The Existential Crisis

Mary Andrews

Dare Association, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Existential crises are confusing and high-anxiety times when a person is trying to resolve and find the answer to this question: Who am I? The existential crisis concept is derived from Erikson (1970), who referred to it as an identity crisis. This article describes different versions of existential crises and also outlines ways to resolve them. One type of an existential crisis that is likely to occur early in life begins as a teenager or a young adult and is referred to as the sophomore crisis. The sophomore crisis deals with identity issues about the future. The adult version of an existential crisis usually begins in the mid to late 20s. The adult existential crisis also seeks resolutions to identity issues, but the issues are more complex. Later versions of existential crises deal with questions regarding mortality, legacy, and achievement. In short, an existential crisis may be different for people at different stages of development and different age groups. Existential issues exist within a society as well; an existential crisis is an internalized by-product of societal problems. If several people within a society do not solve their existential crisis, there can be societal implications. The proposed solutions to solving existential crises therefore depend on multiple factors. The first solution is to match a person to a career. Another solution is to match one person to another. The third solution is behavioral training on social perspective taking.

Keywords: existential crisis, adult development, existential anxiety, model of hierarchical complexity, matching

Many people struggle with issues of identity and with figuring out who they are at different periods in their lives. They are going through an existential crisis. Existential crises occur during confusing and high-anxiety periods, that is, times when a person is trying to resolve and find the answer to the tough questions: Who am I? and What can I contribute to the world? People who are in the midst of an existential crisis will experience high anxiety levels (Bugental, 1965). The anxiety will not fully disappear until the crisis has been acknowledged, addressed, or resolved. The concept of an existential crisis derived from Erikson's (1970) identity crisis. An identity crisis refers to a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself.

Experiencing an existential crisis is part of being alive; it means you are working through an important life task to avoid negative consequences (Jacobsen, 2006). The concept of an existential crisis mainly exists in a modern society (Jameson & Hardt, 2000) because modern society offers individuals from diverse groups many choices. For example, in today's society, many people get to choose their career path and whom they want to marry. When individuals are offered several choices, they want to make sure that they select the best choice for themselves. The process of choosing can cause great anxiety and lead to an existential crisis (Schwartz, 2005).

An existential crisis is a by-product of larger social issues that individuals have internalized (Jameson & Hardt, 2000). It is important that individuals resolve each version of the existential crises when they arise to avoid negative personal and societal outcomes. The personal negative outcomes include existential depression, anxiety, and bad relationships; the negative societal outcomes include high divorce rate and an abundance of depressed retired people not contributing very much to society. We have

---

developed three proposed solutions for individuals to resolve their existential crisis: matching one person to another, matching a person to a career, and behavioral training on social perspective taking.

Difference Between Existential Crisis Period and Stage of Development

The period of time that one experiences an existential crisis is independent of the stage of development someone is in during the crisis because people in the same age group and people in similar life situations may be at different stages of development. There are three versions of the existential crisis: sophomore crisis, adult existential crisis, and later existential crisis. Each version of the existential crisis is a period that depends on what age group one fits into. Someone experiencing a sophomore crisis can be at a higher stage of development than someone in the midst of a later existential crisis. The stages of development are based on the model of hierarchical complexity (Commons, 2007; Commons & Pekker, 2008). Each stage is defined by how well someone performs different tasks. One's stage of development may determine how well one can resolve an existential crisis. Both period and stage are important to know when solving the crisis because they determine the best way to approach the problems.

Sophomore Crisis

An existential crisis usually first occurs during the late teenage years to early 20s (Kehr, 2010). It is referred to as the sophomore crisis (Perry, 1970). During the sophomore crisis, young adults struggle to find resolutions to different dimensions of identity. The identity issues they are most likely to struggle with are related to choosing a career path, forming successful relationships, and life in general.

In the midst of their existential crisis, young adults and their parents experience a significant amount of despair and emotional pain (Kehr, 2010). Before the existential crisis occurs, the young adults are generally high achievers and regularly receive praise from parents and teachers. The sophomore crisis develops out of fear of not having a secure plan for reaching their highest potential in the future. It can happen after the loss (death or abandonment) of a loved

one or from the transition from high school to college. The anxiety caused by the sophomore crisis can serve as an incentive to figure out what someone wants to do with his or her life, but it can also lead to panic attacks and withdrawal from life activities. It is important for the sophomore crisis to be resolved, so the young adult experiencing the crisis can feel more secure and less anxious about his or her future.

Currently, I am in my last semester of college, and I have resolved several aspects of my sophomore crisis. Originally, I was a biology/nursing major because I enjoy science and helping people. Due to my interests, striving to become a nurse seemed like the best career path. I was unhappy the majority of my sophomore year and realized it had to do with my choice of major and my school environment. I listed the things that would make me happy and what needed to change in my life. Once I took the to time to rethink my career path during my sophomore year of college, I realized I would not be happy doing the practical and hands-on work that nurses do for the rest of my life. Now I am at a new college studying psychology and neuroscience, with the hope of becoming a research clinical psychologist. Even though I have mainly resolved my sophomore crisis, I will most likely experience another existential crisis later in my life.

Adult Existential Crisis

In their mid to late 20s, people start to experience another existential crisis, referred to as the adult existential crisis. The adult existential crisis will continue later into adulthood if not resolved early on. Someone experiencing an adult existential crisis also seeks resolutions to issues of identity involving career choice, relationships, and life in general. The adult existential crisis differs from the sophomore crisis by including more complex issues of identity in addition to the issues involved in the sophomore crisis. For example, they consider the following questions: Am I religious or not? How do I confront my sexuality? Am I independent, dependent, or interdependent?

One of my coworkers recently left to begin an educational technology PhD program. He was able to get accepted into his program of choice by working through his adult existential crisis. When he began working at Dare Association, he

vaguely knew he had an interest in policy making, did not know where he wanted to go with his life, and was not very self-assured. By working on many projects here, he realized he has a strong interest in education technology. He also became more independent and self-assured because he had the responsibility of managing an academic journal. Managing the journal meant he could not ask for assurance and approval for every decision he was required the make. Resolving many aspects of his adult existential crisis allowed him to lower his anxiety, he stopped participating in unhealthy habits such as smoking, and he had a better handle on his life.

Bugental (1965) speaks of a patient dealing with his adult existential crisis. The patient was very anxious and felt disconnected from everyone. He was experiencing great distress because he was struggling to confront the fact that he was a homosexual man. By not confronting and accepting his sexual orientation, he cut off many people and was not successful in forming new relationships. Bugental reflects that if he had realized that his patient's struggles were due to an existential crisis at the time, he would have had a better chance of helping the patient.

Later Existential Crisis

Later in adulthood, when one already has established a career, developed relationships, and confronted some questions related to identity, a person can still experience another version of an existential crisis. The later existential crisis occurs late in adulthood. People experiencing a later existential crisis may be struggling with issues involving illness, physical pain, and fear of impending death, but the later existential crisis is not specifically about resolving those issues. It is about wanting to improve one's life before events such as illness and death take over. Specifically, the later existential crisis involves thoughts of morality, legacy, and achievement. In terms of morality, individuals may dwell on past wrongdoings and struggle to find a way to make things right while they still have time. People dealing with the legacy and achievement aspects of the later existential crisis want to know that they have made a positive impact in their career, family, or the world in general. They want to leave an influential legacy behind and achieve all that they can before

it is too late. If they did not fully resolve issues from the sophomore or adult existential crisis, they will have a tougher time resolving the achievement aspect. Before the later existential crisis is resolved, those suffering will be anxious from dwelling on how they could have done things differently, or they will become depressed by thinking there is no way to resolve the crisis before they pass away.

Measuring the Degree of Having an Existential Crisis

There are two main domains to consider when measuring the degree of an existential crisis: relationships and careers. Those involved in a broken relationship or holding a job they do not enjoy usually experience an existential crisis. The degree to which how serious their existential crisis depends on how bad the relationship is and how dissatisfied they are with their job. A relationship is considered broken if it leads to a variety of factors. The factors ranked from most negative to less negative are murder, abuse (physical and mental), fighting all the time, and living together but not communicating. A person experiencing any of those factors with their partner will be experiencing an existential crisis to different degrees. The ways to know if people are dissatisfied with their career are if they seem bored, do not produce good or original work, and retire before they are required to.

Proposed Solutions

Existential crises change for people at different stages in development and different life periods. Therefore, the proposed solutions for resolving existential crises will depend on stage and period. The proposed solutions aim to provide stage-independent simple solutions for matching people and careers with behavioral training. Generally speaking, there are three solutions: matching one person to another, matching a person to a career, and behavioral training on social perspective taking. These solutions can be applied to many aspects within all versions of existential crises.

Matching One Person to Another

The first solution is to create relationships by matching one person to another. This solution

can be used to address the relationship, confronting one's sexual identity, and figuring out one's level of independence aspects of existential crises. Matching one person to another is done by partnering people with similar interests and a similar stage of development. Matching people is important because unmatched people may end up in unhappy relationships and marriages. Only 17% of marriages are considered happy (Vilibert, 2012) because many married partners do not take the time to see if they were matched correctly before getting married. For example, there was a patient in the hospital who asked his nurse about her fiancé's career, and she could not even explain to the patient what her fiancé did for a living. Not knowing about your partner's career suggests you do not know many of his or her interests. An unhappy relationship or marriage can result in infidelity, depression, and low self-esteem and confidence.

Past research presents similar and different factors that predict marital success. Burgess and Cottrell (1936) found that the most significant indicators of positive marital success and adjustment include how often couples engage in common activities, consensus upon life organization, levels of education for both partners, and the attachment of the partners to their parents. A longitudinal study done over 4 years on marital success and failure by Bentler and Newcomb (1978) found four variables with significant positive correlation for both married ($n = 53$) and divorced couples ($n = 24$): ambition (married: $r = .40$, $p < .001$; divorced: $r = .26$, $p < .05$), liberalism (married: $r = .44$, $p < .001$; divorced: $r = .40$, $p < .05$), travel interest (married: $r = .25$, $p < .01$; divorced: $r = .43$, $p < .05$), and religious commitment (married: $r = .48$, $p < .001$; divorced: $r = .69$, $p < .001$).

Matching a Person to a Career

The second proposed solution involves matching a person to a career he or she will be satisfied with and not want to retire from prematurely. People in a fulfilling career find it easier to resolve the career path, level of independence, legacy, and achievement aspects of existential crises. People who are not matched successfully may end up in an unfulfilling job, which can cause lack of engagement, retention issues, boredom, being overwhelmed, and having a lack of passion and energy. My mother,

for example, has changed careers three times. She is a very bright woman, but it took a later existential crisis when she was 50 years old to figure out what she wanted to do with her life. Her life experiences led her to figure out the type of impact she wanted to have on the world and then become an Episcopal priest.

Some common methods companies use to hire an employee are résumé reviews, aptitude tests, personality tests, and interviews. These methods are not always successful for matching a person to a career he or she will want to continue for a long period of time. The way employers can find successful employees is to assess potential employees' occupational interests and stage of development that match the stage required for the position they are being hired into. When people are correctly matched to a career, they will be more engaged, have a higher retention rate, and will produce more creative, innovative, and original work.

Matching Methodology

Our proposed solution uses a scientific way of matching one person to another and a person to a career. The two most important aspects of matching people are knowing one's stage of development and interests. To measure stage of development, we use the Decision Making Instrument (DMI) and Perspective Taking Instrument (PTI), based on the model of hierarchical complexity (MHC). To measure interests, we use our version of the Holland Interest Scale.

The MHC is a mathematical model that explains what underlies stage-like development across the life span (Commons, 2007; Commons & Pekker, 2008). It is made up of 17 stages. Stages of development proceed along a general sequence of behavior called a task sequence. Task sequences exist in several domains, including interpersonal, logical, social, and problem domains. The instruments we use to match people based on stage (DMI and PTI) are both task sequences formed by the MHC. The DMI task sequence is part of the logical and problem domain, whereas the PTI task sequences are part of the interpersonal and social domain.

The reason task sequences based on the MHC are used to match people is because they are able to provide crucial insights into a person. The insights reached from the MHC translate to

matching people with a partner who will be highly engaged, loyal, communicative, and supportive of one another. It is also able to match people to a career that they are best suited for, by comparing their stage scores to scores of the jobs. Each task within the DMI and PTI task sequences has its own order of hierarchical complexity (OHC). The OHC for both task sequences is made up of 17 orders that match the 17 stages in the MHC. The participants' performance on the tasks within the task sequences can be matched to a stage from the MHC. After taking the DMI and PTI, each participant is given a stage score. Careers are also scored. The closer the stage scores of the participants, the higher the likelihood of a successful match.

The interest aspect of matching refers to preferences and repeated choices to engage in activities and tasks that provide some reinforcement to the person giving selective attention to the tasks. The Holland Interest Scale is able to see what types of careers the participants would enjoy the most. The Holland Interest Scale measures interests in six dimensions: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. When taking the Holland Interest Scale, participants are asked to rate tasks on a scale of 1 (hate) to 6 (love). Each task relates to one dimension of interest. To determine the total interest score, each interest dimension is calculated by adding scores of the same interest dimension. For example, if a person scores 4 on the first investigative task, 5 on the second and third, and 2 on the last one, the total investigative score for that person would be 16.

People who have similar interest scores are more likely to be a good match because they can strengthen their relationship by performing activities and tasks together, develop good communication by discussing overlapping topics of interest, and help each other improve on tasks and activities of mutual interest. Calculating the dimensions of interest is also important for matching a person to a career. Having a career that interests you will help you improve productively, and you will be less likely to retire early. Combining passion and interest with stage of development will increase the likelihood of finding a successful match in finding both a partner and career.

Social Perspective Taking

The last proposed solution is behavioral training on social perspective taking. People experiencing issues with life in general, independence, deciding their religious identity, and confronting their sexual identity will benefit from behavioral training on social perspective training. People with mental illnesses, especially psychotic disorders, benefit the most from social perspective behavioral training. For instance, individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia are especially vulnerable to experiencing an existential crisis (Prousky, 2014). When people with schizophrenia become detached from themselves, they develop a disturbance relating to their subjective self-experience in their external or objective reality. People with schizophrenia have existential issues relating to identity and morality that contribute to their problems of understanding what their objective reality is. Finding a way to solve their existential crisis is detrimental because they are likely to experience an overwhelming amount of anxiety that could lead to committing suicide. When they experience an existential crisis, they first need someone to acknowledge that what they are experiencing is very real to them. They also need guidance and behavioral training on social perspective taking. To resolve an existential crisis, everyone needs to come to their own conclusion, although they should recognize that help from others is beneficial. One must learn how to listen to and understand outside perspectives on different aspects of their existential crisis.

Social perspective taking is the ability to learn from other people's perspectives and opinions. Armon's perspective-taking stages are as follows: undifferentiated and egocentric, differentiated, self-reflective/reciprocal, third-person/mutuality, and multiple systems (Rodriguez, 1992). When resolving an existential crisis, you must reach the third-person/mutuality and multiple systems social perspective-taking stages. When in those stages, one will have the ability to step outside one's own immediate or systematic perspective. One is also able to integrate the perspectives of oneself and others when making a decision. Some ways to reach those stages of social perspective taking are to learn to act in plays, become a salesperson for yourself, learn how to act in a charming manner, predict how

behaviors will affect other people, relate how you feel when treated in the way you plan to treat others, and work in teams that require cooperation. By becoming better at social perspective taking, one will be better equipped to resolve many aspects of existential crises.

Conclusion

There are several things to keep in mind when resolving an existential crisis. First, one should remember why resolving an existential crisis is important. People want to resolve their existential crisis so they do not experience negative consequences, including severe anxiety, existential depression, or forming bad relationships with people. The "crisis" part of an existential crisis refers to the negative consequences themselves and to the drive and motivation one receives to avoid those negative consequences. Some other things to keep in mind are to find stage score, figure out weaknesses, and maximize a couple of main interests to be matched correctly with a partner and career. One will need to accept help from others, but figure out who they are and what they want on their own. When one works through an existential crisis, one can have a more fulfilling life and experience less anxiety on a daily basis. In a societal sense, it is important for individual existential crises to be solved. When many individuals do not understand how to solve their existential crisis, there can be a society of people who do not produce original work because they are bored and unsatisfied with their jobs, and there can be a higher divorce rate.

References

Bentler, P. M., & Newcomb, M. D. (1978). Longitudinal study of marital success and failure. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 46,* 1053–1070. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.46.5.1053

Bugental, J. F. (1965). The existential crisis in intensive psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice, 2,* 16–20. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0088602

Burgess, E. W., & Cottrell, S. L. (1936). The prediction of adjustment in marriage. *American Sociological Review, 1,* 737–751. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2084133

Commons, M. L. (2007). Introduction to the model of hierarchical complexity. *Behavioral Development Bulletin, 13,* 1–6. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0100493

Commons, M. L., & Pekker, A. (2008). Presenting the formal theory of hierarchical complexity. *World Futures: Journal of General Evolution, 64,* 375–382. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02604020802301204

Erikson, E. H. (1970). Autobiographic notes on the identity crisis. *Daedalus, 99,* 730–759. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/20023973

Jacobsen, B. (2006). The life crisis in an existential perspective: Can trauma and crisis be seen as an aid in personal development? *Existential Analysis, 17,* 39–53.

Jameson, F., & Hardt, M. (2000). *The Jameson reader.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Kehr, B. (2010, March 8). Existential crisis in young adults. Retrieved July 17, 2015, from http://www.potomacpsychiatry.com/blog/2010/03/08/existential-crisis-in-young-adults/

Perry, W. G., Jr. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme.* New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Prousky, J. E. (2014). Existential oppression faced by individuals having psychosis and schizophrenia. *Ethical Human Psychology and Psychiatry: An International Journal of Critical Inquiry, 16,* 91–98. http://dx.doi.org/10.1891/1559-4343.16.2.91

Rodriguez, J. A. (1992). *The adult stages of social perspective-taking: Assessment with the doctor-patient problem* (Doctoral dissertation, School of Education of Harvard University). Retrieved from http://www.dareassociation.org/Papers/Rodriguez%20Dissertation.pdf

Schwartz, B. (2005). *The paradox of choice: Why more is less.* New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Vilibert, D. (2012, October 3). Are only 17% of marriages happy? Retrieved July 24, 2015, from http://www.care2.com/greenliving/are-only-17-of-marriages-happy.html