

## The Psychic Alternation Theory (PAT) – Model of Life Stage Crises in general and Mid-life Crisis in Particular

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### ABSTRACT

Human mind in the psychoanalytic framework is understood to be structurally consisting of the triad of Id, ego and super ego. According to the psychic alternation outlook; the ego rather than being a mere mediating force, is understood to be a dynamic concept, subjected to inherent internal transformations, periodically. Hence there is a cyclic transformation of the 'ego' under the influence of its inherently predetermined and periodically fluctuating driving forces ('eros' & 'thanatos'). The "Psychic Alternation Theory" postulates that, this inherent tendency towards ego transformations, contributes to the possible origin of life stage crises like Midlife-crisis. This transformation appears to be an unconscious tendency inherent to all individuals irrespective of racial, cultural or geographical differences. Moreover this transformation of the nature of the unconscious aspect of 'ego', from 'life-centered' to 'death-centered', seems to be persistent and periodically cyclic in any individual. In spite of this the appearance of a life-stage crisis at any vulnerable point in lifespan is not a universal phenomenon, owing to the influence of the 'ego-strength' emanating from the cross sectional disposition of the 'will'.

*Keywords: Lifespan, Crisis periods, Constructive periods, Will, libido, Ego-strength*

**H**uman mind in the psychoanalytic framework is understood to be structurally consisting of the triad of Id, ego and super ego. The ego is postulated to be mediating between, the raw uninhibited tendencies emanating from the id and the moral and idealistic restrictions (cultural/environmental) originating from the acquired wisdom of the super ego.

According to the proposed psychic alternation theory; the ego rather than being a mere mediating force, is understood to be a dynamic concept, subjected to inherent internal transformations, periodically. The basis of such transformations stem from the fact that the ego transcends all the three layers of consciousness (the conscious, preconscious and the unconscious) throughout its function of mediation. During such mediations, it is subjected to the influence of two main

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forces; the **'will'**, originating from the conscious aspect of ego and the momentary **'libido'** originating in the unconscious aspect of the ego.

The **'libido,'** is, at a given point in time, understood to be further influenced (or periodically dominated) by one of its two driving and energizing factors; namely the **'eros'** and the **'thanatos'**. This domination of the unconscious aspect of 'ego' by either of the two factors ('eros' or 'thanatos') is postulated to be inherently periodic in nature.

The **'thanatos'** dominates over the **'libido'** in a manner that it coincides with certain discrete periods in the lifespan, more or less in a predetermined mode. These periods can be called the **'crisis periods'**; meaning, periods during which the destructive forces from the unconscious are more influential. The remaining discrete periods of the lifespan are dominated by the constructive forces originating from the **'id'**, leading to a diametrically opposite disposition. The **'eros'** dominates over the **'libido'** during these times and it coincides with certain roughly demarcated periods in lifespan. These periods can be called the **'constructive periods'**; meaning; periods during which the constructive forces from the unconscious are more influential.

Another important factor that determines the final outcome or ego-function is the **'Will'**. The origin and nature of **'will'** is attributed to two factors: the **'environment'** and the **'individual differences'**. The **'environment'** implies the situational or the circumstantial milieu of the individual. The **'individual differences'** imply the genetic factors (physique, health, inherited qualities etc.) The interaction between the **'environment'** and the **'individual difference'** will determine the strength and resilience of **'will'**, also known as the **'ego strength'**. The **'ego strength'** is the conscious aspect of the **'ego'** which can be ordinarily inferred as an individual's **self efficacy** when faced with a stressful event.

At each stage of the human life span, the final direction of the **'ego- function'** (negative or positive) is determined by the resultant outcome of the interaction between the underlying conscious aspect of the **'ego'**; (ego strength) the **'Will'** and the unconscious aspect of the **'ego'** (psychic energy derived from **'eros'** or **'thanatos'**) the **'Libido'**.

The **crisis periods**, approximately correspond or coincide with the onset of **'adolescent transition phase'**, **'midlife'** and **'middle old-age'** in the continuum of the human life span. Conversely the **constructive periods** roughly coincide with phases of lifespan like; early childhood, young adulthood, early old age etc.

Hence there is a cyclic transformation of the **'ego'** under the influence of its inherently predetermined and periodically fluctuating driving forces (**'eros'** & **'thanatos'**). Essentially this

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unconscious aspect of periodic ‘ego-transformation,’ is completely outside the sphere of the individual’s conscious awareness. The basic nature of the unconscious aspect of ‘ego,’ follows a cyclic tendency of periodic transformations ranging from construction, to destruction and then back to construction and so on. Most importantly “The Psychic Alternation Theory” provides an explanation for the augmented possibility of three periods of lifespan namely ‘adolescence’, ‘mid-life’ and ‘middle old-age’, to be inherently vulnerable to crisis formation.

During the aforementioned crisis-stages, the unconscious aspect of the ‘ego’ is dominated by the destructive tendencies emanating from the naturally dominant ‘thanatos’. But this in itself is not a sufficient condition for the triggering of a ‘life crisis’. Final outcome of intra-psychic disposition (ego-function) depends on its (Libido) interaction with the conscious aspect of the ‘ego’(Will). This shall determine whether a crisis would materialize or not. If the degree of resilience of the ‘will’ or the ego strength is low at a crisis period, the result is a life stage crisis. If the degree of resilience of the ‘will’ or ego-strength is high, the individual sails through the period with least discomfort.

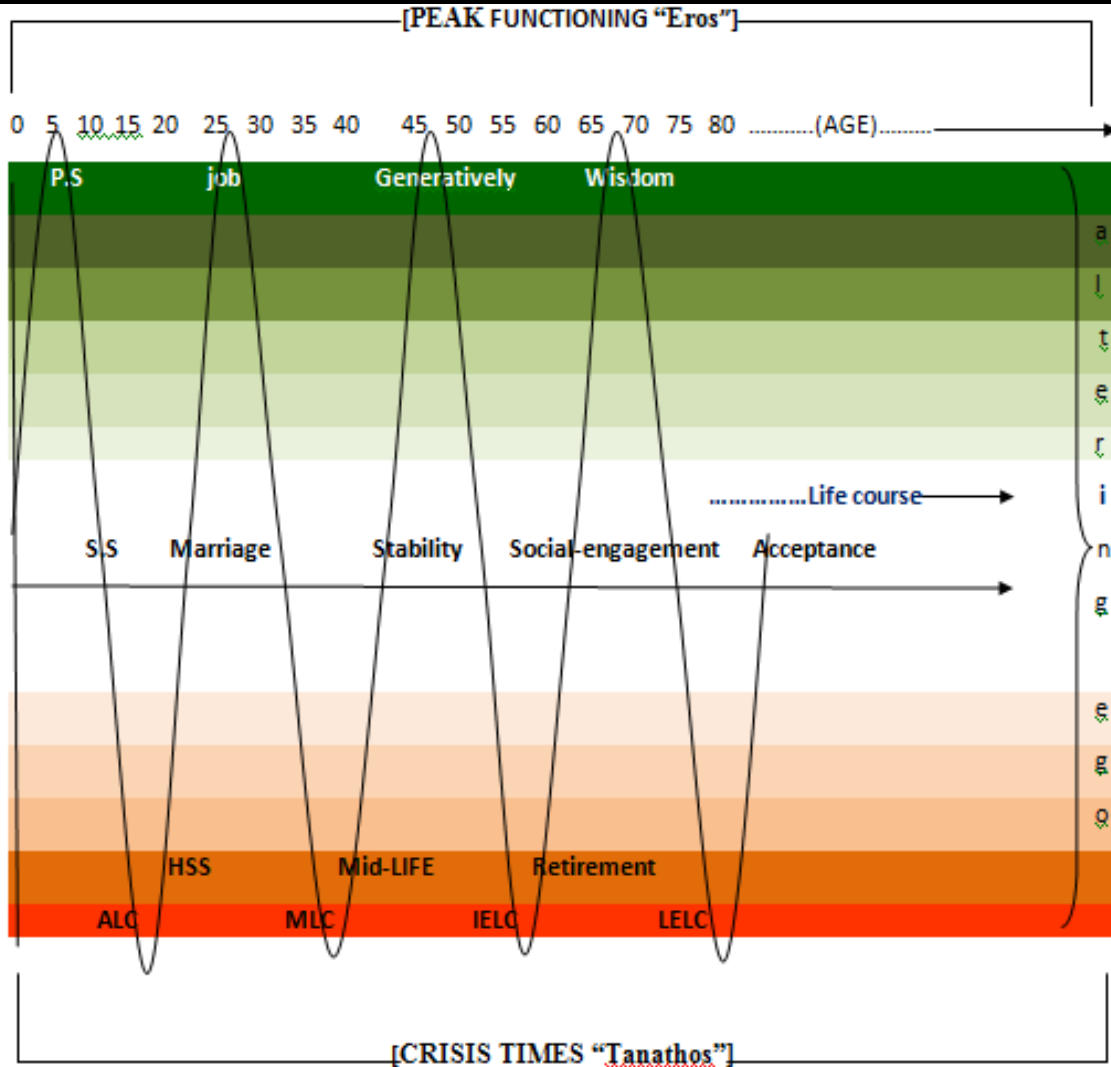
According to the ‘Psychic Alternation Theory’, for example; the negative direction of ego-function at ‘**Mid-Life**’ leading to the **midlife crisis**, is conceptualized to be an outcome of, a transformed unconscious aspect of ‘ego’(destructive and irrational by nature) interacting with its weak conscious aspect (poor ego-strength). That is, the unconscious aspect of ‘ego’ is mediating for the individual’s compatibility with the external reality, under the increasing influence of a ‘Libido’ (psychic energy) majorly powered or driven by the ‘Thanatos’ (destructive forces). This is in stark contrast to the situation at an earlier stage (e.g. early/young adulthood), when the unconscious aspect of the ‘ego’ was mediating under the influence of the ‘Libido’ (psychic energy) majorly driven by the ‘eros’ (constructive forces).

This transformation appears to be an unconscious tendency inherent to all individuals irrespective of racial, cultural or geographical differences. Moreover this transformation of the nature of the unconscious aspect of ‘ego’ from ‘life-centered’ to ‘death-centered’ seems to be persistent and periodically cyclic in any individual. In spite of this the appearance of a life-stage crisis at any aforementioned vulnerable point in lifespan is not universal, owing to the influence of the ego-strength.

In a nutshell, the “Psychic Alternation Theory” proposed hereby, postulates about the inherent tendency towards ego transformations in individuals, in a periodic manner that follows a course of cyclic alternation, permeating life-span from birth to death; thereby contributing to the possible origin of life stage crises.

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**PSYCHIC ALTERNATION THEORY OF LIFE STAGE CRISES**



*The Psychic Alternation theory of Developmental Life-Stage crises fig: 1.0*

**Abbreviations:-**

ALC=Adolescent Life crisis

P.S=Primary Schooling

MLC=Midlife Crisis

Secondary Schooling

IELC=Initial Elderly Life Crisis

LELC=Later elderly life Crisis

H.S.S=Higher

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**PROPOSING A THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT FOR ‘MID-LIFE CRISIS’**

To understand Mid-Life in its full essence contrasting it with other stages of life is essential. Developmentally life stages can be classified in a simplified manner as; birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age and death. Having stated thus, it would be logical to remember that these are not natural stages and are mere classification of convenience for academic research and deliberations. In spite of the absence of any watertight age related criteria; there definitely exist a loose correlation between the mental process at various stages and the possible age range of the stages. To state for example; the adolescent identity crisis is definitely not going to occur to an individual in his late fifties. The theory that there exist no strict chronological age-related or growth related limitations to any stages hence doesn't mean there is no logical criteria at all; it just implies that the degree of freedom is broader.

In accordance with the stage wise classification, the stage of Mid-Life would further encompass the sub-stages of young adulthood, middle adulthood and late adulthood. As mentioned earlier, real life flows in a continuum like a stream, and not in stages. In that sense Mid-life can include many a times, the later part of early adulthood too, as more than the chronological age by itself, it is certain experiences that are the pre-requisite for a stage of adult life to be designated as ‘Mid-Life’.

Mid-life is the period when usually for the first time in his/her life, the adult seriously contemplates on the concept of death as an imminent possibility. What is being referred to here is an emotional insight into the concept, rather than just an intellectual understanding. Many undergo the first-hand experience of the death of a loved parent. The thought of an impending death encroaches the boundary of conscious awareness like never before. Body signs of aging starts popping up, and unprotected and singular the person finds himself at the top of the generational ladder, acting out a social role with a limited degree of personal freedom of choice.

‘What all you could be’ of yesterday has narrowed down to ‘what you are now’ of today, and adjustment with this logical present becomes essential. Initial Signs of the inevitable process of decline in physical strength, cognitive agility and vitality, combined with the emotional understanding of limitations of ‘the self’ derived from experiences in life, forces a person sometimes into a meticulous comparative review of own life story hitherto. Compatibility if perceived, with an earlier harbored vision of the self as to ‘how it should be’, begets normalcy and adjustment. Perception of incompatibility triggers dissatisfaction and unrest, which propels the mental energy to find an alternative to restore normalcy and bring about adjustment. The peculiar experiences that contribute towards the formation of a crisis at this stage are thought to appear universally roughly between later part of early adulthood and late adulthood.

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Some people perceive life to be unsatisfactory at Mid-Life. This may be due to objective or subjective perception of circumstances as hindrances in development or as something that denote failure. Negative experiences/circumstances at Mid-life or the vice-versa i.e. the experiences which are interpreted as negative by people at mid-life; inculcate a fear of imminent death.

Death here seems to be symbolic in the form of loss of youthfulness, vitality and attractiveness. This also brings to the forefront the stark reality that, it is perhaps impossible to recapture that lost vigor. A painful realization sets in, that to relive those past times permeated by an earlier vitality, is practically impossible. This leads to a sense of timelessness in life and a need to compensate for the time lost. The pendulum of mindset swings back from a collective mind-set to that of an individualistic mind-set. The action pattern changes from that of a 'constructive and tolerance based - rational' concept to that of a 'destructive and need gratification based-irrational' concept, aimed at compensating for the perceived loss of time and energy. This involves a re-evaluation of the past in the light of the current subjective lack of life satisfaction, which paints all past efforts as misdirected and futile.

Efforts; mental, social and physical, that has gone into ensuring conformity and conscious suppression of unacceptable fantasies of the self, appear unproductive, resulting in a period of disillusionment and intra-psycho conflicts. This lowers the control of the ego on the Id. With that diminishes the perceived importance of ego and thus far preserved formidable impermeability of the ego ideals. Lack of insight coupled with the energy derived from the pent up negative emotion emerging from anticipated fear of death or doom, leads to the intensification of the raw uninhibited processes in the unconscious.

Instead of mediating between the super-ego and the Id, the ego, away from the conscious awareness, is set into motion to mediate predominantly for the Id. The primary catalyst is the perception of lack of time left in one's life. From this point on, the overt actions are in part determined by the unconscious, which operates with sole purpose of irrational pleasure-seeking fueled by the 'Thanatos'.

According to the 'Psychic Alternation Theory' the negative direction of ego-function at '**Mid-Life**' leading to the **midlife crisis**, is conceptualized to be an outcome of, a transformed unconscious aspect of 'ego'(destructive and irrational by nature) interacting with its weak conscious aspect (poor ego-strength). That is, the unconscious aspect of 'ego' is mediating for the individual's compatibility with the external reality, under the increasing influence of a 'Libido' (psychic energy) majorly powered or driven by the 'Thanatos' (destructive forces). This is in stark contrast to the situation at an earlier stage (e.g. early/young adulthood), when the unconscious aspect of the 'ego' was mediating under the influence of the 'Libido' (psychic energy) majorly driven by the 'eros' (constructive forces). In the unfortunate event of such a

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libido state interacting with a poor ‘Will’ or lack of ego strength; a crisis is automatically triggered.

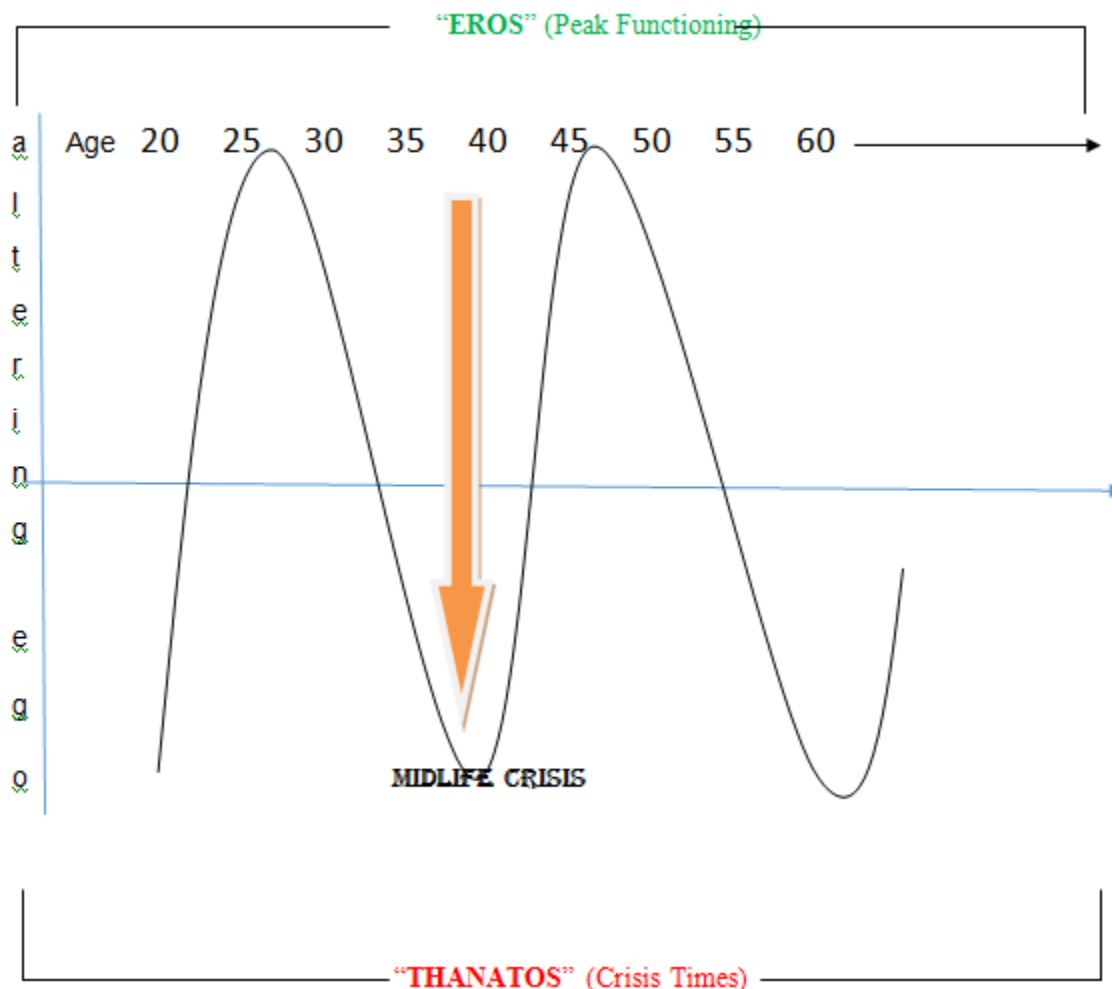
The above mentioned mental processes results in the outcome of the individual’s action to be irrational, illogical and many a times self-defeating. It appears more so in contrast with previous life stage or sub-stage. This mental process is behaviorally displayed as a change which appears to be sudden, radical, and destructive and out of touch with the person’s ordinary nature or from a recent well-adjusted past.

Midlife crisis is hence being proposed to be a particular stage-attached cross-section in the path of ‘psychic alternation’. This stage is marked by the psychological transition from adulthood to old age. An individual at this stage is faced with the formidable challenge of accepting his death and committing to the rest of life in a constructive manner.

A crisis is shaped when this acceptance is not formed and an attempt is made to continue with the mentality typical of the pre-transition stage. This tendency to forcefully hold on to the mental-set typical of a previous stage brings about significant intra-psychic conflict in the individual. This overt part of the crisis may not be a universal phenomenon and varies from person to person and depends upon individual circumstances.

The triggering of the crisis is usually associated with the perception of lack of life-satisfaction at a conscious level. A plethora of factors like; social, interpersonal and intra-personal, may contribute to such a perception. When such a perception of lack of life-satisfaction occurs at midlife, it in turn leads to the weakening of the ‘will’ or ‘ego-strength’ which is the conscious aspect of the ‘ego’. This is automatically met with the unconscious aspect of the ‘ego’ that is naturally predisposed to be under the influence of the ‘Libido’ (thanathos) emerging from the Id. This leads to the escalation of the perception of dissatisfaction into a full-fledged crisis, popularly termed as ‘Mid-life Crisis’.

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***The Psychic Alternation theory of Midlife crisis fig: 1.1***

With the onset of a midlife crisis there transpires a plodding perception of lack of joy (vitality and contentment) in usual mundane life activities which hitherto appeared purposeful and gratifying. This loss of pleasure leads to a meta-cognitive dilemma involving an evaluative self review. Discernment of an existential meaninglessness arouses a state of negative emotion and feeling in the individual. This subtle mood change brings about a gradual but sweeping change in the pattern of interpersonal relationship resulting in distortions and imbalances. The ability to derive fun and enjoyment from any activity, person or matter with in the usual circumstances, almost entirely wanes. Such a state of mental affair on progressive accumulation results in significant dissatisfaction in socio-emotional, professional and routine functioning of the individual. In its extreme it can culminate in development of neuroticism.



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**How to cite this article:** Anoopkumar KV, Annap A (2016), The Psychic Alternation Theory (PAT)–Model of Life Stage Crises in general and Mid-life Crisis in Particular, *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, Volume 4, Issue 1, No. 82, ISSN:2348-5396 (e), ISSN:2349-3429 (p), DIP:18.01.157/20160401, ISBN:978-1-365-59365-9