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Research article

The Narrative Identity Analysis as a Way to Study the Crisis of Adulthood

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Abstract: **Introduction**. The article is devoted to the narrative identity analysis of people experiencing a crisis of adulthood. Narrative identity analysis has so far been used to study ego-identity in adolescents. As a study of the ego-identity of people experiencing a crisis of adulthood, it is used for the first time. **Methods**. The study involved 80 people (40 men and 40 women aged 35–45). The analysis of narrative identity was carried out according to the algorithm of M. Syed and S. Nelson. The reliability of the resulting Kappa toolkit $k = 0.69$, which is a sufficient indicator of reliability. Quantitative indicators of differences in the structure of narrative identity were calculated using Pearson's chi-square, and qualitative indicators were calculated using hierarchical cluster analysis. **Results**. As a result of the study, there were no differences in the experience of the crisis of adulthood between men and women. Nevertheless, quantitative differences were revealed in the narrative identity of people who did not experience a crisis of adulthood, who are experiencing an acute crisis, and who survived it in the recent past. Qualitative differences showed that the three structures differ in the degree of immersion in contradictions and immersion in difficult emotional states associated with them. **Discussion**. The lack of differences in the experience of the crisis between men and women revealed in the course of the study contradicts the well-established opinion that women's crises are related to family cycles. We assume that the 30-year difference in the obtained data may be the reason for this. Qualitative and quantitative differences in groups at different stages of experiencing a crisis have been confirmed both in empirical data obtained by other authors and in psychological theory.

Keywords: age-related crises, ego identity, narrative identity, adulthood crisis, displacement of emotions, qualitative analysis, quantitative analysis, gender-role requirements, cluster analysis, localization of a crisis

Highlights:
➢ Men and women experience the crisis of adulthood in the same way.

➢ The structure of narrative identity differs between those who survived the crisis and those who did not experience it: the differences relate to the degree of acceptance of the contradiction and immersion in difficult emotional states associated with them.
➢ The analysis of narrative identity is an adequate and promising method for studying the crisis of adulthood.

Introduction

The number of fears of modern man is no less than thousands of years ago. Ancient people were afraid of thunder, the wrath of the gods, and wild animals. Current society have managed that situations, but many other fears have appeared instead of these ones: the fear of tomorrow, the fear of oldness, and the fear of one's finiteness (Verdeş & Rusnac, 2015). These fears especially are actualized with the transition from youth to maturity, when personal believes and achievements are rethought in the context of a limited time. Moreover, the severity of a such fear is the stronger, the stronger social competition is expressed. As K. Lash said, modern culture is a culture of competitive individualism, in which the war of all against all was proclaimed, and the pursuit of happiness led to narcissistic preoccupation (Lasch, 1991). That is why the problem of the crisis of adulthood should now be more relevant than ever. Nevertheless, the peak of interest in the problem of the midlife crisis in Russia occurred in 2005–2007, in the West – in the 90s.

The idea of a midlife crisis became popular in the United States after the publication of Passages (Sheehy, 1976), a book by journalist G. Sheehy, which described the crisis of adulthood in women (Schmidt, 2018). In response to the "Passage" of G. Sheehy, three leading psychoanalysts – D. Levinson, J. Vaillant and R. Gould – postulated the crisis of adulthood as an exclusively male prerogative. In this regard, the midlife crisis has become a springboard for the struggle for the recognition of women as full participants in social relations, and the very concept of "midlife crisis" has been reduced to a chauvinistic cliche and has lost scientific interest (Schmidt, 2018).

In Russia, the crisis of adulthood was studied in the context of mental development (Vygotski, 2000; Elkonin, 2007) without reference to gender. We believe that it was because of the leveling of gender differences in the Soviet Union (Ilyina, 2014). Nevertheless, the qualitative studies described by E. L. Soldatova (Soldatova, 2007) point the opposite of the American idea: both men and women experience a crisis of adulthood, but it passes in different ways and depends on role prescriptions.

Despite the limited interest to the problem of the crisis of adulthood, there are gaps in the study of this topic (Oles, 1999), such as changes in ego-identity during the crisis and after its completion. So far, the structure of ego identity has been studied for the adolescent crisis (McLean, 2005; McLean & Mansfield, 2012), while the ego identity of people experiencing a midlife crisis has remained unexplored. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to describe the structure of a person's ego-identity in the context of the crisis of adulthood.

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The crisis of adulthood as a contradiction between fantasy and reality

Throughout our lives, we met several crisis periods, and each of them does not come suddenly, but through the accumulation of dissatisfaction due to discrepancies between expectations and abilities (Craig, 2000). The vast majority of authors (Erikson, 2006; Bratus, 1980; Soldatova, 2007; Levinson et al., 1976) agree that at the age of 30–45, significant changes occur in the personality: time is perceived as limited; people become to compare their believes with the actual achievements, as well as an aware the unfulfillment of many goals set in the early periods of life. B. S. Bratus described most striking manifestation of the crisis: the depressing awareness of the discrepancy between the real Self and ideal Self, between the desired and the possible (Bratus, 1980). In 1965, E. Jacques (1965) published a monograph titled "Death and the midlife crisis", where he empirically proved changes in time perception in adulthood. During ages, the time perspective become shorter and turn to the central motivational aspect: we are above to understand that all of our planes never could be realized, so there is a necessity to concentrate on the most important goals. The tragedy of this period is that people, perceiving the future as limited, are forced to abandon their fantasies in favor of real plans (Freund & Ritter, 2009).

Since the end of the 70s there was a question about experience of the crisis of adulthood by men and women. Due to different gender-role prescriptions, the midlife crisis has long been seen as a lot of men (Schmidt, 2018). D. Levinson (Levinson et al., 1976) conducted research on a male sample of 35–45 years old. With the help of a series of interviews on the example of various biographies, the adult life path of each man was built, including leaving the parental family, mastering the adult world, settling down and reassessing the achieved results and expectations. Later, similar studies were carried out on a female sample (Soldatova, 2007). It turned out that for women, the stages of the family cycle are the most significant indicator (not the transitions of 30–40–50-years, but the birth of children – the growing up of children – leaving the house by grown-up children). It turned out, in particular, that women face the same tasks, but they are solved it in a different way: women's dreams about the future are heterogeneous (there are various options for combining a career and marriage).

Narrative identity

Stories about self are not only information about an isolated episode of life. Narratives contain a personal orientations and evaluations of social events, as well as attitude towards himself (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Narrating one's life is a mechanism for creating ego continuity (McAdams, 1988). An identity formed through a narrative is commonly referred to as a narrative identity.

The phenomenon of narrative identity was first described by P. Riker (Riker, 1989), but its conceptual apparatus was developed much later by K. McLean (McLean, 2005, 2008). The main idea of K. McLean, taken from E. Erickson (Erikson, 2006) and J. Marcia (Marcia, 1993), is that identification arises as a result of awareness and resolution of contradictions between the Self and the external world (McLean, 2005). As an example, K. McLean (McLean, 2008; Suvorova & Glebov, 2018) described the story of a 17-year-old girl, Annie, about a turning point in her life. The narrator recovered from a medical operation, and if she physically recovered fairly quickly, then she suffered from lost sense of security. Contacts with the surrounding reality began to be experienced differently. So, she had to aware herself and to build social contacts

anew. The second story is from18-year-old Sarah, who decided to left university because of discrepancy between university policy and personal values. This conscious choice gave her strength, she said, and now, when she finds herself with a fear of defending her interests, she remembers that incident.

Later, the followers of K. McLean proposed a method for quantitative processing of narratives (McAdams, 2015; Syed & Nelson, 2015). The search for narrative analysis code units is a multi-stage procedure that involves additional research to confirm the legitimacy of identifying certain units (Adler et al., 2017; McAdams & Guo, 2015; McAdams & Pals, 2006). Four categories of encodings have been proposed, varying from study to study (McLean et al., 2020): motivational and affective themes (Tomkins, 1987), autobiographical reasoning (Adler et al., 2017) and structural aspects (Adler et al., 2018).

It is assumed that motivational and affective themes, negative/positive light, narrative coherence will differ in people who have experienced an adult crisis and those who have not. And, since previous studies have established differences in the crisis of adulthood in men and women, we believe that narratives will manifest them. Therefore, our study put forward the following *hypotheses:*

1. The narrative identity structure is different for men and women.
2. The narrative identity structure differs between those who survived the crisis and those who did not.

Methods

Our study involved 80 subjects (40 men and 40 women, 35–45 years old). Respondents were asked to write an essay about the crisis of middle age as well as the goals and values were revised. After receiving responses, a coding system was developed. Statistical analysis included calculation of differences between groups (men-women, no crisis-acute crisis-passed crisis) and hierarchical cluster analysis. Since narrative identity is described by nominal data, statistical analysis was performed using contingency tables (Pearson's chi-square).

Development and verification of the coding system

The parameters for evaluating narratives are given in Appendix 1. In total, 10 parameters were allocated. To check the reliability of the codes used, each text was evaluated for each of the parameters with two appraisers. Thus, each appraiser received 800 assessments. Reliability was calculated with the help of Kappa Cohen (Cohen, 1968) as the ratio of matching assessments to all estimates on the following formula:

$$k = \frac{P_0 - P_c}{1 - P_c},$$

where P_o (*relative observed agreement among raters*) – the ratio of the number of coincidences to the total number of assessments; P_c (*hypothetical probability of chance agreement*) – the ratio of expected coincidences to the total number of assessments.

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When calculating K, it is recommended to use the following interpretation of the coefficient value (Fleiss, 1981): 0.40–0.60 – meets the minimum requirements; 0.60–0.75 – a sufficient indicator of the validity of the tools; > 0.75 – the composed system of codes is a reliable and valid tool. By substituting our data into the formula, we get the following results (Fig. 1):

Figure 1

Calculation of the Kappa

$$P_O = (278 + 404) / 800 = 0.85$$
$$P_C = (141.9 + 267.9) / 800 = 0.51$$
$$k = 0.69$$

	Yes	No	
Yes	278 (141,9)	50 (186,1)	328
No	68 (204,1)	404 (267,9)	472
	346	454	800

In our case, the coefficient k = 0.69, which is a sufficient indicator of the reliability of the tools.

Results

The frequency analysis showed that 50 % of men (20 people) and 75 % of women (30 people) indicated that they passed crisis or are exercising it by now. The difference of 25 % in favor of women can indicate their greater sensitivity to their emotional states. Moreover, unlike previous studies, according to which the life cycles of women were associated with the development cycles of their children, in our study the crisis of the maturity of women was mainly associated with work. The family take a second place. In men, the crisis in the family and at work was distributed equally (Table 1).

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Table 1

The dispersion of the crisis in men and women by spheres of life

Location	Male, %	Female, %
Family	25	21.1
Interpersonal relations	25	15.8
Work	0	26.3
The search of sense of life	0	5.3
Other	50	31.5

We believe that the shift of the women's middle age crisis from a family to work is the fact that modern women identify themselves not only through family roles and seek to occupy official positions along with men.

If we consider the main topics of the crisis, then 20 % of the men indicated the search for relations, 15 % – the search for personal growth, and another 15 % tied the crisis with turning point in life, a sudden occurrence of dissatisfaction which starts the search (see Table 2). In women 36 % cases was associated with the search for professional growth. In second place (21.1 %) – a search for relations.

Table 2

The content of the crisis in men and women

Content of the crisis	Male, %	Female, %
The search of sense of life	0	5.3
The search of relations	20	21.1
The search of inspiration	5	5.3
The search of growth	15	36.8
Crucial moment	15	5.3
Other	45	26.2

Despite the percentage differences in the distribution of the crisis, Pearson's chi-square did not determine the differences. This means that men and women as a whole equally experience a crisis of adulthood. The hypothesis 1 was not confirmed.

When using chi-square to compare a group of people who survived the crisis and did not experience it, differences were discovered in six of the nine evaluated parameters (Table 3). This indicates that the structure of narrative identity is different in people who have survived the crisis and those who have not. The hypothesis 2 was confirmed.

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Table 3

Comparison of crisis experience between sample who survived the crisis and did not

Comparison parameters	chi-square	p
Coping strategies	12.590	0.006
Emotions	13.548	0.001
Result of the crisis	17.435	0.001
Negative/positive light	12.523	0.001
Time location of the crisis	13.418	0.009
Current position	14.354	0.002

A qualitative analysis of differences in the narrative identity structure was carried out using hierarchical cluster analysis. Figure 2 shows the structure of the narrative identity of a person who noted the lack of undergoing a crisis.

Figure 2

Cluster analysis of the narrative identity of people who do not survive the crisis
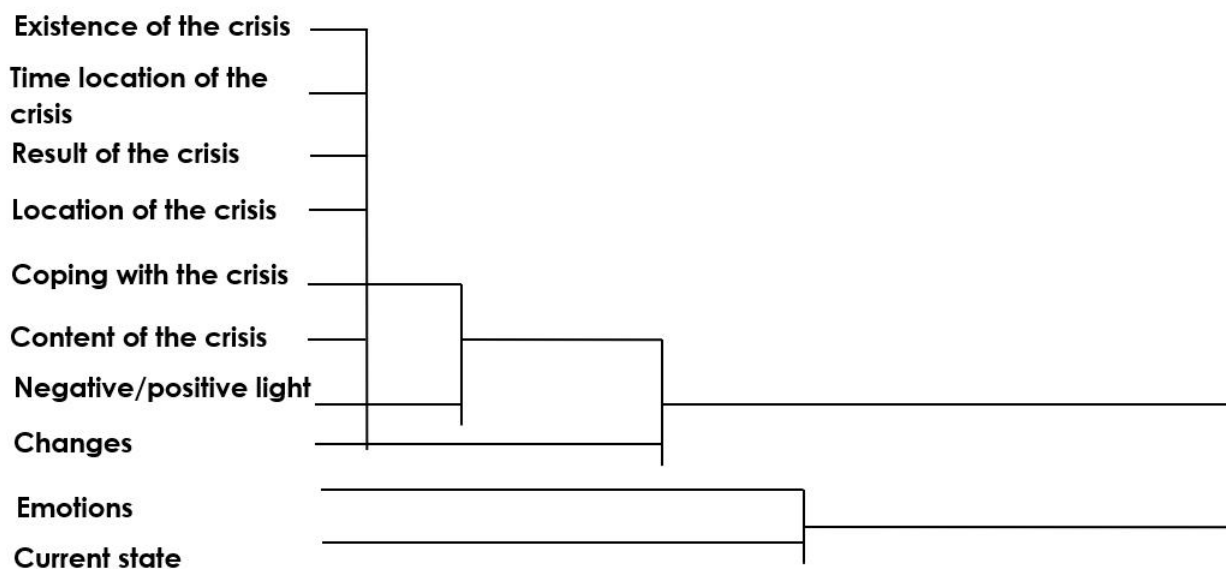
In Figure 2, we see that the most powerful connections are observed between the presence of the crisis, a temporary segment of the crisis, the result of the crisis, localization of the crisis, the method of coping with the crisis and the content of the crisis. All topics regarding the crisis are in the center of narrative identity. However, emotions are taken beyond the limits of this center. A free-crisis experience of 35–45 years is associated with alienation from emotional life and insensitivity to the contradictions that have arisen (in the event that they arise). An example of such a narrative is presented below.

A man, 37 years old: "I don't know what has changed. I live where I lived before, I work in the same specialty. Was divorced last year. Only boxing somehow entertains me, but without special plans for a career, in this path.
*There are no children, I don't plan animals, now I live in a rented apartment, after a divorce.*
From time to time, I see my friends, but I have lost many during a married life, so there are not many candidates".

Figure 3 presents a cluster analysis of the narrative identity of people who experience an acute crisis.

Figure 3

Cluster analysis of the narrative identity of people experiencing an acute crisis
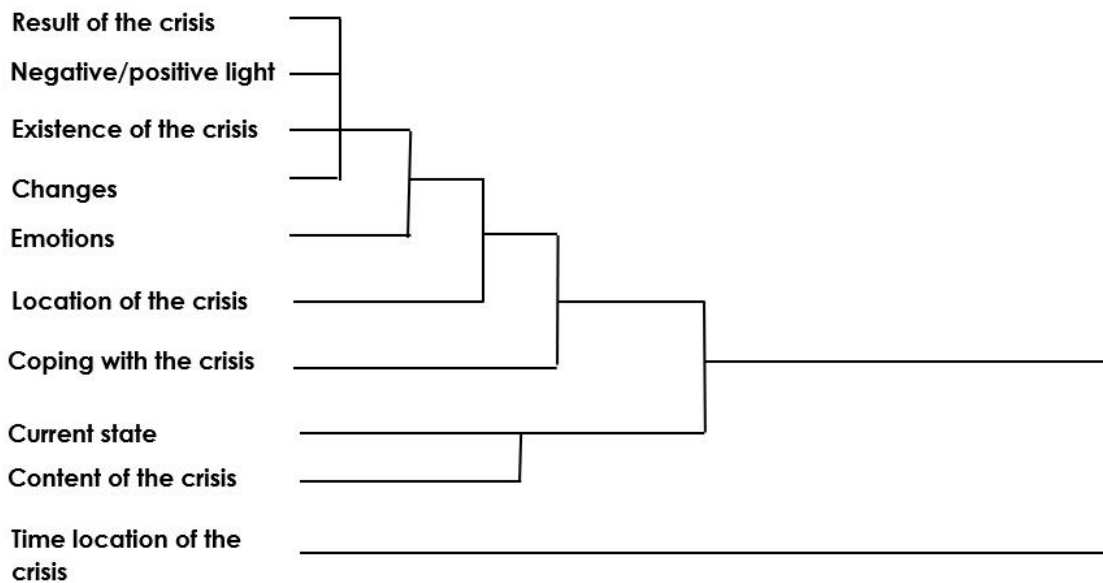
In Figure 3, the most powerful connections are found between the result of the crisis, negative/positive light, the presence of a crisis, and the presence of changes. In some distance – emotional background and localization of the crisis. Methods of coping with the crisis, the

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assessment of the current position and coping strategy are located on the periphery itself. Unlike the previous structure, here the experience of the crisis is intertwined with emotional states. A person at the moment does not see a way out of the situation and is emotionally immersed in an acute crisis state. An example of such a structure can be a narrative of a 42-year-old man.

A man, 42 years old: "I think I have been going through a crisis now for a long time. It seems that I am in this state for at least a year. I have a great job, a car, built a house for my parents – from the material side everything is fine. But inside I feel emptiness. I think I'm missing something in my life, but I don't know how to change it. I like to travel and be free, but because of my work I can't fully do it, but I can't quit work, since it brings me a very good income, although I can't say that I really like it".

Finally, a cluster analysis of the narrative identity of the people who survived the crisis in the past is presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Cluster analysis of the narrative identity of people who survived the crisis
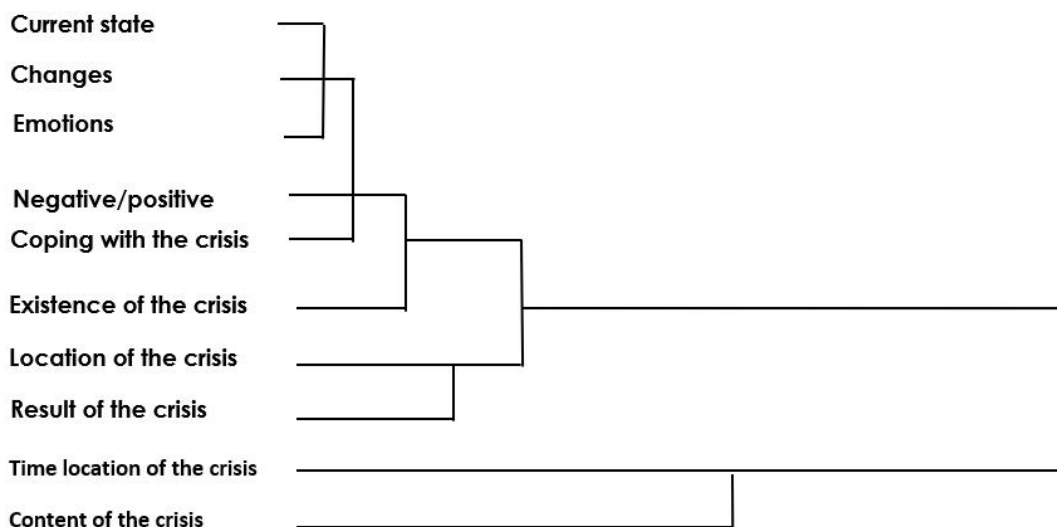

Figure 4 depicts the narrative identity of people who noted that they experienced a crisis in the recent past but believe that they coped with it. As you can see, everything that relates to the crisis is on the periphery of the structure. The closest connections have combined categories such as the current position, the presence of changes, emotional background, negative/positive light and methods of coping with the crisis. We see that a person who has survived the crisis accepts his/her emotions, changes that have occurred to him. An example of such a narrative can be a woman of 38 years old.

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Woman, 38 years old: "I definitely passed a crisis and not alone.

But the most memorable was two years ago. I left my husband and moved from him. In general, I wanted to do this for a long time, but I was somehow ashamed, because he left previous family because of me.

But I did not love him anymore, and this made me crazy.

I have never traveled. We always had plans and expenses. Either we build a house, we buy a car, etc.

I have never lived for myself. I'm tired of all. We were together for almost fifteen years, and only the first couple of years were happy. Now I feel as free as never before.

I understand why I hadn't left him before. I had nowhere to go, the condemnation of my parents, well, the fact that I destroyed his past family … But now I am free and very happy".

Discussion

In our work, unlike previous studies (Tolstyh, 1988; Kulagina, 1999), it was shown that men and women as a whole are equally experienced an adult crisis. So, unlike data of 30 years ago, according to which women are associated with family cycles, in our study, concentration on a career in women was even higher. The reason for this may be female emancipation, which has grown significantly over the past decades. Moreover, there are the date, shown, that women masked their fear about future as an anxieties for children or even for the country as a whole (Skripacheva, 2014). It was the mechanism of transferring the experience of the crisis of the middle of life to the sphere, which is more filed by control (children), or to the sphere, the lack of control over which is obvious. Another reason for the lack of differences between men and women may be the small number of a sample that does not give a complete premium of all the variety of answers.

Nevertheless, the results of our study are confirmed by the data of other modern studies. According to E. A. Pozdnyakova, during the period of the crisis both men and women get tired of work (56 % of men, 62 % of women), and adapt hard to the profession (33 % of men, 43 % of women) (Babiyants & Pozdnyakova, 2020).

Further, we found that the structure of narrative identity differs in people who survived the crisis and did not. Three structures differ between each other by the degree of immersion in contradictions and immersion in severe emotional states associated with them: in the absence of a crisis, that contradictions is not realized, and the emotions associated with it are replaced; in an acute crisis, a person falls into negative emotional states, the contradictions are experienced by unresolved; after the experience of the crisis, the contradictions that have arisen in the past are integrated into the structure of the personality in the same way as emotional states. Our data are confirmed with the data of the empirical study of S. V. Dukhnovsky (Dukhnovsky, 2015), according to which the experience of the crisis of the middle of life is accompanied by the desire of the subject to reject his own unpleasant, negative emotional states and project them on others. Moreover, this condition can be permanent when a person, without solving his contradictions, attributed his negative states to the consequences of the actions of others. Such a permanent crisis state corresponds to the experience of the crisis by women, disguised as care for the family and children described by E. N. Skripacheva (Skripacheva, 2014). Its danger is that it is not solved, but forms a vicious circle, where the projections of a person form an unfavorable reality, which, in turn, only aggravates the crisis state.

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Conclusion

The purpose of this work was to investigate the structure of the ego-identity in the context of an adulthood crisis. Based on the existing literature about an adult crisis, we suggested that the structure of narrative identity is different in men and women. Further, relying on the theory of ego-identity E. Erickson and the theory of the ego-identity statuses of J. Marcia, we hypothesized the difference in the structure of narrative identity among those who survived the crisis and those who did not. As a result of analysis of narratives, it was found that there were no differences in the experience of the crisis by men and women. These data contradict the well-known information accepted 30 years ago. Nevertheless, even that literature said about the transference of women's crisis anxiety to the family or global processes. This transference could also be a result of an attitude to devote woman's life to her family after marriage. Nevertheless, this issue needs to be clarified on a larger sample.

The second hypothesis was confirmed: the structure of narrative identity differs between those who survived the crisis and those who did not. As a result of a qualitative analysis, three groups were identified: those who did not experience a crisis on a conscious level, those who were in an acute crisis, and those who experienced a crisis in the recent past. The three structures differ from each other in the degree of immersion in difficult emotional states associated with them: in the absence of a crisis, the acuteness of contradictions is not recognized, and the emotions associated with it are repressed; in an acute crisis, a person falls into negative emotional states, contradictions are experienced unsolvable; after solving the crisis, the contradictions that arose in the past are resolved and integrated into the structure of the personality in the same way as emotional states. The results of our study are confirmed by the empirical data of other authors, and also 'lay down' on the psychological theory. This means that narrative analysis as a method of studying the crisis of adulthood is justified and promising.

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Appendix 1

Narrative codes

Presence of changes	Yes – 1
	No – 0
Presence of a crisis	Yes – 1
	No – 0
Ways to cope with a crisis	No crisis – 0
	Self – 1
	With the help of other people – 2
	Not aware of the crisis – 3
Crisis localization	Family – 1
	Relations with people – 2
	Work – 3
	Search of since of life – 4

Emotional background	Depression – 1
	Irritability – 2
Overcoming the crisis	No crisis – 0
	No way out of crisis – 1
	Overcoming the crisis – 2
The result of the crisis	Happy with everything – 1
	Lack of close relationships – 2
	Not realized in life – 3
Negative/positive light	Negative light – 0
	Positive light – 1
The content of the crisis	Looking for a sense of life – 1
	Looking for relationships – 2
	Looking for an inspiration – 3
	Looking for a «growth» – 4
	A crucial moment – 5
Timeline of the crisis	Childhood – 1
	Teens – 2
	Youth – 3
	Maturity – 4
	Permanent – 5

Author Contributions

E. R. Sarkisyan collected data, processed, and described the results, searched for literature.
I. Yu. Suvorova managed the project, wrote the theoretical part, edited.

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Conflict of Interest Information

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.