Emerging adulthood in Ireland: Is the quarter-life crisis a common experience?

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by

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Declaration

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis towards the award of the **Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies** is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part-fulfilment of the award named above.

Signature of candidate: …………………………….

Date: 30th September 2011

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight in Ireland to establish the prevalence of what has become known in popular culture as *the quarter-life crisis*. This transitional period in a young person's life is academically referred to as *emerging adulthood* and is a time of great change and personal growth. The study utilised a qualitative approach; individual interviews and focus groups were carried out with the identified research group. The findings of the study indicated that indeed, emerging adulthood is a challenging time, and for some, it is a time in crisis. A variety of stressors commonly arise in the lives of emerging adults, relating mainly to personal relationships, living arrangements, financial issues and identity development. Emotional responses to these were varied, including both positive and negative emotions as participants reflected on their current life and future. In many instances, it became apparent that the crisis experienced during emerging adulthood served a purpose, as a stimulus for change and development. The significance of this study rested in its attempt to expand literature on this life period within an Irish context and to determine ways in which emerging adults might be supported during this challenging period of developmental transition.

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Glossary of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the subsequent terms are defined as follows:

Emerging adulthood: The period of development occurring between adolescence and young adulthood, approximately between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight (Arnett, 2004b).

Emerging adult: A young person approximately between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight.

Factor: A distinct set of variables yielding a pattern or common trend.

Quarter-life Crisis: A period of stress, emotional upheaval and insecurity **between the ages of eighteen and twenty eight.** The characteristics are listed to include frustration with relationships and the working world, confusion of identity, and insecurity regarding the present, the immediate future and long-term goals. The crisis may include depression and other mental illnesses (Blake, 2008; Robbins & Wilner, 2001; Olsen-Madden, 2007).

Life Stage: A stage of development during the life-span characterised by distinguishable psychological characteristics, psychosocial development, chronological age and social rites of passage (Erikson, 1959; Bocknek, 1980; Arnett, 2004b).

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Chapter one begins by illustrating the aims of the study and then explains the rationale for the research and provides an outline of the study.

1.1: Aims of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of young people in Ireland who are in the developmental phase of the life course that is known as *emerging adulthood*. While the ages of individuals in this phase may vary, it is generally recognised that emerging adults are between the ages of eighteen and twenty eight years old. More specifically, the research aims to examine the difficulties that are commonly experienced during this period and the prevalence of what has become known in popular culture as *the quarter-life crisis*.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- How do young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty eight (emerging adults) experience the transitional phase of emerging adulthood in Ireland?
- Is the phase of emerging adulthood a time of crisis (the quarter life crisis) for young people in Ireland? If so, what factors/issues contribute to this?
- What emotions are commonly experienced during this transition?
- What are the emerging adults' own attitudes regarding this time in their lives?
- What are the key issues that affect the emerging adults' positive/negative experience of this phase of development?

In addressing these questions, emerging adults' perspectives and thoughts regarding emerging adulthood and the quarter life crisis will be explored and opinions teased out. The study aims to gain insight with regard to these questions by using a combination of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with emerging adults.

1.2: Rationale for the study

It is estimated that there are approximately 532,000 people between the ages of eighteen and twenty eight years in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2011). As this is quite a significant proportion of the population, about 12%, it is strange that there is a very limited availability of academic research on the experiences of Irish people within this age group. As outlined in

the following chapter, a number of publications aimed at these emerging adults, such as magazines and online blogs, depict emerging adulthood as a time of crisis. The term that is utilised in popular culture for this crisis is *the quarter life crisis*. As key issues that affect emerging adults arise during this research, it is feasible that such information could be used for the purpose of identifying possible interventions that could be put in place by educational or social institutions to support emerging adults during this period of potential crisis. Emerging adulthood is noted as a crucial phase of development that allows an individual to explore the personal and professional avenues they will commit to in adult life (Arnett, 2004).

A limited number of recent studies are available on the experiences of emerging adults and the various factors that influence their well-being during this transitional period, particularly in an Irish context. Most studies on this life stage have taken place in mainland Europe and the United States of America (Holdsworth, 2004). A large focus of these studies relates to the extension of time spent in education and how this correlates with the lengthening of the transition of emerging adulthood. Also, the nature of the relationship between the emerging adult and their parents, and the pattern of leaving home at a later stage and its effects on personal well-being, are central to these studies. It would be beneficial to explore such factors and examine their relevance in an Irish context, as well as to identify additional factors that may be highly influential in the lives of emerging adults.

1.3: Outline of the Study

Chapter one gives a brief outline of the research study, the aims of the research and the rationale.

Chapter two presents the literature review, outlining what has been written on this topic previously.

Chapter three outlines the research methodology, presents the sample and the selection of participants. The chosen data collection method is defended and the ethics of the study and analysis of the data are discussed.

Chapter four presents the research findings of the current study under a number of headings and detailed sub-headings where necessary.

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Chapter five discusses the research findings presented in chapter four in relation to the literature review and the aims of the study. It draws a summary of the main themes that emerge throughout the course of the study and contrasts and compares perspectives of emerging adults. It also presents the limitations of the current study.

Chapter six contains the author's conclusions and future recommendations arising from the research findings and discussion.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1: Introduction

This chapter provides a review of relevant literature related to the developmental phase of emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis. Academic literature on the experiences of individuals during this life-period, particularly in an Irish context, is extremely limited as emerging adulthood and particularly the quarter-life crisis are relatively newly developed concepts. Due to this limited availability, international research on the experiences of emerging adults is examined. The theoretical framework of emerging adulthood as a significant stage in human life-span development is also outlined.

2.2: A Life-Span Perspective of Human Development

Adoption of a life-span perspective of human development is central to this research. Furthermore, an understanding of this perspective is fundamental to recognizing the significance of the developmental phase of emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis. Life-span developmental psychology is an area that is founded on the work of theorists who viewed all change across the human life-course as development involving *role exchange*. These theorists, including Piaget (1967), Erikson (1968), Graves (1970), Levinson (1976), Loevinger (1976) and Kohlberg (1984), proposed several stage theories of human development. Despite differing beliefs regarding the content of these stages, the above theorists agreed that each stage in the life-span reflects a qualitative change in overall mental development. Robinson (2008) describes the change as a "caterpillar-to-butterfly" moment in the developing person. The new structures that emerge with a new stage are more complex than before; they transcend and include prior stages, so that developmental stages retain features of the prior ones and build on their foundation (Graves, 1970). Life-span development is therefore not a long plateau of steady maturity, but a series of alternating phases of stability and transition (Robinson, 2008).

Within the life-span perspective, development is denoted by a process of becoming more fully functioning, rather than utilising chronological age to monitor human development. Non-chronological concepts of age, that is, a person's psychological, social, functional and biological ages, all contribute to the question of how old one is (Sugarman, 2001).

2.3: Crisis and Transition

The first to write extensively about psychological crises and their significance in human development was the life-span development theorist Erik Erikson (1950). A crisis for Erikson is a period when the "wholeness" of a person is compromised, leading to inner and outer fragmentation. Erikson (1950) stated that crises were a normal part of the developmental process and that they were formative in development. Caplan (1964) looked at crisis more closely, with the hope of helping people who were experiencing a crisis to use it constructively for personal growth. Caplan (1964) considered that a crisis was a time which could hold the potential for constructive change or for deterioration:

> Every crisis presents both an opportunity for psychological growth and the danger of psychological deterioration. It is a way-station on a path leading away from or toward mental disorder. The outcome of the crisis depends on the resolution of a complex of conflicting forces during the period of the disequilibrium. (Caplan, 1964, p.53)
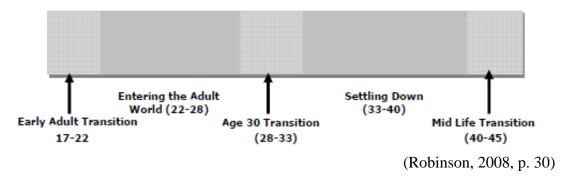
Caplan (1964) postulated two distinct types of crisis. Firstly there are "accidental crises", which are brought about by sudden external events such as bereavement or job loss and are not internally triggered. However, his interest focused on the second type, "developmental crises", which are precipitated by a transitional period between stable life structures (Erikson, 1968; Caplan, 1964). Caplan (1964) suggested that "developmental crises" are more predictable than the former and have a more powerful impact on development. Both of the abovementioned life-span developmental theorists outline the irrefutable relationship between transition and crisis, as it is in developmental life transition that crisis occurs.

2.4: A Life-Span Perspective of Early Adulthood

In respect of the research question of this paper, it is helpful to examine the life phase of early adulthood within the life-span perspective of human development. This is relevant as it indicates how cultural and societal norms influence human development. Also, theories relating to emerging adulthood and the role of crises in human development are founded on the following framework of human development. Early adulthood is one part of Levinson's tripartite division of adulthood into *early adulthood* (20-40), *middle adulthood* (40-60) and *late adulthood* (60+). This threeway division has now become standard in life-span development psychology, with key textbooks in the field such as those of Santrock (2006) and Boyd and Bee (2006), being organised according to these life stages. Each life stage is

broken down further into a set of sub-stages. In Levinson's model (1976), early adulthood has two main stable phases, one mid-stage transition and two boundary transitions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Sub-stages of Early Adulthood

<div align="right">(Robinson, 2008, p. 30)</div>

Levinson's work on early adulthood was preceded by the findings of Erikson (1959). It was Erikson (1959) who first noticed a stage in human development that followed adolescence and preceded adulthood. His framework of the human life span represents adolescence as a time of conflict between identity certainty and role confusion, and importantly, identifies a new phenomenon of "prolonged adolescence" in industrialised countries (Erikson, 1959). Previous to this, Erikson's work simply noted adolescence followed by adulthood. Levinson's model of human development (1976) classifies the *Early Adult Transition* (17-22) as the transition phase that connects adolescence and early adulthood. According to Levinson (1976), the *Early Adult Transition* involves the first tentative consideration of adult roles and expectations, and the initial testing of career and relationship prospects. This sub-stage is not early adulthood yet, but rather is a boundary phase that maintains some experimental features of adolescence but imports some more committed aspects of early adulthood.

After this transition is over, *Entering the Adult World* (22-28) commences. The main task of this period is to fashion a coherent, self-supported life structure of occupation and family for the first time, away from the protective gaze of parents (Robinson, 2008). If commitments are made too early, without sufficient self-examination, a person may find themselves in a pattern that Sheehy (1977) called "locked in". However, if a person continues to explore but never commit, then they may skip from job to job, and from relationship to relationship, in a pattern which Sheehy (1977) termed "transient". Sheehy focused on both commitment and experimentation as active forces in one's twenties.

In his study of developmental crisis in early adulthood, Robinson (2008) stated that while his research findings support the accuracy of Levinson's sub-stages of early adulthood, the ages and durations of each stage in Levinson's model are somewhat outdated and must be altered. Early adulthood as a life stage is shaped by the cultural and historical context, and in the current climate of social change this is clearly apparent. Social trends such as increased female employment, increased father involvement, fewer marriages and more flexible work portfolios have provided new challenges and opportunities for individuals in their twenties and thirties (Robinson, 2008). This contemporary change towards a more pluralistic and ambiguous approach to early adulthood may mean that the more structured formulation of Levinson's model, with its assumptions of a structured cultural template for early adulthood, is simply out-of-date (Robinson, 2008). The changing experience of early adulthood will be explored further below.

2.5: Emerging Adulthood

Arnett (2000) coined the term *emerging adulthood* to represent a new and historically unprecedented period in the life course, between the ages of eighteen and twenty five, that began to present itself in generations X, Y and Z[1]. Arnett (2000, p. 470) argued that emerging adulthood is not to be confused with adolescence nor early adulthood but is a period that is theoretically and empirically distinct from them both. Emerging adulthood is distinguished by virtual independence from social roles and from normative expectations and it is a time in life when many different directions remain a possibility, when the future has not been decided for certain, and when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other stage of the life cycle. Emerging adulthood is described as an extended period of exploration and instability that young adults experience from their late teens to their mid-twenties (Arnett, 2004b).

Arnett (2004a) defines emerging adulthood specifically as:

- The age of identity exploration
- The age of instability
- The self-focussed age

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[1] Generation X: Individuals born 1965-1979
Generation Y: Individuals born 1980-1997
Generation Z: Individuals born 1998-present

- The age of feeling in-between
- The age of possibilities

Psychologically based precursors to the theory of emerging adulthood focused on changing social roles and responsibilities during young adulthood (Bocknek, 1980) and changing markers for the transition to adulthood (Côté, 2000). Arnett (2000) expanded on this work and described emerging adulthood as:

> a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course. (p. 469)

Arnett's theory (2000) of emerging adulthood, which was based on interviews and demographic information about emerging adults gathered and analysed over several years, revealed it to be a time when emerging adults explore identity, love, work, relationships, demographic change, belief, and values. The lyrics of Bob Dyan (1974) "How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?" may be used as a euphemism for the question of how long emerging adulthood lasts. One might ask "How many roads must an emerging adult explore before you call him/her an adult?" It is considered to be a period of the life span that is culturally constructed, not universal and unchangeable (Arnett, 2000).

Arnett (2004) focused on the trend of emerging adults residing in the parental home for a longer period of time and proposes that it is possibly the most influential factor in the experience of the phase of development. This theory is supported by a selection of studies conducted by Seiffkge-Krenke (2006) and Kins et al. (2009) on patterns of emerging adults leaving home in America and Belgium respectively and how this affects their well-being. Both studies found that emerging adults who continued to live with their parents experienced feelings of anxiety and depression at a far greater rate than emerging adults who lived outside the parental home. Trends in these studies indicated that feelings of autonomy, self-directedness and independence are central to the well-being of emerging adults. These are highly influenced by the living situation in which emerging adults find themselves and it is likely that such issues will arise through the course of this research.

Arnett (2000) also identified further societal changes which led to the emergence of this life period, including the rise of marriage and parenthood ages, rise in the number of individuals

entering higher education, and a change in how individuals see life responsibilities and often avoid them. Robinson's (2008) qualitative study of emerging adults in London supports this theory as mentioned above. Culturally, emerging adulthood exists in mostly industrialized or post industrial western countries, as well as affecting individuals from middle or higher income classes who have more opportunities for education and work (Arnett, 2004b; Benson, 2006).

2.5.1: Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood

While emerging adulthood has been accepted as a distinct life period that follows adolescence, an overlap into research into both life stages occurs. In earlier studies, many researchers examined individuals in their early twenties as part of research into adolescence. One important and early contribution was made by Erik Erikson (1950, 1968). He discussed one of the most widely studied issues of this life stage which concerns identity formation. During this period, worldviews become important to the individual, who enters a "psychological moratorium, which is a gap between the security of childhood and the autonomy of adulthood" according to Erikson (1968, p.66). Simply, if youths successfully cope with the conflicting identities that adolescence and the early twenties evoke, they can emerge with a new sense of self that is both refreshing and acceptable. However, those that do not cope well suffer from what is referred to as "identity confusion", wherein individuals can isolate themselves from peers and family or they may lose their identity in the crowd (Erikson, 1950; Durkin, 1995, p. 13 517). Erikson's classification of this identity crisis appears to be a cataclysmic transition. However, many contemporary developmentalists view it as a gradual, lengthy and complex process (Heaven, 2001).

Emerging adulthood theory was found to be linked to identity development theory (Arnett 2000; 2004a; 2004b; 2007; Hollander, 2007). Arnett (2004b) wrote that "the process of identity formation begins in adolescence but intensifies in emerging adulthood" (p. 9). More specifically, Arnett (2004b) found that "In the course of exploring possibilities in love and work, emerging adults clarify their identities, that is, they learn more about who they are and what they want out of life" (p. 8). Unfortunately, while Arnett (2004) offered the most in-depth analysis of the characteristics of this phase and the key issues that influence it, he failed to offer empirically validated information on the strong influence of relationships and work on the lives of emerging adults.

In a study by Hollander (2007) which explored the psychological constructs of attachment, psychosocial maturity, and differentiation of self during emerging adulthood, the researcher found that psychosocial maturity and attachment during the life period predicted differentiation of self and identity development. Hollander (2007) found that "emerging adults who had completed Erikson's stages of psychosocial development were more prepared to combat anxiety and form strong identity" (p. 123). Similarly, a study by Gottlieb, Still, and Newby-Clark (2007) of development in first year college students revealed that experiences during emerging adulthood provided growth opportunities in three domains: relating to others, new possibilities, and personal strength. Leftkowitz (2005) also found that emerging adults portrayed changes in a positive developmental way, with belief and quality of life changes mentioned more frequently by study participants than behavioural changes.

2.5.2: Individual Responses to Emerging Adulthood

Related to identity development during emerging adulthood, researchers also explored the emotional responses of individuals during emerging adulthood. Arnett (2004b; 2007) found instances of high stress and mental distress in emerging adults due to instability during this period. In addition, developmental deficits were found to be related to inability to balance multiple social roles or domains (Arnett, 2004b; Sneed, Hamagami, Ardle, Cohen, & Chen, 2007), although positive development in one domain of development was characterized by positive development in another (Sneed, et al., 2007). Overall, Arnett (2007) reported:

> By and large, emerging adults respond to the challenges of identity development not by collapsing into a quivering mass of fear but by making their way gradually toward laying the foundation for an adult life in love and work, with some anxiety but without trauma. (p. 24)

Sciaba (2002) focused specifically on emotions in emerging adults during her study of two hundred and sixty primarily female, respondents. The respondents answered a questionnaire in which they associated emotion words with different common life changes and themes during emerging adulthood such as work, relationships, personal identity, being isolated, and moving out of the family home. The most common emotion words, though varied in their associations with life changes, were "anxious", "sad", "depressed", "scared", "concerned", and "dissatisfied" (Sciaba, 2002). Words such as "happy", "hopeful", and "satisfied" were associated with life changes such as relationships and moving out of the family home. Sciaba (2002) wrote that respondents felt more negative toward emerging adulthood developmental

tasks and had increased feelings of negativity, instability, and depression. Emotional responses were varied in all studies (Arnett, 2004b; 2007; Sciaba, 2002).

Emerging adulthood theory also focused on the effects of certain life changes. Arnett (2000; 2004a; 2004b) identified several trends as significant during emerging adulthood, including changing relationships with parents, intimate relationships and marriage, the college experience, work and career path, and religion. Changing relationships with parents, such as making independent choices, relating as equals, and moving in and out of the family home, were identified as significant factors (Arnett, 2000; 2004b). Furthermore, emerging adults reported exploring options for intimate relationships, although meeting someone once they are out of school was a challenge (Arnett, 2004b). Montgomery (2005), in a study of adolescents and emerging adults age twelve to twenty-four, found that the older cohort identified as emerging adults were more committed to romantic beliefs and had less romantic idealization. During this period many emerging adults look for a life partner and move toward marriage by exploring several intimate relationships (Arnett 20004b; Badger, 2005). In a study by Badger (2005), the researcher reported that "a growing number of emerging adults believe that they will not be ready for marriage until they go through an extended period of single adulthood that permits them to explore and experiment in various areas of life" (p. 64), although most emerging adults hold traditional views of marriage and work to avoid marital breakdown.

Religion and ideology were also found to be significant factors in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2000b; Barry & Nelson, 2005; 2008). During this life period, while religious beliefs were only reported as being important by a slight majority of emerging adults, individuals were still in the process of forming their beliefs and values (Arnett, 2000; 2004b). Arnett (2004b) noted that during emerging adulthood people face questions of religion, spirituality, and belief more directly than in adolescence. In Barry and Nelson's (2005) study of undergraduates from Catholic, Mormon, and public institutions, the researchers reported that the role of religion differed by religion in the criteria perceived as necessary for adulthood, various aspects of spirituality including beliefs, practices and behaviours. In addition, Barry and Nelson's (2008) later study of the relationship between religion and self-worth found that religiosity, or beliefs and practices, are related to positive self-perception and self-esteem. As reported by Arnett (2004b) the role of religion and belief in the lives of emerging adults is significant, yet varied.

2.6: The Quarter-Life Crisis

The *quarter-life crisis* is a term that is becoming more apparent in popular culture, with magazines, online blogs and recreational literature using this term to represent the difficulties of emerging adults as they are unsure of the route to take in life (Robbins, 2001). In particular, many magazines and newspaper supplements aimed at younger adults contain articles about the quarter-life crisis. One such article described the quarter-life crisis as follows:

> It is a period of emotional upheaval and insecurity immediately following the major changes of adolescence, usually ranging from the ages of twenty one to twenty nine. The characteristics are listed to include frustration with relationships and the working world, confusion of identity, and insecurity regarding the present, the immediate future and long-term goals. (Blake, 2008)

One of the first research-based examinations of the quarter-life crisis was presented by Robbins and Wilner (2001). The purpose of this qualitative study was to introduce the notion of the quarter-life crisis as a modern day phenomenon to the general public. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with individuals between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine in the United States about their life experiences and stressors they experience during this period. For the purpose of the study, Robbins and Wilner (2001) referred to these study participants as "twentysomethings". During the study, a particular significance regarding the ordeal of leaving third level education became apparent, which may account for the fact that the quarter-life crisis is a modern day occurrence, as individuals are more likely to pursue third level education nowadays compared to previous years. The role of education in the quarter-life crisis is elaborated below. Robbins and Wilner (2001) described the quarter-life crisis as a life period that "covers the interval that encompasses the transition from the academic world to the 'real' world" (p.2) in which "individuals relentlessly question their future and how it will follow the events of their past" (p.2). Other researchers found alternative means of defining the quarter-life crisis, in terms of the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008; Olson-Madden, 2007; Panchal & Jackson, 2007). Olsen-Madden (2007) defined the problem of the quarter-life crisis in terms of common experiences:

> Specifically, people in this cohort often look to achieve autonomy from parents both physically and emotionally, establish a career, mould an identity that is favorable, find intimacy, become part of a social group or community, select a mate and adjust to marriage, establish a solid

residence and learn to manage a home, develop emotional stability, and become a parent/rear children. (p. 3)

Robbins and Wilner (2001) specifically discussed six aspects of the quarter-life crisis: issues finding work; lack of a support network; disappointment in what individuals experience versus expectations about life in their twenties; feeling "they have to nail down their lives" (p. 9); doubt; and self-exploration. Interestingly, these aspects strongly correlate with the challenges associated with emerging adulthood.

2.6.1: Third-Level Graduation and the Quarter-Life Crisis

Robbins and Wilner (2001) placed a particular emphasis on the effects of third level education on individuals experiencing the quarter-life crisis. Their research identified college graduation as a major catalyst for many of the problems associated with the quarter-life crisis. Participants in their study reported disappointment over not feeling they were about to apply their field of study to their jobs after graduation; concerns about how to meet people and form relationships; and feelings as if they lacked support network and structure (Robbins & Wilner, 2001). In addition, some participants were found to treat life after college as a direct continuation of their college years in order to avoid entering the "real world". For some, the continuation of the college years included directly entering postgraduate courses following graduation or returning to third level education after a few years. Robbins and Wilner (2001) wrote that some participants felt postgraduate study was an ideal way to prolong their college lifestyle and to "smooth" the transition. It should be noted that the majority of participants in the research of Robbins and Wilner (2001) were college students or graduates. Their findings may highlight college graduation as a catalyst as it is a major life event in the specific group they selected to study. Their findings may not be accurate in portraying third level education as a cause of the quarter-life crisis; the trends they note may simply be due to the fact that graduation coincides with the typical timing of the quarter-life crisis. Other studies (Robinson, 2008; Côté, 2000) show that individuals in this age group who never attended third level education also experience the crisis.

2.6.2: The Quarter-Life Crisis and Mental Health

The common themes of identity development and mental health arose in research of the quarter-life crisis (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008; Olson-Madden, 2007; Panchal & Jackson, 2007; Robbins & Wilner, 2001). Robbins and Wilner (2001) described the overarching cause of the quarter-life crisis as an identity crisis in which twentysomethings are deeply dissatisfied with

their jobs, relationships and lives following college, and are looking to "define who they are by what they do" (p.15). The researchers contemplated that this may be due to unrealistic expectations and refusal to compromise as individuals search for their passion (Robbins & Wilner, 2001). This period of self-discovery has been complicated by feelings that they are not adolescents but not yet adults, and confusion about what defines adulthood (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008; Robbins & Wilner, 2001). Atwood and Scholtz (2008) also reported that commitment to goals and lack of gratification if goals are not achieved is common and the fear of failure in goal attainment can cause mental health issues for individuals (Robbins & Wilner, 2001). They found that for many individuals "failure in one thing can set off a chain reaction of failure in other aspects of life" (p. 75) leading to a downward spiral and mental health issues. Robbins and Wilner (2001) found that mental health issues were often caused by doubts as twentysomethings "try to arrange all facets of life at the same time" (p. 90). Common feelings and emotions experienced by participants included hopelessness and confusion which triggered or prolonged a precarious emotional period.

The literature revealed several stressors leading to emotional and mental health issues related to the quarter-life crisis. As mentioned above, researchers reported that the crisis stems from an overabundance of options and life choices that often lead to frequently changing jobs, living situations, and relationships (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008; Panchal & Jackson, 2007; Robbins & Wilner, 2001). Panchal and Jackson (2007) attributed the expansion of options to globalization and the influence of technology on today's youth and young adults. Ruminating over decisions was consistently reported as a cause of emotional stress and individuals respond by using a variety of coping mechanisms (Panchal & Jackson, 2007; Robbins & Wilner, 2001). Robbins and Wilner (2001) found that "emerging adults often agonize over their decisions; they can spend months trying to figure out the proper choice or procrastinating so they don't have to make one in the first place" (p. 123). The pressure and belief that choices during this time period will affect the rest of their lives such as where to live, where to work, and what relationships to pursue or alter are major causes of stress (Panchal & Jackson, 2007; Robbins & Wilner, 2001). In relation to balancing these areas of stress, Robbins and Wilner (2001) reported that "emerging adults frequently feel like the way they top the balance now will affect them for years to come" (p.149).

Another topic addressed in literature was life satisfaction among individuals in the quarter-life crisis. Olson-Madden's (2007) study involved use of quantitative analysis of life satisfaction, hope, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and social support to describe trends in life satisfaction among individuals between the ages of eighteen and thirty five. The study found that life satisfaction was not correlated to religious affiliation, student status, living arrangement, current relationship status, and money. Olson-Madden (2007) wrote that career and education were correlated to life satisfaction and many individuals were unhappy about their line of work and challenges in meeting their career goals. They also reported that eighty per cent of respondents felt stress over financial situations, and many reported debt of university loans. In addition, younger members of the cohort were more satisfied than older members, possibly due to increased stress levels. Overall, the study revealed that stressors were frequent in the lives of individuals during this life period leading to lower life satisfaction among some members of the cohort (Olson-Madden, 2007).

2.7: Conclusion

This chapter outlined the importance of adopting a life-span perspective of human development in order to understand the experience of emerging adulthood. Upon reading about the topics of emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis, the following correlations became apparent in the issues and challenges included in both areas: the struggle to find an identity; exploration of various work options; entering further education; the challenges of love relationships; and selecting living arrangements to meet one's needs. The absence of empirical evidence examining the experience of this life stage was emphasized by Robinson (2008) who stated that it is irrefutable that early adulthood is full of profound life-stage-specific challenges and changes, which make its relative absence from psychological literature hard to explain.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3:1: Introduction

The central objective of this research is to explore the experiences of young people in Ireland who are in the developmental phase of the life course that is known as *emerging adulthood*. A second objective is to determine whether or not it is common for emerging adults in Ireland to experience a quarter-life crisis and to identify the factors that contribute to the quarter life crisis if it does exist. The research aims to solicit the opinions of emerging adults regarding the prevalence of the quarter life crisis and to examine any difficulties that are commonly experienced during this period.

This chapter provides an overview of the research methods that were utilized in the study, to include research design and development. Details of the samples are outlined, ethical considerations are described and data analysis of research is discussed.

3.2: The Qualitative Method

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach was employed. Individual interviews and focus groups were carried out with the identified research group, to include a certain set of questions and follow-up questions based on participant responses. The interviews comprised a series of questions the researcher addressed to the respondents in order to obtain information (Barbour, 2007) and were mainly semi-structured. The rationale for adopting such an approach will be discussed below.

The interviews and focus groups allowed participants freedom in their responses and the researcher to gather new topics to be explored while still gaining information in specified topic areas (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The study's research questions were open-ended, suggesting a study of an exploratory nature. The inclusion of open-ended questions allowed respondents "the freedom to express feelings and thoughts especially when complex issues were being studied" (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 231). As this is a relatively new area of research, the questions asked covered broad topics and were designed to encourage discussion and generate reflection about emerging adulthood and the quarter life crisis. The aim of the qualitative method was to capture reality through the experience of the respondents (Sarantakos, 2005) which was precisely the objective of the researcher in this study. The

approaches that were adopted enabled an effective exploration of the perspectives of participants and examined their experiences in the contexts in which they occur (Smith, 2003). The intention was to tease out some of the issues associated with this transitional period and examine the factors that contribute to whether emerging adulthood is experienced as a time of crisis or not. Sarantakos (2005) notes that qualitative methods have multiple strengths as they achieve a deeper understanding of the respondents' worlds, allow higher flexibility and present a more realistic view of the world. From the data collected, comparisons and differences in opinions can be established. Qualitative methods are especially adept at capturing the multiple voices of different actors engaged in some aspect of social behaviour, for example, a peer group (Barbour, 2007). They illuminate the very different situations in which individuals find themselves and the different concerns they bring to bear when discussing topics. Qualitative methods also produce additional personal insight, which is especially important in an exploratory study such as this.

3.3: Sample

The identification of individuals and groups that would participate in this research was one of the first steps taken. Initially there was some ambiguity regarding the age range to be utilised as varying age ranges are used to define emerging adulthood in the literature explored. It was decided that the selection for this research would be young adults living in Ireland between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight years in accordance with the most recent definition provided by Arnett (2007).

3.4: Sample Access and Recruitment

The sample groups were accessed in a number of ways. Access was not difficult as many of the researcher's peer group and work colleagues are within the age ranges identified. While it was deemed inappropriate by the researcher to ask friends to participate, due to the personal nature of some of the questions, a number of acquaintances of friends were recruited for interview. Also, a number of volunteers came forward when they heard about the research topic and expressed an interest in participating. It was important to ensure a balance of gender as well as individuals who went to college and those who did not, those who were employed and those who were not. Upon the selection of participants, the researcher setup in-person interviews with participants. The consent form and interview questions were e-mailed to respondents in advance.

Table 1. Interview Participants

	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Female
Age	19	23	27	25
College background	None	Bachelor of Arts	Bachelor of Arts	Bachelor of Education
Working status	Employed	Employed	Employed	Employed

In addition to the interviews, four focus groups were carried out. Each focus group consisted of four participants. Focus groups one and two were carried out with male and female college graduates between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight years. These participants were sourced through colleagues of the researcher. Focus groups three and four consisted of males and females who did not attend third level education but entered into the workforce immediately after their secondary schooling. These participants were sourced through acquaintances of the researcher. These individuals were chosen to ensure a broader range of perspectives on the prevalence of the quarter life crisis from individuals whose paths through emerging adulthood have followed different courses. The main purpose of organising male and female focus groups was to allow any potential differences between the experiences of each gender to become more visible.

Table 2. Focus Groups

	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Female
Education	Degree graduates	Degree graduates	None	None

3.5: Research Tool

The researcher used multiple qualitative measures to analyse experiences of individuals and groups. Sarantakos (2005) accurately notes that the use of a number of methods can allow the researcher to explore a variety of information on the same issue, achieve better reliability and validity, and express a commitment to thoroughness. The research instruments employed were interviews and focus groups. According to Barbour (2007) there are no set rules when mixing interviews and focus groups, in certain cases it may eliminate issues of power and allow for a more frank discussion and disclosure. Focus groups and interviews were

conducted under a number of broad headings including: participants' understanding of the term *quarter life crisis*; participants' belief that such a crisis exists; participants' own experience of the quarter life crisis; areas that cause stress in the lives of participants.

Interviews: The first method utilised was individual interviews, encouraging the respondents to discuss as many themes as possible in relation to emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis. It is estimated that over ninety per cent of social sciences investigations use interviews in one way or another (Silverman, 2004) and is undoubtedly the most widely used technique for systematic social inquiry. This was crucial in generating theories as to why emerging adulthood is experienced as a time of crisis (if this proved to be the case) and, as Barbour puts it, "qualitative research can and does provide explanations" (2007, p.15). It was envisioned that interviews would provide a greater depth of knowledge and understanding into the selected subject area and provide a more detailed account of the emerging adults' perspectives. This enabled the researcher to identify evidence from raw data and demonstrate connections between the research question and findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). According to Sarantakos (2005), interview and facilitation skills are crucial in ensuring that abundant and honest evidence is collected and that the research is managed correctly. Therefore the importance of adopting a "reserved, non-directive position may be best" to ensure that participants answers are not influenced by the researcher (Sarantakos, 2005, p.184).

Focus groups: The second method used was focus groups, which generated a rich understanding of the participants' beliefs, values and experiences. Focus groups have a number of fundamental strengths considered crucial for a study of this kind. Bringing a group together allowed them to compare and discuss their different experiences of emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis. The give and take of group discussions among participants who share these experiences produced very useful insight into what their experiences of this life phase have been so far (Arnett, 2004). In essence, focus groups allowed the researcher to listen to people and learn from them, essentially "structured eavesdropping" (Powney, 1988).

The researcher was aware that there can be negative aspects to group discussions, for example, conditions in the discussion group may force participants to hide their true feelings; domination of the discussion by one /two participants could affect the direction and outcome

of the focus group and lead to agreement with the dominant person(s); and some participants may be less willing to make personal disclosures due to the sensitive nature of the discussions concerning the difficulties which emerging adults experience.

3.6: Limitations

The use of interviews and focus groups with such a small sample of emerging adults will not lead to generalizable findings. The research will not represent the familiarity of the wider population of Ireland with the quarter life crisis but will reflect the opinion and experiences of a specific few. A broad range of contributing factors that may increase stress levels, relating to gender, employment and financial status, living arrangements and relationship status to name but a few, will be reflected in this study. However, further in-depth research on each of these would be required to examine the precise effect they have on the experiences of emerging adults.

Any potential bias of the researcher must also be noted. As an emerging adult, the researcher may have preconceived notions regarding the quarter life crisis and may indirectly steer the content of interviews to favour this conviction.

Despite these limitations, the selected qualitative method is still believed to be the best method to fulfil the key objectives of this research. This method allows the researcher to tease out some of the issues associated with this transitional period and examine the factors that contribute to whether emerging adulthood is experienced as a time of crisis or not. It is believed that it will also generate further research questions regarding the prevalence and experience of the quarter life crisis amongst emerging adults in Ireland.

3.7: Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected through interviews and focus groups was analysed through a coding process to identify factors and themes throughout participants' responses. The researcher reviewed interview transcripts to identify and name categories and concepts. Repeated readings of the interview and focus group transcripts further enabled the researcher to identify recurrent patterns, detect repeated answers and identify common themes and sub-themes across the different participants. The information was then presented under a number of these common themes.

3.8: Ethical Issues

The research complies with the research ethical guidelines of the Sociological Association of Ireland (2002) and the ethical guidelines as set by the Dublin Institute of Technology. These guidelines indicate that the researcher should safeguard the interests of the research participant and recognise any conflicting concerns which may arise (Martin, 2003). Accordingly, best practice was applied with regard to the confidentiality, privacy, respect and anonymity of the participants and all discussions and disclosures were treated with sensitivity and due care. The data gathered was held in the strictest confidence; individuals are not named in this paper; and care has been taken to ensure they are not identifiable by any other means. Furthermore, the researcher accounts for the limits of the reliability and applicability of the data (Sarantakos, 2005).

Gomm (2004) maintains that in terms of codes of ethics, informed consent is paramount as participants need to know what they are "letting themselves in for before they make the decision to cooperate" (Gomm, 2004, p. 307). A letter (Appendix 1) providing a detailed description of the study and the use of any information generated was distributed to each participant and they were allowed time to consider whether or not they wished to participate before providing their written consent. Interviewees were informed of their right to opt out of the research at any time without reason and to have their decision respected.

3.9: Conclusion

This chapter has described the selection and sample of participants and substantiated the use of a qualitative method to meet the aims of the research. The ethical framework was established, as was the framework for the protection of the research participants. An account of the research findings is presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

4.1: Introduction

This chapter will outline and present the main themes that emerged from the four individual qualitative interviews and four focus groups carried out with emerging adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty eight. The participants' views will be presented under broad headings to explore their views on the existence of the quarter-life crisis; variables affecting life satisfaction during this period; and a possible pattern that the quarter-life crisis may follow.

4.2: Views of Emerging Adults on the Quarter-life crisis

The opening questions of the interviews sought to explore the understandings and views of emerging adults about the quarter-life crisis. Participants were asked questions such as: Have you ever heard of the quarter-life crisis? What is your understanding of the quarter-life crisis? Do you believe such a crisis exists? Why do/don't you believe in it? In response to these questions, almost all participants answered with reference to their own experiences or that of their friends.

While most participants had heard of the quarter-life crisis, many sought clarification of its definition. The findings of this section of the interviews confirmed that emerging adulthood is experienced as a challenging phase, with many of the emerging adults expressing their own experiences or those of their friends. Furthermore, most participants agreed that emerging adulthood could often be described as a time of crisis. This was the case for those who had attended third level education as well as those who had not.

> *"Have I heard of it or have I experienced it? Yes definitely. With me yes. But I see it even more so with my friends."* (Participant 5)

> *"Yeah I know of it. For me the crisis is just the confusion. I don't have a clue what I'm going to do with my life, or should I say, what I'm doing with it even now."* (Participant 1)

> *"I definitely went through one. Fingers crossed I'd say I'm out of it now since most things got sorted out. I was terribly stressed out at the time though. I'm talking four years at least, stressed out of my eyeballs, from nineteen to even the start of being*

twenty five actually now that I think about it.   So six years of misery, no exaggeration." (Participant 4)

"Ah yeah sure isn't it just like being a teenager, an extension of that like, but on top of the teenage stuff like birds (girls), spots, hormones and all that jazz, in your twenties, you're meant to find a decent job, get your own place and make a life for yourself. I mean, pressure is on. And now with the recession sure it's a disaster. All your mates are doing it and your thinking, ah what am I at? Yeah, it's a crisis alright." (Participant 20)

While all participants agreed upon and discussed the challenges of emerging adulthood, there was doubt amongst a few, mainly in the male focus groups, that this developmental phase should be described as a time of *crisis*. This particular view of emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis was expressed quite articulately by a male participant who noted that the life span consists of many developmental stages that challenge humans.

"Yeah I get what it is and I'd say it's a fair enough idea but I'm not sure because, if you think about it, every part of your life, you could say is like a crisis. Like there are troubled teenagers, or young lads on drugs or driving fast desperate to be cool. That is a crisis to me. Or like middle aged men trying to be young fellows in sports cars 'cause of their mid-life crisis. Being in your twenties with not much commitments is not too bad. But I suppose with my mates some of them are all over the place with jobs, girlfriends and all. But even that is better than the crisis of being old and alone... So I just don't know if I buy the whole quarter-life crisis thing." (Participant 2)

4.3: The Challenges of Emerging Adulthood

The next section of the interviews aimed to explore the factors that challenge emerging adults and so, contribute to the quarter-life crisis. These will be explored under the headings: relationships, living arrangements, work and finances, and identity development. It became apparent at this stage of the interviews that the challenges experienced in emerging adulthood are quite complex due to an element of overlap between stressors, for example how living arrangements may influence relationships.

4.3.1: Relationships

A common factor identified as a source of stress for the emerging adults was changing relationships with family, partners and friends. During the focus groups, a number of male participants who reside in the parental home described a strain on their relationship with their parents. They explained that while some of their mothers continued to treat them in a caring

manner as if they were not yet adults, many of them felt pressure from their parents to move forward in life and become independent. In some cases, these males reported that their parents had issued an ultimatum to them; they must contribute to the household finances and housework, or move out. This caused stress for the individuals concerned as they described problems attaining work or social welfare benefits. In other cases, males stated that their parents accepted them living at home but they themselves were unhappy with the situation, which led to conflict. They described a desire for privacy and freedom as the source of this conflict and their main reason for wishing to live away from their parents.

In contrast, female participants did not mention relationship problems with their parents as frequently as the males. Females who wished to live away from parents expressed a desire to be seen by others as independent, rather than feeling pressure from their parents to leave home.

During individual interviews with females and female focus groups, much discussion took place on the subject of romantic relationships. Relationships with partners were described as a significant source of stress. Interestingly, most females described their relationships as very supportive and loving. The source of strain related to other stressors which influenced relationships with partners. For example, a number of participants described being unable to financially afford to live with their partner as a source of strain on the relationship. One participant described how she felt that she was "supposed" to live with her partner as they were in their mid-twenties and had been in a committed relationship for several years.

> *"I wondered what was the point in being together if we were stuck and not moving forward."*(Participant 3)

Many female emerging adults expressed a desire, similar to that mentioned above, to "move forward". They compared themselves to others and the societal norms of their parents before them.

> *My mam is always going on about how she was married and had three kids at my age. Says she wonders what'll become of me... I'm twenty six!* (Participant 6)

In a similar manner, romantic relationships are a source of stress for those who are single but wish to have a partner. It was interesting to observe the fear associated with being "left on the

shelf". Many females expressed a strong desire for motherhood and marriage in their future. They perceived their lack of a partner at present as a threat to their future prospects of attaining these roles. This particular issue is explored further below with regard to the importance of identity development.

Interestingly, negative issues with friends did not arise often during interviews, except that some of the emerging adults tended to judge their own success and the suitability of their circumstances, by comparing themselves with their friends. Some participants mentioned the issue of friends moving forward and perhaps not being so available to them, which leads the participant to evaluate their own lives.

Despite this, many of the emerging adults described their relationships with friends as a source of support and comfort during difficult times. It became apparent through deeper discussion on this topic that the most successful friendships amongst emerging adults are those which evolve as their roles in life change. This was illustrated by a male participant and female participant consecutively:

> *"I'm a bit more settled now…so I spend more time with the lads who are in a similar boat with the bit of work, and a steady girlfriend. Like I wouldn't see the lads who are mad into the pub as much now. I'm past that bit, they're not."* (Participant 13)
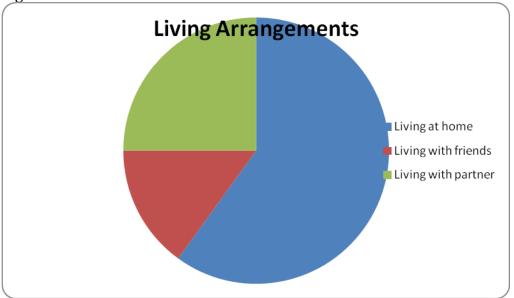
> *"Well E and J are still doing the college thing. They will always be my best friends but at the moment the other girls are the ones who help me out when I need it."* (Participant 14)

In the focus groups, female emerging adults described meeting new friends as a source of change in their lives but not necessarily stress. In contrast, most males described socialising with the same group of friends since their teenage or college years. In instances where these friends had moved on, either due to work or relationship commitments, males described spending more time on individual pursuits such as getting fit or playing computer games instead of seeking new friends.

4.3.2: Living Arrangements

Participants were asked about their living arrangements during the interviews, details of which are outlined on Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

The issue of living in the parental home was a cause for concern for some emerging adults as they felt they should be living independently at this stage in their lives.

> *"I feel like all my friends are with someone and happy out living with them. I'm home, and don't get me wrong, I love my parents and we get on, but it's hard when everyone else lives away from theirs. I suppose I feel I'm being left behind. I'm afraid I'll be the old one who lives with her parents. Even though I'm only twenty six, that seriously worries me."* (Participant 5)

It became apparent that financial factors featured as a major influence on the living arrangements of emerging adults.

> *"Well me and S lived together for two years in Australia. Now he's back in his mam's and I'm in my mam's because we're still paying off our loans. We barely get a minute to ourselves."* (Participant 3)

> *"We lived together. Then we moved into my parents for money reasons. Now he lives in London for work and I'm at home. I couldn't give up my job in the pharmacy, it's good enough money. It's hard though, I don't know what we'll do."* (Participant 8)

Another common theme was balancing personal and family opinions regarding living

situations and intimate relationships. This theme arose particularly amongst females during the focus groups. Two participants expressed their plans to cohabit with their partner as a step towards marriage. They explained that they had discussed marriage with their partner but could not afford to purchase a house and save for the cost of a wedding at the same time.

> *"I know it sounds old-fashioned but my parents, my dad in particular, would like to see me do what they did. Get married and then move in. We can't do both. We can't afford it. I don't want to fall out with them over it but I just know he isn't happy about it. When we get the house we'll start saving for the wedding. Really it's none of his business but ... it bothers me."* (Participant 16)

4.3.3: Work and Finances

The majority of participants interviewed reported working, though for some it was part-time or relief work rather than full-time. Working individuals spoke of work-related stress in two areas; difficulty finding work and negative work experiences.

With regard to difficulty finding work, eleven participants mentioned the immense stress they experienced when searching for a job. Six males described being out of work for periods exceeding six months following graduation from either college or school. Difficulty finding work was attributed to factors such as the economy and the lack of jobs. Some males mentioned avoiding looking for work due to confusion regarding the area of the workforce they wished to join; one participant stated that he would rather stay at home and "figure out" what he wanted to do. In contrast, females were more inclined to temporarily work in a job they did not wish to pursue as a career while they waited for a further opportunity to arise. Furthermore, highly-skilled participants reported the necessity to search for jobs outside of their area of expertise.

> *"I reckon my dad thinks he wasted his money sending me to college. Sure I work in the local (pub) collecting glasses after spending three years doing a degree in journalism. It took me eight months to get this job. They were delighted when I got it. They don't blame me, they know I tried to get a job. But I blamed myself. It was depressing."* (Participant 2)

> *"I was an electrician for seven years. Now I work in Argos on the tills. Same story for all my electrician mates."* (Participant 1)

Evidently, the current economic situation in Ireland has caused a multitude of stresses in the lives of emerging adults. One participant described the uncertainty in her working life as a source of difficult decisions to be made.

> *"I'm an engineer. Luckily I've been kept on but I don't know how long for. Work is drying up fast. I have a fair bit saved but what do I do? Blow my savings on a mortgage or live with my parents? Go abroad for work where I know nobody? To be honest, I don't have a clue what to be doing."* (Participant 7)

Participants also identified dissatisfaction working in their highly skilled career as stressor.

> *"Well I always thought my career was the one thing I was certain of. I thought I knew what I was doing and I studied hard. Turns out I don't like the work as a solicitor and the icing on the cake is I'm lucky to have a job, so basically I'm stuck because of the recession. It's a choice of me being miserable in my job or me being unemployed and poor. My dad thinks I'm spoilt and is always saying how our generation doesn't appreciate anything. He'd go mad if I abandoned my career."* (Participant 4)

The financial situations for many emerging adults have changed dramatically in a short space of time. In some cases, individuals described their difficulty adjusting to this change. Participants remembered clearly the Celtic Tiger and the lifestyles they and their peers experienced during this period of prosperity in Ireland. One participant contrasted her life now with life at that time when money and jobs were abundant.

> *"Sure I remember when I was seventeen leaving my part-time job in one shop and the next day having a job in the shop next door. Sure they were crying out for workers. When I look back I wonder why I didn't save anything. I was in college full-time and still coming out with great money from my little job. I went out every weekend, bought clothes, gave money to my little sister. Now I can barely afford a coffee and I'm working relief hours whenever the agency calls. It's mad how things changed in a few years."* (Participant 3)

4.3.4: Identity Development

Identity development and taking on adult roles emerged as a major factor in the lives of the emerging adults interviewed. As previously mentioned, often stress associated with identity development and transitioning to adulthood was related to comparing one's life with sociologic norms for adulthood such as marriage, having children, moving out of home and finding work. Comparison with peers was often discussed as a benchmarking process for analysing one's life or development. This habit of comparing oneself with peers was evident

throughout the interviews. Many of the emerging adults expressed their fear at being left behind by their peers. In correlation with this, many participants expressed frustration waiting for the desired future and felt as though they were missing out on the present.

> *"A few of the lads have kids now. It's rough that we have to wait 'til we can get money together before we can get on with our lives too."* (Participant 19)

> *"My best friend is married with kids. Another close friend is engaged. Me, I'm on my own. Hopefully not for much longer. I want a family of my own like them."* ((Participant 6)

> *"I suppose I'm just waiting. I'm in limbo, waiting to meet someone. Going out drinking to pass the time. I don't want to be doing that anymore."* (Participant 5)

> *"Living at home is embarrassing at this stage, I'm the only one of my mates."* (Participant 10)

> *"The lads are busy now with their own families. I spend more time golfing or on the internet now just for something to keep me busy."* (Participant 17)

4.4: Emotional Responses

Common emotions during the quarter-life period were explored during the interviews. Participants were asked to reflect on their feelings toward their current life and their future. When asked to speak about how they felt about their current life, participants reported both positive and negative feelings. Negative emotions were reported more often while speaking about actions taken that were perceived to affect the future, such as establishing themselves in their careers. Participants used words such as "uncertain", "anxious", "frustrated", and "uneasy" when thinking about the ability to control one's current life. This underlying sense of insecurity prevailed throughout many of the interviews. Many of the themes and issues already discussed in the interviews were revisited as participants identified and explained the causes for their reported feelings.

> *"I'm anxious about my future. I don't know whether to look for work abroad or not. I don't know if my relationship (with my girlfriend) will survive or if she'll dump me…You'd get depressed thinking about it."* (Participant 20)

> *"Sure my mam says there's no future for any of us here, no jobs. It's frustrating.* (Participant 19)

Participants also reported positive emotions regarding their current lives. The most common theme of those who spoke positively was feeling fulfilled. Often the feeling of fulfilment was in relation to choices and feeling in control.

> *"As I said, I was very stressed out for a long time. Now I'm happy enough 'cause I moved out of home so I can suit myself, met himself and have a job I enjoy, unlike most my friends."* (Participant 4)

> *"I'm not earning much but at least I'm working, I can save for my car now."* (Participant 2)

> *"I like my bit of space out in Kilcock. I can head out for a run with nobody minding me."* (Participant 11)

The majority of participants who reported feeling hopeful about the future, expressed a feeling of control through making choices and setting goals. They explained that while these caused some stress and conflicting emotions, at least they were in control. With regard to jobs and finances, males tended to have a more negative outlook than females during the interviews.

4.5: Pattern of the Crisis

During the individual interviews, one particular emerging adult spoke of her quarter-life crisis in the past tense, as a challenge she had just overcome. She reflected on her quarter-life crisis as a sequential experience that began as a result of the routine in which she found herself.

> *"I was at home, working in the same office since twenty and felt I'd gotten everything out of it I could even though it was grand, had hated college before that, no hobbies, same people day in day out, just felt I was wasting my life."* (Participant 4)

This emerging adult then described how travelling to Australia "seemed like the thing to do to escape". She referred to meeting people from various nationalities and experimenting with different jobs during her time in Australia. Following this period of exploration abroad, this participant decided to return home. However, rather than living with her parents, she moved into rented accommodation with a friend. During the interview, she recognised these new living arrangements as a positive change that led her to meeting new people and gaining a new routine rather than "slotting back into the monotony I was in before I went away"

(Participant 4). She also mentioned that she commenced a part-time evening graduate course and took up new hobbies at this time. However, according to this emerging adult, it was the undertaking of a new committed relationship and purchasing a home with her partner that brought an end to her quarter-life crisis.

> *"I think that was when I started feeling like I knew who I was or what I was doing. I stopped floating around and feeling lost about then."* (Participant 4)

This pattern of moving abroad to explore alternative ways of living, as described above, became apparent with six emerging adults describing extremely similar experiences to Participant 4. However, Participant 4 was the only emerging adult to offer specific insight into her account of how she perceives she overcame her quarter-life crisis.

4.6: Conclusion

This draws a conclusion to the main findings of this present study. It is clear that a number of factors influence the lives of emerging adults and that indeed, some individuals experience this transitional period as a time of crisis. Gender differences have also become apparent, with males more inclined to focus on financial and work issues in comparison to females who discussed relationship issues and moving forward in their love lives as a priority. Interestingly, there was little difference between individuals who had attended third level education and those who had not, regarding how challenging they found this stage of their lives.

The next chapter will discuss these findings in relation to the research questions and make comparisons with current research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1: Introduction

In this chapter the main themes that emerged from the findings will be discussed. The main aim of the research was to explore the experiences of emerging adults in Ireland and examine the prevalence of the quarter-life crisis. The findings were based on four focus groups carried out with emerging adults and four semi-structured interviews for a more in-depth perspective. The findings will be discussed in relation to the three broad themes; emerging adults' views on the existence of the quarter-life crisis; variables affecting life satisfaction during this period; and a possible pattern that the quarter-life crisis follows. This chapter will also examine the findings in relation to literature, linking commonalities and identifying differences.

5.2: Views of Emerging Adults on the Quarter-life crisis

The findings of this study indicate that as the literature on emerging adulthood suggests, this life stage is often experienced as a challenging period, with many of the twenty interviewees indicating that they felt they or a close friend had experienced a quarter-life crisis. The emerging adults used words such as "confused", "stressed", "afraid" and "depressed" repeatedly throughout the interviews and focus groups with reference to themselves, in a similar way to the participants of Sciaba's (2002) study. While all participants discussed the challenges of emerging adulthood, some members of the male focus groups questioned whether or not they would describe their experience as a *crisis*. The rationalisation given for this was based on the belief that humans experience a variety of challenging periods over the course of their life and that there are worse challenges than the ambiguity of one's twenties. These participants unwittingly supported the belief of life-span development theorists (Erikson, 1968; Graves, 1970; Levinson, 1976) that crisis is a normal and necessary component in human development.

Emerging adults who agreed on the existence of the quarter-life crisis mentioned the challenges that arose in different aspects of their lives, as discussed below. However, regardless of which domain of their lives their difficulties related to (relationships, living arrangements, work and finances) each problem had one of two things in common. Either the crisis seemed to exist due to a perceived lack of options, leading to the emerging adult feeling

"stuck"; or due to a perceived over-abundance of options, leading to "confusion". These trends support the theory of Sheehy (1977), who identified both *commitment* and *experimentation* as the conflicting challenges experienced in one's twenties. Sheehy (1977) stated that if commitments are made too early, without sufficient self-examination, a person may find themselves in a pattern of being "locked in". On the other hand, if a person continues to explore but never commit, then they may skip from job to job, and from relationship to relationship, in a pattern which Sheehy (1977) terms "transient". As explored further below, the perception of a lack of options was more common amongst emerging adults in this study, mainly to the current economic recession and the influence this has had on their working and living situations.

In their study of the quarter-life crisis, Robbins and Wilner (2001) emphasised the feelings of confusion and upheaval experienced by emerging adults as they are unsure of the route to take in life. Similarly, in this study, participants recognised the uncertainty of this life-stage as one of the major challenges of being in one's twenties: "For me the crisis is just the confusion. I don't have a clue what I'm going to do with my life, or should I say, what I'm doing with it even now." (Participant 1) However, in contrast to the findings of Robbins and Wilner (2001) that the quarter-life crisis occurs during the transition between third level education and the "real" world, this study found that those who did not attend third level education also experienced feelings of confusion and being in crisis. The findings of Robinson (2008) and Côté (2000) also indicate that individuals in this age group who never attended third level education experience the crisis.

5.3: The Challenges of Emerging Adulthood
The findings of this study support Arnett's (2004b) description of emerging adulthood as an extended period of exploration and instability. This study found that seven out of the twenty emerging adults who were interviewed had recently returned from extended periods of travel. These emerging adults described "trying out different jobs", "trying out a new way of life" and "meeting new people" as the key purpose and benefit of their time spent abroad. In other words, participants used this time to explore possibilities in work, living arrangements and relationships. The study supports Arnett's (2004b) conviction that exploration of life's possibilities is greater for emerging adults than at any other stage of their lives.

However, while Arnett (2004b) describes the absence of normative expectations and independence from social roles as a characteristic of emerging adulthood, the findings of this study indicate that emerging adults do indeed worry about expectations. As discussed below, a number of the participants in this study described feelings of stress and anxiety related to their living arrangements, work situation and romantic relationship status. Some of the emerging adults felt that in comparison to normative expectations their lives may be lacking in some way. The sources of these perceived expectations were varied. Most often, participants compared themselves to their peers and the societal norms of their parents before them. One female emerging adult expressed her dissatisfaction at not being involved in a romantic relationship and compared herself to her mother who was married by the same age. Furthermore, parental expectations were described as a source of stress and pressure. Males reported tension with parents as they were expected to live independently rather than reside in the parental home. Also, the pressure from parents to find work following college graduation was mentioned.

5.3.1: Relationships

As mentioned, relationships with family, friends and partners emerged as a major theme in the lives of the emerging adults in this study. It became evident that during emerging adulthood many changes take place within these relationships.

In accordance with previous literature, the findings indicate that during this period many emerging adults look for a life partner and move toward marriage by exploring several intimate relationships (Arnett 20004b; Badger, 2005). Female emerging adults were more inclined to discuss romantic relationships during this study. Many of these participants who were not in a relationship expressed their wish to meet a partner and expressed their hope to settle down in the future. It was interesting to note that the absence of a romantic relationship at present led some female participants to fear that they would never "find love" and attain the sought-after roles of marriage and motherhood. This supported Badger's (2005) finding that despite the increase in age of marriage, the majority of emerging adults value marriage.

The findings indicated that relationships with partners were as a significant source of stress. Interestingly, most females described their relationships as very supportive and loving. The source of strain related to other stressors which influenced relationships with partners. The main source of strain disclosed by female emerging adults who were in romantic

relationships was the inability of the relationship to "move forward". Some participants expressed a wish to live with their partner but explained that they were unable to do so for financial reasons. One participant described how she felt that she was "supposed" to live with her partner as they were in their mid-twenties and had been in a committed relationship for several years: "I wondered what was the point in being together if we were stuck and not moving forward"(Participant 3). Once again, the tendency to compare themselves to what are perceived to be developmental norms became apparent.

With regard to relationships with friends, many of the emerging adults described these relationships in a positive light, as a source of support and comfort during difficult times. There is an absence of literature on the role of friend relationships in the lives of emerging adults to use as a comparison for these findings. However, it became apparent through deeper discussion on this topic that the most successful friendships amongst emerging adults are those which evolve as their roles in life change. Male and female participants described spending more time with friends whose circumstances are similar to their own. The following example illustrates how other factors, in this case relationship and work status, influence the friendships of emerging adults: "I'm a bit more settled now…so I spend more time with the lads who are in a similar boat with the bit of work, and a steady girlfriend. Like I wouldn't see the lads who are mad into the pub as much now. I'm past that bit, they're not" (Participant 13).

5.3.2: Living Arrangements
Arnett (2004b) focused on the trend of emerging adults residing in the parental home for a longer period of time and proposed that it is possibly the most influential factor in the experience of the phase of development. During this study, emerging adults' living situations emerged as a major source of stress, particularly amongst those who still lived at home. This problem was mentioned more often by males than females, with many feeling pressure from one or both parents to move out and live independently. A high level of emotion was visible amongst participants during this part of the discussion. In some cases it was reported that parents had specifically requested that the emerging adults leave the home by a particular date. Most of these males explained that a major source of this tension was that they did not contribute financially to the household due to problems attaining work or social welfare benefits. One male explained that his mother "spoiled" him at home by doing his laundry and

cooking his meals, but that "every now and again she loses her temper with me and tells me to grow up and get my own place" (Participant 13).

Tension was also described by emerging adults who reported good relations with their parents regarding them living in the parental home. In these cases, the problems arose due to a desire on the part of the emerging adult for privacy and independence. These findings reflect those of the quantitative studies of Seiffkge-Krenke (2006) and Kins et al. (2009) on patterns of emerging adults leaving home. Both studies found that emerging adults who continued to live with their parents experienced feelings of anxiety and depression at a far greater rate than emerging adults who lived outside the parental home. The researchers concluded that the trends in both studies indicated that feelings of autonomy, self-directedness and independence were central to the psychological and emotional well-being of emerging adults. The term "stuck" was used repeatedly by participants with regard to the problem of living in the parental home, as the emerging adults felt unable to change it. Most of the emerging adults who were unhappy with their living situations described a strong desire to live outside of the parental home, either with a partner or friends, but simply stated that they were unable to afford it. The findings of this study support those of Robinson (2008) that the main task of emerging adulthood is to "fashion a coherent, self-supported life structure of occupation and family for the first time, *away from the protective gaze of parents*" (p.31).

Another common issue that arose regarding living situations was balancing personal and family opinions regarding living unmarried with a partner. This theme arose particularly amongst females during the focus groups. Two participants described their plans to cohabit with their partner as a step towards marriage, but expressed concern at their parents' potential disapproval: "I know it sounds old-fashioned but my parents, my dad in particular, would like to see me…get married and then move in." While religion and religious ideology were not specifically discussed by emerging adults during the course of this study, perhaps this concern offers an insight into how the principles of the Catholic church, regarding marriage and co-habiting, continue to influence the lives of emerging adults in Ireland. These findings support those of Barry and Nelson (2005) that various aspects of religion including beliefs, practices and behaviours "infiltrate down through the generations to influence the lives of young people for years to come" (p. 42).

5.3.3 Work and Finances

The influence of work and finances on other aspects of the lives of emerging adults has been discussed above with regard to relationships and living arrangements. While Robinson (2008) reported social trends relating to emerging adults, such as increased female employment and more flexible work portfolios, there has been little empirical research into this area. Olson-Madden (2007) described how career was linked to life satisfaction and that many emerging adults were unhappy about their line of work and ability to meet their career goals. They also reported that eighty per cent of respondents felt stress over financial situations due to problems at work. The majority of participants interviewed in this study reported working, though for some it was part-time or relief work rather than full-time. Working individuals spoke of work-related stress in two areas; difficulty finding work and negative work experiences. Difficulty finding work was attributed to factors such as the economy and the lack of jobs.

Work status seemed to heavily influence the well-being of emerging adults, particularly males. The six males who described being out of work for periods exceeding six months following graduation from either college or school, spoke with emotion about the negative effect this had on them. Interestingly, some males mentioned avoiding looking for work due to confusion regarding the area of the workforce they wished to join; one participant stated that he would rather stay at home and "figure out" what he wanted to do. This showed the tendency of some of these males to associate work with their identity rather than simply as a means of earning an income. In contrast, females were more inclined to temporarily work in a job they did not wish to pursue as a career while they waited for a further opportunity to arise.

5.3.4: Identity Development

The factors that challenge emerging adults are complex and an element of overlap between stressors became evident throughout the interviews, for example, financial situations influence relationships and in turn, relationships have an effect on living arrangements. However, upon further examination and analysis of the findings, the prevailing task of *identity development* arises. Perhaps the significance of relationships, living and arrangements and work and finances lie in the fact that they all contribute to the identity of the emerging adult. Arnett (2004b) found that "In the course of exploring possibilities in love and work, emerging adults clarify their identities, that is, they learn more about who they are

and what they want out of life" (p. 8). This supports Erikson's (1950) belief that during this time, between the security of childhood and the autonomy of adulthood, the emerging adult is challenged with the task of identity formation. It becomes apparent that the challenges experienced within each area of the emerging adults' lives all serve the purpose of forging an identity that is acceptable to the emerging adult. In modern day studies, emerging adulthood theory was found to be strongly linked to identity development theory (Arnett 2000; 2004a; 2004b; 2007; Hollander, 2007).

5.4: Role of the Quarter-Life Crisis

In accordance with the above theory of identity formation, the potential role of the quarter-life crisis role of crisis as a stimulus for development may be explored. Erikson (1950) stated that crises were a normal part of the developmental process, and that they were formative in development. Similarly, Caplan (1964) considered that a crisis was a time which could hold the potential for constructive change and that "developmental crises" have a powerful impact on development.

The following example of one emerging adult's experience of what she refers to as her "quarter-life crisis" shows how the crisis served a purpose in her life. This example may support the beliefs of Erikson (1950) and Caplan (1964) that it is in developmental life transition that crisis occurs. This female spoke of her quarter-life crisis in the past tense, as a challenge she had just overcome. She reflected on her quarter-life crisis as a sequential experience that began as a result of the monotonous routine in which she found herself working in the same job for years and . She described how this led to a period of exploration in Australia. A similar experience was observed in a case-study carried out by Robinson (2008) who explained:

> The process of breaking out of a role and searching for a new one may be experienced as a crisis. Before resolution of crisis is complete, a person may have to search internally and externally for alternatives to the old life structure, and this may involve trial-and-error, further study, a search back into the past, and projection into the future. (Robinson, 2008, p.36)

The crisis of the female in this study was ultimately resolved when she settled into a committed relationship and purchased a home with her partner. She described how she felt she had "found [her] place in the world". This particular interview provided insight into the

possible purpose of the quarter-life crisis as a stimulus for development and moving forward into the next phase of adulthood. This emerging adult's negative feelings ended when she settled into a relationship and home, and formed an identity she was satisfied with.

5.5: Emotional Responses

During this study participants reported both positive and negative emotions when asked to reflect on their feelings toward their current life and their future. Negative emotions were reported more often while speaking about actions taken that were perceived to affect the future, such as establishing themselves in their careers. Words such as "uncertain", "anxious", "frustrated", and "uneasy" were used with regard to the ability to control one's current life. This underlying sense of insecurity prevailed throughout many of the interviews. However, the findings were less extreme than those of Robbins and Wilner (2001), as the term "hopeless" was not used by an emerging adult interviewed to describe their present or future. While participants did not specifically mention any mental health issues due to the ambiguity of emerging adulthood, it is possible that such issues are present but undisclosed due to the "difficulty of mentioning such issues to a perfect stranger" (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008, p.63).

Participants also spoke positively about various aspects of their lives. The most common theme of those who spoke positively was feeling fulfilled to the perception of having choices and feeling in control. This further supports the findings of Seiffkge-Krenke (2006) and Kins et al. (2009) that feelings of self-directedness and control over one's life are central to the psychological and emotional well-being of emerging adults.

5.6: Conclusion

To conclude this chapter on the discussion of findings, it is clear that a number of similarities and differences can be seen between this study of emerging adults and previous studies carried out. The findings provide an interesting insight into the role of identity development and crisis in the lives of emerging adults in Ireland, and the various factors that influence these.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of young people in Ireland who are in the developmental phase of the life course that is known as emerging adulthood. The purpose of the study was to determine whether or not it is common for emerging adults to experience a quarter-life crisis and to identify the factors that contribute to the quarter life crisis if it does exist.

6.1: Conclusions

This study indicated that emerging adulthood is generally experienced as a challenging period, with many of the emerging adults interviewed expressing a familiarity with the quarter-life crisis through their own experiences or those of their friends. However, responses to the *quarter-life crisis* were not as severe as those indicated in previous literature and some participants questioned the validity of the term.

It seems that the overall task of this life-stage for emerging adults is to construct an identity for themselves that is acceptable to them. The crisis seems to occur as emerging adults leave behind an old identity that they feel no longer fulfils them (perhaps that of adolescence) and search for a new identity. Leaving behind the old identity may involve moving beyond student life, setting aside friendships, leaving romantic relationships, or any changes that lead to significant alterations to the self-image of the emerging adult. However, despite moving beyond this previous identity, the new identity may be somewhat ambiguous to the emerging adults, leading to confusion and uncertainty. Many of the emerging adults interviewed had recently returned from travelling abroad, graduated from college or had tried different jobs. They seemed to be in an experimental phase as they attempted to construct a new identity beyond that of adolescence.

Arnett's (2004a) aptly describes the findings of this study of emerging adulthood as:
- The age of identity exploration
- The age of instability
- The self-focussed age
- The age of feeling in-between
- The age of possibilities

The abovementioned old and new identities consist of many aspects including relationships, work and finances, and living situations. These were the main areas that were discussed during individual interviews and focus-groups. Individuals who expressed negative emotions were extremely self-aware regarding which of these areas were perceived as unsatisfactory and that they wished to change. Negative emotions amongst emerging adults regarding these areas of their lives were generally due to feelings of being "stuck" due to a perceived lack of options; or feeling "confused" due to a perceived over-abundance of options. The daunting task of deciding on a specific direction in their lives was mentioned recurrently by the emerging adults who participated in the study. The ability to make changes to positively impact their life satisfaction was highly individualistic, depending on their current life situation. For example, those who wished to move out of the parental home may have been restrained from doing so by financial problems. The current global economic recession was mentioned repeatedly as a source of pressure on relationships and finances. Those who expressed the strongest negative emotions described feelings of uneasiness about the future. Making decisions which were perceived to affect the future were a source of negative emotions, yet individuals were hopeful that their choices would lead to a positive outcome.

Interestingly, those who experienced positive emotions expressed a sense of control over the direction of their lives. This finding supported those of previous research that feelings of independence and self directedness are essential to the well-being of emerging adults (Seiffkge-Krenke, 2006; Kins et al.,2009).

6.2: Recommendations

Emerging adulthood is recognised by life-span theorists, academic researchers and emerging adults themselves as a challenging life-stage. The findings of this study support the belief of many life-span theorists that the crisis serves a purpose; to bring about change and development in the emerging adult. However, it is essential that the emerging adult is provided with supports to help facilitate this change rather than allowing the crisis to cause deterioration in the psychological well-being of the emerging adult (Caplan, 1964). These supports may be provided by family, social or educational institutions.

Furthermore, the collection of more data by interviewing a higher number of participants is recommended as this would allow for more accurate statistical analysis by variable. This

would allow for stronger generalizations about factors affecting emerging adulthood and the quarter-life crisis. The findings of this study indicate that relationships and financial factors in particular heavily influence the lives of emerging adults; yet these factors do not feature much in academic literature on emerging adulthood as they are overshadowed by living arrangements.

It is recommended that further research on this life stage is carried out in Ireland to gain additional insight into the experiences of emerging adults. Particular areas identified in this study as benefiting from further study include:

- The occurrence of the quarter-life crisis for persons who did not attend third level education.
- The effects of normative expectations and independence from social roles on emerging adults.
- The role of friend relationships in the lives of emerging adults.
- How the principles of religious ideology regarding marriage and co-habiting influence the lives of emerging adults in Ireland.
- The influence of work and finances on the lives of emerging adults, particularly during the current economic climate.

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Appendix 1

Letter of consent

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**Centre for Social and
Educational Research**

Dear participant

The centre for Social and Educational Research is carrying out a study on the experiences of young people during the developmental phase of emerging adulthood in Ireland. As part of this study, we would like to hear about your experiences and attitudes about this time in your life.

With your permission, your responses will be recorded. Only the researcher will have access to the tapes and what you say will remain confidential.

If at any time you feel uncomfortable answering a question you can refuse to answer the question or you can stop the interview.

If you have any further questions about the study please feel free to ask the researcher.

I understand the information contained in this letter.

Name:

Date:

I am willing/not willing to take part in this study

Name: Date: