

# Coaching Clients through the Quarter-Life Crisis: What works?

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## Abstract

Evidence continues to suggest that the quarter-life crisis is a prominent experience, yet coaching related literature on the subject is limited. This study develops the understanding of the quarter-life crisis by challenging the potentially outdated work of Erikson (1980) and Levinson (1978). Effective coaching approaches and tools for quarter-life clients are also explored. A qualitative survey was conducted using semi-structured interviews, which found that the prominent challenges this group faces are around identity; experiencing independence; pressure from self and others; and feelings uncertainty and depression. Effective coaching approaches and tools are those that offer the client direction and focus; the opportunity to set goals, action plan and learn new skills; that seek to develop the client's self-awareness, develop their confidence, their ability to view the situation from an alternative perspective and to reflect on a regular basis.

**Key words:** Quarter-life; transition; development; coaching; Generation Y

## Introduction

Previous researchers define the quarter-life crisis as a feeling of 'overwhelming instability, constant change, too many choices and a panicked sense of helplessness' (Robbins & Wilner, 2001, p.3) and a 'kind of emotional crisis among twenty somethings—the sense of desolation, isolation, inadequacy, and self-doubt, coupled with a fear of failure' (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008, p.241). Although both concern major change, the quarter-life crisis appears to differ from the more widely documented mid-life crisis. The former stems from anxiety related to constant change and instability whereas the latter is often an unpredictable reaction to a sense of stagnancy and prolonged stability, in turn sparking a need for radical change (Robbins & Wilner, 2001). The prominent issue in mid-life development appears related to the individual's conflict between maintaining their responsibilities towards their family and fulfilling their own needs (Lachman, 2004). In contrast, the quarter-life crisis appears to occur when the individual moves into being responsible only for themselves and it is the sudden introspective focus on what they want for themselves that creates anxiety and an emotional crisis.

A review of relevant literature suggests that research and interest in the notion of a quarter-life crisis is in its infancy. Robbins and Wilner are seen as the first to formally identify the quarter-life crisis only ten years ago in 2001. As a result, there is limited authoritative literature on the subject and even less that is relevant to coaching. Of most relevance is the coaching model presented by Panchal and Jackson (2007) designed for working with those experiencing a 'Turning 30' transition, a model that this research will examine and evaluate closely.

What literature in this area does document well are the contributory social pressures to a quarter-life crisis. For example, it is evident that globalisation and IT developments, such as the

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internet, provide individuals with too many options and thus the pressure to decide on the right path, right now, causes anxiety and confusion (Atwood & Scholtz, 2008). An affluent, yet financially unstable economy has led to conflict (Simon & Gagnon, 1976) where individuals feel trapped in current careers due to debts (Common Purpose, 2004) stemming from continued education and an out-of-reach property market. A form of anomie is evident where the means to achieving goals is no longer an issue so achievement becomes less satisfying, creating a never-ending feeling of dissatisfaction (Merton, 1938). On top of this, traditional expectations from parents and society for young people to be settled in a career and a relationship, and to have purchased a property by the age of 30 creates additional conflict for the individual who wants to take the time to find out who they really are, find a career with meaning and purpose and to get it right first time (The Telegraph, 2008).

The key debates, which this research seeks to discuss, are whether theory on developmental stages, such as Levinson (1968) and Erikson (1980), remains relevant and accurate today. Quarter-life crisis literature suggests society has changed and a new 'quarter-life' stage needs to be recognised (Panchal & Jackson, 2007; Atwood & Scholtz, 2008) due to suggestions that we are remaining 'adolescents' for longer, delaying our development into adulthood. Previous research into the quarter-life crisis has predominately been conducted in the United States (US) and does not examine the impact of coaching on those experiencing a quarter-life crisis in the United Kingdom (UK). This research aims to determine if currently documented conceptions related to the quarter-life period, and life stage development in general, remain relevant to today's younger population in the UK. In addition, research continues to suggest that the mental health of young people in the UK is deteriorating (YoungMinds, 2006; Tyrrell, 2011), with a large proportion stating they are experiencing a quarter-life crisis (Vodafone World of Difference, 2010). With continued evidence of the strains impacting today's quarter-lifers, to understand this unique experience and how to work effectively with this group is essential for coaches. Without an awareness of the quarter-life crisis and effective coaching methods for working with individuals experiencing such a crisis, the coach may limit their ability to support such clients and may in fact hinder their clients' progress and development if treated the same as other clients.

As a result, this study's findings aim to improve coaching practice by helping coaches understand the quarter-life crisis in more detail whilst recommending effective practice for working with those experiencing such a crisis in the UK. In order to build an evidence base in this area, the objective of the research was to determine what quarter-lifers feel works for them in coaching; what they want from a coach; what approaches, techniques, and tools coaches are using with clients and which ones are proving effective according to the coach and client.

This paper next explains the methods used to carry out this research and why certain approaches and methods were used over others. It also explains how the data was analysed and further discusses the limitations of this study. The first results section presents the themes from interview transcripts relating to the experience of the quarter-life crisis. It debates the age that such a crisis appears to occur and evaluates how well developmental theory correlates with the findings. The feelings and issues that individuals appear to face whilst experiencing a quarter-life crisis are presented in this first section. The second section presents findings on what approaches, techniques and tools coaches are using with their clients and which ones are proving effective and why. A conclusion follows in which the findings are summarised and the implications of the results discussed.

## **Methodology**

With a Critical Realist paradigm, a qualitative approach was chosen to provide a deeper, more detailed and open understanding of the quarter-life crisis and effective coaching practice than would be obtained from the constrained, pre-determined categories associated with quantitative data

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designed to analyse connections between static variables (Mason, 1996; Silverman, 2000; Patton, 2002). A qualitative survey approach was chosen to gather rich, descriptive data, which could not be directly observed elsewhere, as it was the distinct attitudes and perceptions of the respondents that was important to assess (Silverman, 2000).

The study therefore uses people as its data source as it is individuals themselves that are seen as repositories of knowledge, evidence and experience (Mason, 1996; Silverman, 2006). Thus, the most appropriate way to explore the question was to speak to and gain access to the accounts of quarter-lifers being coached and to ask their coaches about their experiences. Following the initial survey, interviews were conducted to ask individuals about their experiences, attitudes, values and thoughts in order to develop a deep understanding of how they think and feel (Oppenheim, 1992). An interview felt appropriate as it offered a responsive space where any questions could be answered, information given and any emotional distress managed. An interview also created the opportunity to build rapport with the participant, which is often needed to obtain meaningful and honest accounts of their experiences (Oppenheim, 1992).

Furthermore, semi-structured, open-ended interview questions allowed a range of sub-questions to be explored. A series of questions for the client were put together followed by a series of questions for the coach. This method ensured that the specific areas of interest could be examined (Silverman, 2006), whilst maintaining the space for flexibility and sensitivity to the dynamics of each interview, which are hard to predict in advance (Mason, 1996). Although setting standardised questions prior to the interview could be seen to bias the results by imposing assumptions on the importance of specific areas to be explored (Raimond, 1993), the interviews were open to explore any other topics that came up in the discussion. A Pilot Study was conducted to test how understandable the questions were and confusing questions were adjusted accordingly.

### *Sample*

A small, purposeful, non-probability sample was used in this study rather than a large, representative sample, as empirical generalisation was not the aim here (Patton, 2002). The specification of the target population was that the client needed to be between the ages of 18 and 30 and being coached in the UK, or had been coached in the last six months. This age range was chosen in line with evidence drawn from the literature review, which indicated that a quarter-life crisis could occur during these ages (e.g. Atwood & Scholtz, 2008). There is evidence of a quarter-life crisis occurring between 30 and 35 (e.g. Robbins & Wilner, 2001; Common Purpose, 2004), but there is also evidence that an early mid-life crisis can occur between 30 and 35 (Womack, 2002). Consequently, to ensure that the data gathered was valid and only documenting experiences of a quarter-life crisis, the age of participants was limited to 30.

The participants that took part were aged 21, 25, 29 (x 3) and 30. There was no selection based on gender but it happened that all participating clients were female. Three coaches were male and three were female. The sample was kept to UK-based participants to open up findings on this geographical location. The coach participants also needed to be UK based and working as a coach specifically. Several mentors requested to take part but the research question focused on coaching only and blurring the boundaries with mentoring practice may have impacted the validity of the data.

In order to access coaches in the UK working with those between the ages of 18 and 30, quota sampling methods (Diamantopoulos & Schlegelmilch, 1997) were implemented by targeting coaches using social media websites. Posts asking coaches, based in the UK and working with this age group, to get in contact were posted on Facebook, Twitter and coaching-related groups on LinkedIn. Emails outlining the research and asking for volunteers were sent to personal contacts known to be coaches and also to people on the Oxford Brookes Masters in Coaching and Mentoring Practice. The same

email was also sent to every coach that came up in the first three pages of a Google search under the terms 'quarter-life crisis coach' and 'quarter-life coach' filtered to 'Pages from the UK'.

Six coaches participated. The aim was that for each coach interviewed, one of their clients would also be interviewed to build a two-sided perspective of the quarter-life crisis and the coaching experience. Consequently, six clients participated; one client on their own (the coach was not available); one coach on their own (their client did not respond to email contact); and five pairs.

It is recognised that the definition of the sample used here may produce some population specification error (Diamantopoulos & Schlegelmilch, 1997). There is mixed literature on the age a quarter-life crisis can occur and it could be that other ages are experiencing such a crisis that this study does not touch upon. Furthermore, a degree of frame error may occur, as some of the population will have been excluded by only focusing on known coaches and members of the online communities accessed. There were also no male clients interviewed out of coincidence.

It is also noted that by approaching the coaches first, asking them to identify which clients might like to take part, it may be that the clients interviewed were cases where the coach felt their work had been most effective, biasing the results. It is unlikely that a client who felt their coaching had not been effective would be willing to participate and it is unlikely that a coach who felt the same would have asked that client to participate in a study looking to examine effective coaching practice.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

Once coaches had expressed an interest in taking part, they were told via email a little more about the research and asked to check with their own clients if they would be happy to participate too and if so, whether they would be happy for their coach to pass on their email address. When the coach confirmed that the client had expressed an interest in taking part and passed on their email address, an Information Sheet and Consent Form was emailed to the coach and to the client. They were asked to complete these and return via email or post.

#### *Interviews*

Originally, the aim was to interview each participant face-to-face as it was felt that such personal interaction might build better rapport and lead to a more honest and open discussion. However, with the vast range of geographical locations of the participants and strict timing deadlines, this was not feasible. It was therefore decided that they would be interviewed over the telephone as rapport could still be built using this method.

A suitable time was arranged with the participants to be interviewed and they were called by telephone or Skype. The call was recorded using Garageband software on a MacBook. Rather than rely on notes written during the interviews, they were recorded and transcribed word for word. It was highly likely that much would be missed during the interview if only notes were taken. Notes would only represent thoughts had at the time, facts would be hard to remember and it would not be necessarily accurate to rely on pure recollections of conversations (Raimond, 1993; Silverman, 2000).

#### **Data Analysis**

A data analysis approach was needed that allowed inferred meaning to be drawn from the data in order to understand the complexity within the participants' accounts of objective reality, but also subjective knowledge of that reality in line with the Critical Realist approach. Jansen (2010) introduces a three-level classification of qualitative survey analysis: *unidimensional description*, *multidimensional description* and *explanation*. The data collected here was analysed using a *unidimensional description*, which aimed to organise the data into themes, dimensions of that theme

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and categories of that theme. To do this, an upward coding process was used to specify a commonality between responses by attributing categorical labels to segments (Jansen, 2010). Each transcript was treated as a holistic 'unit' and non-cross-sectional data analysis took place to produce an explanation of distinctive processes within that individual unit (Mason, 1996). This approach recognises that specific themes and issues may not appear cross-sectionally in such a small data set but that each one identified is valuable to the research. This approach also means that any 'deviant' themes in which regularities of data are absent are still valued and analysed (Silverman, 2000).

Only once each unit was analysed were all the transcripts cross-sectionally indexed to determine whether in fact any themes did correlate, offering a systematic overview of the data. To do this, notes were first made in the margins of the transcripts, which Robinson and Smith (2010) suggest prompts the first analytical insights and categories to emerge. This stage was followed by copying and pasting relevant parts of the transcripts into the rows of an Excel document so that over time the row filled with similar responses that appeared to reflect the same emerging theme. Each row was then labeled with a theme that appeared to encompass, explain and define the responses in its row (Appendix D). These rows were continuously categorised, developed and revised during the analysis process as more insights and connections were made. In line with ethical commitments, the participants' initials were removed at this stage and codes implemented to further disguise the identity of the individuals taking part. Clients were numbered one to six and classed as 'a' (e.g. R2a) and their coach as 'b' (e.g. R2b).

## Findings

This section is split into two parts, the first analysing the results related specifically to understanding the quarter-life crisis, and the second looking at what works when coaching those experiencing such a crisis.

### 1. Understanding the Quarter-Life Crisis

This part of the paper is divided into three sections. The first, *Age Trends*, analyses the age that a quarter-life crisis may occur according to the clients and coaches interviewed. The following two, *Identity* and *Pressures*, examine the findings and document the issues that quarter-lifers may face whilst experiencing a quarter-life crisis.

*Age Trends* - The coaches in this research study, much like the literature in this area, depict a variety of ages at which the quarter-life crisis appears to occur: 'around 30' (R2b); '25 to 35 I'd say' (R5b); 'It can happen at 16...experiences of those in their mid to late 20s is echoed...that decade of the 20s...14 to 18, it's very much the same sort of patterns I see all the way through' (R6b). In addition, the clients interviewed constructed a varying picture of when such an experience occurred for them and their friends: 'I was 25' (R1a); '23 onwards, maybe 23 to 28'.

The age range appears to span from the age of 14 to 35 according to those interviewed. Explanations for why such a wide age range may be affected are discussed later, with conclusions linking life events and personal issues to the onset of a quarter-life crisis more so than the age of the individual. Here the findings are analysed in more detail against the specific ages documented in previous research related to this topic.

In the literature, there was no recognition of issues related to the quarter-life crisis commencing as early as 14 years old. Authors such as Panchal and Jackson (2005) maintain that the quarter-life crisis is unique to those between the ages of 28 and 32, which these findings contradict. They insist that those between 18 and 22 are yet to really consider their future. In some respects, findings from this study support this notion: 'I wasn't really thinking about that [children and career] in my early

20s' (R4a). It would appear that in some instances, individuals often are not focusing on their long term plans, preferring to focus on the short term in their early 20s. Panchal and Jackson (2005) maintain that those between 22 and 27 begin to question their future plans but not in a serious manner. However, findings from this study do not correlate wholeheartedly with these findings in that data collected from individuals aged 21 and 25 showed evidence of them contemplating their futures in what appears to be a serious manner, serious enough for them to feel the need for support from a coach at that time e.g. 'It's a crisis about where your life is heading...figuring out what you're going to do' (R3a); 'I didn't know where I wanted to go, I didn't know where I could go' (R6a).

Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that reaching the age of 30 creates anxiety among those interviewed: 'Next year I am going to be 30 so I think it's a bit of heading in to that' (R4a); 'The ones that come to mind are around 30..feeling a bit more like a crisis...they expressed they were short of time' (R4b). These clients, both aged 29, therefore appear to support Panchal and Jackson's (2005; 2007) notion of a 'Turning 30' transition crisis, and findings by Common Purpose (2004) which cite 30 as the age that crisis often occurs. Panchal and Jackson (2005) maintain that crisis occurs at this age because individuals begin to realise that they have not reached the goals they set themselves in their 20s, which they hoped to have achieved by the age of 30, namely marriage, children and a stable career. The statements provided by two clients below certainly appear to support this explanation:

*'I realised that I wasn't where I wanted to be by the time I hit 30' (R2a)*

*'At 18 I had an idea that in ten years time I'd be in a respectable, stable job and earning at least 20k. I'm now coming up to 30 and realising that my career hasn't developed and I'm only earning 10k' (R4a)*

It could therefore be said that coaches working with those in their early 20s ought to be aware of this potential pattern and deconstruct any life rules or expectations that the individual may have internalised in order to avoid a crisis occurring towards the age of 30, which only one coach appeared to recognise:

*'Life rules set in the early twenties and the pressures these set suggest that perhaps these life rules of being in a relationship for a certain number of years, then marriage for another few years and then kids by a certain age and the realisation that it would make them thirty-seven by then need to be re-visited at some point along the way to avoid the emotional crisis and stress of them not being met' (R5b).*

There remains little quarter-life crisis literature or research to explain the findings in this study that the quarter-life crisis appears to be experienced from the age of 14 right through to the age of 35. Robbins and Wilner (2001) do however go so far as to broaden the quarter-life period from late adolescence to mid-30s, attributing the diverse age range to the transition from education to the 'real' world. This transition was documented by four of the clients and two of their coaches, stating that leaving education, namely university, and entering the 'real' world was a big change for them; one which prompted anxiety and questions about their future. Participants also discussed how decisions to continue education appear to have delayed the experience of a quarter-life crisis in themselves and friends. Sugarman (2001) and Atwood and Scholtz (2008) state that with ever-increasing changes in the educational system, the age of those leaving education is gradually increasing. The impact of this, as above, suggests that the experience of a quarter-life crisis may be linked to when individuals finish the final phase of education and enter the 'real' world of work. It is then that they are faced with decisions over what to do with their future.

As a result, it appears that for a coach to define their client's quarter-life crisis by his/her age would not be accurate. In fact, despite participants suggesting specific ages that a quarter-life crisis might occur, all coaches and clients interviewed, bar three, followed up their responses by stating that it may be more accurate to link the onset of a quarter-life crisis with the circumstances or life events of the individual. Wong (2011), in his criticism of generational theory, suggests that defining members of a cohort, in this case quarter-lifers, by varying chronological age bands is problematic, as such distinctions do not take into account how a construct such as a quarter-life crisis may interact with complex individual differences, which the above findings support. Recognition of the impact life events and individual circumstances have on the quarter-life crisis may also seek to explain the wide spectrum of ages given by participants in this study.

As a result, Santrock's (2007) Life Events Model of Adult Development appears a more accurate theory, as opposed to Erikson (1980) and Levinson's (1978) age-defined approaches, in which to describe and understand the development of today's quarter-lifers. Rather than use age categories, Santrock (2007) maintains that development depends on life events and the individual's adaptation to the event, which can be affected by the socio-historical context of the time. As detailed above, factors such as delayed graduation, in addition to current increases in unemployment and the financial struggles of today may be hindering the ability of those interviewed to adapt to the life events they have faced (e.g. relationship ending, birth of a child, leaving university/education, starting or ending employment; events which were experienced by the participants in this study), perhaps resulting in the experience of a quarter-life crisis. Williams (1999) supports this notion as an *Extended Crisis* during the *Experience of Transition* is said to develop when an individual is unable to cope with a change in circumstances.

**Identity** - When discussing the quarter-life crisis, the theme of identity arose within the responses of both the clients and the coaches in this study. Although more directly stated by the coaches, perhaps due to their understanding of such psychological constructs, comments from the clients about the issues they were facing do point towards a time where they are seeking to understand themselves more and create an identity: 'I suppose its some sort of identity crisis in your 20s...when everything starts and you start realising who you are...you find out who you really are' (R5a). Robbins and Wilner (2001) and Atwood and Scholtz (2008) agree that the quarter-life crisis is, at its core, an identity crisis, which the findings here appear to support. It is a time where individuals have many questions about themselves, mainly about who they are. The themes of *confidence* and *self-awareness* are important in that the above statements reflect how a lack of self-awareness may lead to a confused and uncertain sense of identity during a quarter-life crisis. It is the development in self-awareness that coaching sessions bring which allows the client to understand themselves more and thus create a greater sense of self and identity, which in turn enables them to feel more confident about who they truly are.

The clients who referenced this struggle were all 29. With evidence of identity issues at this age, findings contradict developmental theorist Levinson's (1978) assertions that identity is consolidated and formed between the ages of 17 and 22, and Erikson's (1980) proposals that the *identity v role confusion* conflict is unique to that of 12 to 18 year olds. Responses concerning those older than 18 also documented issues around role confusion.

As a result, these findings appear to contradict Erikson's (1980) age categories. Only clients in their late 20s and 30s appeared concerned with the task of finding an intimate relationship to avoid isolation, which Erikson (1980) maintains is the fundamental concern of those in young adulthood (19-40). However, he does state that concerns raised between the aged of 19 and 40 also include career choice and career consolidation, which appeared to be one of the issues that clients brought to coaching: 'I wasn't entirely sure if it was the career path that I wanted' (R2a).

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The findings here appear to support Atwood and Scholtz's (2008) and Arnett's (1998) assertions that individuals today are remaining adolescents for longer, maturing later in life than previously documented by developmental theorists. For example, findings here show evidence of the issues that Erikson (1980) contributed to the stage of adolescence (12-18), although there remain hints of the issues he attributes to young adulthood. Levinson (1978) claims that those between 22 and 28 are subject to *Entering the Adult World*, getting established and creating a stable life structure. Yet, from the above, it feels that those interviewed are actually experiencing more of what he describes as relevant to the *Early Adult Transition* stage e.g. exploring the adult world, forming and following a dream for example. Consequently, it could be said that such theory is out of synch with 21<sup>st</sup> century early adulthood and may prove misleading to coaches referencing such theory when working with clients experiencing a quarter-life crisis.

**Pressures** - Throughout the data there was evidence to suggest that individuals experience a vast deal of internal conflict and pressure when coping with a quarter-life crisis. The most prominent pressure relates to two strong expectations outlined below:

#### 1. Internal pressures.

Individuals' had high expectations of how their lives and careers would turn out and the feelings provoked when such expectations are not reached were recognized by coaches and clients:

*'Ten years ago I had an idea that in ten years time I'd be in a respectable, stable job and earning at least 20k. Now I'm coming up to 30 and I'm realising that my career hasn't developed and I'm only earning 10k. Things aren't what I'd hoped for or what I was expecting'* (R4a)

*'They set life rules in their early 20s and these set pressures on them...these need to be revisited along the way to avoid the crisis of realisation that it won't happen'* (R5b)

This issue appears to stem from the raised expectations of this generation, which Panchal and Jackson (2007) attribute to the influx of media and celebrity coverage demonstrating more and more that unique opportunities, fame and wealth are easily obtainable at a young age. Atwood and Scholtz (2008, p.236) discuss how developments in information and technology have also resulted in 'a generation that expects instant gratification and has a sense of entitlement'. Schwartz (2003) also documents how, within a quarter-life crisis, choice overload is responsible for such raised expectations. It is therefore inevitable perhaps that with such high expectations, a sense of entitlement to a mass variety of options and the impression that goals should be easy to achieve, that the participants in this study express deep disappointment at not achieving the goals they had set themselves.

These findings appear to contradict Simon and Gagnon's (1976) experience of 'anomie of affluence' in today's apparently affluent society. Goals are thought to be easier to achieve due to readily available means, resulting in the attainment of goals being trivialised and leaving the individual with a deep sense of dissatisfaction whenever a goal is reached. Yet, there is no evidence here to suggest that those experiencing a quarter-life crisis are achieving goals with such ease. There is a feeling of dissatisfaction but this relates more so to the frustrations individuals feel due to simply not having the means to achieve their goals. Society today could still be described as affluent perhaps but the means of the younger generations do not appear to reflect this affluence.

## 2. External pressures

Little was said by the clients interviewed in this study about external pressures and expectations yet the coaches were clear that quarter-lifers do experience conflict in relation to these influences. It could be that such expectations become deeply internalised and it is only through self-awareness that the individual begins to realise that perhaps what they thought were their own goals are perhaps more influenced by external pressures than they realised. Panchal and Jackson (2007) build a stage into their coaching model specifically designed to identify the various expectations coming from different sources because their research heavily recognised the external pressures that impact this age group more so than in others. However, it would seem that it would be of use to include in this stage the identification of the expectations the individual holds and how these can be re-assessed to avoid feelings of disillusionment and failure.

Relevant literature on this topic (e.g. Robbins & Wilner, 2001; Sugarman, 2001; Panchal & Jackson, 2005; Atwood & Scholtz, 2008) widely documents the unique cause of conflict between current quarter-lifers and their parents. The parents may measure their children against their Baby Boomer upbringings and fail to appreciate the change in economic landscape that their children currently face. Thus 20 and 30 year olds now may feel a pressure to live up to their parents' expectations and achieve what they have, which in today's economic and employment climate is harder and less realistic. It also means that the individual's own goals and desires are disregarded, hence they experience a conflict.

## 2. What Works: Effective Practice to Meet the Needs and Wants of the Client

This section analyses six themes highlighting what clients appeared to want and need from coaching. The coaches' view on this is also discussed. These sections are: *Direction and Focus, Goals, Action, Skills, Self-Awareness, Reflection* and *Confidence*.

**Direction and Focus** - Those experiencing a quarter-life crisis face a vast degree of uncertainty and confusion. It is therefore no surprise that clients expressed a need for direction and focus from their coaching sessions: 'I just wanted a clearer way forward...where I wanted to go and how to get there...categorise and organise how I was going to address the problem' (R2a). As a result, Panchal and Jackson's (2007, p.50) decision that the first stage of working with those experiencing a quarter-life crisis should be to 'Take Stock' and 'review current issues and identify focus for change' is supported by these findings.

It would also seem that their coaching model is applicable to younger age groups than Panchal and Jackson (2005; 2007) first appreciated. They stipulate that their model is designed for use with individuals in their late 20s and early 30s but one of the clients quoted above is only 21. This therefore suggests that this coaching model may indeed be effective when used with younger age clients.

**Goals** - Emerging from the interviews about what works for clients is the importance of goal setting in coaching sessions. The exercises clients, and one coach, felt were effective tended to be related to the ability to allow them to set clear goals. For example,

*'The [Wheel of Life] made things seem more achievable and understandable as opposed to being phased by the daunting prospect of the kind of big deal that you may never achieve...breaks it down into incremental steps...feels a bit more manageable...little steps that help make up towards the big' (R2a)*

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However, of important note was the need for goals to be focused reasonably on the short term, rather than too far in the future:

*'The [Rocking Chair Exercise] was quite hard for her to grasp, it went too far into the future I think...it was too much to take in thinking about when she is 30, 40, 50 years older... I think people have a better handle on where they are likely to be in five years' (R3b).*

The implications for coaches working with this age group would therefore be that goal-setting exercises should focus at the most on five years in the future, as clients may find it difficult and less effective to consider anything further.

In quarter-life crisis literature, Robbins and Wilner (2001) and Panchal and Jackson (2005) both dedicate time to setting goals in their self-help books. In their coaching model of 'Turning 30' transitions, Panchal and Jackson (2007) build goal setting into the fifth stage of their model, 'Change', where the aim is to identify clear goals based on needs and facilitate sustainable change towards them. Rogers (2004, p.121) supports the importance of such a stage, stating that 'without goal setting it is unlikely that there will be any significant change'. It could be argued that goal setting is paramount because of the direction and focus it offers, as discussed in the previous results section above. Goal setting also offers the individual a degree of certainty and stability in that they have an idea of where they are going, which in turn motivates change by giving them a feeling of purpose and a direction to move forward in (Latham & Locke, 1979; Grimley, 2007). Goal setting could therefore be an effective exercise to help address these particular issues of a quarter-life crisis.

**Action** - Interview responses also revealed the effectiveness of action planning in addressing the quarter-life crisis. Action planning was one of the only two exercises where both the client and their coach chose to discuss its effectiveness independently of each other, adding weight to its importance.

Clients had questions about *how* exactly to get where they wanted to be, the *how* representing queries over what action to take: 'I didn't know quite *how* to address it...where I wanted to go and *how* to get there...working out the next steps' (R2a); 'It would help me to try and be more focused and think through what I want to do and *how* to get there' (R4a). These responses indicate that for sessions to be effective content may benefit from always relating back to the goals set at the outset, and that discussions may work better when moved into the setting of specific actions for the client to take away with them and complete.

Additionally, exercises that two clients found ineffective were ones where coaching discussions did not result in clear actions being set:

*'We didn't always translate those [discussions on thoughts and feelings] into actions or something more tangible. How can we take what we've learnt and translate it into the practical, that may have been a bit more useful' (R2a).*

Interestingly, this quote was from a client who had been working with a coach using a narrative approach. Atwood and Scholtz (2008) discuss how a narrative approach to working with the quarter-life crisis may benefit clients as such an approach seeks to develop a new, more flexible and useful story and to create space for the client to become aware of their preferred actions and goals. However, although clients appear to value the reflection that a narrative approach may offer, the sometimes unstructured, storytelling methods used are not felt to be as effective or useful. With the value of action-planning outlined above, it could be said that if a narrative approach is to be effective when used with individuals experiencing quarter-life crisis, it is important to ensure that a final stage is

added to the process; where stories and theme evaluations are then formulated into a plan of action. Law (2007, p. 181) supports this notion by adding a final step to narrative scaffolding, which sees conclusions drawn from the coaching sessions pulled into an action plan aimed at achieving set objectives.

**Skills** - Within the data collected, there was clear evidence that the exercises clients found effective were ones that allowed them to develop a new skill. This ranged from improving the ability of two clients to say 'no' (assertiveness skills) to three clients seeking coaching to enhance their coping skills when faced with constant rejection from interviews. The strongest evidence was for the ability to learn a new skill via the use of an exercise, which was then transferable to other areas of life or for use in the future to process different tasks:

*'I learnt how I can move the way I behave in one scenario to another' (R3a);*

*'I've definitely taken that with me and sort of used on a regular basis...even if it's not necessarily just about what we did in that first session...it's definitely something that I do now' (R3a);*

*'One of the techniques I've been using is a journal to write down my ideas in and I've used journaling for other things in my life' (R4a).*

The effectiveness of skills training is not something that literature on the quarter-life crisis currently discusses. Of course, the needs of each client may differ widely but it would seem that practical exercises where a skill is learnt which can be re-visited and transferred to other situations is of use in this context. Tschannen-Moran (2010, p.203) describes Skills and Performance Coaching (SPC) as 'assisting someone to learn how to do something better'. This approach appears to be what clients are describing above as the exercises they chose to discuss were ones effective in improving their ability to handle particular situations in the future. SPC requires structured repetition of the skill, which responses indicated was taking place, since clients used the exercises they worked on in their coaching appointments outside of their sessions again and again, often using them in different situations too. This practice allows the individual to develop their skills and learn new, more effective ways of managing challenging situations in the future (Tschannen-Moran, 2010). By learning and implementing such skills, the individual may be less likely to remain in crisis as they may learn to deal with presenting pressures and issues in a better way than before.

It could therefore be said that perhaps a SPC approach ought to be considered by coaches working with those experiencing a quarter-life crisis. Coaching models designed for coaches working with this client group should perhaps include SPC stages or approaches in recognition of the importance of learning new skills, which the above responses highlight.

**Self-Awareness** -An additional theme prevalent in the responses of the clients (but only with one coach) was how coaching had been effective in increasing levels of self-awareness: 'It was the most amazing thing at the beginning as that shocked me into realising how out of kilter I had myself' (R1a).

Panchal and Jackson (2007, p.50) state 'for today's generation, self awareness is more necessary than ever before so they are able to make effective choices from the sea of options available to them'. As a result, the third stage of their coaching model is designed to encourage clients to gain greater awareness of their values, strengths and personality. The findings from this study support the importance of such practice, as clients did indeed document how beneficial such exercises proved to them. Exercises aimed at increasing self-awareness could be said to be effective as they appeared to offer clients the opportunity to examine and build their identity:

*'Understanding myself for being me; taking it as that is what I am' (R1a)*

*'Recognise myself a bit more...recognise what my values were and articulate then better' (R2a)*

*'I know from our chats what I like and don't like' (R6a)*

Consequently, the need to explore their identity, which appears to be a large part of the quarter-life crisis, could be addressed with the use of particular coaching exercises designed to develop self-awareness. As discussed above, Robbins and Wilner (2001) who dedicate a whole chapter to 'figuring out who I really am' and Atwood and Scholtz (2008) each assert that the quarter-life crisis is, at its core, an identity crisis. It is a time where individuals have many questions about themselves, mainly about who they are. The above findings suggest that to build an individual's self-awareness during their coaching sessions is therefore an effective way to develop their sense of identity, in turn helping them to better manage their quarter-life crisis.

Robinson and Smith (2010) lend further weight to the importance in developing self-awareness during the coaching process. In their breakdown of the four phases that crisis episodes in early adulthood appear to follow (*Locked In, Separation, Exploration* and *Resolution*), the final stage, *Resolution*, is founded upon a new life structure focused on the individual's own interests and passions. These interests and passions are discovered in the previous stage, *Exploration*. Robinson and Smith (2010) maintain that the *Exploration* stage occurs during the late stages of crisis and that *Resolution* occurs post-crisis. It could therefore be said that it is important for the client to be coached in a manner that prompts great insight and generates self-awareness as to what their interests and strengths are in order to move them from late crisis (*Exploration*) to post-crisis (*Resolution*), and thus move forward from the quarter-life crisis altogether.

**Reflection** - Responses given suggest that clients find particular coaching exercises effective in encouraging them to reflect. It is this reflection that develops their self-awareness: '[Journaling] helps you reflect on things as they come up during the week...usually I wouldn't think that deeply about it' (R4a).

The effectiveness and need for building reflection into the coaching process is not something that literature surrounding the quarter-life crisis specifically documents. Other than recognizing the opportunity coaching offers clients to reflect on their lives, the coaches interviewed did not comment on its specific use either. Kolb (1984) documents the importance of reflection in the process of learning in that it is a vital step to modifying the current cognitive structures holding the individual where they are. To move forward from the quarter-life crisis, developing the ability to reflect appears important for the individual to learn new ways of critiquing the assumptions they are making, which in turn may allow them to then become receptive to alternative ways of reasoning and behaving (Raelin, 2001). Such reasoning could therefore help people process the issues experienced during a quarter-life crisis, allowing them to move forward. Interestingly, Gray (2007) suggests that storytelling and reflective journals are effective exercises to use to develop reflection, which the above findings support as clients did indeed comment on the reflective benefits of such exercises.

**Confidence** - There is evidence from the clients and coaches that those experiencing a quarter-life crisis lack confidence: 'I was starting to lose confidence...I'd got quite meek I think. My self-esteem got very low' (R5a). Particular exercises, such as an exploration of *Goleman's Leadership Styles*, use of goal-setting and exercises aimed at challenging negative beliefs all proved effective in developing confidence according to client and coach responses.

Coaches use such exercises to improve the confidence of their quarter-life clients. In addition, it would seem that the majority of the exercises discussed above proved effective due to their ability to develop the self-awareness of the client. They appeared to learn more about themselves, accept

aspects of themselves more and thus confidence improved as a result. This point therefore ties the theme of *confidence* in to that of the theme of *self-awareness*. Indeed, Panchal and Jackson (2007) assert that the third stage of their model, 'Self-Awareness', is designed to help the client gain insight into personal values, strengths and personality, will result in greater self-confidence.

In terms of development, Maslow (1968) suggests that *esteem* and confidence are fundamental needs for an individual to achieve before reaching true *self-actualisation* (i.e. their full potential). Coaching sessions designed to develop self-awareness, and in turn confidence, may therefore be effective in allowing those experiencing a quarter-life crisis to learn more about themselves, address their self-doubt and go on to fulfill their potential.

## Conclusion

By exploring what works when coaching those experiencing a quarter-life crisis, the aim of this study was to build a picture of how coaching practice can be improved to incorporate effective practice based on empirical evidence. In summary, exercises that proved effective were ones that:

- a) offered direction and focus. Panchal and Jackson's (2007, p.50) decision that the first stage of working with those experiencing a quarter-life crisis should be to 'Take Stock' and 'review current issues and identify focus for change' is supported by these findings.
- b) gave the opportunity to set short-term (maximum five years ahead) goals and to action plan. Although clients appeared to value the reflection that a narrative approach may offer, responses here appeared to criticise the unstructured, story-telling approach of narrative coaching, contradicting Atwood and Scholtz's (2008) conclusion that such an approach may benefit quarter-lifers. With the value of action planning evidenced in responses, it could be said that if a narrative approach is to be used with an individual experiencing a quarter-life crisis, it is important to ensure that a final stage is added to the process where stories and theme evaluations are then formulated into a plan of action.
- c) encourage the client to reflect, develop self-awareness and confidence. Clients in this study found exercises that encouraged them to reflect (journaling, storytelling) were effective in developing their self-awareness. Increased self-awareness in turn appeared to encourage them to feel more confident as they learnt to accept themselves more. Of main interest however was that self-awareness exercises were beneficial to clients. They appeared to help them answer questions they had concerning their identity, who they are, and what their passions and interests are.
- d) help the client learn new skills. There was clear evidence that the exercises clients found effective were ones that allowed them to develop a new skill e.g. assertiveness skills, prioritisation, action planning. Of most benefit was when a new skill was learnt via the use of an exercise, which was then transferable to other areas of their life or different tasks. The effectiveness of skills training is not something that literature on the quarter-life crisis currently discusses. These findings therefore suggest that Skills and Performance Coaching may be an effective approach to coaching those experiencing a quarter-life crisis.

This study also aimed to explore the experience of a quarter-life crisis for those living in the UK. It aimed to define and understand the quarter-life crisis from the perspective of the participating coaches but also the clients, which previous research often ignored. With the aim of determining when a quarter-life crisis may occur, findings suggested a wide age range, from the age of 14 right up to 35. Sugarman (2001) and Atwood and Scholtz (2008) both document that ever-increasing changes in the educational system mean that individuals are leaving university later or taking advantage of a vast array of post-graduate courses. The impact of this suggests that the experience of a quarter-life crisis may be linked to when individuals finish the final phase of their education and enter the 'real' world of work. Findings from this research suggest that it may be more accurate to link the onset of a quarter-life crisis with the circumstances or life events of the individual. As a result, Santrock's

(2007) Life Events Model of Adult Development appears a more accurate theory, as opposed to Erikson (1980) and Levinson's (1978) age-defined approaches, in which to describe and understand the development of today's quarter-lifers.

Findings supported Robbins and Wilner (2001) and Atwood and Scholtz's (2008) assertions that the quarter-life crisis is, at its core, an identity crisis with themes of identity featuring heavily in responses from clients in their early and late 20s right up to 30. Findings therefore went further in contradicting Levinson's (1978) assertions that identity is consolidated and formed between the ages of 17 and 22, and Erikson's (1980) proposals that the *identity v role confusion* conflict is unique to that of 12 to 18 year olds. These findings therefore appear to support Atwood and Scholtz's (2008) and Arnett's (1998) assertions that individuals today are remaining adolescents for longer, maturing later in life than previously documented by developmental theorists. Participants in this study described the quarter-life crisis in a similar manner to previous research, detailing similar issues and experiences. Individuals felt under enormous pressure during this time, mainly stemming from overly high expectations of how their lives and careers ought to be, resulting in feelings of disillusion when goals were not achieved.

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