EXPERIENCE RISING FROM QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS: A PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY

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Abstract

Early adulthood is a vulnerable period to various problems in life. Various problems have the potential to lead individuals, especially in early adulthood, to a quarter-life crisis. This study aimed to understand the experience of falling and rising (resilience) from a quarter-life crisis. A phenomenological approach was used and involved seven participants (three men and four women) aged 25-29 years who generally have completed undergraduate education and had suicidal intentions. Collecting data using in-depth interviews. The results show that the participants who had suicidal intentions perceived that their parents' parenting style was authoritarian, indicated by the excessive demands received. Participants are responding to this demand by rebelling against their parents. Rebellion, failure at work, and the breakdown of relationships with lovers brought them to a slump. Participants lost their purpose in life, felt depressed, and got suicidal intentions. Insight in the form of regret and hope for the future becomes a turning point in life. Acceptance from parents, peer group social support, and professional assistance are important factors in the process of recovering from the quarter-life crisis. Participants who exceed a crisis show a harmonious relationship with their parents and the opposite sex and work with the support of various parties. This research has implications for the urgency of communication and harmonious relations in the early adulthood phase, especially emerging adulthood.

Keywords: early adulthood; quarter-life crisis; social relations; resilience

INTRODUCTION

Humans grow and develop according to their stage of development (Santrock, 2018). Early adulthood is the stage of development that intervenes in late adolescence to middle adulthood. Individuals who are at the stage of late adult development have the task of establishing intimate social relationships (Sari & Alfaruqy, 2021). According to Santrock (2018), early adults are also expected to be personally responsible for economic and emotional matters before building a commitment with a partner. Individual success at this stage will affect their mental and physical health (Papalia & Martorell, 2021).

Several studies show that individuals who are classified as early adults have various problems, including anxiety in dealing with the world of work (Upadianti & Indrawati, 2018), academic stress (Mulya & Indrawati, 2016), lifestyle (Azizah & Indrawati, 2015), and marriage dilemma (Alfaruqy, 2019; Alfaruqy et al., 2021). These problems have the potential to lead individuals to crisis conditions. The crisis that occurs in early adulthood is known as the quarter-life crisis (Rosen, 2019). This background encourages our research to understand the phenomenon of the quarter-life crisis.

The term quarter life crisis emerged in the last two decades. Robbins and Wilner (2001), proposed this term view that individuals in their 20s, who have just graduated from higher education, tend to experience psychological turmoil such as anxiety, stress, and depression. According to Robinson (2015), quarter-life crisis is a common phenomenon in emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a period that spans the ages of 18-29 years (Arnett, 2015). The quarter-life crisis is characterized by a sense of worry because of the perception of future uncertainty that includes careers and social relationships (Agarwal et al., 2020). According to Robbins and Wilner (2001), someone who is experiencing a crisis at this time is attacked by

doubt in decision-making, negative perceptions of oneself, hopelessness, anxiety, depression, feeling trapped, and worried in interpersonal relationships.

Many crises in college graduates are caused by careers, both in job search and financial aspirations (Papalia & Martorell, 2021). It is undeniable that social expectations from the immediate environment, such as family, sometimes become pressures for someone. Previous research found that there was a significant negative relationship between individual psychological variables such as religiosity (Habibie et al., 2019) and self-efficacy (Muttaqien & Hidayati, 2020) with the quarter-life crisis. Another study found that there was a significant positive relationship between loneliness and the quarter-life crisis (Artiningsih & Savira, 2021).

What conditions and why did a quarter-life crisis occur in every single one is not the same. Some individuals can rise or are resilient, some are not. In short, resilience is a prfocess of good adaptation in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threat, or even a significant source of stress (Joyce et al., 2018). In addition, resilience is not static, but dynamic (Rutter, 2012). The concept of resilience includes not only the ability to survive but also bounce back from crises (Fauziah et al., 2020). Research by Palupi and Indrawati (2022) shows that family plays a role in acceptance when someone faces problems. Family also plays a role in agent of value socialization such as personal, interpersonal, divine, and political-cultural values (Alfaruqy et al., 2022). The role of the family cannot be ignored. Especially for the collectivist Indonesian people.

A quarter life crisis phenomenon is actually found in various countries and cultures. In Western culture, it is based on individual-oriented achievements, while in Eastern culture it is based on a collective orientation (Duara et al., 2021). However, research conducted by Hasyim et al. (2024) found that quarter life crises occur more frequently in collectivist cultures because of the encouragement to gain acceptance from the social environment, especially the family. For example, in Indonesia, someone considers the family's aspirations regarding marriage and having children before the age of 30 to be important.

Suicidal ideation is an instance of a quarter-life crisis's worst impact in early adulthood. The novelty of this current research is involving emerging adulthood participants who has graduated from collectivist country's college, especially Indonesia. Previous research mostly involved college students. College students have different tendencies and main activities compared to early adulthood who have completed their studies. It provided some data that there was associating factors of suicidal ideation around college student with religious coping (Utami et al., 2023), perceived social support (Zahara et al., 2014), and meaning in life (Wise, 2022).

Research specifically conducted on participants who were college graduates was conducted by Robinson (2018) and Robinson et al. (2021) in the United States. This research does not describe suicidal intentions tendency, but there are problems in getting and doing work, as well as psychological well-being and depressive symptoms. We expect that there may be differences in the primary focus of the one who has graduated from college to face a quarter-life crisis, moreover in a suicidal intention. In addition, this research will also take in-depth figures of not only the conditions of falling but also the bouncing back from adversity.

Based on the problem description above, the interesting questions to explore are a) how was the experience of falling in a quarter-life crisis? and b) how did the experience rise from adversity from a quarter-life crisis? This study aimed to understand the experience of falling and rising from a quarter-life crisis. The research is expected to be theoretically useful for family psychology, especially regarding the dynamics of the quarter-life crisis in early adulthood. The research is also expected to be

practical to provide an understanding of how to rise for early adults who experience a quarter-life crisis, and other perspectives for future researchers who are interested in researching quarter-life crises and their resilience.

METHOD

This study was designed using a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research is reflective research on the subjective experience of participants (La Kahija, 2017). This study aimed to understand the experience of falling and rising from a quarter-life crisis. We include a) male or female aged 25-29 years, b) have a minimum educational background of a bachelor's degree, c) ever had suicidal ideation, d) willing to become a research participant. The age 25-29 years were the age range of emerging adulthood, who generally have completed undergraduate education. Suicidal ideation is fatal, it may be the worst condition and an indicator of someone who experienced a quarter-life crisis. Based on these criteria, seven participants were obtained (Table 1).

Data was collected by interviewing the research subjects. Based on considerations of time, effort and effectiveness, the researcher chose semi-structured interviews. The research instrument is in the form of an interview guide which has four main questions, they are: a) Tell me how the worst experience you have had in a quarter-life crisis? b) What factors have brought you down? c) Tell us about your experience of getting up from adversity from a quarter life crisis? d) What factors made you rise? Interviews were conducted in July 2022. Prior to the interview process, the researcher gave informed consent to ensure that participants were willing to be involved in this study. The interview duration with each participant is varies, it run through 1 hour 3 minutes with AA, 1 hour 15 minutes with BR, 59 minutes with CX, 1 hour 20 minutes with DS, 50 minutes with ES, and 59 minutes with FU.

Table 1.
Study Participants

Participant	Initial	Sex	Age
Participant 1	AA	Male	28
Participant 2	BR	Male	29
Participant 3	CX	Male	28
Participant 4	DS	Female	28
Participant 5	ES	Female	26
Participant 6	FU	Female	26
Participant 7	GB	Female	26

Data analysis used interpretative phenomenological analysis. Interpretative phenomenological analysis or IPA is a type of phenomenology that provides a double-hermeneutic space, namely the researcher's interpretation of the participant's interpretation from the experiences they have gone through (La Kahija, 2017). IPA analysis includes the following stages: 1) live the transcript, 2) provide exploratory comments, 3) formulating emergent themes, 4) formulate the superordinate theme, and 5) find patterns among participants' experiences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Themes

The results show that there are three main themes, namely background, crisis and awareness, and resilience; and eight superordinate themes, namely perceptions of parental pressure, downturn factors, forms of quarter life crisis, insight, resilience factors, here and now conditions (Table 2).

Table 2.

Themes

Main Themes	Superordinate Themes
Background	Perception of parental pressure
	Factors that cause the slump
Crisis and Awareness	Forms of the slump in the quarter-life crisis
	Regret against parents
	Be aware of the future
Rise up: Resilience	Factors that support resurrection / resilience
	Here and now condition

Main Theme 1: Background

The participants felt high pressure of demands from their parents (Figure 1). Participants AA, BR, CX, DS, ES, FU, and GB perceive that their parents require them to engage in prestigious jobs, such as civil servants, bank employees, or employees of large companies. Parents hope that by working in this place, participants will have a bright future including high income. As revealed by participant AA, parents expect themselves to work in bona fide companies. This limits participants from making decisions about job choices that match their interests.

> *"As a child, I am required to be perfect according to the expectations of my parents' work, so there is no room to express what I want to do. My parents demand that I can be more successful than them, work in a bona fide company" (AA, male)*

Another demand experienced by participants of AA, BR, DS, and FU is the demand to get an ideal partner who will become a prospective husband/wife. The two demands mentioned above are felt to be more severe because parents often compare the participants' achievements with their relatives or friends. This is experienced by participants BR, CX, DS, and ES. Participant CX said that he was often compared to his older brother in terms of academic achievement while he had not yet graduated from college.

> *"My parents started to compare me with my sister for academic problems, the thesis that never ends" (CX, male)*

The parental pressure perceived by the participants as unpleasant was reinforced by several factors that caused a quarter-life crisis (Figure 1). First, the factor of rebellion against parents. Participants BR, CX, DS, and ES did not want to be regulated by their parents in job selection. They chose to insist on a career path according to their interests. BR wants to be a young executive and CX wants to work before completing their undergraduate studies. Meanwhile, DS wants to be entertainers.

Second, the failure factor to achieve success in work. In the journey to fight for jobs that match their interests, participants BR, DS, CX, and ES met with failure. The failure is quite varied, starting from the process of getting the job or how much the income is earned. This unpleasant condition caused the participants to be compared to their siblings. For example, participant E, who had been unemployed for a year, was often compared to his brother who had gotten a permanent job.

> *"When I was unemployed for a year, my parents compared me to my sibling who could enter B**, B**, and civil servants" (ES, female)*

Third, the factor of relationship failure with lovers. The relationship between BR, DS, and FU with people who are projected to become husband/wife candidates has run aground. As a person who have reached early adulthood, their expectations about relationships with the opposite sex are not just for fun but have led to marriage. The relationship failure created a psychological shock during the participants' failure to fight for jobs that match their interests. For example, FU has been dating a

man for several years. The two are planning to get married. His parents also knew each other, but the man projected by FU as a potential husband chose to be engaged to another woman.

> *"My ex-boyfriend cheated on me with another woman, and unfortunately, they had been engaged for a long time. I don't understand, I'm the third person or I'm being cheated on. The point is that the man already knows my parents and we are planning to get married." (FU, female)*

Main Theme 2: Crisis and Awareness

There are several forms of the slump in the quarter-life crisis (Figure 1). The most common is not knowing the purpose of life as happened to participants AA, BR, CX, ES, and FU. The waiting period after graduation and being accepted for a job or creating a job is a difficult time. Participants experienced inner turmoil between parental expectations and personal interests. Not to mention when the participants failed in the choice of work.

Another form of adversity is losing trust in the opposite sex. The relationship between BR, CX, DS, and FU with people who are projected to become husband/wife candidates has run aground. There are several reasons why the relationship ended, participants (especially men) were considered less prospective, and participants (especially women) were considered less comfortable. The end of this relationship makes disappointment and loss of trust in the opposite sex. As stated by the FU, she does not believe in all men and becomes avoided when a man tried to approach her.

> *"She chose a more promising person. That's what woman do, it is always the same." (BR, male)*

> *"We broke up. So, I don't trust all men, I don't want to be in a relationship. If a man tries to 'get close', I immediately run away." (FU, female)*

The next form of adversity is depression. Participants BR, DS, ES, and FU felt a psychological condition that fell and was stressed or depressed. For example, DS said that she had been involved in the activity of pre-marriage sex with his ex-lover. Loss of sanctity and the breakdown of relationships, make her deliberately self-destruct. DS plunged herself into the habit of smoking, staying up late, and promiscuity. These habits do not make her happy, but instead anxious and depressed. DS said that she had been a patient of a psychiatrist for one year.

> *"I became increasingly wild, destroying myself with free smoking and staying up late, often wandering around at night. . But it didn't make me happy and rather became anxious. I ended up depressed and became a psychiatric patient for a year after getting my bachelor's degree." (DS, female)*

The most severe form of adversity is suicidal intentions. All participants stated that they had suicidal thoughts. BR even drank the insect-repellent liquid. Luckily, his life was saved by his parents. However, BR still felt pain in their chest and stomach due to the burning effect of drinking the insect repellent.

> *"I tried to kill myself but was unsuccessful because my parents saved me after being caught drinking B***. Now I am very sorry about the suicide idea because I still feel the scars, yes it is pain in the chest and the stomach due to the burning effect of B***" (BR, male)*

As previously explained, the participants showed rebellion against parental advice, which resulted in a slump in the quarter-life crisis (Figure 1). At one point, the participants arrived at a deep sense of regret. Deep regret accompanied by an awareness of the importance of preparing for a better future is an insight that brings participants to awakening from a crisis. As stated by the ES, he started to think about the future. She realizes that she is the only hope for her parents.

> *"I started thinking about the future because I was the only hope for my parents." (ES, female)*

Likewise, CX realized the importance of accepting their family's condition with grace. Even though his family was not harmonious (his mother is cheating), he realized that he should not rebel and ignore his future. According to CX, acceptance of family conditions had a positive effect on mental health.

> *"I realize that there are times when things are very bitter, and cannot be accepted by our minds, but we must accept them with grace. Learn to accept conditions psychologically, mentally, and spiritually." (CX, male)*

Main Theme 3: Rise up, Resilience

This study identified that a factor that encouraged the participants to rise from the adversity of the quarter-life crisis was that their parents made peace with the situation (Figure 1). Parents come to the fact that they are not able to achieve their expectations. Parents provide flexibility and support for participants AA, BR, DS, and ES to engage in their current work. As revealed by BR, his parents can now accept that he is not as successful as his older siblings. The parents can also accept BR jobs that can fulfill his daily needs, even though he is not a civil servant.

> *"Now, my parents can accept the situation that I can not be like my more successful siblings. Even my parents can accept my current job. I don't have to be a civil servant as far as I can still earn for myself." (BR, male)*

Another factor is support from peer groups. Peer groups from AA, BR, DS, and ES provide support and motivation for a better life. The peer group also opened up that he/she was not alone. Everyone has problems in life. In addition, BR, DS, and CX received assistance from professionals, both psychologists and psychiatrists. The last factor is feeling God's help. DS revealed that she was very grateful because she felt God's love. They felt more peaceful, quieter, and calmer psychological condition. They were also grateful for being met with supportive friends.

> *"I meet the community (car b***) where I learn from my friends that each person's problem has its version." (AA, male)*

> *"I feel that God still loves me so much that I meet new people by accident. And that's when I felt I had to get closer to God so that my life could be calm and peaceful, I got new friends." (DS, female)*
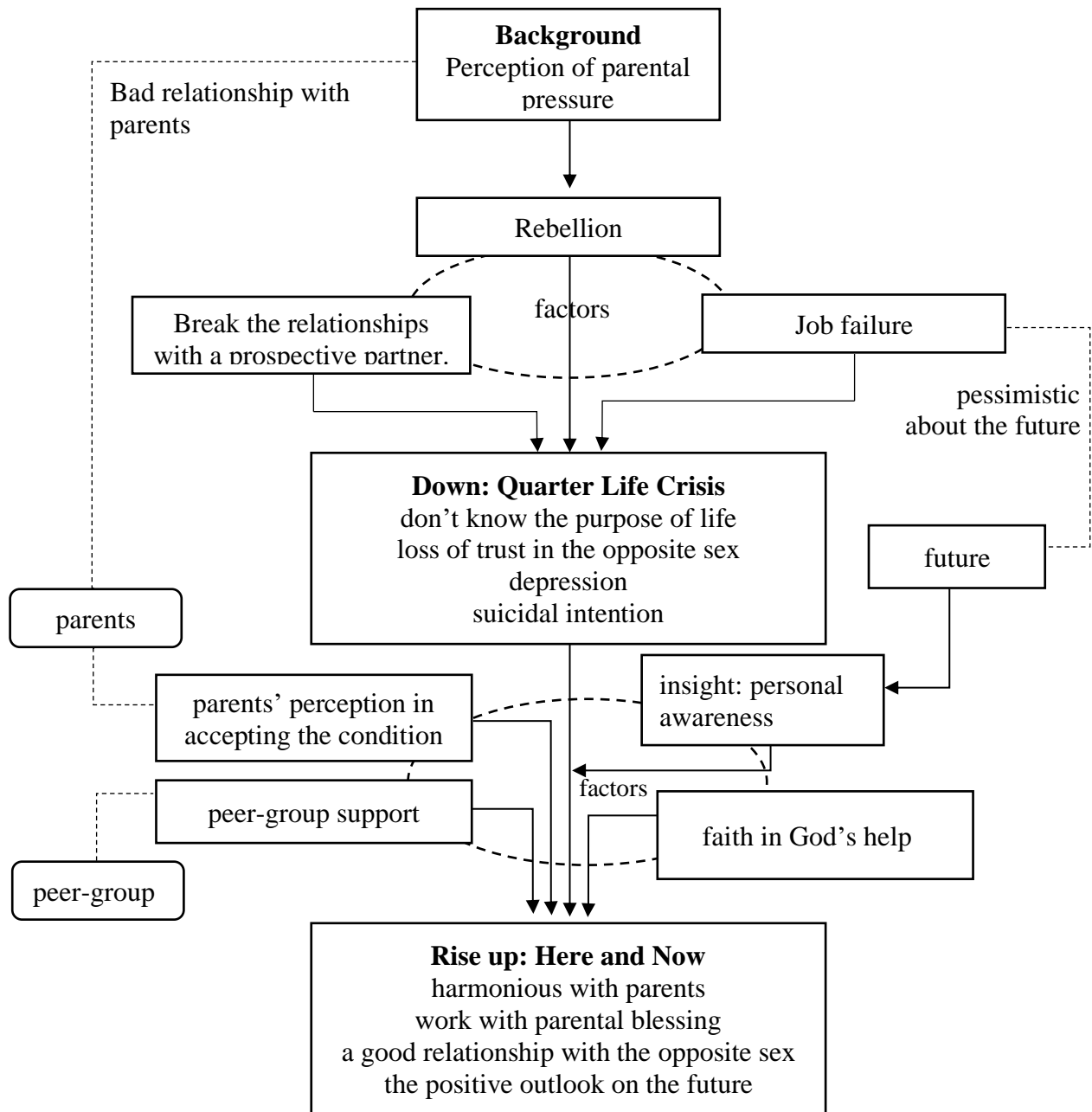
Currently, the participants are in a better psychological condition (Figure 1). AA, BR, CX, DS, ES, and FU have confidence in welcoming the future. They have also been working with full support from their parents. DS revealed that her parents had accepted that she chose to work in the entertainment sector. FU feels a more harmonious relationship with her family.

> *"My parents no longer restrain me from choosing a career that suits me. I was also given the freedom to choose my partner." (DS, female)*

> *"Now I'm more comfortable spending time at home with my family." (FU, female)*

Another thing that makes AA, BR, CX, DS, and ES grateful is that at the age of 26-28 years, they have established a relationship with a lover who accepts them as they are. As revealed by BR, currently he is in a relationship with a woman who can accept him as he is. They have a plan to get married next year.

> *"I already have someone who can accept me as I am after many times trying to express love to several women and being rejected. Thank God there is a woman who can accept me as I am." (BR, male)*

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                          ┌─────────────────────┐
                          │   **Background**    │
Bad relationship with     │ Perception of parental │
parents                   │      pressure        │
                          └─────────────────────┘
                                    │
                          ┌─────────────────────┐
                          │     Rebellion       │
                          └─────────────────────┘
                              factors
  ┌───────────────────┐                    ┌──────────────┐
  │ Break the relationships│               │  Job failure │
  │ with a prospective partner.│           └──────────────┘
  └───────────────────┘                         pessimistic
                                                about the future
                ┌───────────────────────────────┐
                │  **Down: Quarter Life Crisis** │
                │  don't know the purpose of life│      ┌──────────┐
                │  loss of trust in the opposite sex│   │  future  │
  ┌─────────┐   │         depression            │      └──────────┘
  │ parents │   │      suicidal intention       │
  └─────────┘   └───────────────────────────────┘
                                                 ┌──────────────────┐
  ┌───────────────────┐                          │ insight: personal│
  │ parents' perception in│                      │   awareness      │
  │ accepting the condition│                     └──────────────────┘
  └───────────────────┘            factors
  ┌───────────────────┐                  ┌──────────────────┐
  │ peer-group support │                 │ faith in God's help│
  └───────────────────┘                  └──────────────────┘
  ┌───────────┐
  │ peer-group│
  └───────────┘
                ┌───────────────────────────────────┐
                │      **Rise up: Here and Now**     │
                │       harmonious with parents      │
                │     work with parental blessing    │
                │ a good relationship with the opposite sex│
                │    the positive outlook on the future│
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Figure 1. Psychological Dynamics

Interpretation

This study found that early adult participants who experienced a quarter-life crisis, both male and female, had one thing in common, namely the perception of the authoritarian parenting model. An authoritarian parenting style is characterized by high demands and low affection (Santrock, 2018). As a result of authoritarian parenting, a person feels the nuances of pressure in the late adolescence or early adulthood phase (Papalia & Martorell, 2021). The long-term effect of authoritarian parenting is the result of a poor quality of life (Ghosh, 2021). A meta-analysis study conducted by Tehrani et al. (2024) found a relationship between authoritarian parenting and neuroticism personality.

This study found that parents have good expectations about participants' future, but participants perceive these expectations as too

high demands. The demands mentioned above are felt to be more severe because parents often compare the participants' achievements with their relatives or friends. So, this condition creates a bad relationship between parents and participants. This research emphasizes the connection between higher family demands and a person's quarter life crisis. Previous research also correlated the strong role of the family in persuading a person's achievement orientation in Indonesia (Hasyim et al., 2024), as well as in other collectivist cultures (Duara et al., 2021).

The study also found that rebellion against parental authority was the main cau'e of the decline of early adult participants in the quarter-life crisis. All participants in this study did not want to be regulated, directed, and advised by their parents. There is a tendency for participants to want to show themselves that they can succeed and even exceed their parents' achievements without parental intervention. According to Arnett (2015), an early adulthood is an intermediary between late adolescence and adulthood. The search for identity in adolescence will continue into early adulthood until finding what is identity looks like (Papalia & Martorel, 2021; Santrock, 2018). This spirit encourages the phenomenon of self-evident in early adulthood which is more a reflection of rebellion against parental advice.

Failure in work matters and the breakup of relationships with lovers who are projected as prospective husband/wife are also factors that cause the participants' decline. In line with the findings of previous researches that the quarter-life crisis is closely related to work problems (Upadianti & Indrawati, 2018), marital problems (Joyce et al., 2018; Robinson, 2015), and problems in the family (Putri et al., 2022). In our study, factors of failure at work cause deep disappointment in male participants. Meanwhile, failure in relationships causes trauma to female participants. A relatively similar pattern was found in another systematic literature review (Hasyim et al., 2024). One alternative explanation for this finding is the gender

construction obtained from the culture in which a person lives (Schmitt et al., 2018). Cultural construction of gender provides aspirations about what a certain gender should achieve at a certain age.

This study found that problems in life that cause a quarter-life crisis to fall include loss of purpose in life, loss of trust in the opposite sex, depression, and suicidal intentions. Problems or unpleasant experiences can reduce psychological well-being and individual self-esteem (Robinson, 2018), and increase loneliness (Artiningsih & Savira, 2021). According to Robbins and Wilner (2001), someone who experiences a crisis in emerging adulthood is attacked by doubt in decision-making, negative perceptions of oneself, hopelessness, anxiety, depression, feeling trapped, and worry in interpersonal relationships. When it comes to parenting, the research conducted by Donath et al. (2014) shows that the authoritarian parenting style increases the idea of more than 50% of suicidal ideation during the quarter-life crisis. All stated that they had suicidal thoughts. Out of seven participants, one of them even drank insect-repellent liquid. Luckily, his life was saved by his parents.

As time passed, the early adult participants began to realize with a presence of mind that they were in a state that was not what they wanted. Borrowing a term from Robinson and Wright (2013), participants are in the locked-in form condition, which is trapped in their role as an adult. The turning point of the slump is the insight into the realization that it is difficult to match or exceed the success of parents. This condition causes a compromise between participants and their parents. Nabila (2020) found that self-compassion is needed for a person to fully realize that he is the one who is most responsible for relieving himself from the quarter-life crisis.

Resilience is a process of good adaptation in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threat, or even a significant source of stress (Joyce et al., 2018). This study found that there are three factors that affect the resilience of early

adult participants who are experiencing a crisis. First the willingness of parents to come to the situation that their children are not as good as their parents and there are even suicidal intentions. Referring to the research of Palupi and Indrawati (2022), family plays a role in acceptance when members face problems in life. Participants feel that parents may give and provide support. After all, the family is the source of social happiness in a collectivist tradition (Afiatin, 2013).

Second, presence of peer groups. The presence of peer groups can provide comfort and social support. Social support is needed to save someone in a quarter-life crisis (Syifa'ussurur et al., 2021). A relationship with significant others can provide physical and emotional comfort (Hasyim et al., 2024). Third is feeling God's help. Participants felt more peaceful, quieter, and calmer psychological condition. Previous research found that there was a significant negative relationship between religiosity with the quarter-life crisis (Habibie et al., 2019). Research conducted by Sahrah, (2023) found that solution-focused brief therapy was proven to improve the spiritual well-being of postgraduate students experiencing a quarter-life crisis.

There has been an intimate interaction between parents and participants. This is certainly very influential on the dynamics of resilience. During the awakening (resilience) process, parents are perceived as angels who help and guide them toward a better future. We could define that resilience is not static, but dynamic (Rutter, 2012). Resilience includes not only the ability to survive but also to bounce back from crises (Fauziah et al., 2020). Along with time, the participants' self-confidence increased and could be happy to live a life full of optimism. All participants have confidence in welcoming the future. They have also been working with full support from their parents.

This research has implications for the urgency of communication and harmonious relations in the early adult phase, especially emerging adulthood. This study advises early adults who experience a quarter-life crisis to have a supportive social environment. Future researchers who are interested in quarter-life crisis research can look at this phenomenon with other approaches, such as grounded theory or case studies.

CONCLUSION

Early adults who have suicidal intentions perceive that their parenting is authoritarian because it demands more than they can afford. Participants responded to this demand by rebelling against their parents. Rebellion, failure at work, and the breakdown of relationships with lovers brought the participants into a slump. Participants lost their purpose in life, depression, and suicidal intentions. Insight in the form of regret and hope for the future becomes a turning point in life. Acceptance from parents, peer group social support, and professional assistance are important factors in the recovery process from the quarter-life crisis. Participants who passed a crisis show a harmonious relationship with their parents and the opposite sex also works with the support of various parties.

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