to the varied circumstances and situations that influence human lives. For example, critical polytextualism proposes multiplicity of interpretations and highlights the need to look at the particular rather than the general. It gives importance to complexity of experiences rather than attempting to develop a universal way of viewing human lives. Emphasis is thus given to multiple stories on which consequences appear (Morss, 1996). According to Rex:

*...all understanding is socially constructed, that understandings form a heterogeneity and that each understanding is predicated upon an ultimately unfoundationable worldview or cosmology. Critical polytextualism sees each and every understanding as having the same status as a practical reality. This status is as accounts, stories, social representations, viewpoints or discourses. (1995, p. 191)*

Thus, experiences of crisis among young people need to be placed within multiple stories which at the same time are influenced by underlying social and economic systems that determine certain outcomes and consequences of individual choice. This could be explained using the concept of self-socialisation given by Heinz (2002). According to Heinz self-socialisation is based on two principles: first, individuals make choices whilst “attempting to come to terms

with opportunities and constraints concerning transition pathways and life stages” and second, make choices based on self-identity and perceived outcomes “in reference to social contexts which are embedded in institutions and markets” (2002, p. 58). Thus, multiple stories are created based on, not just individual choices alone, but also the contexts that influence the possibilities, outcomes and consequences of those choices. Instead of viewing ‘quarterlife crisis’ as solely a problem in the individual, there is a need to recognise the conditions that have carved the individual stories leading into the experience of crisis. As also posed by Beck (1992):

*Psychology has yet to undertake this historization and socio-historical revision of its forms of thinking, necessary if it is not to run aground on the appearance of individuality from which it profits by displacing the causes of problems into the very people who have them. (p. 119)*

In his work, Beck (1992) highlighted the risk society that is generated as a result of individualisation thus forcing the individual to make his/her own decisions and at the same time making them accountable for the consequences of the same. This runs the risk of underplaying the role of macro-conditions that determine and influence an individual’s life. This shall be further discussed in the following section.

#### **5.4 What does this research add to placing ‘quarterlife crisis’ in the wider social, economic and political climate?**

*...inequalities by no means disappear. They merely become redefined in terms of an individualisation of social risks. The result is that social problems are increasingly perceived in terms of psychological dispositions: as personal inadequacies, guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts and neuroses. There emerges paradoxically, a new immediacy of individual and society, a direct relation between crisis and sickness. Social crises appear as individual crises, which are no longer (or are only very indirectly) perceived in terms of their rootedness in the social realm. (Beck, 1992, p. 100)*

In these lines Beck directs attention to the risk of a contemporary society that predisposes towards blaming people independent of context for the problems they face. In this way, Beck draws parallels between ‘crisis and sickness’ where the person is victimised and diagnosed as failing rather than considering the social factors that may have perpetuated or caused their problems. Beck also went to the extent of using the term ‘social crisis’ which recognises such contextual conditions often experienced as individual.

In addition, Beck (1992) postulated that diagnoses of individual problems have, in turn, perpetuated inequalities between social groups based on assessment of their apparent inadequacies. The same was reflected in young people’s accounts in the present study where they constantly compared themselves with others in transition to gage their relative success or failure. Whilst doing so, only a few participants considered the ways in which social and/or economic conditions may have influenced their achievements. Instead, they often situated the problem within themselves and viewed failure on an individual level. In this section, I shall look

at how external factors might cause or perpetuate the experience of crisis among young people. This is not to completely negate the influence of personal choices and decisions in the lives of individuals, but to be aware of, and to acknowledge, the ways in which exterior factors may be influential in the experience of ‘quarterlife crisis’.

‘Quarterlife crisis’ as experienced by young people in the present study is associated with the feeling of being stuck and paralysed in their transitional process. There was a feeling of being unprepared to make the necessary choices and decisions deemed essential to navigate into adulthood, and/or stuck in adult roles and with responsibilities that they felt unprepared to assume. In these experiences there is a sense of existence of a personal problem, as if they *ought* to be prepared before taking up adult roles and *ought* to make choices at the right time in order to ensure a smooth ‘progression’. Here there is an emphasis on choice: assumption of a task that the individual ‘should’ take responsibility for in order to ensure a successful transition. The same was discussed by Beck (1992) and Levinson (1978).

Beck (1992) suggested that, in a postmodern society, there is freedom of choice but at the same time, people are compelled to make the choice (even if unprepared) “for the sake of their own material survival” (p. 88). The compulsion of making choices renders young people responsible for their own success or failure in their transition. Such an outlook underplays the social, political and economic conditions that put pressure on young people in their choices and decisions for the future. In the present study, young people often felt that they had not made the right choice at the right time in order to ensure ‘progress’ in their transition: that is, linear movement towards a self-satisfactory goal. On one hand, they felt the demand to navigate in a linear straight line from education to work and, on the other they needed it to be based on their personal interests and preferences. This required them to ‘know’ their goals and preferences quite early in their lives. However, the interviews were full of statements such as: ‘*I have no idea what I want to be, I’m absolutely clueless with that*’, ‘*I didn’t actually know what I wanted to do*’. In these accounts there is a sense of self-blame – that they ought to ‘know’ their interests and preferences at the right time. Levinson (1978) discussed this paradox in his discussion of the novice phase where he said,

*One of the great paradoxes of human development is that we are required to make crucial choices before we have the knowledge, judgement and self-understanding to choose wisely. (p. 102)*

This places young people in a difficult position because, whilst they are still developing a sense of self-understanding, they are forced to make wise decisions about their goals leading to an adult life. The experience of crisis was situated in this disparity between what is expected of them in order to make a smooth transition and what they actually experience in the course of their transition. In Levinson’s (1978) own study, he found that there were only a few who followed the decisions that they initially made in starting their education-to-work journey. The



majority of his participants did not know their interests until late in their transition, at which point they had to change trajectory or modify their life structure in order to make it more self-satisfactory. This process of modification and change in order to create a new life structure was found to be a stressful period for young people (Levinson, 1978). Thus, there was a freedom of choice, but also a compulsion of making the right choice at the right time, which could in turn lead to stress. This constraining feeling of limited choices (also experienced as crisis by some young people) could be placed in social, economic and political factors that influence the availability of options from which to choose.

In the following section, I discuss the social and cultural influences on the experience of 'quarterlife crisis'. In the present study, it was seen that young people continued to establish their self-worth through the eyes of other significant people and through meeting the social expectations of others (discussed in the theme, *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*). This means that they often relied on their parents and society's opinion and approval for the measure of their own success and failure. This is a point where the traditional markers of adulthood could potentially clash with new markers developing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Arnett (1997) argued that young people in the new century hold different markers of adulthood that have individualistic elements like 'accept responsibilities for the consequences of your actions' and ability to 'decide on own beliefs and values independently of parents and other influences'. On the other hand, the traditional beliefs are based on attaining specific milestones that involve 'role transitions' like attaining a stable job, marriage and parenthood that determine successful adulthood (Arnett, 1997). Whilst looking for approval from their parents and the society at large, young people are still prone to be influenced by these traditional markers of adulthood. For instance, some participants in the present study (from both the cultural groups) expressed this difference in opinions when they felt the pressure to prove their capabilities by establishing a stable job and a romantic relationship because of parental expectations (discussed in the sub-theme *Feeling responsible* in the theme *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*) or social and cultural expectations that stress these milestone achievements as markers of adulthood (discussed in the sub-theme *Living up to social and cultural myths* in the theme *Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations*). Participants have expressed their differences with these beliefs and expectations, and yet felt obligated to follow them in order to prove their worthiness and/or capabilities to others. When previously expected structures of transition disintegrate (*Betrayal of the 'ideal'*) and there is absence of any other guiding principles to measure their success whilst navigating through to adulthood, young people may rely on parents' opinions or social and cultural expectations in determining their success. Thus, here there is a reflection of restricted choice that takes into consideration external demands than being a purely personal decision based on own interests and preferences. It was seen that

participants struggled to bring a balance between internal and external demands which in turn caused a feeling of crisis.

Having discussed the social and cultural influences on the experience of crisis, the following section discusses the political and economic influences of the same. In the present study, it was seen that young people felt forced to make choices, but they also felt bound within set tracks in their navigation to adulthood. In their transitional process, it was found that some young people often grappled with decisions to follow the ‘secure progression’ route governed by smooth and linear progression. This emphasis on linear route is also seen in Robbins and Wilner’s writings on ‘quarterlife crisis’. They posed that:

*...after graduation, the pathways blur. In that crazy, wild nexus that people like to call the “real world”, there is no definitive way to get from point A to point B, regardless of whether the points are related to a career, financial situation, home, or social life... (2001, p. 3)*

In these lines, there is yet an implication of a ‘solid line’, linear ‘pathways’ from ‘point A to point B’ through the transitional process, as if that is the only right way to navigate through to work and adulthood. The core problem is not just with the disintegration of this ‘solid line’, due to multiplicity of options, but also the lack of recognition of complexity in transition in the wake of the new century (Looker & Dwyer, 1998). The complexity in transition is caused in part due to the changing education and employment scenario that does not always render a smooth linear pathway from education to work. These complexities were discussed in Chapter 1b that highlighted the relationship between education and work in both UK and India. While young people may opt for higher education in the hope of getting better opportunities in the labour market, there are economic conditions in the job market determining the employability of young people just out of education (Keep, 2012; O’Higgins, 2001). Moreover, the increase in temporary and contractual jobs (Marsden & Ryan, 1990; O’Higgins, 2001) and employer preference for work experience (Keep, 2012; Payne, 2000) mean that young people have to change multiple jobs before establishing themselves into a stable career. In India specifically the lack of efficient skill based training (Brar & Amandeep, 2015; Saini, 2015) leaves young people unemployable in the labour market. These conditions could lead to a rough, non-linear transition from education to work.

The literature review discussed many of these economic conditions that determine youth employment. In addition, government policies determine standards and structures distinguishing the right from the wrong. For instance, policies that emphasize linear ‘pathway’ from education to work (Looker & Dwyer, 1998; te Riele, 2004) create this expectation among young people that they *ought* to move into employment soon after education. As also mentioned by Payne (2000), youth aspirations are often ignored and overlooked in government policies concerning transition from education to work. The above suggests a loose link between economic

conditions and government policies. While economic conditions do not allow easy manoeuvre from education-to-work, the policies continue to emphasize on linear movement from education-to-work for all young people. Young people are trapped between these economic and political conditions and consequently some may experience crisis when unable to make the linear 'progression'. This directs attention to the need for placing the experience of crisis in the wider context, understanding how this experience in itself could be a result of underlying demands and expectations placed on young people.

Young people often believe that there are innumerable possibilities and that the higher their education, the greater the options available in terms, for example, of career path (Muller, 2005). This not only creates a dependency on education, but also on the labour market in determining self-worth and their success and failure in transition. This dependency can lead to an experience of crisis when young people are unable to smoothly navigate from education to work.

As discussed in the theme, *Smooth navigation and Self-fulfilment*, my participants paid very little attention to the demands of the labour market whilst in their transition. Instead, they blamed themselves for their failure in attaining employment. Of course, attaining qualifications and obtaining the right training are important in order to make oneself a viable candidate for employment. However, the availability of jobs is largely dependent on economic climate and other factors such as company and industry strategy. For instance, O'Higgins (2001) highlighted the economic conditions that determine youth unemployment. Different economic conditions in different countries were found to determine the condition of employment where young people are seen to be hit hardest with the downfall of employment opportunities.

Furthermore, young people with specific backgrounds encounter different sets of limits and opportunities. In the following sub-section I shall highlight some of these differences in experiences based on culture as well as educational background.

#### ***5.4.1 What nuance does this research add to our understanding of 'quarterlife crisis' based on the two cultural groups and educational background?***

The present study consisted of young people from two broad cultural groups: British and Indian. This provided an interesting ground for comparison in terms of representing respectively a typically 'individualistic' and 'collectivist' society. As discussed in the literature review (in the section, *Background: UK and India*), a common feature across different Indian states is the importance given to family and social connectedness (Chadda & Deb, 2013). In the present study, 5 of the 8 Indian participants lived with their parents, mainly as part of fulfilling family responsibilities. In comparison, only 3 of the 16 British participants did so, and not typically to fulfil responsibility towards them but for the availability of financial support from parents during the time when they were trying to establish their career. This gives a sense of the extent

to which social expectations around family could differentially impact lives of young people belonging to the two different cultural groups.

The question raised is then: To what extent does this difference in family relations impact the experience of crisis? In the previous sections of this chapter, I have identified some of the key features of the 'quarterlife crisis' experience based on the analysis in the present study: specifically, that which involves (1) a period of moratorium giving a sense of stagnancy; (2) a *deficit of eudaimonic wellbeing*; and, most importantly, (3) a gap between the expected and the actual transitional experience. Although these were identified as common experiences across and within the different groups (cultural and educational), there is a call for attention to the specific situations and circumstances faced by the young people based on their background. Some of these differences were discussed in the beginning of this chapter, but in this sub-section I shall further elaborate these differences in crisis experience.

Some of the Indian participants expressed the pressure felt from their family to follow certain career routes over their own personal preferences. This influence of family in decisions on career was felt by some as a result of the financial needs of the family (also associated with the SES) and by others as a general parents' expectation of following a specific career option. This sacrifice of personal interests and preferences was also highlighted by the Indian participants as a point of crisis, an unexpected turn in their transitional process. Such direct influence of family on career decisions was not seen among the British participants. As discussed in the category, '*Pressure from the family*' (in the sub-theme, *Question of 'what I want'*), the influence of parents in career decisions was only felt indirectly and they did not feel the obligation to fulfil these expectations. Some British participants talked of family pressure only in terms of bringing pride and avoiding disappointment to their parents that in turn motivated them to perform better and work hard towards their goal. This did not necessarily mean changing their personal goal. Thus, there were only peripheral ways in which family influenced the career decisions of the British participants. The same was found by Bergen (2006) in which young people in the UK were seen to be only indirectly influenced by family, including work aspirations of the parents impacting career choice. Thus, compared to the British, the Indian young people in the present study felt more direct pressure in their career choice leading to a feeling of loss and sacrifice that was associated with their crisis experience.

Another difference in the experience of crisis between the British and Indian participants can be seen in the tasks that needed to be performed as part of their transitional requirements. Many British and Indian participants were in a period of moratorium, attempting to build a life structure, a purpose and meaning to their transition to adulthood. But in this process, Indian participants were faced with additional responsibilities and roles to be performed for the family of origin. However, this was seen to be less of a direct imposition and more of a cultural

expectation. The importance of such cultural norms for young Indian people was also evident in Seiter and Nelson's (2010) study of young people in Coimbatore (a state in India). The authors found that 'Norm compliance, 'Family capacities' and 'Independence' were highly endorsed as markers of adulthood by the young participants in their study. This shows the coexistence of both independence and interdependence in the contemporary Indian context. As also seen from the present study, both the personal goal of a self-fulfilling future career and the need to fulfil social and cultural expectations were expressed by the Indian participants. Although these additional responsibilities were expected and indoctrinated in their lives, the practicalities involved in balancing their personal goals with these responsibilities were only fully understood in their actual transitional process. Most of the Indian participants in the present study situated their crisis in the feeling of unpreparedness in dealing with family responsibilities whilst making their transition to a self-fulfilling future goal.

This is contrary to Oinonen's (2003) proposition that young people in transition focus on taking care of themselves alone. Oinonen's study was based on young people from Finland and Spain, suggesting that culture could play an important role in determining transitional experiences of young people. Arnett (2000) too proposed 'emerging adulthood' as a period when they are self-focused. His study was based on North American sample. These propositions does not hold true for the Indian participants in the present study. This suggests that transition to adulthood and the crisis experience associated with this period needs a nuanced understanding of how this could be differentially experienced by young people from different cultural backgrounds.

In addition to this, there was no gender difference seen in this experience of crisis in the Indian sample between males and females. They both recognised the need to take care of their family and at the same time to pursue a career goal. This is interesting given the social and cultural expectations of women's roles in the family. The patrilineal society continues to exist in most parts of India wherein sons acquire the hereditary properties from the father and take responsibilities of the family of origin (Sonawat, 2001), but on the other hand, women in the present study were seen to be concerned similarly like men with regard to family responsibilities and career goals. One of the reasons could be because the present study did not reach those women who focus solely on being a wife, home-maker and/or mother.

Another reason for the lack of gender differences identified in the present study could be, given the relative gender equality existing in the North Eastern region of India compared to the rest of the country (discussed in the literature review), there are chances that the culture of the region render relatively equal responsibilities in family and labour market with that of men. However, there are changes in overall women's attitudes in contemporary India that are worth noting. In a study done by Dhawan (2005), Indian women's (specifically college students) attitudes, role expectations and aspirations in the contemporary context were explored. The author found that

women are aware of the social expectations of gender-based roles and tend to value the same, but at the same time perceived attaining independence and autonomy as a possibility, although with greater effort in pursuing their career goal. The participants in her study reported having aspirations for “competence and achievement in multiple roles, and reported low levels of conflict with society’s conventional demands” (Dhawan, 2005, p. 91). This directs attention to the changing attitudes and possibilities for women in India who venture into taking dual roles in the family as well as in the job market. However, Dhawan’s study did not include women in rural settings or those who have not attended college. In the sample of four women (three attended university and one did not) in the present study, the dual roles in family and in job market were found to be undertaken by all.

In addition to the two cultural groups, the present study also had a sample of 7 participants (4 British and 3 Indian) who have not attended university. The intention of including this sub-sample was to speculate how transitional process and the experience of crisis could be similar or different from those who have, and those who have not, attended university. According to Muller (2005), educational decisions vary according to social class. In the present study, 5 of the 7 participants from the non-university background were also from low to middle SES. It was from the accounts shared by the participants, that they were identified as belonging to lower SES. Just like the participants who had attended university, these participants too had aspirations of a future career that would be associated with their personal interests. However, there were other priorities that were recognised by these participants that needed attention before they could consider their personal interests and preferences. There were priorities in the form of: (1) financial requirements, and (2) training themselves to perform basic adult skills in order to live independently.

In terms of financial needs, 12 of the 17 participants who had attended university expressed concerns, of which half (6 out of 12) considered this to be an obstacle to personal interest fulfilment. On the other hand, 6 of the 7 participants who had not attended university expressed urgent financial needs, of which 5 associated this with barriers to interest fulfilment. In particular, participants from the non-university background expressed a sense of urgency, desperation and extreme stress related to financial requirements. They expressed how without establishing a financial safety net they would not be able to explore and fulfil their interests. Thus, instead of being concerned with smooth linear progression to a self-fulfilling work life, they were engaged in jobs that might provide them with the resources that could potentially support and provide the time and space for exploration and fulfil their interests. Consequently, a longer moratorium could be recognised considering the preoccupation with establishing a financial stability before settling down with a self-fulfilling future career.

For instance, Vikram was 30 years of age, struggled to attain financial stability and yet held aspirations for a self-fulfilling future career that would be based on his interests. Although he was working, he did not consider himself to be settled because he was yet to reach the point when his work would be associated with his personal interest. Thus, a delay can be recognised in this case where being settled with a stable job was pushed into his thirties. This gives a specific character to the period of moratorium, that which is primarily influenced by structural constraints leading to delay in exploration and commitment. This could be associated with Heinz's (2009) proposition where he discussed the different opportunities for exploration and agency available for those from an advantaged background compared to others. The same was emphasized in Roberts's (2009) study where he proposed that different resources available for young people from different backgrounds provide specific and limited choices. In this way, for some, choice is situated as the 'next best' rather than the multitude of opportunities commonly recognised to be available for young people in the new century (Heinz, 2009).

Another priority by these young people from non-university background was training to perform basic 'adult' skills. Those participants, who lived away from their family of origin with no financial support, expressed difficulties in fulfilling 'adult' skills like paying bills, preparing food, and taking care of domestic tasks. They felt unprepared to perform these basic tasks of life and there was a feeling of inadequacy recognized among all the three participants who discussed these matters (discussed in the sub-theme, *'Train myself to be an adult'*). There was realisation that they had not had the time to gain the necessary experience before having to live independently at a relatively young age. In addition to being an obstacle to fulfilling personal interest, their lack of basic life skills contributed to their feeling of crisis. Interestingly, these concerns were not found in the accounts of participants who have attended university and were living away from home. One explanation of this could be the safety net of parental support and also the support networks provided within a higher education setting, such as purpose-built accommodation, availability of friendship groups on courses and through the students' union, and university services providing support and information. Participants who did not attend university did not have ready access to such services and social opportunities and for those from low to middle SES, often little support was available from their family to assist their venture into an independent life.

For the Indian participants from lower SES, there was an additional responsibility of having to take care of financial needs of their family of origin. This is similar to the findings of Sanchez et al. (2010), who studied Latino young people of low SES. The authors found that young Latinos felt the need to cater to the financial requirements of the family and considered it selfish if they did not take on this responsibility. Indian participants from low SES in the present study recognised the same responsibility and shared the hardships in fulfilling these expectations.

Thus, the experience of crisis for young people who have not attended university, and/or who are from low to middle SES, was embedded in the urgency to attain financial stability and/or to gain the necessary skills to perform basic adult responsibilities. Whilst engaging in these tasks, they had to postpone their aspiration of fulfilling personal interest. This shows the limited opportunity of choice rendered to young people with restricted financial, social, and educational resources. The same was highlighted by Roberts (2009), whilst referring to Beck's research. Roberts's work was focused on transition from education to work and how structural constraints determine choice and the consequences of this on young people's lives. Whilst referring to Beck's work, Roberts said:

*...young people from different social class backgrounds are no longer herded into metaphorical public transport vehicles which then convey them all to certain destinations. Rather, they are dispatched into life in metaphorical private motor cars, albeit fitted with differently powered engines and with fuel supplies that will convey them over different ranges. Responsibility for outcomes is personalized (privatized) but outcomes are not simply personal choices (2009, p. 362)*

In the above lines there is a reflection of limits imposed on young people from relatively impoverished backgrounds which often is not given full recognition in a contemporary society. Although young people may have choices, these can be narrowly proscribed in actuality for the less privileged. Young people, in the present study, had similar aspirations in terms of entering a career based on personal choice, interests and preferences- irrespective of social and economic background - but the opportunities available to reach these goals were different. This differential opportunity is not just based on SES, but also on the educational qualifications. Young people who have not attended university had limited choices in terms of work because the job market tends to give preference to those with higher educational qualifications (Khare, 2014; Muller, 2005). Hence, the 'quarterlife crisis' experience of young people who have not attended university and/or are from low to middle SES, is situated in this encounter of structural constraints that limit opportunities for attaining a self-fulfilling and settled life.

Having discussed the experiences of young people from particular cultural and educational background, the next question is whether there were any overall gender differences noted in the experience of 'quarterlife crisis'. The present study did not find any differences across the themes and sub-themes based on their gender. Across the two cultures, men and women were seen to struggle with navigating to adulthood whilst developing their career and settled life that would be self-fulfilling. Both men and women were also working towards attaining financial self-sufficiency and assuming adult roles and skills essential to take care of themselves and/or the family of origin. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons for this could be because the study did not tap those women who focus on being a home-maker, wife and/or mother.



### 5.5 What are the strengths and limitations of this research?

In this section, I will be first discussing the strengths and limitations of the methods used in this research. This discussion will be based on participants' opinions and feelings about taking part in the study, and also my reflexive notes on how the methods worked in supporting or limiting the aim and the study process. I will then discuss the overall strengths and limitations of the current research.

#### *Participants' opinions and feelings about taking part in the study*

At the end of the interviews, participants were asked to share their views about the study and their experience of the process from collecting the photos to the interview. Responses were obtained from 20 of the 24 participants. In the first three interviews, this question was not asked (two British university-educated males and one British female who had not attended university) and for one there was a technical issue due to which the response to this question was missing from the audio-data (university-educated British male participant).

12 of the 20 participants expressed the study process to be 'therapeutic' and that the study benefitted them personally. Two reasons for these were dominant. First, it gave them an 'opportunity to speak' (phrase from Denver's account) to someone about the problems they were facing/faced. Second, it led to some helpful self-reflection in the context of their past and the present experiences.

Most of the participants expressed it to be a good opportunity to get 'things off [their] chest'. For example, Isha explained how participation gave her the chance to talk about every detail of her transitional experience:

*But the first thing that came to my mind is that 'Okay, I'm finding someone to share these things so in... such a detailed manner. Even in my... even with my bestie, I don't deal with things in details because they have been a part of my life. So I don't narrate everything from first to last...*

Isha expressed a need to share what she was experiencing with someone. She recognised a benefit in which the interview provided her the chance to talk about events from the beginning to the present, re-enacting the events in visual form, and reviewing details of the flow of her transitional process. Some participants talked about how participation provided scope to express their experiences without inhibition. For example, Amrita said:

*One thing is that you also made me feel at ease that I could talk. You know, it depends you know on the interviewer also. And umm... I talked absolutely without any inhibitions, you know. I talked a lot.*

Hence, for many, the interview provided a space in which they could openly talk in detail about their experiences. This is good to know because, for research purposes, it was essential that participants felt comfortable to speak fully about their personal issues and what they felt when they were faced with a crisis. This enabled the interview to be more like a conversation and

needed me to use only a few probes. I was continuously engaged with their stories, asked questions specific to their contexts when appropriate, and was able to cover all the questions that were part of my interview schedule. This way of approaching the interview gave participants the comfort of talking about their problems, allowing them a lot of control on the information that they were giving while, at the same time, feeling the relief of being able to talk about it in details with someone.

The second reason (identified from the accounts) why participants found participation to be ‘therapeutic’ was because it gave them a scope for self-reflection. The timeline facilitated this by providing the platform for laying out their experiences in terms of events and when they occurred. For example, in the following lines, Bill expressed the way the timeline helped him organise his thoughts and his past experiences to inform, and at the same time reflect on, his experiences:

*It's always good to sort of, I mean, I suppose, in a lot of ways, it makes it easier to think of it yourself. I mean, this has helped me in a way (pointing to the whole timeline), because I can sort of picture that now and sort of see it as, you know, as like a physical thing, that they're not just sort of abstract concepts going round in my head, that they sort of do manifest themselves and that there is a sort of, you know, direction to them, that they're ordered. So yeah, I suppose, sort of cutting through all that is a, you know, valuable thing, so yeah, and it does really, really help to talk about it, I think, you know.*

Organising the events in a form of visual representation gave ‘physical’ appearance to his experiences making him feel as if it was not something that was just ‘going round in [his] head’, but which existed in reality. He was able to reflect on his past and order experiences to how things occurred in his transitional process. He even moved photos around to show points when he had regrets and other times when he felt relatively sure of his ‘progress’. Thus, with the use of the timeline and the visual representation that it rendered, he was able to engage in some self-reflection. This was, in turn, beneficial to him and, in a way, ‘therapeutic’. The timeline supported his narrative and helped him talk about the events in relation to each other. In addition to helping him with his recall and organisation, it helped my study in gathering vital information about how participants felt at different points in their transition. Aspects like regret gave me an understanding of what participants appeared to expect and where the crisis experience is situated in their transitional process.

There was just one participant who shared difficulty using the timeline. Sylvia found it hard to manage and display the events in the timeline:

*Yeah, it was difficult on the timeline because it felt like there were two distinct periods, so it was like the time when I was in London (gestures towards the first half of the timeline) and then the time when I was unemployed (gestures towards the second half of the timeline) and they were all kind of similar themes but for different reasons, like so it's kind of difficult to place them on a timeline.*

In these lines, there is a sense that the timeline limited her expression of events in visual form. The visual representation was too crude for her to be able to fully explain how the two periods of her life were similar but differed in ways that she could not quite explain through the timeline. This suggests that the linear fashion in which the timeline is drawn and represented creates a standard with which not all participants might be comfortable. However, in the present study, Sylvia was the only participant who expressed explicitly how the timeline limited her expressions of events. For others, the photos along with the timeline provided a supportive medium through which participants felt that they could get a 'bird's eye view' and remind themselves of how events were knit together from the past to the present. For example, Erica said:

*I mean like I'd just forgotten the photos of this and these ones so it was kind of like nice to go through and think about what they actually represent and how I felt about myself during all these different times.*

The photos provided participants a way through which they could recall the events from the past and the feelings associated with these various points in their transition. Some found the process of collecting photos to be exciting and therapeutic. The following lines were taken from Vikram's opinion about the study:

*I felt good collecting photos... while collecting photos, I kept recalling the past... like making scenarios in mind. It felt good.*

By collecting photos themselves, participants had the opportunity to personally construct a way to express their transitional experience and, through this process, the opportunity to revisit the past and make sense of it. Hence, the whole process of recalling, constructing and collecting the relevant photos was itself therapeutic.

Even so, many participants expressed difficulty in getting started with collecting the photos. This was one of the major limitations recognised by a few participants in the study. These participants expressed feeling unsure of how to represent the whole transitional experience. For example, Andrew shared his experience of the process of collecting the photos:

*Collecting the photos was hard because I just didn't know what to do, like I was very much like studying your sheet like about the particular life events that I could use but once I'd done it and I started doing it I was very much, oh yeah, these are the things, because I haven't really thought about all this stuff for a while.*

Andrew shared the difficulty in recalling, choosing the important events, and collecting the relevant photos. However, he also said that once he had some thoughts organised, he was easily able to obtain the photos. The same difficulty was reported by few others like Olivia and Denver. However, Erica expressed a different issue with the photo-elicitation method which was to do with the specific rules that they were asked to follow as part of ethical protocol. She said:

*And also really difficult to find photos that didn't have other people in because obviously like these ones, this had two people in and I don't speak to them anymore so I*

*couldn't ask them but I need to put it in because it was an important part of my life that I wouldn't have been able to discuss otherwise*

Her narration of events was closely associated with others that she met and related to in her difficult times. Because she was not able to obtain permission from those people, she had to bring photos that would remind her of the events, but had the significant people cropped out of them. This was not an issue for the study purpose, but Erica felt that it was an obstacle to collecting photos associated with the events in her transition.

Different participants had different approaches to using the photos and the timeline. Some, who were perhaps comfortable with visual representation, found it useful, while others struggled to think of photos to use for the interview. However, all the participants made good use of the photos and the timeline in the interview process.

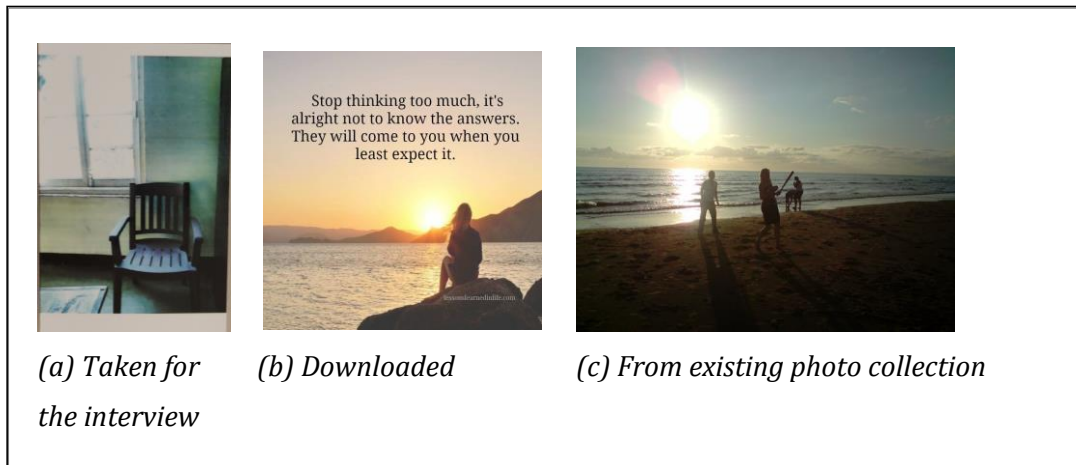
In the following section, I share some of my reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the methods used in the study.

#### *Reflections on the use of the study methods*

In the self-pilot, I found the photos and timeline productive in expressing my experiences. Just like a few of the participants, I too had difficulty in starting to collect the photos, but the process gave me a sense of control and comfort during the interview when I was communicating my experiences to the interviewer.

As an interviewer of the participants in the present study, I could sense the feeling of agency among them. For instance, Amrita decided to have her timeline plotted out in the course of the interview and later collect photos that would aptly represent the events. In this way, she found it feasible and logical to talk about the events and then think of photos that would typically represent various points in her timeline. It was later that she sent me information along with the photos about what each meant to her in the context of the events she mentioned in the timeline. Her interview was one of the longest in the study and she made extensive use of the timeline, communicating her experiences in detail verbally through different milestones in her transition. In doing so, she made full use of the timeline to relate relevant events and how they were linked together. Later, when she gave me the photos associated with the events, I saw that they mostly conveyed feeling states. In this example, there is a clearly active involvement by the participant in the creation of the data in which the process was adapted to suit her requirements. There is a move, here, towards a very real attempt to democratise the power relations between researcher and the researched in which Amrita exercised her agency and challenged the research process, but not to the point of disturbing the purpose and intention of the study. The flexibility in which I was able to adapt my methods was highly productive and Amrita provided extremely rich data that had a flow of events along with the verbal and visual communication of the feelings associated with them.

Participant agency was also seen in the kind of photos collected by them. A few participants collected photos that were downloaded from the internet, some used photos from their existing personal collection, and others clicked new photographs specifically for the purpose of the study. Figure 31 gives an example of each of the aforementioned types of photos.



*Figure 31.* Examples of photos that were (a) taken for the interview, (b) downloaded from the internet, and (c) chosen from an existing photo collection

This liberty exercised in gathering photos gave participants a sense of control over what they wanted to express and how they would use the photos in the interview process. This shows the agentic value promoted in visual methods, similar to arguments put forth by Allen (2008) and Drew et al. (2010), who had studied use of visual methods in researching topics concerning young people. Allen (2008) explored the dynamics of using visual methods in studying sexuality among young people and found that the methods promoted balance of power relations between the researcher and the researched and at the same time, found that young people were actively engaged in negotiating the types of photos to be used for the study. Similarly, Drew et al. (2010) worked with young people to explore the challenges and benefits of using photo-elicitation in studying chronic disease self-management in adolescents. The authors found that the use of visual methods allowed young people to decide on the focus of their experiences, thus allowing the research to “obtain rich data through which young people’s voices and perspectives are heard loudly and clearly” (Drew et al., 2010, p. 1686). The present study has also demonstrated the aforementioned benefits of using visual methods and in addition showed potentiality to obtain not just varied perspectives, but also feelings and emotions associated with experiences of different events. There were different things represented in the photos. Some photos focused on conveying feeling states, while others were chosen to represent significant people in their lives. There were also metaphorical images used by the participants to represent certain experiences in their transition. Additionally, as also discussed by Drew et al. (2010), visual methods also allowed exploration of sensitive topics in the present study. For instance, Figure 32 shows the photo used by Aman to depict a significant event when he held his father’s hand in

his death bed, sharing last few moments in the hospital. The photo brought by Aman helped him raise this sensitive moment in his transition.



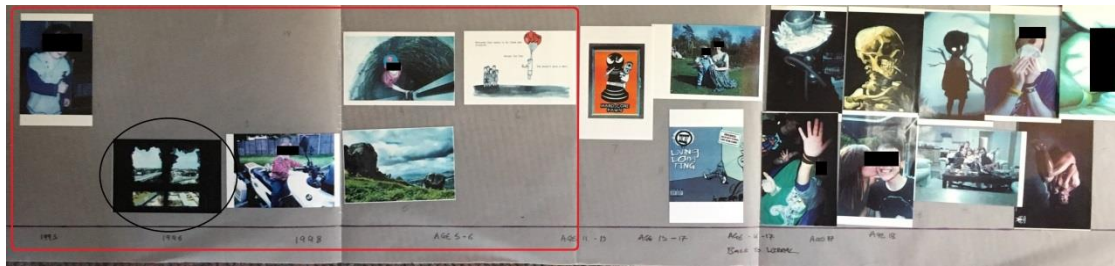
*Figure 32.* Photo used by Aman of him holding his father's hand in his death bed

In this way, by providing the scope for participants to use a variety of images, there is potential for research to obtain a wide spectrum of perspectives and feelings associated with their crisis experience. [These varied ways of how participants represented experiences through photos were discussed in the Photo analysis section of Chapter 3]. This suggests that research employing visual methods could benefit from assuring participants some degree of authority over what photos to collect for the study.

The ways participants used the timeline was also interesting. Some used the first part of the timeline to lay the context, typically representing childhood and using it as a way of communicating background information on their economic conditions, family relationships, or even events that occurred in their school life. For instance, Jack used a photo of a cracked window to express the difficult situations in which he grew up and economic challenges faced by his family that limited some of the opportunities available to him. Figure 33 shows Jack's timeline produced in the interview. In this way by using the timeline Jack was able to represent multiple stories in his life. This advantage provided by the timeline method was also explicated by Adriansen (2012):

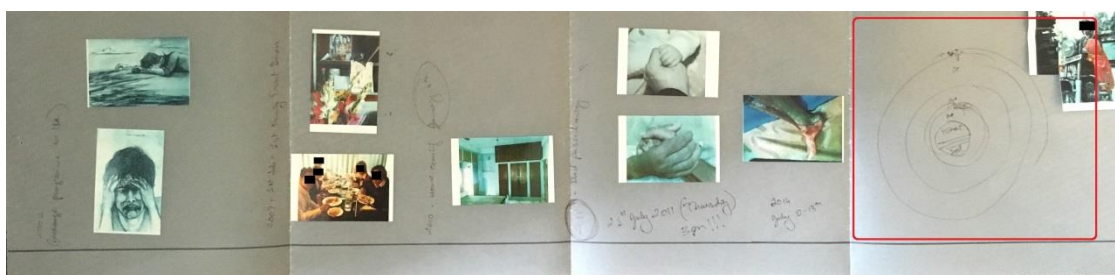
*Often when people tell their story, it is nice and linear, rational and coherent – it becomes one's life. But we live many lives and by using the timeline method... we can make room for these different lives, for the different stories and their contexts (p. 43).*

Jack (and many others) wanted to lay the context of his transition by talking about the other stories that converged and overlapped to form and influence the overall transitional experience. The timeline proved to be a useful medium through which participants could display the varied stories lived through time.



*Figure 33.* Jack's timeline with the first half marked with a red box indicating the part he used to lay his childhood experiences, attempting to give a context to his crisis experiences in the present, circled is the photo of the broken window

In this way, photos along with the timeline provided a medium through which I could understand the circumstances and situations in which my participants transitioned and experienced crisis. It helped me gather information that I perhaps would not have access to with only using the questions prepared for the interview. Moreover, the present study particularly benefitted from using timeline since it is associated with understanding the experience of crisis embedded within the *process* of becoming an adult. The timeline allowed a visual depiction of this process of 'becoming' whilst interlinking events and experiences. Apart from generating an understanding of a process that occurred in the past, interestingly some participants (Hannah, Denver, Jack and Alex) even used the timeline to represent future fears and aspirations. For example, Denver used the last part of his timeline to represent the positive changes that he expected to occur at a future time. Given the sense of agency and the flexibility rendered to the interview process, the study gained some additional vital information, aspects that were important in the participants' lives. For example, Aman used the end of the timeline to make a visual representation of what and who were important to him in his life. Figure 34 shows the part in Aman's timeline where he drew concentric circles to represent significant people in his life. This was done in the extra space that was left after laying out the events to date.



*Figure 34.* Aman's timeline, red box marking the portion of the timeline used to draw and show important people in his life

Some even asked if they could move back and forth in time in case they missed out information. In this way participants were seen to use the visual methods to their advantage in expressing and sharing intricate details of their experiences. This is especially useful for the present study because they had to recall events that may have occurred in the distant past. The timeline provided a medium through which to navigate across different times whilst sharing their experiences with me in the interview setting.

Detailed expression was also supported by the fact that the interview was semi-structured. Such a format gave them the ease in explaining fully what they were experiencing in their transition. The interview itself started with no specific questions, but laying the chart out and allowing participants to start wherever they wanted. In particular, the timeline gave me the ease to ask questions related to what had been mentioned earlier but when I had not wanted to interrupt the participant's flow. In this way I could wait for them to finish and use the timeline to raise my questions later.

In summary, the use of visual methods along with semi-structured interview gave participants a sense of authority and lessened the gap between the researcher and the researched. It allowed the study to obtain rich data, unique to the participants that explicated details of their crisis experiences. This is especially useful for exploratory studies, particularly those drawing upon IPA, as they focus on individuals in particular contexts and are able to access experience and meaning in in-depth, participant-led ways.

However, these methods also had some limitations. Some potential participants withdrew when they realised that they would be asked to take/bring photographs to the interview. For some of them, I did not get the chance to clarify their doubts and clearly explain the use of photos and timelines and how this might be adapted for them. However, some did convey how the thought of using the visual methods was intimidating and they backed out after our initial meeting at which I explained the study. On the other hand, others who were initially not comfortable using visual methods still made the effort to collect photos and later did find it useful in communicating their experiences. My assurances and effort to provide flexibility in the use of visual and verbal means of communication gave those participants the confidence to take part in the study and to use the photos and timeline in ways comfortable to them.

The process of using photo-elicitation along with time-lining was in itself an unusual way of carrying out an interview. Participants often expected certain rules on how the photos and the timeline are supposed to be used in the course of the interview. The information sheet only stated, "I will ask you to place your photos on a timeline of events we will create and discuss in the interview". Although there were no specific step-by-step rules, I had to explain how they could work together in the interview. Most of the time, I told the participants that they could place the photos as and when they spoke about relevant events. Some of the participants did so without me having to mention it while, for others, I had to spend more time explaining the use of the visual methods because they thought it to be a part of a more complicated procedure. Thus using visual methods does require some extra amount of effort and dedication on the part of the researcher, which one should prepare for before deciding to use such methods. Participants may not always be attuned to the way the researcher anticipates the use of these methods. Such considerations need to be kept in mind when using such novel methods like



photo-elicitation and time-lining. There were others, in the present study, who used the timeline and the photos how they wanted and did not show any inhibitions in manipulating the ways of using the visual aids. Thus, although informed of the flexibility with which they could use the visual methods, there were some initial discomfort and inhibitions seen in a few participants with its use.

Allowing too much flexibility might lead some participants to stray away from the aim of the study. For instance, there was one participant who spent a lot of time at the beginning of the interview talking about things that happened in school, activities that he was engaged in, and things he used to do with his friends. His intention was to share his school life and how it was linked to what happened subsequently; however, in this process, he got carried away sharing unrelated events and it was difficult for me to ask him to limit his stories from school and carry on further with how they link to the next course of events.

A methodological limitation of using timelines is the structural layout that could promote linearity or progression. Although it is not clear whether participants were influenced by the layout, there is possibility that their thoughts and concerns about linear progression were supported and/or perpetuated by the use of the timeline. However, given the present study's interest in understanding 'quarterlife crisis', which is said to stem from confusion and lost when navigating towards settled life (Robbins & Wilner, 2001), the use of timeline helped understand the nuances in this process of transition. Furthermore, given the focus on photos and personal timelines, participants may have been inclined to express more about themselves than external influences or wider contexts in determining their crisis experience. Having said that, there were still a few participants who made passing references to the economic context that limited their scope for progression. For instance, Vikram referenced the job market in Assam and how that impacted his career choice.

The methods used in this study had both strengths and limitations, but it was found to be an innovative and engaging way of collecting data that suited the aims of the current study.

#### *Strengths and limitations of the overall study*

Apart from the limitations associated with data collection methods, there were other drawbacks of the present research. Because it is a qualitative study adopting IPA, the sample size had to be kept small. The intention for limiting the sample size was to ensure in-depth analysis of each of the interviews: a necessity when adopting IPA as a method of analysis. There were 24 participants included in this study with an equal distribution of males and females. However, there was an unequal distribution between the two cultures (16 British and 8 Indian participants) and between those with and without a university education (17 university educated and 7 non-university educated). This leaves restricted scope of comparing differences between the different groups. However, the present study adopts a different philosophical stance guided by

IPA and thus concentrated on individual experiences and explored possible similarities and differences in experiences based on participants' background. The study provided useful insight into how the experiences of crisis could potentially differ among young people from different educational and cultural background. Additionally, the sample was only chosen based on educational qualification and not specifically on SES, although SES is loosely related to educational level. Thus, not much could be analysed based exclusively on different SES. However, some information from the participants helped identify the economic background of the participants that further helped to see how their crisis experiences differed from others.

As per the guidelines of IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), the present study included a homogenous sample of young people between 22-30 years of age who had experienced crisis, but explored experiences among young people from two different cultural groups. Using IPA to analyse this sample was a challenge and meant that in-depth analysis had to be carried out for the two samples whilst being cautious of the different cultural and social background. In the present study, the British sample was first interviewed and analysed and later it was decided to include the Indian sample. This allowed both in-depth analysis of the experiences of young people from the two groups and also allowed exploring the similarities and differences between them. This could be possible because of the flexibility rendered in using IPA, a methodology that is yet developing and to a large extent mouldable to suit the requirements of the concerned research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Another limitation of this study is that an important sample remained untapped: those young people who may not have career goals, but want to be a wife/husband, homemaker and/or a parent. Furthermore, interviews were only carried out with young people who identified experiencing crisis. This excludes young people in transition who may have faced difficulties but did not experience a feeling of crisis. Including this sample could provide useful insight into how they may have differently experienced transition to adulthood or even coped better with the problems. Lastly, qualitative research is quite often accused of researcher influence and bias. Although I was primarily engaged in the analysis of the data, I discussed my analysis with my supervisors through the study, presented at conferences and other public events, and was open to reviewing my ideas and checking the evidence for my developing findings.

Although the present study has the aforementioned limitations, it is one of the first to explore the experience of 'quarterlife crisis' across the two cultural groups – British and Indian. It provides novel information about the specific events that can trigger an experience of crisis. Moreover, it provides insight into how young people perceive these events in the light of their previous expectations that, in turn, moulded a sense of stagnancy and '*lagging behind*'. Investigating the two cultural groups gave useful insight into how 'individualistic' and 'collectivist' societies influence young people's experience of transition. In this way, cultural sensitivity is created, informing us about how young people may experience the same feeling of

stagnancy and moratorium, but faced with different situations and circumstances (influenced by social and cultural norms) that lead to complex experiences, in turn broadening the understanding of ‘quarterlife crisis’. The specific geographical locations have particular social, political and economic climates that need to be taken into consideration whilst understanding and dealing with problems experienced by young people transitioning to adulthood. In addition to this, the term, ‘quarterlife crisis’, was proposed based on interviews done with young graduates. By including a sample of young people who have not attended university, the present study is able to capture unique crisis experiences that are different from those who made the choice and/or had the opportunity to attend university. Thus, the present research identifies the commonality of crisis experience among young people while acknowledging the varied situations and circumstances that might influence their feeling of crisis. The research brought together both the internal and external demands that could cause and perpetuate the experience of crisis.

Moreover, the present study exemplified some of the coping responses of participants in times of crisis. Only four of the 24 participants went for counselling services in the past. This shows that even though they may experience challenging and difficult times in transition, not many seek professional help. However, some did use informal social support as a channel of letting out their problems which posed as protective factors in times of crisis. Most used personal resources like engaging in other activities, writing out their problems/experiences and holding optimism. As mentioned in the chapter of *Coping Responses*, what primarily helped young people deal with their crisis experience was the assurance of their personal skills and capabilities and developing new perspective of the problem. Overall, the accounts gathered from participants gave useful information about what resources, personal and social, young people use in dealing with ‘quarterlife crisis’ and what helped them best in coping.

## **5.6 Quality Assessment of the present study**

The quality of this study is assessed using the guidelines provided by Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999). Elliott et al. have given a list of seven publishing guidelines specifically for qualitative research. In the following section I discuss the quality of this study based on the guidelines given by Elliott et al.

### **1. Owing one’s perspective**

At the beginning of the thesis, I have laid down some of the theories pertaining to young people in their twenties. There were both previous and recent theories elaborated in the chapter of *Literature Review* that reflects my theoretical orientation, highlighting popular developmental theories applicable for young people in transition. While being open to these theories of development and transition, I have also acknowledged the views of critical developmental

approaches whilst placing the experience of ‘quarterlife crisis’ in these discussions. The developmental theories were revisited in the *Discussion* chapter to understand the extent to which they apply in the understanding of ‘quarterlife crisis’. In addition to this, the *Methodology* chapter catered to the methodological orientation of the present study, also highlighting previous works using these methods and discussing how these methods might be useful for the present study.

By including my background in the preface and reflections and reflexivity notes across the thesis (see also the reflexivity note after Conclusion), my place in the current study has been considered and reported. These notes lay out my experiences and perspectives before, during and after conducting this study.

## 2. Situating the sample

The present study has explicitly stated the age, gender, ethnicity and educational background of the participants. Additional information about their SES was obtained from the accounts shared in the interviews. Table 1 in the chapter on *Method* demonstrates the demographics of the British participants including age, gender, educational qualifications, the source of recruitment, interview length and the number of photos brought by each and Table 2 does the same for the Indian participants. In addition to this, some extra information was added of the Indian participants based on where they were living, that is, in terms of- living in Guwahati city (never moved out), living in Guwahati city (moved out and returned) and currently living away.

## 3. Grounding in examples

The analytical procedures used in the present study were discussed with examples in the *Method* chapter. Step-by-step procedures were explicated in the *Method* chapter for both verbal and visual data collected through the interviews. All the themes discussed in Chapters 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d and 4e were supported with examples. There were also instances where I have used more accounts from the same participant to demonstrate its fit in the light of specific themes. For example, in the sub-theme *Mirrored and Repositioned* (part of the broad theme of *Becoming and knowing oneself*) I have given four extracts from Aman’s account to convey the essence of this theme as reflected from his lived experience.

## 4. Providing credibility checks

The analysis of the interview data was primarily done by me, but discussed with the supervisory team to obtain their reflections and thoughts about the materials analysed. The themes and sub-themes generated were constantly discussed and exchanged within the supervisory team to check for its applicability and credibility. Re-evaluations of the data were done wherever deemed essential.

## 5. Coherence

I have explicated the aims, methods of data collection and the analysis in a coherent manner in the *Introduction, Method, and Analysis* chapters of the thesis. In addition, the introduction of the analysis chapters presents a synopsis of the themes and sub-themes generated from the data. I have also produced a concept map for the theme *Becoming and knowing oneself* in order to provide an overview of what is self-understanding based on the participant data. Similarly, the chapter *Smooth navigation and Self-fulfilment* begins with a figure showing the connections between the themes, sub-themes and the categories. In this way, attempts were made wherever found essential to develop a pictorial representation of the themes and sub-themes. Moreover, each chapter of analysis of themes (Chapters 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d and 4e) contain a summary and a mini-discussion of the themes.

## 6. Accomplishing general vs. specific tasks

Elliot et al. (1999) state that wherever a “general understanding of a phenomenon is intended, it [ought to be] based on an appropriate range of instances” (p. 223). In my study, sub-themes explicating experiences that were common to many were discussed with broader range of examples of extracts from different participants. I have also specified wherever essential the extent to which they are applicable to participants from different backgrounds. Elliott et al. also suggested that examples of experiences that pertain to particular samples should be “described systematically and comprehensibly enough to provide the limitations of extending the findings to other instances” (1999, p. 223). In the present study, I have been mindful of the few participants who shared experiences that reflected the influence of culture, educational qualification and/or SES that limited its applicability to other participants from different backgrounds. For instance, I have demonstrated how the pressure to follow a linear progression was not particularly experienced by those from non-university background. Similarly, the sub-theme *‘Train myself to be an adult’* was experienced by young people from non-university background and living away from the family. These specifics identified in the themes and sub-themes with regard to its applicability have been discussed throughout the analysis. Given the variety of the sample and the unique situations and circumstances they faced, it was important for this study to present the findings in the light of specificities in experiences.

## 7. Resonating with readers

The lived experiences of the participants were communicated in the reports in simple language while also using photos in some places to convey the essence of the experiences shared by the participants. I have also made sure that the photos are presented along with the particular extracts from the transcripts of the respective participants where they have explained the photos. This was done in order to ensure transparency of the interpretations while at the same time allowing the scope for readers to relate to what the participants were expressing.

## 5.7 What are the practical implications and scope for future research?

### *Practical implications*

Given the high rate of suicide among young people (as mentioned in the literature review) especially when faced with crisis (World Health Organisation, 2016), there is a recognised need to understand the situations and circumstances young people face that could lead to disturbances in their psychological wellbeing and impact their mental health. The present study captured lived experiences of young people who found their transitional process challenging and testing. The findings of this study have implications for both macro (e.g. education and employment policies) and micro (e.g. family, educational settings and counselling) domains. In the following section, I discuss first the implications on the macro environment and then narrow down to the immediate environment. At the crux of these implications lies the need for promoting and accepting multiple transitional processes and experiences, be it in terms of education-to-work transition or other milestone achievements like marriage and parenthood.

At the macro level, there has been an overall rise in life expectancy, age of retirement and geographical mobility – all of which could have considerable effect on the working life of an individual. Global life expectancy has been increasing at the rate of 5 years since 1950, with the life expectancy in 2015 being 71.4 years (World Health Organisation, 2016). The average age of retirement in both public and private sectors is 60 (both men and women) in India (Central Statistics Office, 2011) and in the UK it is 64.6 for men and 62.3 for women (Office for National Statistics, 2012a). International migration among young adults (18-29 years) is higher than among all other age groups, accounting for 36 - 57% of all international migrants, peaking in the 20s. Reasons for migration are mainly “related to important life transitions, such as obtaining higher education, starting work or getting married” (United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs, 2011, p. 5).

These changes largely go unnoticed by young people rather they are caught up with the pressure of making a choice that they assumed would affect the rest of their lives. Robbins and Wilner (2001) too noted this pressure of making the right choice because young people “feel that the choices they make during this period will influence their thirties, forties, fifties and on, in an irreparable domino effect” (p. 9). However, increases in life expectancy and age of retirement in the recent years means there is more time left in the hands of individuals at work, in turn providing a greater scope for future changes in career, if desired.

In addition, greater geographical mobility means exposure to varied cultures, widening options for careers and other possibilities. However, the plethora of options could create confusions when they feel the need to choose one among the many to develop their career. Moreover, the pressure of following linear progression as explicated from this study adds an extra layer of

stress whilst choosing from the multiple career routes and options. Bearing in mind the scope for future career changes (as discussed above) and the possibility and acceptability of following non-linear/alternative career routes, young people can make the most of the varied options available. Thus, conditions existing in the present historical time have considerable influence on young people's lives and they need to be made aware/reminded of these influences so that they can place their experiences and choices in the wider context.

Furthermore, policy-makers need to be made aware of the crisis experiences of some young people, which have become more common than atypical (as also suggested by Robbins and Wilner, 2001). By continuing to promote and encourage a one-tracked, linear route from education to work in government policies, the system risks pressures and crisis in young people who feel unable or not inclined to pursue this. Similarly, young people are made to be in training and education till the age of 18 (in UK) and 14 (in India), in turn creating a sense of age-related norms for education and a pressure of linear progression that might not necessarily lead to a fruitful development to a self-fulfilling future career (as also seen from the present study). There is a need for policy-makers to acknowledge multiple and shifting timeframes and pathways towards being an independent and secure adult. The UK government has recently been making some effort to promote alternatives to both A –Levels and university by promoting apprenticeships and traineeships (Delebarre, 2016).

However, there has been failure of these training programmes in delivering the skill requirements demanded by the employers (Ofsted, 2015). Although government funding in these training programmes have increased by 1.5 percent from 1987/88 to 2009/10 (Office for National Statistics, 2011), there has been an increase of young people in not in education, employment and training (NEET) as reported by the Office for National Statistics (2016). This directs attention to the need for revising training programmes to make them more valuable for young people transitioning to working life. First, there is a need to create a normalcy in being part of these programmes, which for most seen as a place for low achievers (Heinz, 2009), and second, there is a need to increase the productivity of these apprenticeships and training programmes in leading to employment. In this way, multiple pathways need to be given importance so that young people have more options and time to experience what kinds of work might be right for them.

As well as from policy-makers, educational settings are also attuned to the traditional education-to-work ideals. The present study shows that young people, especially those who have attended university, graduate assuming a self-fulfilling job awaits (explicated in the theme *Smooth navigation and Self-fulfilment*). When this expectation was not fulfilled, they experienced stagnancy, self-blame and a crisis. Not only do young people need to be made aware of the possibility of non-linear transitions and multiple, shifting pathways in adulthood, teachers and

parents also need to understand the complexities in transition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the increasing number of choices and changing job trends (discussed in the *Literature review*), young people may not always find themselves in a self-fulfilling job just after exiting education. Temporary jobs and job-hopping are common among young people (Krahn & Galambos, 2013; Wyn & Woodman, 2006), although this reality does not seem to be well represented to young people, or their families. That this may be an experience for a young person needs to be accepted and acknowledged by the family in order to inhibit false expectations, ideas and pressure. In India, especially, teachers and parents often put pressure on young students for good academic performance in order to attain a job soon after completion of education. Academic scoring is the focus in most Indian educational institutions whilst undervaluing psychological wellbeing of young people (Chattopadhyay, 2010; Ganga & Kutty, 2012). Chattopadhyay (2010) highlighted the urgent need for workshops for parents, teachers and students to address unhealthy academic competition and focus more on stress reduction among young people (see also Ganga & Kutty, 2012).

As mentioned in the *Literature review* chapter, young people even in UK were found to often consult their parents whilst making career decisions (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002; British Youth Council, 2009). Thus, bringing awareness among parents about the existing conditions in the labour market and the changing conditions of young people transitioning to adulthood could potentially make a difference to the experiences of young people. Educational institutions could invite people who have gone through the transitional process, to address the students, teachers and parents, creating awareness of the normalcy in experiencing complexities in transition.

Thus, at the grassroot level if there is a generalised recognition among policy-makers, educational institutions and parents of the complexities in transition, young people can be expected to transition to worklife without worrying much about following a linear pathway. With the understanding and acknowledgment of complexities in transition, educational institutions could also engage in guiding young people in decision-making, not necessarily in making concrete choices but leading them to understand the alternative routes that are available to them which can cater to their personal interests.

Moreover, understanding and acknowledging the experience of crisis could assist young people to feel more comfortable with seeking help. One of the participants in the present study, Ravi, thought that if he told others about his experiences, they would think that he is '*talking insane*' (from Ravi's account). This brings me back to the need for recognising the commonality of experience as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Many participants mentioned that the interview experience was the first time they have ever elaborately discussed their problems. Both men and women expressed relief being able to talk about their experiences to someone. For example, towards the end of the interview, Jack said:



*Well I, this is true, you're the only person I've ever actually explained my entire fucking life to, I've never said anything like, you know what I mean, I've never really, so it was gonna, it was quite therapeutic really, I've never, not even me girlfriend who I'm gonna have a baby with and whatever...*

Participants expressed feeling content about the fact that they could talk about all the difficult points and personal feelings, something that they have rarely done before. Acknowledging the existence of crisis experience as a reality common to many, while at the same time increasing awareness of the internal and external factors influencing this experience could lead young people to speak out more. There could potentially be less of self-blame and a balanced approach to understanding their transitional experience.

Previous studies have shown that self-blame could potentially lead to suicide (Yen & Siegler, 2003) and by engaging in talk therapy the risk of suicide is reduced (Erlangsen et al., 2014). Given the positive experience shared by the young people in the present study claiming it to be '*therapeutic*' to talk about their experiences in the interview, engaging in expressing their concerns could potentially pose as a protection against traumatic crisis experience and/or suicide. Moreover, rather than discussing these problems with someone known to them, young people experiencing crisis could benefit from talking to a counsellor or someone who knows very little of his/her life story. As explained by one of the participants – the fact that I, as an interviewer, knew nothing about her life gave her a chance to explain her transitional experiences and the feeling of crisis in full length, thus also providing a space for themselves to reflect and re-appraise their transitional experiences. Many participants in the present study talked about getting a perspective when they laid out their entire transitional experience. This could potentially foster a new outlook that could help them deal with their crisis experience. Furthermore, giving a sense of agency by the use of visual or other innovative methods could help young people feel more comfortable sharing their problems. In a period when young people are dealing with a sense of weakness and worthlessness, feeling of authority and control in delivering the information of their experiences could provide a useful exercise in counselling settings. Furthermore, the present study has highlighted two basic elements that have helped young people cope with crisis experiences, that is, assurance of their skills and potential and getting new perspective of their transitional experiences. These could be effectively used in counselling services whilst dealing with young people traumatised by crisis experiences.

Another vital concern raised by a few participants in this study is with regard to establishing a stable romantic relationship and marriage. Whilst being engaged in upward comparison with their peers, they were often seen to compare their relationship/marriage status with them and felt they were '*lagging behind*'. This in turn creates a sense of urgency in establishing intimate connections, and consequently experiencing crisis when they fail to do so. However, the statistics suggest that age of first marriage is delayed among most young people. In the UK (specifically England and Wales) it has increased by eight years since 1972 – mean age of first

marriage for men is 36.5 and women is 34.0 in 2012 (Office for National Statistics, 2012b). In the Kamrup district of Assam (Guwahati city), the mean age of marriage for men is 29.7 and women is 24.3 (Census of India, 2012). The rising age of first marriages could be attributed to the prolonged time spent in education (Arnett, 2003) and also to reduced prospects of attaining job stability soon after education, among other reasons. As explicated in the *Literature review* chapter, career and romantic relationship are interlinked and decisions need to be made in coordination of both these domains (Wolbers, 2007). Given the longer time period required in establishing job stability (as also seen in the present study), rising age of marriage has become a common trend and a new norm in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet young people are largely unaware of these trends— instead assuming that they are ‘*lagging behind*’ few people who might have chosen to get married at a relatively early age. Bringing awareness of the common trend of later marriage could potentially reduce the tensions that young people feel when they perceive themselves to be ‘*lagging behind*’. However, social and cultural expectations (based on traditional norms of marriage) are likely to continue to exercise pressure on young people with regard to marriage and parenthood as these are such embedded markers of adulthood, stability and security – themselves culturally defined, rather than necessarily individually defined, values. Parents of young people could be made aware of the changing trends and new norms (as mentioned earlier) so that there is availability of support network and reduced pressure from the immediate social environment. These changing trends could also be included in the secondary school curriculum so that the present generation is made aware of it.

Overall, the current research had implications in fostering understanding of different circumstances in which some young people experience crisis, not just for the young people themselves, but also for counsellors dealing with their difficulties and policy-makers involved in education and youth employment. In addition, young people could benefit if awareness is built, among teachers in educational institutions and parents, of the multiple transitional and often shifting routes, thus reducing pressure of linear navigation expectation. The study gave new insight into the complexity of experiences that is situated in both micro and macro environmental conditions as also internal demands, that influence the crisis experience. In this way it informs policy-makers of the need to acknowledge complexities in transitional experiences and focus on giving equal importance to alternative routes, rather than normatively prescribing a linear progression expectation from education to work. Furthermore, there is a need for young people to have access to resources through which to take support when they are faced with crisis experience. In the UK in 2008, 54% of universities had policies for mental health support and 29% were to initiate programmes and training initiatives for both staff and students (Brown, 2016). Access to counselling services is free and easily available for those from higher educational background. The unions, career services and other networks within educational settings provide essential support for young people in transition. However, most of

these services focus on transitional periods to university (Williams et al., 2015). As seen from the present study, most experienced crisis when they were leaving education to enter work life. This is the time when counselling services in educational institutions could assist and guide young people.

Furthermore, despite the availability of counselling services in schools and universities, it was found that teachers and parents do not consult mental health services and students do not approach them for help because of the social stigma associated with mental health problems (Chattopadhyay, 2010; Frith, 2016, August; Patel, Flisher, Hetrick & McGorry, 2007). Time for Change in the UK and PRIDE in India are examples of projects initiated to combat social stigmas associated with mental health problems. However, the problem of stigma continues to exist in the society and few young people seek mental health support (as discussed in the literature review chapter). Moreover, late disclosure of mental health problems are hard for educational institutions to tackle (Williams et al., 2015). Thus, there is an urgent need for removing social stigmas associated with mental health concerns so that young people can seek for help when faced with crisis.

Apart from mental health services available to students, there is a need for access to counselling services especially for those (particularly from low SES) who may not be able to afford them. In this regard, there are initiatives at the local level in the UK (like Holt Youth Project in Norfolk, Pause in Birmingham, Chilypep in Barnsley and MAC-UK in London) and in India (like Manas in Goa, PRIDE in New Delhi and Integrated Child Development Services in Kerala) to provide mental health support to young people. For instance, the project, Manas (mana shanti sudhar shodh), trained local counsellors and graduates to provide advice and treatment to young people suffering from depression, anxiety and stress by using psychoeducation, interpersonal psychotherapy and yoga. Both psychiatrists and counsellors are involved in this project where diagnosis is supervised and confirmed before treatment is sought (Chinai, 2007, August). Despite these efforts made by different organisations, the demands in both these countries outweigh the supply and there are not enough funds and mental health professionals (Brown, 2016; Chattopadhyay, 2010; Frith, 2016, August; Williams et al., 2015) to cater to the large flow of demands. In most cases, the organisations focus on treatment rather than prevention (Ganga & Kutty, 2012; Frith, 2016, August) as there are not enough resources available to fulfil the needs of those who do not have a diagnosis. Hence, the impact of early intervention is overlooked, when young people may not have reached a diagnosable problem, but may exhibit risks for developing mental health problems. In the UK, it was found that 23% of young people are turned down by local mental health services because they do not meet the high thresholds provided for the services (Frith, 2016, August). Moreover, young people are categorized under adult services that focus on older people with chronic conditions, leading to exclusion and neglect of young people's concerns, also causing delays in treatment (Patel et al., 2007).

The crisis experiences explicated in the present study shows the need for services for early intervention where young people can approach for help when faced with critical problems in their transition to adulthood.

### ***Future research***

There is scope for future research to focus on understanding crisis experience over the course of young people's transition to adulthood. Thus, adopting a longitudinal study would enable research to tap feelings and experiences at different points over the transition. This could potentially throw new light on what young people perceive and experience in different points of milestone achievement and how they analyse their situations in these various points. This could help locate the experience of crisis in young people's transition and understand better the process that leads to its appearance.

Considering the limitations of this study, future research could also include young people who have not experienced crisis and analyse how they perceive their problems and deal with the same. Identifying these differences could provide useful insight into how young people experiencing crisis could deal with their problems in a productive way. It could help gather psychological elements that help some young people transition without experiencing crisis. As mentioned earlier, this should also be done keeping in mind the contexts within which the crisis experiences are situated. More research is also needed to focus on young people from different backgrounds. Although Robinson and Smith (2010) worked extensively on phases of crisis experience among young adults, their study was based in the UK, data collected from London. Similarly, Arnett's (1997, 2000) work on 'emerging adulthood' was based on young people from North America. Robbins and Smith (2001), who gave the term 'quarterlife crisis', based their interviews on young graduates from the US. There is a sense of gap in research where some young people's lived experiences, who do not typically fall into the categories of samples used by the aforementioned studies, are overshadowed and brought under generalised knowledge based on others' experience. For instance, young people from economically disadvantaged position, different cultural settings and those with different approach to a settled life (like wanting to be a homemaker, wife/husband and parent) could be taken into consideration in the understanding of crisis experience.

Furthermore, future research could also investigate how the use of visual methods support or limit counselling approaches. In terms of conducting research, Allen (2008) suggested that it should be designed in a manner that offers "young people more opportunities to critically examine their conditions of possibility" (p. 575). The author also argues that one way this could be done is by the use of visual methods wherein by using photos young people can actively engage in the process of meaning-making. Future research could investigate how the same approach used in conducting research might also be integrated in counselling settings engaged

in helping young people. This could provide insight into how young people's experiences of crisis could be understood through visual and verbal communication and whether young people would benefit from such an approach in counselling settings.

### **5.8 Conclusion**

The present study exemplified an in-depth understanding of 'quarterlife crisis' that included not just circumstances and individual perceptions that have led to this experience, but also feelings associated with these various events. At the crux of this 'quarterlife crisis' experience lies the difficulty that some young people encounter in dealing with the discrepancy between the expected and realities in transition. The feeling of crisis is associated with the experience of (1) a period of moratorium giving a sense of stagnancy; and (2) a *deficit of eudaimonic wellbeing*. There were internal and external demands encountered that some young people found hard to tackle and balance in order to move ahead in their transition to adulthood. The present study also created sensitiveness to social, economic and political contexts that creates conditions in which some young people could experience crisis. By capturing experiences of young people from two different cultural groups and educational backgrounds, it was able to broaden the concept of 'quarterlife crisis'. In addition to this, the coping responses shared by the participants gave useful information of the personal and social resources used in dealing with crisis.

Given the novelty of this term, 'quarterlife crisis', and the little research done on it, future research could be aimed at further understanding of this term – analysing its relevance to a wider group of young people.

## Reflexivity (ending note)

In the process of this research, I discovered pieces of a puzzle that gradually fitted together to give me an overview of young peoples' experience of crisis which I, too, had undergone during my own transition to adulthood. I mentioned in the preface of this thesis that a year before I started my PhD I had my own experience of crisis that raised questions and doubts in my mind about my capacity to find my place in the world. In hindsight, now I see how my judgements were skewed to include only my personal life without consideration of the wider social and economic context that influenced my experiences. I shifted my base from Bangalore to Mumbai when I was offered the job as a Project Manager. I was quick to take the job because I felt that, on completing my post-graduate education, I was supposed to demonstrate my productivity in the real world. Without much exploration, and in fear of losing the opportunity to work, I rushed into the job. I did not analyse what I was signing up for and neither did I seriously reflect on whether I would personally enjoy the job: much like many of my participants who found themselves in dissatisfactory job in a rush to attain some financial stability and independence. The answer to why I experienced crisis during that time is now available to me. It was the gap between what I felt I was *supposed to be* in contrast to what I *wanted to be* that caused me to feel stuck.

With experience we learn to work on, and mould, our interests that could potentially lead to self-satisfaction. I was scared that if I took the time to build my interest, I would be judged as someone who is 'doing nothing productive', 'wasting time' and 'being too casual about work'. This piece of the puzzle helped me to find perspective. Taking time does not necessarily mean *wasting* time and sometimes it may be more productive and sensible to take the time to decide. Especially enlightened by the accounts of a few of my participants, I also understand that situations and circumstances might compel one to take jobs that are not necessarily based on personal interest. For instance, a few of my participants had the baggage of immediate financial needs that made them take jobs that would provide enough income to sustain them and those for whom they were responsible. Thus, different contexts can lead to different experiences of crisis. However, underlying this is still the feeling of a gap between what *could* be compared to what *is* and this is what I have personally experienced.

Many a times I turned to my family for their guidance for what I *should* do, instead of exploring myself what I was *interested* to do. In this respect, I differed from many of my Indian participants because most only talked about family views as expectations that were imposed upon them. In relation to family, my experience of crisis was somewhat similar to many of the accounts of the British participants because I realised that I, too, had an implicit pressure to make my family proud and avoid any disappointment. However, unlike in my case, my British

participants did not highlight this as the central point of crisis when unable to deal with this pressure.

When I left the job of Project Manager, I found it hard to tell my parents. There was always that fear that I would not be able to reward them for everything that they had done for me. It was when I started to work as a school counsellor, found my productivity, and was rewarded for my achievements at work that I started to often speak to my family and tell them about it. Just like most of my participants, the assurance of my capabilities whilst working as a counsellor was crucial in bringing me out of my experience of crisis.

However, there were different points of doubts and confusions that I encountered even while I was doing my research in the UK. Although it was my own decision to do this research and I came with great enthusiasm and zeal to explore the topic of 'quarterlife crisis', I too had my own low points and feeling of being stuck during this process. It was not a continuous feeling of being motivated and content with the work. There were times when I doubted my decision of being away from home, questioning my own judgements of future prospects and sometimes feeling as if I was set in a journey that I had not chosen for myself. On contrary, it was my own conscious decision where I chose to follow a research track than a clinical one after my post-graduation in Clinical Psychology, especially led by my own interest in exploring the idea of 'quarterlife crisis'. The issue was, however, that I never really anticipated the problems that I would encounter in the process. Obstacles could be present in any direction that one chooses, but, most often than not, we make a choice based on our understanding of our capabilities to smoothly progress in the career choice we make. Like many of my participants, I was unprepared for the pitfalls and the struggles and when I encountered them, I assumed that I had made a wrong decision.

Over time I have come to realise that I never took opinions or asked any recent postgraduate researchers of their experience. Although my mother and my grandparents shared inputs, their experiences were set in a different social and historical context and I never actively went to seek information about the potential difficulties involved in following this route. My brother has recently been accepted to do his PhD in Astrophysics in Chile and I ensured that he asks people of both the positives and negatives, not to discourage him but to prepare him for experiences in a real setting that could be quite different from how we commonly imagine.

The process of this PhD, and the lived experiences that I have been fortunate to be exposed to, gave me useful insights on real life experiences and how different factors, internal and external, could potentially cause one to feel stuck in their journey towards adulthood. My values and beliefs have been considerably reshaped not just from the findings of the research alone, but also by my experience of doing an independent research, making decisions by myself whilst living overseas and learning to depend less on my parents and more on my own judgements of

what I want. It is healthy to take opinions, but it is also important to recognise when these opinions do not match with personal needs. Overall, my research gave me a myriad of experiences and perspectives that helped me understand not just Indian and British young people's transition to adulthood and their experience of crisis, but also helped me grow, and understand and view my own story of transition under a new lens.



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## Appendix A: Consent forms

### Consent Form - Screening Phase

The purpose of this form is to make sure that you are happy to take part in the screening phase of this research and that you know what is involved. Please confirm each statement by putting your initials in the associated box.

I have read the participant information sheet or had it explained to me	
I have had the opportunity to ask questions and to discuss the study	
I have received satisfactory answers to my questions	
I have not received professional support for mental health difficulties	
I self-define as being mentally healthy	
I understand that completion of these questionnaires is for screening purposes only and that further consent for the interview stage will be sought subsequently.	
I understand that, based on this screening, I may be unable to take part in the interview phase.	
I understand that I am free to choose not to answer any question.	
I grant permission for my data to be included in the above named study, and in research outputs, with anonymity guaranteed.	
I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any point, and can withdraw my screening data up until one month after the date of questionnaire completion (written below).	
I agree to take part in this study	

Participant signature
Date
Name of participant
Researcher signature
Date
Name of researcher: Raginie Duara

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study.

**Researcher:** Ms Raginie Duara

**E-mail:** psrd@leeds.ac.uk

**Supervisors:** Prof Anna Madill & Dr Siobhan Hugh-Jones

**Address:** School of Psychology, University of Leeds

**E-mails:** [a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk), [s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk)

### Consent Form – Interview Phase

The purpose of this form is to make sure that you are happy to take part in the research and that you know what is involved. Please confirm each statement by putting your initials in the associated box.

I have read the participant information sheet or had it explained to me	
I have read the instructions related to the photographs	
I have had the opportunity to ask questions and to discuss the study	
I have received satisfactory answers to my questions	
I have received enough information about the study	
I have not received professional support for mental health difficulties	
I self-define as being mentally healthy	
I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any point and can withdraw my data up to one month after the interview (written below).	
I understand that I am free to choose not to answer a question and / or end the research interview at any time and without having to give a reason	
I agree to the interview being audio- and video-recorded	
I grant permission for extracts from the interview (transcript, audio-, and video) to be used in reports of the research on the understanding that my anonymity will be maintained (e.g., use of pseudonyms, editing out words, face blurred)	
I grant permission for the researcher to keep a copy of the photographs I used in this research and to include the photos in reports of the research on the understanding that they are anonymised (e.g., faces blurred)	
I confirm that I have received verbal consent for the use of photographs in this research from people who are identifiable in the photos on the understanding that their identity will be obscured if the photo is used in reports	
I agree to take part in this study	

Participant signature Date
Name of participant
Researcher signature Date
Name of researcher: Raginie Duara

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study.

**Researcher:** Ms Raginie Duara

**E-mail:** psrd@leeds.ac.uk

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**Address:** School of Psychology, University of Leeds

**E-mails:** a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk, s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk



## **Appendix B: Information sheet**

**Researcher:** Ms Raginie Duara

**E-mail:** psrd@leeds.ac.uk

**Supervisors:** Prof Anna Madill & Dr Siobhan Hugh-Jones

**Address:** School of Psychology, University of Leeds

**E-mails:** [a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk), [s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk)

**Ethics no:** 15-0021

**Date of Approval:** 30/01/2015

Hi

My name is Raginie and I am a postgraduate, doctoral student in the School of Psychology at the University of Leeds. I am also a trained and experienced school counsellor and am passionate about supporting young people in reaching their full potential. A central challenge of early adulthood (about 18-28 years) is 'finding one's place in the world'. This often involves, for example, looking for a life partner, settling on an occupation, and discovering 'who one is' (interests, skills, preferences etc.). For many reasons, some people find this phase of life more difficult than others. This study seeks to understand the experiences of young people who have overcome, or are currently coping successfully with, substantial challenges in 'finding their place in the world'. If you feel this describes you, and you meeting the criteria, I would like to invite you to take part in my study. If you are interested, please read the following information which explains why the research is being carried out and what it involves. Thank you.

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

I am doing this research for the qualification of PhD (doctorate) but aim to communicate my findings widely, for example through presentations and publications, and to inform educational and support services for young people. The purpose of the study is to understand how young people overcome substantial trials and tribulations in early adulthood.

### **Why have I been invited?**

I am contacting you because I understand that you might fit the study inclusion criteria: (1) a British national (Assamese for the Indian sample); (2) aged 22-30 years; (3) self-define as having overcome, or are currently coping successfully with, substantial challenges in 'finding your place in the world'; (4) have never sought professional support or intervention for mental health difficulties. I'm sorry, but if you are feeling very troubled by things at the moment, it would be ethically inappropriate for me to accept you into this study. A free source of support is offered at the end of this sheet.

### **Do I have to take part?**

No – it is completely up to you to decide. If you are interested in participating in the study, I will go through this information sheet with you again before to ensure you fully understand what the interview will involve. You can ask me any questions you have about the study before you decide – my e-mail address is at the top of this sheet.

### **What does the study involve?**

If you appear to fit the criteria and might be interested taking part in the study, I will invite you to have an initial, face-to-face meeting with me. This initial meeting will allow us to discuss the study further and if you are happy to proceed, I will ask you to complete two screening questionnaires: a short questionnaire about yourself and a

standard, well-known personality questionnaire called the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire. After this, if you are still interested in taking part, I will let you know as soon as possible after this meeting if you are suitable to continue to the interview stage (based on the screening questions). I am looking for a sample of people with a wide range of different backgrounds, experience, and personality, so please do not feel bad if you are not selected for interview!

If you meet the criteria, and accept an invitation to take part in the audio- and video-recorded research interview, please do not worry about the video-recording. It is unlikely that your face will be on the video and, if it is, we will obscure your identity (e.g., blurring your face) if ever showing clips or using stills in reports of the research, and only if we have your consent for this use of the video. I will ask you to bring photos that are relevant to your crisis and how you coped with it, or in some way represent aspects of the challenges you have met. These photos could be pictures taken from the past or new ones that you take just for this research. These need not always include images of yourself. It could be anything related to the crisis and coping represented in time, space or objects (metaphorical, significant people or otherwise). This will help us focus on what is really meaningful to you and maybe help bring back important memories.

You will be given 1-2 weeks to generate or gather the photos and to e-mail them to me so that I can print them out before the interview. I will give you more detailed information about this in a separate sheet. I will ask you to place your photos on a timeline of events we will create and discuss in the interview. It is this time-line and our pointing to different photos that I will be video-recording in case I forget. At the end of the interview, I will take a photocopy of your timeline and keep a copy of the photos, with your consent. I will also ask you to complete a consent form before the interview starts, which includes consent for audio- and video-recording. I expect the interview will last between 60-90 minutes – but will ask you to keep about 2 hours free so we don't have to rush - and hope it will feel like a conversation with someone who is a very good listener. I will ask you to tell me about your period of crisis 'finding your place in the world', what helped and what hindered its resolution, and incorporate discussion of the photos you brought with you.

#### **Where will the research be done?**

Our initial meeting can take place in a public place, such as a café or at the University. My preference is that the interview will take place in a quiet, private room in the School of Psychology at the University of Leeds. However, we can discuss the possibility of conducting the interview elsewhere if the location is reasonably quiet and private and my supervisors approve it. We will agree mutually convenient times to meet.

#### **What about anonymity and confidentiality?**

In order to protect your identity, the interview transcripts, the photos, video, and the photocopy of your timeline will be anonymised. This means that all identifying details will be changed, e.g. names of places, people and details of very specific events. I will be asking you to take verbal consent from people who are identifiable in photos you want to use, and I will blur faces in the photograph I use in reports in order to anonymise them. However, you should avoid taking photos of children under age 16 for the purpose of this study since it is not possible to obtain appropriate consent from them. The copyright of the images will remain with you since they are photos that you have generated. The background questionnaire and Eysenck Personality Questionnaire data will not contain your name but will be labelled with a numerical identifier allowing the matching of questionnaire data with transcripts. Audio and video recordings from the interview will be kept on a university computer and locked with a username and password. Moreover, the video-recording are unlikely to reveal your face as the video-recorder will be placed behind us in order to record our pointing to

the photos, but we will blur your face if you are identifiable. Consent forms will be stored safely in the Institute of Psychological Sciences and separately from the research data. My supervisors may become aware of the names of who is taking part but will keep this information confidential.

I must make you aware that there are some limits to confidentiality in research. If you reveal to me any criminal activity you have been involved in, or any intention to harm yourself or others, I will be obliged to contact my supervisors to discuss what to do, which could mean informing relevant authorities. However, I can reassure you that my interview does not actively seek such information.

#### **Are there any risks in taking part?**

I do not expect there to be any significant risks in taking part. Some of the topics we may discuss could be upsetting since we will be talking about some challenges you have experienced, but you can choose not to answer any particular line of inquiry and you are free to leave the interview at any time and without giving a reason. As well as the challenges you have faced, I am interested to hear about your successes and your strengths and will seek to close the interview on a positive note.

#### **Are there any benefits in taking part?**

We hope this research will help schools better prepare older teenagers for possible developmental challenges ahead and align with the SEAL (Social & Emotional Aspects of Learning) curriculum. Study outcomes will have relevance to the UK's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and other mental health charities which offer support and services to young people with mental health difficulties (e.g., Mental Health Foundation). On a personal level, I hope you will find it a sympathetic and supportive meeting.

#### **Ethics**

If you decide to take part, you will be given a consent form and asked to sign to show you agree to take part – first in the screening phase and then separately in the interview phase. However, even after you agree to take part in the study you are free to: (a) withdraw before the screening and/or before the interview; (b) stop the screening and /or interview at any time; and / or (c) withdraw your screening and / or interview data from the study even after completion - this will be possible up until one month after your screening and / or interview date as then, analysis will have begun on your data. You do not have to give any reason for withdrawing and can let me know in person or via email.

The ethical guidelines for this research have been set out by the British Psychological Society code of ethics. These guidelines include ethical principles such as making sure you know what will happen and are happy to take part, explaining that you can stop the interview at any time, and protecting your identity. If you have any complaints about my contacting you, or anything that happens during our meetings, please contact my supervisor, Dr. Anna Madill, who will be happy to discuss what action to take.

I hope you have enough information about my study, but if you would like to ask any questions please just send me an email.

Thank you very much,  
Raginie Duara

**Free source of support:**  
Leeds Nightline 0113 380 1381

Mental Health Helpline (for India) 1860 266 2345

## Appendix C: Instruction sheet for the photos

### **INFORMATION ABOUT BRINGING PHOTOGRAPHS**

#### ***Why do I need to bring photos???***

I'm inviting you to bring photos so that we can have a look at things that are/were significant to you in relation to your crisis and coping. We can discuss what images you've brought and why, during the interview.

#### ***What will happen to the photos after the interview???***

I will ask your consent to keep a copy of the photographs and will store them securely. I will also ask your consent to use the photographs in research reports. I will blur the faces of people, if any, in the photos before using photos in the reports.

#### ***I'm confused. What should I click???***

You can click anything you want while you try to keep it relevant to your crisis and the coping strategies that you use/d. If there are clear images of other people in your photos, you need to take verbal consent from them.



***You can click anything related to the research as long as:***

- It does not have close-ups of people from whom you can't get consent.
- It does not have photos of children under the age of 16
- It does not have images of something illegal.

#### ***How many photos should I bring???***

You can bring as many as you want to represent your crisis and coping. However, I suggest that you bring around 5-20 photos.

#### ***How much time do I get to take the photos???***

After our first meeting, you get one to two weeks to take the photos and to e-mail them to me so that I can print them out.

#### ***Can I use my own camera???***

You can use your own camera or camera-phone as long as you can e-mail the photos to me.

#### ***Can I use photos taken from the past???***

You can use any photos, recent or from past or click new photos. I will ask for your consent to keep a photocopy of any old photos you bring so that I can use them for my research.

*Raginie Duara  
psrd@leeds.ac.uk  
University of Leeds*



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## Appendix D: Eysenck Personality Inventory (Form A)

### Instructions

Here are some questions regarding the way you behave, feel and act. After each question is a space for answering YES or NO.

Try to decide whether YES or NO represents your usual way of acting or feeling. Then put a tick in the box under the column headed YES or NO. Work quickly, and don't spend too much time over any question, we want your first reaction, not a long drawn-out thought process. The whole questionnaire shouldn't take more than a few minutes. Be sure not to omit any questions.

Start now, work quickly and remember to answer every question. There are no right or wrong answers, and this isn't a test of intelligence or ability, but simply a measure of the way you behave.

	YES	NO
1 Do you often long for excitement?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Do you often need understanding friends to cheer you up?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Are you usually carefree?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Do you find it very hard to take no for an answer?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Do you stop and think things over before doing anything?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 If you say you will do something do you always keep your promise, no matter how inconvenient it might be to do so?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Do your moods go up and down?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 Do you generally do and say things quickly without stopping to think?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 Do you ever feel 'just miserable' for no good reason?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 Would you do almost anything for a dare?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 Do you suddenly feel shy when you want to talk to an attractive stranger?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 Once in a while do you lose your temper and get angry?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 Do you often do things on the spur of the moment?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14 Do you often worry about things you should have done or said?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15 Generally do you prefer reading to meeting people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16 Are your feelings rather easily hurt?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17 Do you like going out a lot?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18 Do you occasionally have thoughts and ideas that you would not like other people to know about?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19 Are you sometimes bubbling over with energy and sometimes very sluggish?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20 Do you prefer to have few but special friends?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21 Do you daydream a lot?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22 When people shout at you do you shout back?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23 Are you often troubled about feelings of guilt?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24 Are all your habits good and desirable ones?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25 Can you usually let yourself go and enjoy yourself a lot at a lively party?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26 Would you call yourself tense or 'highly strung'?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
27 Do other people think of you as being very lively?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28 After you have done something important, do you come away feeling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

you could have done better?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
29 Are you mostly quiet when you are with other people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
30 Do you sometimes gossip?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
31 Do ideas run through your head so that you cannot sleep?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
32 If there is something you want to know about, would you rather look it up in a book than talk to someone about it?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
33 Do you get palpitations or thumping in your hear?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
34 Do you like the kind of work that you need to pay close attention to?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
35 Do you get attacks of shaking or trembling?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
36 Would you always declare everything at customs, even if you knew you could never be found out?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
37 Do you hate being with a crowd who play jokes on one another?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
38 Are you an irritable person?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
39 Do you like doing things in which you have to act quickly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
40 Do you worry about awful things that might happen?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
41 Are you slow and unhurried in the way you move?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
42 Have you ever been late for an appointment or work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
43 Do you have many nightmares?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
44 Do you like talking to people so much that you never miss a chance of talking to a stranger?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
45 Are you troubled by aches and pains?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
46 Would you be very unhappy if you could not see lots of people most of the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
47 Would you call yourself a nervous person?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
48 Of all the people you know, are there some whom you definitely do not like?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
49 Would you say that you were fairly self-confident?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
50 Are you easily hurt when people find fault with you or your work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
51 Do you find it hard to really enjoy yourself at a lively party?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
52 Are you troubled by feelings of inferiority?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
53 Can you easily get some life into a dull party?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
54 Do you sometimes talk about things you know nothing about?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
55 Do you worry about your health?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
56 Do you like playing pranks on others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
57 Do you suffer from sleeplessness?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Appendix E: Screening form

Name:  
 Gender:  
 Age:  
 Nationality:  
 Ethnicity:  
 Highest level of education:

Have you had to deal with substantial challenges ‘finding your place in the world’?  
 YES  NO

Are you currently in contact with any mental health support service?  
 YES  NO

**If yes, I’m sorry, but if you are feeling very bothered by things at the moment, it would be ethically inappropriate for me to accept you into this study.**

Do you self-define as being mentally healthy at the moment?  
 YES  NO

Have you ever experienced difficulty establishing what ‘kind of person’ you are?  
 YES  NO

If yes, what age were you? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever felt ‘stuck’ in life?  
 YES  NO

If yes, what age were you? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever felt anxious about choosing the next step in life?  
 YES  NO

If yes, what age were you? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever craved for a change in direction of life?  
 YES  NO

If yes, what age were you? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever felt lost in the multiplicity of options in life?  
 YES  NO

If yes, what age were you? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever felt apprehensive after having made a major life decision?  
 YES  NO

If yes, what age were you? \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you**

## **Appendix F: Interview schedule**

Thank you for coming to this interview. I'd like to hear your story as far as possible in your own words. So that I can understand better, can I ask you to draw me a 'timeline' of the major events in your life, focusing particularly on your experiences of 'finding your place in the world' during your late teens and early adulthood?

You sent me and have brought some photos to help me understand your story. Can you show me where each fits on the timeline you have drawn?

Can you show me on your timeline where your difficulties finding your place in the world first started? OK – please tell me what happened?

Prompts:

What happened next?

Please tell me about how this object fits here?

In what ways did you feel 'stuck' at this point in your life?

What were your worries at this point?

What difficulties were you facing here?

What responsibilities did you have at this point in your life?

What were your relationships with other people like at this point in your life?

How did you cope with that?

Do you have any regrets about that?

Concluding questions:

What was most helpful to you during these difficult times?

What advice would you give to another young person facing similar challenges?

Is there anything you'd like to say that we haven't covered?



## Appendix G: Posters for recruitment

Ethics no : 13- 0236  
Date of Approval : 21<sup>st</sup> Nov 2013



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### Research Study Finding our place in this world



Raginie Duara [psrd@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:psrd@leeds.ac.uk)  
Postgraduate Research Student  
Institute of Psychological Sciences  
University of Leeds

Supervisors:  
Dr Anna Madill [a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk)  
Dr Siobhan Hugh-Jones [s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk)  
Ethics reference: 13-0236  
Website: [www.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.leeds.ac.uk)

I feel so stuck in life.  
Nothing I do seem to satisfy me.  
Sometimes I don't even know what my needs and desires are.  
I wish things were as simple as it was in school or college.  
Oh! This is not how I thought life would be like...



Are you, or have you ever been, in a similar situation?  
If YES, then please consider being part of my study!

I am looking for people to interview who:

- are between 22-30 years old
- self-define as having overcome, or are currently coping successfully with, substantial challenges 'finding your place in the world'
- British national
- Not currently in contact with any mental health support service

[psrd@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:psrd@leeds.ac.uk)

[psrd@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:psrd@leeds.ac.uk)

[psrd@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:psrd@leeds.ac.uk)

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[psrd@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:psrd@leeds.ac.uk)

[psrd@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:psrd@leeds.ac.uk)

Ethics no: 15-0020  
Date of approval: 30<sup>th</sup> January 2015



**Research Study**  
**Finding our place in this world**

**Raginie Duara** [psrd@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:psrd@leeds.ac.uk)  
**Postgraduate Research Student**  
**Institute of Psychological Sciences**  
**University of Leeds**

**Supervisors:**

**Prof Anna Madill** [a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk)  
**Dr Siobhan Hugh-Jones** [s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk)  
**Ethics reference: 15-0020**  
**Website: [www.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.leeds.ac.uk)**

**I feel so stuck in life.**  
**Nothing I do seem to satisfy me.**  
**Sometimes I don't even know what my needs and desires are.**  
**I wish things were as simple as it was in school or college.**  
**Oh! This is not how I thought life would be like...**



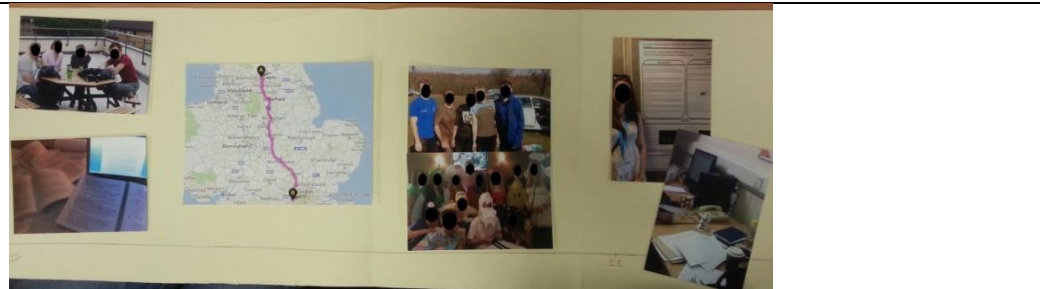

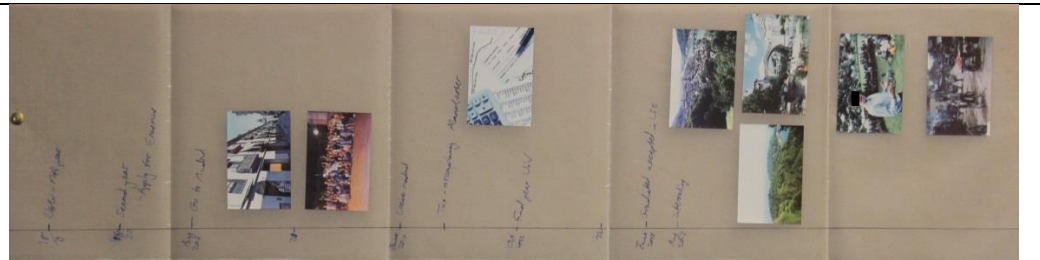


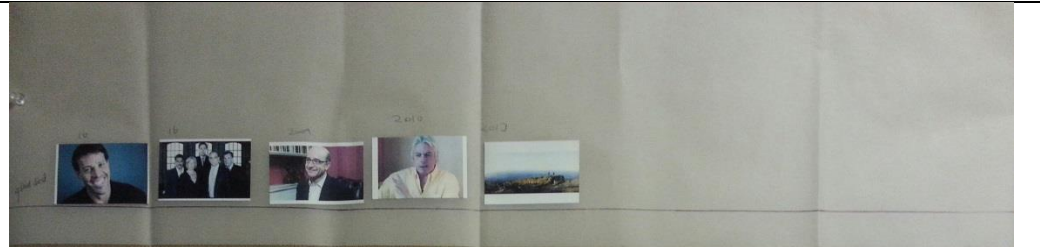
**Are you, or have you ever been, in a similar situation?**  
**If YES, then please consider being part of my study!**

**I am looking for people to interview who:**

- are between 22-30 years old
- not attended university
- self-define as having experienced difficulties 'finding your place in the world'
- British national
- Not currently seeking treatment for mental health problems

**Reward for participation: £20 LoveToShop voucher**  
**Contact email: [psrd@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:psrd@leeds.ac.uk)**

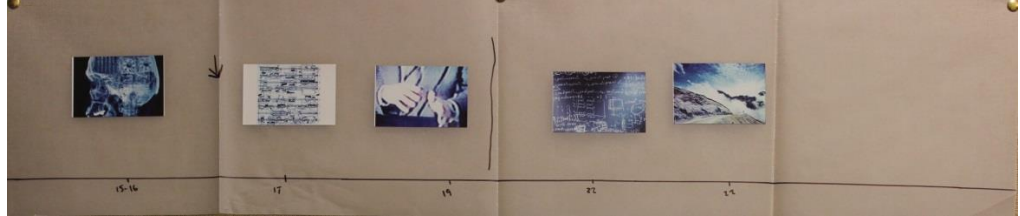
## Appendix H: Timelines produced by each participant

Participant	Timeline
Mary	
Sarah	
Alex	
Harry	
Hannah	
Aran	

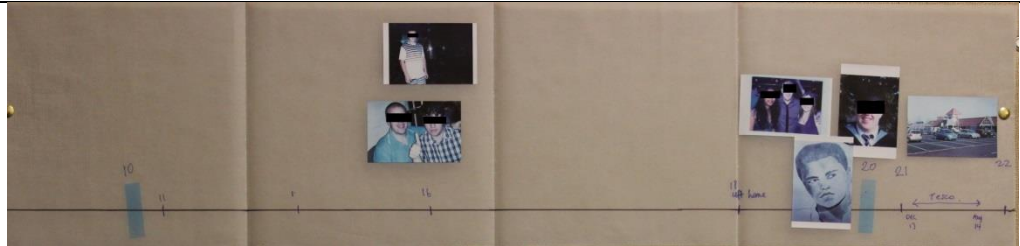
Olivia



Bill



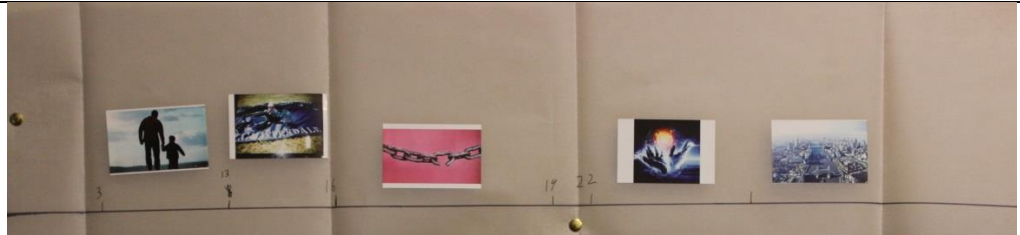
Andrew



Avril



Denver

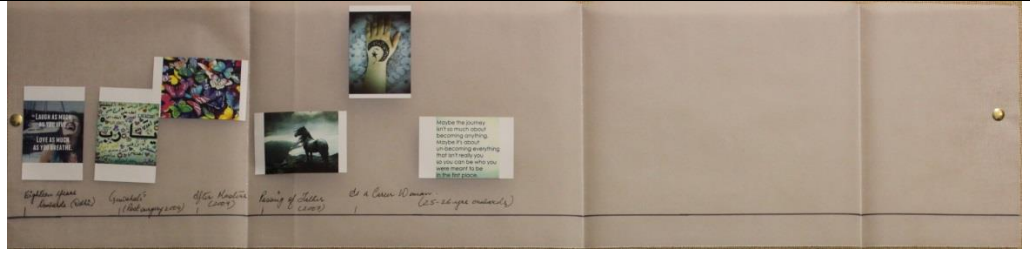


Erica





Amrita



Isha



Raj



Vikram



Niti



Ravi



## Appendix I: One example of transcript summary

### Voice 116 (British sample)

Gender: F

Age: 27

Educational qualification: undergraduate degree



Figure: timeline as obtained through the interview

### Life trajectory

She starts marking in the timeline from the age of 22, with a lot of photos placed in the timeline, she displayed a transition from university through her work experience till the present.

University ➡ Year break (temporary teacher’s assistant) ➡ First job (Doctor) ➡ Contract terminated ➡ Working in a school ➡ Applying for teaching (Change of interest area)

Superordinate themes	Themes	Line no	Description
New challenges	Finding ‘what I want’	9-11 26-34	‘Felt a bit lost’ The main question for her was finding what she would want to do after her graduation. Instead of being excited about graduating, she expressed how worried she felt on her graduation day because she was clueless as to what job to take that would interest her after graduation. She brought two photos representing how she ‘should’ be feeling in contrast to how she was feeling during her graduation. The question of ‘what I want’ lingered further on.
	Betrayal of the idealistic	168-169	There was an expectation of a linear progression following school and hence she wanted to pick something that she would have a job in soon after university
	Making the decision/being the ‘Hamlet’	192-199	She had difficulty making the decision about what would she choose as her career path. This also stems from the idea that she had very little understanding of what she wants and as such she felt stuck at various points. She ended up taking a year break for her to figure out. She was frustrated from the incompatibility that she felt between the course and her. There seem

		193	to be a constant question as to what led to the frustration. Is it the course or herself in general?
		196	'Being like frustrated, really frustrated'
		613-621	'Catch 22 situation'
			Difficult decision at such an early age
			She expresses the difficulty that one faces in making decisions especially when it has to be taken at such a young age when one is not sure of anything to do with career path
	Work environment challenge	365-368	Work environment is something novel to anyone who enters work for the first time. For her, it was challenging because she felt there wasn't much support and people were too busy with their own lives
		379	'Really, really big change obviously'
	Financial consideration	321-323	Financial consideration also plays an important part in what she chooses as her career path.
		647-650	Because she couldn't tell her parents that she was terminated from her previous job, she had to depend on her partner financially to some extent. As such she felt accountable to him. Taking this into consideration, she chose a particular subject in teaching based on the grants available. She claimed this to be a 'big factor'
	Contact with the larger picture	481-503	It is the time when she started looking at the larger picture about work environment
			She looks at the bureaucracy involved at work and develops new worries about adjusting to such bureaucracies. She brought a photo associated with it. She talks about the whole system that functions at work and the friction that develops consequently
<b>Perpetuation of pressure</b>	'Just curl up'	50-53	She would hide away from work because she didn't feel good about it. As such she stopped going for work. By the time she was able to deal with it and come out of her comfort zone, her contract was terminated. Although hiding away was one of her ways of escaping her problems, it led to more problems consequently
		549-555	
	Comparison with others	36-40	There is a constant comparison with others in different situations and circumstances. At work she would compare herself with others in terms of how they felt at work as against how she felt doing the same things that they were doing. Also brought photo to show the comparison
		152-164	'got behind' because she was concentrating on minute things while everyone else was moving ahead and doing larger things
		241-249	Comparison with others continued at different levels, starting from work to family formation
		305-310	These comparisons also affected the way she behaved among people. She had to 'act in a role' pretending to be as confident as everyone else. It was almost like being in a rat race
		180-185	Comparison with others also led her to self-blame because she felt 'what's wrong with me'



	247	as she feels that she's not keeping up with the rest of the people around her
Negative turn of events	128-129 544-555	Her contract was terminated before she could complete her training. She wasn't going to work and hiding away from everything. But gradually she overcame that and started to put more effort, but by the time she did that, they terminated her contract. This brought about a major turning point adding to her stress in many ways (financial, family expectations, 'what to do now')
	552	'big, big shock'
	138	panic after contract terminated
	140	'Feeling really, really lost'
Negative self-evaluation and thought loops	330-340	She tends to have low self-confidence that adds to her pressure because she constantly evaluates how things should be and how it sometimes turns it to be and she feels that she wouldn't be able to perform well enough. She brought two photos to compare what 'should be' as compared to what she 'might be'
Need to explain and be understood	138-144 181-186 524-530 532-538	She had to explain to her parents and convince them to accept her change in career path. This put a lot of pressure on her because on one hand, she didn't like lying and on the other, she felt the need to explain and convince. She showed need of her friends around her so that she could explain her conditions and be understood for the same.
Pressure from family expectation	419-424 427-433	There are expectations held by her family about her career achievements. This poses as a pressure for her She had to do a lot of convincing because they thought it to be a waste to do 5 years of doctor training and then shifting into teaching
Being alone	547 546-548 524 515-522	She felt 'completely on my own' and this added to her struggle (especially after the contract termination) because she didn't have anyone to help her through the struggle that she was going through 'wish for more help' Need for more personal support during university to guide her
Time and age pressure	662-668	She expresses feeling time dawning on her and the limited time that is available to sort things out during the transition
Concern for physical self-image	74-94 93	She was putting on weight because on one hand she was eating more to cope with her problems and on the other, she was having side effects from anti-depression medicines that she had prescription for. Her concern for putting on weight made her feel worse about her situation. 'Made you feel worse'
Popular notions about	304-305	She expressed about the popular notion where success is measured by whether or not you have

	success	310- 313 325- 327	a partner. In this case she does show disagreement of this notion, but at the same time she is forced to accept it leading her to compare herself with others who have partners. This added to the pressure because she felt that she was not accepted as being successful on such grounds. She even brought a photo representing swarming questions about her love life.
<b>Self-perception</b>	Concentrating on the wrong thing	152- 164	She expresses doing the wrong thing at the wrong time when she was busy concentrating on minute things in her course while everyone was moving ahead with the course. This posed difficulty for her because it left 'gaps in her theoretical knowledge'
	'Undeserving'	335- 341	She felt undeserving at certain times because she compared herself with others and felt that she does not deserve to graduate like everyone else
	'More of a people person'	348 352  642 638- 643	The perception of her being a 'people person' led her to develop the central theme of interest and work towards it while also keeping the financial aspect into consideration 'I'm good with people' She expresses being content with the teaching route because she perceives herself as someone who's good with people
	'a really big control freak'	557- 561	She expressed being a control freak and this worked against her because she was depressing over things and hiding away. This in turn led her to more trouble. Inability to productively cope with the given situations
<b>Change with time (General)</b>	Friends over family	212- 218 473- 479	She describes her friends as 'people who know me' over that of her family and hence shows desire to spend time with them because they would be able to help her more than her family. She also didn't tell her family about her contract termination because she assumed they wouldn't understand.
	Taking a matured position/distancing from family	459- 466	She gradually started taking a stance separate/distancing from her family of origin. Although she tried to explain her current position to her family, she also mentioned that it doesn't matter if they oppose because she says 'I'm grown up and I have my own life'
	Perception of age and time pressure	665- 671	With time she has come to a middle ground with the pressure she feels about age and time dawning on her.
	Reduced negative thinking		She claimed that she had changed over the years
<b>Coping/What helps?</b>	Distraction/thought escape	61 393- 394	'Distraction more than anything else' 'Distraction is probably the biggest stress-reliever' Distraction was used as one of the major coping mechanisms although not always leading to positive outcome. Some of the ways she

		distracted herself were: 57 'I mean I'd shop' 58-59 'Baking was another one' 273- 279 Eating and drinking 281- 286 She would drink alcohol before bed because that helped her escape stressful thinking before sleeping 390 209- Movies: 'just good distraction' 219 Travelling She expressed that she would have loved to go travelling with her friends because that would have helped her distract from her problems. But she couldn't do so because of shortage of finance
Physical manifestation of 'nice'	61-65 67-72	Baking was more than just a distraction. She would put more effort to make a good cake at the end and that would make her feel good about what she sees at the end. Even shopping online was one of the ways she would make herself feel good. She would feel good when she sees a post arriving and 'surprise' her
Substitution	218- 235 357- 361 274- 277 381- 384 105 110- 116	She would substitute the need for warmth and care from others with her cats She also substituted the need for love with 'someone to care' with a relationship Baking also made her feel productive because she would 'bake from scratch' and be happy about the end result of it She would also watch movies to contain the loneliness (also associated with using it as a distraction) 'Making someone else feel good' She would attempt to make others feel good in order for her to feel good. It was a way of substituting her emotions associated with the low feelings she had from the negative experiences She would also do things for people in order to get the appreciation from them. It was a way of proving self-worth through things that she could do within her reach. There is quite often a need to be recognised and appreciated by others and when this is not obtained through the career path, it can be substituted with something else. In this case, she wasn't doing well in terms of her career and hence there was no appreciation from it, but doing things for people through other ways helped her get that appreciation
Dealing	667- 671 586- 595	Holding Optimism She holds optimistic thoughts about the time pressure that helps her to deal with things better Telling someone Talking to people helps her 'getting it off your

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577- 581 583- 584 595- 602	chest' that makes her feel lighter about her problems. She would also write it all down, just 'like telling someone' Taking perspectives helping her with self-realisation
558 559- 567	'Let it go' Over time she has come to a realisation that she should stop being a control freak and let things go and not ponder over it. This way she's in a better position to deal with her issues. She attempts to move on from what happened and take the next step required to develop her career Making the best of the given
563- 574	She highlights the positive bits of being a teacher. She attempts to look at the brighter side of things that had happened instead of focusing on the failures that she had gone through time Reassurance also plays a big part in her dealing with problems. This reassurance was not only obtained from people around her, but also through movies (even though it's frictional). This reassurance help build the confidence about her position
353- 356	Her need for appreciation could also be associated with the reassurance at the time when she needed to feel worth of something (when the channel through career failed)
391- 393	Support from people
110- 116	Support from her partner played a major role in helping her move forward. This support was both emotional and material.
253- 260 268 273	People's opinion also plays an important part in making her realise at times when she makes a wrong move. When she was using alcohol to deal with her problems, it was her friend's reaction that helped her get over such unproductive ways of dealing with problems.
293- 296	At many places, it was seen that she would try to lay the cause outside herself allowing her to cope with the negative experiences like the contract termination
Externalising cause	She gave example of how she would have been in a better position if she was guided well during her university and that more of 'personal support' and 'assessments' would have helped her
515- 522	'it's not your fault'
560	

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Some brief notes:

- Her advice stems from her learning experiences and the changes that she had undergone through time. She alerts young people of the changes that one is likely to go through with time. These changes are mostly centred in the self and the perception of the time pressure. She advises young people to accept the changes that happen and not feel that time is dawning upon them because that leads to all the pressure causing a wrong decision. She has come to a point where she is ready to accept any large change in the career path given the circumstances at various points in her life. This was more like an example given to young people through her advice. She also highlights the importance of personal choices over others' expectations. This is where the family expectations come into play because she had always felt the pressure of their expectations in relation to her achievements and the choices that she was making over time. Overall, figuring out 'what I want' becomes an important ingredient of her advice.

- In her decision-making process, she takes one major aspect into consideration and that is her future family. She aspires to have a job that would give her the time and space to be with her family (partner and kids) in the future. She claims that the choice of teaching has also to do with this framework because she feels that this would let her have flexibility and give enough time to her family in the future. This highlights the importance of balancing work and family as part of the broad future goal (line no. 433-447).

- Although she frames family expectation as pressure, she also highlights the importance of being accepted by her family. The need to explain and convince her parents was an integral part of the pathway choice that she was taking. This directs one's attention to how important the role of family of origin plays in the transition to becoming an 'adult'. With time she has come to an idea that she has grown up and she has the right to make her own decisions. It is interesting to think about what triggers this change in the thinking. Is it the non-acceptance by parents of her choice or is it a gradual realisation through time. In this case, it was more of the former because it is evident from the transcript as she mentions her parents giving a negative response to her career choice and then she goes on to saying how she feels that she should stand for her rights as a grown and matured adult.

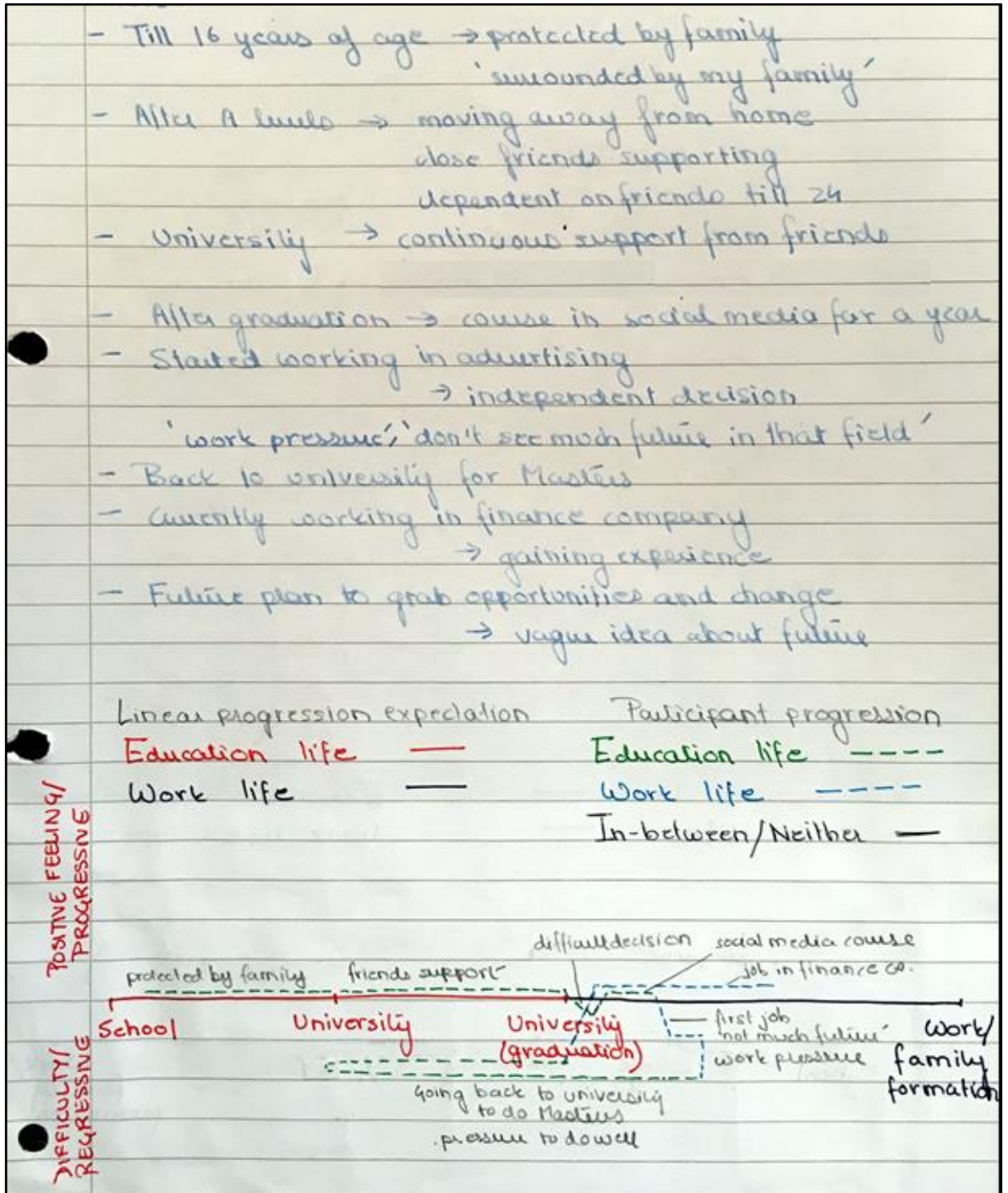
- Rather than feeling responsible and accountable to her family, she feels more responsible and accountable to her partner and friends. This stems from two main reasons: one that her parents don't know about her contract termination and hence they didn't have the opportunity to show their support in this matter, and the other is related but yet a different aspect wherein she seems to have replaced importance of family with that of friends and they seem to know more about her as a person than her family does. She would open up and be more frank to her partner and friends rather than her family. This also explains the pressure of family expectations that she feels and the fear of not being accepted for her choice.

- She hinted towards the balance requirement for romantic involvement and work. At such times of transition, she mentioned being unprepared for a 'new relationship' as she claimed that she wouldn't be able to 'concentrate on him'. This hints towards the divided attention and concentration required in terms of work and relationship and the difficulty that one might face in balancing both although they both may form a very integral part of the transition. It makes the transition more demanding and challenging. In this case, she had people talking about her single life, and on the other, she had the career path to think of (Line no. 316-320).

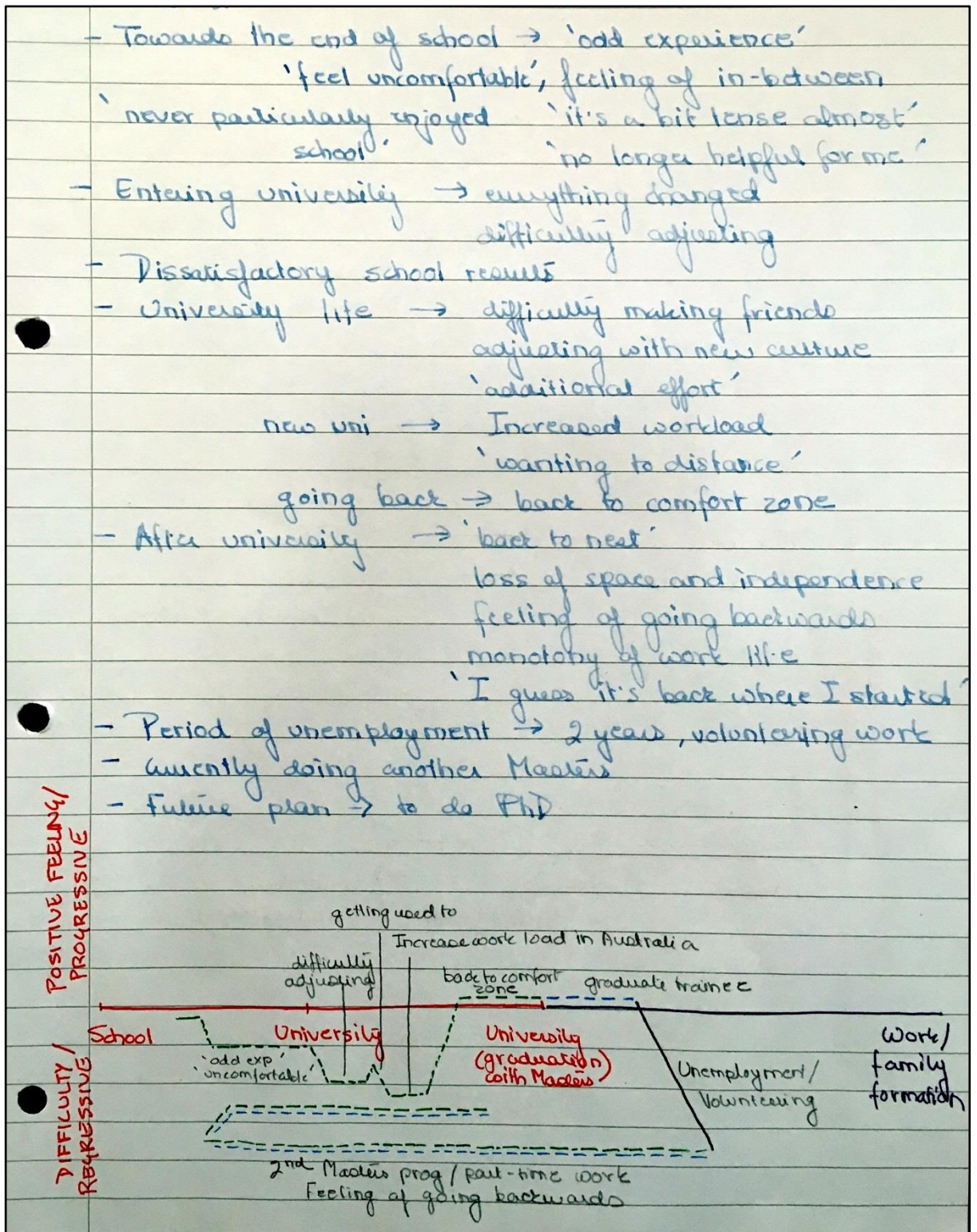
- This interview reflected many things that she had to juggle with, all holding almost equal importance throughout the transition. Some of them being, romantic relationship, parental expectations, decisions about 'what I want' and financial independence.

## Appendix J: Pictorial representations of participant transitional process

Participant: Ishita (Indian participant)



Participant: Max (British participant)



## Appendix K: Connection between cross-cutting themes and final themes

Table showing the connection between the initial and final themes and sub-themes

Final theme	Final sub-theme	Extracts from the interviews	Cross-cutting themes	Individual themes	Description
Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment	Betrayal of the 'ideal'	<i>In short... when I was in school... life was simple... I will get a college and after that job and settle down... when I... means after 12 I saw that it's very... it's going opposite... (Line no. 426-429)</i>	New Challenge	Betrayal of the idealistic	He had idealistic expectations about how life would progress following his education, typically in a linear progression. In both romantic relationships and career, he had some imaginations that he thought would turn into reality with time in his transition.
	Question of 'what I want'	<i>And I was still in work figuring out what I wanted to really do so yes, [names his company] is good but do I want to be in [names the town where he works]? You know where else could I be? What else can I be doing so that is still why nothing really changed then, this was then pretty much a full year of being anxious then, there had been no change if anything, you know, building up more. (Line no. 285-291)</i>	New challenges	Finding 'what I want'	One of his major concerns was finding what he really wanted from his career. While he joined work, he didn't have 'much of a direction' as to where his career path was leading him and was unsure whether he made the right choice.
Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations	Playing catch up	<i>...it is just a whole, you know, you go back into the same routines, but the routines are slightly kind of different because no one's got much of time because they've all got jobs. They've all got proper lives to lead, whereas, whereas some of us are still studying... (Line no. 1090-1095)</i>	Perpetuation of pressure	Comparison with others	He compared himself with his fellow mates who have got a job and making their own busy lives, while he feels that he still isn't quite there. There's a feeling of lagging behind in comparison with others.



Feeling responsible		<i>I somehow subconsciously sort of feel that even though if I'm not in touch with my parents that they would be judging whatever move I make or what jobs I take or what I'm doing which is strange because I've not spoken to them for a couple of years now but I feel like if I did suddenly meet my mother and she said "What are you doing? Oh you're <u>only</u> working in the university, why aren't you doing this or earning this much?" And that's always kind of in the back of my mind even though I enjoy the job in itself I still feel that way. (Line no. 432-447)</i>	Perpetuation of pressure	Answerable/ Proving self-worth	Another thing that has potential to add an implicit pressure is the part where she feels answerable towards her mother. Although they have not been in contact for years, she finds it quite surprising herself that she always has this uncanny fear that one day she would bump into her mother and she would question her about her achievements and she would not have much to say from her end. Feeling of her worth being questioned by others.
Living up to social and cultural expectations		<i>Yeah, I don't actually mind living at home, but it's like how other people see it, like when I say I'm still living at home, people are like, 'whoa', like it's really weird or something, so even like I don't mind living at home, it's still a bit like embarrassing to say you live at home when you get to my age. (Line no. 244-249)</i>	Perpetuation of pressure	Social pressure	There is a pressure that she feels because she lives with her parents and she feels 'embarrassed' about it. However, she claims being comfortable living with her parents. What bothers her is the reaction that she gets from people when she tells others of her living arrangement. 'embarrassing to say you live at home'
Becoming and knowing self	Mirrored and re-positioned	<i>I think my mum, apparently we're very similar and in some ways I agree with that... We're both very stubborn, in my opinion we're both very selfish, but she won't have anything other than what she wants. (Line no. 116-128)</i>	Self-perception	'stubborn'	He expressed the similarities that he shared with his mother and he wanted to change that about him. He said that he regretted this 'stubbornness' that he felt he acquired from his mother.
	Prompted and carved	<i>I've never really met my potential in a lot of ways, because, of course, you've got to remember that I, you know, did really well out of my GCSEs and things, and I was, you know, far and away, well, I was just very intelligent at what I did and, you know, other people recognised that, and I recognised</i>	Self-perception	'intelligent'	He developed the idea that he was an intelligent person from his performance at school. This ironically led to stress in his transitional process where he felt that he had to maintain his status of being 'intelligent' in every junction that he reached henceforth.

it...(Line no. 117-123)

Suggested and compared	<i>I did my HS. I did well... I scored very well in Economics and I wanted to take Economics as my subject, but then I was very afraid of Maths. (Interviewer smiles). I hated Maths. I knew that in Economics, I will have Maths, but my teachers said that 'If you put your efforts, we can help you. You can do well.' Umm... but then I couldn't. I couldn't take the risk. I was always... I kind of... one of my friends... one of my good friends, she describes me as Hamlet (Both smile). Here is that Hamlet somewhere inside me. I can't decide. (Line no. 285-295)</i>	Self-perception	Being a 'Hamlet'	She talked about how she has always been a 'Hamlet' in various life circumstances, portraying her indecisive nature. This has affected her in educational, work and romantic relationship decisions. She first gathered this idea about herself as someone like 'Hamlet' when her friend mentioned it to her. She used this description in various parts in the interview.	
Incompetent and conflicted	<i>...when I was working there, I wanted to be someone because I saw... saw everything was going so fast there. That too it's a dev... not even a developing country... it's underdeveloped country... happening so much... like I didn't .... I think like there was one reason that happened. Once the MD like he told me to xerox and I didn't know how to xerox it. I was in... in that... in that knowledge... like I didn't know how to do anything. I was so blank about life. (Line no. 1231-1240)</i>	Self-perception	'I was so blank about life'	While he was working, he realised that he didn't have the basic skills required to be in work life. He started perceiving himself as someone who was ill-equipped to make a successful transition through work.	
'Dropped into'	<i>I'm quite antisocial and it's not my fault, I'm just, I'm naturally like that and that's a big problem, that's the only other thing really that winds me up through my life, I'm not good at making friends so yeah, that's about it really. (Line no. 1165-1169)</i>	Self-perception	'I'm quite anti-social'	He perceived himself to be an anti-social person and a lot of that came from his interaction with the environment that he grew up in that confined his opportunities to say, make friends or have a healthy relationship with someone significant	
Forced	'Train myself	<i>I think I've become a lot more responsible and you</i>	New	Being a	At the time of the interview he was due to

adulthood	to be an adult'	<i>know 'cos I'm having a kid and stuff. And that's the next thing for me is having a kid and trying to be a dad which is daunting but in the same hand I kind of think you know I can do it... (Line no. 867-871)</i>	challenges	father	having a child. He shared his apprehension of being a father and taking in the huge responsibility. He found this 'daunting'.
	Rush into financial self-sufficiency	<i>I felt like I really took the most that I could out of my time at university. But when I had some family problems I was basically left to be completely independent financially and everything and I ended up in a job that I felt was really unsuitable based on my expectations of where my career would be going (Line no. 43-47)</i>	New challenges	Financial independence	She came from a family who used to abuse her (not much detail given by the participant about this) and as such she was recommended by the police to 'cut ties and impose a harassment order'. This put a pressure on her financially and in turn had to take up a job that she felt wasn't up to her expectations from her career goal.
	'Man of the house'	<i>...when I lost my dad the basic thing was that like you know I could no longer afford to be little kiddish anymore. Whatever- whatever little kid was left in me you know. I was approximately 22-23 at that point of time and I couldn't you know afford to be a child anymore. Not even child-like...(Line no. 852-857)</i>	New challenges	Forced into adulthood	Soon after her father's death, she had to take up adult like responsibilities, at the same time feeling unprepared for the same. There was a changing position in her family wherein she had to take full responsibility and care of her mother who was entirely dependent on her.
Coping responses	Acceptance of non-linear progression	<i>Because, I don't know, I like the idea of doing things properly and, you know, I don't think I'm the only who likes, you know, that, takes some sort of small comfort from it. I've just sort of got to reconcile myself with the fact that, you know, the world doesn't work out that way sometimes, and you've just got to go with whatever, you know, you've got. (Line no. 852-858)</i>	Change with time	Acceptance of non-linear progression	'reconcile myself' Realisation of a probable and acceptable non-linear progression under some circumstances

Optimism and momentum	<i>'cos I'd always been taught that I'd be in prison, you know, or I'd be in some dead end job, I'd just be a product of my upbringing like the rest of the people were, but it didn't turn out like that [...] now I'm a free person, you know, free thinker, so I enjoy all these types of lives that you can, be thinking about I could have been this place, I could have been that place, just gives me some freedom in that sense that I'm not trapped in one particular area, in one particular life for the rest of my life [...]It's all about discovering hope. (Line no. 575-583)</i>	Change with time	Changing way of thinking	He started listening to 'positive music'. When he saw all the bad that was happening in his area, he decided to take a leap and move away and start a new life. He started thinking of his situation differently and took a more positive approach to his living – 'my life opened up' He changed his ways because he expressed being 'sick of being a victim' and also a product of his upbringing.
Productivity and Escapism	<i>I suppose it's kind of a distraction in a way but also just because then you'd get something in the post, so it would be like you're getting little presents, like little things that you'd almost not forget you ordered them but like you wouldn't know when it would arrive so it would be like, you know, a little nice surprise, if you got in and you'd had a bad day and there was something you'd ordered waiting for you, like that's nice... (Line no. 55-72)</i>	Coping/What helps?	Physical manifestation of 'nice'	Baking was more than just a distraction. She would put more effort to make a good cake and that would make her feel good about what she sees as the end result. Even shopping online was one of the ways she would make herself feel good by getting a post delivered and 'surprise' herself
'Triaholic'	<i>This is when I was younger, but it also came apparent when I moved on my own after a while as well, so I just thought, right, that's it, I'm going to [Mumbles], ramp it up, so look at as many solutions as I can, try everything out that I can so I just decided to get some money and I just went on a complete triaholic, trying to go to therapy, FT... (Line no. 362-365)</i>	Coping/What helps?	Struggle through it	He had to go through a lot of struggle to make his way through things like taking care of basic needs and even saving money and take up courses of interest. He explained how he struggled through it. He used the word, 'triaholic' to express how he kept persevering through hard times

Venting and Letting it out	<i>I first cry... I cry alone. Just today I cried in front of you otherwise I don't cry so easily (she smiles). I first cry alone... when I get scared, I feel weird in the stomach, then I cry and after I cry, I feel calm and then I say 'All right. Whatever happens, will face'. (Line no. 502-506)</i>	Coping/ what helps?	Keep calm	She expressed dealing with problems by venting out and then calming herself to be able to deal with the situations at hand.
Reassurance and inspiration	<i>I didn't think that he would be able to help me in any way but like now I can tell him pretty much anything and he is brilliant, if I'm stressed about uni, it's like "[names herself] you'll be fine, like you're very clever, you know what you're doing, like you're going to be fine" and then if say like a placement's been stressful I can talk through any situations with him. (Line no. 1175-1181)</i>	Coping/ What helps?	Reassurance	Reassurance played a big part in coping with her difficult times. This was obtained from his boyfriend wherein he would reassure her of her worth and provide her with the support that ultimately boosted her confidence in her stressful times.

## Appendix L: Distribution of the participants across the themes and sub-themes

Participants (British)	Education	Age	Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment		Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations			Becoming and knowing oneself					Forced 'adulthood' /independence		Coping responses					
			Betrayal of the 'ideal'	Question of 'what I want'	Feeling responsible	Playing catch up	Living up to social and cultural expectations	Mi	P	S	I	D	R	Tr	M	A	O	Pr	T	V
Mary	Uni	25	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X									X
Hannah	Uni	27	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X		X		X	X
Olivia	Uni	23	X	X	X				X	X	X	X					X			X
Bill	Uni	23	X	X		X			X	X	X				X	X	X	X		X
Andrew	Uni	22	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X			X				X	X
Avril	Uni	28	X	X		X		X		X	X	X								X
Max	Uni	25	X	X		X		X	X			X								X
Denver	Uni	22							X	X	X	X			X	X				X
Erica	Uni	24	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X				X	X		X	X
Aran	Non- Uni	25							X		X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X
Alex	Uni	23	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X				X		X	X		X
Sarah	Non- Uni	23	X	X				X		X	X	X					X		X	X
Harry	Uni	26	X	X		X		X		X	X	X				X	X		X	X
Jack	Non- Uni	22							X	X	X	X	X			X	X		X	X
Silvia	Uni	25	X	X						X	X	X					X		X	X
Amy	Non-Uni	27							X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X		X

Participants (British)	Education	Age	Smooth navigation and self-fulfilment		Perceived standards and unfulfilled expectations			Becoming and knowing oneself					Forced 'adulthood' /independence			Coping responses				
			Betrayal of the 'ideal'	Question of 'what I want'	Feeling responsible	Playing catch up	Living up to social and cultural expectations	Mi	P	S	I	D	R	Tr	M	A	O	Pr	T	V
Aman	Uni	29		X	X		X	X			X			X			X		X	X
Ishita	Uni	26	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X					X
Amrita	Uni	30	X		X			X				X	X	X			X		X	X
Isha	Uni	26	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X					X	X
Raj	Non-Uni	24	X	X	X			X	X			X					X			X
Niti	Non-Uni	28		X	X		X		X	X	X	X							X	X
Vikram	Non-Uni	30	X	X	X	X		X	X			X	X					X	X	X
Ravi	Uni	25		X	X		X	X	X	X						X			X	X

Abbreviations used in the above two tables:

Mirrored and re-positioned (Mi), Prompted and carved (P), Suggested and compared (S), Incompetent and conflicting (I), 'Dropped into' (D), Rushing into financial self-sufficiency (R), 'Train myself to be an adult' (Tr), 'Man of the house' (M), Acceptance of non-linear progression (A), Optimism and momentum (O), Productivity and escapism (Pr), Triaholic (T), Venting and letting it out (V) and Reassurance and inspiration (Re)