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'Lives Overpromised'

The Transition to Adulthood and the 'Quarter-life Crisis'

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ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been a lot of speculation and (often negative) stereotyping about 'Generation Y'. Many witty labels have emerged to describe the generation from an outside perspective, but few have explored the perspective of these young people as they enter the 'real world' and embark upon their 'adult' lives. Whilst the generation has had limited attention from the academic world, the concept of a 'quarter-life crisis' has emerged through the popular media, proposed by journalists Robbins and Wilner (2001). Although such a concept may be readily dismissed as media hype, or a fabrication of spoiled, whining 'Gen Y'ers, there is much evidence to suggest that the transition to adulthood today is much more complex and turbulent than that experienced by previous generations. Through six focus group discussions involving 26 members of Generation Y going through the 'quarter-life' (or 'emerging adulthood') stage, this study sought to explore how the transition to adulthood is experienced by young people in New Zealand, including the highs and lows, challenges and pitfalls; whether these years represented a time of personal 'crisis'; and how they felt about their future looking forward. Participants' stories suggested that many felt ill-prepared for the demands and decisions of the 'real world', which sat at odds with what they had been conditioned to expect. While not all of the participants experienced this phase as a 'crisis' in the true sense of the word, many found themselves disappointed with how life in the 'real world' was turning out, unsettled by the disintegration of their initial plans and dreams, and overwhelmed by the complexity of this life stage. Nonetheless, they clung to hopes that the "good life" and the "happily ever after" that they had long-expected would eventually materialise – that fate would intervene and deliver the destiny they felt they deserved. The findings highlight the mismatch between how young people are prepared for the transition to adulthood and how they experience it. The implications of this situation and recommendations for addressing it are discussed.

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CHAPTER 1 – ‘GENERATION Y’: A GENERATION OF CRISIS OR A GENERATION /N CRISIS?

The current generation of young people making the transition into adulthood and entering the working world is the most labelled, but arguably the least understood, of the generations to make this transition so far. A lot of speculation surrounds this seemingly ‘mysterious’ generation, and many superficial labels and stereotypes have emerged in an attempt to describe them. They have been branded: ‘Generation Y’, ‘Millenials’, ‘The Net Generation’, ‘Generation Next’, (numerous sources), the ‘Ebay Generation’ (Fox, 2005), the ‘Boomerang Generation’ (Furman, 2005), ‘Twenty-somethings’, ‘Quarter-lifers’ (Robbins & Wilner, 2001), ‘Adultescents’ (Gordon & Shaffer, 2004), ‘Start-up Adults’ (Levine, 2005), and ‘Emerging Adults’ (Arnett, 2000); to name but a few.

Much of the commentary about ‘Generation Y’ (the most commonly used of the labels – generally referring to those born between 1979 and the millennium) paints a negative picture. They are largely typecast as spoiled, self-absorbed, and arrogant – as ‘know it alls’ who have little respect for older generations and are resistant to advice or anything that appears like hard work. Some positive contributions of the generation are acknowledged, but often these still speak predominantly from ‘the wise older generation’ tasked with dealing with the ‘problem’ this generation would appear to represent. Speculation has been particularly fervent in management and human resources circles, who are anxious about how to cope with the invading young ‘aliens’ entering their organisations and teach them to ‘fit the mould’.

While much of the focus has been on how to cope *with* this generation as they make the transition to adulthood, there has been comparatively less interest in how this generation is actually coping with the transition *themselves*. The period of life after completing one’s education is widely promoted as ‘the best years of your life’ when “the world is your oyster”, and this is a phrase frequently encountered by wide-eyed young adults when they leave the comforting structure of their university or high school institutions behind, and step out into the “real world”. However, in recent

years, an idea has begun to filter through the popular media about the emergence of a “quarter-life crisis”, which, whilst at risk of becoming another ‘catchy’ label, at least makes an attempt to communicate *their* experiences from *their* perspective. When mentioned to many people beyond the age of 40, the notion of a quarter-life crisis is often initially met with the response “the *what* life crises?” “Don’t you mean *mid*-life?” A lot of people have difficulty believing that people can be anything but positive and excited at the point in one’s life when they have “the world as their oyster”. In contrast to this typically idealistic perspective, the American bestseller ‘*Quarterlife Crisis – The unique challenges of life in your twenties*’ by Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner (2001) brought to light the issue that many, if not most, young adults are not living the carefree lives that the rest of society appears to think that they are living. While the precise origin of the term ‘quarter-life crisis’ is somewhat debated, Robbins and Wilner (both ‘quarter-lifers’ themselves) were the first to publish a book on the topic. Their work is based on interviews with approximately 100 participants in the United States, from a variety of different states, ethnic backgrounds, and SES backgrounds, but predominantly university graduates. In the book, the quarter-life crisis is described as “a response to overwhelming instability, constant change, too many choices, and a panicked sense of helplessness” (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p. 3). They claim that “[w]hile at its heart the quarterlife crisis is an identity crisis, it causes twentysomethings’ conflicting emotions to show up in different ways” (p.7).

While the wider world appears uncertain of what to make of this generation, this generation appears uncertain of what to make of the wider world. The main ‘symptoms’ of the quarter-life crisis are said to include: feelings of uncertainty, disappointment, nagging doubts and changes of mind, a search to define one’s identity, fear of failure, procrastination/ indecision, a sense of helplessness, feeling left behind, trying to find balance in their lives, and using education as a ‘stall tactic’ (Robbins & Wilner, 2001). Robbins and Wilner argue (2001) that those experiencing a quarter-life crisis typically get caught up in a vicious cycle, whereby they feel unhappy, anxious, and depressed but are reluctant to talk to anyone about it and therefore don’t realise that their experience is normal; instead feeling like something is wrong with them individually, which only aggravates their initial worries. As life in one’s twenties is

frequently romanticised by older generations as 'the best years of your life', they are unprepared for the challenges, pressures, and decisions they will encounter in today's 'real world' (Levine, 2005; Robbins & Wilner, 2001).

Choice and decision-making are considered central issues at the heart of the quarter-life crisis, with 'twentysomethings' adopting a 'trial and error' approach in response to the plethora of choices that lay before them as they embark upon their adult lives. Robbins and Wilner (2001) claim that their interviewees expressed a sense of urgency in trying to sort all of their issues and uncertainties out before being hedged in by responsibilities. Although trying to develop a coherent identity on which to base their decisions, they also displayed a desire to keep their minds and options open, hesitant to 'settle down' too soon. This may link to some of the participants' torn feelings and identities between childhood and adulthood, being reluctant to move on from their carefree youth. It appears that they felt unprepared for these challenging decisions facing them, (such as whether to take or leave a job, whether to stay in a 'good' relationship or move on in search of a better one, and how to manage their typically tight finances) with little other experience to base their judgements on. Fears of making the wrong decision sometimes led them to avoid making it altogether (Robbins & Wilner, 2001).

As a follow-on from the book Robbins and Wilner wrote, the website www.quarterlifecrisis.com was developed, including links to various articles and resources to assist people who are experiencing difficulty at this time in their life. There is also an online message board where forum members can post comments about their issues, challenges, and anxieties, and hear back from other members who may be encountering similar issues and may wish to exchange their perspectives. As of January 21st 2009, the forum had over 11,000 members (predominantly from the United States, but with many other international members as well) with more than 26,000 discussion threads, and in excess of 460,000 posts on the message boards. Examples of topic threads include: "Who just doesn't 'get life' anymore?", "WTF is wrong with me? Do I just suck at life?", and "Masters Degree, Good Job, Travelled, Expensive car...And completely lost". This suggests that despite the notion of a

quarter-life crisis being in its infancy and derived from informal and methodologically questionable research, it is obvious that there are many people who are finding this no easy transition and are actively seeking out support.

The term 'quarter-life crisis' is clearly used to both compare and contrast this stage with its older, more established counterpart - the 'mid-life crisis'. Their common element is said to be 'change', with the midlife crisis being based around a desire for change as a means of breaking out of a sense of plateau or 'stagnancy', and the quarter-life crisis borne out of too much change at once (Robbins & Wilner, 2001) (akin to the description of 'Future shock' presented by Toffler in 1970). The concept of the mid-life crisis is a widely acknowledged phenomenon in popular ideology and well-accepted in academic circles. A literature search on the term 'mid-life crisis' reveals over one-hundred academic studies on the topic, while a search on 'quarter-life crisis' returns only two. Robbins and Wilner (2001) argue that while people approaching midlife have come to anticipate feelings of crisis at that stage, those in the quarter-life stage have had little warning for theirs, highlighting that "[i]ndividuals who are approaching middle age at least know what is coming...Because the midlife crisis is so widely acknowledged" (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p. 4). They argue that the impact of the quarter-life crisis is on par with, if not greater than, the mid-life crisis and is therefore deserving of the same recognition and respect.

Aside from asserting that there *is* a quarter-life crisis and that struggling twentysomethings need to be informed of this for the therapeutic value of knowing that 'you are not alone', Robbins and Wilner (2001) do little to address possible solutions for the issues they put forth. Nor do they attempt to locate or connect the concept within a theoretical framework. Coming from backgrounds with little, if any, formal research experience, Robbins and Wilner (2001) do acknowledge that the 'research' they did for the book is 'non-scientific', and therefore that they have little grounds to propose potential solutions to the issue. They instead judiciously point to a gap in the research on this age group, and the need for further psychological research to examine the issues. There is no description of the methods that were used in gathering and analysing interview data, or of how the questions and basis of the

interviews were framed to participants. Their university graduate focused sample seems to implicitly assume that the issues and feelings associated with a 'quarter-life crisis' are less prevalent for those who didn't go to university. One has to be somewhat cautious of making unwarranted conclusions from their 'findings', particularly with the potentially biased commercial motives of the book in mind.

The publishing of Robbins and Wilner's (2001) book spawned a series of even more informal, haphazard studies. In perhaps the most dubious 'research' on the topic to date, reports on a 'study' commissioned by a London Public Relations consultancy Beatwax Communications (www.beatwax.com) made the sweeping claim that two-thirds of the 25 year olds in their study were having a 'quarter-life crisis', based on their answering 'Yes' to the question 'Are there aspects of your life you feel you should be sorting out?', an exaggerated and unwarranted interpretation. Even more bemusing, they purport to know the 'causes' of it through responses to their question 'Which area of your life do you feel you should sort out?'

The notion of a 'quarter-life crisis' has gradually been filtering into the New Zealand media, with the term appearing intermittently in various speculative articles. Generally media commentators have approached the topic with a rather sceptical view. For example, an article in the workplace section of The New Zealand Herald in May 2006 titled '*Quarterlife crisis? Come on*' begins, "Is this some sort of joke? Can they really be serious? Apparently, the latest term to describe the agonising dilemma facing the 20-something throngs of layabouts incurring ginormous debts and living with their parents is – wait for it – the 'quarterlife crisis'" (Russell, 2006, p. 1). However, in an arguably more well-informed view on the topic, New Zealand's '*Career Edge*' magazine (produced by the government-funded 'Career Services' organisation) presents the perspective of a Career Coach, Melita Sharp, who claims she has observed symptoms of a quarter-life crisis in many of her clients. "Many of the people we're seeing are around 25, they've gone to university, they've done a degree, they've got a few years experience in the field and then they find it's not working for them. They're very frustrated. There's also a sense of panic that they're letting people down, such as their parents" (Sharp, 2007, p. 11). Sharp claims that some of her clients have been so

distraught that they have required emotional counselling before they are able to address their career issues. A further article on www.nzgirl.co.nz boldly claims that there is “proof that a quarterlife crisis is common and something which can be overcome with will and determination” (Tay, 2006).

Being in my early to mid 20’s myself and having had discussions with many of my peers encountering difficulty in this life period, the idea of this being a ‘crisis’ phase resonated with me. However, having reviewed the academic literature for any publications on the ‘quarter life crisis’ and finding a noticeable lack of focused research on the topic, it made me wonder whether it was just another ‘media fad’. While this ‘phenomenon’ proposed by Robbins and Wilner (2001) resulted in considerable interest within the popular media, including discussions on ‘The Oprah Winfrey Show’ and an inevitable spin-off of self-help books out to cash in on the hype (many of which have been slammed by critics for their ironic *lack* of ‘self-help’), the academic world has largely remained silent on the issue. Further research on the topic is needed in order to examine whether ‘The quarter-life crisis’ is a legitimate phenomenon rather than just representing a ‘media fad’, and if it does, to establish theoretical support for it. This is the intended purpose of this study.

The transition to adulthood is effectively the launching pad for the rest of one’s life. Failing to make an effective transition may have flow-on effects that extend well-beyond the ‘start-up’ years (Levine, 2005). Although there are unquestionably many young people who go through the transition to adulthood without cause for concern, it is evident that something must be done to find ways of making the transition easier for many others. In conducting this research I was surprised at the level of interest the topic seemed to generate, with a number of journalists and organisations contacting me to express their interest in discussing the eventual findings. It therefore appears to be a topic of increasing salience and concern in society, as older generations and organisations seek to improve their understanding of this seemingly ‘mysterious’ generation that is increasingly shaping modern society as much as it shapes them.

This chapter has highlighted the need for further research in order to fill the knowledge gaps concerning this generation. Although there is negligible academic research on the topic of the 'quarter-life crisis', literature and statistics on this group point to significant changes that have occurred in how this generation makes the transition to adulthood and the nature of the challenges they face. In the following Chapter, I discuss the changing social context of the transition to adulthood (the 'stage' of the quarter-life crisis), and how various societal factors thought to make such a transition easier have potentially made it more difficult. Chapter Three looks at some of the foremost concerns during the transition to adulthood and the quarter-life years, while Chapter Four discusses the limited academic research on the 'quarter-life crisis'. Chapter Five presents an explanation of the methods I employed for this study, in exploring the perspectives and experiences of young New Zealanders who are currently going through this life phase. This is then followed by the presentation and in-depth discussion of the study's findings in Chapter Six and, finally, a summary of conclusions and recommendations that can be drawn from the study in Chapter Seven.

CHAPTER 2 – THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

This chapter looks at significant changes to the transition to adulthood over the past few decades and how this has impacted upon the lives of young people today. It discusses long standing developmental theories that conceptualise this stage and challenges to these in light of the changing nature of the transition. This is followed by an overview of the limited research and knowledge on how this transition is experienced in modern society, and recent policy changes in New Zealand that impact upon this life stage.

One of the reasons that there may be a disconnect between Baby Boomers and 'Gen Y' is that the worlds that they grew up in and the ways in which they have been conditioned are very different. Generation Y has grown up through the Technology and Knowledge Ages, with the rapid growth and impact of technology and media profoundly shaping the ways in which they acquire information and goods, communicate with and relate to others, and indeed how they view the world and conduct their lives in it.

The old "in my day..." argument of parents has little impact as young adults feel far removed from that world. For the 'Boomer' generation comparing their children's youth to that of their own, it is easy to focus on the positives for this generation compared to their relative 'deprivation', and the idea of a quarter-life crisis may seem self-indulgent and frivolous. However, the changing nature of the transition to adulthood and the range of choices faced during this time have created a new set of challenges for this generation to negotiate, which must be explored further to gain an understanding of why this could and may be a 'crisis' phase. That is the intention of this study.

The Changing Nature of the Transition to Adulthood

Change is inevitable. The human life cycle is centred around a variety of changes and transitions, but arguably few, if any, compare to the magnitude of the change

experienced as youth leave the security of educational institutions and step out into the 'real world'. In today's fast-paced world new fashions, hobbies, lifestyles, forms of entertainment, technologies and even entire industries are constantly emerging, and there is little contention that the experience of young people making the transition to adulthood today is vastly different to that of their parents (Lehmann, 2004). Many commentators agree that the transition has become increasingly difficult for most young people (Arnett, 2004; Leggatt-Cook, 2005; Levine, 2005).

The use of the term '*quarter-life*' crisis clearly positions it as an issue connected to life development. The two developmental theories which have guided the majority of thinking about life stages and transitions include the Eight-Stage model of Erikson (1963), and Levinson's (1978) Life Development model. These break the human life cycle into a series of developmental stages, outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Erikson's (1963) Eight-stage model	Levinson's (1978) Life development model	
<i>Stages</i>	<i>Sub-stages</i>	<i>Stages (or 'Seasons')</i>
1) <i>Infancy</i> - infancy to age 1	1) <i>Childhood and adolescence stage</i> - < 17 years	Childhood and adolescence
2) <i>Early childhood</i> - ages 1 to 3	2) <i>Early Adult Transition</i> - 17-22 years	Early adulthood
3) <i>Childhood</i> – ages 4 to 5	3) <i>Entering the Adult World</i> - 22-28 years	
4) <i>Late childhood</i> – ages 6 to 11	4) <i>Age-30 Transition</i> - 28-33 years	
5) <i>Adolescence</i> – Puberty to late teens	5) <i>Settling Down</i> - 33-40 years	Middle adulthood
6) <i>Young adulthood</i> – Early 20s to mid 30s	6) <i>Mid-Life Transition</i> - 40-45 years	Late adulthood
7) <i>Middle adulthood</i> – Late 30s to mid 50s	7) <i>Entering Middle Adulthood</i> - 45-50 years	
8) <i>Maturity</i> – after mid-50s	8) <i>Age-50 Transition</i> - 50-55 years	
	9) <i>Culmination of middle adulthood</i> - 55-60 years	
	10) <i>Late Adult Transition</i> - 60-65 years	
	11) <i>Late Adulthood</i> - 65+ years	

In his early work, Erikson (1963) noted vulnerabilities to crises in connection to developmental stages. He proposed that, in the transitions between the eight stages described in his theory, lie inherent psychosocial conflicts or 'crises', a person's

response to which can either result in positive development or put them at risk of psychopathology (Erikson, 1963). During the stage of adolescence, Erikson suggests, is the 'crisis' of *Identity vs Role-confusion* for the individual to work through. For this task they are said to be granted a "psychosocial moratorium" (Erikson, 1968), whereby they are free to explore and experiment with various potential identities and avenues without the pressures and responsibilities of adulthood (Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes, & Shanahan, 2002). Erikson (1963) saw the following stage, 'young adulthood', as being a time by which identity should be established, leaving the individual to undergo the next stage-appropriate task of establishing intimate relationships, typically with a romantic partner. This is where the issue of the *Intimacy vs Isolation* crisis was thought to reside, as young adults seek intimacy in their motivation to avoid loneliness and isolation.

Levinson's development model (1978), whilst hampered by being based on an all-male sample of men at mid-life 'looking back' on their life course, was a lot more comprehensive than Erikson's (1963) in covering a greater range of distinct life stages, grouped in four broader life 'seasons'. The stages of particular relevance to this topic of study are the 'Early Adult Transition' and 'Entering the Adult World'. Levinson (1978) describes the 'Early Adult Transition' as a time when young adults strive to become more independent. He argues that those who do not branch out on their own and remain emotionally dependent on their parents during this phase, tend to develop at a slower rate. The phase of 'Entering the Adult World' is seen as a critical one by Levinson. He claims that career paths should have begun to develop at this stage, and that young adults who have not established a clear sense of direction by the completion of this phase will tend to drift through frequent job changes and have ambiguous objectives (Levinson, 1978).

These long-standing developmental models were based on the development of individuals through the 'Baby Boomer' era and no longer adequately capture the developmental experiences of Generation Y as they make the transition to adulthood. The transition to adulthood has become more uncertain, fragmented, volatile, and individualised for those experiencing it today (Lehmann, 2004; Mortimer et al., 2002).

For previous generations there was a relatively well-defined timeline and 'road map' about what they were expected to do in their life and when they were expected to have done it by. Stereotypes predominantly based upon one's gender and socio-economic status formed the bounds of foreseen possibilities and defined expectations. As a result of the women's movements and increased accessibility to education intended by New Zealand's student loan system, constraints such as these have been substantially eroded (J. Higgins, 2002), although it is argued that they still exist to a greater extent than is commonly acknowledged (Leggatt-Cook, 2005; Lehmann, 2004). These societal shifts have had a notable impact on the way young people have come to occupy their 'early adult' years.

There is a much greater emphasis on education for today's young adults, with employers increasingly expecting formal qualifications on the curriculum vitae of young job seekers. In New Zealand in 1999, an estimated 51.5 percent of secondary school leavers went on to pursue further education and training the following year, with 26.1 percent enrolling in university or colleges of education. In the decade from July 1990 to July 2001 the percentage of people aged 18-24 years old who were enrolled in public tertiary institutions increased from 20.5 percent to 30.2 percent. The increase of women in higher education has been particularly notable, with numbers growing 45.3 percent in the period 1995 to 2001, compared to the 25.9 percent increase of men during this time. This has led women to make up 57 percent of the tertiary student population, a dramatically different demographic to that of previous generations. On average, people in New Zealand now spend 17.2 years in the formal education system (from age 5 onwards), longer than the OECD average of 16.7 years (all statistics from www.stats.govt.nz).

According to Leggatt-Cook (2005), young people may have various incentives for remaining in formal education for longer. With growing numbers of graduates entering the workforce each year, competition for the most desirable jobs is increasingly fierce, resulting in the bar of expected qualifications being raised. Young people are therefore motivated to pursue post-graduate qualifications in order to distinguish themselves

from the rest of the pack, and New Zealand has witnessed a noticeable increase in those taking up post-graduate study (www.stats.govt.nz).

Likely stemming from this increased uptake and duration of education, particularly by women, the tendency to marry later and women's increased participation in paid work and pursuit of career opportunities are also salient societal changes that have affected the transition to adulthood over recent decades. In 1971 the average age at first marriage was 20.8 for women and 23 for men, whereas latest figures in 2006 place the average age of first marriage at 28.2 for women and 30 for men, a substantial increase (www.stats.govt.nz). As suggested by Kroger (2007), delaying marriage is likely to be connected to the participation of women in paid work, partly because the "[g]reater possibilities for economic independence among women have removed pressures to marry purely for economic reasons" (Kroger, 2007, p. 146-147). Statistics New Zealand reports that in the 10 years between 1991 and the 2001 census the rate of women participating in the paid-workforce rose almost 10 percent to a figure of 60 percent. By March 2001 they subsequently comprised 47 percent of the total workforce. Thus, in many western societies young women have a significantly greater number of vocational and lifestyle options compared to their predecessors a couple of decades ago (Kroger, 2007).

Tied up with the trends for longer durations in education, greater workforce participation by women, and later marriage, the trend towards delayed parenthood is also well-publicised, with women tending to have their first child significantly later and demand for fertility assistance increasing as a consequence. Fewer New Zealand women in their teens or twenties are having a child, generally in favour of delaying childbearing until after age 30. The median age of women having their first child was 30.2 years in the year ended December 2003, compared with 28.3 years in 1993 and 24.9 years in the early 1970s (www.stats.govt.nz). Becoming a parent therefore tends to occur approximately five years later for Generation Y than it did for their parents' generation.

For previous generations, the expectation was that young women would focus on getting married and fulfilling their childbearing and child-raising obligations, while their

husband was tasked with getting a 'good' job and working his way up in the company in order to support his family and achieve increasing levels of prosperity. As Arnett (2004, p. 6), suggests, responsibilities such as marriage and parenthood were once seen as "achievements to be pursued" but are now "perils to be avoided". However, these 'perils' once provided clear roles and pathways, as young people knew what to expect from their adulthood. While these changes may be perceived as empowering in opening up a broader range of possibilities for both women *and* men, they are accompanied by a new set of issues and consequences which have changed the landscape for today's younger generations.

As these traditional markers once associated with becoming an adult have been pushed out further and further over the past few decades, there is an increased tendency for many people in their twenties to be still engaging in Erikson's (1963) adolescent tasks of exploring and experimenting (Levine, 2005). It has therefore been suggested that we are witnessing what appears to be a prolonged period of adolescence in young people today (Leggatt-Cook, 2005; Levine, 2005; Mortimer et al., 2002), which has been affectionately labelled 'adulthood' (Gordon & Shaffer, 2004), or the 'Peter Pan syndrome' (Fox, 2005).

As a result of these shifts, life stage developmental models such as those established by Erikson (1963) and Levinson (1978), are becoming increasingly imprecise for describing and predicting key tasks and concerns of the adolescent-young adulthood life stages, as the life stage timeline has undergone a dramatic shift since their inception. This has placed the transition to adulthood into a nebulous state where the beginning and end of the transition to adulthood has become more ambiguous to define. As the following statement by Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut (2005, p. 18) suggests:

"Entry into adulthood has become more ambiguous and generally occurs in a gradual, complex, and less uniform fashion. It is simply not possible for most young people to achieve economic and psychological autonomy as early as it was half a century ago (p.5)... We cannot easily define the end of early adulthood, but we can say with certainty that it is not the magic ages of 18 or 21 that are most often used

to define adulthood in social policies and the law. The network [MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy] has defined early adulthood as spanning the years from eighteen to thirty four.”

Instead of adolescence ending and adulthood beginning, this period has come to represent an amalgamation of the two, with young people in this phase cycling between these stages, their behaviour reflecting characteristics of both adolescence and adulthood (Leggatt-Cook, 2005). In response to this apparent amalgamation and evidence that the transition to adulthood is being increasingly drawn out, Arnett (2004) answered the call for a much-needed challenge to the prominent development theories of Erikson and Levinson. He proposed that a new, distinct life phase was taking shape between adolescence and young adulthood, which he branded ‘*emerging adulthood*’.

Encompassing roughly the period from the late teens through to the mid- to late twenties, emerging adulthood is seen as *more* than just a case of extended adolescence, involving much greater freedom, but not quite the responsibility of full adult status (Arnett, 2004). In light of this, the phase is therefore deserving of its own title. Arnett’s theory provides a clearer picture of modern challenges of the emerging adulthood phase. Its essence is said to lie in five core features, where it is characterised by: 1) *Identity explorations*, 2) *Instability*, 3) Greater *self-focus* than any other time of life, 4) *Feeling in-between* (neither adolescent nor adult), and 5) *Possibilities* (when ‘hopes and opportunities abound’) (Arnett, 2004).

In discussing the lack of studies (and subsequent lack of understanding) about people aged 18-25, Arnett (2000) postulates that this may be partly due to difficulty obtaining samples from this age group, but may also stem from the fact that a clear developmental conception of this age group has been lacking. It was his hope that framing ‘emerging adulthood’ as a unique developmental period would facilitate increased scholarly studies on this life phase. The characterisation of emerging adulthood provides a sound conceptual basis to guide the present study, and is adopted as the terminology of choice throughout the remainder of this thesis.

Experiencing the Transition to Adulthood

The biggest gap in the research on the transition to adulthood concerns the perspectives of those who are actually going through it. In Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck & Holmes' (2002) reference to the 'subjective transition to adulthood', they acknowledge that "despite much speculation, little is known about how young people themselves view their circumstances." (p. 443).

As precursory work for his theory of emerging adulthood, Arnett (1997) reported that traditional markers of adulthood such as finishing education, starting work, marriage, and parenthood were largely *rejected* as signals of adult status by those in this age group. Instead, they felt becoming an 'adult' was a more gradual process, with subtle psychological shifts playing a much greater role. These included accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's own actions, deciding on personal beliefs and values independent of parents or other influences, establishing a relationship with parents as an equal, and being financially independent from them (Arnett, 1997). While government agencies, statisticians, and researchers still often rely on role transitions such as age, marriage, parenthood, and finishing education as criteria to define adulthood, this individualistic process of 'becoming an adult' experienced by those actually going through this phase suggests that such criteria may not have overt relevance to them (Arnett, 1997, 2001). Although such role transitions (or indeed absence of them) are undoubtedly pivotal in shaping one's transition to adulthood in terms of their focuses and priorities at this time in their life, they do not appear to determine whether one feels they have attained adult status. One may speculate that this shift from tangible events to psychological criteria could cause increased ambiguity and uncertainty for people in this age group about their status, as it involves a more gradual, subjective process. It may be that the intense introspection likely required in this task makes a person more susceptible to feelings of doubt and 'crisis'. Arnett (2007) disputes the common notion that young people are 'selfish', arguing that they are actually '*self focused*' as a necessity of this introspective exploration required at this time in their life.

The School-to-Work transition

Much of the work regarding subjective perceptions of young people going through the transition to adulthood has focused rather narrowly on the school-to-work transition, whereby one leaves the secure and familiar setting of the school or university environment and starts out on a job or career path. It is arguably one of the most challenging aspects of the transition to adulthood, with numerous studies highlighting its stressful nature (Graham & McKenzie, 1995; Lehmann, 2004; Levine, 2005; Perrone & Vickers, 2003; Polach, 2004). This is largely a result of it being complicated by “few institutional supports, the prolongation of education, and a multitude of options with respect to the combination of school, work, and family” (Mortimer et al., 2002, p. 439). Like other aspects of the transition to adulthood, the school-to-work transition appears to be fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity.

Due to the magnitude of this transition, there are often a great deal of expectations surrounding it. The first 18 or so years of an individual’s life are spent ‘preparing’ for something; something mysteriously referred to as ‘the real world’. When a young adult graduates from school or university and steps out into the real world, there are underlying expectations that they will finally realise their goals and aspirations in a brilliant culmination of all their hard work up to this point (Graham & McKenzie, 1995).

Young people about to enter the workforce are typically enthusiastic and ambitious. Many employers tasked with managing ‘Generation Y’ as they embark upon their entry into the world of work, bemoan the apparent impatience of graduates who ‘expect to become boss overnight’ (Walsh, 2006). Indeed, how to work with and manage ‘Gen Y’ has become a key topic of interest for many organisations. But this apparent ‘sense of entitlement’ is not entirely Gen Y’s fault. With the increasing importance of education that is emphasised to young people, many are led to believe that they are investing in a ‘ticket to guaranteed success’. As Perrone and Vickers (2003, p. 73) highlight, there currently exists among graduates the inflated expectation that “if one obtains a university degree, one is guaranteed to get, not just any job, but a wonderful job”.

These expectations can set the confident and optimistic young graduate up for a significant reality check, as the working world school leavers and university graduates encounter today can be an uncertain and scary place (Leggatt-Cook, 2005). Since the parents of Generation Y entered the workforce there has been a global movement of labour market restructuring, workplace reorganisations, and changing educational demands (Lehmann, 2004). Major economic reforms that occurred in New Zealand in the 1980's (such as privatisation) dramatically altered the landscape of the labour market, creating a situation where "contemporary labour market entry for youth is far riskier, with the options facing young people more numerous and diverse than for previous generations" (Leggatt-Cook, 2005, p. 5). However, despite these apparent 'options', young school and university leavers are often presented with the immediate hurdle of the 'work experience paradox' (Perrone & Vickers, 2003) - the need to already *have* experience to *get* experience. In recent years, employers have increasingly expected to see experience in addition to qualifications in young job seekers. Browsing graduate opportunities on New Zealand's largest job-site 'SEEK' (www.seek.co.nz) reveals job advertisements such as 'Graduate Electrical Engineer – 2 Years Experience'.

An Australian case study by Perrone and Vickers (2003), found that these inflated expectations and the setback of the 'work experience paradox' could make life after graduation a "very uncomfortable world" and a "low time", plagued with feelings of uncertainty. Perrone and Vickers (2003) suggest that many graduates experience considerable 'culture shock' after leaving university and finding the world of work is not as they were led to believe. While their in-depth interviews with the sole participant in the case study provide rich accounts of the graduate experience in a country similar to New Zealand, further studies which involve a broader sample of participants are needed, in order to provide greater insight into such issues.

Similar feelings and difficulties were uncovered in a qualitative study by Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck and Holmes (2002) on the process of occupational decision-making during the transition to adulthood. Participants descriptions of their experiences encompassed several themes; many were grappling with 'unfulfilled expectations', not

being where they thought they would be in their career several years after education, and feeling that it was now 'too late' to fulfil their initial dreams. However, they also showed some relief for having an extended 'moratorium', buffering them from serious decisions and the responsibilities of adulthood. Mentors and friends were considered the most useful forms of support in their occupational decision-making, while career counsellors were perceived to be of limited assistance. For some, their initial dreams were found to be less accessible than they had anticipated, with finances and the cost of education cited as the main obstacles impacting upon their occupational goals and decisions. It thus appears that emerging adults often do not experience their early working years as the exciting, fulfilling time they had geared themselves up for.

While the transition to adulthood in both a psychological and role sense may be being increasingly drawn out, the major change from school to work may be experienced as rather dramatic and unsettling. In discussing the difficulties experienced by many of the recently employed graduates in their study, Graham and McKenzie (1995) evoke the concept of 'Future shock' (presented by Alvin Toffler in 1970), which is described as "the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a period of time" (Toffler, 1970, p. 12). They argue that the school-to-work transition is characterised by numerous small but significant changes which multiply together to create a strong sense of upheaval and insecurity (Graham & McKenzie, 1995). Furthermore, it may coincide with other changes occurring across the broader spectrum of one's life at this stage, which could combine to create cumulative uncertainty and potentially feelings of 'crisis'.

The crux of this shock may lie in the fact that the working world provides notably less of the security, support, and structure that they had become accustomed to during their years in education. Research by Polach (2004) uncovered three key differences between educational and work settings, as experienced by young people who had recently begun their working lives. These include: the *structure*, the *social environment*, and *feedback* (Polach, 2004). After coming from the highly structured educational environment, the participants in Polach's (2004) study found there was much to learn in the work environment, but very little structure was provided to help

them in this endeavour, creating stress and frustration for them through being largely left to their own devices. They had also discovered that establishing friendships in the workplace (a main source of social contact for graduates, particularly those who have moved to a new city for their first job) was very different from the social havens of high school or college, requiring a much more proactive approach. Friendship was perceived as an important part of their transition to working life, a key priority for them to feel settled and comfortable in their new environment. Another challenging difference was the lack of feedback in their new role. This was quite a shock for them, coming from an environment where feedback tends to be regular and explicit (in the form of grades), and expectations are clearly outlined. Participants therefore felt uncertain about what was expected of them and how they were performing (Polach, 2004). This is an issue recognised also by Levine (2005, p. 56) in his comment, "In school, students are the recipients – whether they like it or not - of a steady tide of candid feedback...In contrast, early in a career, a person may come to the panic-inducing realization that he really does not know how he's doing."

The 'Work-life unreadiness' of 'Startup adults'

Despite young people generally spending greater time in the preparatory process of education and the 'moratorium' of exploration, it seems they may actually be *less* ready for adulthood than ever. In an interesting and in-depth account of the transition of young people into the world of work, Levine (2005) suggests that today's generation of young people are afflicted by '*work-life unreadiness*', hampering their transition through what he refers to as their '*startup years*', and varying "from just a few years to a decade or more of uncertainty and justified anguish" (Levine, 2005, p. 4). Drawing from the work of Arnett (2004) and others, Levine (2005) argues that there is presently a mismatch between how this generation of young people have been socialised and prepared for their adult lives. In his aptly named book '*Ready or not, here life comes*', Levine (2005) shares insights from several decades working with young people through their schooling years and beyond as a paediatrician and learning expert. From his observations, "Adulthood has ambushed them; its demands have taken them by surprise" (Levine, 2005, p. 5).

Whilst the way in which many members of this generation have been conditioned may have been intended to rectify difficulties of previous generations, it appears to have created a new set in their place. Some of the aspects that Levine (2005) suggests have been instrumental in creating the 'unreadiness' of this generation include: the tendency to encourage students to be 'well-rounded', to provide a consistent stream of entertainment and 'instant gratification', to over-protect them from adversity, and to over-idolise their achievements. Those who may be set up for the toughest transition may be those who were the most well-rounded, celebrated and successful students in high school, who do not learn to cope with setbacks or feelings of inadequacy, and find it difficult to commit to a specialised area of employment (Levine, 2005).

In many Western societies over the past decade there has been an increasing emphasis on constant streams of stimulation and 'instant gratification' (whereby satellite television, X-Box/Playstation and i-Pods can keep young people passively entertained at all times), and on rewarding 'participation' as much as 'success'. In light of this, the transition from school to work may represent the end of the 'party' and the 'free ride' for many emerging adults (Levine, 2005). There are few 'multi-choice' exams to bluff one's way through in the workplace and immediate rewards are seldom, typically requiring hard-work, patience, and persistence. Those who have been consistently pandered to while growing up may bring a strong sense of entitlement with them to the workplace; Levine (2005, p. 46) writes:

"A child who has been overindulged at home and made an icon in school runs the risk of feeling that the world owes him something. As a startup adult he will indeed be a fallen idol in a state of shock, as his boss and fellow workers fail to respond to his sense of entitlement."

In a response to such 'unreadiness', many young people may seek to delay their entry into the working world, often by staying in education longer. When faced with an uncertain labour market and a multitude of options, extending education provides an opportunity for them to 'buy some more time' in preparing for the transition, sometimes falling into the role of a 'permastudent' (Fox, 2005) reluctant to let go of

their halcyon student days. However, prolonged education can be costly. Aside from the obvious financial costs of tuition fees, it may also result in “ambiguous dependency” on parents and the structured comfort of educational institutions (Leggatt-Cook, 2005), that can conflict with a time of life where independence and agency are often sought (Arnett, 2001; Erikson, 1963; Levinson, 1978). The trend towards increased education may also create a vicious cycle. More extensive education fuels the need for more people to pursue more extensive education, encouraging the whole cycle over again (Leggatt-Cook, 2005). Ultimately, it may also fail to have the expected effect, resulting in “a generation of young people who are over-qualified and over ambitious” (Leggatt-Cook, 2005, p. 6), with the framing of education as an ‘investment’ seen as encouraging over-zealous expectations of employability and financial rewards (Roberts, 2004).

It is clear that in many respects emerging adults are not getting the ‘startup’ to life that they need to thrive and prosper. The importance of an effective transition through these years should not be underestimated, with potential implications for the rest of one’s life (Levine, 2005; Wiesner, Vondracek, Capaldi, & Porfeli, 2003). As Wiesner et al (2003, p. 152) emphasise, “Entering the labor force marks a central transition in the lives of many young adults, and failure in this transition often has both negative financial and psychosocial outcomes.”

Policies guiding the transition to adulthood

In light of such evidence that the transition to adulthood is stretching out further and further, one would expect that society would have begun to pick up on this and revised its provisions and policies accordingly. However, Higgins (2002) and Smithies and Bidrose (2000) argue that a lack of knowledge and conceptualisation of the nature of the transition to adulthood in New Zealand has hindered the development of effective policies regarding this transition. Some existing policies seem to proliferate the increasingly drawn out nature of the transition to adulthood, such as student allowances policy which stipulates that young students are the financial responsibility of their parents until age 25; while those that *have* been revised in recent years have tended to be in the direction of giving increased responsibility at a *younger* age, such

as lowering the drinking age from 20 to 18 in 1999. If emerging adults are increasingly 'unready' for adulthood, and typically do not enter full-time employment until age 21 or 22, the question must also be asked whether they are ready for the responsibilities such laws proffer. The perception of people aged 18-25 as independent 'young adults' capable of making tough choices and seizing (or even creating) opportunities runs counter to the emergent trends. As Vaughan (2005, p. 184) highlights, "The paradox is that the current stress on youth independent choice and opportunities comes at a time of greater dependence on parents, the education system (particularly qualifications) and a welfare system." In many ways, it seems society is telling emerging adults that they 'should have grown up by now', yet psychologically, emotionally, and financially it appears that many are not quite there yet.

Much of the transitions policies surrounding the transition from high school to employment are considerably outdated (based on policy reforms of the 1980s) and do not account for the more complex nature of transitions and choice-making in the 21st century (J. Higgins, 2002). Higgins (2002) highlights the urgent need for greater understanding of how the transition is experienced by young New Zealanders, including mechanisms they find helpful (and unhelpful) in the process. As she suggests, it is time policy makers started "taking them and their lives into serious account" (J. Higgins, 2002, p. 57).

CHAPTER 3 – KEY CONCERNS OF THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD FOR TODAY'S EMERGING ADULTS

This chapter discusses some of the key concerns or challenges that individuals grapple with in their emerging adulthood years. It is a period of life where they are expected to make sense of everything at once (Robbins & Wilner, 2001); where they have to make difficult choices and decisions about their life, choose and establish a career, and learn to manage their finances; where they are encouraged to broaden their horizons through overseas travel, where relationships with friends and family change and romantic relationships become more important. Overarching these choices and challenges is the emerging adult's quest to find 'who they are' and what they want in each of these spheres.

1 – Making sense of choices

One of the key reasons that the transition to adulthood may have become increasingly complicated is that the process of making choices (one of the major features of the emerging adulthood years) has become almost impossibly complex. As a result of greater freedom and possibilities enabled through a prolonged period of 'commitment free' emerging adulthood as well as a globalised range of options, young people in Westernised societies such as New Zealand have a greater range of choice than ever before. Instead of encountering 'forks in the road' or 'crossroads' with only several paths to choose from, today's emerging adults are faced with what is more accurately described as a 'labyrinth', a web of choices which extends to an additional web of choices and so on.

While choice is generally celebrated as positive and empowering, it comes at a cost. In *The Paradox of Choice: Why more is less*, Schwartz (2004) argues that while the proliferation of choice in Westernised societies has *objectively* improved the quality of our lives, we are no better off (perhaps worse) *subjectively*. He pinpoints the tendency to seek only 'the best', concern about opportunities missed, regret, adaptation, comparison, and expectations as powerful forces sapping the satisfaction we derive

from our choices. Schwartz (2004) contends that those likely to experience most difficulty in dealing with the vast choice afforded in today's society are those Simon (1955, 1956) labelled '*maximizers*'. With such a great range of options, Schwartz (2004) claims that people become consumed by the desire to choose 'the best' - to become '*maximizers*' in their choices. However, maximising is becoming increasingly arduous and dissatisfying. Instead, Simon (1955, 1956), recommends that people become '*satisficers*', settling for 'good enough' instead of 'the best'. In contrast to Schwartz's 'maximising' perspective of decision making tendencies in the early 21st century (Schwartz, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2002), Simon's 1950's view was that 'satisficing' was the predominant, innate tendency. This indicates how people's approach to choice and decision-making may have evolved over the past 50 years with the 'choice boom'.

As much as we typically wish to avoid risks and losses ('sunk costs') in our decisions, all decisions we make inevitably involve some form of *trade-offs* or '*opportunity costs*' (Galotti, 2002; Schwartz, 2004). When researching and comparing multiple options to a decision, usually each option will have some attractive qualities but not others. The bigger the range of options, the bigger the list of attractive features among them, and in deciding upon only one means losing the individual attractions of the options rejected (Schwartz, 2004). Research suggests that having to deal with trade-offs tends to make people unhappy and indecisive in their decision making attempts (Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1993; Tversky, 1972), with the fear of missing out on a 'good thing' producing "not just dissatisfaction but paralysis" (Schwartz, 2004, p. 128). There is some indication that 'opportunity costs' are a salient issue among young people trying to make their first major life decisions (Vaughan, 2005).

Even if we do commit ourselves to a decision that we are very happy with initially, the inherent process of *adaptation* can lead this happiness to wear off over time. Psychologists suggest that we adapt to pleasure and levels of satisfaction but still continue to actively pursue these, in the form of '*hedonic treadmills*' and '*satisfaction treadmills*' (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Kahneman, 1999). There is also a tendency for us to subject our choices and decisions to rather intense scrutiny. We compare them to our hopes, expectations, previous experiences, and other people around us

(Schwartz, 2004), frequently finding 'gaps' between our decision outcome and these comparisons (Michalos, 1986).

The 'luxury' of choice that emerging adults have in the twenty-first century is accompanied with a pressure to make the 'right' ones. Presented with an abundance of choice, the responsibility is positioned predominantly on ourselves; to make a bad choice becomes a failure to choose effectively on our behalf, rather than due to situational constraints (Schwartz, 2004). In a society filled with choice, the individual is positioned as the self-determining 'master of their own fate'. Success and happiness are implicitly assumed to be equally available to those who are prepared to 'make something of themselves', as socio-structural barriers are rejected in favour of agentic will and determination (Leggatt-Cook, 2005). The onus therefore lies within the young person themselves to find their own path to success and happiness. However, young people encountering this plethora of choice in their transition to adulthood may be unprepared, both mentally and emotionally, for the onslaught of options that lay before them. The structure and shelter provided by educational institutions and parental intervention may have protected them from difficult decisions (Levine, 2005), and left them unsure of how to approach the decision-making process. In order to be adequately prepared for the decisions encountered during emerging adulthood, it is argued that emerging adults need to have developed 'adolescent planful competence' (Clausen, 1991), which concerns thoughtful and rational thinking processes that aid decision-making. However, rather than adopting a planned approach, it seems this period has come to involve more of an emphasis on flexible yet conscious experimentation (Settersten et al., 2005).

Impacts of choice and consumerism on emerging adults

In modern Western societies, choice is increasingly tied up with consumerist ideology and young people have come to embrace consumerism in multiple areas of their lives. Essentially 'born to consume' (Sassatelli, 2007), they grew up with consumerism as an underlying focus, targeted by advertisers who commercialised their childhoods, and were often pandered to by parents who, reflecting on their baby boomer childhoods, wanted them to 'have the things that they never had' (Martens, Southerton, & Scott,

2004). Fox (2005) explored the concept of the quarter-life crisis and the life skills required in 'the age of eBay'. She found that the actions and descriptions given by the young adults of what they were doing in their transition to adulthood evoked strong consumerist themes, of "life shopping" in search of 'perfection'. Consistent with the experimental approach that characterises 'adulthood', the participants were seen to be 'trying on' different jobs, relationships, and lifestyles to find the 'perfect fit' for them, reasoning that faced with such a vast amount of choice they should not 'settle' for less (Fox, 2005). As one of the participants in the study explained, "I think people are more 'consumer' about everything now: I'm 'consumer' in my job, I'm 'consumer' in my marriage, I'm 'consumer' in my relationships – and if it's not going well for me and not suiting MY needs, then I'm outta here!" (Fox, 2005, p. 20). Fox (2005) argues that the generation's apparent restlessness and reluctance to commit to anything prematurely is more purposeful than typically perceived, emphasising the distinction between 'hopping' and 'shopping'. She claims that, rather than moving reflexively from job-to-job, partner-to-partner, they are actively trialling them to see if they fit with their (high) expectations. However, whilst Fox (2005) endorses 'life-shopping' as a natural and positive thing, there is irony in her suggestion that it may be linked to the experience of the quarter-life crisis.

This linkage may be due to the fact that, almost by definition, consumerist mentality invokes a sense of 'temporariness' to choices, where people are happy to buy into the latest trends or fad and act according to their whims, despite the knowledge that something better will most likely come along further down the track to supersede the choice of this moment (Bauman, 2001). It seems plausible that this may encourage a precarious mindset in some emerging adults through their exploratory 'life shopping', based around a false sense of security that "no decision is final, that none has irreversible consequences, that each one can be safely taken since, like all other decisions, it will bind the decision-maker only 'until further notice'" (Bauman, 2001, p. 25). One may speculate that the quarter-life crisis may emerge from the realisation that this isn't always the case in life, and that there is no 'consumer guarantee' in choosing a career or life partner.

Perhaps the greatest pitfall of the vast amount of choice and a culture of consumerism that has raised today's young people, is the overwhelming possibilities that lay before them and the subsequent difficulty on deciding upon a particular course of action. While trivial everyday choices such as what shirt to wear, what bread to eat, what to listen to on one's i-Pod, and what to do on the coming Saturday night can be challenging enough in a choice-saturated world; bigger decisions such as what to actually do with your life can be overwhelming. Decisions such as what field you want to work in, whether to take or leave a particular job, whether to stay in a relationship or search for 'what else is out there', and where to live (when anywhere in the world is possible) can be anxiety-provoking, overarched by the fear that these decisions will affect 'the rest of one's life' and that if a wrong path is taken it may be difficult to find one's way back.

2 – Making sense of careers

One of the first major choices (and arguably one of the most critical) a young person will make typically concerns their career. Once upon a time choosing a career was a fairly straightforward case of picking from a finite range of options that conformed to class and gender stereotypes. In contrast, New Zealand's national Career Services website (www.careerservices.govt.nz), a popular resource for young people, currently lists over 700 occupations from 'A La Carte Short Order Chef' to 'Zoo Educator'. Such a vast number of options makes choosing what to do with your life an increasingly difficult task.

The process of choosing a career begins earnestly, with 'all-important' subject selections at school typically beginning in Year 9 or 10 with the intention of beginning to chart out their future career direction. From there, they have to decide what type of occupation they would like to pursue, whether to go on to tertiary education or not; and if so, which courses to take, as well as which tertiary institution of numerous to go to; not necessarily occurring in that order. It is a very complex decision, most often made with limited knowledge of occupations and where they would 'fit' best. As Levine (2005, p. 85-86) explains, "Deciding what to do with your life requires assembling a puzzle from lots of odd-shaped pieces. First of all, a person has to decide

to decide. I've known kids who opt out of this decision making." As this section will discuss, young people frequently take an exploratory, 'consumer' type approach to making such decisions, sometimes picking at random, sometimes following the 'norm', and sometimes shying away from making a decision altogether.

A study by Vaughan (2005) presents an interesting picture of ways in which young New Zealanders make their educational and employment decisions. Interviewing 17-18 year olds who had just started in an employment or education option, Vaughan found that many of the young people were engaging in the consumer-oriented 'job shopping' strategy, preferring to experiment rather than to worry about 'settling down'.

Consistent with Mackay's (1997) characterisation of an 'options generation' who "tend to remain non-committal for as long as they can before adopting short-term goals and temporary solutions" (Vaughan, 2005, p. 180), participants' decisions tended to occur '*just in time*' and '*just in case*'. It appeared that there was an element of 'happenstance' for some, while others who had taken a more planful approach were led to question their choices or second-guess options previously discarded; as Vaughan (2005, p. 175) explains: "Some young people who carefully planned their choices were still quite ambivalent about them. Some of the others who had seized an unexpected opportunity or 'fallen' into something reporting surprised enthusiasm for their choice or for having made a choice at all." These findings suggest that young people often lack confidence in making career decisions. It appears they are often not confident enough to make a commitment until they feel pressured to, or are prone to second-guess the decisions they have made.

Upon leaving high school, pursuing further education is a salient, apparently logical next step. As mentioned previously, the value of education has been increasingly emphasised over recent years. With unskilled labour becoming more and more marginalised and companies shifting operations offshore to developing countries in search of reduced costs, the need has arisen for young people to undertake higher-level education in pursuit of more skilled occupations (Arnett, 2007; Leggatt-Cook, 2005). As a result, education has become an 'investment' believed to result in better jobs with better pay. Objectifying education in this way has positioned it as a consumer

decision, like any tangible commodity (Leggatt-Cook, 2005; Schwartz, 2004). Schwartz argues that people effectively 'shop for knowledge' in a form of 'intellectual shopping mall':

"Today, the modern institution of higher learning offers a wide array of different "goods" and allows, even encourages, students – the "customers"- to shop around until they find what they like...But this freedom may come at a price. Now students are required to make choices at a point in their intellectual development when they may lack the resources to make them intelligently." (2004, p. 14-17).

This freedom can also lead them to decide not to decide. Vaughan (2005, p. 180) notes that "sometimes young people's response to such high level, consumer-based, individual decision-making is to deliberately postpone the development of career and/or work identities", which may serve as a form of 'coping strategy' (du Bois-Reymond, 1998). The idea that university education can act as a mechanism to delay making difficult choices and decisions is increasingly gaining support. In a study of university graduates by Mortimer and colleagues (2002), many participants described their current work situation as 'occurring by default or random luck'. They found that young people felt encouraged to "focus on getting into college...like an extension of high school" rather than to make 'specific career decisions' (Mortimer et al., 2002, p. 451), while Vaughan (2005, p. 181) referred to the possibility that "tertiary institutions, particularly universities, may provide opportunities for young people to be 'aimless' or postpone commitment to a particular pathway". A participant in the case study by Perrone and Vickers (2003) provides a compelling example of this in his comment:

"I've never really had to decide anything before. I've never really had to take that much of an interest in my own direction...I mean choosing a university degree can be a decision. I mean, I just put it off and did commerce. You can do anything with a commerce degree. It's a "wonderful" thing." (p.73).

In many senses it seems that University has become more of a 'rite of passage', an experience or an end in itself. There are many people who seem to go to university for the sake of 'going to university'. Some appear to find it so difficult to detach from the familiar structure of university institutions that they become 'permastudents' (Fox,

2005), taking course after course, degree after degree; either seeking as broad an education as possible, or lacking confidence in their educational decisions to date and their ability to make the 'right' decision going forward, to the point where they can't make a decision. This is illuminated in a comment by Levine (2005, p. 48-49):

“Work-life during the startup years can feel tightly confining compared to schoolwork in high school or even college. Formal education is like a gala buffet banquet: You can have it all! Whenever they feel vaguely bored, teenagers can switch nearly instantaneously to a new channel of excitement...Then, wrenchingly, in their 20s they have to make agonizing decisions...The buffet is finished; faced with an unlimited menu, these emerging adults are forced to pick only a few items.”

However, it should be emphasised that not all people may have access to this 'investment' or 'buffet'. In their American study of occupational decision-making during the transition to adulthood, Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck and Holmes (2002) found that a lack of resources for attending higher education was frequently cited as an obstacle. New Zealand has a relatively liberal student loan system (with many students arguably having a liberal attitude towards them, seeing loans as part and parcel of the student experience), perhaps presenting less of an obstacle in this country. However, the rising cost of living for students who have left home often necessitates significant part-time work, which undoubtedly acts as a deterrent for some.

Career development – then and now

So how does this explorational, non-committal strategy fit with existing theories about the career development of emerging adults? Largely, it doesn't. Much of the thinking about career development has been guided by Super's (1980, 1990) 'Life span-Life space' theory, based on an integration of career and development theories. In this approach, Super examined life and career stages in the 'Life-Career Rainbow' model (Super, 1980, 1990).

The occupational development stages across the life span which comprise the life-career rainbow include: 1) *Growth* (approximate age 5-10); 2) *Exploration* (approx age

10-20); 3) *Establishment* (approx age 20-30); 4) *Maintenance* (approx age 30-55); and finally 5) *Decline* (approx age 55+). According to Super's (1980, 1990) conceptualisation, emerging adults are expected to have completed the exploratory stage whereby career choices have been narrowed and selected, and should now find themselves engaged in the establishment stage. In the establishment stage during their twenties, the emerging adult should have now stabilised themselves in a job and organisation, and have ideally even begun working their way up the organisational hierarchy (Super, 1980, 1990).

Like the life stage models of Erikson (1963) and Levinson (1978), Super's career development theory has lost relevance as the transition to adulthood has shifted and the traditional hierarchical career path eroded. In recent years, Super's life span model has been criticised for its linearity, as "vocational choice for both men and women frequently does not follow such an orderly path" (Kroger, 2007, p.152). Hence, the model is considered increasingly outdated by the cyclical nature of modern careers. However, associates of Super (Osborne, Brown, Niles, & Usher Miner, 1997) have attempted to address this somewhat by emphasising that the ages at which each stage was presented on the rainbow are 'approximate', and that indeed people can cycle through the stages and roles as they undergo various life and job/occupation changes.

Whilst established career theories may still be based loosely on the notion of the 'organisational career' where the focus was on working ones way up in a company, with their loyalty rewarded by job security, Generation Y have to grapple with a new form of careers – the '*boundaryless career*' (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Boundaryless careers rewrite (or even discard) the rules of how careers are managed by individuals and organisations. In stark contrast to the old model of linearity, a person's career is no longer confined to a 'job for life' in one organisation, instead crossing intra-organisational, inter-organisational, international and even occupational boundaries (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). They have become more varied and less predictable, whereby volatile market demands have created a climate of uncertainty and made resilience, adaptability and an ability to improvise essential career competencies (Arthur et al., 1999). Many of those in Generation Y witnessed

their parents displaced from long-held jobs during industrial and economic changes such as mergers, acquisitions and downsizing of the 1980s and have learned that there are no longer guarantees of job security, and that responsibility for their career rests firmly with them (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

Career 'Pathways' in Contemporary New Zealand

In an attempt to provide some sense of direction in early career development, current New Zealand social and educational policy espouses a 'pathways framework' for career development, whilst acknowledging that a 'one size fits all' approach does not work for many young people. This framework aims to promote a variety of different options which cater to various different learning styles and aspirations, on the premise that each person can achieve success and satisfaction if they pursue the most appropriate path for them (Vaughan, 2005). Despite the idealism the pathways framework may intend, it is criticised for its tendency to still be determined by educational institutions and its allusion to linearity in career development at this stage, which is seen as being more erratic in practice (Inkson, 2002) for a generation where 'job hopping' or 'job shopping' have become commonplace (Fox, 2005).

In perhaps the most enlightening study to date examining the career transitions of young people in New Zealand in the early 21st century, the 'Pathways and Prospects' study of Vaughan, Roberts & Gardiner (2006) looked at how young people experienced their transition through the pathways framework (including modern apprenticeships, the New Zealand defence forces, polytechnic courses, university degree programmes, university bridging programmes, and youth training courses). Vaughan et al (2006) found participants' pathway experiences fell into four categories: 1) '*Passion Honers*' (34% of sample) who expressed satisfaction and commitment for their pathway; 2) '*Confident Explorers*' (29% of sample) who felt self-assured in their abilities and that these would inevitably help them to find a suitable path; 3) '*Hopeful Reactors*' (14% of their sample) who pursued a sense of 'contingent security' based more around what they *didn't* want than what they *did* want; and 4) '*Anxious Seekers*' (24% of sample) who doubted their current pathway and were anxiously exploring other options.

While the study of Vaughan et al (2006) suggests that the majority of young New Zealanders find pathways that they are happy and confident in (Passion Honers and Confident Explorers), or at least confident in (Hopeful Reactors), it appears that a significant proportion are experiencing difficulty. It is interesting to note that those who showed the greatest level of satisfaction with their pathway, the Passion Honers, were predominantly those in defence force careers. Presumably, such careers have a greater degree of structure, security, and therefore *clarity* than other pathway options. Such clarity may effectively close off other options in one's mind, resulting in a 'satisficing' (Schwartz, 2004) approach which could foster a greater sense of satisfaction in their choice, compared to the apparent 'maximising' strategy of Anxious Seekers (Schwartz, 2004; Vaughan et al., 2006). While Vaughan et al's (2006) study did not account for the participants experiences after the completion of their respective educational pathways, one could speculate that a 'quarter-life crisis' may arise from the inability of Anxious Seekers to rectify the uncertainty they experienced during their initial pathway years and attain the 'maximisation' they sought. 'Anxious Seeking' behaviour might also extend beyond the careers sphere, with difficulty perhaps flowing either from or to other areas of their life. Although Anxious Seekers seem the most likely candidates for a quarter-life crisis, it is also plausible that the similar lack of direction observed in the comparatively optimistic 'Confident Explorers' could result in difficulties once the educational structure guiding their pathway is removed; while the 'Hopeful Reactors' lack of engagement may either lead to 'satisficing' with their chosen pathway or to disillusionment once the novelty of merely finding a pathway wears off.

While notions of boundaryless careers and 'self-directed' pathways may present a greater range of choice in theory, this may not always transpire in practice. Some evidence suggests that these 'pathways' may be more prescribed than they imply, potentially resulting from subtle but ingrained socio-structural forces. A study by Lehmann (2004) indicates that while structural changes may *appear* to have created more egalitarian and individualised transitions, there is still a tendency for young adults to predominantly follow in the occupational footsteps of their parents and to conform to gender stereotypes. Lehmann (2004) found that those whose parents were from well-educated 'white collar' families tend to follow 'academic-tracks' of higher

education to reproduce careers similar to their parents, while those who were from more manual, 'blue collar' backgrounds tend to go down the practical, apprentice route. Choosing to go to university appears to be perceived as more risky and uncertain for those from lower SES or less intellectually-oriented family backgrounds, compared to those from middle-class, well-educated family backgrounds. These findings suggest that although young people tend to *perceive* their chosen paths as informed and agentic rather than predetermined, there is a tendency for them to reproduce the occupational paths and social positions of their family (Lehmann, 2004).

3 – Making sense of finances

Learning how to manage one's finances and beginning to build up a savings base have traditionally been important focuses of the transition to adulthood. However, research and statistics emerging for this age group suggest that Generation Y is experiencing considerable difficulty in this task.

In today's digital world, money has taken on a more abstract or theoretical appearance rather than being a physical object. The common practice of having multiple bank accounts, credit cards, finance agreements and 'pay as you go' options, makes individual finances increasingly difficult to monitor, and reports and statistics from financial institutions and studies indicate that young New Zealanders, like other emerging adults in Western societies around the world (Kamenetz, 2006), are finding themselves in serious debt. A survey by Veda Advantage (New Zealand's largest credit information provider) in March 2007, found that people in Generation Y aged 18-27 (also known as 'Generation Debt', Kamenetz, 2006) accounted for a third of all loan defaults listed with the credit information agency in 2007 (a 33 percent increase from the previous year). 15 percent of these loan defaults were found to be for basic expenses such as telephone and utility bills. A report in the Herald on Sunday newspaper, titled '*Our bankrupt youth*' (Slade, 2007), describes the generation as "financially illiterate", indicating that people in the 20 to 29-year-old age group represent the greatest rise in bankruptcies over the past three years.

This situation may be aggravated by the fact that many young New Zealanders enter the working world accompanied by debt. Those that aim to get ahead by 'investing' in education frequently find themselves faced with hefty loans. A recent article in the New Zealand Herald (NZPA, 2008) cites a study by one of New Zealand's largest independent research consultancies, TNS Conversa, which found that average student debt (including debt from student loans, bank overdrafts, personal bank loans, loans from parents and family, credit card and other loans such as hire purchases) sits at \$28,838, a rise of 54 percent from 2004 figures. Rises in tuition fees and general living costs are cited as major contributors to this increase.

It seems that easy access to credit and the commonality of large student loans may serve to desensitise emerging adults to debt, with the false sense of security in starting work and consumerist pressures encouraging them to adorn their new working lifestyle and image with material goods that reflect their change in status from 'poor student' to upwardly mobile 'young professional'. The desire of commercial institutions and indeed wider society to make it easier to get what one wants, at least in a material sense, has exacerbated the issue. Credit cards, bank loans, 'interest free' and hire-purchase arrangements encourage a 'why wait when you can have it now?' mentality, something this 'want it now' generation readily embraces in their desire for "instant gratification" (Levine, 2005). Levine (2005) argues that through modern technology, toys and media, young people have come to anticipate immediate gratification and rewards. Essentially, they haven't learned to exercise patience in waiting until they physically have the money.

While the great 'Kiwi dream' of home ownership is proving increasingly difficult for most New Zealanders, it may be virtually unthinkable for those just starting out in the adult world. With fixed interest rates nearing 10 percent per annum at the time of this study, and talk of a "housing affordability crisis", there were suggestions that there may be "a generation of angry young Kiwis unable to ever afford a home" (Jacobson, 2007). A survey on housing affordability indicated that paying a mortgage on a median-priced house (with a national median of \$351,000) would require 80 percent of an average person's income, up from 43.2 percent four years earlier (Jacobson, 2007).

While financial pressures may be felt at all stages of adult life, the generation of young consumers who enter the world already in debt may take years to establish any traction.

4 – Making sense of the world

Instead of focusing on getting a good job, setting oneself up financially, and settling down with marriage and children, many emerging adults now seek the opposite of settling down by choosing to go travelling.

Travel has come to have increasing significance for young New Zealanders, forming perhaps the most prominent pastime of the 18 to 28 age group. The well-regarded tradition of the “Big O.E.” (‘Overseas Experience’) is long acclaimed as a ‘rite of passage’ for young antipodeans. Although young people across the world are increasingly giving themselves ‘an early sabbatical’ to travel and seek out new experiences (Settersten et al., 2005), the ‘Big O.E.’ (predominantly to the U.K) has become such an institution in New Zealand culture and the psyche of young kiwis, that travel may have unique meaning and significance for emerging adults in this country. Explanations for going on an O.E are not expected as it tends to be ‘the done thing’. According to Bell (2002, p. 144), “As a cultural institution, O.E is a life stage that ranks with leaving school, getting a degree, the first job, or getting married”.

The O.E typically occurs for young New Zealanders in their early twenties, after the completion of their education, and with perhaps a short time (1 to 2 years) working in order to save sufficient funds for their trip. This contrasts with the original career theory of (Super, 1957) which sees this period as the time to move on from exploration into focused career establishment. As with other areas of life discussed so far, exploration instead forms an integral focus of the O.E, often as a conscious desire to *move away from* premature ‘establishment’ or ‘settling down’ (Bell, 2002). Many prefer to keep their options open, with minimal planning of their time overseas, tending to adopt a more improvisational approach (Inkson & Myers, 2003).

In a study of 50 O.E returnees by Inkson and Myers (2003), many motives for undertaking the O.E were mentioned, the most frequent being: for exploration, social attractions, to 'escape'/needing a break, based on long-held intentions, and timing ('felt like the right time to go'). Career opportunities and career development received little mention. From New Zealand's geographic and cultural isolation and exposure to 'tasters' of other countries through the media, it seems natural for young kiwis to develop an urge to go exploring and 'see the world'. In addition to it being a journey to gain knowledge about the world outside, it may also act as a journey to gain knowledge about the self within. It could be that finding oneself in the midst of something akin to a 'quarter-life crisis' serves as a driving factor for some. Emerging adults who are having difficulty finding direction may embark on O.E's as a personal quest to 'find themselves', or to extend their 'moratorium' from making difficult life decisions (Bell, 2002; Inkson & Myers, 2003). It can also be used to break away from boredom or an unhappy work situation, repay hefty student loans, or may be instigated by a relationship break-up (Inkson & Myers, 2003). As members of one's social group start to embark on their O.E's, it may also have a flow-on effect, with the exodus of friends potentially providing a strong incentive to join them.

Participants in Inkson and Myers (2003) study reported that their O.E was a positive experience, indicating that "they had experienced major changes, universally in a positive direction" (p.178). Their enjoyment of their time abroad often led them to extend their O.E for several years longer than originally intended (to approx 3.65 years on average) (Inkson & Myers, 2003). Many therefore spend a large chunk of their emerging adulthood in a foreign country. Although few O.E travellers have career development as a primary motive for the experience, being quite happy to explore different working options, it appears that career development can happen inadvertently in the process. Through their overseas working experiences, individuals often accumulate self-insight, communication and interpersonal skills, adaptability, self-confidence and broader thinking skills. These attributes are referred to as cultural and career 'capital', increasing their potential value to employers (Inkson & Myers, 2003).

Once they have had a taste of the opportunities available in larger economies such as the U.K, some O.E's become permanent migrations. In their work on 'talent flow' (considered a more positive frame of reference than 'the brain drain'), Inkson et al (2004) and Jackson et al (2005) examined factors that either encourage individuals overseas ('push') or encourage them to remain in/return to New Zealand ('pull'). They surveyed 2201 New Zealanders who were currently abroad on O.E's or had migrated permanently (primarily in the U.K and Australia), to see what influenced them and their attraction towards New Zealand or away from it. The top 5 'push' factors identified by participants were: 1) Salaries; 2) Career opportunities; 3) Business opportunities; 4) Challenge; and 5) Cultural opportunities; while the top 5 'pull' factors included: 1) Parents/older relations; 2) Bringing up children; 3) Being close to relatives; 4) Safety and security; and 5) Lifestyle. Furthermore, the top two 'push' factors were rated of significantly greater influence than any of the other factors ('push' or 'pull'). The two lists read almost like complete opposites, and although New Zealand appears to be viewed as a safe and serene and family-friendly environment, this may not be enough to hold onto ambitious, achievement-oriented individuals who see greater potential for achieving the media promoted 'ideal' of success, status, and money. With relentless exposure to such ideals and the wider world of opportunities, young New Zealanders may find themselves increasingly faced with the difficult question of whether to trade-off lifestyle and proximity to family for career and financial gain, a major decision with potentially lifelong ramifications.

5 – Making sense of relationships

The emerging adulthood years are perhaps more susceptible to changing relationships than any other time of life. Family relationships are altered as emerging adults become more independent; previously stable, long-standing friendships may be divided as social groups begin to dissipate and move away through overseas travel or relocations for employment, and in their place new friendships and romantic relationships may be formed and cultivated.

5.1 - Friendship

As often observed, relationships are of great priority during the emerging adult years, with friendships serving as a key source of life satisfaction, particularly for those who are single (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998). Although perhaps not so often explicitly acknowledged as a core life goal, evidence suggests that “[b]eing connected to others seems to be much more important to subjective well-being than being rich” (Schwartz, 2004, p. 107). A study by Rose (1985) found that the friendships of young adults have seven key functions, providing: acceptance, help, loyalty, availability, recognition, intimacy, and companionship. Friends may have come to have increased significance for young people today through the tendency to delay settling down with a partner in marriage, fulfilling the omnipresent need for closeness throughout the emerging adulthood years (Arnett, 2004; Konstam, 2007). In the United States there has been a rise in what are referred to as ‘urban tribes’, groups of intensely close friends who take on the form of a ‘tribe’ in their solidarity, protectiveness, roles and rituals (Watters, 2006). In this life phase characterised by change and uncertainty, having a stable social network may be a valuable source of support in coping with challenges or ‘crises’ that may arise during this time.

Despite increased outlets for communicating with peers and maintaining existing relationships (such as SMS texting, email, and social networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace), establishing *new* friendships may be more complicated than it was for previous generations. While it was once the norm to have networks naturally resulting out of close communities and long-term working situations, we must now make more conscious, deliberate efforts to establish friendships; devoting time out of our increasingly hectic schedules to cultivate relationships (Lane, 2000). For emerging adults who are trying to focus on the establishment of a career, many may come to experience significant conflict between the expectations of building a career and meeting their social needs and commitments (Konstam, 2007; Lane, 2000).

Levine (2005) suggests that it may also be difficult for emerging adults to match the closeness they had with their school or university friends in establishing friendships after their schooling years. He believes that today’s young people tend to build

stronger bonds and alliances amongst their groups of school or university friends, and that while this may set them up to be good 'team players' in their working lives, their new relationships may not be as satisfactory as their old friendships. When long-term friends move away, it may also leave those who choose to stay behind (or have to) disengaged from their comfortable, established social networks. As the tradition of an O.E often results in a form of 'mass exodus' of young New Zealanders during their twenties, it is possible this makes maintaining relationships even more challenging for young antipodeans. Those who lose their friends to the O.E may therefore find themselves cut-off from the social network that is so important during this phase.

5.2 - Romantic relationships

Through the increased trend towards delaying marriage until the late twenties (on average), it appears common, even expected, for emerging adults to 'shop around' for romantic partners in the same consumer strategy they apply for choosing employment (Fox, 2005). Erikson's (1963) adolescent-stage objective of 'exploring' therefore characterises their approach to such relationships, as emerging adults try out different relationships in line with their developing identity. For most emerging adults from western societies there is no clear guideline of when the exploration of relationships *should* end. More common examples of alternatives to marriage may be more readily brought to mind; 'career men and women' in their thirties who may have chosen to focus on achievement in their field over marriage and children; fun-loving bachelors and bachelorettes that seek to stave off commitment and responsibility; couples in long-term de-facto relationships who don't consider marriage necessary; and increased acceptance of sexualities and family models that differ from the traditional 'husband, wife and two kids' norm. There is no longer 'one right way' of doing relationships or marriage, making the decision of 'if', 'when', 'why', and 'who' one should marry another of the major choices facing emerging adults. The paradox of these greater number of options is described in the following comment by Arnett (2004, p. 100):

"Emerging adults today have much greater freedom to decide for themselves when they should marry. The norms for what is considered the "right" age to marry have weakened...This is an important new freedom for emerging adults...However, like

the other freedoms of emerging adulthood, this new freedom comes with a cost. Instead of being able to follow a clear cultural norm for when to marry, now the responsibility for deciding when to marry is on the emerging adults themselves. And it may not be easy.”

Emerging adults may find themselves in a bit of a bind when it comes to making relationship decisions, which are possibly even more difficult than career decisions in their inclusion of strong feelings and emotions. To get married in one’s early twenties so soon after gaining their independence may induce anxiety about sacrificing their opportunity to focus on themselves and explore their options (Arnett, 2004); whereas letting go of, or not committing to, what seems like a good relationship (albeit with little means of comparison), may induce anxiety about potential regret for letting go of a ‘good thing’. As a compromise, cohabiting offers an alternative to marriage for those who feel strongly about their partner and ready for the intimacy and benefits of living together, yet need more time and experience to decide whether to be legally bound to their partner. Arnett (2004) and Sassler (2004) cite an increase in emerging adults taking advantage of the cohabiting option, with around two-thirds of emerging adults living with their partner before marriage.

Emerging adults romantic relationships may also be tainted by exposure to increasing rates of failed marriages and divorces, with various studies suggesting that emerging adults whose parents were divorced or appeared unhappy in their marriage are more likely to perceive romantic relationships as impermanent, as plagued by a lack of trust and fidelity, and as something to be cautious about (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Arnett, 2004; Buchanan, 2000; Weigel, 2007). Despite a shift away from romantic commitment, there is also evidence that an ‘age 30 marker’ still holds concern for emerging adults, particularly women who feel the pressure of their ‘biological clock’ and worry that if they are not married by thirty they may find themselves at risk of being ‘too late’ to have children (Arnett, 2004; Konstam, 2007).

5.3 – Family relationships

Young adults’ connections with their family are increasingly complex. The old pathway of: leave high school, leave home, start a family is no longer the common norm. Yet

another metaphor for the generation arises here – the ‘boomerang generation’ which refers to the tendency for young adults to alternate between periods of living away from the parental home and periods of returning, a cycle which many young adults tend to repeat several times over – even into their 30’s (Fox, 2005; Furman, 2005). As Settersten and colleagues (2005, p. 18) highlight, “families...are called on to bear an increasingly large burden of support....As the period of early adulthood becomes more protracted, the family is the primary institution that absorbs the costs of greater investment in the next generation.”

Whether an emerging adult lives with their parents or not can have a significant impact on their relationships with their immediate family. Research suggests that those who move out of home after completing their schooling have closer, more positive relationships with their family than those who remain at home during their emerging adulthood years (Arnett, 2004; Dubas & Petersen, 1996). Emerging adults who leave home ‘on time’ (i.e. soon after completing their schooling) are considered to be more psychologically healthy than those who still live with their parents (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006), however, the option of being able to come home intermittently when they hit a rough patch can also serve as a beneficial ‘safe haven’ for emerging adults to regroup and reassess before venturing out into the ‘real world’ again (Arnett, 2004).

Family matters such as divorce and quality of parenting can have a flow-on effect for individuals during their emerging adult years, impacting upon their personalities, identities, quality of personal relationships, educational performance, depression, and alcohol and drug use (Arnett, 2004; Buchanan, 2000; Dalton, 2006; Weigel, 2007). Emerging adults often report the divorce of their parents as a turning point in their relationships with their fathers in particular, typically a turn for the worse (Arnett, 2004). It is clear that family matters have a bearing on the transition to adulthood. It seems that secure attachment styles that do not inhibit independence yet provide unconditional support, having respect and positive attitudes towards one’s parents, and learning how to relate to each other in the changing family context are important elements of a smooth transition to adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). It is likely that emerging adults whose family relationships are characterised in this way may be less

likely to experience personal 'crises', or if they do, their relationship with their family may moderate its effects.

6 – Making sense of who they are

Overarching all of the concerns of the transition to adulthood that have been discussed so far in this chapter is the general quest to 'find oneself'. To deal with complex choices and decisions such as what career and relationships are right for them, how to manage their finances and whether to travel and where – one must have a sense of who they are and what is most important to them. Yet the sheer number of choices available across these multiple areas of their lives also creates more ways in which one can construct their identity. Amidst all of the labels society has tried to place on young people today, it seems almost to have been forgotten that they are trying to figure out who they are for themselves - in an increasingly complex world.

Many theorists and researchers have tended to take for granted that a sense of identity has been achieved by late adolescence (Erikson, 1968). However, identity development is a complex and challenging process, often extending well beyond the emerging adulthood years and, arguably, for one's entire life. As Levine (2005, p. 100) astutely suggests, "There is no one harder to get to know than yourself", and there are indications that many emerging adults are struggling with this task to a greater extent than is commonly acknowledged. Research by Pulkkinen and Kokko (2000) revealed that the majority of individuals graduating from college have still not established a meaningful sense of who they are. Without the institutional shelter that protected them from the perils of not knowing who they are (yet still gave them some opportunity for 'safe' exploration), this may place them in a precarious situation. As they enter their post-educational lives, identity questions may become increasingly salient and the search to answer them increasingly anxious. According to the observations of Levine (2005), many 'startup adults' with 'work-life unreadiness' seem to be constantly trying out new identities, unable to define a cohesive sense of self. This situation can have implications for many of the central concerns of the emerging

adulthood life stage that have been discussed in this chapter. This section considers some of those implications.

6.1 Connection between identity and choice

There are various explanations as to why emerging adults may be finding identity a more elusive concept. Perhaps of greatest influence is the changing nature by which identity is formed. Identity was once defined primarily by family background and occupation (Leggatt-Cook, 2005; Schwartz, 2004), however has come to be more *constructed* in nature, with a greater connection to choice and consumption - particularly of music, fashion and lifestyles for young people (Dittmar, 2008; Leggatt-Cook, 2005; Vaughan, 2005). With such extensive choice and options of material goods, consumption is used as a vehicle for people to express who they are and what they stand for. Choice is therefore said to have *expressive value* (Schwartz, 2004). Herein, Schwartz (2004) argues, is both the 'good and bad news' of choice in connection with identity. Greater choice allows us to be more specific in selecting options to better express our identity, but consequently puts added pressure on finding the most appropriate reflection of ourselves. Identity therefore becomes not only about how we view ourselves, but how others view us as well. For the image-focused young person, this can create a particularly difficult situation, as it is "almost impossible for some adolescents to distinguish between who they actually are and who they want others to believe they are" (Levine, 2005, p. 247).

6.2 – Connection between identity and relationships

In the theory of Erikson (1963), achieving a sense of identity was seen as a prerequisite to the following intimacy-focused early adulthood stage. While there are relatively few studies of intimacy and identity in young or emerging adults beyond those of Erikson (1963, 1968), those that have been conducted report positive associations between a clear sense of identity and healthy romantic relationships. Today's generation of emerging adults appear to have a preference for establishing 'who they are, and what they want' before they feel prepared to make decisions about the suitability of prospective partners (Konstam, 2007). Collins and van Dulmen (2006, p. 227) elaborate on this in saying, "[w]hen identity issues pervade, individuals feel in-between adult and

nonadult status with respect to relationship commitment. Further, not having arrived at a satisfactory vision of who they are and whom they wish to be with, emerging adults may continually perceive – or imagine – new opportunities”. For those who marry ‘young’ (i.e. in teenage years or early twenties) before their identities are adequately formed, these may take the form of ‘starter marriages’ that are almost set to fail (Fox, 2005). In such instances, individuals may actually experiment with marriage itself, learn from the experience, and move on in search of their ‘true match’. Those who *have* developed a strong sense of identity by late adolescence are found to have more successful intimate relationships in young adulthood (Hennighausen, Hauser, Billings, Schultz, & Allen, 2004; Stein & Newcomb, 1999).

Identity formation therefore seems connected to more positive intimate relationships, one of the major focuses during the emerging adulthood years. Those who have not established a cohesive identity by emerging adulthood may therefore experience more difficulty in growing and maintaining romantic relationships, lacking the intimacy they often seek during this time. In addition to the relationship between intimacy and identity in romantic relationships, greater intimacy also characterises the relationships with friends and family networks during one’s emerging adulthood further contributing to identity development (Reis, Lin, Bennett, & Nezelek, 2004).

6.3 – Connection between identity and work – ‘Vocational identities’

While some have suggested that one’s occupation may be less central to the identities of emerging adults today, with many less inclined to define who they are by what they do (Robbins & Wilner, 2001), one’s identity can be an important factor in career choices. Instead of identity based around occupation it is now considered more important to base occupation around identity. As careers have become more of a product of one’s identity rather than the other way round, intrinsic rewards consistent with one’s personal values and identity appear to have taken on greater significance. Kroger (2007, p. 153) suggests that “Finding a vocational context that can express identity-related needs and interests rather than just bringing in a paycheck appears crucial to the lives of many contemporary young adults.”

Super (1980, 1990) had begun to acknowledge this in his emphasis on the centrality of 'self-concept' to career choice. He viewed a strong self-concept as a key prerequisite to career choice, with his model suggesting that "the development of vocational self-concept is a part of life stage development and that occupational choice is an attempt to implement self-concept" (Patton & McMahon, 1999, p. 40). Super (1990) also perceived 'vocational identity' as an integration of one's self-concept into their occupation, and implied that the process of developing a 'vocational identity' or 'occupational self-concept' should be well underway by the time an individual reaches the 'establishment' stage of age 20-30.

6.4 – Connection between identity and travel

As touched on earlier in this chapter, travel (or 'The Big O.E') can also serve as a means of 'finding oneself', or even 'creating oneself' for those who are struggling to define a sense of identity (Bell, 2002; Inkson & Myers, 2003). Bell (2002) suggests that, away from their familiar surroundings and social groups, young New Zealanders may start to forge a new identity by exploring and experimenting with new things. In examining the impact of O.E on careers, Arthur, Inkson, and Pringle (1999) found that many of their participants who had been on an O.E saw it as instrumental in helping them to learn more about themselves, enabling them to build the self-knowledge required for choosing or reassessing their careers. Travel may therefore serve as an effective mechanism for 'lost' emerging adults to develop some sense of who they are and find their way in the world.

6.5 - Summary of identity in Emerging Adulthood

As this section has discussed, identity development appears to be very important to the well-being and effective functioning of emerging adults. To have not developed a strong sense of identity by the emerging adulthood stage may leave an individual in a vulnerable position, as it may serve as a critical anchor to give direction to an otherwise transient life (Erikson, 1968). The value of having this 'anchor' through the emerging adulthood years should therefore not be underestimated. Although identity exploration may often be a long, drawn-out process, it is better that it begins sooner

rather than later. Levine (2005) argues that, instead of waiting until their 'startup years' to hastily try to pull a sense of identity together, it is important for individuals to begin consciously asking themselves who they are, what they're turning into, and where they're heading *before* their startup years, even if they do not have definitive answers. It therefore seems that, although identity is an ongoing process, it is vital that at least some form of identity and self-knowledge accompanies individuals through the emerging adulthood years, in order for them to "take hold of 'some kind of life'" (Kroger, 2007, p. 144).

CHAPTER 4 – ‘THE QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS’

As discussed so far through the preceding chapters, emerging adulthood is arguably one of the most complex and challenging phases of an individual’s life, more than ever before. Today’s emerging adults are simultaneously trying to cope with: 1) A more uncertain transition to adulthood; 2) A greater range of choice than ever before (with the pervasive influences of consumer culture as their primary guide); 3) Much more complex career and educational decisions; 4) Financial difficulties; 5) Desires (or pressures) to travel; and 6) Challenging and changing relationships. All of this whilst somehow trying to figure out who they actually are. In light of all of these issues, the popular literature has proposed that this is increasingly a time of crisis – a ‘*quarter-life crisis*’. So what is the academic take on this proposed phenomenon?

The answer to that question is straightforward – there is no academic view on it. One would expect that the amount of references to ‘the quarter-life crisis’ through articles, blogsites, and advice columns that have appeared on the internet and in the popular media since the release of Robbins and Wilner’s book in 2001, would have sparked some form of follow-up by scholarly research. However, the academic silence on the issue has been deafening. As a result the majority of supposed ‘studies’ and accounts of the ‘quarter-life crisis’ that have emerged through the popular literature are haphazard and speculative at best, sparked from a source with commercially-biased intentions.

Sitting somewhere between being academic research and popular research is a study by Fox (2005). Although conducted by a seemingly credible research institution (the *Social Issues Research Centre* in the United Kingdom), the study was reportedly ‘commissioned’ by eBay which somewhat reduces one’s confidence in its findings. Whilst acknowledging that the use of the term ‘quarter-life crisis’ is somewhat tentative, and that the research by the SIRC was unable to confirm or deny its existence, Fox (2005, p. 21) reasons that “[t]he transition to adulthood has certainly become an intensive period of ‘life shopping’- and we all know how exhausting and

frustrating any kind of shopping can be. When you are, in effect, shopping for your future, for your identity, for your life, it could easily feel like a crisis". However, despite her initial caution in using the term, Fox's logic is somewhat circular when she proceeds with the statement "assuming that there is such a thing as a quarterlife crisis, we now have a clearer picture of what is causing it" (2005, p. 21). These alleged 'causes' are claimed to be: 1) the overwhelming range of choices, which are perceived as being 'life determining' or 'identity-defining'; 2) The conflict between their high expectations and the realities of the 'real world'; and 3) The conflict between their life-shopping strategies and their underlying need for stability and security. Fox (2005, p. 18) surmises that, "Although they are willing, in some cases 'driven', to experiment and life-shop in search of perfection, YEPPIES have an underlying, often unconscious need for security". Although the data collection methods and details are not disclosed in their report, and some of the inferences of the study's findings unsubstantiated, the study does present potential avenues for further investigation.

In an opposing viewpoint, the idea of a normative crisis occurring for today's generation of young people going through this transition is refuted by Arnett (2007), who has previously described the emerging adulthood years as "the most *volitional* years of life" (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). In citing the original work of Robbins and Wilner (2001) on the quarter-life crisis, Arnett (2007) agrees with their description of the uncertainty and instability that may characterise the transition of emerging adulthood, but argues that it is a great exaggeration to suggest a widespread, 'agonising' quarter-life crisis. He claims that "[i]f the majority of emerging adults are miserable, they certainly are hiding it well" (Arnett, 2007, p. 25), and suggests that if the term 'crisis' is to be used to describe their experience, then the 'identity crisis' Erikson (1968) proposed as central to the adolescent life stage is more appropriate; in light of the merging of characteristics of adolescence into 'emerging adulthood'.

In critiquing sociological research that seems to share Robbins and Wilner's (2001) perspective of the perils and struggles of this phase, Arnett (2007) argues that the trends of increased depression and anxiety cited by such studies are confounded by increases of these disorders across the spectrum of the population. Conversely, he

presents examples of research that instead point to *increases* in well-being from teenage years through the twenties (Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006). However, Arnett does also acknowledge a sharp 'spike' in major depression in emerging adulthood for some of those experiencing it, and agrees that "there is validity to the 'quarterlife crisis' insight that many emerging adults experience anxiety over the instability and identity challenges of their lives, even as they also celebrate their freedom and the wide range of possibilities before them" (Arnett, 2007, p. 25), specifying it as "a time of instability and identity crises, even if it is rarely a time of despondency or collapse" (p. 25). The perception of widespread crisis across the age group is thought to be a result of their comparative cynicism towards the wider world, rather than towards their own lives, seemingly possessing "high hopes in a grim world" (Arnett, 1997). However, the undeniable popularity of the quarter-life crisis website set up as a supplement to Robbins and Wilner's (2001) book, would beg to differ. The extensive number of hits and wide variety of topic threads on the website (as discussed in chapter one) would suggest that perhaps Arnett (2007) has been overly dismissive in his views, and that there certainly are a significant number of individuals who are experiencing notable difficulty in this period; related to a variety of different areas of their lives that cannot be accounted for by 'identity crises' alone.

The preceding chapters have examined the separate research threads (or lack thereof) for both the transition to adulthood/emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis. Sciaba (2002), attempted to merge these threads together in her Doctoral dissertation on 'Emotions and Emerging Adulthood', the only other dissertation or thesis found on record to refer to the quarter-life crisis phenomenon. Unfortunately, what could have been a potentially interesting and insightful study was fraught with theoretical and methodical flaws. Sciaba (2002) seems to take the quarter-life crisis as a 'given', despite the non-scientific approach of Robbins and Wilner (2001), and therefore proceeds to base her quantitative research on an inadequately developed theory. For the study, a questionnaire was developed consisting of Likert-scale items - based loosely on transition tasks associated with the emerging adulthood phase, and 'fill in the blank' questions (combined with a word bank) about emotions thought to be linked to the quarter-life crisis. Although a pilot version of the questionnaire was

commendably used, it was participant feedback rather than psychometric properties that was used to refine the items in the questionnaire. Consequently, the reliability and validity of the questionnaire was only considered concurrently when the data collection process had been completed via the internet, with the results suggesting questionable psychometric value of the questionnaire. On examination of the questionnaire in the dissertation's appendices, it is immediately apparent that several of the questionnaires 21 items are poorly designed and highly loaded.

Unfortunately, as a result of the flaws, the majority of the 'findings' of the study have little utility. The data was analysed by performing correlations between the emerging adulthood task questions and the corresponding quarter-life crisis emotions used to describe their feelings towards these tasks. Majority emotional responses (i.e. positive or negative valence) for each question/task were also presented. Unsurprisingly, questions loaded with a negative valence tended to be described by more negative emotions, while those loaded with a positive valence tended to be described by positive emotions. While Sciaba (2002) acknowledges various limitations to her study, including its inability to determine cause, generalisability of the results, and issues of honesty presented through its internet administration; she unfortunately fails to recognise the undeniable flaws in the questionnaire's design. The overall study points to the emerging adulthood experience being characterised more by negative emotions than positive emotions towards this phase, as Sciaba (2002) hypothesised, however some of the clear flaws in the study erode confidence in these results and highlight the need for more thorough research in this area. As her sample was also heavily female skewed, with 234 females and only 26 males, further research may also benefit from a more balanced gender sample.

Summary / Rationale for Research and Aims / Objectives

Up until now, little has been done to explore the transition to adulthood and this phase of life from the perspective of those actually going through it. This is particularly apparent in the New Zealand setting. As this country has an arguably unique environment for socialising young people, there is a great need to learn more about how to better assist young New Zealanders to grow and flourish in their lives. Issues

such as drug and alcohol abuse and the high suicide rate in teenagers and emerging adults in this country, while perhaps extreme examples, indicate that it is complacent to assume that these years are wonderful and that any young people who suggest otherwise are 'spoiled whingers'. Research suggests that those who 'fall through the gaps' or fail to make a successful transition to adulthood find themselves increasingly marginalised throughout their adult lives (Canny, 2001; Kellock, 2005; Leggatt-Cook, 2005; Mills, 2004; Shanahan, 2000). It is hoped that the results of this study will provide further insight into how emerging adults in New Zealand are coping with the transition to adulthood, and where the core issues of this transition lie; with the intention that the findings may assist educators, parents, policy makers, managers and human resource professionals, as well as the emerging adults themselves.

The key questions that therefore guide this study include:

- a) Is the quarter-life period experienced as a 'crisis phase' by young adults in New Zealand?
- b) How do they feel about their lives at the moment?
- c) What are some of the most salient concerns or challenges during this phase?
- d) What are some of the most positive aspects of this phase?
- e) Do young New Zealander's feel adequately prepared for their experience of 'entering the adult/real world'?
- f) How do they feel about their future?

The methodology employed in this study to explore these questions is discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodological approach to conducting this study. In the first section, I begin by explaining the rationale for the methods employed in the research process. The second section describes the strategies for recruiting participants for the study and the group compositions. The third section details the ways in which the focus groups were framed to participants and my approach to facilitating and managing the discussions. In the fourth section I discuss how ethical concerns were managed and minimised during the study. The final section then describes the approach I took to analysing the data from the discussions.

1 – Rationale

Why Qualitative?

To gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of those who are in their twenties through this period of concentrated change and adaptation, a qualitative research approach was considered most appropriate.

In their research conducted towards their popular book pioneering the concept of the 'Quarterlife crisis', Robbins and Wilner (2001) present the idea that many people in their twenties are experiencing difficulty with the choices and decisions they are suddenly faced with, yet are hesitant to discuss their feelings with friends or family as they believe they are 'all alone' in their experience. Qualitative research that delves into the worldviews and experiences of this population, which has been largely overlooked by academic researchers, was believed to enable a greater understanding of how people in their twenties feel about and experience this phase of their lives, what they consider to be the positive aspects, pitfalls and challenges, and to examine the appropriateness of the terminology employed by Robbins and Wilner (2001) in presenting the notion of a 'quarter-life crisis'.

Rather than seeking a definitive answer either confirming or disconfirming the existence of phenomena such as that of the quarter-life crisis, and trying to measure its 'severity' or prevalence (such as that which would be endeavoured by quantitative methods in their search for 'truth' or 'fact'), the typically idiographic nature of the qualitative approach acknowledges the complexity and potential diversity of experiences that may exist for individuals (Ponterotto, 2005). While the positivist, quantitative frame of reference was originally seen as the hallmark of 'good' psychological research in its focus on the 'scientific' measurement and prediction of human behaviour, this has become increasingly challenged by the richness of information enabled through qualitative methods (Berg, 2007; Litosseliti, 2003; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Taking a quantitative approach to this topic would provide limited understanding of the anticipated complexity of the participants' experiences, and would be theoretically and scientifically unsound as there is not yet a strong theoretical foundation to 'the quarter-life crisis'. Furthermore, to develop a purpose-built measure of 'the quarter-life crisis' by bypassing the development of a strong theoretical basis would be fraught with issues related to construct validity. As the experiences of 'twenty-somethings' (as referred to by Robbins and Wilner, 2001) have been relatively under-researched, a qualitative approach will serve as a solid platform from which to begin the exploration of not only *how* this group experience the often turbulent transition from the protected educational setting to the much less structured "real world", but also *why* some people may be encountering possible 'crisis states' and *what* these may mean to them. This idea is captured eloquently in the statement by Litosseliti (2003, p. 11):

"Simply put, qualitative methods are often applied to complex, rich-interpretation questions, and generally put emphasis on aspects of meaning, process, context: the 'why' and the 'how', rather than the 'how many'...Such methods are interested in language used in context, in meaning as it emerges from the participants themselves, rather than being predetermined by the researcher or measured in variables"

Guiding principles

Qualitative methods have long been criticised for not being 'scientific' or 'empirical', and for those reasons were often considered 'invalid' (Berg, 2007; Merrick, 1999). However, proponents of qualitative research have justly argued that "[b]oth qualitative and quantitative approaches are empirical methods in that they involve collection, analysis, and interpretation of observations or data" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128), and that in fact "everyone is doing science, provided that *science* is defined as a specific and systematic way of discovering and understanding how social realities arise, operate, and impact on individuals and organizations of individuals" (Berg, 2007, p. 14). Whilst psychology has been relatively slow to recognise the valuable contribution of qualitative methods to the field (Ponterotto, 2005), its popularity now appears to be growing, perhaps encouraged by the increased uptake of qualitative methods in staunchly scientific fields such as medicine (see for example Koch & Harrington, 1998; Malterud, 2001), and by a recent explosion of literature and guidelines on its practice and applications in the form of a "qualitative revolution" (Charmaz, 2000).

While the paradigm guiding quantitative researchers is rather prescribed and thus generally taken for granted (as predominantly positivist but with some flexibility towards post-positivism), qualitative researchers are encouraged to 'own their own perspective' (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999), with the responsibility of defining what paradigm their research will operate from and conveying this and their broader worldviews to their audience (Merrick, 1999; Ponterotto, 2005). As a researcher, I identify most strongly with the post-positivist paradigm, but recognise the merits of constructionist ideology in describing complex phenomena such as the topic of this study. Having come from a background with more of a quantitative focus from my undergraduate studies and initial employment, the traditionally quantitative concepts of validity and reliability had been deeply instilled in me. In making the transition to qualitative research for this project, I recognised the importance of following principles of "good practice", described by Merrick (1999) as involving the core qualitative criteria of *trustworthiness*, *reflexivity*, and *representation* (see also Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

'Trustworthiness' concerns the overall integrity and transparency of the researcher and research process (Merrick, 1999). As "good practice", it is important to be open and transparent in your approach so that readers are able to draw their own conclusions on the quality of the research and its findings. In discussing 'reflexivity', Merrick (1999) emphasizes the need for the researcher to be aware of their impact on the data collection and analysis process, and upfront in acknowledging it, including biases or preconceptions they unavoidably bring to the process through their own individuality, interests and values. The notion of 'representation' refers to the qualitative dictum of multiple 'truths' over the positivist paradigm's 'one truth'. It involves the acknowledgement that the findings of qualitative research present one particular 'representation' of the phenomenon studied, with the ideas and terminology used largely reflecting the researcher's own personal style (Merrick, 1999).

The often-cited work of Lincoln and Guba (1985), informs much of recent qualitative practice. In extending the overarching guidelines above, Lincoln and Guba (1985) present the idea of "parallel criteria". Whilst criticised on the grounds of being overly 'defensive' in an attempt to justify the merits and credibility of qualitative research by comparing processes and characteristics with those of quantitative research (Merrick, 1999), the notion of "parallel criteria" further emphasises quality and integrity in social sciences research, which, arguably, should be the ultimate aim of those conducting any type of research. The positivist criteria espoused by quantitative research, of validity (both internal and external), reliability, and objectivity as markers of good research, can be observed in qualitative methodologies through the parallel forms of 'credibility', 'transferability', 'dependability', and 'confirmability' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba compare the aim of 'credibility' to 'internal validity'. Credibility concerns the *prolonged engagement* of the researcher with the data; *triangulation* of multiple methods/sources; *peer debriefing* to assess findings/interpretations; *negative case analysis* to test and revise hypotheses; *referential adequacy* by keeping data aside for checking and confirmation of findings

later; and *member checking* in reviewing interpretations with relevant stakeholders (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The notion of 'transferability' can be likened to 'external validity', with the researcher aiming to provide "thick description" in order to allow others to assess the potential of transferring the conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). 'Dependability' is comparative to the positivist criteria of 'reliability' in aiming for transparency and detailing of processes and findings so that the quality of the research can be scrutinised in an "inquiry audit". Finally, 'confirmability' is seen to parallel 'objectivity' in its commitment to the "accuracy of the product" and to ensuring that the findings and conclusions are supported by and coherent with the 'bottom line' of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) (or 'grounded' in the data). By following these principles of good qualitative research, it was my intention to produce research of high quality, based upon thorough procedures to obtain rich data and produce insightful findings. These are core objectives of qualitative research advocated by Berg (2007).

One of the most widely used and respected methods of qualitative analysis is grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Ponterotto, 2005), which will further guide the strategies applied in this study. While grounded theory originated out of a positivist/post-positivist background (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it has gradually become more constructivist in its approach (Charmaz, 2000; Ponterotto, 2005). As the method has continued to evolve, it has been argued that "[t]here is no one way or right way to conduct grounded theory analysis, but there are relatively clear guidelines as to what can be considered to constitute a grounded theory" (Chamberlain, 1999, p. 190). It is therefore considered "a set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions or packages" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 9), which can be adapted to the inquiry at hand (Ponterotto, 2005). While this study may not represent grounded theory' in its most 'traditional' sense (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it draws upon several of its guiding principles, adapting them to suit this particular inquiry. As there has been little research in this topic area to date, utilising principles of the grounded theory methodological framework allows flexibility to let the data guide the research, and to further explore issues that arise out of it.

Why Focus Groups?

The Focus Group method was selected as the data collection strategy of choice for a variety of reasons. There are numerous advantages of using focus groups as a qualitative method, predominantly concerning: their flexibility, their potential for gathering extensive yet detailed information, their typically non-directive format (resulting in less artificiality of response and greater ecological validity), and the opportunity to interact with participants in clarifying responses and probing further (Berg, 2007; Edmunds, 2000; Salkind, 2003; Stewart et al., 2007). These aspects make focus groups particularly well-suited to exploratory research. They are noted to be an ideal research method where little is known about the topic of interest (Stewart et al., 2007), such as that of the present study. As there has been negligible prior research on the 'quarter-life crisis', the focus group method was felt to enable the in-depth information required for a sound understanding of how today's emerging adults are experiencing the quarter-life phase, aided by the flexibility for research participants to raise topics they felt were of utmost relevance to them and to convey their shared understandings. Berg's (2007, p. 145) description of focus groups as "an attempt to learn about the biographies and life structures of group participants" aligns closely with the aims of this study.

Focus groups present various distinct advantages over other qualitative methods such as individual interviews in relation to this particular study. In their informal research for their book on the quarter-life crisis, Robbins and Wilner (2001) conducted a series of individual interviews which captured undeniably interesting data on each participant, but may not provide insight to the 'shared understanding' of people in this life phase as a collective, and does not consider the potentially socially constructed nature of the phenomenon they describe as the 'quarter-life crisis'. According to Krueger (1994, p. 19), "Focus groups... present a more natural environment than an individual interview, as focus group participants 'are influencing and influenced by others – just as they are in real life'". This perhaps has particular relevance for people in such a peer-influenced stage of life as that which forms the focus of this study.

Participants were encouraged to view the focus group in a rather natural, non-threatening light by framing the discussions as 'similar to a chat you would have with friends over coffee'. Focus groups also have the advantage of greater synergy and spontaneity than individual interviews, and greater efficiency in collecting data (Stewart et al., 2007). This last point also provided a practical motivation for the use of focus groups in this particular study, with constraints of time and scope inherent in a Masters project.

Furthermore, in addition to the benefits of focus group discussions as a data collection method for the topic of this study, they were also anticipated to provide benefits for participants taking part in the study. It was the intention that the focus groups would be stimulating and enjoyable for the participants, serving as a source of support, insight and advice for them through the sharing of perspectives and experiences with peers. A supportive environment such as this was also expected to encourage them to share their experiences and deep concerns in a more open and comfortable manner, as group members may provide support and legitimisation for each others' feelings (Berg, 2007).

Like all research methods, focus groups do have potential disadvantages as well. Many of the criticisms directed at focus group methodology concern their perceived lack of generalisability and the influences of the moderator on the data obtained. Critics target their 'idiosyncratic' nature as having little generalisability, with their limitations of only involving small numbers and often representing 'convenience samples', and the possibility that the actions of a moderator may bias the results (intentionally or otherwise) (Berg, 2007; Stewart et al., 2007). Dominant participants may also 'take over' the discussion, and individual responses are not independent from those of others (Berg, 2007; Stewart et al., 2007). While these are valid criticisms of the focus group method, the method's advantages were considered to greatly outweigh its potential limitations for this study. Most of these limitations can be addressed through awareness and conscientiousness on behalf of the moderator, and responsible reporting of results. It is with these potential issues in mind that I have conducted this study. In my approach to conducting the focus groups (discussed later in this chapter)

and reporting the results I have been mindful to limit the impact of myself as well as dominant participants towards biasing the results, and acknowledge boundaries for generalisability.

The methods used in this study are expected to provide a greater understanding of young adult's experiences in the 21st century, in order to begin working towards a more confident way forward for this group.

2 - Procedures

A total of six focus groups were conducted for the study, sampling individuals from a variety of age bands within the ages of 20-29 (broadly covering the emerging adulthood or quarter-life stage), at various stages of their transition to the 'real world' of work, and from a variety of backgrounds and fields of employment. While six focus groups is perhaps slightly more than most focus group researchers use (according to the guidelines of Litosseliti, 2003), the target population of 'people in their 20s' was clearly quite broad and therefore necessitated broader sampling through multiple groups. This required a variety of recruitment strategies, and subsequently these and the focus groups were conducted in two waves, the first three groups being recruited for and held in June and July 2007, and the second three groups being recruited for and held between October and December 2007.

The first three focus groups targeted university graduates several years into their working careers. This group was sampled more extensively as the interviews and results of Robbins and Wilner (2001) implied a greater prevalence of the 'quarter-life crisis' phenomenon in the tertiary educated, linking an increased likelihood of experiencing such personal crises to the increased choice and pressure which may accompany the acquisition of university qualifications. Participants were recruited for these groups through eliciting the assistance of Massey University's Alumni Association, with an email advertising the research to potential participants distributed via the Alumni Association's email network (see Appendix A). Limits were set on the email distribution to include only those aged between 20-29 who graduated between

2000-2005 (and who had email addresses), a sizeable pool of 1,608 alumni. This resulted in a considerable response rate from interested alumni who were keen to take part. As this study hoped to explore the perspective of those who had been through the New Zealand education system, for the results to have relevance for this setting, international students who had experienced the majority of their education in another country were screened out, and the first 20 respondents were liaised with to determine a suitable time for each of the three groups (anticipating some attrition of potential participants in the process).

Focus group number four consisted of a sample of final year university students, several weeks out from completing their final exams for their degrees. This group was sampled in order to capture some of the perceptions and expectations of emerging adults before leaving the structure of educational institutions and stepping out into 'the real world' of work. Recruitment of participants for this group was straightforward, with flyers (see Appendix B) placed on student noticeboards throughout Massey University in Albany and in the university library.

The fifth focus group involved individuals who identified themselves as having difficulty finding direction at this time in their life. This enabled a more focused discussion on some of the specific difficulties experienced, as well as whether these were experienced as a personal 'crisis'. The sixth (and final) focus group sampled emerging adults who had gone straight from high school into full-time employment and were several years into their working careers. This therefore incorporated a group largely overlooked by Robbins and Wilner (2001) in the initial conceptualisation of the quarter-life crisis, and explored their perspectives on this phase in their life. Participants for these final two focus groups were recruited from adverts placed in public locations such as community noticeboards, dairies, bars, cafes, and bus stops in the central Auckland and Albany areas (see Appendix C for colour advertisement); as well as on websites such as www.theoddjjob.co.nz and www.gumtree.co.nz. There was a considerable response rate from those who identified themselves as 'having difficulty finding direction'; however, participants who went straight from high school into full-time employment were somewhat more difficult to locate and coordinate, eventuating

in a snowball sample consisting of a group of friends. For each of the groups, potential participants who responded with their interest were promptly emailed an information and consent form with further details on the study for them to review before confirming their agreement to participate, and were encouraged to ask questions at any time (see Appendix D).

Between 4-6 participants were sought for each focus group, resulting in 26 participants in total across the six groups. 4-6 participants was considered the ideal number of participants for each group as it was thought to be enough to ensure an active discussion and a variety of perspectives, while also enabling detailed accounts from each of the participants. For complex topics such as that of this study, it is generally considered beneficial to have no more than seven participants (Berg, 2007; Krueger, 1994).

As a result of these participant sampling strategies, the groups were comprised as follows:

- Focus Group #1: *University graduates/Young professionals* – 4 participants (2 males and 2 females), aged between 24 -27 years old.
- Focus Group #2: *University graduates/Young professionals* – 4 participants (1 male and 3 females) aged 24-27 years old.
- Focus Group #3 – *University graduates/Young professionals* - 4 participants (3 males and 1 female) aged 27-28 years old.
- Focus Group #4 – *Final year university students* - 4 participants (1 male, 3 females) aged between 20-24 years old.
- Focus Group #5 – *‘Having difficulty finding direction’* - 6 participants (2 males and 4 females) aged between 22-28 years old.
- Focus Group #6 – *Straight from high school into full-time employment* - 4 females (aged 20-21 years old).

While each of these groups were fairly homogenous in relation to the contexts of the participants' experiences, a degree of diversity was also incorporated within the groups by way of including a mix of genders, ethnicities and socio-economic status (SES). The purpose of keeping each group membership relatively homogenous is based on research which suggests that people have a tendency to share more in groups where they see themselves as being similar to other members (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1988). However, with the exception of the final focus group participants who were the result of a 'snowball' sample of friends, groups of people who have *pre-existing* relationships with each other were generally aimed to be avoided as "familiarity can limit self-disclosure and discourage disagreement, as interaction is likely to rely more on past experiences, shared or assumed knowledge, and particular events, rather than on diverse perspectives on the immediate topic" (Litosseliti, 2003, p. 37).

Participant Demographics

The twenty-six participants who took part in the study ranged from 20 to 28 in age, with a mean age of 24.5 years old. The sample therefore encompassed a group of individuals going through the 'quarter-life' or 'emerging adulthood' phase. While the sample was slightly female skewed, with 17 females (65%) and 9 males (35%), all but one of the focus groups included both genders. The ethnic composition of the sample was reasonably representative of the wider New Zealand population, consisting of 20 NZ Euro/Pakeha participants (76.9%); 3 Maori/ NZ Euro/Pakeha (11.5%); 1 Pacific Islander/ NZ Euro/Pakeha (3.8%); 1 Zimbabwean (3.8%); and 1 who identified as NZ Euro/Pakeha/ Other Euro/ Other (Fillipino/Spanish) (3.8%).

With the majority of participants for the focus groups recruited through university advertising and networks, the sample was quite highly educated overall. Six of the participants (23%) had completed postgraduate study as their highest qualification, while twelve (46.2%) had obtained University Degrees, one had obtained a Certificate/Diploma, one had completed an Apprenticeship, and six had completed high school as their highest level of education (including a focus group of four females recruited as having gone straight from high school to full-time employment).

Employment status varied across the group from full-time student to full-time employment, with the highest proportion (46.2%) being in full-time paid employment. Of the other participants many were combining work and study to varying degrees. Only two people in the sample were unemployed, as a result of having just returned from their respective 'Overseas Experiences' in the week or fortnight prior to the focus group. The participants' areas of employment were also rather varied, including a range of different types of work from Café Assistant, Promotions, and Postie workers to Communications and Marketing Manager, Specialist Business Manager and an Alcohol and Drug Professional. On average, participants had been in their current role 15.8 months, their current organisation 18.9 months, and in paid employment for 64 months (5.3 years).

Just over half of the sample (54%) currently had student loans, ranging from \$3,000 to \$30,000, with a mean of \$12,077. Travel appeared to be a priority for many, with seven (27%) of the participants having spent longer than 6 months overseas since completing high school and fifteen (58%) indicating that they intend to spend more than 6 months overseas sometime within the next two years. Consistent with trends towards delaying marriage until one's late 20's or early 30's, the majority of participants were not in a serious romantic relationship, with eight of the participants indicating that they were single (31%); and six 'casually dating' (23%). Eleven of the participants were 'in a committed relationship' (42%), but only one participant was married (4%). In line with Furman's (2005) characterisation of a 'boomerang generation', five (19%) of the participants were currently living in the parental home, all having spent brief periods flatting before returning to their parents house following financial difficulties or a relationship breakdown; however, the majority were living independently, with 13 (50%) in flatting situations; 5 with 'one foot in' (Arnett, 2004) cohabiting with their partner (19%); 1 living alone (4%); 1 living with their partner and their child (4%); and 1 living alone with their child (4%).

Conducting the Focus Groups

Half of the focus groups were conducted at the School of Psychology offices of Massey University (Albany) in a designated research room, while the other half were held at my offices of employment in the Auckland Central Business District. These locations were based around convenience for the majority of participants in each of the groups. With the exception of the focus group of final-year students, which was held mid-morning on a weekday, the focus groups were held on weekday evenings starting at either 6pm or 7pm to allow sufficient time and flexibility for travel to the focus group after the participants' working day. Focus groups were conducted in person because this results in richer data and enables the observation of highly important non-verbal cues and reactions to be incorporated in the analysis (Litosseliti, 2003). With some previous experience in moderating focus groups through my employment in the field of Occupational Psychology, I moderated the groups face-to-face by myself, taking brief notes during the discussions and recording them with audio recording equipment.

In conducting the focus groups, a general topic outline and some core questions (see Appendix E for example topic guide) were used to guide the discussions without putting preconceived constraints on their direction, allowing the participants to describe their personal and collective accounts of being a 'twenty-something' in the 21st century, through their reflection and discussion of relevant concepts and issues. I took some basic notes on key points and behaviours observed during the discussion which were used to complement the participants' verbalised views and descriptions. Charmaz (2006) advocates this approach as a means of acquiring the 'rich data' that forms the cornerstone of qualitative methods. The notion of the 'quarter-life crisis' was raised as the last topic of the focus group discussion to first capture their perspectives without this concept or 'label' potentially 'colouring' or adding bias to the discussion. It was then able to be critically reviewed by the group in light of the previous matters discussed.

While issues of 'power' relationships have been argued to impact upon the gathering of data through interactions between the researcher and participants (Litosseliti, 2003; Stewart et al., 2007), this was considered to be of minimal effect in this study as the focus group discussions were conducted in quite an informal and relaxed manner, with myself (as the moderator) positioned on an equal level as a fellow 'twenty-something'. In fact, it has been argued that the focus group method effectively "places participants on a more even footing with each other and the investigator" (Berg, 2007, p. 148) compared to other methods.

On arrival at the focus group discussions, participants were offered nibbles and refreshments and given time to settle in and get acquainted with the other focus group participants, as the majority of participants did not know each other and had not experienced a focus group discussion first-hand before. This enabled them to relax and make themselves comfortable in the focus group environment.

Details of the study were then explained to participants, with regards to the general focus of the research (framed broadly as discussing 'Life in your 20s'), and the format by which the focus groups would be run. They were advised that the focus groups would be fairly informal and unstructured in nature, and that while I might raise certain topics, questions, or ideas with them from time-to-time, that the discussion would be largely guided and directed by them as a group and what they felt were the most important issues at this time of their life. Copies of the information sheet and informed consent forms were provided for the participants to review again, and they were given the opportunity to ask questions prior to the signing of the informed consent forms. They were also given the option of recording their address details on the consent form if they wished to receive a summary of the research upon completion. In accordance with the suggestions of Litosseliti (2003) and Berg (2007), some basic guidelines (or 'house rules') of conduct in the focus group were discussed, such as: courtesy for other participants and respect of confidentiality for their contributions, as well as the right to opt out of the discussion or request for the recording to be paused should they feel uncomfortable for any reason. The discussion

was launched by suggesting relatively general topics such as their education (for the student and alumni groups), or an overview of their lives leading up to this point.

At the conclusion of the focus group discussion, participants were asked to complete a simple, 2-page demographic questionnaire (see Appendix F) to collect details on their age, ethnicity, education, and occupation; as well as various lifestyle characteristics. The questionnaire took most of the participants less than 5 minutes to complete, and then they were thanked for their time and input. All of the focus groups were approximately 1.5 hours in length each, and, as appreciation and compensation their time and input, participants received a \$20 voucher of their choice out of a selection of C.D, Grocery, or Petrol vouchers. The participants appeared to find the discussions thought-provoking and enjoyable, in many cases staying on to continue talking with each other after the focus group had concluded.

3 – Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the research project was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, with the study perceived to involve minimal risk for the research participants, their wider population, or for myself as the researcher.

Upon contacting me with their interest, participants were emailed the information and consent form with further details on the study (see Appendix D) and encouraged to contact me if they had any questions. While the exact focus and research questions were not disclosed to participants to avoid exposing details that could direct the focus group discussions (Litosseliti, 2003), there was no deliberate deception involved. In both the information sheet and in a briefing on arrival for the focus group, participants were advised that in agreeing to participate they had the following rights:

- a) To ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- b) To withdraw from the study up to the end of the focus group discussion;
- c) To choose not to raise or comment on issues or topics during the focus group which they did not wish to discuss;

- d) To request for the audio tape recording to be paused at any point during the focus group, should they feel uncomfortable;
- e) To provide information during the focus group on the understanding that their real name would not be used in the transcripts or write-up of the research;
- f) To receive a summary of the findings on completion of the research, through requesting one on the consent form.

After discussing these matters at the focus groups, the consent forms were then signed by participants, and I collected them for secure storage before beginning the focus group discussion.

As part of the informed consent process, participants were informed (on the information sheet and in the briefing at the focus group) that the focus group discussions would be audio-taped and transcribed. They were advised that pseudonyms would be used to replace real names of participants and others that were mentioned during the course of the discussion, through transcribing the discussion dialogue and presenting segments of the data in discussing the results. All consent forms, tapes, demographic questionnaires and printed transcripts were stored securely in locked cabinets accessible only to me and shared only with my supervisor. Participants were given my assurance that tapes are to be destroyed once my thesis has been graded.

4 - Data Analysis

Each of the focus group discussions were transcribed by myself in their entirety, including notations to indicate pauses in speech, and emotive indicators such as laughter by individuals or shared as a group, as well as sighs and speech fillers (e.g. 'Um'). Although some researchers adopt a more efficient approach by transcribing only the most relevant comments, this is considered undesirable as it circumvents one of the primary purposes of a focus group, that of examining the collective understanding of participants and looking at their comments in context (Millward, 2006).

While focus group data is often viewed as rather difficult to summarise and interpret (Stewart et al., 2007), there is considered to be “no single canonical – or even preferred – way of analyzing (focus group) data” (Wilkinson, 2003, p. 203), which allows an element of flexibility to analytic procedures. Once the data had been transcribed following each focus group, I worked through the resulting text by drawing on basic principles of grounded theory, interpreting and writing memos on ideas, concepts, and issues emerging from the raw data. In the second stage of analysis this was then summarised further and coded at a higher level of abstraction from the raw data. From these higher level analyses, key thematic concepts and ideas emerged which then formed the interpretations, findings and conclusions presented in the following chapters.

I have taken various measures to ensure my handling, analysis, and reporting of the data meets quality guidelines for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merrick, 1999; Ponterotto, 2005). I have had ‘prolonged engagement’ with the data from the first focus group conducted in June 2007 through to the final focus group in December 2007 and beyond, transcribing and analysing the discussions immediately following each focus group and constantly comparing data with preceding focus groups (Charmaz, 2000). The data was also triangulated through multiple focus groups. The results of the discussions have been debriefed and checked with my supervisor on this project, eliciting his input and feedback on interpretations. In conducting the six focus groups in two waves, I was able to reflect on initial interpretations from the earlier focus groups to revise sampling strategies and topics/questions used for successive focus groups. Finally, in the discussion of findings which follows in Chapter 6, I aim to provide detailed (“thick”) description and concrete examples of the data to support my representations and conclusions presented.

A great number of findings emerged from the varied yet in-depth discussions. While each of these appeared interesting in their own right, the scope of the study and the aim of developing a broader theoretical overview of the issues required these to be amalgamated into key themes or categories to describe the experience of this life

phase. Mirroring the complexity of the participants' lives, this process of categorisation was found to be complex, as a lot of the findings were interconnected. Although this made the organisation of coded data and concepts into discreet themes difficult at times, it was ultimately reflective of the emerging adults' experiences. They were trying to tackle multiple areas of life all at once, with their experiences in one area frequently having flow-on effects for other areas.

CHAPTER 6 – FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the focus group discussions, discussed in terms of key themes describing the emerging adults' experiences. These themes encompass the questions of the study presented in Chapter Four, giving insight into whether this time of life is experienced as a 'crisis phase', how they feel about their lives at this point, what some of the most salient concerns or challenges as well as positive aspects of this time of life are, their preparedness for this transition, and their feelings about their future. It was found to be an unexpectedly difficult time, characterised by *disappointment, disintegration, and complexity*. However, they still had *hope* in the belief that everything would 'fall into place' eventually - like a lifebuoy they could cling to as they rode out the storm. Each of these themes is presented with illustrative comments and analysis, followed by a discussion of why the theme may be a key feature of emerging adults' lives today.

EXPLORING THE NOTION OF A QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS

Participants' views were divided as to whether the 'quarter-life crisis' is a legitimate concept for describing their passage through this phase of life. Perspectives ranged from those who agreed strongly that a 'quarter-life crisis' is a legitimate phenomenon and felt that they had experienced or were experiencing one, some who believed their friends were experiencing crises, through to one participant who rejected the idea. Generally there was an agreement that it was a particularly testing time and that many people experienced substantial difficulty in transitioning through this life phase, although the word 'crisis' sat uncomfortably with some participants. For such participants 'crisis' was associated with catastrophic events and humanitarian issues that made their problems and concerns seem trivial in comparison.

It was discussed as a major turning point in life, their stories suggesting that it was perceived as a time for 'make or break'. There were some who were able to move through the phase progressively and confidently (the 'makers'); while others (the 'breakers') found themselves somewhat blindsided and let down by the reality of their

emerging adult lives, wondering why they were not prepared or why their plans were falling apart; stuck in a state of uncertainty and ambiguity, struggling to deal with the complex choices, changes and conflicts that they were faced with. Some found themselves embroiled in an endless search for meaning and answers, while others anxiously waited, watched and hoped that the world would suddenly make sense again. The core themes of the participants' experiences that are discussed in this chapter may occur to varying degrees from individual to individual, likely serving as minor frustrations for some, while turning others' worlds upside down and creating a sense of crisis.

THEME ONE:

A TIME OF DISAPPOINTMENT – Lives 'overpromised and underdelivered'.

One of the strongest themes that emerged from the participants' stories across the various different focus groups was that life was 'just not what it was supposed to be'. Many of the participants described a nagging sense of disappointment in their lives at this stage. They had expected their entrance into the working world to be a grand one, for it to be a time when their dreams would finally take flight and they would begin to reap the material, financial and psychological rewards that they thought they deserved as a result of all the hard work and 'preparation' they had been through to get to this moment. They had expected to have it all 'sorted by now', that things would naturally 'fall into place' and they would be able to bask in their inevitable success. As it happened however, the transition to the real world was often experienced as a considerable anti-climax.

ADAM (age 26): "I definitely expected myself to have sorted it all out by now.....definitely had expectations of having known what I was going to do, having started it...probably earning quite a lot of money, maybe being married/having a partner, possibly a child...you know...except all those things you kind of think of when you're sixteen – '10 years from now is *miles* away and I'm bound to have done all that...'..." [Focus Group 5]

LISA (age 21): "...I expected to be nearly finished uni...have this like, degree...and like, be planning my travels, and a job, and like just be like 'set up'....." [Focus Group 6]

The emerging adults disappointment appeared to be the product of a number of factors that may individually be well-intentioned but combined seemed to have the effect of creating particularly high (unrealistic) expectations of this phase of their life.

Through messages conveyed by the media, their parents, and university institutions, they had been led to believe that this would be an exciting and fulfilling time, and that they were 'destined' for success. Instead, they found that life had been 'overpromised and underdelivered', that they had been sold an 'illusion of grandeur' that did not hold true.

There was a growing realisation that much of their expectations and values had been a fabrication of the media, promoting images of fantasy that were misinterpreted as representing reality. Having grown up with a saturation of film, TV and advertising that sold the importance of image and status, the emerging adults experienced an underlying pressure to conform to the espoused criteria for success, which they had been exposed to from a young age and typically revolved around expensive houses and cars, glamorous careers, and the physical attractiveness of both themselves and their 'perfect partner'. Strong cues of conformity were seen by some as operating under the guise of enabling expressions of individuality. Their lives often did not pass the 'billboard test' where they compared their current status and their possessions to the criteria for success and found them lacking. Nor did they have their requisite 'happily ever after' that they had expected to "just...turn up". Some participants described a nagging sense that they should have more to 'show' for their age, inciting feelings of disappointment, deficiency and failure. The following conversations amongst a group of participants who identified themselves as 'having difficulty finding direction' exemplifies how pervasive these feelings could be and how they can lead into feelings of 'crisis'.

ADAM (26): "You definitely assume that it's just gonna suddenly, just...turn up...."

DANIEL (25): "Yeah...'fall into place'..."

ADAM (26): "Oh yeah – people just grow up and get the kids, and the house, and the money...blahblahblahblah.....just like that..."

DANIEL (25): "Receive your money tree seeds in the mail...."

ADAM (26): "Goals, money, all that stuff is just expected to happen..."

(Further on in the conversation)

NATALIE (22): "To be honest, like...when I think about, you know....pressures upon society and all that...it all comes back to advertising, like...that's something which has grown so much over the past, like, even just 10 years...and, because it's always advertising something 'consumable'...you know...like, ipods etcetera...just like...'Go out – live your own life – listen to your own music' etcetera, like.....we all have this sort of thing, you know, where...'I'm a free spirit'...'But I need to get that..'...and it's sort of like there's something conflicting.....it's 'at you' all the time..."

DANIEL (25): "I mean...I'm annoyed that I have to drive home in my Bluebird...I'm not going home in a nice car, to a fancy house...with...you know..."

EVE (25): "But that's exactly what we were saying before, like...where does that whole ideal come from...that...you know, when you get to a certain age you should be...in your own house with all your own furniture, and...that...it's like...no-one's making you, you don't *have to*..."

DANIEL (25): "Well...it's not a case of *making you*..."

NATALIE (22): "It's also a comfort thing..."

DANIEL (25): "...but...when you watch...you know...movies, television, magazines, all that sort of stuff...when your culture is completely immersed in that...those sort of values...you know...and you grow up in that culture, *that* is what you value..."

NATALIE (22): "...and maybe that's where that comes from, like...you know...because so much of, your...whatever...is coming from media, like, watching films and, you know, advertising...and reading books and all that stuff...and then...maybe like, you know...early to mid twenties is the time where you figure out 'Oh – it's actually a load of bollocks...'...and that's where the crisis comes in...and it's like 'Oh – real world'..."

DANIEL (25): "Yeah...you realise that all of these things that you thought you would get...or you thought you *deserved*...and you wanted...and you're like...'Ok – I'm probably actually never going to attain any of these'...or...they're completely unrealistic dreams...um...yeah..."

(Further on in the conversation)

DANIEL (25): "You're conditioned to expect that from a young age though, I mean...from, well, as young as you can remember...you kind of expect that when you're older you should have this great job, that pays well and, you'll have this big house, fancy car...all that sort of stuff...and then you're just pretty much setting yourself up for disappointment..."

EVE (25): "...you want to have, like, a house, and a great job and be successful, and happy and healthy and everything, but I don't like...if I look at my family, it's like...well we don't have, like, the big house or the, like...my mum is passionate about her job but it's not like, the big, glamorous job and things like that...so...maybe it is TV??..." [*Focus Group 5*]

While the unrealistic images promoted as 'the standard' by the media may be of a somewhat more calculating origin, well-intentioned parents also added to the inflated expectations of emerging adults. Perhaps stemming from their more constrained upbringings and much fewer opportunities of being a 'baby boomer' child (when gender and social class had a much greater impact on determining life and career paths), and a desire for their children to have all the things that they never had, somewhere along the line parents begun spouting a rhetoric of 'you can be anything you want to be'. Whilst it might have seemed like an inspiring and empowering message, aimed at encouraging young people to look beyond their gender or social standing and focus on the possibilities rather than their limitations, many of the participants rejected this notion, reflecting on its role in creating unrealistic expectations. It appeared to lead to whimsical thinking and a blind confidence that diverted their attention away from learning to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses as a means of narrowing down career options and providing greater focus. From the emerging adults criticisms of this rhetoric it appears the saying needs to have

a lengthy caveat added into it, such as: 'You can be anything you want to be – that is from a limited range of jobs you will have exposure to and sufficient awareness of during your childhood and adolescent years; and also *can be* – some of the options requiring in the vicinity of seven years of study, and which ultimately require particular skill sets'.

AINSLEY (28): "... my parents used to always say to me, like, as a girl, you know...you're a girl, but you can do whatever you want...like, whatever you want to do...you can do it...and I think that actually was *not* a good thing to say...cos it like...I'm like 'I can do anything!! I can do everything!! [laughs]...and I took that to be that I *could* do everything, and that I didn't see what my limitations were..." [Focus Group 5]

ELIZABETH (21): "...and like, you're parents are telling 'you can do anything', you know, like....'anything you want to do you can do it'...and it's just...I was reading that somewhere, the other day, and it was saying you know, that your parents lie to you the whole way through your life...they lie to you about Santa, and about the tooth fairy and stuff like that, and they lie that you can do anything you ever want...you want to do, and mum was like "But you can.." ...and I was like "No you *can't!*.." ...you know, like.....just expect so much more of yourself....." [Focus Group 6]

Leading on from parents' misleading assurance that they could be anything they wanted to be, universities promised to make it happen. Tertiary education was pitched to the emerging adults as an 'investment in their future' to the extent that it was viewed as a ticket to guaranteed success. In the often highly sophisticated advertisements developed for universities by leading ad agencies, university education is promoted as the ticket to the 'good life', and (as with promises made by their parents) the emerging adults had viewed universities as trusted advisors with their best interests of foremost concern. They had expected a university education to automatically and immediately translate into a prestigious, exciting, high paying job upon graduation. However, hindsight had highlighted their covert underlying commercial motives, that they were essentially 'a business just like any other business'. This commerciality was accepted as logical and justified, the participants rueing their naivety in not recognising this earlier, however, the need for more objective advice was also raised.

AINSLEY (28): "I had the expectation of getting a job, like....that....you automatically kind of get a job from uni...I had this weird thing that 'Uni equals jobs'..."

EVE (25): "Oh yeah!..."

DANIEL (25): "Yeah..."

AINSLEY (28): "Ah, no...it doesn't..."

DANIEL (25): "Walk out the door and there's people lining up wanting to bring you to interview." [Focus Group 5]

MIKE (25): "I just don't think it's as simple, as it's portrayed in, in a lot of the...like, you see a lot of ads for universities and courses, and they say: 'Do this course, get a cool job!'...and, you know, it's just like any other ad – it's a bunch of crap...(shared laughter)...it's not the case at all..."

Interviewer: "So you think there's kind of a need for a more informed way to make educational decisions? or..."

MIKE (25): "Well, it's just, it's just so dangerous to go on...I didn't appreciate at the time that, um, to what extent universities are businesses just like any other business...they've gotta get students in to make their money, and, um, you know, they're not there to say, 'Look – you're really doing the wrong course...you should be at that university over there'...they're just as likely to say that as McDonalds is to say 'Look – you're more of a chicken person...you should go over to KFC' and, you know..."

JAKE (25): "Universities hire the career advisors to pull in the students as well, so it would be nice if there was a neutral, sort of, ground, where you can make your own decisions...but ah...it's tricky.." [Focus Group 1]

Instead of this being the exciting and wonderful time they had expected, complete with the perfect job, perfect partner, perfect house, and perfect life, the real world felt flat. There was no ticker-tape parade to welcome them and no-one else seemed to think they were as special as they thought they were. Far from employers 'lining up' and fighting over them in bidding wars to secure their 'special' knowledge and talent as they had expected, the emerging adults typically struggled to even get a foot in the door, rejected on the grounds of their 'lack of experience'. Considering how pervasive they found this attitude towards graduates to be, many were surprised that they had not been forewarned. Further complicating the situation was that some found they had effectively educated themselves *out* of a job, branded as overqualified for entry-level jobs (and thus perceived as likely to get bored quickly and move on) yet under-experienced for anything that would actually utilise their qualifications and challenge them.

NATALIE (22): "Yeah...there's still so....there's always that experience 'Catch 22' though, like.....I haven't applied for any amazingly high, whatever, jobs...but, there's always that sort of..." "Oh – we're looking for someone who has experience..." "...and I was like "Well how do you get experience??" [giggles] ...gimme a job!!...." [Focus Group 5]

MIKE (25): "...you can come out of your degree and you're going around looking for jobs and people are saying 'No, you're way too overqualified for this...you're going to get bored of this job in six months and bugger off somewhere else....well, when all you want to do is hang around and work your way through the company, if that's the way it works...." [Focus Group 1]

They had also underestimated (or had not been informed) how competitive the job seeking process would be. Far from their supposedly impressive qualifications being a

unique selling point, they found they were a 'dime a dozen'. This was explained as a motivation for continuing on with post-graduate study, the bar continually being raised as emerging adults sought a way to differentiate themselves from the pack. Some thought that maybe if they did just a little bit of extra study they would be able to bypass the 'work experience catch 22' and avoid the demoralising process of starting at the bottom and having to work their way up, a mindset which could easily turn into a vicious cycle.

ADAM (26): "You go to a job with a degree and they're like "Oh yeah – cool, well what have you done?..."...although, they still need to have the degree...."

DANIEL (25): "But that's probably because there's just so many people now with those degrees...and now it's a case of "Well okay – we've got this giant pool of applicants with the degree...but now we're looking for the experience as well so..."...I mean, and it is cos more and more people are going to university....there's more starting to go studying..."

NATALIE (22): "...so many people do go now [to university]...compared to, you know like, my parents generation etcetera...like...you know, it is a little bit devalued maybe...unless, like, if you do more...like, there's more emphasis on post-grad, and Masters etcetera now..." [*Focus Group 5*]

CRAIG (24): "...you have all these expectations...through university and high school and that, about jobs and all the rest...and then you sort of finish up and you're like...'Well – maybe it's not quite like that..'...or you need to be prepared to spend 2 or 3 years starting at the bottom and then working up...' '....So that's probably one of my motivations for carrying on with studying or going away or whatever, because I'm probably not prepared to put those two years in to hard yards...so that's a factor...push it out..." [*Focus Group 4*]

Compounding the shock and disappointment that university came with no 'money back guarantees' of a job at the end of it, despite how it had initially appeared, was that many could readily cite examples of friends or family members who had *not* gone to university and appeared to be better off (at least financially) than they were, via the time-honoured 'work your way up' route instead (which they found themselves faced with at the end of their degrees anyway). However, it appeared there was a tendency for people on each side of the fence (those who went to university and those who did not) to view the 'grass as greener on the other side'. Lisa and Elizabeth (both 21), who had gone straight into full-time employment from high school, had felt like they had 'one up' on their student friends during their friends' years of 'poor studenthood', being able to flaunt their steady income. However, as their friends graduated into what they also perceived from the outside to be great job prospects, their relative sense of success plummeted, feeling as if their progress had stalled and they were being left behind.

JAKE (25): "I had a friend, she um, sort of, quit school at 6th form and did finance and slowly just worked through, um, courses at work, and now she's on like, a 6 figure income, and I've been at uni for 10 years nearly (shared loud laughter)..."

Interviewer: "So it seems there's no 'one right way' really..."

JAKE (25): "Nah, well, it sucks when you see other people doing better than you when you've been taught education will pay off in the end..." [Focus Group 1]

LISA (21): "Like, S*** [her boyfriend] is almost better off...in a better position money wise than me and he doesn't even have a job yet, he's got a 3...like a business degree behind him, he's gonna be better than me, and like, as soon as he starts working his position is just gonna be like 100 times better than me...and I've been in the workforce for like 2 or 3 years...and I just...it just feels like I've just like, slammed the brakes on..."

ELIZABETH (21): "Yeah, I mean, that's the thing...like, when they were all studying, you know...we'd be like 'Yeah - I've got money'...you know...I can buy you a drink'....you know and then its...now it's kind of like 'Oh crap'...you know, like.....I don't know...." [Focus Group 6]

Once they finally got over the hurdle of the 'work experience Catch 22', participants seldom ended up in the glamorous, exciting jobs they thought they would end up in, instead often finding themselves in routine, unchallenging positions struggling to adjust to the monotony of the 'daily grind'. Having grown highly accustomed to a clear sense of linear progression and achievements through the education system, accompanied by variety, stimulating social provisions, and long holidays to pack a great number of activities and experiences into, the comparatively repetitive and time consumptive nature of working full-time could leave their lives feeling suddenly empty. Instead of basking in excitement at a time when 'the world is their oyster' as they had expected, they instead found themselves living in 'groundhog day', asking '*Is this just life?*' Perhaps in trying to hold onto their student days or to break the unfamiliar monotony of working week-in, week-out, regular drinking sessions were often mentioned as a common occurrence during their early working years, but which effectively became part of the repetitive cycle themselves. They often had a sense that their lives had lost meaning, with some (like Adam, aged 26, and Natalie, aged 22, below) attempting to break the cycle of monotony by searching for meaning through overseas adventures. These feelings were discussed as central to some participants' perceptions of what typifies a quarter-life crisis.

ADAM (26): "...how would I describe the quarter-life crisis?...let me think about this...you, you...kind of do a whole bunch of activities, or, you kind of, you know, do a bunch of jobs and things...and, you know, you've done school, you've done university...and you're into some type of job, no matter what it is...and a couple of years have passed...and suddenly you realise that...nothing's gonna change, and...you've just kind of reached this point where...you can either, you know, quit this job, you know...go do something else, or like...for me, it was like I got back from travelling, cos like I just went "Fuck it....I'm just going overseas', and just threw

myself overseas...just lived over there for a bit, and came back....I think it's kind of been a two-year quarter-life crisis....[laughs]...cos that was when...the start of it was when I just went 'What the hell? This is....you know...all I do is: Friday night I get really really drunk, and Saturday night I get really really drunk....Monday through Friday I just work and probably get really really drunk on maybe Wednesday....[loud shared laughter]...and there'd probably be some type of like 'sleaziness' through that week....um...and then, it'll just be this cycle of the week just going over, and over, and over, and over again...and then like I'll go 'Ah yeah – what did I do in the last year?...you know, I worked...I might have changed jobs, but...just stuff isn't changing...you realise that – 'Is this just life????'..."

DANIEL (25): "Same shit – different day..."

NATALIE (22): "...I think I had a crisis sometime this year, like, I....there was about 3 months where all I did do was go to work and then get drunk....um, yeah...it was kind of like that, but, it was like...that was the time where I was thinking about things, like, I had this....sudden, you know...I hate everything...like, I'd just broken up with my boyfriend of a year etcetera and was like 'Aaahhh'....and then was just working and was like 'I don't even want to be in the city....I'm in this concrete bunker of an apartment and....like, a friend of mine left to go overseas and then suddenly, like, him going was just like 'Ohh – I'm gonna miss him, I wanna go hang out with him overseas'....and it just like, actually made me realise...well not realise, but just *remember* that, that can be my focus....so...yeah...moved up here to...[pause]...be 'less comfortable'...[giggles]...yeah..." [Focus Group 5]

It was a time when they suddenly realised their days of unadulterated fun were over, that they would have to give up the carefree days of their youth for the unappealing responsibility and tough decisions of adult life. For some of the younger participants, a fear of letting go of their youth came early in their twenties, the idea that they were now accountable and responsible for their own lives inciting anxiety, sadness, and resistance. It dawned on them that they no longer had their youthful naivety as a buffer or an excuse for their bad decisions and missteps, sensing that people had a whole new level of expectations of them now and that they may need to change their 'self' to fit their new role as an adult, letting go of their childhood identity and creating a new one. Many felt they were not ready for this task and tried to find ways of putting off this transition and clinging to their youth. It was as though they had lived their lives to this point on a relative high and they viewed the transition to adulthood as a real 'downer'.

CLAIRE (21): "Yeah, that's the same as me...like last year when I was 19, when I turned 20...I was like crying I was like 'I don't want to be 20!'....I wanted to stay being a teenager cos you get away with so much stuff, and I enjoyed being, you know, young and stuff..."

KELLY (20): "I remember when I turned 20, last year...last November...and I invited my friends over to commiserate...I was like 'Oh god – I'm not a teenager, I'm getting so old now...'....now I'm like turning 21 and like my boyfriend's turning 25, and I'm like....'Oh my god...'....like...I suppose now I've got to start thinking about my future..."

CRAIG (24): "... don't want to be...considered an adult.....like being innocent.....you know...being able to get away with things....well, sort of, I like the idea of thinking 'Oh – you're young'....I like that, I think that's a compliment...like thinking 'You're too young to be

here'...sort of thing...."I think the longer you can push off being an adult the better.... [Focus Group 4]

ELIZABETH (21): "...when I was a teller, I was like 'I want to have more responsibility'...but now that I have it, I'm like 'Yeah –responsibility's overrated' and I'd rather just...have fun..." [Focus Group 6]

Disappointment in the way life at this point turned out to be could easily translate into disappointment with oneself. Many described a sense of deficiency or failure in their progress (or perceived lack thereof), tending to focus on all that they did not have at this point rather than being content with what they did have. The nagging feeling that life was just not what it was supposed to be was discussed in relation to the idea of a 'quarter-life crisis', as people struggled to reconcile what they had with what they wanted or to learn to accept their life and be content. A few expressed disappointment that they had allowed themselves buy into the hype of what this time of life should be like.

EVELYN (26): ".....I've seen quite a few of my friends go through it [the 'quarter-life crisis'] and I've always just been like 'What are you talking about?...'.like, they sort of go 'Oh my god, I'm 25...I've got, you know, I've got nothing to show for it...'...and I'm like 'Well yes you do – you've got this, you've got this, you've got this...'...and...they sort of go 'Well yeah, but there's still this feeling...." [Focus Group 2]

AINSLEY (28): "Yeah...actually that tangible thing, cos I get quite depressed when I think that I'm 28...and I don't have...I don't really own any furniture...I don't have a house....." [Focus Group 5]

CRAIG (24) – Focus group #4: "I think it's the time...when you sort of realize life isn't what it *should be*...or this isn't what I *planned*...["yeah" - Hannah]..."and that's that thinking stage, of sitting down and thinking...'I *really* didn't think I'd be here...right now'...and that's what I'd term...define a 'quarter-life crisis'...I think it's inevitable...I think it's probably...at some stage someone...definitely at that 25-26 year old age...pretty much everyone's gonna go through some form of it..." [Focus Group 4]

'A time of Disappointment' – Discussion of Findings

The finding that this phase was often experienced as an 'anti-climax', marred by disappointment, supports the inferences of previous authors which suggest that disappointment is a common feature of the quarter-life or emerging adult years. Robbins and Wilner (2001) postulated disappointment as one of the main 'symptoms' of a quarter-life crisis, while others Perrone and Vickers (2003), and Mortimer et al (2002) describe it as a result of the 'inflated expectations' that typically go unfulfilled

at this stage. However, these authors did not explore the spectrum of reasons that may lie behind these high expectations and subsequent disappointment. The findings of this study suggest that a variety of subtle yet powerful influences are at play, conditioning young people to expect more from their entrance into the 'real world' than it typically delivers - predominantly through the media, their parents' unconditional encouragement, and the glorified image of tertiary education.

The media may be one of the most powerful educators in young people's lives today, serving as "a window on a larger world outside their families and school" (Brown & Witherspoon, 2002, p. 154), or as a form of "super peer" (Strasburger, 2004). Although there is quite a wide body of research documenting linkages between media exposure and short-term effects on a range of specific, potentially harmful forms of behaviour such as violence (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005), sexual behaviour (Ladin L'Engle, Brown, & Kenneavy, 2006), alcohol/cigarette use (Tickle, Hull, Sargent, Dalton, & Heatherton, 2006), and disordered eating amongst young people (Field et al., 2001) (see Brown & Witherspoon, 2002 for a review of research across these topics), there is comparatively few studies that examine longer-term effects of prolonged media exposure in a more general context, such as how it impacts upon the broader worldviews and expectations of adolescents and emerging adults.

While the linkages between media exposure and readily observable and measurable behavioural outcomes such as smoking and violence may be relatively straightforward, its broader influences on the psyche of young people are more indirect, based on subtle but persistent messages that suggest who they should be and what they should value (Dittmar, 2008; Richins, 1991). The media and the consumer culture fostered by it have created what Arnould and Thompson (2005, p. 875) describe as "lifestyle and identity instructions that convey unadulterated marketplace ideologies (i.e. look like this, act like this, want these things, aspire to this kind of lifestyle)", creating materialistic value orientations (MVOs) that represent the "dark side" to consumer culture (Dittmar, 2008). With frequent references to material possessions and status symbols as things they considered pivotal to happiness and success, it was evident that such value orientations were deeply entrenched in many of the focus group

participants; values they were now forced to re-evaluate in light of the fact that they seldom had furniture let alone the grand house they had envisioned being able to put it in. Various studies have demonstrated negative relationships between MVOs and well-being in young people, with strong MVOs associated with lower self-actualisation, vitality, self-esteem, and relationship quality, and increased depression, anxiety, narcissism, physical symptoms and drug use (see studies by Kasser & Kanner, 2004; Saunders & Munro, 2000). Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) sheds some light on why the media, advertising and the associated MVOs espoused through these mediums can have such negative effects on individuals. Kasser and Kanner (2004, p. 17-19) highlight that such mediums model a "level of wealth that is unattainable by the average consumer and often show idealized versions of life....ads are often constructed to engender upward social comparisons that make viewers feel uncomfortably inferior". While people of all ages are targeted by advertising and encouraged to buy into fantasies of "the good life", adolescents may be most vulnerable to incorporating these values as part of their identities and 'possible selves' they perceive as achievable (Dittmar, 2008), with a tendency to use the media as a "tool kit' for possible ways of being" (Brown & Witherspoon, 2002, p. 155).

As young people internalise the images and values conveyed by the media, it seems their parents do little to counteract its effects in creating unrealistic expectations. If anything, it seems that they may serve to exacerbate such effects. Aside from television being used by some parents as a convenient 'babysitter' (Brown & Witherspoon, 2002), with children given open and unsupervised access to the values endorsed by the media, there also appears to be a tendency for parents to over-promise their children that they can 'be anything you want to be', over-entertain them with endless streams of stimulation and outlets for instant gratification, and over-protect them from the harsh realities of the 'real world'. As Levine (2005) suggests, these tendencies (however well-intentioned they may be) can paradoxically create a different form of 'deprivation', whereby they are unequipped to deal with many of the constraints, banalities, and adversities the real world presents. The stories of some participants in this study seemed to encapsulate Levine's (2005, p. 46) suggestion that young people can feel as if they are "destined to excel on automatic pilot, ever upward

towards success and glory without even trying particularly hard, sacrificing anything, or fretting about the future. There's something to be said about graduating from the 'school of hard knocks'. Except when it's too hard, that school can provide a valuable education".

Where the media's influences on young people may be driven by self-interest, and parents' influences may be driven by a desire to act in the 'best interests' of the child, the interests of tertiary institutions sit somewhere awkwardly in-between. The increasing commercialisation of tertiary institutions and their burgeoning participation in consumer culture and the associated ideologies is beginning to come under scrutiny. A critical review by Cote and Allahar (2006) of the life conditions and development of young people in industrialised societies today notes the "conflicts of interest" involved in the administration of tertiary institutions as commercial entities. It is clear that the esteemed position universities hold in particular, can place them in a position of power that becomes problematic in the conflict between student interests and an institution's commercial interests, which may not always be complementary. Extending work on the 'enterprise university' (Marginson & Considine, 2000), Marginson (2006) highlights the captivating role of prestige in driving young people's educational decisions, with the status of education as a commodified "positional good" (Hirsch, 1976; Marginson, 2006) having greater bearing on such decisions than the arguably more substantial element of teaching quality. It appears that while students may buy into the image of university education as a commodity, sometimes the practicalities of how their investment translates to market dividends is frequently overlooked. The translation from 'ivory tower' to the 'free market' can be a rude awakening for students experiencing the 'work experience catch 22', and it seems that universities should have an obligation to be more up-front about some of the limitations of their 'product' so as not to sell unrealistic images and 'overpromise and underdeliver'.

These disappointing discrepancies between the idealised lives the media, their parents, and university led them to expect and how things were actually turning out can be further considered in connection with the framework of Self-Discrepancy

Theory (Higgins, 1987). Self-Discrepancy Theory proposes that there are three primary domains of the 'self': the *actual* self (which refers to the representation of the attributes that either oneself or another person believes one *actually* possesses), the *ideal* self (which refers to the representation of the attributes that either oneself or another person would ideally *like* one to possess), and the *ought* self (which refers to the representation of the attributes that either oneself or another person believes one *should* possess) (Higgins, 1987). For the emerging adults these 'attributes' could be viewed as referring to both tangible possessions or symbolic representations of 'success' and psychological constructs such as 'satisfaction' and 'fulfillment'. It appeared that the emerging adults were experiencing several different types of self-discrepancy at once, most prominently between their 'actual/own versus ideal/own' self, with an absence of the positive outcomes they hoped for by this stage leading to what Higgins (1987) describes as 'dejection-related emotions' – disappointment and dissatisfaction. They also appeared to be experiencing 'actual/own versus ideal/other' and 'actual/own versus ought/own' types of self-discrepancy, based on the absence of positive outcomes they perceived parents to ideally expect from them (leading to further dejection-related emotions such as shame and feeling downcast), and on the sense that their comparatively un-glamorous or monotonous lives were not what they were 'ought' to be (leading to 'agitation-related emotions' such as self-contempt and uneasiness). As Higgins (1987) hypothesised, in cases where an individual possesses more than one type of self-discrepancy, they are likely to experience most strongly the discomfort associated with whichever discrepancy is of the largest magnitude and accessibility. The great discrepancy between the unrealistic 'ideal' self portrayed by the media and their 'actual' self, as well as the continued dominance of these ideals, may thus explain why disappointment was one of the most salient emotions apparent in the emerging adults' stories. Additionally, the cumulative effects of the various negative emotions associated with multiple discrepancies may provide some insight into why this may be experienced as a time of crisis for some emerging adults.

As quarter-lifers make the transition to the real-world it appears that they are confronted with the shock of discovering that much of what they had grown to believe in, and the aspirations they held, were based on an alluring illusion. They had been

effectively set up for disappointment, their lives 'overpromised and underdelivered'. This experience could easily become a precipitant for crisis in the quarter-life stage as individuals struggle to close the gaps between the expected and the experienced, to revise their deeply entrenched but unrealistic expectations and values, and to start from scratch in trying to make sense of the world and their place in it.

THEME TWO:

A TIME OF DISINTEGRATION AND DISEQUILIBRIUM - When plans unravel and lives come adrift.

Far from having it 'sorted by now' as they had expected, many of the participants found themselves actually getting *further* away from that ideal. As their relatively carefree student days came to a close and the reality of having to chart their next steps all on their own sunk in, many came to the unsettling realisation that they had no idea what to do next. Some who thought they had rock solid plans suddenly found they had become untenable or undesirable, while others found that what they had thought was a plan was really not one at all. Either way, many referred to 'the plan' as if it were some kind of transcendent vision, as no matter how vague it was, it was typically the only one they had. Instead of 'the plan' seamlessly 'clicking into place', the road map was disintegrating into a myriad of different routes right in front of them, leaving them in a state of disequilibrium, mourning the sense of direction they had lost.

One of the major factors that led to the emerging adults finding themselves in this precarious position appeared to be flawed or non-existent decision-making strategies. Often these were manifested as the participants made their way through the tertiary education system, many tending to drift into it and drift out. Although university is purported to prepare emerging adults for entry to the 'real world' and serve as a gateway to a career path, it appeared that university graduates generally had greater difficulty dealing with the actual transition process than those who entered full-time employment directly from school. This may be attributable to the fact that university 'decisions' were rarely made in connection with a life or career path afterwards, but rather on a more isolated, reactive basis.

The decision to go to university was frequently a normative one. For some participants it was simply 'the done thing', citing their parents expectations, conforming to what their peers were doing, or because they didn't know what else to do and it seemed to 'tack on' to the end of high school quite nicely. A few participants described having 'instincts' that another option may have suited them better personally, but the normative pull and influence of others encouraging them to go to university was too strong.

DANIEL (25): "...sort of finished high school and just had this idea that you should go to university, once you finish high school, and I didn't have a clue what I was going to do, I was like 'Arghhh...'...and so my father suggested that I move down to Auckland with him and study at Massey, or study at Auckland, whatever...and I'm like 'Yeah alright' – and just picked a random BA degree, and just ran with that for three years...I just...it was absolutely pointless but, you know...it seemed like it was what everyone else was doing...didn't really stop and think, or sort of get my bearings...." *[Focus Group 5]*

MIKE (25): "Yeah...you know, like, one of the things that I was tossing up, when I was choosing, was to do the Bachelor of Communication studies at AUT, which is like a really practical thing, but, um, I was actually talked out of that...um...by my mum, believe it or not, because she wanted me, like, to do like um, like a 'proper' university.....yeah...which I've regretted...I wish I'd stuck to my guns cos I really think it would have suited me a lot more to do a practical course..." *[Focus Group 1]*

Decisions that were made reactively in selecting courses and majors for university were seldom questioned during the process of completing their studies, and if they were, any doubts that surfaced were often pushed back down by a reluctance to give in and accept the 'sunk costs' of a bad decision. Once caught up on the 'education treadmill', the participants had tended to manage their lives one semester at a time, guided by the structure imposed by university and focusing on the concrete goals set for them by the education curriculum. They appeared to be too mired in the detail of their everyday lives to see the bigger picture, and few took time during these three to four years to sit down and seriously contemplate their direction. Some participants were conscious that they were not enjoying their chosen studies and had made a 'false start', but felt compelled to see it through. Even early on in their degrees the fairly rapid 'escalation of commitment' became a factor constraining them from making adjustments, and they effectively became locked on a path they did not feel sure about.

NATALIE (22): "...that's like...I mean....you go to high school, and you go to uni, blah, blah, blah...like, just sort of...have this *flow*...and then, like...don't stop and really *think*...like, actually just take time out to *think...really hard*...." [Focus Group 5]

CRAIG (24): "...it's hard, because then....[to group] I don't know what you guys were like but all through high school and things, I knew exactly what I was doing the following year and...bang, bang, bang...and then you finish your degree and then it's just like...'What do I do now?...'

HANNAH (24): "That was the really scary thing... halfway through this year I'm like...'What am I gonna do?!...What am I gonna do when I finish?...'...like, my whole life I've been prepped...'You're going to university, you're going to university, you're going to university...'...and then I stop....and there's nothing else...like, what goes beyond the, finishing my degree?....." [Focus Group 4]

MIKE (25): "Once you get started, it's so hard to, you know, to realise...'actually this isn't for me'...and you know, you drop 4 grand on the first year of a course and spend a whole year studying...and then you think 'should I spend another two years and finish this off? Or....'although I know this isn't really for me'...but you've already...the escalation of commitment comes up so quick before you realise..." [Focus Group 1]

As illustrated in Craig and Hannah's comments above, the university experience can be an insular one, where life beyond graduation can seem almost inconsequential to students until it is bearing down upon them. Through the shelter of the education curriculum and the flow of university study, few of the participants gained first-hand exposure to their chosen field and did not test the realities of their decision. They were largely 'uninformed consumers' of their education. As a result of the lack of consideration they had given to how their field of study would translate to specific jobs, a number of the emerging adults found themselves stranded upon graduation, exploring job options open to them and finding them unappealing. They realised they had taken a wrong turn somewhere and ended up in the wrong place. Some participants discussed this as being a potential instigator of a quarter-life crisis. They had not really had to use their initiative before and did not appear to know where to start. So much emphasis and guidance was focused on getting to this point, but here it stopped abruptly. They appeared to feel as if they had been led all their lives and then suddenly abandoned and told to find their own way.

KATIE (27): "I went straight from high school to uni....and I didn't know what I wanted to do [giggles]...and you tend to either do what you're good at, or what you're interested in...and that's what happened to me, I got to the end of the degree and went 'Hang on...[laughs]...now I don't think any of the jobs that are actually open to me are what I want to do...better think of something fast!'...you know....so I did an extra year after it..." [Focus Group 3]

AINSLEY (28): "Do you think like after uni's kind of a time when a lot of people have that quarter-life crisis?...Because you kind of get a bit disillusioned..."

NATALIE (22): "Yeah..."

AINSLEY (28): "...because then you're like 'thrown out' to try and figure out what you want to do with what you've done...or whatever..."

DANIEL (25): "Into the 'big, bad world' ..."

AINSLEY (28): "Yeah...and it's kind of like this disillusionment, and that....I think a lot of people I know have had that.....like at the end of their uni career..."

DANIEL (25): "I got that too...and I ended up taking a job which I really didn't like, and working at it for ages...cos I just didn't really know..."

NATALIE (22): "...cos, yeah..., like, I know a couple of people who, like, just got *really freaked out* once they finished their degree...it was just like "*Huuuuuhhh* [long gasp]...now I actually have to *go do something* with this!!..."...and it was always the people who...hadn't *messed* around at all....like, you know.....like, had done it within 4 years and had worked hard etcetera..."

DANIEL (25): "Yeah...that...that was exactly it....left high school – went to university – finished university got the bit of paper and then thought '*What the fuck??!*'... [Focus Group 5]

There were also several participants for whom the idea of university education as leading onto something was unimportant, instead viewing university education as a mere 'end in itself', as a rite of passage or artefact of achievement, such as Craig (aged 24) below, not long from graduating with a Masters degree.

CRAIG (24): "Yeah, like, I think that the whole university thing, like the degree and even the thought of getting the Masters is really just an accomplishment...like, didn't really...it's just a 'tick the box' – move on...I guess that may be a bit narrow or short-sighted...but I still feel that way....." [Focus Group 4]

While the process of drifting through university without thought to the real world implications of their decision was subconscious for some, for others it served as a welcome form of procrastination. A few of the participants noted the ability to 'put decisions off' during university and 'push out' their entry into the real world. They appeared afraid to confront the intense, unsettling decisions required for planning their future, and discovered university could serve as a stall tactic through which they could 'buy some time'.

Aside from these flawed or non-existent strategies in making seemingly haphazard education decisions (preventing them from making fitting and durable plans for their entry into the real world), some found that their identity had shifted and they had '*moved on*' from their initial plans, often without them realising. This revelation could be quite startling for the emerging adults who experienced this feeling, coming to terms with the fact that they had been holding onto plans and dreams that were no longer 'them'. Although their identity and interests may have changed gradually and subconsciously 'while they were not looking', the realisation that this had happened appeared to come suddenly and unexpectedly. They found themselves having to let go of what may once have been core to their sense of self and sense of direction and

having to construct a new identity and plan in its place. This could leave them feeling entirely lost.

HANNAH (24): "You reach a point where you, like....When you're young...you're like: 'This is what I'm gonna do, this is what's gonna happen, here's my plan...I'll travel here for this period...I'll have a relationship with this person for this long....and then I'll have...da, da, da....and then all of a sudden you just realise '*No friggen way...*'...and it's scary....it's like 'Oh my god!'...you know....and it's hard to accept too...it's hard to accept that all your best made plans are just going out the window, and you don't want to do those things anymore.....and then what?....you have to start like a new plan of action....." [Focus Group 4]

DANIEL (25): "I had the fact, that you sort of reach a point where you're like 'I *did* have these goals for myself....I just haven't achieved *any* of them'...or, you know...you haven't achieved the ones that really mattered to you...and you've kind of been chasing these goals that you then look back and go 'They're not even important to me anyway...'*so....*'" [Focus Group 5]

NATALIE (22): "... that's probably the point where I fell down in university, cos like....I was always...I was 'drama geek' in high school, and then....you know, when I did first year of uni they didn't have any Practical Theatre at Victoria, until second year...and so I was just like 'La la la – I'm gonna do acting...I'm gonna do it'...and don't actually like theatre all that much, I like film, but I'm gonna do that...and then I got there and *couldn't stand it*, and then I was just like...."

DANIEL (25): "Already spent a whole year..."

NATALIE (22): "...this is what I've...kind of liked the most for the past 17 years....Oh 10 or whatever...[laughs]...yeah I'm bad at maths....um...and then I was like 'Oh – I don't know now...'*so yeah, that was....some kind of ambition....*'" [Focus Group 5]

One participant sought to escape this unsettling feeling by retreating back to the shelter of university again. When a long-held dream of competitive sailing in Europe that he had been directing all his focus and energy towards was no longer appealing to him, he sought comfort in the shelter of university (a 'safe haven'), where things made sense and he could distract himself from the uncertainty of his future:

CRAIG (24): "...I was just...a bit sad because I'd been putting *all* my effort into doing that, and then I'm like 'I'm here...'*and I remember sailing on the boat...sitting there and going 'This is quite boring...'*and 'I've been busting my ass to get here..'* – and then I'm like ...'Oh well now I'm here...well...'*

Interviewer: "...*What next?...'*

CRAIG (24): "...*'What next?'*...yeah...which I guess the...go back to school was the easy answer..." [Focus Group 4]

Having found that some things in their 'master plan' did not fit anymore they often started to scrutinise their other choices and decisions, swamped by a deluge of questions that sought answers to the penultimate question – 'What am I doing with my life?' It was an intensely introspective time during which snowballing doubts and anxieties could lead them into a downward spiral of 'crisis-like' proportions.

AMY (25): "I think it's definitely the case [that there is a 'quarter-life crisis']...you sort of get to that stage where you're sort of like 'Oh my gosh – where am I going? What am I doing? Why haven't I done this? Why haven't I got that? Why haven't I done...you know, Why aren't I in this job?...That person's doing better than me? Why aren't I doing that?...I think it's definitely, there is something...you're always...looking at yourself..."

ELLE (26): "...I knew *exactly* where I was going until a few big things happened and then...like going through the whole addiction thing and sort of thinking...'Oh do I really want to do this career that I've always 'wanted' to do...and 'Oh maybe I should do this? Maybe I should do that?' and it reached a stage where I *could not* make a decision...like, I just had all these ideas and nothing that I was really too certain about....and I even considered being a train driver, like, that was one of my [laughs]...serious!...like, yeah...I was just *confused as* and just thinking 'Oh my gosh – I've gotta somehow get a house...like house prices just make it *impossible...how the hell am I ever gonna do that? Oh my god...*and it's like 'How do I find this partner? I mean...How do I know if he's the right one?...and there's a few things there that...hmm...Do I put up with that or do I just be really happy that...all the great things about him, and it's like...'Oh my God'....it's like all these big decisions...and it's like, you know...and then Kiwisaver...and it's 'Oh my God – saving for your retirement!' [laughter]...and it's like "I can't even save up for a house!'...[laughter]...and it's like....yeah...suicide material!..." [Focus Group 2]

EVE (25): "...sometimes it's that drunken realization though...'what am I doing with my life??.....for me, for me...it came with like...I'd been with someone for quite a long time and it was the, you know...you break up, you move out of house...I was changing jobs at the same time, and it was like...'What am I doing?...What am I doing with my life??...Ohhh..."

DANIEL (25): "That's the question ay?!...that's..."

EVE (25): "...I haven't...I haven't...and it's just like the...you know...it just takes one little thing like that to like "Oh my god – I'm *still* studying?.....and it just kind of spirals a bit....." [Focus Group 5]

'A time of Disintegration and Disequilibrium' – Discussion of Findings

This second theme concerns the finding that on top of (or perhaps leading on from) the disappointment that they had not made the progress they had originally anticipated by this stage, some found their plans seemed to be falling completely apart as they made the transition to the real world, at the same time the comforting structure of the education curricula was removed. Any false sense of security or certainty they had about the ease of the transition seemed to be fairly rapidly stripped away, leaving them exposed to the incessant demands of the real world. The experiences of these emerging adults called into question the utility of a 'pathways' framework for conceptualising young people's transition to full-time employment. If 'career pathways' are supposed to guide emerging adults through the transition from educational settings to the 'real world' it appears many (particularly those on a university-based pathway) are sleepwalking their way along them, suddenly waking up and not knowing where they are, or that the structured path has led them to a daunting abyss.

From the stories of participants in this study, there appeared to be a number of different scenarios that could lead them to find their plans disintegrating at this stage, such as: 1) They had (either consciously or subconsciously) put off developing a plan for their transition, 2) They hadn't actually thought to develop a plan until they were faced with having to put one into action, 3) They couldn't bring themselves to abandon a plan they had already made substantial investments in, or 4) They discovered retrospectively that somewhere along the path they had changed and they were no longer committed to the plan. This section examines why these various scenarios may occur.

Participants representing the first two scenarios listed above were typically university graduates. Their experiences appeared consistent with the findings of previous studies which have suggested that university often serves as an 'extension of high school' such that it barely constitutes a decision (Mortimer et al., 2002; Perrone & Vickers, 2003), and that it potentially allows students to be 'aimless' (Vaughan, 2005). In such instances, university study becomes less of a pathway and more of a facility for undecided young people to disguise their uncertainty and lack of direction under the pretence of doing something purposeful. Some sincerely hope for university to provide the direction they need, while others seem to use it as a means for avoiding "genuine if difficult decisions" (Vaughan, 2005). The findings of this study suggest that while some undecided young people enter university with the hopes of it somehow *becoming* a pathway to work, they often do not follow-up with the intensive self-evaluation and tough decisions required to shift it from a superficial aim of 'getting a university education under their belt', to a more strategic process aimed at setting them up towards careers they have a durable interest in. The eminence of university education as a salient, apparently logical decision (a 'no-brainer') may make it a pathway they tend to pursue with a blind confidence that it will naturally lead them to the right place.

Raffe (2003) describes "academic drift" as the tendency for increasing proportions of young people to 'drift' towards university study (what he categorises as 'general' pathways) over pursuing 'vocational pathways' such as apprenticeships and the like,

pathways that have been found to be more likely to lead directly into the labour market (Raffe, 2003). This process of “academic drift” was certainly evident in the stories of participants in this study, however, it was also apparent that such pathways can be *too* general, whereby young people may continue the ‘drifting’ process through them without even realising, eventually finding a disconnect between their qualifications and their actual job-related interests upon entering the real world. Indeed, one of the criticisms of the pathways framework is that it can be overly ‘loose’ with respect to links between education and work (J. Higgins, 2002; Vaughan, 2005). Unfortunately, many young people seem to find themselves so caught up in the chase for a qualification, on a form of ‘education treadmill’, that they can ‘run’ for three or so years only to stop and realise they have not actually reached a ‘destination’.

It also appeared that even when many of the participants did reach their intended destination of their pathway they could realise that they no longer wanted to be there. Many found their goals, interests or identity had shifted since they set out on the pathway. While Erikson’s (1968) earlier theory located identity development quite firmly in adolescence, a number of studies have characterised continued identity explorations as a feature of the new and distinctive emerging adulthood stage (Arnett, 2000, 2001; Cote, 2000; Kroger, 2007; Schwartz, Cote, & Arnett, 2005), and the stories of the participants in this study suggested many were still struggling to define a sufficient sense of self to commit to a career pathway and be happy and confident in their choice. Although some authors have recently suggested that vocational interests become increasingly stable between the ages of 18 and 21 as young people ‘increase their self awareness and occupational knowledge’, becoming ‘highly’ stable through the college years and beyond (Low, Yoon, Roberts, & Rounds, 2005), this study calls such findings into question. From a number of participants in this study it appeared that vocational interests can be subject to a complete overhaul in the early to mid-twenties as individuals begin ‘reality testing’ them (later than Low et al, 2005 would suggest). These participants were surprised to find themselves no longer attracted to jobs or careers they had considered to be prime interests or long-held dreams that they had spent years working towards. This experience could feel like the rug had

been pulled out from under them, knocking them off their feet, and throwing the rest of their world into disequilibrium.

Some participants' plans fell apart on entering the real world because they had effectively found themselves 'stuck' on a pathway they did not feel committed to, yet felt compelled to see through to the 'bitter end'. Although the pathways model is argued to be flexible (see Raffe, 2003), whereby "[e]ven if pathways have developed in an unplanned way, they can be reconstructed or modified" (Raffe, 2003, p. 4) the findings of this study suggest that this is an overly simplistic view, and this supposed flexibility does not always transpire in practice. University education is expensive (prohibitively so for many young people), and the idea that they can easily 'reconstruct or modify' their educational path does not take into account the reality of 'sunk costs' (Arkes & Blumer, 1985), and the 'escalation of commitment' (Staw, 1981) as factors that impact upon an individual's perceived flexibility to change course. Research on the 'escalation of commitment' (Staw, 1981) highlights the role that 'sunk costs' have in locking individuals into a costly, failing course of action. Although it is typically a more logical decision to accept sunk costs, cut one's losses and not allow them to get in the way of subsequent decisions, individuals may defy such logic and 'throw good money after bad' in attempts to justify their initial decision to themselves (protecting their own self-image) or to others (Ramona Bobocel & Meyer, 1994; Staw, 1981) such as their parents or peers.

The variety of issues discussed thus far in this section may be behind the tendency for some emerging adults to engage in decision avoidance. A lack of preference stability, costs in changing the status quo, and anticipated regret are noted as being key antecedents of decision avoidance (Anderson, 2003). When young people are faced with high stakes decisions that they do not feel prepared to deal with, postponing these decisions may serve as an effective 'coping strategy' (du Bois-Reymond, 1998) to temporarily ease their anxiety. However, the long term ramifications of this strategy may put them in the position that they will find themselves stranded without a plan at the time when they need one most, making the transition to the unrelenting real world even harder.

That young people can reach the end of a three or four year degree (accompanied by \$14,620 of student loan debt on average - *Source: Statistics New Zealand, www.stats.govt.nz*), only to discover that they do not want to work in the area of their qualification, is highly problematic and should not be considered an acceptable outcome from the educational system. It is important that such costly decisions are founded on sound information and that these foundations are tested regularly along the way, with various checks in place to ensure greater flexibility to change and minimisation of sunk costs. It seems that the apparently inextricable link between high school and university in modern society may not incite the change students may need to experience in order to prompt serious thinking about their futures. Self-assessment seems to come more suddenly and drastically after they have completed university - by which time their ability to re-think their decisions is greatly complicated by the time and money they have already invested in their education.

THEME THREE:

A TIME OF COMPLEXITY – Coping with choices, changes, and conflicts.

The emerging adults' feeling of being *underwhelmed* at their experience of entering the real world, and their perceived lack of progress they had made towards their goal lifestyle, appeared to sit in tension with a simultaneous feeling of being *overwhelmed* by the onslaught of difficult choices they felt forced to make, and changes they had to deal with. They had a sense of being pulled in multiple directions, their own wants conflicting with others expectations, or even having conflicting wants within themselves. They found themselves thrown in at the deep end of the decision pool, but no-one had taught them how to really swim. As a result they floundered, paralysed by indecision. They felt they had too many options, too much 'floating'.

LISA (21): "I feel like I've got too much floating, like too many routes to go...and they're all sort of about as 'easy' as each other, but I don't know which one's more desirable..." [Focus Group 6]

GEORGINA (26): "...there's more opportunity and more information out there now....like, the internet...everything's accessible...um.....and also...I just think there's more of this idea that 'anything is possible now'...you know...." [Focus Group 5]

AMY (25): "I think there's too many options, I think that can be the problem sometimes...is that you can basically do whatever you want really...so you've got too many options and that causes more...anxiety about what you're going to do..." [Focus Group 2]

ELIZABETH (21): "There's quite a bit of pressure ay...yeah...I remember my mum saying that to me, you know, saying like "I think you guys just have too many options", you know, like...and that's the thing..." [Focus Group 6]

Much of the pressure and anxiety they felt from the overwhelming array of options that lay before them seemed to stem from the fact that they felt they had too much to lose from settling on just one. They wanted to 'have it all', a concept that had seemed entirely plausible in theory when they had been exploring their options, but they found was not so simple when it came to the 'crunch' and they had to choose. They appeared unwilling to compromise, after all they had been taught to expect the best for themselves and did not see why they should have to settle for anything less. The psychological conflict of having to make trade-offs and compromises at this 'crunch time' was evident in the following comments by 24-year-old Craig, who was struggling to decide whether to go with a 'safe', logical option or throw caution to the wind and risk it all by going after a long-held dream. He found himself 'between a rock and a hard place' with potential for regretting the sacrifices he made if he failed, or for regretting a missed opportunity and having to spend the rest of his life wondering 'what could have been'. These were 'high stakes' decisions that he did not feel prepared to make, and he cursed his insatiable sense that the 'grass is always greener' somewhere else.

CRAIG (24): "..... I can sort of see the goals I had through high school...some pretty major goals...which now I have the choice of pursuing or compromising on...and, the real world would probably say 'compromise'...but if I *do*...that means in five years time I'll probably regret it...and I don't really want to be like that....but the goals I have are very expensive and very time-consuming goals....The problem is that....everything that I want to do has consequences, or potential consequences..... and I talk myself out of it....so, I'm getting pulled in these goals, or these things that I want to do...but, everything has problems associated with it, that pull me in other directions that causes the indecisiveness...you know, like I could go away for the next three years, but then I'd miss my friends, my family, and....you know....something...bad things do happen...but then I could get hit by a bus tomorrow!..." [Focus Group 4]

CRAIG (24): "I think the big thing is...like...the grass is always greener....like...and, when I've been away [working overseas]...all I've wanted to do is come home and go to school...and now I'm at school, it's like, all I want to do is go back...[shared laughter]...over there, you know...and...that makes it hard..." [Focus Group 4]

It was a time where they also had to come to grips with the realisation that they were now held solely responsible for whatever the consequences of their choices may be, a

frightening prospect. Sometimes this involved a complicated process of trying to disentangle *whose* choices had actually led them to this point and trying to figure out who or what played the biggest role in defining what they want from life – themselves, their parents, their peers, or the media? For some, this was therefore a time when they sought to delve beneath the layers of others’ influences and try to uncover what *they* really want. However, some (such as Elizabeth, aged 21, below) found these confronting self-directed questions too much to handle and would rather divulge the responsibility for such difficult choices to *others* instead of having to deal with the confronting task of trying to figure out ‘who they are’ and what they want. Overwhelmed by the options in front of them and paralysed with the uncertainty of their situation, they felt that others may know them better than they know themselves and actually toyed with the idea of having other people make their choices *for* them, being willing to surrender their freedom of choice in favour of a more prescribed direction.

ADAM (26): “It’s quite hard to filter through what *you* want, and what you’re pretty sure other people have made you want...”

NATALIE (22): “Yeah...”

ADAM (26): “Like....I’m pretty sure that I want this....I mean I can’t remember when it started...it might have been when my brother started telling me that I should do something with my life...dammit!’...[laughs]...yeah....”

AINSLEY (28): “You mean, like, other people’s expectations?....”

ADAM (26): “...like, the whole....you’re parents have kind of bred into you, like, the whole ‘needing a house’, and get married, and have kids.....you know, I’m kind of like ‘I *think* I want that?....When did I start wanting that?....Or do I want to just travel around?’...” [Focus Group 5]

LISA (21): “I just get different pressures from different people, everyone has a different pressure on me...like, what they want....so then you kind of don’t know what *you* want in the end....and you’re like [gasps] “Which way do I go?....yeah, I mean like...I don’t feel I *have* to but then I don’t know what I want to do anyway...”

JANE (20): “I wish you could just be told what you’re gonna be...”

ELIZABETH (21): “I know, exactly!...I just want somebody to tell me “Ok – EH...No, you should just go travelling”...you know, or like “No – you should do this study, and it will be fine”.... “I just want to be told – “do this, you’ll be good at it, you’ll be successful...just do it”....” [Focus Group 6]

The choice they appeared to experience the most difficulty with was trying to find a career that would ‘tick all the boxes’; that is, one that would provide a combination of enjoyment, challenge, fulfilment, status, income, and flexibility to allow a good balance with outside interests. Trying to fulfil these ambitious criteria could see their occupational interests swing wildly from wanting to be an academic to wanting to be a

train-driver; from wanting to be an artist to wanting to be a high-powered businesswomen; from being a corporate professional to wanting to pack it all in and become a builder.

MIKE (25): "It's hard though when you're expected to...it's hard enough just finding a job that you're interested in, but you're expected to find something that you're interested in, that uses your skills to their full potential, that has a long-term, sort of, future...It's hard to find all that out of a job..." [Focus Group 1]

LISA (21): "Like, I got all like 'Yeah – I'm gonna be like a high-powered businesswoman'...and then I was kind of like....'No – but I like doing arty stuff'...and 'I'm kind of like 'maternally' as well'...and, 'now I kind of want to go and get some money though....but Oh I want to have fun, and I want to play around'...and I'm too 'wishy-washy'...like, with what I want..." [Focus Group 6]

AARON (28): "Yeah, to be honest I still don't know really [loud laughter]...I'm 28 now and I still don't know really what I want to do!...you know, from say 30 to 40...and, if I want to stay in my profession or just go buy a business...or go be a police officer...university didn't sort that out for me....working in the financial industry 7 years hasn't either...um....still wonder 'Is this what I'm sposed to be doin?' [laughs]...degree and all!..."

MARK (28): "I think certainly, yeah...the days of getting a job and staying in it for life are, in general, well gone...yeah...and yeah...I, every now and then think 'Well...should I change tack completely?...go be a builder or something like that...you know...it is..."

AARON (28): "Yeah I've certainly noticed it amongst my peers, just in the bank...all under 30, and...they ask the same questions, you know...'What am I doing this for?'...or, 'Is this what I want to do?'...degree or no degree...[laughs]...it's interesting...have some interesting conversations!..." [Focus Group 3]

AINSLEY (28): "It's quite cool, like, having that flexibility, like....I think a lot of people my age are a lot more flexible....like we can do lots of different things really well...like, not just like one skill or one thing, you know..."

DANIEL (25): "That's not necessarily a *good* thing...I think..."

AINSLEY (28): "It *can* be..."

DANIEL (25): "It *can* be...but it also complicates you like....'What can I do?'..."

ADAM (26): "The sky's the limit..." [Focus Group 5]

Some also struggled with the notion that they were expected to find one person who they would spend the rest of their life with. While to choose a career that they acknowledged may change in ten years anyway was difficult enough for some individuals, the idea of a 'life partner' was almost incomprehensible.

MIKE (25): "I don't think I could ever go into anything with that sort of certainty ay...Like, you say it's either right or it's not...I don't know how I could....I can't help but second guess everything, you know...I mean, my girlfriend and I have been together for a long time but I...I just don't know how I could ever say, about somebody..."Yep this is...this is it for the rest of my life..." [Focus Group 1]

Although many expressed appreciation that they were able to extend the exploration process and trial different jobs, relationships, and lifestyles while they did not have the

responsibilities of children, marriage, or a mortgage to worry about, some appeared to be tiring of such restless transience, with an underlying longing for some sense of certainty and meaning. They appeared to have a 'love-hate' relationship with change, wanting freedom and variety yet also craving stability. With previous plans disintegrating right in front of them and too many options to choose from, many of the emerging adults expressed dissatisfaction with sticking with the 'status quo' yet did not know what to change it for. It could also feel as if they were walking a fine line between 'too soon' and 'too late', not wanting to give up their independence and flexibility too soon but at the same time nervous that it could all too quickly become too late. While a number of participants in their mid-twenties spoke of being appreciative of their current freedom through their twenties, there was still reference to some form of 'age 30 deadline' in relation to overseas travel and getting married, with the window of opportunity for these to ideally occur perceived as becoming narrower and more pressured. The following discussion between a group of participants in their mid to late twenties exemplifies these conflicting desires between wanting to enjoy the freedom they had from not being 'locked down' or committed to a particular path or responsibilities, and wanting something 'secure' to anchor them and give them some sense of direction in their life. In this discussion, material possessions such as furniture took on a more symbolic meaning.

AINSLEY (28): "...I don't...there's...I just don't have anything really [giggles]...to like, sort of tangible, to say 'I'm 28'...[giggles]..."

GEORGINA (26): "Yeah...but that's good, because then you can decide one day, 'Oh – I want to leave tomorrow' ...and you can just go...[laughs]..."

DANIEL (25): "But often, is that what you really need?..."

AINSLEY (28): "I think I actually specifically did it like that, because I wanted to be able to do that, but then, I still have that feeling of, like, 'Oh – I wish I had it...'...so it's kind of like this double...yeah..."

DANIEL (25): "Yeah, that's probably the two...you know, there's the one side of you which wants to be free and have all those options, and the other side that wants to own all the fancy stuff and have..."

AINSLEY (28): "...stability..."

DANIEL (25): "Yeah...that stability..."

AINSLEY (28): "Yeah..."

DANIEL (25): "...live like out of the movies....or a catalogue..." [Focus Group 5]

CRAIG (24): "...I'm thinking 'Well...the next 10 years....I can do this [alternate between travelling and studying], but...after I'm 30 I can be doing the real world stuff'but for the next 10-8 years I may as well go enjoy it...but then reality kicks in...'well...need to buy a house and all of that stuff...'...so I think it's just that age of indecisiveness..." [Focus Group 4]

One participant (Adam, aged 26, below) spoke of this time of life as being ‘full of new freedoms – but it’s really hard to enjoy them because you’re too busy feeling lost’, while another invoked the term ‘positive confusion’ to describe the awkward juxtaposition between being excited but overwhelmed at the array of options available.

Interviewer: “... how would you kind of sum up in one statement ‘your life in your 20s’ then.....?.....Can you do that do you think?....”

DANIEL (25): “Rollercoaster ride...”

ADAM (26): “... ‘Full of new freedoms – but it’s really hard to enjoy them...’...can I make it rhyme?...Nah – it’s just full of heaps more freedoms which nobody used to have, but it’s easy to not enjoy them...because, like, you’re too busy feeling lost...”

NATALIE (22): “That...that is so true....”

EVE (25): [referring to ADAM’s summation] “That’s *good!*.....”

GEORGINA (26): “Or not having the money to do any of them...[chuckles]...” [Focus Group 5]

Overlaying their difficulty making choices was that the emerging adults wanted it all, they wanted it now, and they wanted it easy. That was just the way they expected it to be. As part of their earlier ‘planning’ process, many of the participants had set high expectations (‘wanting it all’), combined with over-ambitious time-frames (‘wanting it now’), and had not factored in that it might take a significant amount of hard work and time to actually achieve the high flying lifestyle they expected (‘wanting it easy’). Patience was rarely a virtue of the emerging adults and they were losing the little that they had.

ELIZABETH (21): “We just want *everything*...we want everything...we want to be with our friends, you know...you don’t want to move to Palmerston North, we want to be able to do it *now*, you know...we don’t want to have to *pay* for it, we want it to be easy, but.....it’s *not*...and that’s *why*...” [Focus Group 6]

‘A time of Complexity’ – Discussion of Findings

Just as they weren’t prepared for the disappointment they experienced and the disintegration of their plans or ‘pathways’, the emerging adults did not appear to anticipate the intense complexity of this life phase. Again, they had assumed that it would all ‘naturally come together’. The choices they have to make, the changes they have to cope with, and the various conflicting internal and external forces that pull at them can create overwhelming pressure on them, and few seem to have the tools or the wherewithal to wrestle with this complexity.

The stories of participants in this study exemplified the intense psychological conflict and confusion that can be presented through the 'paradox of choice' (Schwartz, 2004). While parenting and schooling strategies have tended to focus on providing ever-increasing choices for young people and touting the benefits of 'options', they failed to realise that *'more'* can sometimes be *'less'*, as Schwartz (2004) compellingly highlights. There is now a growing body of literature to suggest that the function of choice (or 'hyperchoice') in Western societies today can have numerous detrimental effects, potentially outweighing its positive aspects (see for example Mick, Broniarczyk, & Haidt, 2004; Schwartz, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2002). While individuals with considerable life experience to draw upon may be experiencing increasing difficulty in making trivial everyday decisions in the era of hyperchoice, it is evident that emerging adults who are trying to make multiple 'high-stakes' life decisions about careers, relationships, lifestyles, and finances all at once, with little previous experience to base them on, can find themselves at a complete loss. When overloaded with options, when it seems that 'anything is possible now' (as one participant, Georgina, aged 26, suggested above) choice "no longer liberates, but debilitates" (Schwartz, 2004, p. 2).

Many of the participants seemed to be embroiled in a state of "to'ing and fro'ing", their attention so divided between different options and possibilities that they could not just settle upon one course of action and stick to it. This point of life appeared as a complex intersection of the various pitfalls Schwartz (2004) describes as inherent in a world of choice overload, with 'trade-offs', 'opportunity costs', regret, and insatiability standing in the way of their decisions and their happiness. Seemingly hard-wired to 'want it all', to 'want it now' and to expect it to be easy, some struggled to accept that they would have to make sacrifices ('trade-offs') and let go of one opportunity in order to pursue another ('opportunity costs'). With these glaring realities forefront in mind, the potential for regretting one's decision loomed large for the emerging adults, intensely fearful that they would make the wrong choice and forever wonder about 'what might have been' had they taken another path. Torn between different options and opportunities, and doubting their ability to make the right choice, many of the participants found themselves stuck. While they may not have been aware of it, many

were avoiding the psychological conflicts and regret by simply avoiding the decision. Schwartz (2004) argues that all of these complex conditions that accompany increased choices make it more difficult to make decisions and more difficult to be satisfied with the decisions that one *does* make. He claims that “when people are presented with options involving trade-offs that create conflict, all choices begin to look unappealing” (2004, p. 128), and that ‘anticipated regret’ for decisions can produce “not just dissatisfaction but paralysis” (2004, p. 148).

The in-depth work of Schwartz and others (Mick et al., 2004; Schwartz, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2002; Simon, 1956) suggests that the people who experience the most difficulty with hyperchoice are those that seek ‘only the very best’, people referred to as ‘Maximisers’ (in comparison to ‘Satisficers’ who tend to be content with ‘good enough’). What becomes evident throughout the findings of this study is that Generation Y has effectively been raised as a generation of ‘maximisers’, encouraged to seek ‘only the very best and not settle for anything less’. A recent study by Iyengar, Wells and Schwartz (2006) supports this idea, reporting significantly higher maximising tendencies in a sample of graduating university students (particularly those from top-ranked universities) than the broader adult population.

Participants in this study described expectations that they would find a career option that was able to ‘tick all the boxes’, fears of committing to something (like a career or a partner) only to find that something better would come along, and a persistent perception that the ‘grass is always greener’ somewhere else. These high expectations, inability to ‘settle’, and insatiability are core problems of a maximising orientation over satisficing, whereby “If your goal is to get the best, then you will not be comfortable with compromises dictated by the constraints imposed by reality. You will not experience the kind of satisfaction with your choices that satisficers will. In every area of life, you will always be open to the possibility that you might find something better if you just keep looking” (Schwartz, 2004, p. 89). While there is an element of truth to suggestions that ‘young people never had it so good’ with more options to choose from, the flipside is that it is more difficult for them to just be content, especially those who subscribe to a maximising orientation. Although those

who seek 'the best' may be better off *objectively*, they tend to be worse off *subjectively*, with maximisers found to be less satisfied with life, less happy, and less optimistic; and more susceptible to regret, perfectionism and depression than those with low maximisation scores (Schwartz, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2002). Iyengar et al's (2006) study into the job seeking strategies of college graduates found that despite maximisers tending to secure jobs with 20% higher starting salaries than satisficers, they were less satisfied with their outcome and more pessimistic, stressed, tired, anxious, worried, overwhelmed and depressed during the search process. Iyengar et al (2006, p. 149) suggest this is a result of their high expectations, where "[e]ven when they get what they want, maximizers may not always want what they get".

THEME FOUR:

A TIME OF 'HOPING FOR AN EPIPHANY' - Endless searching and anxious waiting

Those who struggled to cope with the choices, changes and conflicts they faced; who could not formulate a new 'plan' that they could confidently move forward with; and who could not shake the nagging feeling of disappointment that life was 'not what it was supposed to be' found themselves endlessly searching or anxiously waiting (or cycling between the two). They appeared to be searching for meaning, for identity, for self-actualisation and fulfilment, for 'perfection' or just plain contentment; or waiting and hoping for everything to fall into place as they had felt sure it would. They clung to the hope that they would soon have an epiphany – that some form of divine intervention would occur that would pull everything together.

Some decided to go looking for their epiphany, searching the globe for the answer to the penultimate question 'What am I supposed to be doing with my life?' Many of the participants talked excitedly about their intended 'Big O.Es', with the belief that it would change their life and perform a pivotal part in their personal growth and development. Those who were struggling to find direction in their life or realise a sense of identity tended to view travelling as a panacea for resolving these issues, with high expectations that in the process of travelling they would naturally discover who they are and all would become clear.

SARAH (20): "The thing is, I don't know why everyone thinks they have to go travelling..."
 ELIZABETH (21): "I just really want to travel....I think it will grow me, like heaps...."
 LISA (21): "I knew you...when I first met you, you were adamant you were...."
 ELIZABETH (21): "I didn't want to travel....But now I've just realised, you know, that like...I think that I *need* to travel, like, to just like *learn* more about myself and stuff...."
 JANE (20): "Yeah...yeah...and just to go and do things by yourself, cos I think, like, your parents sort of keep you in cotton-wool...so to go out and do that..."
 SARAH (20): "....I just kind of think that....I can travel when I'm old...like I can go see the world when I'm old....."
 ELIZABETH (21): "See like....yeah...cos your travelling is just like 'to travel'...but mine is actually, like, to....come to some sort of realisation of what I want to do, like...mine actually.....that's what I expect of it...probably won't happen...."
 SARAH (20): "Fingers crossed..."
 ELIZABETH (21): "...and I'll come back and be like 'Shit guys – I still don't know what I wanna do!!'...but, you know?..." [Focus Group 6]

CLAIRE (21): "I have more short-term goals than long-term..... ..I reckon that while I'm travelling I'll probably find out what I want to do with my life..." [Focus Group 4]

AINSLEY (28): "...cos when I went over to Australia, I just kind of, um...found this confidence...somewhere, just suddenly...and, I...I don't know...I just kinda changed..."
 NATALIE (22): "...Well, just going somewhere where no-one knows you...like, you sort of turn into a 'blank canvas' that you can 'paint yourself on again'...[chuckles]..." [Focus Group 5]

If the 'Big O.E' was not to provide the answers they so desperately wanted, it could at least distract them from the anxiety and uncertainty of their current situations.

ADAM (26): "...my goal was to just, literally, just get 'lost' overseas...and just not know where I'm gonna be next week...and just, once I'm done with one place...move onto the next... [Focus Group 5]

LISA (21): "I wish that I'd go [travelling] soon...I wanna go soon..."
 ELIZABETH (21): "That's the thing....I just wanna go now.....I just think cos I don't know what else I wanna do, I wanna travel..." [Focus Group 6]

Sometimes this search could end up leading them round in circles. Some participants found that instead of giving them focus and curing their restlessness, long periods of overseas travel could actually exacerbate the problem, creating a new standard of variety and excitement in their life that could make reintegrating into their 'routine' lives back in New Zealand particularly challenging. The search for an epiphany through travelling could also turn into an endless one, with the feeling that the answers lay just around the next corner...or the one after that. It appeared that the expectations and excitement of travelling could set them up for another anti-climax when they had to 'come back down to earth', often realising they were hardly any closer to their goal of finding their life purpose.

CRAIG (24): "I think the travelling is...is a double-edged sword...cos it's great, but it...it causes...problems in your mind...like I mean...you, you think 'Oh, you know, Rome's so cool – I want to go back to Rome' ...and then you're stuck studying for an exam, so then you....you're getting pulled in different areas...." [Focus Group 4]

ADAM (26): "...and then just every year it's been like, 'Oh yeah, yeah...I'm almost there...I'm sure I'll figure it out soon...I'll do a bit of travelling and figure out...see then...you know...see the world and figure out what I want to do' ...and a year later I'm like 'Oh – I'll just do a little bit more travelling, by then I'll figure out what I want to do' ...and then I'm like 'Well I'll just go back to New Zealand...and then when I go back to New Zealand it's bound to become obvious what I want to do...[laughs]....so now I'm kind of 'back' ...still not quite sure..'" [Focus Group 5]

While some searched, others waited. Despite their early experiences evidencing to the contrary, some were still clinging to the notion that everything would fall into place, that their intended path in life would suddenly materialise and the world would make sense. The participants engaging in the 'waiting' strategy (or non-strategy as the case may be), were effectively biding their time, forgoing attempts to create long-term plans for the future and instead just living firmly in the present. Whereas some of the 'searchers' had found comforting distraction provided through variety-filled overseas travel, some of the 'waiters' found comforting distraction by allowing themselves to get caught up in the monotonous routine of working life. They found the easiest thing they could do to distract themselves from their uncertainty and anxiety about the future was to absorb themselves in their day-to-day existence and focus their energies on short-term goals. Nonetheless, despite getting by with their seemingly 'make-shift' lives at the moment, there appeared to be a growing sense of impatience for their life purpose or calling to become clear.

HANNAH (24): "...I really just want to find *my 'thing'* ...I don't have a thing.....I've *always* had a thing...since...since I can remember...I've always had a thing that I'm, like, really excited about...like my trip [overseas]...like, that's a perfect example...and for ages I haven't had a thing...and I'm just waiting for my next thing, like....to just turn up...and I'm hoping that it's something that will be...like something productive that I can do in a job...and I don't know what that thing is...and it's really frustrating..."

CLAIRE (21): "You just kind of take every day as it comes at the moment...yeah..."

KELLY (20): "Everything's kind of just 'short-term'...like try and get a job now, or....try and do something for now...I'll deal with the future later, that can just be put off...."

HANNAH (24): "You kind of just hope that you'll gonna fall into your dream job...."

(20): "Yeah..."

HANNAH (24): "...that it will just come...that it'll just happen, you know....that you'll just stumble across... 'Oh – of course this is what I should be doing for the rest of my life!...you know, or the next 7 years...'....."

Interviewer: "Like an 'Ah-hah!' moment...?..."

HANNAH (24): "Yeah...just wait for the 'Ah-hah's'...." [Focus Group 4]

ELIZABETH (21): "...where's my 'falling into place' you know? Like...."

JANE (20): "It will though...."

SARAH (20): "It'll come Elizabeth, it'll come...."

ELIZABETH (21): "But I want it *now!*...I think that you've just gotta look for it, you know....because I know that I haven't, you know...I just feel like, working at the bank, you just keep your eyes shut, you know....you don't look for the opportunities out there...."

SARAH (20): "We do tend to just go day-to-day-to-day..." [Focus Group 6]

For some of the participants who had found themselves in this 'holding pattern' for a while, it was beginning to dawn on them that maybe the universe *didn't* actually have a plan for them after all, that they may be waiting and hoping in vain for their 'true calling' to become clear. Ironically, their epiphany became that they may never really have the epiphany that they expected. Instead they appeared to be gradually moving to a position of acceptance or 'satisficing', acknowledging that the utopian happiness they had long-expected may be a fictional state and that they may have to rescale their idealistic expectations back considerably. Their mindset seemed to be in the process of shifting from the belief that they would find their destiny to the acceptance that they may have to go out on a limb to create their own and learn to live with it. However, for some this idea of taking charge of their own direction was uncharted territory and they questioned whether they had what it takes. One of the participants (Adam, aged 26, below) drew a distinction between individuals who seemed to have it all figured out at this stage, and those (like him) who were still waiting for the answers. He considered decision-making capability and inner conviction as innate qualities that one either has or does not have, viewing himself as deficient in this regard. He pondered the possibility that he had conditioned himself to be forever indecisive, or even incapable of just being 'content'.

NATALIE (22): "Hmm...yeah...there's still that sort of mindset where they don't realise they've had that, you know, just....like...what you were saying, like you wait to find out what your ambition is....and I'm just starting to think that 'Well, does it just 'click' at some point??'...or..."

ADAM (26): "I...I *hope* so!..."

AINSLEY (28): "Like a 'magic light bulb' that goes off..."

NATALIE (22): "Yeah...but I'm....sorry to be negative...but I don't think that it does...like, you either have to *push* yourself into something and, you know, eventually just...like it...Like, I've got a friend that's known that he wanted to be a film director since he was 5 years old..."

DANIEL (25): "Yeah – what's up with that?....those people?..." [Focus Group 5]

ADAM (26): "I think mine [key concern at the moment] is the same kind of thing...lack of direction, cos I just got back, once again....and kind of gone 'Well – I'm back, back in New Zealand..'...and, you know....there was the whole waiting...waiting for that decision of what to do with the future to turn up...I think it was literally half a week ago, I just went 'that's just not

gonna happen...’...like, I’m just gonna have to *start* something, and just...decide as I’m going along whether it’s actually kind of....well....even by saying that, I’m kind of almost assuming that I’m going to make some decisions at some point [chuckles]....but it’s just that, I think...like you were saying before [referring to Natalie]...like, life is just a progression of small little changes...and you may never find your exact direction, that you decided from birth...but I mean, if you’ve never had that direction from birth, I don’t think your minds ready to make that decision anyway....”

DANIEL (25): “For the last 5 years, I’ve just been sitting around, waiting for options to kind of fall on my lap.....or for people to suggest things and go ‘Oh yeah...’...um...I’ve never really gone out and looked for the answers myself....and I think probably that’s the difference between people like myself, who kind of don’t have this clear-cut goal...and those that, you know, at 14 are ‘Yes – I want to be a microbiologist’...and they just, I don’t know, they seem to go out and find the answers to what they want to do I suppose...”

ADAM (26): “I think some people just aren’t *made* to make a decision like that...”

EVE (25): “I can’t handle it ay...[giggles]”

ADAM (26): “Nah...I’m serious, I’m serious...like, um....like, even if I suddenly went ‘Wow – I love...’...you know...I don’t know... just make up something, like ‘Science of the Oceans’ or something...‘I love it...’...but because I’ve lived 26 years of being, you know, indecisive about what I want to do with my future, I think that even if I did decide that I loved this....loved ‘the ocean’...I’d still be kind of like, ‘Oh yeah – you know, we’ll see what happens..’...then I’d try to do this, and I’d still end up fluffing in that direction, cos my mind’s not used to being totally contently happy with some life choice.....” [Focus Group 5]

‘Hoping for an Epiphany’ – Discussion of Findings

“For this is the journey that men [and women] make: to find themselves. If they fail in this, it doesn’t matter much what else they find...”

-Michener, The Fires of Spring, 1972 (cited in Kroger, 2004).

Many of the participants seemed to be experiencing difficulty in negotiating their way through the complex decisions involved in this phase of life because they didn’t have a clear sense of identity as a foundation to base their decisions upon, getting in the way of their ability to move confidently forward with their lives. Some participants took a proactive stance to dealing with this situation, going searching for the answers, while others were more passive, waiting and hoping that the answers would come to them. The underlying theme of both strategies was the hope of an ‘epiphany’ that would pull their lives together and everything would suddenly become clear.

The typical strategy for those ‘searching’ for the answer was to take the search global. A recent television advertisement by Tourism Australia makes the suggestion that “Sometimes you have to get lost to find yourself” by going on an overseas adventure, an idea that seemed to be endorsed by a number of the participants in this study, such

as Adam, aged 26 (“my goal was to just, literally, just get ‘lost’ overseas...”). As in the quote above by Michener, the process of identity development is often expressed as a ‘journey’ (one in which the stakes are high), and young New Zealanders have certainly subscribed to this idea. The kiwi pastime of the “Big O.E” is a journey of self-discovery ritualised in this country, such that to not have been on one almost represents a self-deficiency, with overseas travel seen as part and parcel of the transition to adulthood in New Zealand (Bell, 2002). This reverence of ‘O.E’ as a pivotal rite of passage for young New Zealanders seems to foster high expectations about the experience and what it will bring to the lives of those who embark on one. The comments of participants in this study suggest that there may be a tendency for young New Zealanders to view overseas travel as a ‘panacea’ for resolving crises of identity and direction, as the sure-fire way to find ones ‘self’ and whatever it is that ‘self’ is looking for (“I reckon that while I’m travelling I’ll probably find out what I want to do with my life...” Claire, aged 21). Although some of the participants who spoke of travel in this way seemed confident (almost blasé) that it would provide the answers that they were looking for, others conveyed a sense of anxiety or desperation about their high expectations of their ‘O.E’. To Erik Erikson, the very notion of ‘identity’ is almost inherently bound up with feelings of crisis, as referring to “a more or less desperate ‘quest’, or to an almost deliberately confused ‘search’” (Erikson, 1968, p. 19), a statement that would seem to eloquently encapsulate the motivations of some of the ‘searchers’ in this study.

For many young ‘searchers’ looking for a sense of identity and meaning in their lives, travel may indeed deliver the outcome that they seek. Several studies support the idea that overseas travel can aid in the accumulation of self-knowledge or self-insight, and in developing self-confidence (Bell, 2002; Inkson & Myers, 2003). As part of an extensive study by Arthur, Inkson and Pringle (1999) various participants who had been on a ‘Big O.E’ credited it with assisting them to figure out ‘who they are’ and what they wanted to do with their lives. However, contrary to the expectations of some of the participants in this study, there is some indication that identity may be less of a case of being something that is ‘found’ through travel, rather something that is ‘created’. Adding weight to the suggestion of Natalie (aged 22) that “going

somewhere where no-one knows you...like, you sort of turn into a 'blank canvas' that you can 'paint yourself on again'", Bell (2002) proposes that, away from old familiarities and insular social circles, young New Zealanders are able to 'reconstruct' themselves and discover new directions as they get out of their comfort zone and push themselves to experiment with unfamiliar activities, in an unfamiliar place, with unfamiliar people. It thus seems that travel may enable young people to redefine their sense of self and wants removed from the influences of others and the now outgrown goals and identities they carried through their childhood. The implication of these points suggests that the 'answers' may not come to young people in the epiphany they expect through travel, but may instead develop through a more gradual, iterative process, less consumptive of the experience and more constructive.

In his exploration of the interrelationship between identity and travel, Desforges (2000) suggests that periods of transition such as leaving higher education or having a 'mid-life crisis' which are characterised by 'anxiety and opportunity' incite a restless need to explore self-identity and construct a new sense of self for the next period of life, which may make travel more alluring at these times. Desforges (2000) claims that these turning points serve as "fateful moments" (as conceptualised by Giddens, 1991) for constructing a new self-identity, and that "the decision to go on a long-haul trip, it seems, provides answers to questions that are raised about self-identity at fateful moments" (Desforges, 2000, p. 936).

Though many positive outcomes from O.E travel are acknowledged, such as self-insight, and cultural and career 'capital' (Inkson & Myers, 2003), there may also be less positive side-effects as well. From the discussions with the emerging adults, it was apparent that extended periods of travelling can create a sense of restlessness that makes reintegrating into their 'routine' lives back in New Zealand challenging. An insatiability for the excitement and adventure of travelling may result in a 'hedonic treadmill' (Brickman & Campbell, 1971), whereby they have adapted to certain levels of stimulation provided through a steady stream of exciting weekend trips away to exotic places. Just as transitioning from the fun-filled adolescent years to the responsibilities of adult working life can be difficult and even demoralising to adjust to

(as suggested by the findings of this study and of Levine, 2005), emerging adults who have spent several years roaming the globe may find it difficult to satisfice (Schwartz, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2002) with a more mundane existence on their return, as alluded to by Chris (aged 24) in his description of travelling as “a double-edged sword”.

For some the travel may also serve as little more than a distraction from their uncertainties and as another means of avoiding difficult decisions. Just as university can provide a means of delaying entry into the ‘real world’ and avoiding making tough decisions about career and life paths, so too can the O.E. It is clear that with an extended ‘moratorium’ now often encompassing an entire decade between the ages of 20 and 30, emerging adults can find themselves adrift, floating between time and space without anything to anchor them and provide stability or certainty in their lives. Orsman (1977, p. 547; cited in Bell, 2002) proclaimed that “as well as being vital to emotional and intellectual (and sexual) development, O.E very nicely fills that awkward gap between school and marriage”. However, the gap is now much wider and more awkward; therefore the O.E may be increasingly ineffective at providing such a seamless filler to ease the transition between school and career or marital commitments. It may now serve more as a temporary stop gap to occupy one’s attention and enjoyment, providing distraction from the challenging decisions they will inevitably have to make and the ‘real world’ they will have to face up to.

While the epiphany ‘searchers’ in this study went looking for meaning and direction in their life, those who adopted a more passive strategy of waiting for the answers to “fall on their lap” (as suggested by Daniel, aged 25), had surrendered responsibility for their futures to the hands of fate. As some of the participants in this study alluded to, there are a variety of personal attributes that may predispose an individual to be active or passive in their approach to dealing with this often uncertain phase of life, such as their *locus of control* (Rotter, 1966) and their *decision-making competence* (Fischhoff, 2008). ‘Locus of control’ refers to the extent to which a person perceives events or their life as determined more by their own choices and actions (‘internal locus of control’) or by external forces such as fate or higher powers (‘external locus of control’) (Rotter, 1966). It may be hypothesised that emerging adults who respond to

the uncertainty of this life stage by searching for answers and constructing their own lives tend towards an 'internal locus of control', whereby those who respond by waiting anxiously for the answers to come along tend towards an 'external locus of control' in their view of the world. It could also be possible that some of the emerging adults may have shifted more towards an external locus of control as a result of setbacks and disappointments during their transition to the real world, becoming disengaged from their futures in a form of 'learned helplessness' (Seligman, 1972). Various studies have shown a positive relationship between an internal locus of control and well-being (see for example, DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Peacock & Wong, 1996).

Those waiting for an epiphany may be waiting in vain. Studies have suggested that the self-knowledge required for young people to make confident decisions about their careers tends to emerge more from a 'trajectory of experiences' rather than as a single 'turning point' (Mortimer et al., 2002), and that the requisite sense of identity is best developed through a proactive approach (Schwartz et al., 2005). In their discussion of the increased need for emerging adults to "individualize" their life courses in the absence of normative structures (such as marriage and gender roles) to guide them, Schwartz et al (2005, p. 203) claim that "Emerging adults who address these issues in a proactive and agentic manner may be most likely to form a coherent sense of identity that can be used to guide their life paths and to negotiate for social resources and positions. On the other hand, emerging adults who adopt more passive or procrastinatory approaches may have trouble forming coherent identities". They compare strategies of "default individualization" (a passive, reactionary approach to their life course) and "developmental individualization" (a more proactive, exploratory approach to the life course), arguing that developmental individualisation more effectively prepares emerging adults for the decisions and challenges required of their adult lives (Cote, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2005). It thus seems that activities that encourage exploration (such as overseas travel) should continue to be encouraged, while something must be done to assist those whose lives become arrested by uncertainty. While there may be risks associated with searching, the risks associated with not searching could be much higher.

STAVING OFF THE QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS

While many of the participants encountered difficulty through vague, under-researched or unrealistic plans that evaporated in the transition from the educational setting to the real world, there were indeed some who *were* actually 'living the dream'. Although they appeared something of an exception in the discussions, there were some participants who expressed comparatively more confidence and contentment with their life direction and progress at this point. They tended to be those who had set concrete yet not overly glamorous or grandiose 'plans' at an early age, particularly in terms of their intended careers, and had never looked back. For such focused individuals, moving through their emerging adulthood years was indeed a time where they were able to experience 'the plan' coming to fruition and reap the rewards of their focus and commitment to their clear, long-held goals.

EVELYN (26): "Now, I've kind of...I'm a bit of a geek like this and I've known since I was like this big [gestures with her hands to represent height of a young child] that I wanted to be an accountant, so I kind of always knew where I was going and, um, yeah..."

MATT (24): "Yeah, I spose I'm similar, with Engineering, I've always been pulling things apart and trying to put them back together and, ah, actually decided when I was in 4th form that I wanted to go to Massey in Palmerston North and do the Engineering there..."

EVELYN (26): "...I've felt the older...well the further through my twenties I've moved, I just...like my life has slotted more into place... but I guess it's because I've always known what I was gonna do and where...you know...and what I needed to do to get there...things are finally starting to come into fruition, so...it's been quite grounding for me I think...or I feel more settled, in um, my quarter-life stage than I have done at any other point in my life....yeah..."

[Focus Group 2]

While one may infer that such cases (which were rare examples from the wider sample of participants), represent astute self-insight at an early age in 'choosing' a career path, or an element of 'luck', a more likely explanation is that by setting such a clear goal at an early age they had conditioned themselves to block out other 'distracting' options. It is also plausible that having 'made their mind up' as their identity development was in its infancy, that their choice came to be incorporated into their identity. As Levine (2005) explains, "Propelling oneself toward a career by early decision has its advantages and its drawbacks. If you make your mind up at a tender age, it becomes harder and harder to imagine yourself doing anything else; there goes your freedom of choice!" As we have seen, the freedom of choice and opportunity for exploration young people have as they go through their often 'commitment free'

emerging adulthood years, can actually be a burden in disguise. In committing to a choice at an early age, narrowing down ones options and forgoing the exploration that has generally been encouraged and celebrated for this generation, one is effectively adopting a 'satisficing' strategy. One participant who described his parents as 'stuck in the past' spoke of his comparatively sheltered upbringing and lack of exposure to passive entertainment and the media through television or radio, whereby he learned to satisfice and appreciate 'the simple things in life'.

MATT (24) ".... ah, it's been very interesting growing up, because of the way that my parents have been almost, ah, sort of stuck in the 70's in some ways...um, we grew up on the farm in the middle of nowhere, so...um...I didn't....we had a TV but we'd hardly ever watch anything on it...so it wasn't until I was at like 15 or 16 before I actually thought about any TV at all, or radio stations or anything like that...so, I've grown up with a little bit of the simple things in life, so...um, I've had a couple of periods with things I don't know how to deal with...but I've always been, probably, overly positive about everything so I haven't worried about anything....um, which in some circumstances...is probably gonna come back and bite me at some stage, but, um, I have been...I'm always an optimist, so...." *[Focus Group 2]*

The importance of a satisficing attitude that keeps things in perspective and helps emerging adults to deal with the challenges of this period of life (and the feelings of 'crisis' that may arise), was further emphasised by other participants, who suggested that learning to accept what one has and to focus one's energies on what one *can* control (rather than worrying about what one does not have and cannot control), becomes a key coping strategy for the transition through the emerging adulthood phase. Such participants highlighted that, in the bigger scheme of things, things 'could always be worse.'

MARK (28): "...it is sort of accepting where you are, what you've got, what you have...and moving from there...not dwelling...and looking at what you don't have and then not doing anything to attain it...so..yeah....[pause]...there's no point in crying over something and then sitting down and letting it go by still...you know...if you don't put the action in then you've only got yourself to blame for it as well..."

AARON (28): "...Every year I try and set some goals, you know....like in that sort of vein as well....relationship is something that I just...you just can't control, it just happens and...you put yourself out there and you hope...you *pray*....[shared laughter]...well not pray, but you *hope* someone, well the right person comes along and that works out...um, but financially, yeah I suppose you can control that to a point...career-wise you can certainly control...degree, Masters, all that sort of stuff you can control....just gotta do it..." *[Focus Group 3]*

MIKE (25): "...I find that pretty easy when I step back...things can be wearing me down a bit...but usually I won't worry about it for more than a few hours before I'm able to step back and see 'Really, I've got so much...it's fine, you know....'"

HEIDI (25): "It could be a lot worse.." *[Focus Group 1]*

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has examined the transition to adulthood as it is experienced by emerging adults today and the notion of a 'quarter-life crisis'. While the jury is still out as to whether the quarter-life crisis can be conceptualised as a 'normative' crisis comparative to that of the widely acknowledged (almost obligatory) mid-life crisis, or whether the word 'crisis' is indeed the *most appropriate* terminology to describe the experience, it is apparent that this time of life can induce something that at least subjectively *feels* like a personal 'crisis' for many emerging adults, and is experienced as a difficult and confusing time for a great many more. The findings of this study suggest that the transition to the 'real world' through the quarter-life period (contrary to invariably being the best years of one's life) is often a time of disappointment, disintegration, and overwhelming complexity, whereby emerging adults search desperately for answers, or wait anxiously for the answers to come to them and for their 'destined life' to click into place. While it was a disheartening and frustrating time, their previously high confidence and expectations having taken something of a battering through their experience of the transition to the real world, many nonetheless held on to the hope that it will all work out in the end – That 'fate' will intervene and ultimately deliver the life they deserve.

Although the quarter-life crisis as put forward by Robbins and Wilner in 2001 bore much of the hallmarks of a 'media fad' or a gimmicky concept dreamed up to sell a new string of self-help guides, this study added further weight to many of their original propositions. Many of the features Robbins and Wilner (2001) described as characteristics of a quarter-life crisis were evident in the discussions of the emerging adults in this study, such as uncertainty, disappointment, nagging doubts and changes of mind, a search to define one's identity, fear of failure, procrastination/indecision, helplessness, feeling left behind, trying to find balance in their lives, and using education as a 'stall tactic'. Emerging adults in New Zealand therefore appear to be experiencing very similar challenges to their American counterparts, and experiences such as the quarter-life crisis may represent a side-effect of the complexities and pressures of over-indulgent Western societies, obsessed with image and success.

The overarching 'take home message' from this study was that there is a major disconnect between young people's preparation for the real world and their early experiences of it. Despite spending elongated periods theoretically preparing for their transition through education, it appears something vital is lacking in this process. From the discussions it was apparent that many were not psychologically ready for the 'real world', not least those who had the most extensive educations. Furthermore, it seemed that some aspects of the socialisation process had actually served more to make them more 'unready' (as suggested by Levine, 2005) than ready. As a result participants experienced a form of 'reality shock' on their entrance to the real world.

Having learned that they 'can be anything that they want to be', that university leads to inevitable success and happiness, and that success and happiness means 'exciting job + flash car + big house + perfect partner', it is little wonder that emerging adults feel disappointed and 'ripped off' with how life in the 'real world' is turning out. Instead of moving forward and revelling in the success that they expected, participants in this study were surprised to find their plans and dreams disintegrating at the very point they expected to realise them. Many had effectively 'sleepwalked' their way into the real world, based on the high expectations and false sense of security they had, waking up to find they had no idea where they were. The place they woke up was a lot more scary and complex than they had ever encountered before and they felt overwhelmed and lost. However, they felt confident that fate would soon come to their rescue, like a ray of light that would show the way and guide them to their destiny.

The greatest problem is that life has been 'overpromised and underdelivered' to young people in recent decades, effectively creating an insatiable generation who may never be content with anything except the 'very best', spending their lives caught up in the endless pursuit of happiness. This may therefore cause a crisis that extends well beyond the quarter-life years. As suggested by Bauman (2001, p. 13), "desire is 'narcissistic': it has itself for its paramount object and for that reason is bound to stay insatiable".

Recommendations

The results of this study suggest that a comprehensive review of the ways in which young people are socialised and prepared for the 'real world' is needed. This section presents a variety of recommendations that may help to enhance the preparation and support young people receive for their development.

Managing expectations in the transition to the 'real world'

To avoid the disappointment emerging adults can experience on entering the real world and realising it is 'not all they thought it was cracked up to be, there needs to be a concerted attempt to manage their expectations more effectively. As media serves as a ubiquitous influence in the lives of young people today it becomes increasingly important to ensure it is appropriately governed and monitored. While it is desirable for media organisations to adopt more socially responsible practices in the images and values they promote (Brown & Witherspoon, 2002), this may require quite a dramatic mind shift which could take time to enact. What may be more effective and have a greater short-term impact is an increased emphasis on educating young people about the media and teaching them to deconstruct and critique the images and messages conveyed. As suggested by Brown and Witherspoon (2002), media education may be a valuable addition to the school curriculum in increasing their "media literacy", and the "media diets" of children need to be paid closer attention.

Similarly, it may also be time for tertiary institutions to examine their social responsibilities to students. While students that drift aimlessly through university doing degree after degree may be good for an institution's commercial interests, the student may not experience such beneficial returns. Universities are in positions of prestige and power, and they have an obligation to ensure that they maintain the best interests of their students at heart and do not overpromise and build unrealistic expectations. They need to also take a more proactive role in educating young people about the realistic challenges of their years following graduation, rather than painting it as an (unrealistic) 'field of dreams'. Rather than allowing students to become 'just a

number', it may be greatly advantageous for tertiary institutions to set up support networks for young people making the transition.

Parents also need to recognise the fine line between encouraging self-confidence and encouraging delusion in their children. They need to stop over-protecting, and over-sheltering them from adversity. They need to allow them the opportunity to recognise that life is not all roses, that not everything comes easily and that they will not always get a medal just for taking part. Young people need to learn to deal with challenge and adversity, to learn to take the bad with the good.

Develop more effective strategies for 'bridging the gap'

The results of this study suggest that the notion of 'career pathways' guiding young people through education into employment may be an overly idealistic concept in light of the increasingly complex nature of the school to work transition, particularly for many of those on a 'general' university pathway (Raffe, 2003). The way in which this 'pathway' proceeds may be due for some scrutiny, to examine why students appear to be coming out of the tertiary education system with little idea of what to do next or discovering that they are not suited to their field of study. Much of the issue appears to lie in the absence of concerted self-reflection and exposure to working environments connected to their field of study, as well as the 'uni = jobs' mindset built upon the commodification of tertiary education. To complete a three year degree only to discover it is not right for oneself is a very costly exercise that should be prevented wherever possible. There are a variety of measures that may assist in addressing this issue, including: 1) Breaking up the 'flow' from high school to university, through encouraging 'gap years' and exposure to the real world of work *ahead* of committing to study (perhaps as a form of 'pre-university internship'); 2) Encourage or integrate sabbaticals during qualifications to enable greater 'reality testing' along the way and to accumulate practical experience for counteracting the 'Work Experience Catch 22'; 3) Greater synthesis between educational institutions and working environments, through building or enhancing reciprocal relationships; and 4) Revise the provision of career advisory services for young people – Participants in this study appeared to have quite an indifferent attitude towards career services, viewing them as largely

unhelpful, inaccessible or complicated by 'agendas' (in the case of careers advisors employed by universities). It seems there needs to be a review of careers assistance available to young people, in order to make it more visible, more accessible, and more relevant for young people.

Build strategies for coping with complexity

Instead of simply spouting off rhetoric about how lucky this generation is to have choice, it is important that young people are taught about some of the perils of choice too, and how to cope at the point when 'choice no longer liberates - but debilitates' (Schwartz, 2004). Schwartz's (2004) recommendations for dealing with the 'paradox of choice' are particularly pertinent for emerging adults who are in a particularly choice-intensive period of life. He suggests that instead of 'maximising' and living by the mantra of 'only the best', that we: 1) learn to embrace voluntary constraints, 2) recognise that sometimes 'good enough' is 'good enough' rather than constantly seeking the elusive next level, 3) do not expect our decisions to deliver endless joy, 4) that we refrain from 'looking back' and thinking about what we gave up or what 'could have been', and 5) that we do not calibrate our happiness by constant comparisons with others. However, considering our objective good fortunes in comparison to other less fortunate individuals may also create an "attitude of gratitude" (Simon, 1956), that enables us to keep perspective on our issues. Young Westerners going on 'Gap years' to third world countries may acquire great perspective and more grounded values from their experiences of cultures much less spoiled for choice, however it is important that it does not become a 'feel good' pastime for self-development dressed up under the guise of humanitarian service (Simpson, 2004). Learning to satisfice is undoubtedly one of the most valuable tools one can have when confronted with overwhelming choices – it is the maximising strategy (Schwartz, 2004; Simon, 1956). If young people can learn to recognise that it is okay to 'shoot for the moon' but that one should not be too disappointed if they merely 'land amongst the stars', then the complexities of the transition to adulthood may become a whole lot simpler.

Encourage activity rather than passivity

Some of the participants seemed to respond to the uncertainty of their future by actively going out to find it or craft it through in-depth self-exploration and overseas travel; while others became stuck, waiting in a state of limbo or even helplessness for fate to provide the answers. While people engaging in either strategy had expectations that clarity comes in the form of an epiphany, studies have shown that it is more likely to come through a 'trajectory of experiences' (Mortimer et al., 2002). It may therefore be beneficial to encourage young people away from the expectation that life naturally clicks into place and that their future lies in the hands of fate, towards a willingness to take risks and chart their own path. As suggested by Schwartz et al (2005), those who take a more active and agentic approach to resolving identity and directional issues are more likely to develop the coherent sense of identity required for the difficult decisions and challenges that confront them. Extending the 'gap year' endorsement earlier in this section, it could be particularly beneficial for young people to undertake overseas working holidays (even if as a more abbreviated 'mini O.E') between high school and the commencement of education or career 'pathways', so that they can engage in agentic exploration towards enhancing their sense of identity (Inkson & Myers, 2003), rather than getting caught up in the momentum of education or expecting identity to be something that 'just happens'. For those who have experienced a series of 'false starts' or bad decisions, it is important that they have strong support networks to continue to encourage them and keep them engaged in their futures, rather than allowing them to lose their confidence and become passive observers of their lives.

While these recommendations are unlikely to be a panacea guaranteeing a seamless transition for all, they may provide practical and achievable initial steps to address the apparent disconnect between how young people are prepared for their emerging adulthood years and how they experience them.

Limitations and potential for further research

As with most qualitative research, claims about the generalisability of this study's findings cannot be made. Whilst the focus groups in this study aimed to sample people from a variety of different backgrounds, and attempts made to keep the discussion environment as natural and informal as possible, the results cannot purport to speak for the entire population of emerging adults in New Zealand. With a sample of only twenty six people from such a complex and heterogeneous life stage (Arnett, 2000), generalisability may be beyond the scope of this (or any other) study of emerging adults. In accordance with the view endorsed by Litosseliti (2003, p. 22) regarding focus group data, the results "may not be generalisable or representative, but indicative: this is, illustrating particular social phenomena". The majority of the sample was highly educated (with only six of the twenty-six participants having not completed tertiary education) and did not appear to include individuals from backgrounds of notable hardship. As the study intended to capture the experiences of individuals who had grown up in New Zealand and completed most of their education here, the results are unlikely to represent people from other cultures, nor those who grew up in truly impoverished circumstances. The results may be perceived as describing somewhat of a 'poor spoiled little rich kid syndrome' but as Schwartz (2004) highlights, our adaptation to our circumstances has a powerful influence on our satisfaction, and objective well-being does not always guarantee *subjective* well-being. The data collected from the focus groups also represents a 'snap shot', or single point in time sample of the participants' views and opinions, and could therefore be significantly influenced by events in their lives at the time.

This research has provided valuable insight into ways in which the transition to adulthood and phenomena such as 'the quarter life crisis' may be experienced by emerging adults in New Zealand. However, there is still much work to be done in this considerably under-researched area. Further research of a longitudinal nature that follows the development of young people through the adolescent and emerging adulthood stages may be of considerable value. Such research could capture the

changing needs, expectations, and perspectives of young people through their transition to adulthood, and examine the effects of various life experiences and events on their development in greater detail. As this study was quite broad in nature, many of its findings present avenues for more in-depth follow-up research; such as quantitative and qualitative studies that examine tendencies to adopt 'maximising' decision-making strategies across different cohorts and across the life-course. It may be that those who are more vulnerable to a 'quarter-life crisis' may be those with an increased tendency to maximise.

This study was conducted at a time when the world was quite a different place than it is in March 2009. At the time of data collection during mid to late 2007 the world economy appeared to be buoyant, and New Zealand had been enjoying fairly strong economic growth (with annual growth in gross domestic product at 3.1 percent for the year ended December 2007, *Source: www.stats.govt.nz*). However, the past twelve months have seen a rather rapid shift in the global landscape. The economic bubble has burst, and across the globe (including New Zealand) there has been a dramatic rise in redundancies, unemployment, and bankruptcies. The transition to the real world may now be more daunting than ever for inexperienced emerging adults, likely being an even greater shock for those who are just graduating from studies they had commenced in more prosperous times. However, this cloud may also have a 'silver lining' in that it may serve to readjust expectations to a more appropriate level. Before the global recession, Generation Y had never experienced a global downturn of such magnitude and were living their lives as if the party would never end (exploiting credit and loading themselves with debt). Once the 'hangover' subsides, young people will hopefully have learned to embrace the benefits of 'satisficing' and living more within their means, over the insatiable pursuit of 'nothing but the very best'. Further research that monitors the impact of the global economic crisis on the experiences of emerging adults will therefore be of great interest.

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APPENDIX A: EMAIL ADVERTISEMENT SENT TO UNIVERSITY GRADUATES THROUGH ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

Hi,

My name is Nikki Rasmussen and I am currently completing my Masters degree at Massey University in Albany. I am looking for participants for my research on the **life experiences of young adults in today's society**.

I am looking for volunteers **aged between 20-29**, who have **graduated within the past 7 years**, to take part in some informal focus group discussions with their peers to talk about and reflect upon their experiences at this time in their life.

Each participant will be required for only one focus group discussion.

The discussions are expected to take approximately **1-1.5 hours**, at a time and location to be confirmed based on convenience for participants. To compensate for your time, you will receive a \$ [REDACTED]

If you are interested in being part of this project or have any questions, please contact me on [REDACTED] for further information on the study. I am supervised on this project by Professor Kerry Chamberlain of Massey University Albany.

Many Thanks,

Nikki Rasmussen

APPENDIX B: ADVERTISEMENT USED TO RECRUIT FINAL-YEAR STUDENTS

Are you in the final year of your degree? Thinking (or re-thinking) about your future directions?

My name is Nikki Rasmussen and I am currently completing my Masters degree at Massey University in Albany. I am looking for participants for my research on the **life experiences of young adults in today's society in New Zealand**.

I am looking for volunteers from a variety of different backgrounds who are **in the final year of their degree**, and are **aged between 20-25 years**, to take part in an informal discussion with around 4 - 5 of their peers to talk about and reflect upon their experiences at this time in their life.

Each participant will be required for only one focus group discussion. The discussions are expected to take **approximately 1 – 1.5 hours**, at a time and location to be agreed upon between the participants. As appreciation and compensation for your time and input, you will receive a [REDACTED] (your choice).

If you are interested in being part of this project or would like further information, please contact me on [REDACTED]

I am supervised on this project by Professor Kerry Chamberlain
(K.Chamberlain@massey.ac.nz)

Many thanks,

Nikki Rasmussen



APPENDIX C: ADVERTISEMENT USED TO RECRUIT PARTICIPANTS FOR
FOCUS GROUPS 5 AND 6



ARE YOU IN YOUR 20'S?

THINKING (OR RE-THINKING) ABOUT YOUR FUTURE DIRECTIONS?

MY NAME IS NIKKI RASMUSSEN AND I AM
CURRENTLY COMPLETING MY MASTERS DEGREE
AT MASSEY UNIVERSITY IN ALBANY.

I AM LOOKING FOR PARTICIPANTS FOR MY
RESEARCH ON THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF
YOUNG ADULTS IN TODAY'S SOCIETY IN
NEW ZEALAND.

I AM LOOKING FOR PEOPLE FROM A VARIETY
OF BACKGROUNDS WHO ARE AGED BETWEEN 20-29
AND MEET EITHER OF THE CRITERIA BELOW:

- WENT STRAIGHT FROM HIGH SCHOOL INTO FULL-TIME WORK.

OR

- ARE HAVING DIFFICULTY FINDING DIRECTION AT THIS TIME IN LIFE.
PARTICIPATION INVOLVES TAKING PART IN AN INFORMAL DISCUSSION WITH AROUND
4 - 5 OF THEIR PEERS TO TALK ABOUT AND REFLECT UPON THEIR EXPERIENCES
AT THIS TIME IN THEIR LIFE.

EACH PARTICIPANT WILL BE REQUIRED FOR ONE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION, OF
APPROXIMATELY 1-1.5 HRS IN LENGTH, AT A TIME AND LOCATION TO BE AGREED.

AS APPRECIATION AND COMPENSATION FOR YOUR TIME AND INPUT,
YOU WILL RECEIVE A [REDACTED] (YOUR CHOICE).

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED OR WOULD LIKE FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT ME ON

[REDACTED]
I AM SUPERVISED ON THIS PROJECT BY PROFESSOR KERRY CHAMBERLAIN (K.CHAMBERLAIN@MASSEY.AC.NZ)

APPENDIX D: INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

Life experiences of young adults in today's society

Information Sheet

What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research project that aims to explore the life experiences of young adults in the early 21st century. My name is Nikki Rasmussen and I am conducting this study as part of a Master of Arts in Psychology at Massey University. I am supervised on this project by Kerry Chamberlain, Professor in the School of Psychology at Massey University in Albany. You can contact either of us with questions about this project using the contact details provided at the bottom of this Information Sheet.

What is involved if I agree to take part?

I am seeking volunteers from various backgrounds and aged between about 18 and 30 years old, who are thinking about their future directions and may be interested to take part in this research. If you are interested in participating, it would involve taking part in a focus group discussion, to talk about what it is like to be a young adult in today's society, including some of the issues and challenges you may be facing; as well as completing a brief demographic questionnaire at the end of the focus group. The focus group will consist of approximately 5 people of similar age, and is expected to involve about 1 to 1.5 hours of discussion time. The demographic questionnaire is expected to take less than 5 minutes to complete. As compensation and appreciation for your time and travel, I will give you a \$20.00 C.D or Grocery voucher (depending on your preference) for your participation.

The focus group discussions are aimed to be an open, supportive forum for people to share their personal experiences of the transition to adulthood and to hear about others' experiences and perspectives. The issues discussed will be largely determined by the focus group participants. You have the right to choose what you share with others in the discussion and are welcome to withdraw from the focus group discussion at any time. I hope that participants will find the discussion stimulating and thought-provoking.

The focus group discussions will be audio-taped and transcribed. While participants' actual names may be used during the recorded focus group discussion, these will not be included in the transcripts used for analysis. Pseudonyms will replace actual names to ensure your anonymity. All consent forms, tapes, demographic questionnaires and printed transcripts will be stored securely in locked cabinets and will be accessible only to the researcher. The tapes will be destroyed once my thesis has been graded. When the research is completed I will send you a summary of the research findings, if you would like one. If you are interested in receiving one simply provide me with your address on the consent form.

What are your rights if you agree to participate?

Participation is completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- withdraw from the study up to the end of the focus group discussion;
- choose not to raise or comment on issues or topics during the focus group which you do not wish to discuss;
- request for the audio tape recording to be paused at any point during the focus group;
- provide information during the focus group on the understanding that your real name will not be used in the transcripts or write-up of the research;
- be given a summary of the findings on completion of the research, if you request one on the consent form.

How you can gain further information or volunteer to participate:

If you are interested in taking part in this study please contact me on:

Nikki Rasmussen

██████████
██████████

If you have any further questions about the study, you can contact myself or my supervisor Kerry Chamberlain.

Kerry Chamberlain
(09) 414 0800 ext 9078
K.Chamberlain@massey.ac.nz

Life experiences of young adults in today's society

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate in the research under the conditions outlined in the Information Sheet.

I agree to not disclose any sensitive personal information discussed in the Focus Group by another participant. Any other issues of confidentiality concerning more general discussions will be decided by the group and I agree to respect and adhere to such decisions.

Signature:

.....

Date:

.....

Full Name - printed

.....

If you would like to receive a summary of the findings at the conclusion of this research, please provide an address or email where I will be able to send this to you.

.....

.....

.....

APPENDIX E: GENERAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD & 'THE QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS' STUDY -- INTERVIEW SCHEDULE --

Topics or potential questions to be covered in the Focus Group discussions:

Education: (approx 15-20mins?)

- Choosing to study / or not study
- Choosing what to study/where to study
- How important/valuable they feel their education is (Costs vs Benefits)

Employment / Career: (approx 15mins?)

- Why interested in their area of employment
- Knowledge of job options
- Finding a job
- Finding the 'right' job, Finding the 'right' career
- Career/Job Satisfaction
- Expectations

Relationships: (approx 10mins?)

- Managing relationships (Friends, Family, Romantic)
- Making relationship choices (starting/ending relationships)
- Expectations

Finances (approx 10mins?)

- Managing finances
- Getting 'ahead' / Saving / Investing

Travel (approx 10mins?)

- Intentions of travel/Importance of travel
- Expectations
- Length of travel
- Finding where to live

Image (approx 10mins)

- Self-image
- Importance of others opinions
- Adult Status – Do they consider themselves to be adults? How/when will they know they have become an adult?

General: (approx 20mins?)

- What are the things that help/hinder them most during this transition phase?
- Challenges / Issues facing them at this point of life What is their biggest concern right now?
- Positive aspects – What are the most positive aspects of this stage of their lives?
- Decision-making – (i.e) How do they feel about the choices and options they face?
- How do they feel about the decisions they have made in their life so far?
- What have been the most difficult decisions for them? What have been the easiest decisions?
- Self-knowledge/Identity - How well do they feel they know 'who they are' and/or what they want?
- Vision for the future / Expectations - How do they feel about their future?
- What are some of the things they feel sure/not so sure about?
- Satisfaction - Areas of life they feel *most* satisfied and *least* satisfied with?
- The Quarter-life Crisis – To what extent do they feel it is a valid experience/phenomenon?
- What meaning (if any) does the notion of a quarter-life crisis have to them?
- If it is considered to exist – how is it experienced?
- What may be the most influential contributing factors?

APPENDIX F: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

This brief questionnaire includes a number of demographic questions related to some of the topics included in the study. It should only take several minutes to complete and your responses will remain completely confidential. Thank-you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

1) Name: _____

(will remain completely confidential – only pseudonyms will be used in the research)

2) Age: _____

3) Gender: M / F (please circle)

4) Ethnicity:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maori | <input type="checkbox"/> Middle Eastern |
| <input type="checkbox"/> NZ European / Pakeha | <input type="checkbox"/> South African |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pacific Islander | <input type="checkbox"/> Other European |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian | <input type="checkbox"/> Latin / Hispanic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Indian | <input type="checkbox"/> African |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please name) _____ | |

5) What is the highest level of education that you have completed?:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than high school | <input type="checkbox"/> University Degree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Completed high school | <input type="checkbox"/> Post-graduate qualification |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Certificate / Diploma | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please name) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apprenticeship | |

6) What best describes your current status? (tick all that apply)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Full time student _____
(please name qualification studying) | <input type="checkbox"/> Casual employment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time student _____
(please name qualification studying) | <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time paid employment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed | <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time paid employment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer | |

7) If in employment, what is your current position title? _____

8) How long have you been in your current role? _____

9) How long have you been in your current organisation? _____

10) How long have you been in paid employment for? _____

11) Do you have any student loan debt? Y / N

12) If so, approximately how much do you owe? _____

13) Have you spent time overseas for longer than 6 months since finishing high school? Y / N

14) If not do you plan to spend longer than 6 months overseas anytime within the next 2 years? Y / N

15) What is your current relationship status?

- Single
- Casually dating
- In a committed relationship
- Engaged
- Married
- Other _____ (please name)

16) What is your current living situation?

- Living with parents
- Flatting situation
- Living with partner
- Living alone
- Other _____ (please name)

Please feel free to add any other comments you think may be useful

Thank-you very much for completing the questionnaire and taking the time to participate in the research. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.