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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.