

IDENTITY CRISIS IN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS: THE QUARTER-LIFE

IDENTITY CRISIS

THESIS

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By

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INTRODUCTION

What are the boundaries of adolescence? Is it possible that this period extends beyond what many people assume? In popular culture the idea of adolescence has not seemed to change in quite some time. Those children that have begun puberty through those that are still in high school living with their guardians are traditionally viewed as being in an adolescent state, but there is an increasing number of individuals that do not fit this definition that can be classified as adolescent. In the current literature there exists a plethora of guidelines that help classify adulthood.

Piaget classified an adult as one that incorporates hypothetical reasoning as a means of problems solving (Piaget, 1972). Erikson has noted fidelity (loyalty) as a major landmark in one becoming an adult (Erikson, 1975). These definitions serve as a basis for labeling one as an adult instead of as an adolescent, but I believe the transition between the two states is quite complicated.

Erikson in his *Memorandum on Youth* (1983) predicted that young people at the present time will have a harder time finding relevance in their lives because of the explosion of technology. It has been my observation that in recent years this has indeed occurred (see appendix A). Erikson also predicted that those that conform to the technological age have an increased likelihood to conform to the ideals of the older generation and consequently have lesser chance of developing their own identity. What

does this entail for non-conformers? It is my prediction that the youth of the present era (especially the non-conformers) have a strong chance of facing a crisis of identity in “quarter-life”.

I believe with investigation of young people a crisis of identity can be defined that is similar to identity crisis situations that are present at other stages of life. There has been much written in not only scientific literature, but also in popular culture about a life crisis situation beginning mostly in males in the late thirties (Oles, 1999); this is more commonly known as the mid-life crisis. Also, identity crisis situations occurring with medical trauma, war, and other situations will be evaluated and compared to the situations of today’s youth.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of the thesis is to inquire if college students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five (i.e. quarter-life) display a crisis of identity. This thesis will attempt to gain insight into a plethora of questions:

Do college students experience a crisis of identity
in quarter-life?

What are the points of commencement and
termination for the crisis?

What characteristics separate the individuals that
have undergone a crisis of identity from those that have
not?

What types of coping strategies are employed to
relieve stress in the crisis situation and in stressful

situations in general?

JUSTIFICATION

The thesis topic is worthy of acknowledgement for many reasons. First, the thesis will be one of the firsts of its kind to examine the current college student in relation to a crisis of identity in quarter-life. If it is found that many students display a crisis of identity educators and school counselors can better understand the student body. It is of utmost importance in education to be able to relate to the student.

Next, the understanding of coping strategies employed by students can aid health care professionals in treating this group. If coping strategies are used that could possibly harm the students, these strategies could be changed in order to aid in the accomplishment of the student's goals.

Lastly, the students of today could benefit from the knowledge that undergoing a crisis of identity in quarter-life is not uncommon. It is important for students and people in general to understand that they are not alone in their feelings. Support could be implemented in the form of groups or in the form of information that is available to the students.

SUBJECTS AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Participants for this thesis were recruited from psychology classes at SWT, but this did not limit the study to only psychology majors. The participants were traditional college students (i.e. between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five). Participants were interviewed as either part of a focus group or in personal interviews in order to gain insight on their experiences. Students were presented with questions from the researcher involving subjects such as adulthood, commitment, decision making procedures, and

stress reduction (see table 1 for outline of questions). The participants were also invited to comment on identity crisis situations that they have faced. The students were instructed to treat the questions of the researcher as a catalyst for discussion, and they were encouraged to add any information that they felt was relevant.

ORGANIZATION

The thesis is presented in four chapters. After the introduction is a review of the literature. The literature review focuses on adolescence, adulthood, life stages, problems associated with transitioning between life stages, and comparison of the problems faced by college students to other groups. The second chapter focuses on the methodology which encompasses the participants and procedures used in data collection. The third chapter consists of the results attained from the interviews with the students. Finally, the fourth chapter is a discussion of the research. The discussion reports on the findings of the research in relation to the preexisting literature. In addition, future research concerns are presented and the thesis itself is criticized.

CHAPTER ONE

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

DEFINING ADOLESCENCE AND ADULTHOOD

What are the boundaries of adolescence? Is it possible that this period extends beyond what many people assume? In popular culture the idea of adolescence has not seemed to change in quite some time. Those children that have begun puberty through those that are still in high school living with their guardians are traditionally viewed as being in an adolescence state, but there is an increasing number of individuals that do not fit this definition that can be classified as adolescent. In the current literature there exists a plethora of guidelines that help classify adulthood.

Piaget spoke of thinking in a formal operations system as the main classifier of adulthood. Piaget asserted that adults have incorporated hypothetical reasoning as a means to problem solving much more than adolescents (Piaget, 1972). Although the ability and desire to employ hypotheses testing begins to emerge at the end of adolescence, it is not fully developed until one has matured into an adult, if it occurs at all. A definition such as this is ambiguous in nature depending on how we view adults in our society. According to Keating (1990) most adults do not incorporate formal operations in a complete capacity which leads research in a direction that adulthood can

not be marked as the period of life that uses hypotheses testing as a means for deduction. This, however, is not to say that one who employs such cognitive strategies is not an adult, but rather there are many more characteristics that play into our definition of adulthood and consequently adolescence.

Labouvie-Vief (1985, 1986) expanded somewhat on theories of Piaget and others, and added subjective qualities as part of the overall definition of adulthood transitioning. The combination of sound logical reasoning and the personal feeling that one is an adult set the standards by which Labouvie-Vief explains adulthood. The subjective appeal of this theory leaves still more questions to be asked although it is reported that the feeling that one is an adult comes from personal experiences (1985,1986). For example, a young adult transitioning into a parental role would serve as a vehicle for cognitive awareness that eclipses that of an adolescent.

Schaie (1982) set adults apart from adolescents by observing the way that information is not only processed, but also used. The adolescent state is marked by a period of “acquisition” in which the individual gathers a great deal of new information as well as a multitude of ways in which to approach difficulties, but the attainment of the devices exists in the absence of actual application. In contrast, the young adult has already acquired the skills necessary for competence and instead of focusing on the collection of new information the transition is made to applying these strategies with the goal now being accomplishment (Schaie, 1982).

Jonah (1986) and Whiting and Whiting (1975) define the adulthood transition more in terms of the absence of certain behaviors. Jonah observed that adolescents and young adults are more apt to participate in “reckless” activities such as driving while

intoxicated, driving at increased speeds, recreationally using illicit substances, and more often breaking rules that are not only implemented as laws, but also rules that exist as societal norms. The decrease in such behaviors does not coincide with the traditional age of eighteen years in the United States but with an age in the mid-twenties.

Whiting and Whiting attempted to explain this behavior in a societal way. In a more individualistic society such as the United States the freedom to explore is much greater than in countries that have had traditionally “more narrow” societies where family commitments, for example, make up as much or more of one’s character as individual thoughts and desires. In Western societies the delayed requirement to assume increased responsibility allows for extended times in which one can explore his individual interests without having to conform to societal norms. For example, the Netsilik Eskimos have a structured way of life in which young boys and girls are expected to assist their same-sex parent in traditional roles of that gender, and this practice lends itself to an increased amount of parental supervision (Balikci, 1970). Behavior in societies such as this one does not undergo a drastic change from adolescence to adulthood, especially in the realm of reckless behavior. Since responsibilities have been taken care of alongside reckless behavior the individual learns to implement both as part of a functional lifestyle (Schlegel and Barry, 1991). Situations like these can be related easily to what is observable on college campuses across the United States. Students are given the opportunity to explore their individuality (sometimes in the form of reckless activities) in conjunction with learning to take more responsibilities for themselves financially, emotionally, interpersonally, and cognitively.

Modell (1989) concurred with the shift toward a larger social spectrum in the United States that has led to increasingly less application of traditionally adult related activities, stating that “one’s own identity has come to matter correspondingly more”. A broadening of “acceptable” behavior has permitted an ever increasing variety of times in which one can and does enter a state of adulthood. The increasing number of options in society as described by Whiting, Whiting (1975), Modell (1989), and others has moved the discussion from defining adulthood in the light of chronological and even physical absolutes to one with boundaries that are more societal in nature. For example, Flanagan, Schulenberg, & Fuligini (1993) have offered the idea of a combination of residential independence coinciding with a state of financial independence as a means of defining an adult in American society.

In the light of these references to the definition of a break between adolescence and adulthood we are led to assume certain characteristics of the modern American young adult. It is of utmost importance in the modern American culture for an individual to feel that he is indeed an adult. This “sense” of adulthood can and is a combination of numerous factors such as employing reasoning strategies, the ability to control one’s behavior, and consequently be able to predict the outcome of certain behaviors (while accepting the consequences of the behaviors). In addition to these criteria the modern adult must, as adults have traditionally done in the past, move to a more emotionally independent state and “not rely too much on anyone else for their happiness” (Arnett & Taber, 1994, 533). Also, it is important to note that for individuals in the modern United States marriage is not a necessary requirement for adulthood, but traditionally marriage is still seen as a characteristic of adulthood. No singular event can mark one’s passage from

adolescence to adulthood. Arnett, Taber (1994), and others view the broadening and confusion of societal norms in the 21st century as an opportunity to redefine the traditional roles and definitions of adulthood.

THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

It is no mystery even to the unscientific observer of modern American society that definitive rites of passage have diminished to the point in which they are virtually non-existent outside of the realm of mere chronology. A requirement for one to exist as an adult is for one to undergo developmental tasks in order to receive societal acceptance (Markstrom-Adams, Berman, Sabino, & Turner, 1998). This raises the question of what developmental tasks should be incorporated into an individual's lifestyle in order to be an adult participant in the surrounding environment. "Transitional periods from one stage to the next are typically viewed as unsettled periods or times of crisis in which the individual is in a state of disequilibrium" (Markstrom-Adams, Berman, Sabino, & Turner, 1998, 342). This must be a chilling statement in the context of a society such as in the United States that has become broadened to the point in which the individual is left often only to find comfort of thought and deed internally.

Kimmel and Weimer (1985) have abandoned the more chronological arguments for adulthood transition in favor of more societal reference points. So in our society what rites of passage now exist? Allen and Dyck (1987) admit that ceremonies such as high school graduation, receiving a driver's license, Confirmation, and Bar Mitzvah can serve as the starting point of adulthood transitioning. However, the true essence of these rites of passage is not to create adults in our society because they do not serve to place an individual into a specific group.

This leads us back to the argument for the individual to find his own path in order to become what is considered an adult. However, dissonance can occur when the individual feels that a mature state has been reached, yet society does not recognize his actions as those of an adult. There has been a marked increase in the number of individuals that chronologically could be classified as an adult but who have not reached that plateau with the increase in technological advances (Markstrom-Adams, Berman, Sabino, Turner, 1998). In essence, the technology explosion that has occurred in recent years around the world's industrialized nations has helped to create an exorbitant number of choices for young people. Fields such as technology are breeding grounds for people who are still in an adolescent state of mind, but can now function as an adult since they can easily reach financial independence without taking traditional stepping stones like formal education (although this trend is declining at the present moment).

THE ROLE OF PARENTS

The role that parents or guardians play in the development of the adolescent/young adult in his own personal search for rites of passage is not lost, and it is actually just as important as in the past. Compared to previous times, parental support in modern America is destined for a shift toward support not in the form of passing on specific ideals and knowledge, but in the form of supporting the individual choices of the adolescent.

Parental emotional support is not only important in lessening egocentrism in young people, but also is associated with enhanced identity development because the adolescent increasingly experiments and explores new options when a base identity is already defined (O'Conner, 1995). Past literature has often confirmed that, especially in

males, parental support has facilitated decreased egocentrism, which is now being associated with increased identity achievement (O'Conner, 1995). This is not to say that unhealthy parental attachment that can be formed by supportive parents will always work itself out in the end. A high level of parental attachment significantly correlates with depressed mood later in life, although not as much in women since society does not place the same pressures to give up maternal ties as it does with males (Berman & Sperling, 1991).

It is of utmost importance for healthy separation to occur in the present as it has been in the past. "Beginning college (or moving away from home) may be the most clearly identifiable landmark in this departure from parental attachments and close familial involvement." (Berman & Sperling, 1991) College students need to (and do for the most part) begin to identify more with peers, although when students still live with their parents the attachment remains stronger since the attachment has not had time to dissipate over time (as with students that move away to school).

The students that live separately from their parents or guardians also have more opportunity to pursue their own actions and have more control over what it is that they choose to do (Eiguer, 1996). In popular culture this phenomenon can be easily witnessed. Student-led protests have long been a mainstay of university life, and college is generally viewed as a time for each individual to try new activities. This argument aligns itself with the notion that the majority of college students are still in an adolescent state, and they are exploring new beliefs in a controlled setting before committing to ideals that they will present to society. One theory for why many adolescents enter college despite not knowing what to study or if they really want to be in school is because

college gives enough direction but still lends itself more toward exploration. Schmukler (1990) has cited that transitions are made with a less difficult outlook when some direction is in place as opposed to moving in an obscure direction.

SELF EFFICACY ACHIEVEMENT AND MODERN AMERICAN YOUTH

One's background and environment play a prominent role in the creation of the boundaries in which people live, and an adolescent's schema of self is directly related to these cultural ideals (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). No matter how much of an individual one is, the environment in which growth occurs will always have an influence on the final outcome. In the recent past of this country the media, the researchers, and the educational system have put an emphasis on raising the self-esteem of the youth. In theory this does not appear to be an intolerable idea, but in practice the outcomes can be quite shocking. The self-esteem of the individual is a personal belief of how one feels about his or her own self. By increasing only self-esteem in our children we are doing nothing more than allowing them to feel good about themselves despite (in many cases) actions that would say otherwise. While self-esteem has indeed been linked to success, it has consequently been linked to failure as well. An emerging hypothesis is that prisoners as predicted are not plagued by low self-esteem, but rather will produce self-esteem ratings within the normal range. This does not imply that all prisoners have above average self-esteem scores or that individuals with high self-esteem will necessarily become criminals, but it does shed light on the fact that people can commit crimes against society and still feel good about themselves.

Changing the structure of instruction to the youth of America to more self-efficacy training in place of self-esteem building could allow for more individuals to

transition from adolescence to adulthood with increased ease. Self-efficacy was described by Cramer (1995, 357) as “a sense of pride in one’s strength, confidence in one’s capacity to achieve, and a belief in one’s individual worth”. In other words, self-efficacy is a belief that one can accomplish and succeed, and not merely the feeling that he or she is a “good” person. When young adults are in a transitional period it is commonly accepted that the majority of them that reach identity achievement (as defined by Marcia and others and discussed later) take exploratory steps in order to learn more about society and where they belong in it. Self-esteem alone leaves one with less desire to explore, take initiative, and believe in one’s abilities. Self-efficacy, however, can teach essential tools that can ease concerns associated with new experiences.

Lauver and Jones (1991) reported that self-efficacy is highest among whites, followed by Hispanics, and is the lowest in Native American rural high school students. Also, Moon and Feldhusen (1992) traced the accomplishments of high school seniors that had been involved in an elementary enrichment program; it was found that a small number of students were classified as average or as underachieving upon reclassification in high school. The students had originally been chosen for the enrichment program based on expert evaluation (i.e. teacher, school counselors, etc.). This reiterates research by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) in which teacher expectations of students related to the students’ performance in the classroom. The fact that disparities such as this exist speaks volumes about the treatment of children in the modern United States. Without a belief in one’s personal worth, full potential will be difficult to reach. It is time that our society place emphasis on raising positive young people that are able to explore the increasing

number of choices presented by modern society in order to achieve greater personal satisfaction and stability later in life.

ERIKSON'S CONTRIBUTIONS

At the pinnacle of Erikson's research on life phase transition from adolescence to adulthood is the ability of the individual to maintain strong interpersonal relationships (Erikson, 1975). Bishop, Macy-Lewis, Schneklath, Puswella, & Struessel (1997) agree that the formation of these bonds is the major component of developing one's identity. This extends not only to one's peers, but also to one's romantic relationships. Fidelity (loyalty) is one of the major landmarks that denotes the transition into a more adult state. In addition, the incorporation of a stable committed relationship has been shown to be predictive of positive adjustment in life crisis situations (Bolger, Foster, Vinokur, Ng, 1996). Fidelity is of utmost importance because it displays to the individual that he can trust himself since he has been loyal to the important people that he personally chose to be in his life. A sense of fidelity shows that at least on some level the individual has developed impulse control.

Impulse control has also been noted, by Goleman (1995), as a key feature for success later in life. Goleman and others tested impulse control in children by using different food objects such as marshmallows and M & M's. The child would be asked to sit quietly in front of the object of temptation for a few minutes and told that they could eat the food if they so desired. However, if the child chose to wait for the researcher to return and did not indulge in his absence then the child would be rewarded with more of the food. The children that would wait for the researcher to return were said to have better impulse control and consequently be higher in Emotional Intelligence. Goleman in

his 1995 book by the same name claims that emotional intelligence, not necessarily intelligence quotient, is the most important predictor of success later in life.

The arguments Goleman (1995) makes about the importance of impulse control must lead us to raise questions about fidelity as impulse control as a predictor of adult behavior. For example, there are many successful people that have thrived on impulsiveness as a means to make a living. Careers in fields such as law, medicine, stock trading, etc. often require quick decisions that must be made spontaneously after the consequences have been quickly weighed.

The purpose of this study is to focus on two of Erikson's stages of development that are of great importance: *intimacy vs. isolation* and *identity vs. role confusion* (Sternberg, 1995). *Identity vs. role confusion* is said to take place in the adolescent state following the time known as *industry vs. inferiority* (6-12 years of age) in which children are building confidence in themselves. *Identity vs. role confusion* is characterized by the individual exploring who he is, what ideals he holds, and the type of person that he strives to become later in life. Ethics must now be considered along with academic and social aspects. *Intimacy vs. isolation* corresponds to the phase of early adulthood in which the young adult strives to become committal in relationships. "The adult who fails develops a sense of isolation and may fail to connect with the significant others in his or her life." (Sternberg, 1995, 452)

It will be one of the goals of this research inquiry to categorize the American college student into one of these two categories. Are college students still in a state of adolescence or have the majority of them moved onto a more adult-like outlook of the world? Lastly, it is quite possible that these two separate periods are losing the disparity

between them, and that they are being shifted or extended to points later in life (i.e. *identity vs. role confusion* exists from the age of twelve through the beginning of the period of time classically assigned as the young adulthood).

Even if some doubts exist when using Erikson's criteria as a means to categorize individuals along a life continuum his predictions for the future of youth have seemed to be fulfilled. Erikson wrote an article entitled *Memorandum on Youth* (1983) in which he lent his insight in a predictive manner of how the youth at the turn of the twenty-first century will behave and special stressors that they might uncover. As with any other time period he felt that young people will act in a manner directly influenced by societal elders. "Actions of young people are always in part and by necessity reactions to the stereotypes held up to them by elders." (Erikson, 1983, 860)

He felt that because of the great technology explosion that young people will have a harder time in this era finding what to them is "universally relevant". Since the search for young people will be different and more difficult than in the past, Erikson urges that youth are not merely acting in a hedonistic manner, but the search for relative importance has been changed because of the desacrilization of our institutions has been caused by the adults in power (i.e. the youth culture will not have basic traditions and entities that they can hold in high regard because of the mistakes of the previous generation). In acknowledgement of that statement Erikson (1983, 861) offered this . . . "as a teacher I am more impressed with our varying incapacity to own up to the almost oppressive authority we really do have in the minds of the young than in the alleged skepticism of all authority in the minds of the young."

He gave a less optimistic outlook for those that conform to the technological explosion. He said that those who have immersed themselves in technology have an increased likelihood to conform to the ideals of the older generation and consequently have lesser chance of developing their own identity. Non-conformers to the technology age are more likely to gain a “cynical pride”, asking that they be seen as human without pretenses, exposed yet not narcissistic, free from the ideals of the past, yet still caring, and ethical despite an overshadowing immorality, ever searching but not crazy, and involved in society with the utmost honesty. These individuals will push for increased “humanitarian activism” (Erikson, 1983, 866) and act not as individuals but as “universalists” (Erikson, 1983, 867). From these demands an extension of young adulthood is inevitable. While these are merely the opinions of Erikson of what was to come at the dawn of a new century it is easy to observe throughout popular culture that these societal shifts are occurring.

MARCIA’S IDENTITY CLASSIFICATIONS

Marcia (Marcia, 1966) classifies individuals into identity categories based on the outcomes of decision-making and conflict resolution. Classically this model has included only four such categories but later research by Orlofsky, Marcia and Lesser (1973) has yielded a possible fifth category of identity. While there are different interpretations of this classifying system this summary will focus on the definitions of the categories as presented by Orlofsky, Marcia and Lesser.

Identity achievement is characterized by strong commitment not only to a career or occupation, but also to a specific ideology. This commitment is rendered through extensive searching of different experiences and alternatives. Those individuals in the

identity achievement category display strong coping skills while dealing with different environments due to a highly developed personal frame of reference. These are stable people that have the ability to create, strive for, and achieve realistic goals.

Moratorium (Slugoski, Marcia and Koopman, 1984; Orlofsky, Marcia and Lesser, 1973; Sternberg, 1995) is an identity category that includes those people that are currently in an identity crisis or life transitional period. While at times these individuals may appear to be committed in one area or another their commitment usually fades rather rapidly. Individuals in moratorium often do not appear to be experiencing a crisis period at all since they are more than likely actively searching for new ideas and environments while engaging others in worthwhile conversation. This is usually not a discussion of ideals that have been firmly entrenched into the individual, but it is more of a “verbal searching” in order to uncover new ways of thinking. Males categorized as being in moratorium can in many instances display ambivalence toward authority, and are more often mistaken for being in an identity achieved state. Overall, moratorium is a time in which reckless behavior/rebellion can serve as a means in which to seek guidance for the future.

Those individuals in the foreclosure (Orlofsky, Marcia and Lesser, 1973; Slugoski, Marcia and Koopman, 1984; Sternberg, 1995) category are often mistaken for identity achieved individuals due to strong commitments to beliefs and ideals. The major difference in these two groups exists in the fact that foreclosed individuals have not come to hold beliefs because they have found certain ideals to be true, but rather they have accepted the ideals of another (often a parent or guardian). Whereas the identity achieved individual is able to explore comfortably in new situations, the foreclosed individual

appears more “rigid and authoritarian” and is not able to discuss his beliefs in an open manner. Although these persons are committed to an occupation and ideology, they have not experienced an identity crisis. This is not to say that foreclosed individuals can not be productive in society or the workplace because they usually conduct themselves in a professional manner. However, when the foreclosed person is made to question certain tenets of thought, the functional aptitude may decrease drastically. Lastly, the foreclosed individual appears often at first inquiry to be comfortable with the chosen ideology since most are cautious and sensitive to the ramifications of their actions. However, their ideology, unlike the identity achieved individual, has not been attained by self reflection.

The individuals that display a non-committed identity status and may or may not have experienced an identity crisis period are said to be in a state of identity diffusion. This individual displays ever changing future plans and goals and may appear as a drifter or someone who is lost in society. For the most part those persons in a state of identity diffusion stray away from situations that are too demanding, and they can appear to be aimless. This individual may also display inappropriate anger or frustration in certain instances, but the main characteristic of the diffused person is that they have not made an identity commitment.

The last category constructed by Marcia with Orlofsky and Lesser is known as alienated achievement (1973). The individual in the alienated achievement condition is harder to identify than the other groups because it encompasses many qualities classically attributed to the first four categories. When one is alienated they express high commitment to ideology but not necessarily to a specific line of work. These individuals may often appear to be in a diffused state. Despite extensive philosophizing, the

individual has not made an overall commitment. However, to these people personal relationships are highly important, and they have a decreased desire for approval from others. As compared to others that are not committed to an identity the alienated achievers have a strong sense of identity resolution. This difference is more than likely attributable to an increased strength of ego produced by the desire to maintain close personal relationships. However, alienated achievement classified persons are often still defiant of social order although their need for affiliation remains quite high.

When first examining these categorical references set forth by Marcia and his colleagues it is simple to assume that those individuals that have reached the identity achievement phase are better off than the rest of society, but in actuality each classification serves a unique purpose and has transitionally healthy components. It is important to remember that these classifications are not chronological in the same way as Erikson's stages of development are (although there is a more chronological pattern represented in males from foreclosure to identity achievement that can be explained socially, Toder and Marcia, 1973), but exist more independent of one another with vital importance placed on life experiences that can occur at variable times. For example, Toder and Marcia (1973) found that foreclosed individuals displayed the highest levels of self esteem and also held the lowest anxiety. Although these individuals have accepted the doctrine of others, they function at a high level in certain situations since their tolerance for ambiguity is quite low.

The individuals experiencing a moratorium status are often most enthusiastic to be involved in group-work and usually enjoy leadership positions. Since these individuals have not made specific commitments they are free to use a plethora of

problem solving techniques in order to achieve their goals (Slugoski and Marcia, 1984). Of course, even with some positives stemming from other classifications the identity achieved individuals exhibit the most well balanced interactive ability because of their solid basis of commitment to their own ideals. The commitment made through one's own experiences is utilized as a bases of exploration that allows the individual to immerse himself in new situations and hear new ideas without feeling threatened or discouraged (Berzonsky, Rice, Neimeyer, Greg, 1990).

In the case of alcohol consumption (which is of high concern on most university campuses) definite lines have been distinguished between the different Marcian classifications. In one study Bishop, Macy-Lewis, Schnekloth, Puswella, & Struessel (1997) found that heavy drinkers more often were found to be in a state of diffusion or foreclosure. Those who consumed the least amount of alcohol were in the moratorium phase, and the intermediate drinkers were usually identity achieved individuals. Perhaps those that have achieved their own identity have the ability to trust in themselves more in all types of situations including the consumption of mind altering substances compared to those individuals that have less reassurance in their own abilities (i.e. those in moratorium).

COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS WITH OTHER GROUPS

War Veterans

Another major component to this research endeavor is to compare the identity crisis situation faced by American college students to other life crisis scenarios such as war, disease, professional/graduate study, and the mid-life crisis.

In general veterans of the Vietnam conflict have displayed behavior inconsistent with Americans that did not participate. They were more apt to have volatile relationships, problems on the job, problems with substance abuse, and more frequently had problems with the law (Harmless, 1989). This pattern of behavior lends itself to the lifestyle of college students as a whole. It is commonly accepted that traditional college students (i.e. students between eighteen and twenty-five years of age) are more apt to experiment with controlled substances, abuse alcohol, and in generally have run-ins with the police at a rate higher than that of the average citizen (of the same age). Although there is no research on the subject, college students have been observed, by their employers as well as their peers, to miss work more frequently and for reasons that could be avoided such as simply not desiring to work on a particular day.

The group of soldiers that had the most problems was the seventeen - nineteen-year-old age group. The increased numbers of drastic behaviors was due to the fact that they were less likely to have a firmly incorporated system of beliefs than their older counterparts. Also, they had not previously had to define a social role, yet were suddenly expected to function as a competent adult. This is comparable to the situation of the typical college student. Entering college often marks the first transition from life with a guardian to life defined by the individual. The student must not only function well academically, but also learn and incorporate a structured belief system simultaneously. When the young soldiers did begin to thrive it was often because of the strong peer relationships that they formed while on duty. At any moment in a war-time environment relationships could be lost to disease, reassignment, and of course to the enemy. This is not completely unlike the college student that loses relationships constantly due to

advancement in different fields than their close companions (i.e. through internships, different majors, dropping out of school, moving through curriculum faster or slower than others, and graduation). Peer groups play a large role for the developing adolescent because they give a basis of comparison for new ideas in a safe situation. When the structure of the peer group is constantly shifting, such a safe haven has trouble existing. This idea ties into the fidelity concept in which Erikson holds that commitment to relationships plays a large role in the development of the adolescent or young adult. It is apparent in Harmless' study (1989) that age of entry into the military was the largest predictor of the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among Vietnam veterans.

Medical Trauma

After major medical trauma such as is the case with stroke victims many patients enter a period in which their lives are reevaluated. Nilsson, Jansson, Norberg (1999) reported that following strokes the patient's thoughts began to focus more on individual existence and future life. These appear to be the same focal points with which the average adolescent or young adult must grapple. In college the student must find his or her own niche in the world (i.e. find his or her own individuality which marks the end of adolescence in the Eriksonian sense). Also, in many cases success or failure in academic settings has a direct effect on future achievements and career standing for the individual. It has also been reported that stroke victims often need much confirmation from their close relationships. They are at a period in which their emotional needs must be taken care of in a way greater than before the incident. In this way most college students differ from the stroke victims described by Nilsson.

During these developmental years is commonly when adolescents begin to loosen ties with parents and guardians and begin to achieve a more emotionally independent state. Lastly, discomfort that is associated with stroke victims is a result of an uncertain future. Uncertainty about the future is a frequently observed trait in college students. Especially in a world that is technologically based, the majority of college majors face a new age in which their skills do not relate directly to the job market of the new century. Two groups of people appearing different, but experiencing many of the same obstacles, is not out of the ordinary. Frankle (1985) said that anxiousness is a product of the absence of meaning and that meaning is a basic human need, so in any condition in which meaning is questioned we might expect to find a life crisis situation.

Cancer Survivors

Bolger, Foster, Vinokur, & Ng (1996) examined the effects that close relationships have had in the life of breast cancer patients. Generally, a strong personal relationship, as long as it was not overwhelming, aided the recovery of these cancer patients. Those patients with strong personal relationships such as marriage displayed better adjustment and had better overall outcomes than the patients that did not. It is interesting to see that close relationships aid in the recovery from crisis situations because in the college student experiencing an identity crisis, close relationships, such as with one's parents, are lost in the attempt to become more independent. Also, if the college-age individual has a close relationship with a significant other, that individual is probably more likely to become overwhelmed by the crisis and confusion since the longevity and level of commitment of the relationship can not match that of a spouse. We can then assume that the individual that is experiencing an identity crisis while in college will not

have as much support as would be most beneficial to achieve a smooth transition into the next phase of life.

Medical Students

As with college students as a whole, medical students also face complications set forth by their curriculum, professors, status at the university, and their devotion to personal interests. For medical students, stress is often a result of decreased success academically which leads the individual to begin to find blame in external factors and consequently find much of the assigned curriculum to be irrelevant (Grover and Tessier, 1978; Rosenberg, 1971; Thomas, 1976). Medical students (and other graduate students) have the special problem of facing academic inadequacies for the first time. In order to be accepted into medical school, one must have shown aptitude in the classroom. When achievement decreases due to increased competition, the chance for a crisis to occur is greater. Medical school students also have less time for personal reflection and less time to study what is most interesting to them. The increased amount of material that professors require to be learned leaves little time for the student to focus attention to material that will not be covered by examinations (Rosenberg, 1971). This increased amount of material to be learned can also allow the medical student to develop feelings of learned helplessness (Boyle and Coombs, 1971).

The longevity of adolescence in medical students is increased by the student's position within the learning environment. The students are in a lowly position in which the instructors have absolute power, which lends itself to feelings of inadequacy (Adsett 1968; Siegel and Donnelly 1978). In order to decrease the strain medical students employ three main coping strategies: fighting against the structure of the system, using

passive resistance, and conforming to the ideals of the system (Rosenberg, 1971). The students that choose to fight against the system tend to have the most unique stress because in order to achieve their goals they must first merge with the very entity that they are rebelling against (Rosenberg, 1971).

Even once the student becomes an intern the problems do not seem to disappear. Some obstacles that interns must overcome are the incorporation of a young adult lifestyle with their new occupational status, engaging in committed romantic partnerships, and maintaining professional duties without neglecting personal responsibilities to relatives (Siegel and Donnelly, 1978). It appears that by some definitions these medical interns can not be classified as adults, and they are rather still in an adolescent state.

The Mid-Life Crisis

There has been much written in not only scientific literature, but also in popular culture about a life crisis situation beginning mostly in males in the late thirties (Oles, 1999); this is more commonly known as the mid-life crisis. This crisis situation deals primarily with the interpretation of past personal experiences, present stagnation, and possible future outcomes (Hermans and Oles, 1999).

These interpretations by the individual are usually not accurate, leading to the crisis itself. The reason for reevaluation of one's life in the first place is usually a feeling that development has been stifled. For example, Freud himself admitted at age forty one he felt as if he were in a "cocoon"; at that age in his life Freud was a struggling professor with only a moderate number of clients, and he had just abandoned his Seduction Theory (Newton, 1992). The mid-life crisis is increased substantially because instead of making

secure positive changes most individuals merely attempt to reduce negative emotions (Hermans and Oles, 1999).

The mid-life identity crisis has been categorized by having three key components (Hermans and Oles, 1999). First, the individual now finds many adaptive actions of his adolescence or young adulthood as unacceptable. Next, the individual begins to focus on the time that he has left to live instead of how old he is. Lastly, the individual begins to make plans about the future and changes his overall outlook about the future. The distinguishing factor between the mid-life crisis and the quarter-life crisis exists in the difference in time perception. The mid-life crisis occurs in combination with disillusionment concerning past events, whereas the quarter-life crisis occurs in combination with concern regarding future inadequacies. It will be interesting to discover if adolescents entering a young adult life phase display not only similar symptoms to those in a mid-life crisis state, but also approach the problem in a similar fashion.

CHAPTER TWO

METHOD

This study wishes to collect the experiences of American students currently enrolled in a four-year university. The participants will be asked to share information concerning their personal experiences to this point in their lives, and to add insight regarding different modalities of stress relief. Through interviews and focus groups the researcher strives to examine identity crisis situations that occur in American college students in order to better understand the situation, and to consider possible hazards that can be avoided. Special attention will be given to the individuals that have experienced a life crisis in quarter-life to discover what characteristics, if any, separate them from the individuals that have not undergone a crisis of identity.

PARTICIPANTS

This study included participants between the ages of eighteen and twenty five years old attending Southwest Texas State University. Twenty-five students, fourteen females and eleven males, participated in the study. The majority of the students were psychology majors, but a few other majors were represented. In addition to the psychology majors two participants were marketing majors, one was an accounting major, and one was a mass communications major. The majority of the participants were

upper-classmen with only one freshman, two sophomores, and one graduate student volunteering. Nine of the volunteers were offered extra-credit in introductory psychology or statistics courses for their participation, thirteen participated as a class project, and the others volunteered without any incentives. Out of the twenty-five students participating only four declared that they had indeed experienced an identity crisis situation at some point in their college career.

Students were solicited from introductory psychology classes, statistics and measurement classes, and experimental methodology classes. The researcher visited each classroom and gave the students an overview of the project and also displayed a copy of the research consent form to give the students an idea about what the research project would entail. Students could then meet with the researcher at scheduled meeting times, or elect to contact the researcher to arrange a more suitable time.

PROCEDURE

The participants were interviewed either individually or in a group setting at various locations. The first focus group consisted of two members and took place in a classroom in the psychology building at SWT. The second and third groups also took place in the same location with three participants in the second group and two participants in the third group. These first three groups were formed by means of a posted sign-up sheet in which different times were offered for participation. The fourth group took place in a different classroom in the psychology building and included thirteen students. This group was somewhat different from the others because the participants volunteered as a class project in cooperation with the course instructor. These students were also more familiar with each other than the students in the smaller

groups. The remaining five interviews were conducted one on one with only the researcher and the participant present. These personal interviews were done in an office on the first floor of the psychology building, and these students had not previously been interviewed in one of the groups.

During the interviews the participants were asked to share not only their ideas on certain subjects, but also to share any personal experiences that they felt were relevant. In the opening statement the researcher explained that at any point that the students felt uncomfortable with a question that they did not have to share any information with the group. The researcher used a basic outline to aid in facilitation of the discussion (see Table 1) but encouraged the participants to include any thoughts that they wished regardless of whether it pertained to the question that had just been asked. It was a major goal of these interviews to create an environment in which the students felt free to share their opinions in a non-judgmental situation in order to get the clearest picture of what the students thought.

TABLE 1

-
- I. Do you view yourself and others around you as an adult? (I believe it is important to establish if the participants see themselves as adults or adolescents to facilitate comparisons of our data to crisis situations described by Erikson and others)
 - A. What is an adult?
 - 1. Marriage
 - 2. Career . . . what type
 - 3. Other
 - B. Are you independent of your parents/guardians?
 - 1. Financially
 - 2. Emotionally
 - 3. Values
 - C. Do you go in and out of adulthood and adolescence?

1. Act differently in class than in public
 2. Act differently at parents' house vs. your own house
- II. What makes one responsible?
- A. Who are you responsible to?
 1. Parents
 2. Friends
 3. Self
 4. Spouse
 5. Other
 - B. Which careers are responsible?
 1. Making as much money as possible
 2. Helping as many people as you can
 3. Do what you want to without other concerns
 4. Other
- III. What has been limiting for the future?
- A. Have your academic pursuits limited your options?
 1. Poor grades early limit professional choice/school
 2. What are school's limitations
 3. Have you lost your dream or previous ambitions
 4. Other
 - B. Is a college degree limiting?
 1. Because it says this is what you are
 2. Because feel now you must apply it
 3. Feel that are not properly prepared for work force
- IV. Effects on overall well being
- A. Is making decisions about your future stressful?
 - B. What stresses do important decisions put on you?
 - C. Is it harder to cope with decisions now vs. earlier in life?
 - D. Is it more or less stressful to make decisions or put them off?

This general outline acted as a catalyst for discussion. Here I have listed some general categories for exploration with possible more specific questions that might follow each topic. I felt it was important, however, not to inhibit the participation of the focus group members to merely what has been outlined here (i.e. these aspects serve as a starting point). Also, with good group progression specific questions were asked when it appears that there is indeed a life crisis situation with which the group identifies. We then considered questions of how others have affected the transition (who and how they

helped), if a search for spiritual enlightenment played a role, specific techniques that people used, etc.

The more specific questions were also considered in more detail during the one on one interview although the personal interviews made the strongest effort to record the specific transition through which the participant has gone. For those students who agreed to participate in the individual interview I made a similar opening statement thanking them for sharing and then used the same format as in the group discussion. The interviews in both the group setting and in one-on-one setting were recorded on audio-tape and notes were taken by the researcher. Original expectations were to allow for students being able to participate in both group and individual sessions, however, no students participated in both.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

INTERVIEW ONE

Number of students: 2

Gender: Both Female

Age: Both 21

*An adult is one who accepts responsibility for himself through the building of strong relationships, thwarting prejudice, and being adaptable to different situations (i.e. able to appear confident even in areas of weakness).

*These two did not put emphasis on marriage playing a role in adulthood and merely stated that they felt it was expected by society; yet as “people get older they want it more”.

*The group members stated that choice of career did not influence personal growth as long as responsibilities were met.

*However, the statement was also made by one member that “careers with much schooling require more maturity”.

*Both of these twenty-one year olds felt emotionally independent of their parents despite the fact that neither claimed to be financially independent at all.

*Each of these young women claimed to have chosen their majors in college and subsequently their careers based on the fulfillment of intrinsic desires and not through a lust for money.

*The consensus of the group was overwhelmingly in favor of a college education as preparation for the future. Neither felt that her dreams had been lost by attending college and both based high importance on the attainment of a college degree. The sentiment was that without a college education the expectancy of getting a “good job” was lowered.

*The two young women, although reporting similar thoughts throughout most of the discussion, strayed from each other while discussing the issue of stress. The first one said that thoughts concerning the future can be very stressful because she does not know “exactly what she will be doing.” With major decisions she becomes “run down” and subsequently becomes more introverted. She stressed the importance of treating decisions as important throughout life, especially pertaining to acquaintances because “the people you hang out with influence who you become.”

The second group member prefers being an extroverted person when dealing with stressful issues because then she is “not worried about it on her own”. She feels that the decisions being made right now are most important because they directly affect her future career and even where she may live.

*Both group members point out that they do not feel that they have gone through a crisis of identity. “Knowing yourself gives less stress and lends to avoiding identity crisis”.

One of them emphasized “not going with just what is around”.

INTERVIEW TWO

Number of students: 3

Gender: 2 Females, 1 Male

Age: F 21, 18 M 21

*An adult is classified by the females as one who has a job with a salary. The male interjected that adult status denotes more freedom. In addition he claimed that obstacles like a death in the family aid in acquiring maturity, but it is within reason to define one as an adult without the display of fidelity (i.e. loyalty to romantic relationships as well as personal acquaintances). The group consensus was that adults have the ability to cope on their own and can find motivation internally. The male added that adults are aware of the consequences of their actions and, unlike in adolescence, there exists no “magic wand” that can minimize those consequences (the “magic wand” was in reference to parents and other adults that take care of problems for adolescents).

*The females agreed that institutions such as marriage play a role in adulthood because they are an indicator of maturity. However, they were in agreement with the male that adults as a whole function with emotional independence.

*The group added that dorm life is a necessary step in the maturation process. Although they agreed that it prolongs an adolescent state, it is important to be surrounded by like others upon first entering college and not to have other responsibilities such as paying rent, bills, etc. This frees students to make friendships, which will influence future maturation.

*Responsibility was reported by the group to be focused on own self first and foremost, but that family was also important because “you’ll always be with your parents.”

*The twenty-one year old female stated that careers with large companies shows more responsibility because “always going to the office is harder to do”. The eighteen-year old

female claimed that business jobs hold the most responsibility because they “keep the country going”. The male gave equal responsibility to a wide range of jobs. He gave an example of society giving more prestige to the medical profession but not as much to a job such as instructing beginning skydivers . . . “but really doctors and skydiving instructors are equally responsible”.

*The group felt that family influence is often the biggest limitation on the future, and the male added that feeling like one must choose a major when just starting college is limiting. He also interjected that societal boundaries like marriage and the importance placed on going to college in the first place can limit one’s outlook on the future. He emphasized that travel can enhance learning about different perspectives and can “open up” the future.

*The group admitted that our society has placed such emphasis on college that it appears difficult to begin a career without a degree. The females and the male agreed that the importance of college in our society is not the material learned or studied, but rather the new experiences involved.

*The twenty-one year old female is finding stress now more than ever because it feels to her like it is too late to start over (i.e. that is in college). The eighteen year old has experienced increased stress due to the fact that decisions now can have horrible consequences. She gave the example of drunk driving because at the very least that offense will “legally follow you.” The male has found that stress was more difficult at eighteen than at twenty-one because he had built a good support system for himself. He added that stressing over “little things” is perceived as meaningless if one has the right

perspective. When he begins to feel stress, he often thinks about the most important things in his life, permitting smaller stressors to subside.

*The older female and the male claimed not to have experienced an identity crisis, but the younger female predicts that she will have one in the future. She specifically mentioned concerns about her major (accounting) being too difficult for her once she begins to take classes in that field.

INTERVIEW THREE

Number of Students: 2

Gender: 1 Male and 1 Female

Age: M 19 F 20

*An adult is one that can handle his or her personal problems and is financially independent. Through experience adults have acquired the ability to adapt to a plethora of situations. An adult should solve problems without direct assistance, but they use friends and family as “backup”.

*Although the participants agreed that marriage is not “for everyone” they insisted that marriage displays personal responsibility.

*These students viewed people with salary-based careers as more responsible and mature. These individuals are seen as more mature because “they must be there everyday” (referring to the job). A person’s chosen profession is the major definer of who one is and knowing oneself is the key to happiness, so career success is vital for happiness in life. Salaried jobs are most important for college graduates because that is why one goes to college in the first place and because happiness is easier to find when one has money.

*These two participants feel that they are more responsible to their parents right now than anyone else. With problems involving examples such as failing grades and trouble with the law the male said that his first thought would be worry for his parents rather than for himself.

*One of the most important decisions is to associate with friends that will lend support. Friends at this point have such great impact on one's life that one must make sure that his friends take this responsibility seriously.

*College can be limiting because students are “forced” to chose a major before they really know anything about college at all. This can leave many students simply “passing the time and hoping something better comes along” rather than working toward a goal or exploring other possibilities.

*These participants feel that they are being prepared for the workforce because they are learning responsibility but not from the material that is covered in college courses.

*The male stated that decisions in his life are not of any more importance now than at any other time. He said that he has very little stress about the future because “thinking about what you will think of yourself when you look back” helps alleviate stress. Also, to reduce stress he finds carefree people to be around in conjunction with simply gathering his thoughts and doing some physical exercise. The female also used physical fitness as a stress reliever, and planning the events of the week including down time makes coping with stress easier.

*Neither of these students thought they had had a crisis of identity, but the female gave this final thought . . . “at this age there is still plenty of time to figure things out and hopefully everything will come together because I’ve done what I was supposed to do”.

INTERVIEW FOUR

Number of students: 13

Gender: 7 Males, 6 Females

Age: 20-23

*An adult is one that can “do it all”, one who is financially independent. College students that are still dependent on their parents financially can not really become adults in the same way that children with training wheels on their bicycles are not really riding.

*Marriage can be used in different ways. “Some people use marriage as a crutch”, and others simply get married in order to “get out from under” parental conditions.

*The group consensus is that the type of employment that one chooses defines adult status. They defined a career as a salaried job in which one uses his college degree and a job as something like waiting tables. They made no distinction on which was better than the other and left it up to individual preference regarding which road was best suited for the person. In this instance about 2/3 of the class stated they would take a more traditional approach to employment (such as attaining a 9 to 5 job) while the other 1/3 would like to explore more options even upon attaining a college education.

*Most of the members of this group felt a strong connection to their families (even the ones that are financially independent), and the overall idea was that no matter how old one gets or how adult one becomes the need for emotional closeness doesn’t change.

What might change is the nature of the relationships with loved ones. For example, one might begin to speak to their parents only one time per month at age twenty-one instead of twice weekly at age eighteen. The need for emotional closeness has not died but the amount of reassurance necessary has decreased.

*There exists an ambiguous period that has qualities of adolescence and adulthood. The class agreed that the transition to adulthood happens in a stepwise progression. One may focus on doing quality work at his job or making above average grades in school as early indicators of a maturing outlook. Through these steps young adults can become more comfortable with themselves, and often feel free to revert back to what might be considered childlike activity.

*Half of the class reported the feeling of having two homes. The example they gave is when one goes to his parents' house he refers to it as "going home", but the return trip from his parents' house back to school is also referenced as "going home".

*As long as parents are the major contributor of finances then the students feel more responsible to their parents than to their personal agendas. Marriage, however, can shift responsibility away from parents even if their financial help is still prevalent.

*This group saw college being limiting if one does not attend a school that is a "good fit". They find it more important to make sure that one is ready to go to college and to understand what he is looking for before making the decision to enroll. A few of the older females in the group felt that travel is just as important of an educator as a university. However, these students also suggested that students spend a year close to home at a junior or community college in order to ease the transition from high school.

*Dreams about the future do not dissipate, but rather they simply become more realistic. The key is to incorporate what is required by school but never completely forget why you wanted the college experience in the first place. If one stays open to the possibilities, then new dreams that were never previously realized begin to emerge from older dreams.

*This group did not feel as if college prepared them for the workforce. “Things are just so relaxed in college even though so much is going on . . . just because the atmosphere is relaxed”.

*Decisions for these participants have become more stressful because they seem to have the ability to change the course of one’s life. “There is no fall back”.

*To reduce stress one must prioritize, and remembering what is most important (ex. family and friends) makes minor stressors carry less value. It is important to focus on how well off college students are compared to others. When comparing the stressors of college life to that of families with real problems, the situations and decisions faced in college seem miniscule.

*Volunteering to help those less fortunate can put one’s own decisions in perspective.

*None of these students claimed they had had or displayed signs of a crisis of identity.

INTERVIEW FIVE

Number of students: 1

Gender: Male

Age: 22

*One cannot fully be an adult until he is completely financially independent. This man claims he is not an adult yet because his schedule is “up to him” and it contains “less structure”.

*A “9-5” job definitely indicates adulthood.

*He feels that the length of a committed relationship does not make one an adult. He stated that, although not married, he has a relationship that has lasted for five years.

However, he feels that he is still not an adult despite this long-term commitment. I feel it

is important to note that later in the interview the participant admitted that fidelity had not always been upheld.

*Transitioning to adulthood leaves more emotional attachment to mate more than anyone else.

*The subject claims to be more introverted when he is in more adult situations such as work or school but is more open when with close companions.

*Although he is still financially dependent on his parents, the participant feels that it is most important to focus responsibility on what is important for his personal growth. His parents are in his thoughts, but he must take care of his own life.

*In his eyes any job can make one an adult. A career is not more important than just a “job”.

*This subject doesn’t feel that college has limited his choices for the future although at first he was disappointed that he did not get to attend his first choice college because of declining high school scores. He later realized that the university one attends is not the most important factor in future success.

*He felt college was important not for the knowledge learned in the classroom, but for the responsibility that he has learned.

*His well being was enhanced when he began to study what he was interested in and not merely focus on future earning potential. He felt that it is important for people to make decisions based on what they believe is correct and to not rely on the opinions of others.

*The subject often uses smoking cigarettes and drinking as a means to release stress and feels that if these vices were completely taken away that he would definitely have more

stress. He also mentioned that “breaking stuff is good” . . . although he said that with a big grin on his face.

*He feels that making decisions as soon as possible diminishes the stress involved.

*Identity Crisis? This subject reported a crisis of identity that began at the end of his high school career and lasted through his first two or three years of college. He was raised in a small town and could not fit in with his peers, but he did not know what to do. He was looking for new situations, and these were found through the diversity he experienced at college. He reported that with an increase in options he was able to “eliminate things he didn’t like”. He also began to understand that it was okay to disagree with someone of “high status.” He began to accept his own educated opinions as guidance for his life and believes that being true to himself and not authority figures is the most important part of leading a healthy stress-free life. He said that it is paramount for one to be able to recognize “insignificant” opinions (i.e. opinions that do not apply to what you think is right). “It is okay to be and think differently.”

INTERVIEW SIX

Number of students: 1

Gender Female

Age 24

*The subject feels that she is an adult because she is “self sufficient.” Living on her own makes her an adult, and she admits that she is not ready for adulthood but it was “thrust upon her.”

*She stated that satisfaction from work denotes adulthood, not the actual job that one performs. One can find employment that allows for more freedom from responsibility and still be an adult. What matters is what makes the individual feel most comfortable.

*Since marriage usually leads to children one is often forced to get a “real job” (9-5) in order to provide for the family.

*She feels that as she has grown older that emotional support from parents has become more important, and parental acceptance is a large part of becoming an adult.

*This woman reports that she does not change her views or the way she acts in different situations, but her outward appearance does change.

*She reports that it is important to be responsible to what makes one personally satisfied because “your friends will accept you for whatever.” She also claims that she needs parental support for her actions in order to feel that she is on the right path.

*This participant found that college was limiting because she had no choice but to go to college. She did not actually want to attend college but would have traveled and explored the world if given the opportunity. She now feels too old to “do the right thing,” and she must now begin to plan for the future and children. School was not fulfilling because “it did not teach character and merely taking classes cannot replace practical exploration.”

She stated that she disliked the structure of most college courses but really enjoyed learning. Another big problem for this woman was the societal stigma of needing a college degree to ensure future success.

*The most stress that the subject has now is changing plans to long-term commitments. She said that it is difficult to formulate “a new game plan,” but once one makes a choice and continues with it, the stress level begins to decrease.

*Stress can be curtailed by talking problems over with people that have similar views to your own. This participant also mentioned that smoking cigarettes and drinking can be stress relievers.

*Stressful decisions are approached by this student at a slower pace than in the past because she now likes to wait for her first emotional reaction to dissipate before making a final decision.

*Identity Crisis: This participant began to have a crisis of identity during her second semester of graduate study because her identity, based on future plans had changed. Her parents appeared not to be as proud of her new career choice because it did not lead her in one direction. She still does not know exactly what she will do in the future or what she wants to do, but this is fine with her. She is excited to see that the “world is open” since she does not have a set plan of action. To begin eliminating her crisis of identity she began to pin point what it was that she did not want to do. This subject feels that college must be a crisis for everyone even if they do not admit it because of “all of the firsts” and the fact that one must rely on the friends he makes more than on his family. College is the first time that the “rose-tint comes off of the glasses and you see that the world has so much bullshit.” It appears to her that frustration stems from never being completely able to separate herself from society and completely be herself. This participant feels that the questioning of authority separates those that would probably have a crisis of identity from those that probably will not.

INTERVIEW SEVEN

Number of students: 1

Gender: Female

Age: 21

*Adulthood has not been reached; rather a transitioning between adolescence and adulthood has emerged. This participant defined an adult as one who makes decisions “based on their own ideals” and does not confuse personal beliefs with the opinions of others. Adults are also financially and emotionally independent of not only their parents, but also of their friends and mates.

*Her parents are still major contributors financially which gives them the right to give advice and input on her decisions. However, she is finally able to make some decisions on her own since her parents are not the sole financier. Her parents think that they should be her first priority, but she doesn’t feel responsible to her parents. She claims to be responsible to herself first, her fiance next, and lastly to her parents. However, when communicating with her parents she still presents the façade of “the perfect child” which she believes they “need to see.”

*The participant was raised in an authoritarian household that relied heavily on family and church.

*She describes a responsible adult as one that “does not miss work” and works “9-5.”

*Acting more responsibly in class has been incorporated into her lifestyle, but outside of the classroom she still admits that she is irresponsible and will skip work without good reason simply so she can go out and “party.”

*In her own career she wants to have an impact in her community and views high paying jobs as limiting her mobility and not allowing for adequate personal time.

*The participant had conflict with her parents throughout her senior year in high school, and this led to her not performing well her freshman year in college. She “just wanted to

party” and did not put an emphasis on grades. Her newly found freedom was exercised to such a degree that she failed every class. She took a semester off from school to reevaluate her situation and decided to enter school the second time with a much more proactive view. She stopped paying for everything with credit cards and decided to use career evaluation assistance in order to gain more perspective on careers for which she might be suited.

*This participant found that college in general did not limit her future, but she believes that she would have had more opportunity if she would have gone to a “better school.” Overall, however, she claims to have enjoyed her relationships with friends and professors in college but feels that the curriculum is outdated.

*Her decision making has become easier with regard to smaller decisions but has become increasingly harder for more important decisions. The most important factor for these decisions becoming more difficult is that she now wants to be completely honest with her parents about her life style. She recently told her parents of her decision to “cohabitate” with her fiancé; this was difficult because of her strict religious upbringing. She eventually decided that she was doing the right thing because she spent a year contemplating the decision, and a marriage would have taken place if her parents would not have forced their opinions as much as they did (i.e. the marriage was taking place to appease her parents, but it was her parents’ own persistence that caused the delay of wedding plans).

*In order to reduce stress with her parents she “gets into the water slowly” by first contacting them via email, then letters and lastly with a personal visit. She has found that

putting off decisions causes more stress but also believes that it is important to examine the repercussions of decisions more thoroughly.

*In order to mature into adulthood the participant felt it was important to break from her parents' religion of Catholicism since she no longer agreed with the teachings of The Church. Despite this fact she plans to have a Catholic wedding because she feels that marriage equates adulthood in the eyes of her parents, so she will concede to having a traditional wedding in order to be treated as an adult.

*She admitted that the expense of being financially independent has come as quite a shock to her. Not only is she struggling with rent, utility bills, and car payments/car insurance, but also she has the responsibility to pay the credit card debt she accrued early in her college career and what seems to be a large amount in student loans. These money concerns are influencing her choice of career now because she does not feel that she can make enough money unless she takes a job that she really does not like (specifically she listed computer work).

INTERVIEW EIGHT

Number of students: 1

Gender: Female

Age: 21

*This participant feels that she is an adult because she has been responsible for important decisions that revolved around college (i.e. balancing classes, work, and studying), but she admits to not being financially independent. She also says that she is an adult because she has "drive and desire".

*The only time she claims to act more like an adolescent is when she is around “more immature friends,” and her group of friends has a variable level of maturity.

*She feels responsible to herself because no one else knows her as well as she knows herself, and she lists family and friends as others to whom she is responsible.

*The participant feels that the type of job one has does not decide the degree of maturity that the individual holds, but rather the quality of work and responsibility to do a good job are paramount. Personally she feels that a profession in which she can aid others takes precedence over a career that simply would afford her more luxuries.

*A main goal in her life is to find someone to marry and with whom to have a family.

*She claims to have had a problem early in her collegiate career with finding a major since she did not initially do well in college due to her pre-medical school emphasis.

However, she claimed to have no problem finding her other interests.

*She feels that college has prepared her to “compete with anyone” once she enters the workforce because she learned responsibility and how to utilize her time. However, she feels that the actual knowledge she gained from her classes is not significantly related to future success.

*The participant said that she receives the most stress from her grades and her student loans. In order to reduce stress she feels it is most important to allow enough time for sleep, stay active and drink alcohol . . . “but not too much to leave a hangover”.

*At the end of the interview the participant claimed to never have experienced a crisis of identity despite the fact that earlier in the interview she offered the following thoughts.

When she first entered college she had a problem adjusting to college life and meeting new people because she came from a town in which she was very active and knew many

people. For the first time in her life she experienced “down time” and she decided to take a break from school in the middle of the semester. She spent two weeks at home with her parents in order to prioritize her life and to “do a reality check”. She feels that this break from school was important because although she describes her parents as “authoritarian,” she added that they are also supportive and that if one has supportive parents then they can avoid a crisis of identity. During this hiatus from college she also found it important to end her romantic relationship from high school. With this “reality check” she was able to become emotionally independent of her parents during her second semester in college.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

The focus of this study was to determine if the modern American college student faces a quarter-life identity crisis during the college years. Also, attention was directed toward determining special stressors that are possibly involved and how the students combat stressful situations. Lastly, I wished to examine the individuals that admitted to having a crisis of identity and determine what separates that individual from one that has not experienced an identity crisis.

To accomplish this goal students were interviewed in order to gain their perspective on issues such as adulthood, college in general, relationships with family and peers, future career options, and what stressors invade the college experience. The students were also encouraged to add personal insight and anecdotes that they felt were relevant to their personal experiences.

According to the data collected from the interviews with the current sample, the overwhelming majority of the students interviewed had not experienced a situation of identity crisis in “quarter-life”. Included among the twenty-five participants were only four students who had experienced an identity crisis situation;

these were older students (i.e. over twenty-one years of age) although the crisis of identity in one case occurred at eighteen years of age. These four participants all gave personal interviews.

Most of the students interviewed believed that a college degree is the vital component in insuring future career and life success. This view comes as no surprise to the researcher since it is easy to understand that, if students did not believe that college would aid in future accomplishments, they would not be in college in the first place. What is interesting is the fact that since college (in their minds) will culminate in sending them on a successful path, then the students are not forced to think about future problems they might incur. In essence we can speculate that the lack of anxiety about the future has left the students in a state of extended adolescence. In a Marcian sense these students have a foreclosed belief concerning college education since they have made the decision that receiving a college degree will ensure a good future without exploring other possibilities.

Erikson described a period of development, which he called *identity vs. role confusion*, characterized by the individual exploring who he is, what ideals he holds, and the type of person that he strives to become. Although Erikson described this developmental period existing from about age thirteen to early adulthood (i.e. late teenage years) we can surmise that many of these students can still be categorized as searching for identity rather than moving toward a state corresponding with their chronological age. The college student has not been forced to make adult decisions in which they would have to explore personal ideals and values. The participants in this study, excluding two, claimed that they were not yet adults. Therefore we can expect that

they do not have to act in an adult manner when it comes to self-exploration. In fact, the search for self-identity was rarely mentioned in any of the interviews, and when it was mentioned, it was in the context of stress relief. For example, one would examine what points of a situation were most important to them as a means to making a decision.

The students admit to not having reached a state of maturity or adulthood, and the definition most often given for an adult is one who is financially independent. The lack of financial responsibility for today's college student is not merely for those individuals that receive financial security from parents or other relatives. Even the students that are paying their own way through college use the fall back of student loans and credit cards to pay for not only school, but also other necessities. Loans and credit accounts alleviate the need for financial security because payment of debt is an action that by its very nature can be postponed until the individual is able to pay. There will be time to pay off accrued debt when the students gain employment with a high salary that their college degree "guarantees".

When asked if college prepares one for the future the students were quick to respond that the advantage of attending college is not the knowledge learned in the classroom, but rather that being in college teaches one responsibility. The participants of this study claim to be learning responsibility between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, although they were not employing responsible/adult like decision making at this time. It is my assumption that the time in which more manifestations of a quarter-life identity crisis situation may occur would be the few years directly following the abolishment of the collegiate lifestyle described in the results of this inquiry.

The discussions about stress supported the view that the best prescription by the students to control anxiety in decision making was to understand oneself and to make decisions that are right for the individual. This is odd in light of the fact that the majority of the students (twenty-one out of twenty-five) listed someone other than themselves (most often parents were listed) when asked to whom they are most responsible. The cure for stress seems to exist for the participants in an area of thought into which they have not yet delved. A benefit that could actually stem from the stressors found in a college setting could be that it acts as a catalyst for young people to begin to examine who they are and what beliefs/ideals are meaningful.

It is also worthy of mention that the participants in this study, with almost complete agreement, claimed that having a “9-5” job that paid a salary was a major characteristic of one that is an adult. The reasons given for the “9-5” job being important varied, but the two that were given the most were because it is more difficult to be responsible enough to be at work in a structured format everyday and because jobs such as these are usually harder.

A question for future research would be to find the reasons that the modern college student does not view one with an “easier” job to be as valuable as a “harder” working career person. It would be interesting to understand why students believe that their careers must be hard in order to be adults, and why they do not explore careers that are more appealing to them or that incorporate their natural abilities. The famed baseball player Lawrence “Yogi” Berra claimed in his book When You Come To A Fork In The Road Take It (2000), that he co-authored with Dave Kaplan, that his decisions are influenced by his abilities and the actions at which he is good. He offered the example

that he dropped out of school in the eighth grade because he was not good at school. He did not drop out because he did not enjoy it, but he knew that he was more productive working than at learning at school. Later, he quit working in the factory because he was a better baseball player than a factory worker. He claimed to always trust his strengths and that has kept him on a successful path in life.

Another idea that was often mentioned in regards to stress reduction and easier decision making is to consult with family and friends that the individual trusts in order to gain support and insight. This is an odd statement to hear since many of the participants find it an important step toward adulthood to become emotionally (in addition to the aforementioned financially) independent. One would assume that if these students were asked if the President of the United States is an adult that the majority would agree. However, it is commonly known that the president surrounds himself with a cabinet of advisors to assist in official decision making. It is important that the participants realize the need for support in stressful times, but trying to become more isolated as one enter adulthood might prove to be faulty reasoning.

Out of the twenty-five participants only four displayed characteristics of a crisis of identity (two said that they had had an identity crisis, and two gave examples of their personal crises without admitting that such a situation had taken place). These four students were the only ones in this study to claim that the persons that they are most responsible to are themselves. The most common answer was one's parents. It appears that the individuals that strive to learn more about their own character and evaluate what is important in their own lives have faced problems not mentioned by other participants. One of these four relieved his struggle with identity by changing his major to something

that he was interested in rather than something that offered greater earning potential. Deciding to do what was right for him and understanding that it is acceptable to disagree with someone that is an authority figure is what changed his approach to life. Another of the students that admitted to having an identity crisis also listed the questioning of authority as leading her into a crisis or confused personal state. One of the students that did not outright claim to having had an identity crisis offered a personal account of her conflicts with her parents about her ideology which was shifting away from the views with which she had been raised. She did not have problems until she began to assert her views to her parents. With this participant the questioning of authority also played a role in a state of identity change. The last student to display identity crisis characteristics did not offer the rebellion against authority as a major turning point in her life. Rather, explaining that after she had a period in her first year of school in which she said "I lost it" she returned to college more assertive and made decisions based on her beliefs and not those of anyone else.

It is also worthy of note that these four students were also the only ones out of the entire study to list alcohol as a form of stress relief. It is possible that these students feel comfortable enough to state exactly what they do even if it is contradictory to what is deemed healthy behavior by society. In essence, the honesty level of these students might exist in a higher plane than that of the other students.

Bishop, Macy-Lewis, Schnekloth, Puswella, & Struessel (1997) found in a study of college freshman that the group with the highest rate of alcohol consumption was those labeled in the Marcian state of identity diffusion. Identity diffusion (as discussed earlier) is a state often marked by non-conformity and the individual may appear to be aimless or

lack direction. The individual in this state is changing. This definition of the diffused individual fits the changing attitudes of the four participants that stated alcohol consumption as a form of stress relief (i.e. they all at some point had already undergone a shifting in their belief systems).

However, these individuals can be viewed as transitioning into the status of identity achievement since their ideologies are becoming more secure. Categorizing these students as identity achieved could also explain their disinhibition to list drinking as an anxiety relieving activity. Those individuals who are identity achieved have investigated and subsequently acquired a belief system that is personal in nature. Therefore, apprehension due to societal conformity is much less likely to occur.

Although this study found little information concerning the sequence or root cause of an identity crisis in the modern college student, characteristics of those that have had such an experience were identified, compared to those not having a crisis. Methods of stress control employed by students were also identified. In addition to alcohol as previously described, students used exercise and personal reflection to aid in stress reduction. Knowledge regarding stress reduction techniques may aid health professionals' understanding of how to help college students.

More evidence for a quarter-life identity crisis may be found if the focus is shifted away from college students to young adults that are in the infancy stages of their careers. Perhaps the institution of college delays progression into adulthood; this at least appears the case with the students that were interviewed here. Future research could also consider the most effective methods of teaching college students about the job market

and help them examine their strengths and weaknesses. This could aid in the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

It is in losing sight of ourselves that we often find a more clear vision of what it is that we strive to become. This statement is more pertinent in the present era than at any point in the past century. Mankind has gone to great lengths to ensure the survival of human offspring, but simple survival has in the recent past been replaced with the desire to achieve perfection on Earth. The common man in the industrialized world, now more than ever, possesses the means in which to gain luxuries that have long been a privilege of royalty or the elite. A prestigious profession is no longer required in order to ensure that one and his family are blessed with markers of affluence such as ample food and shelter, running water, entertainment, and climate control. If one chooses and has the aid to do so he has the option in a great number of cases to pursue occupations that will allow for all of these prized commodities along with others such as luxury transportation, convenience devices (such as mobile telephones), and larger domiciles.

In a society with such pleasure surrounding us everyday we often act in a manner that is directly contradictory to our societal ideals. As a young adult that has benefited from the sacrifices of the previous generation I have wondered quite frequently at the meaning of the popular expression “you can do whatever you want to do with your life”. Most often this phrase is included in discussions concerning the future careers and lives of children and young adults. Children in the United States across cultural and socioeconomic strata answer the question “what do you want to be when you grow up?” with the same frequency when the

answers they give are professions that accrue a higher salary than most others (namely, medical doctor and lawyer/attorney). Despite the high occurrence of these answers from children most of them do not become medical practitioners or attorneys. This dissonance has caused me to explore my memory and the memories of my acquaintances to find out if the same incompatibility has taken place; not surprisingly it had indeed transpired.

Another observation that I found through my casual pilot questioning is that the desire to attain such lofty undertakings lasted not only throughout the grade-school years of most young adults that I interviewed, but also throughout the high school and the preliminary year or two of collegiate study. Information of this type is consistent with current literature stating that adolescence is extending into the period of time that formerly marked the commencement of adulthood. There has been an obvious blurring of the end of childhood and the beginning of the span of time in which people are expected to be responsible for their own actions and make their own decisions. Further study in this area is needed to compare and contrast the transitions that today's young adults make with historic literature from researchers such as Erickson and Marcia that observed that these types of transitions occur during the middle teenage years.

The child-like adults of the present day are in essence forced to make life altering choices with the background of a world that falsely supports hard work and diversity but in reality champions wealth and prestige. What then happens to the young people that find themselves torn between their career decisions and the expectations of the environment surrounding them?

My personal experience with this struggle is that many of the people in this extended adolescence group face a crisis of identity that far exceeds much more

publicized crisis eras in human existence such as the popular culture phenomenon of the mid-life crisis. I wish to examine the literature concerned with this crisis situation: to explore the crisis and catharsis that occurs between the ages of eighteen and twenty five in the modern American college student as it presents differences and similarities to other crisis situations. First, however, I need to conduct interviews in order to gather qualitative data that will shed light on how this situation is discovered, how it is approached and how it is resolved (if it is resolved at all). This study has the potential to explore the mental wellbeing of today's young adults and uncover some potential hazards that can possibly be avoided.

A feeling of accomplishment, and an equivalence between thought and deed have long been cited as factors that reduce stress and consequently improve mental as well as physical health. A more thorough understanding of the special problems that the "quarter-life identity crisis" entails for today's young adults can aid health care professional greatly when examining and treating patients from this group. The investigation should make an effort to pinpoint when the crisis period begins for most individuals, the duration the approximate age of completion, and how many individuals believe that they face a crisis situation at all. In addition, information along the lines of how the problem is dealt with and if any aid is sought out, and the type of aid, could allow for identification of areas in counseling that should be better informed of what to expect in the future; especially in school and university counseling situations.

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