

IMMIGRANTS IN TIME: LIFE-PATTERNS 2004

Peter Dwyer, Graeme Smith, Debra Tyler and Johanna Wyn

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Australian Youth Research Centre
Faculty of Education
University of Melbourne Vic 3010
Australia

Phone: (03) 8344 9633

Fax: (03) 8344 9632

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Life-Patterns Project was originally designed by Associate Professor Peter Dwyer as a longitudinal study of the post-school pathways into adulthood of a sample of Victorian students who left school at the end of 1991. After initial surveys of about 30,000 students in 1991 and 1992, a sample of about 2000 was established in 1996 and surveyed on a regular basis since then. The Project has been funded by the Faculty of Education of The University of Melbourne (1994-5), the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) (1996 and 1998), and the Australian Research Council (ARC) (with two grants, 1998-2000 and 2002-2004). Associate Professor Peter Dwyer was Chief Investigator of the Life-Patterns project until 2000 and Professor Johanna Wyn was Chief Investigator from 2002-2004. Professor Dianne Looker was involved in the ARC project 1996-2000. Johanna Wyn is Chief Investigator of a new ARC funded project, **Pathways Then and Now** (2005-2009) which will support the continuation of a modified form of the Life-Patterns cohort and at the same time will start a new cohort study. The Life-Patterns project has benefited substantially from the intellectual and technical support provided by Peter Dwyer, who has continued his involvement in the project in an honorary capacity. Associate Professor Dwyer is also a partner in the new **Pathways Then and Now** Project.

Susan Day and Geoff Poynter worked on the Project during 1996, and Aramiha Harwood and Debra Tyler were responsible for the interview program that was incorporated into the study. More recently, Graeme Smith has joined the team and has been mainly responsible for data analysis.

Professor Lesley Andres from the University of British Columbia, Canada was a Partner Investigator in the 2002-2004 ARC grant and is a Chief Investigator of the new ARC grant. The Life-Patterns study has benefited from the links with her study, **Paths on Life's Way**, based in British Columbia, Canada.

From 1996 onwards the Project has had a participant research dimension to it, which has enabled the participants to provide regular written and verbal feedback and to shape the progress of the research. In many ways they have put their stamp of ownership on it and its continuing success is in large part due to them. The Project would not have been possible without their generosity, willing engagement and honesty. We are grateful to all participants who made this Project possible.

Executive Summary

This is the final report on the Life-Patterns Project concerning a representative sample of young Australians, born in the early 1970s, who undertook further study during the 1990s after leaving school in 1991. By 2004, at age 30, most were married and in full-time career jobs, and a third had children of their own.

The Report begins with personal narratives and case studies from our participants. Their narratives illustrate their progress through life since leaving school and the ways in which they have worked to achieve an effective balance between their personal priorities in life. They set the scene for our analysis of the progress of a generation from the time of leaving secondary school to the age of 30.

The evidence on their progress into adulthood calls into question many of the media stereotypes and research assumptions about their generation. Their transitions have been complex and varied, with only one-third following a linear pathway from school directly into a career based on a particular tertiary area of study. Even those who have now found careers for themselves have entered a restructured and more flexible workforce than they had expected on leaving school. Most

have changed jobs many times and have been led to redefine their ideas about careers and their other personal priorities in life. They have realised that the changing nature of the labour market within the global economy suggests that flexibility is replacing permanency as a determining factor of career success.

The evidence also calls into question the assumption made by many academic commentators that young people in this generation may be characterised as a generation whose transition processes have either failed or are faulty. Their own assessments of their lives suggest that they are shaping new ways of becoming adult. Our research suggests that it is the traditional models of transition held by academics and policy-makers that may be 'faulty'.

Consistently over the years of the Project, the vast majority of participants have insisted on a blending of 'being' and 'doing' – maintaining both financial security and family relationships as joint top priorities taking precedence over other ambitions and expectations about adulthood. Most believe they have been faced with a new adulthood characterised by an increase in the positive value placed on personal autonomy and on attaining a balance across life spheres of work, education, leisure and personal relationships with family and friends. They see that this demands greater flexibility on their part to cope with uncertainty and achieve a genuine balance between their top priorities in life.

The evidence also suggests that the decisions they make concerning study and careers have been shaped in large part by developments affecting the more personal aspects of their lives. There is a third dimension of identity formation that determines many of the choices they make in other dimensions of life. For them adulthood is not a 'given' with pre-determined roles, but a 'project' or 'journey' of self-discovery. Career is defined in terms of personal fulfilment and satisfaction rather than high status or financial rewards. Only one in five in 2004 placed high importance on being better off financially than their parents and less than one in ten had any major ambition to 'make a lot of money'. If their baby boomer parents (Gen A) can be characterised as an achievement-oriented generation, then the evidence suggests that our participants (Gen B) are marking themselves out as a generation for whom a balance-orientation is paramount.

As the first generation of Australians for whom post-school study was the 'mainstream' or majority experience, they were at the same time confronted with the serious economic recession of the early 1990s and the far-reaching restructuring of the workforce with its downsizing, casualisation and emphasis on flexible career-paths. Not yet married or parents or homeowners by their late twenties, they were however the most highly qualified generation of Australians and already established in their careers. In this sense they were *immigrants in time* who were confronted with an on-going mismatch between present-day realities and

the established 'time-line' of youth transition into adulthood idealised by Gen A. They are learning to live with a disruption to the 'expected' sequence of events represented by the traditional 'markers' of adulthood.

Overall, they still insist on the importance of the values they have inherited from their parents. Many of their aspirations and expectations about life are at one level quite traditional and conservative, with financial security and family life at the core. At another level though, the defining difference with the past has been to fulfil these values by means of an increasing emphasis on personal flexibility and autonomy. It is paramount for them to display a readiness to reflect on their own life circumstances so that they can face and negotiate the uncertainties of life and be ready to change in the face of changing life circumstances rather than insist on what 'ought to be'.

Introduction

This report is intended to provide a final summary of the Life-Patterns study, for participants, youth researchers and policy makers. It constitutes the sixth in a series of Australian Youth Research Centre *Research Reports* and *Working Papers* that have documented the project's findings over the years (see Appendix A). The findings of the project are also presented in the book **Youth Education and Risk: Facing the Future**, by Peter Dwyer and Johanna Wyn (Routledge/Falmer, 2001).

Here we provide an overview of the project since its inception. We discuss the findings and the ways in which the survey results, comments written by participants and the interviews have influenced our understanding of the nature of young people's transitions to adulthood during this time. The analysis of the final survey and interviews that took place in 2004 has confirmed many of the conclusions that we drew, sometimes tentatively, through the years. This report refers to our earlier conclusions throughout, drawing extensively on our previous work, providing a synthesis of these reports and an update based on the data generated in 2004.

The Life-Patterns project has, in one sense, become a dialogue with two generations whose lives have been affected by social change. The life context of each generation has a significant impact on the circumstances in which they grow up, on the possibilities and the constraints. We have found that it is necessary to understand the specific life context of both the post-1970 generation, who are our participants, and the life context of the previous baby-boomer generation who are their parents and who are also often the policy makers and researchers who speak about 'young people today'.

This report marks the completion of the second phase of the Life-Patterns study and the end of the tracking of the panel cohort that was initiated in 1995. A modified sample of the cohort will be followed up during the years 2005 – 2009, with the aim of gathering primarily qualitative evidence.

THE LIFE CONTEXT

Each generation of young people faces a specific set of life circumstances that influences the way they make their transition to adulthood.

In the course of this Project we have often drawn attention to the ways in which our participants have undergone complex transitions that were in many ways different from those their parents had experienced at the same age. In considering the generations that come after them we therefore need to remind ourselves that their transitions are also likely to be different from those of our recent participants. We need to be aware of what was specific to the life context of those making their transitions in Australia from 1991 to 2004. In particular we need to pay attention to the educational and economic changes that were likely to have a significant impact on those about to leave school in the early 1990s.

In the field of education, they were the first generation of young

Australians who faced the prospect that continuing their studies well into their twenties was to be a majority experience. For the first time in the history of Australian education, those *not* completing their schooling through to Year 12 were in the minority. By their final year of schooling, overall apparent retention rates to Year 12 in Australia had reached the 77% mark – a doubling of the rate in the space of a decade. By continuing their education further they were promised entry into the kinds of full-time, life-long, career paths that the parent generation achieved or aspired to. The policy documents told them bluntly that 'we will never return to a world where large numbers of jobs are available for unskilled young workers', so they became the 'trail-blazers' of a new kind of educational transition never before experienced by most Australians.

At precisely this time a set of economic changes introduced great uncertainty about their likely future outcomes. First, there was a serious economic recession in Australia in the early 1990s and this increased the pressure on young people to find some course of study

that might provide the credentials to help them escape the high levels of youth unemployment. Thus 13% of our original sample who had gone straight into the workforce after school soon decided to undertake further study in an effort to find a career for themselves. Also a further quarter of our sample, which had enrolled in post-school studies immediately, reconsidered their options and either changed courses or institutions in their quest for a way of life. Secondly, though, even the 34% who had followed a linear path into tertiary studies in an area of their choice found that a radical restructuring of the work force had taken place throughout the nineties and so they were confronted with a much more flexible and contingent labour market once they had graduated. Many of them could only find short-term contract positions and it was not until they had reached their late twenties that they began to find the fulfilment they had been seeking. The improvement of the economy in the late nineties with reduction in unemployment levels and an expanding labour market made them feel that it had all been worth it.

This new mode of prolonged transition into fully-fledged adult status also had a direct effect on their own identity formation: their relationships, expectations about family life and home ownership, and eventual parenting. They began to discover that they were being judged and pressurised about failing to measure up to traditional patterns of transition, even though many of their parents' generation were also becoming unsettled by the transformations in social roles and employment practices impacting on their offspring at the very beginning of their adult lives. As we commented in our 2003 research report:

even in their parents' generation and before, there were other adults who pursued academic studies well into their late twenties and beyond, who 'chose' to remain single or not have children, who changed or disrupted

their careers, or who did not have households of their own. They were not denied adult status because of those choices. In fact, while some of those who deviated from the norm may have done so lightly or 'immaturely', the decisions of most were accepted as genuine adult choices about personal priorities, despite strong social pressure to the contrary. Because they were assumed to have reached the age of decision and responsibility, they were seen as making the right choices for themselves. In other words, in the past even for those making non-mainstream choices the established time-line led to an assumption of adulthood. For present-day young adults in their twenties, the same assumption is not readily made – in fact the mismatch between the out-moded time-line and expected 'normal' outcomes calls their adult choices into question. There is an obvious reluctance to let go of established assumptions about what 'ought to be', and a failure to give due credit to a generation that knows it has grown up in a new kind of social environment and is making the necessary choices of coming to terms with it (Dwyer et al, 2003: 23).

MEDIA IMAGES

The reluctance to let go of out-dated assumptions about young people is evident in the trend for media to make use of stereotypes about young people's lives and their motivations.

Instead of making use of the available evidence that reveals complex lives, media representations often make use of old categories to perpetuate simplistic understandings of the ways in which young people are affected by social change.

One of the difficulties which is confronted in youth research is that, apart from education and employment, data on the other important dimensions of young people's lives have proved difficult to document systematically. The

old linear categories which define 'transition' almost exclusively in terms of the two dimensions of 'study' and 'work' continue to dominate... and evidence about other priorities which young people themselves may have – personal lifestyles, leisure interests and even family priorities – tends to be piecemeal, sporadic or market-driven... These wider priorities are often trivialised by the use of conceptually dubious labels, such as 'Generation X' and 'Generation Y', which tend to homogenise the real diversity of young people's experience. The labels themselves are also 'applied to' rather than 'derived from' young people themselves (Dwyer et al, 1999: 28).

In late 2003, *The Age* newspaper published a number of articles on Gen X and Gen Y. Like much public commentary on the differences between generations the articles highlighted what were seen as 'generation gaps' and even antagonisms. Little effort was made to check the assertions made or to recognise the tremendous diversity that exists in any one generation of people. Labels like Gen X and Gen Y inevitably create the impression that similarities of age mean that everyone is much the same. What was particularly disturbing in this case was the degree of antagonism evident in the articles. They are portrayed as a selfish, ungrateful, 'whining' and 'envious' lot.

Don Edgar complained about the 'little buggers' who bludge off their parents and stay on in the parental home. Even if some do eventually move out, he claimed they are likely to return at a later stage because they are unable to cope with 'the inconvenience of caring for themselves'. Tim Colebatch ran a similar line and suspected that the parents 'pay most of the education bills, everyone pays mortgage bills, and Gen X and Gen Y lead the spending on mobile phones and nights out'. Angela Shanahan also pursued this theme, letting us know that Gen X 'having been brought up in unprecedented

levels of luxury are neither interested in, nor capable of, looking after themselves’.

These examples taken from *The Age* newspaper provide a local example of a wider tendency for media to perpetuate ‘adult’ stereotypes of young people. These stereotypes rely on well-worn themes that characterise an entire generation as unworthy and ‘at risk’ (Wyn, 2005). The facts seldom fit with the stereotype. In the Life-Patterns Project we discovered that back in 1996 when our participants were still in their early twenties as many as two-thirds were still living with their parents. Despite what Don Edgar asserts, by 1999, in their late twenties, this remained true for less than one in five of them. National data confirms this with less than 20 percent of those aged 25 to 29 still living with their parents.

Even when clear evidence is available to contradict stereotyped views of young people, simplistic analyses support the stereotypes by drawing selectively on the evidence. What is most disappointing is that, in characterising a generation, only evidence to their disadvantage is offered while countervailing evidence of a positive kind is totally ignored.

The key issue is that, even if the media characterisations of the mythical ‘Gen X’ and ‘Gen Y’ were based in fact, the members cannot begin to be understood unless we acknowledge the extraordinary complexity and diversity of their lives throughout the 1990s. They have responded to the challenges in quite different ways from each other. In both our survey data and interview evidence, for example, there are respondents who are career-oriented and determined ‘to rise to the top’, but others regard qualifications as less important than getting a job – however routine it might be – and having a regular income from it. For others, decisions about both study and work are contingent upon personal relationships and lifestyle choices, or upon remaining in – or returning to – their local rural community.

The uncertainties of adult life in the contemporary world make a diversity of choices and outcomes inevitable for them. There is, however, one thing at least that they appear to agree on. One of the constant themes to emerge across the study has been the high value that participants place on their families and the support they have received from them.

RESEARCH BARRIERS

The selective use of research evidence has also occurred within the research community. Elements of the media representations of young people are often supported by research on young people’s transitions. This has been especially the case with regard to the idea that nowadays young people’s transition processes are faulty.

A major question we have puzzled over many times... is why studies of adolescent development and youth transitions, which recognise the widespread upheavals affecting all aspects of the lives of the young people they are studying, nevertheless continue to analyse and interpret their lives with reference to... the very different life experience of the past... (T)here has also been a considerable degree of academic closure which has prevented inroads being made into the prevailing modes of thinking. Measuring new research against the established literature and the authoritative traditions of a particular nation or a particular discipline has the effect of reducing divergent evidence to what is at best a sub-text or else a contextual issue that leaves the accepted wisdom intact. This certainly helps to explain why many of the studies we have examined on the same youth issues but published in different journals or different countries refer almost exclusively to a closed corpus of source material... The bibliographies display the closure (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001: 200-201).

There is a continuing tendency within much of the research literature to force the findings from new research into established frameworks. ‘Moral panics’ about the priorities and lifestyles of young people that surface in the media, such as those described above in *The Age*, are often backed up by contemporary youth research. The sense that all young people are at risk of ‘faulty’ transitions to adulthood is a common theme, supported by evidence of their failure to marry, to buy homes, to remain in stable jobs and generally to ‘settle down’. Youth researchers use terms such as ‘arrested adulthood’, ‘extended youth’, ‘post adolescence’, ‘stranded generation’ and ‘generation on hold’ to describe youth (Wyn, 2004a; Wyn, 2004b). These terms lend support to the notion that there is a problem about their transitions to adulthood.

These terms do not describe the lives of the young people in the Life-Patterns Project. As the following chapter will illustrate, when young people’s own interpretations and experiences are taken seriously, it is possible to see how a new generation has responded to the unique circumstances of their times. The problem with drawing on out-dated assumptions about young people is that their lives are trivialised and the very real contributions that they make to shaping ‘new adulthoods’ (see Appendix B) are ignored.

In the next chapter, we present selected personal narratives from the Life-Patterns study. The following chapters provide detail on the survey findings and on the ways in which we have interpreted and analysed both.

Chapter 1:

Personal Narratives

A central feature of the Life-Patterns Project has been the regular interview process with a cross-section of the participants. This has been a major contribution of Debra Tyler who has held the responsibility for the interview process from 1996 onwards. This chapter draws on her individual research to illustrate at a more personal level (with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity) the overall findings discussed in the subsequent chapters of this report.

THE PASSAGE OF TIME

A constant theme in our reports on the Project has been that our participants have viewed their transitions from school into adult life as a personal project or journey. They had a sense that they had to rely much more on their own initiative and sense of personal autonomy than may have been true in the past. Even those who had clearly defined ambitions about the future have been ready to adjust to changes in their life circumstances and respond to new challenges.

Sean, for example, had a clear view of what he wanted to achieve early in life. He trained as a cabinet-maker and set out to build his own business, which he achieved in his mid-twenties. He had set off with a very ambitious goal, to be like a well-known figure in the building construction industry, or, in his words: *“to be the Grollo of the cabinet*

making industry”. In his late twenties Sean got married, and by 2004 at the age of 30, he had also become a father. He reflected that being married for fourteen months had perhaps made him start thinking differently: *“I can do the balance thing!”*

Sean

When Sean was at school he always felt he was seen as an underachiever; he went to a school where university was the expected pathway, and he set out to prove them wrong – he knew he was better than this. His motto had become *“never say never”*. He agreed he didn't like being disappointed and was *“greedy for success”* – not so much in a materialistic sense – although he aimed to be able to build his own home and be comfortable financially, *“to set myself up for the future”*. His family was incredibly important to him, providing

support and advice. Sean's father advised him that starting a business at an early age was a very difficult thing to achieve, but was prepared to support him throughout.

As soon as his apprenticeship in cabinet-making was complete, Sean started up a cabinet-making business with a partner. He subsequently undertook a course in accountancy to cope with the bookwork, but gave up because the business was expanding and becoming very demanding. After five years in the industry Sean described himself as having *“grumpy old man's syndrome”*. He felt worn down by the frustrations of running a large business. In many ways he felt jaded, saying *“I feel older and wiser, I don't have the wool pulled over my eyes anymore.”* He had reviewed his earlier ambition, feeling that perhaps he had *“bitten off more than I could chew.”*

In his late twenties Sean got married, and this made him start thinking differently. *“I have someone else to think about now, this is a partnership in itself and it will take more than just dollars to keep it going.”* He felt that he had forgotten how to have fun, how to relax, instead working in the factory 12 to 14 hours per day, always six days a week but sometimes seven. Physically he said he felt like he was 58 at 28 years of age. He felt there was *“something missing”*. On his honeymoon (a trip to Europe for two months), he felt after two weeks he was ready to come home. He emphasises that having children has *“helped put everything into perspective.”* Turning 30 was also a bit of a landmark. *“It made me stop and reflect, it*

made me think about being careful with time and how I want to play it out, how I want to plan the next ten years." Sean has put a lot of time and energy into rethinking the business so it will run more productively while making it easier on himself. Now he says, *"the family comes first and I needed to reduce the hours I was working here."* Sean now employs more people and has revolutionised the factory floor with new computerised equipment.

Sean likes to think he has set the foundations for the rewards he will get in the next five to ten years. He thinks that the business has consumed his twenties but he also feels he has learned a lot. At times he thinks he perhaps would have liked to do what his younger brother did: change jobs, go overseas, experience life more fully. He reflects that as the eldest son in the family he was perhaps not going to be the ground breaker. Looking back, he sees that his path has led him to the person he is today and he seems pretty satisfied with that.

Sean's journey is matched by many of those who followed a more academic journey into adulthood. These young people also had their share of re-thinking to do, despite their overall academic and career success. Fiona's story provides an example.

Fiona

Fiona graduated from a secondary school in a rural community, and has worked hard to complete her PhD in Psychology, achieving her goal through a circuitous route. She began her studies in secondary teaching, but then applied (unsuccessfully) to transfer to physiotherapy. Next she gained entry into a masseuse course but due to an accident to her arm found the actual work too painful, so she applied to study clinical psychology to enable her

to register as a psychologist and work with patients recovering from accidents. As Fiona nears the completion of her PhD in Psychology, she is already planning to return to the country to work as a psychologist specialising in clinical health.

Fiona had done well at secondary school (in a rural area) and initially chose to do secondary teaching as her first preference. This was because in her work experience at school she had done some physical education teaching and loved it. After beginning the teacher-training course she realised that she particularly liked the physiology side of things. She applied for a transfer to do physiotherapy. At about this time she broke her arm in an accident, and although she applied for special consideration for her exams, she was not successful in her transfer application. Fiona felt particularly disillusioned. She applied to get into a massage course and deferred her teaching course. However from the beginning she was more interested in working with people in rehabilitation than 'straight' massage, so next she started a massage business and gave up the teaching course completely. She continued studying however, completing a remedial massage course and also studied pharmacology and x-ray for masseurs.

Because of financial need, Fiona also worked as a swimming teacher whenever she could. Nevertheless, in general terms by this stage everything seemed to be on track until she realised that she could not physically sustain the work she was doing. Remedial massage was too hard and, because of her accident, it became painful for her hands and arms. She knew she would have to change direction before too long, so she applied to study clinical psychology to enable

her to register as a psychologist and work with patients recovering from accidents. This meant that Fiona was able to return to her earlier goal of working in rehabilitation.

As Fiona nears the completion of her PhD in Psychology, she is already planning to return to the country to work as a psychologist specialising in clinical health. As she herself had grown up in the country she understands the struggle many people have, and she wants to be part of a small community. Currently she does a lot of volunteer work for her local church about which she says: *"this takes up my energy and is my commitment to the community."*

Fiona hopes to work in a rural or regional public hospital, perhaps have a small private practice and do some volunteer work. She recognises that many of her friends have bought houses and 'settled down' but she says she is happy with her lot. As she doesn't have the financial or personal commitments at this stage she is not concerned about 'stability and security'.

What is important for Fiona is the passion she has for her work and the learning this involves for her. *"The more I study the more I realise I don't know that much, this job means I will never stop learning."* She also recognises that her work involves understanding people at a very personal level. *"There is a danger that you will become arrogant, I think it is disrespectful if you work from a position where you always think you have your clients sussed. You need to be open, to be a good listener. If the job ceased to be challenging, it is really more to do with attitude than anything else."*

Fiona believes her efforts to achieve a PhD are not so much about being a Doctor as about having the capacity to make a difference. She sometimes despairs

at her generation and what she reads as their sense of apathy or futility. She feels sad that people think they have to be leaders to effect change when in her mind, for example as a teacher of a group of aboriginal children in the outback, an enormous amount can be achieved. To take the risk and have the time to be involved is a priority thing – a choice thing she thinks.

These two examples serve to illustrate the ways in which members of this post-1970 generation have responded to opportunities and setbacks. They demonstrate in considerable detail the challenges and rewards faced by their generation. While the fine detail is different for each person, many share in common a period of struggle to achieve their goals and recognition that, in achieving their (changing) goals, there are important dimensions other than study and work. We have referred to this as the 'third dimension' because, while it is important, it is often expressed as a messy constellation of areas, including health, wellbeing, 'balance in life' and relationships.

For example, one young participant with a private school education moved to Sydney on completing university studies where he worked in the financial sector until 2002. He says: "I left the last job because I realised they were a rather dodgy firm." He moved back to Melbourne but ended up unemployed for a lengthy time until he started a new job in February 2003 as a financial planner, on a lower salary than he had enjoyed in his previous job. He likes the work and although he acts as adviser to ten of the 'big clients' for his company, he has "problems with the way the company is managed" and so is thinking about moving on or reducing his time commitment. His main concerns though are about the 'third dimension' of his life. He says: "I am seeing a career counsellor right now to work out why I can't do the life/work balance thing – why don't I have a relationship?"

Career change is clearly a common experience, which occurs for many different reasons at an individual level. One woman with a very successful career as marketing manager for a large cosmetics firm has recently moved back to the position she held with the firm three years ago but is currently thinking of quitting. She points out that she is "particularly keen to achieve a balance between work and home, but also I want to do something that makes a difference. Hair care doesn't do this. I think my dream job is quarantine officer, a detector dog handler, at sites of international transit." She explains it all this way:

"The job has been going extremely well; I have just completed a successful merger of another large company with ours. I had to shift to Sydney for six months to do it. The project was a milestone career wise. The next step was OS. I was all set to go to London when I checked out the quarantine requirements" (she has two dogs that hold a special place in her life). "One dog in particular had not coped with the shift to Sydney; this was going to be much worse. Best case scenario was one month in quarantine. It would be like putting them in prison. That was the end of OS. I realised I had to restrict myself to Australia. My family and friends are in Australia as well so that is the place to be. My parents were urging me to slow down, not make too many decisions in a panic. The manager was fabulous; I have officially downshifted. I am now doing the job I did three years ago. It is about more than paying the bills. I suppose I did a mapping exercise, to work out where I was happy and what gave me pleasure. It was in Melbourne with my family and dogs. I have a science degree; I want to work training dogs and making a difference – the quarantine job looks like it could work. I watch for the ads. If I get the job it would be a fabulous stepping-stone to working with the Blind Dogs. I tried to get in there years ago but this time it would be to work

with the animals, not the marketing side. I am prepared to sacrifice two thirds of my wage to do this."

A very different narrative is offered by the young man from a migrant family who is on regular medication for a bipolar disorder. This obviously affects his job situations and as he says: "I am not an ambitious person – I admit to this – I feel under the shadow of bipolar all the time." Still he has struggled on, working with his brother in a video store business until it was dissolved in the beginning of 2004. He has always wanted to break into the film industry but without success, does a bit of swimming teaching part-time and has recently begun a professional writing and editing diploma. His *de facto* partner is still at home with their six-month old baby and he is currently on unemployment benefits and applying for ten jobs per fortnight. "It's difficult as my back is just not up to doing much of the manual work that is available. I have started to think about writing children's books. My partner goes back to work next week. We will split the child-care time, me for two days, mother in law for two days."

Parenting has importance for a growing number of our participants and this has had an impact on their attitudes towards careers and life in general. One 31 year-old who is now married and the mother of two children had previously worked in a bank and then in a part-time position in a retail firm. On returning from maternity leave she found that she had been retrenched! So she began looking elsewhere.

"I wasn't nervous that I wouldn't be able to get work as I did not plan to work until the end of the year. I thought it would take two or three months to find something when I started. While on leave I did a short course on being a medical receptionist. I was excited by the course and really motivated, but of course I had no experience in the industry. After two months of rejections and not even one interview I went through the phone book. I sent out resumes and rang a few up.

I happened to ring one centre and they were just about to advertise. They agreed to take me on. I love the work. I like the patient contact, the stories – really very fascinating. But I am getting a bit bored, they have stopped bulk billing and now the place is deserted. When the kids are at school I will look around for something more challenging. Security is not as important as it used to be; jobs come and go. You think you are secure when you are not. My husband is in IT. We haven't had security in his line of work for years. We cope. It seems to be the nature of the industry, more graduates, less permanency."

Even the highly successful are prepared to undertake a radical shift in their life priorities, like the successful business woman who has just sold her highly profitable company, has a seven-month old baby daughter and *"plans to have three children by the time I am 35, and maybe when the kids are older and at school age my sister and I might open a café."* She had reached a pinnacle of success after some job disappointment in her early adult life. She had completed a university Arts degree after finishing school and, because of a part-time job she had while studying, became interested in marketing. She did a further degree in Business and Marketing and gained a recruitment position in a large bank. To the dismay of her parents, she quit the job after eight months because *"there was no spontaneity; I was crushed when I tried to demonstrate any kind of initiative."* She then joined up with a business partner to start a fresh juice franchise. By the time they sold the business four years later, they had 24 stores. She says: *"when I told people we were selling, those who knew me well were pleased. If I do feel the need to work I will look for work in a shop until the next baby comes along, maybe in 18 months time."*

PRIORITIES IN LIFE

We would be giving a false impression if we suggested that the changes this generation undertakes in assessing their priorities in life are commonly a matter of dramatic upheaval. For many of our participants this is certainly not the case. Many have established a comparatively routine existence for themselves and change for them is more a matter of gradual adjustment as their life circumstances alter or new opportunities present themselves. Some of them have been in the same career or with the same firm from their early twenties onwards, but even so they continue to reflect on where their real priorities lie.

Sarah is a good example of this. After completing her associate diploma in advertising, Sarah began work in an advertising agency, but after a trip overseas she found a new job with a travel agency. She is still with the same firm seven years later. After some setbacks she began to look elsewhere and then decided to stay but re-think her priorities in life. *"It has made me think about focusing on things other than work."* As the case study below reveals, she has been successful in achieving this.

Sarah

Sarah graduated with an advertising diploma and then joined an advertising agency. The company then changed hands and Sarah did not like the direction it was going in so she quit and got another job with Tabcorp as personal assistant to the manager. However the lure of overseas travel meant that Sarah did not stay long with this company either. She had a fabulous trip overseas but found upon her return it was difficult to gain employment. She was disappointed and felt she had done the wrong thing. *"Work is really hard to get; I wouldn't do it this way again; I didn't think it would*

be this hard," she said. Fortunately for Sarah, her sister was able to get an interview set up for her in the Travel Company she worked for. She discovered that the travel industry was not as fickle as advertising. She liked the fact that in this job relationships were more stable and as part of the job you were expected to build on them. *"In advertising, it was one day in, one day out!"*

Sarah wasn't sure where she would go with the company but apparently the company had other ideas: they saw her as someone they could invest in as a future manager. To her surprise *"this job has turned into something quite unexpected. I was promoted at the end of last year. I have a brand new role and I am completely out of my depth but the company has faith in me and will provide the training, so why not!"*

Sarah still held her reservations about the travel industry and, because she hadn't chosen to be in it as such, she was still not sure it was the place for her. After September 11th, the travel industry had not recovered in 2002. Sarah's company had to make a number of redundancies. Luckily she survived, and applied with confidence for a promotion. When she missed out she felt betrayed because *"promotions are not based on hard work and loyalty but who you know. I feel more cynical, I am looking around."* This 'grounding' experience encouraged Sarah to think about her priorities; if she was that 'expendable' she needed to make sure she had other things in her life. *"It has made me think about focusing on things other than work. I bought a house last year and have spent hours fixing it up, with some family help as well. It gives me so much pleasure. Work is not the be all and end all I used to think."*

In 2004 Sarah is still working for the same company; she has been

there seven years now. She has since been for another promotion and missed out again. This time she seems more prepared to take this in her stride. The lack of transparency and poor management still frustrate her but she sees she can still do good work from the position she is in. For a while she did look around for other work, but this enabled her to recognise that there is still much about her current job that works for her and that it was *"apparent that I am good at what I do, even if my role is not officially recognised."*

Sarah regards her decision to stay where she is as a lifestyle consideration. *"I have just sold my first house and bought another; I like it here enough to stay in the interim. If the right thing came up I would consider it."*

A young man who grew up in a rural town and was the first in his family to have a university education is even more settled in his way of life. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Information Technology and has been in the same job for the past ten years as a senior analyst programmer, saying, *"I'm pretty happy and I don't yearn for anything."* The only thing that has changed is that he is now married with a 20 month-old child, but for him that was a big change. He describes it in a very simple matter-of-fact way: *"Home is clearly the priority. I now take the car to work – even though it is more expensive it means I get home 30 minutes earlier. I don't do overtime any more."*

He has his counterpart in the young woman who has been a kindergarten teacher in a child-care centre for the past ten years. She is married and now has a three-month old baby: *"just had a baby and still adjusting. Bit of a shock being left at home."* She is finding it hard to adjust to the impact the change might have on her career.

"I'm on maternity leave after ten years. Last year my boss went on work-care and then left. Just after

that I found out I was pregnant. I coordinated the centre from January to July. This was the job I have wanted for so long and now I might not get it! There is another woman doing the job while I am on leave and now they have just advertised the position. I didn't get this opportunity but I hope people see I can do it! If I don't get the job I will be crushed. It is just the two of us going for it."

Another young woman is single and still living at home with her sister and her widowed mother (her father died 15 years ago). She gained two post-school qualifications majoring in marketing and then found an administrative position, saying: *"Well, I'm still here, five years in February, and I didn't think I'd last a year!"* She feels she is good at her job and her employers have offered to pay for her to do further study to up-grade her skills, but she seems hesitant about this. This may be related to the fact that she comes from a conservative background where there were few expectations for women as far as careers were concerned. *"I'm a bit confused though, even if I get personal satisfaction out of the diversity of work that I do."* She is trying to sort out now what 'career' means – even with her qualifications and her employment record – saying: *"I see it for me as a journey to find out exactly what my focus is! – I will do the course and I will probably be here in five years' time!"*

The shift in priorities towards 'the third dimension' is also evident in other narratives. A single male who grew up in a large rural town became a truck driver and now works for a hire car company. He quit his previous job because *"the new owners are only interested in making money rather than offering a good service; poor management ruined everything. There was no respect; they treated us as if we were stupid. I think they realise now I was good at my job as everything has fallen apart. They are now asking me to come back but not everything is about money."* He likes his new job because *"every day is different";* he likes being outdoors and

gets bored if there is too much routine. But for him it is hard to find permanent full time work in the local area, so he is adjusting to the situation by doing a variety of things.

"I help out at the church every week – I tape the sermons and then put them on CDs and distribute them. I also do voluntary work in the office. I exist on the borderline financially. Hard to get full time work so I exist on three or four casual jobs. I have had a few sleeping disorders since secondary school. In the last six to eight years they have escalated. I see a specialist all the time. This limits what I can do for work. My ideal would be when I get well to do some long distance truck driving but then if the wife and kids come along I might need to stay home more often. At the moment I just want to keep on with the small jobs I have until I get the sleeping disorder fixed up. I like the work in the car, gives me time on my own, a nice balance, this is enough. I have always been a bit of a recluse. I visit an old bloke that lives in the area; he has so many stories to tell about everything he has done in his life; this is my one regret that I won't have anything to tell the grand kids."

CONCLUSION

The stories vary but what comes through time after time is the honesty they display. Some have been able to reach their original goals with relative ease, while others have struggled. There is a wide variety in the extent to which people have taken up 'careers' and to which they have achieved material success. But what comes through these narratives clearly is the justified pride that participants hold in the ways that they have managed their journeys to this point. At the same time, many have achieved remarkable things, which they regard with humility. As researchers we feel privileged to have been party to their personal narratives and feel both grateful to and inspired by them.

Chapter 2: The Story So Far

The participants in the Life-Patterns Project left school back in 1991, and most have completed further studies or training since. During their years of post-school study many also had jobs of some kind and had continued to live in the parental home. By 1999, most had moved out and by 2002, over a third was married and 13% had become parents.

The sample was both urban and rural, covering a representative range of school (60% from Government schools) and ethnic (with one third of parents born outside Australia) backgrounds, and a variety of parental educational attainment (close to half not having completed high school). It was based on two separate groupings: a 'Studying' sub-set who went on to further study at the end of school; and a 'Non-Study' sub-set who chose some other alternative. However, it is significant that of these 'Non-Study' respondents, by 1996 as many as 80% had returned to study in the intervening years.

By 2004 they had reached the age of 30, and most were working in 'career' jobs. The majority had found full-time jobs after completing their studies,

even though from 1996 onwards four out of five had changed jobs – some as often as five times. On the whole, they express satisfaction with the way things have turned out for them, although a small minority say that it has been difficult to find fulfilment (5%) or that they have felt a lack of real achievement (11%).

In March 2004, we conducted another of our regular surveys of the participants. This working paper concentrates on the findings from that survey. This chapter provides a reflection on what we have learnt so far from the participants about their biographies since leaving school in 1991.

NON-LINEAR FACTORS

Linearity still dominates much of the research and policy concerning the transitions of young people in post-industrial society. To move beyond this particular research barrier it is imperative to insist on a simple fact: youth pathways are diverse. Although 90% of our sample have undertaken some form of study in their post-school years, for many there have been delays, stop-overs and changes of plan. Even in their first post-school year of 1992, the pathways of the total group were already beginning to display considerable diversity. Some were fully involved with study and were not currently employed, but others had gone directly into the workforce without doing any further study or were working but combining that with further study.

Even among those who had settled on study pathways into adult life, the element of diversity was also evident. Their responses highlight internal transfers within and across courses and institutions, and in fact over 50% of our sample had made a change of some kind (e.g. course, institution, deferral) during their post-school study rather than staying on a linear track.

When we look back from the present at the various types of transition journeys that different young people have undertaken since 1991 in our Life-Patterns Project, linear routes have not been as common as is sometimes assumed. In our research samples, only one-third is made up of those who have followed a linear pathway through post-compulsory study. We must take into account that other types of journeys are also undertaken by those who:

- begin further study but change courses or institutions;
- follow a linear path directly into the workforce after school;
- begin to do this but then change their plans and enrol in study; and finally
- leave school without completing.

Furthermore, even though we can identify five comparatively different post-school routes, there are crossovers between them. We cannot assume for example that all non-completers have turned their back on further study, or that full-time students have not also been part of the workforce. Nor can we assume that the eventual outcomes

for the groups from 1996 onwards are predetermined by the different routes that were followed during the first five years after school. For example, if we look at those who had changed their study plans in some way, these changes do not seem to have had noticeably negative outcomes. In fact, by 1999, as many as 73% of these participants had found career-related jobs.

AMBIGUITY OF OUTCOMES

A second problem we have been faced with in this Project is the extent to which for this generation the meaning of career has changed (Anisef *et al*, 2000; Ball *et al*, 2000; Collin and Young, 2000; Côté, 2000; Heinz, 2000). The patterns of work, the clear separation of public and private roles for men and women, the prospect of permanent full-time employment and uninterrupted career paths until retirement age that were taken as gospel truth in the industrial era have been significantly transformed during their lifetime. What their parents saw as a guaranteed and largely predictable future as they entered into their early adult years is a recollection from the past and not a 'living memory' as far as their own offspring is concerned.

Thus, there is now growing uncertainty in their minds about the relationship between having a 'full-time' job, having a 'permanent' job, and deciding when a job moves beyond being one with career 'prospects' to one that is a career. They are beginning to discover that, given the move to more flexible and deregulated labour markets, outcomes from post-compulsory education are now less straightforward and take longer to achieve. They are also discovering that the old assumptions about predictable career paths need to be questioned now.

At most, 18% have held only one job since 1996. A majority (61%) has held between two and four jobs and a very mobile 20% have held five or more. In all 82% have changed jobs in this time, but it is also true that 55% of

this group say that they changed jobs because of better opportunities. In fact, the respondents are generally positive about their current job and, although only about two-thirds have a job directly related to their field of study, as many as 88% believe it enables them to use their skills and abilities.

How do these levels of satisfaction relate to actual career outcomes? To answer this question we can look at a sub-set of 303 VET graduates with 'successful career outcomes', and examine three major job characteristics:

- job is ongoing – permanent or at least a 'renewable contract';
- job is viewed as a career position – or at least one with 'genuine career prospects'; and
- as far as possible, in a job related to the field of study.

Obviously not all these successful participants have been completely successful on *all three* job characteristics, but lower success on any one indicator was counterbalanced by considerable success on others. For example, no one field of study in the sub-set can guarantee that all of the objective criteria of 'success' will be met for its graduates, or will be met to the same extent for each individual concerned.

Table 1. Year 2000 Outcomes by Field of Study (%)

| | <i>permanent</i> | <i>career job</i> | <i>field-related</i> |
|--|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| <i>business, economics</i> | 83 | 64 | 61 |
| <i>trade qualification</i> | 84 | 53 | 61 |
| <i>arts, social science, education</i> | 72 | 66 | 69 |
| <i>technology, computing</i> | 75 | 67 | 54 |
| <i>maths, sciences</i> | 86 | 64 | 71 |

Permanency is higher for the fields of business/economics (83%), trades (84%) and maths/sciences (85%), but the arts/social sciences/education fields were more likely to result in field-related (69%) career (66%) positions. Being qualified in a particular field of study is obviously important for setting out on a career path but, depending on where particular individuals place the

emphasis regarding the different career criteria, their field of study in itself is not likely to be the deciding factor regarding eventual career success.

This evidence suggests, therefore, that the *balance* between objective factors (about job outcomes and status) and subjective assessments (of career aspirations and attainment) has become much more important in the way individuals measure their career 'success'. Factors such as 'permanency', 'on-going commitment' and 'study-related positions' are still important elements in the make-up of career profiles, but the relationship between them has become less straightforward. The shift towards a more contingent and flexible workforce has directly affected the objective conditions under which people are now expected to work. They are learning how to redefine 'careers' for themselves in the face of the ambiguity of outcomes.

IDENTITY FORMATION

Quite rightly, much of the policy and research attention devoted to processes of youth transition pays detailed attention to the two dimensions of education and employment. There is, however, a third

dimension of youth transition that is arguably even more important: *identity formation*. Unfortunately, not enough attention has been paid to the extent to which this third dimension affects the conclusions we draw about the other two.

In our year 2000 annual survey we explored this issue in some detail.

When asked to rate from low to high how much practical importance in their lives they placed on selected items, both males (75%) and females (87%) placed a high priority on 'developing personal relationships'. Males (80%) were more likely than females (76%) to emphasise career, while females stressed family life (93%) more than the males (67%). Two-thirds of the males placed great importance on 'leisure/recreational activities' and three-quarters of both males and females emphasised 'health and fitness' issues. Their responses (Table 2) confirmed the priorities indicated elsewhere in the survey, with a strong emphasis on the importance of personal issues (such as relationships with family) alongside their work or career concerns.

It is possible that their responses have been influenced by their prolonged entry into career paths, in the sense that they have had more time than previous generations did to assess and balance their priorities concerning adult life. It is not simply that another five to ten years have 'slipped by', but that they now come to those events with increased levels of intellectual formation, as well as extended experience in work, relationships and lifestyles. They have been given the advantage of time to sort out and balance for themselves their priorities for the future.

If it is true that this third dimension of identity formation is becoming a determining factor for an increasing

number of young people as they move through their post-school transitions, we need to pay much more attention to it in our research designs. How would we formulate our research for the future if we acted on the assumption that, in addition to young people's employment and education, other priorities regarding locality, living arrangements, lifestyle, experimentation, leisure and multiple personal commitments are seen by them as part of *their* 'human capital' and are already being taken into account in decisions about study and career outcomes?

Table 2. Main Practical Commitments in Life

| <i>n = 1109</i> | <i>high support</i> | <i>%</i> |
|--|---------------------|----------|
| <i>developing personal relationships</i> | 918 | 83% |
| <i>family/home life</i> | 891 | 80% |
| <i>pursuing my work or career</i> | 852 | 77% |
| <i>maintaining my health and fitness</i> | 824 | 74% |
| <i>leisure/recreational activities</i> | 683 | 62% |
| <i>being environmentally aware</i> | 528 | 48% |

Chapter 3:

Continuity and Contrast: Survey 2004

After a two-year break, in 2004 we resurveyed our continuing sample of the Life-Patterns Project. We received 625 returns and the sample profile was maintained in terms of gender, family and locality background, and schooling.

At one extreme there were 99 (16%) whose father had a professional or managerial occupation and whose mother had a tertiary qualification, by contrast with another 161 (26%) from families with paternal occupations of a non-professional/managerial kind and whose mothers were not tertiary graduates. Most of the sample (58%) lay in between.

CONTINUITY

Our participants continue to report positively on their progress in most areas of their lives. The one area of concern continues to be 'health and fitness issues'.

They continue to report positively about their regard for their parents, and

in fact a majority (58%) acknowledge that their post-school lives have been easier for them than may have been true of their parents. The number expecting to marry, have children or buy their own home continues to increase, while most other expectations about the future are much the same as in the past. It is worth noting that while currently 12% mention home duties as their 'main' (but not necessarily their only) work situation, only 1% envisage having 'no work outside home duties' in five years' time (see Table 4).

Table 4. Five years from now (%) (n=625)

| | <i>very likely</i> |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>I'll be married</i> | 60 |
| <i>I'll be a parent</i> | 50 |
| <i>A secure, well-paid job</i> | 43 |
| <i>In a position of authority</i> | 25 |
| <i>Self-employed</i> | 9 |
| <i>Returned to study</i> | 5 |
| <i>Own my own home</i> | 46 |
| <i>Above average wealth</i> | 22 |
| <i>In casual or irregular work</i> | 5 |
| <i>No work outside home duties</i> | 1 |

Table 3. Satisfaction with progress (%) (n=625)

| | <i>very satisfied</i> | <i>satisfied</i> | <i>dissatisfied</i> | <i>very dissatisfied</i> |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>your own personal development</i> | 36 | 59 | 5 | 0 |
| <i>relationships with your family</i> | 51 | 45 | 4 | 0 |
| <i>your work or career</i> | 29 | 57 | 12 | 2 |
| <i>your personal relationships</i> | 44 | 41 | 13 | 2 |
| <i>your social life</i> | 26 | 59 | 14 | 1 |
| <i>health and fitness issues</i> | 14 | 60 | 23 | 3 |
| <i>your educational attainments</i> | 38 | 54 | 7 | 0 |

A third of our sample still describe themselves as 'single and unattached', while those married and those with children have increased in number (see Table 5 – note that there is an overlap in the percentages of those married and those in on-going relationships).

Table 5. Relationships (%) (n=625)

| | <i>%</i> |
|--|----------|
| <i>single, unattached</i> | 34 |
| <i>married</i> | 60 |
| <i>in an on-going or de facto relationship</i> | 33 |
| <i>in a parenting role</i> | 31 |
| <i>divorced or separated</i> | 3 |

Their main commitments continue as before, with career, family life and personal relations at the core, while local community involvement and political action rate poorly (see Table 6).

These commitments are clearly a reflection of their goals in life as Table 7 shows. Again, relationships, family and financial security are much more important than making a lot of money or being better off financially than their parents and, while 'to live up to religious and spiritual ideals' rates poorly, over 40% give a high or very high rating to helping the needy and working for a better society.

On the work front, two-thirds are in full-time jobs directly related to their field of study; for three-quarters, these jobs are permanent and regarded as an on-going commitment. While about 12% consider themselves overqualified for the positions they hold, as many as eight out of ten consider that they are suitably qualified. The number who

Table 6. On-going commitments (%) (n=625)

| | <i>very high</i> | <i>high</i> | <i>medium</i> | <i>low</i> |
|--|------------------|-------------|---------------|------------|
| <i>Pursuing my work or career</i> | 31 | 41 | 22 | 6 |
| <i>Further studies/training</i> | 8 | 21 | 43 | 28 |
| <i>Developing personal relationships</i> | 40 | 44 | 14 | 2 |
| <i>Family/home life</i> | 62 | 27 | 10 | 1 |
| <i>Local community involvement</i> | 2 | 15 | 48 | 36 |
| <i>Political action and causes</i> | 1 | 5 | 19 | 75 |
| <i>Leisure/recreational activities</i> | 21 | 43 | 34 | 3 |
| <i>Maintaining my health and fitness</i> | 29 | 45 | 24 | 2 |
| <i>Concern for the environment</i> | 12 | 29 | 46 | 14 |

Table 7. Goals in life (%) (n=625)

| | <i>very high</i> | <i>high</i> | <i>medium</i> | <i>low</i> |
|---|------------------|-------------|---------------|------------|
| <i>Have financial security</i> | 71 | 25 | 4 | 0 |
| <i>Make a lot of money</i> | 9 | 33 | 44 | 15 |
| <i>Care and provide for a family</i> | 64 | 20 | 11 | 6 |
| <i>Better off financially than my parents</i> | 19 | 28 | 35 | 18 |
| <i>Live up to religious or spiritual ideals</i> | 11 | 10 | 27 | 51 |
| <i>Help people who are in need</i> | 12 | 30 | 47 | 11 |
| <i>Pursue a life of pleasure</i> | 13 | 36 | 37 | 14 |
| <i>A special relationship with someone</i> | 73 | 22 | 5 | 0 |
| <i>Active in working for a better society</i> | 12 | 34 | 41 | 13 |

Table 8. Defining careers (%) (n=625)

| | <i>very important</i> | <i>important</i> | <i>less important</i> | <i>unimportant</i> |
|--|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| <i>The job is a secure one</i> | 53 | 38 | 9 | 1 |
| <i>It pays well</i> | 29 | 60 | 11 | 0 |
| <i>It makes me think a lot</i> | 34 | 55 | 10 | 1 |
| <i>Lets me work on my own</i> | 17 | 44 | 33 | 5 |
| <i>Involves lots of work with others</i> | 13 | 45 | 38 | 4 |
| <i>It is a 'high status' job</i> | 4 | 20 | 57 | 19 |
| <i>Is full-time</i> | 35 | 28 | 28 | 9 |
| <i>Has flexible hours</i> | 23 | 42 | 30 | 5 |
| <i>Is busy and demanding</i> | 9 | 44 | 40 | 7 |
| <i>Requires organisational skills</i> | 15 | 60 | 21 | 3 |
| <i>Provides day-care facilities</i> | 7 | 12 | 30 | 51 |
| <i>Involves responsibility over others</i> | 7 | 26 | 47 | 21 |

describe their 'main' work as 'home duties' has increased from 4% in 1999 to 12 % in 2004.

Their assessment of career jobs reflects the same values we have seen in earlier surveys with 'high status' and 'responsibility over others' rating poorly (see Table 8). While less than 2% of males consider 'day care facilities' very important, they are listed as important by 9% of females.

CONTRAST

Despite the overall continuity in responses over time regarding many aspects of life, there are some contrasts that are worth recording.

For example, by comparison with the assessments made by our 1996 sample, a higher proportion in 2004 (58%) than in 1996 (35%) now consider that their transition has been easier than it was for their parents. This may reflect a contrast between their years of post-school study, which many found challenging, and their subsequent career success, with a higher proportion by 2004 in professional/managerial positions (57%) by comparison with their parents (35%).

Strangely enough, the one sub-group that does not as readily agree to this are females who come from professional /managerial family backgrounds. It is possible that they are still finding it somewhat difficult to achieve the kind of career success they have aimed for or recognise in their parents. We shall look more closely at this sub-group a little later.

Another contrast with the 1996 sample can be found in their definitions of careers. Clearly in 1996 many had not yet found career jobs and their attitudes were likely to be shaped by their expectations and hopes for success. Thus, in 1996 they were more likely to place great importance on a 'high status job' (13%) than our 2004 sample (4%), or being 'busy and demanding' (17% versus 9%) and having 'responsibility over others' (12% versus 7%).

If we move closer to the present and compare data from 1998 onwards, other contrasts emerge. The increases in marriage and parenthood have affected the employment situations of the females in particular. The percentage of females with extensive home commitments has risen from 11% in 2002 to 18% in 2004, and the

number in part time jobs has risen from 9% to 12%. At the same time there has been a sharpening of life priorities, with a widening of the gap between the three major priorities (financial security, personal relationship and providing for a family) and those regularly considered of lesser importance.

A major contrast that demands closer attention is related to the degree of success our Life-Patterns participants have achieved at a career level. They were all members of a *new* generation of Australians who were expected to make their entry into adult life by concentrating on further post-school study as a pre-condition for participation in a post-industrial economy.

Table 9. A Career Sample 2004 (n = 523)

| | % |
|--|----|
| <i>government school education</i> | 57 |
| <i>catholic school education</i> | 24 |
| <i>independent school education</i> | 16 |
| <i>parents Australian-born</i> | 66 |
| <i>from large metropolitan area</i> | 60 |
| <i>father professional/managerial job; mother tertiary qualified (Group A)</i> | 16 |
| <i>father non-prof/manag; mother no tertiary education (Group B)</i> | 28 |
| <i>other parental classification</i> | 56 |
| <i>initial post-school qualification: university</i> | 63 |
| <i>TAFE/vocational ed</i> | 16 |
| <i>apprenticeship</i> | 3 |

Table 10. Work Situation 1998 and 2004 (%)

| | 1998 | 2004 |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|
| <i>family/home commitments</i> | 7 | 13 |
| <i>in casual/irregular paid job</i> | 16 | 4 |
| <i>regular part-time job</i> | 11 | 10 |
| <i>full-time job</i> | 66 | 66 |
| <i>unemployed, looking for work</i> | 4 | 1 |
| <i>a number of jobs</i> | 9 | 2 |

Table 11. Career Outcomes (%)

| | 1998 | 2004 |
|---------------------------|------|------|
| <i>in a permanent job</i> | 58 | 67 |
| <i>in a career job</i> | 48 | 68 |

Table 12. Contrasts : Professional and non-Professional Family Backgrounds (%)

| | Group A | | Group B | |
|----------------------|---------|------|---------|------|
| | 1998 | 2004 | 1998 | 2004 |
| <i>full-time job</i> | 70 | 74 | 69 | 68 |
| <i>permanent job</i> | 56 | 73 | 47 | 50 |
| <i>career job</i> | 50 | 71 | 49 | 66 |

The generalised statistical data we have provided in our annual reports on their progress indicate that they have already fulfilled many of the aspirations they had held in their final years of schooling. However, it has not been easy and it has taken longer than most had imagined. We can illustrate this by examining the career progress from 1998 to 2004 of a particular sub-sample.

The sub-sample consists of 523 participants who have provided us with detailed information of their backgrounds and career paths. The composition of the sample is given in Table 9.

The number in the sub-sample who nominate 'family/home commitments' as their main job has doubled since 1998 (see Table 10). This reflects the increase in the parenting rate. Overall, the work situation of the participants has improved markedly with a decline in casual jobs, unemployment and the number dependent upon two jobs for their income.

The improvement in the work situation since 1998 is more noticeable in the number who have now found career positions: an increase from 48% in 1998 to 68% in 2004 as shown in Table 11.

In our previous Research Report (Dwyer *et al*, 2003: 16-18, 33-8) we examined the contrasts between those with professional and tertiary qualified parents (Group A) and those from non-professional non-tertiary families (Group B). The two groups represent two ends of the spectrum of parental 'advantage'. The results are presented in Table 12. As we might

expect, more from Group A (71%) were proving successful on the career front, although by 2002, those from Group B with a university qualification were also proving particularly successful. By 2004, Group B as a whole had further improved in outcomes with an increase in career jobs from 49% in 1998 to 57% in 2002 and a further increase to 66% by 2004 .

It is possible that some of these contrasts would appear sharper if we looked more closely at the individual responses. In other parts of this report we have paid considerable attention to the ways in which the outlook and choices of particular individuals have changed over time, but for the sake of simplicity in this chapter we have limited ourselves to the overall trends. This evens out the data and can mask significant individual differences. We can illustrate this point by looking more closely at the responses about levels of personal satisfaction.

Thus, when we compare the satisfaction expressed about family relationships in 2002 and 2004, we see that the various totals for levels of satisfaction are made up of some who have more recently become *less* satisfied but who have been replaced by others whose satisfaction level is now *greater*. Of 225 who expressed high satisfaction with family relationships in 2004, there were 67 who had previously been very satisfied but were now merely satisfied, and another 32 who had moved from merely satisfied to very satisfied.

Another example from the same question brings us back to the sub-group of young women from professional family backgrounds. By contrast with many others in the 2004 sample – even with the males from similar backgrounds – they tended to express lower levels of satisfaction with their progress even though many of them had achieved great success in their career lives. As we noted in an appendix to our 2003 report, they were also the people most likely in 2002 to be considering changing

jobs within the next two years in a search for better opportunities. It is possible that this indicates that their lower levels of satisfaction are related to higher expectations or levels of personal ambition, but further analysis is needed before we can draw any firm conclusions on the subject. What we can say is that the more generalised statistical picture tells only part of the story and a proper understanding of the data and trends can only be achieved by examining the qualitative evidence as well. This we do in the following chapters.

JOB PROFILES AND CHANGES

In 2002 we shifted the emphasis of the Life-Patterns Project to concentrate on a core of long-term participants who had provided us with detailed responses regarding their career outcomes and life priorities. The core sample remained consistent with our larger sample in terms of schooling, ethnic, locality and family backgrounds, but in our judgement it represented a 'success file'; it may have had a representative profile but it was composed of those who had achieved better educational and career outcomes than the generation as a whole. Despite this, there remains a remarkable diversity in the job profiles recorded in the 2004 responses.

Of the 625 in the 2004 sample, there were 75 or 12% who stated that their 'main' work commitment was 'family duties'. Thirty-four of these had other commitments as well, mainly working in a part-time capacity, for example as nurses (7), teachers (6) or administrative assistants (5).

Given their educational qualifications, it is not surprising that half (314) of the sample were working in professional jobs. Eight out of ten of these had found positions directly related to their field of study. The fields were many and varied – including some architects, lawyers, dentists, midwives, economists, engineers, physiotherapists, a

podiatrist, some psychologists, librarians, computer experts and 12 working in research positions in their field of study. As many as 64 had jobs in the health area, including 17 nurses and 12 doctors. The financial sector had 25 positions including 17 accountants, and 34 were working in the field of education mainly as school teachers.

In addition to those working directly in their professional area, there were a further 47 in administrative or clerical positions and 69 in management roles. Sales and customer service accounted for 42 positions and there were five para-professionals.

Of the remainder, there were nine machine operators, five in labouring jobs, 16 technicians and 29 working in trades of various kinds. Amongst these were two bus drivers, some carpenters, electricians, a hairdresser, a few welders and a shearer who despite his nomadic and often remote lifestyle has been a very reliable and regular participant over the years.

The general statistics are displayed in Table 13.

Table 13. Job Profiles 2004 (n=625)

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>home duties</i> | 75 |
| <i>professional positions</i> | 314 |
| <i>management/executive positions</i> | 69 |
| <i>administrative assistants</i> | 26 |
| <i>clerical duties</i> | 21 |
| <i>sales/client service</i> | 42 |
| <i>para-professionals</i> | 5 |
| <i>technicians</i> | 16 |
| <i>trades</i> | 28 |
| <i>labouring</i> | 5 |
| <i>machine operators</i> | 9 |
| <i>other</i> | 15 |

It has taken them a lot of time and effort to reach this point in their lives. Their job histories demonstrate conclusively how important personal autonomy and flexibility are for establishing a career in the new labour market. Less than a fifth of them have had only one job since 1966 and up to

two-thirds had a series of jobs before being able to claim that they had finally achieved what they were looking for. Having a tertiary qualification did not provide them with the immediate entry into a guaranteed career that they had been led to believe. For most of them it was not until their late twenties that they felt assured about their career futures. By 1998 less than half (48%) saw their job as a career, but for the 2004 sample this had become the reality for over two-thirds (68%).

Although most had changed jobs a number times throughout their twenties their reasons for doing so varied from individual to individual. Factors such as job satisfaction, income, limited contracts and family needs were explicitly mentioned, but during these years the predominant reason for change was a quest for better opportunities elsewhere. Even in 2002 there were those who were still on the move, and as many as 44% were hoping to change from their current job within the next two years. Those who did change have now joined the majority of the sample who report that they have now sorted out their career prospects for themselves. By 2004 four-fifths were content to continue in their current jobs, although it is important to record that as many as one-third of them had been in their job for less than three years (including over half of those who in 2002 had hoped to change).

Of the 714 listed as employed in our 2002 sample, we have since received detailed information from 488 by mid-2004. Although most seemed satisfied with their current position, one in five indicated that they were seriously planning a job change for themselves. Table 14 shows that their reasons for doing so were more evenly spread than had been the case in the late 1990s.

Table 14. Reasons for Job Change (%)

| | 1996-2002 (%) | 2004 (%) |
|-----------------------------|---------------|----------|
| <i>job satisfaction</i> | 5 | 26 |
| <i>limited contract</i> | 9 | 16 |
| <i>non-work reasons</i> | 9 | 10 |
| <i>pay</i> | 3 | 16 |
| <i>better opportunities</i> | 56 | 31 |
| <i>other</i> | 18 | 1 |

The personal narratives presented in other chapters of this report flesh out these bare statistics. They reveal a generation that is making a conscious effort to hold onto a firm set of inherited ambitions and life priorities and yet grapple with on-going change and uncertainty. They grew up in families that placed a high priority on personal achievement and thus invested high hopes and material support in the future of the next generation. The participants of the Life-Patterns Project acknowledge this in the decisions that they make, but they continually remind us that, for them, achieving a balance between competing priorities is uppermost in their minds. Study and career are thus assessed in terms of other personal concerns and interests – what we refer to as the ‘third dimension’, which is the theme of the following chapter.

Chapter 4:

The Third Dimension

This chapter concentrates on what we have termed the ‘third dimension’ of our participants’ adult lives. In previous reports we have already provided detailed evidence about their achievements in the other two dimensions – their studies and their work. Clearly, those dimensions have been particularly important for this generation because of the heavy emphasis given to the need for post-school qualifications and the ways in which flexible labour-markets have affected their career-paths.

In previous work, however, we have noted that it is important also to take into account the wider circumstances that have affected the lives of the post-1970 generation.

The transformations occurring on a global scale can no longer be seen as mere ‘life-cycle transitions’ that can be neatly incorporated into the traditional interpretations of the experience of youth and the outcomes of schooling. Yet the assumption persists that, while the social realities and reference points of transition may have become much less certain, ‘youth’ is still the same sort of experience that we, the teachers, the parents and the policy-makers, went through ourselves. We read our own pasts into an experience that we, in another voice, say has been transformed (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001: 2).

It is relatively easy to read the experiences of a previous generation into the lives of the next when we consider only study and work. But what about the more personal aspects of their lives: their relationships, their lifestyle choices, and their hopes and expectations about achieving a fulfilling adulthood in the new millennium? In the course of the Life-Patterns Project the participants have insisted that these elements are integral to the study and career choices they have made. What do they mean by this?

The evidence suggests that they have seen their ‘transition to adulthood’ as a process of *identity formation* – that, in their words, adulthood is no longer a ‘given’, but a ‘project’, a ‘task’ or a ‘journey’ that demands their on-going commitment. If we are to understand the choices they are making in their lives we need therefore to develop a proper understanding of how and why this third dimension is so important to them.

NEW NARRATIVES OF LIFE

Significant structural upheavals in society introduce an element of unpredictability that challenges many of the basic assumptions of social research. It becomes difficult to get a reliable ‘fix’ on what is happening and to develop new procedures or methodologies to re-establish some predictability of analysis. However, the people whose lives are directly affected by structural upheavals do not have the luxury of time required for detached analysis – they must act and learn to live with the consequences. Decisions are forced on them, even to the extent of ‘rewriting’ their own life-script in an attempt to maintain ‘authorship’ for their own lives. Life takes on the unpredictability of a mystery story, but the narrative is theirs. As Beck puts it:

the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing... Decisions on education, profession, job, place of residence, spouse, number of children and so forth, with all the secondary decisions implied, no longer can be, they must be made. Even where the word ‘decisions’ is too grandiose, because neither consciousness nor alternatives are present, the individual will have to ‘pay for’ the consequences of decisions not taken (Beck, 1992: 135).

This insight helps to explain many of the complexities revealed in the lives

of our Life-Patterns participants. They are developing new narratives of life as they try to piece together the values and priorities handed on by their parents and the unforeseen challenges and circumstances confronting them in becoming adults in a period of upheaval. Their scripts have followed a familiar story line with some persistent 'leading ideas', but the characters are taking new shape as the narrative progresses and the passage of events causes changes of plot and some dramatic or unsuspected outcomes. This is best illustrated by reference to what they have revealed to us so far about the 'third dimension' in the course of the Project.

1996-2002

If we look back to 1996 when they were in their early twenties, we can see that this third dimension was already high on their agenda. Most of them had completed their initial post-school studies and were members of the full-time workforce. It seemed an appropriate time to ask them how they defined adulthood for themselves. In their replies they emphasised personal attributes and factors of autonomy, while some of the customary 'markers' of adulthood – parenting and home ownership – were rated much lower than might have been expected (see Table 15).

Two years later they were even better established in their work situations, even though they had found the search for on-going careers harder than they had expected or had been promised. Generally, they expressed high levels

of satisfaction with their progress, and particularly with what they were achieving on the third dimension (Table 16).

In our year 2000 survey we examined their personal priorities more closely. We provided them with a list of 15 items to choose between and some remarkable contrasts emerged (see Table 17). The two dominant items were 'having a steady job' and 'family relationships', but there appeared to be some differences in interpretation by contrast with responses to other items. They were making some clear distinctions between items that are often assumed to be closely connected.

Thus, while 'having a steady job' is given top ranking, a distinction is being made between the element of security this provides and actual levels of attainment such as career involvement (ranked 7), doing well in studies (ranked 8) or earning a lot of money (ranked 10). Similarly, a distinction emerges at the level of personal relationships. While 'family relationships' (ranked 2) scores at virtually the same level as 'having a steady job', closely followed by 'developing friendships' (ranked 3), these notions of family and friendship do not seem to necessarily equate with either 'marriage or living with a partner' (ranked 9) and 'having children' (ranked 12).

Table 15. Characteristics of Adult Life (1996)

| <i>n=1908</i> | <i>high support</i> | <i>%</i> |
|---|---------------------|----------|
| <i>financial independence</i> | 1450 | 76% |
| <i>making own choices/decisions</i> | 1310 | 67% |
| <i>emotional maturity</i> | 1283 | 67% |
| <i>a secure job</i> | 1219 | 64% |
| <i>taking responsibility for things</i> | 1155 | 61% |
| <i>getting on well with people</i> | 1124 | 59% |
| <i>sticking to one's principles</i> | 885 | 46% |
| <i>owning one's own home</i> | 791 | 41% |
| <i>academic/training qualifications</i> | 602 | 32% |
| <i>becoming a parent</i> | 533 | 28% |
| <i>having authority over others</i> | 97 | 5% |

Table 16. How satisfied are you with the following? (1998) (n=1419)

| | <i>very satisfied</i> | <i>satisfied</i> | <i>dissatisfied</i> | <i>very dissatisfied</i> |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Your personal life</i> | 615 (43%) | 611 (43%) | 169 (12%) | 24 (2%) |
| <i>Your family life</i> | 646 (46%) | 633 (45%) | 103 (7%) | 22 (2%) |
| <i>Your work or career</i> | 435 (31%) | 657 (47%) | 249 (18%) | 65 (5%) |
| <i>Where you live</i> | 436 (31%) | 708 (50%) | 223 (16%) | 38 (3%) |
| <i>Your educational attainments</i> | 553 (39%) | 650 (46%) | 160 (11%) | 38 (3%) |
| <i>Career opportunities for your generation</i> | 172 (12%) | 631 (45%) | 472 (34%) | 129 (9%) |

Table 17. Personal Priorities (2000)

| | rank |
|---|-------------|
| <i>having a steady job</i> | 1 |
| <i>involvement in work as a career</i> | 7 |
| <i>doing well in studies</i> | 8 |
| <i>earning a lot of money</i> | 10 |
| <i>family relationships</i> | 2 |
| <i>developing friendships</i> | 3 |
| <i>marriage or living with a partner</i> | 9 |
| <i>having children</i> | 12 |
| <i>involvement in leisure time activities</i> | 4 |
| <i>owning your own home</i> | 5 |
| <i>travelling to different places</i> | 6 |
| | |
| <i>being physically attractive</i> | 11 |
| <i>working to correct social problems</i> | 13 |
| <i>involvement in community activities</i> | 14 |
| <i>staying in my local area</i> | 15 |

These nuances of understanding had practical consequences. Many made a direct link between the two top priorities of job security and family. Shirley, for example had taken up a job as a home-cleaner: *"having the security of his (husband) work is a bonus for things like planning our family and owning a home... To be financially secure I'll go out and work at whatever I have to – even home-cleaning if I have to."* Geoff completed his apprenticeship as a fitter and turner and got a steady job at an industrial chemicals plant and made the comment: *"pretty happy at work, now I'm more interested in my*

home life – setting up a great place to live and working on a family." A woman from outside the metropolitan area of Melbourne had got up at six every morning to travel into the city for a hospitality course and then worked an evening shift on returning home. She now works at a local hotel and *"couldn't imagine living anywhere else – this is where my friends and family are (these are the most important things for me)."*

The link between their top priorities had its down side as well.

"I sacrificed relationships etc to study and get a career established – which

I have not achieved and what I really desire more than a successful career is a happy family life etc: marriage, children. Most of my friends are married so there is no one to go out socially to meet new people with and I am often excluded from social events as I don't have a partner."

Thus the nuances of understanding were also related to the possible conflict between their top priorities. This became clearer two years later when we asked them to measure their priorities against their actual time commitments (Table 18). Two-thirds admitted that they were finding it difficult to achieve a proper balance in their commitments, with six out of ten attributing this to 'work pressures'.

Deciding about work pressures produced a wide variety of responses. Some resigned themselves to it, particularly if they were not yet settled into a career. One participant, for example, had a part-time job as a source of income, but was doing voluntary work in his chosen career area. He found it hard to have the energy to do anything else: *"I find that I am too busy and too exhausted just dealing with the hassles of day to day life to be able to think of the bigger picture."*

Others simply rejected the pressure. One unsuccessful student who had wanted to become a welder (and dreamed of being a musician) had taken a few years off *"to see the world"*

Table 18. Time Commitments (2002)

| n=745 | Estimate of areas where most time is spent | | Preference for where most time is spent | |
|------------------------------------|---|----------|--|----------|
| | No | % | No | % |
| <i>work</i> | 220 | 29.5 | 96 | 12.9 |
| <i>family/home life</i> | 186 | 25.0 | 321 | 43.1 |
| <i>personal relationships</i> | 74 | 9.9 | 225 | 30.2 |
| <i>leisure/recreation</i> | 28 | 3.7 | 132 | 17.7 |
| <i>health and fitness</i> | 37 | 5.0 | 160 | 21.4 |
| <i>study</i> | 44 | 5.9 | 42 | 5.6 |
| <i>concern for the environment</i> | 9 | 1.2 | 32 | 4.3 |
| <i>community involvement</i> | 7 | 0.9 | 10 | 1.3 |
| <i>political action</i> | 2 | 0.3 | 7 | 0.9 |

and then got work as an administrative assistant. When interviewed in 1998 he was planning to quit the job *"before the end of the year"* because it is *"human nature to move on – you get stale when the routine sets in."* The same year a qualified accountant who was recently promoted was quitting his job to go overseas *"backpacking in Europe"* – after all *"you could get retrenched tomorrow"* anyway. Others, both with and without jobs, want to travel: *"get out of Moe, get out of Victoria, get out of Australia, have a look at the world."*

In their year 2000 list of personal priorities, this item of 'travelling to different places' ranked sixth on a par with 'owning your own home' and 'involvement in leisure time activities'. By 2000, half had spent a month or more overseas and one third had achieved the home ownership dream. TV, reading and outdoor leisure activities were the main leisure pursuits. Males (36%) were twice as likely as females (18%) to play organised sport, while females (42%) were more likely than males (13%) to regard shopping as a leisure pursuit.

Meeting friends and visiting family were weekly events in their lives, with 'partying' and going to films gaining majority support at least on a monthly basis. While 45% frequently surfed the web, as many as 66% rarely or never indulged in computer/video games. Involvement in clubs, associations or hobby groups proved to be minority interests.

In terms of their relationships, by 2002 a majority (62%) were in ongoing relationships (36% married and 29% in *de facto* relationships), 13% were parents and 36% described themselves as 'single and unattached' (44% of males and 33% of females). It is interesting to note that as many as 85% of these (equally for males and females) at the same time report that they are very satisfied or satisfied with the 'way things have turned out' with regard to their own personal development!

An overwhelming 91% of the participants were satisfied or very satisfied with their level of personal development, and 89% were satisfied or very satisfied with their current family life. The main areas of dissatisfaction for the group as a whole were social life, personal relationships and health and fitness. In response to questions about physical and mental health, for example, only 56% of respondents were prepared to claim that they were 'healthy' or 'very healthy' physically, and a similar percent (58%) said they were mentally 'healthy' or 'very healthy'. Thus, while it is true that only a small minority were at all dissatisfied with their current physical (13%) or mental (16%) health, at least one quarter (26%) had definite doubts about their own health and fitness and at least one fifth (22%) expressed concern about their personal relationships. Overall, however, most participants were fairly satisfied with their progress, and especially with their personal development and family life.

2004

By 2004, many participants had begun to reflect on how to achieve their goals in areas outside of work and study. The 'third dimension', including personal development and family life, had come to influence their perspectives on work, and the theme of achieving a balance in life became increasingly significant.

"I think my generation is deeply concerned with attempting to attain a better work-life balance. This seems to be the catch-cry of my friends, and is certainly a reason for why I am looking for another job."

"It's one big learning experience, where you are learning all the time about life itself by living every day – e.g. job changes, building a house, travel, getting married, future planning, money, life after work etc etc. The world we live in never stops changing – but always look outside the square you live in, and think how lucky we are to live in Australia."

"I am intending to travel and work overseas for a period of two years with my partner. I have learnt that work is only part of life and I have placed more importance on my relationship and doing things I want to, like going overseas."

"I believe it is important to continually maintain a commitment to your own professional development in order to stimulate and challenge yourself and this then leaves you with a sense of achievement. Being a parent is the hardest thing I have had to do and there is little training for that! Only on the job – positive and negative experiences here!"

"I'm a down-shifter, as is my partner. We are both highly educated and have prestigious, moneyed careers behind us. Since being made redundant (I was about to leave), I have worked part-time in dance instruction/studio management. I earn 25% of my previous salary, half the hours, and couldn't be happier. I finally love life again."

Their major priorities are the same as in previous years: financial security, family life and a special relationship with someone. They still seem to make a clear distinction between financial security and being wealthy, with only a minority giving very high priority to making a lot of money (9%) or being better off financially than their parents (19%).

As might be expected, over the past few years, life has changed for many of our sample. Thus, by 2004 most had formed on-going relationships and a greater proportion (about one-third) now had children. This was an increase from only 13% in our 2002 sample. One effect of this development is that there has been an increase in the number of females in casual or part-time employment as well as an increase in the number who describe their main work situation as 'family/home commitments'.

This shift in female work commitments is also reflected in a gender divergence in life priorities, with males placing greater emphasis on pursuing a career and females more likely to give priority to family life. Nevertheless, even for the males, career is defined in terms of security rather than the status it brings, and while most expect it to 'pay well', only 12% regard 'making a lot of money' as a top priority for them. Thus, the consistent emphasis placed in previous years on the two main priorities of 'financial security' and 'care and provide for a family' has been maintained by both males and females in the year 2004. The link between these two dominant concerns is clear from the expectations they manifest about their lives five years from now. For both males and females, four out of five see it as likely or very likely that they will be married by then, over two-thirds expect to have become parents and seven out of ten expect to have fulfilled their home ownership dreams. It is not surprising then that while males tend to be the more career oriented this is balanced by the fact that 'financial security' is even more highly regarded by the females (73%) than the males (66%).

At first sight, this pattern of consistency over time can be read as a set of traditional expectations about adult life that are similar to those held by their parents' generation. On reflection it is important to note that for their parents at a similar age those expectations had become established fact. By contrast, for example, for many of this generation at age 30, marriage, parenthood and home ownership still lie in the future. They are faced with the task of matching their expectations to a new sequence of adult life events.

The continuing evidence on levels of satisfaction with their progress through life confirms that they are very positive about this. In light of media images of them as a selfish ungrateful lot, it is interesting to record that a clear majority is quite ready to acknowledge that their passage into adulthood has

been easier for them than it had been for their parents. At the same time, even though by comparison with their parents they are yet to achieve many of the major 'markers' of adulthood, they are coping positively with this. As in previous surveys, as many as eight or nine out of ten express broad satisfaction with their personal development, family relationships, work situation, education, personal relationships and social life. The only area of life where this is not the case is their own health and fitness, with 26% expressing concern and only 14% 'very satisfied'.

NEW SEQUENCE OF LIFE EVENTS

What do our participants tell us about how this 'new sequence of life events' has affected their futures?

OVERALL PROGRESS

For some it has not been easy. One female, who had grown up on the family farm in western Victoria and gone to a Catholic school, had enrolled in creative arts in a TAFE or vocational college. It was a real upheaval: "my expectations since leaving school have been totally blown out of the water. Things don't fall into place like we think they just will." Another was more blunt. She felt that her "teenage self would be dismayed to find out I've floundered about for over 10 years with little to show for it, whether it be assets, experiences, relationships or purposeful career." The pressures in their final years at school led some to make uninformed career choices and this has led to regrets and changes of plan. "After making, I believe, a naive decision to study social work, I now can't find anything else I'm qualified for. It's very emotionally

draining and I don't want to start a family until I find another field – it's already affecting my relationships." Others faced problems of a more personal kind that frustrated their aims and hopes. One young woman commented: "One never imagines in high school how the future will turn out. Deaths of those close to you and illnesses of your own can sideline your plans completely. I am sad at aims I cannot reach now that I thought would be easily achieved." A male participant wishes "I had been taught to manage my own emotions, beliefs and states of mind years ago – would have saved me years of misunderstanding and anxiety about myself and others, and I could have managed my personal history positively."

It remains true, however, that by age 30 the majority in our study are positive about the progress they have made. This is true of participants from both professional and working class backgrounds. One of the former who had done business studies said: "my expectations were met since leaving school and moving into a professional role. I continue to maintain a balance between work, fitness, friends and most important family." One of the latter, from an immigrant family, had not done any university studies but does not regret it: "I am very happy where things are going at the moment even though I didn't go further with my studies. If I did I would have had a better paid job but it's not a big problem as my husband and I are doing well with our incomes put together." Another with an immigrant background who had done computer studies felt that "life after school has been a good learning experience. I've grown mentally and personally through life's challenges as well as the challenges I give myself. Working 60 hours a week and studying to achieve a Masters has been more challenging." One drew a contrast with what is likely to face the students of today: "I am very grateful to have finished my education and entered the workforce when I did. Seeing what students have to cope with now (high fees, drugs, more competition from overseas students for University places) I consider myself to be very fortunate."

RE-DEFINING CAREERS

The question of balance is central to the way most are now defining their careers. This is a concern that is important to both the males and the females in our study. One male accountant from a working class migrant background gained entry to university and now works as a financial consultant in the fashion industry. He put the issue very succinctly: *"social and health balance has become increasingly important to my lifestyle. I have learned to enjoy the journey rather than focus on a destination."* A male architect from a similar background was more expansive: *"30 seems to be a year of change. I, like many of my friends, seem to be re-examining what is important in our lives: work/life balance, chosen careers and the purpose and meaning in what we do and the experiences we have."* A qualified social worker has found a niche for himself working in a telephone counselling support service for men with relationship and family concerns and sees that and his own relationship as central to his life. *"It took a couple of years to choose the right career path but eventually it came together. I am proud of my social work qualification – it is excellent to be in a satisfying job, even if it is poorly paid – and as well as that my marriage is important to me."*

These assessments are matched by those of the young women in our sample. One with a private school background works as a sales executive and values the lack of stress associated with it: *"While my current job is not a career position or high paying, my life is more balanced and satisfying than when I was in a high paying, high status career job. The hours and stress of that position impacted on my relationships and personal life."* Another comes from a professional family in a country town and now works in the field of education. She relates her career to

her personal life and says that: *"I am now very secure in my personal life which has made it much easier to focus on my career. This also gives me flexibility – if I am unhappy in my work I can leave – I have this freedom in the short term. Life is very different than expected."* A nurse adopts a similar attitude: *"I am glad that I chose nursing as a career path. I have found an area that suits me – the hours allow for a good balance of work and play. I feel it is more important for me to be happy in my personal life than to have a high profile, well paid job."*

This quest for a balance in life does not mean that career has ceased to be a personal goal for this generation. Some still in fact give it pride of place, and in the process pursue further qualifications to attain or shift to a career position that they desire. As a tutor in law says: *"I have been studying almost continually since I left school. The doctorate I am completing now is the qualification I need for the job I want as a legal academic. As I have studied, I have worked out that this is the job I want."* A teacher is proud of the fact that *"I've done well to get where I am today – but it was hard. My job totally relates to my study, and in the future I want to be financially secure and get more respect from my students and the community for my work."* A young woman working in the banking industry is now undertaking an undergraduate course to further her career and even suggests that *"work and career have become more important for me recently and I feel a great sense of satisfaction with working hard and being recognised for it. Family life is not so important for me at present."* Still, even here some have doubts, like the property consultant in the real estate industry who admits: *"I feel strongly that life and work are out of balance for many people, including me. But I haven't yet taken any steps to downgrade work commitments. There's so much more to life than paid work!"*

RELATIONSHIPS

The transformed process of transition for this generation has in many ways 'put on hold' the resolution of personal commitments that for their parents' generation were achieved by their early twenties. A third of our sample at age 30 still describe themselves as 'single and unattached' and many of those who are in on-going relationships are still weighing up the pros and cons of parenthood and home ownership. These are not easy choices to make in the current economic climate in Australia. But relationships are central to their quest for balance in their lives.

A young man from a working class background who now works on a farm is conscious of a personal dilemma regarding an on-going relationship: *"I sometimes feel that if I was in a relationship I would have confidence to find a proper job, but then I also think that I need such a job to have a girl friend in the first place – either way it seems too hard."* A nurse from a professional family background also expresses some uncertainty: *"I have focused a lot on study, work and travel and less on personal relationships and settling down into family life. I am now anxious to do this and feel insecure about where I'm at in my relationship and being ready for children."* For a self-employed carpenter who grew up in a small country town and went into an apprenticeship things are different – *"All I wanted to do when I left school was to be a carpenter – so I have achieved what I wanted. But the main thing now is to provide for my wife and two kids."*

For those in on-going relationships, the issue of parenting has become a major concern in the past few years. Two of the young women who had done information technology studies are now coping with a change of priorities. One states openly that: *"my priorities have changed since having a child. Career used to be important but now it is not. I am now content to raise a family with the support of my husband, but I hope to return to part-time work some time in the next five years if practical."*

The other is conscious of the costs involved and finds it *“very hard to own a home or get in front in life. Life is very expensive, especially for those of us with young children.”* This view is shared by another mother from a professional background who did economics at a university and now works as an assets manager in a local council: *“Buying a house with my partner has been a positive experience, but housing prices are so high it is virtually impossible for me to stay at home full time with my baby. This is a common problem with my peers, but fortunately my job is flexible.”*

In the face of this new sequence of life events, the responses that appear to be proving most effective as the participants move into their thirties are those that allow for flexibility. A readiness to adjust to new circumstances and even to change direction and take on new priorities is becoming a standard survival strategy.

“I think that many of the hopes and expectations that I had when leaving school were uninformed and unrealistic. Many of the values and priorities I had then I would now consider misplaced. The last couple of years have brought a complete re-evaluation.”

“Often it takes people longer to discover what they really want to do. They do this by changing education streams and job opportunities and then finally find something they like doing. It took me a long time – many courses and different experiences.”

“My original area of study has assisted my current career, however I feel my life experiences and changed ideas and responsibility are more important in shaping my professional life. My priorities have changed greatly due to my son and world view.”

“Life changes have forced me to relocate several times but which in turn forced me to gain wider employment experiences. This has resulted in my current success.”

Without these changes I would not have pushed myself for the better.”

“I have found the need to rebalance my life as career is less important to me now. I would rather focus on more fulfilling activities and friends than overwork and not take holidays. Next step is to own my own business or undertake a new area of study.”

“I have recently taken a new job in rural Victoria. I wanted more free time for recreational activities because my job in Melbourne was becoming too demanding. I hope this new position will be less time demanding – but so far it doesn't appear to be better.”

This readiness to change is well illustrated by the progress of one of the participants (pseudonym Vince) we have referred to in previous reports. Vince was undecided about a range of options on completing school in 1991, and was interested in physical education, forestry and photography. He decided on the third of these as his first choice but was unsuccessful and so began a course in computers and applied physics *“to keep occupied”*. He soon gave it up (*“wasn't really interested in it”*) – but was also doing some volunteer work for a National Park environmental group and so moved to a horticulture course (*“a lot of outdoor work – which is what I wanted”*) and then a certificate in resource management. He started a correspondence course at a regional campus in Parks/Recreation/Heritage in 1994 – used local resources and went up to the campus for two weeks a semester to do the required labs etc – *“self-motivation and interest in what you're doing is the main thing.”*

Vince continued his volunteer work in National Parks and through that got a job as a Park Ranger. As he put it in 1997: *“I'm now glad I didn't get into photography because I am now doing exactly what I want.”* By 1998 his contract had run out so he found work as a landscape gardener, but continued actively looking for work as a Park

Ranger. He would prefer to work in his home state but was so focused on his chosen vocation that he *“would take a job anywhere”* as a Ranger. By 2000 he was married and had found the job he wanted and reported that he saw it as *“an on-going commitment”*. In 2004 he suddenly informed us that he was no longer a Ranger. He explained it all this way:

“Life is great. My baby daughter (2) has caused a major change to my views and priorities in life. To me, being a parent overrides most other concerns – her life and health, and my wife's, is crucial. My career has changed due to this. I cannot work as a Park Ranger and easily provide the needs of my family.”

He has now taken up a new position as a conservation officer with a local council in Melbourne.

Chapter 5:

Immigrants in Time

This report brings to an end this on-going study of a group of young people who left school back in 1991. Although we shall maintain contact with a small sample, from 2005 onwards we intend to undertake a similar study with a new group of young people who have not yet completed their schooling. Will their journeys into adulthood be similar or will new factors start to influence their progress and lead to very different outcomes? The future will tell, but for the present we offer here some concluding reflections on what we have learnt from the current study.

MAKING SENSE OF CHANGED SEQUENCES OF GROWING UP

How do we make sense of the changed sequences of growing up that the Life-Patterns study has documented? Perhaps an insight of the American anthropologist Margaret Mead in the late 1960s can help us. Like their parents, our Life-Patterns participants are *immigrants in time*. She coined this phrase in an effort to interpret the growing conflict between adults and young people that was topical at that time. The phrase reflected a shrewd insight into the impact that the process

of social and technological change was having on the lives and outlook of the baby-boomer generation and their parents.

Mead's insight was based on an analogy between the experience of migrant people moving from the familiar surroundings of their native land and its culture, into a new and strikingly different land with its seemingly strange customs and standards of behaviour (Dwyer, 1989: 99). Theirs was an experience of strangeness in the sense of being 'out of place' in their new surroundings. Mead suggested that since World War 2, adults of every nation had been confronted with new customs and standards in their own country as a

result of the process of change. Theirs has been an experience of strangeness in the sense of being 'out of phase' in a new world which demanded that they learn new ways of doing things and find new answers to old questions.

In this sense, then, of having moved into a present for which none of us was prepared by our understanding of the past, our interpretations of ongoing experience or our expectations about the future, all of us who grew up before World War 2 are pioneers, immigrants in time who have left behind our familiar worlds to live in a new age under conditions that are different from any we have known.

We still hold the seats of power and command the resources and the skills necessary to keep order and organise the kinds of societies we know about... Nevertheless, we have passed the point of no return. We are committed to life in an unfamiliar setting; we are making do with what we know (Mead, 1970: 58).

The changes that have affected Western nations since her book was written have given that insight of hers even greater depth and significance. She was writing about the supposed conflict between the post World War 2 parental generation and the new post-war generation of baby-boomers. Members of that generation are the parents of our participants. As we pointed out in the Introduction of this Report, current media criticisms of Gen X and Gen Y suggest that, like their parents before them, they in turn are beginning to voice concerns about 'a present for which none of us was prepared by our understanding of the past' – 'we are making do with what we know'. There is an echo of this too in the reluctance of many researchers to credit new findings about youth transitions.

Current social analysis indicates that the impact of change on the baby boomer generation has in many ways caught them by surprise (Sennett, 1998). Their sense of career has been shaken by far-reaching restructuring, downsizing and forced early retirement, and their heavy investment in their children's futures has not had the outcomes many of them had expected. What some of the media commentators fail to recognise however is that the children's generation has been caught up in the same process – their sense of career has also been shaken, and their parents' investment in their futures has not had the outcomes that the offspring had expected either. The experience however is not the same. The emergence of a post-industrial economy, the shaping of a deregulated and flexible workforce, the priority placed on the gaining of tertiary qualifications, and the transformation of urban lifestyles certainly challenges the established patterns of life for their parents' 'achievement-oriented' generation (Gen A), but it has been a *generative* experience for their offspring (Gen B) on the threshold of adult life. Flexibility, moving on, and adopting a 'balance-oriented' approach to life have become paramount.

It is certainly true that for this generation being 'immigrants in time' means that they are not only 'out of place' but also 'out of phase' with the established sequences of transition to adulthood. In our *Research Report 23* we expressed it this way.

There is a strange irony here that is related to the disruptions that have affected the established time-sequence of transition from youth to adulthood. Instead of prolonging the experience of adolescence or postponing the realities of adulthood, those disruptions have caused an *overlap* in their lives between the two. When they make choices about study, work, relationships, family, or lifestyle, the disruptions to the established time-sequence make

them feel that they are continually 'working against time'. The time-line is there, but in terms both of their own parents' experience and of parental expectations for their sons and daughters, there is a constant mismatch between the time-line and life realities (Dwyer *et al*, 2003: 23).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

As we look back over the evidence from 1991 to 2004, there are three factors in particular that reinforce this image of 'immigrants in time'.

First, particularly with regard to the importance of the 'third dimension' in their lives, the participants are remarkable honest and realistic about the difficulties they are having in giving it the priority it deserves. The time-sequence of transition into adulthood has not proved as predictable as they had been led to believe. They openly admit this and respond readily to questions about the gaps between their ideals and actual life circumstances.

"I sometimes wonder what I am doing and where I am going with my life. I started with such high aspirations and good intentions. I went to university and studied for four years only to be in a job that does not even require you to finish high school. Despite this, I really enjoy my job and find that I am quite suited to it. I have decided that since it does not look like I can establish a career for the time being I will concentrate on owning my own home."

"I can't seem to figure out how to get what I want: i.e. a committed relationship, a job/career that I enjoy. The world seems to be passing me by and leaving me behind."

"My health has taken a back seat to my career and now my health is suffering."

"I made work my priority and now I have regrets about my social and personal life."

"After 10 years of University education and nearing completion of a veterinary medicine residency to sit for specialist exams in three months I am exhausted. I watch no TV, have minimal social life, no family life. I work at the hospital more than 100 hours a week and all other time is spent studying. I have achieved great things academically, but have studied continuously to the detriment of my life, family, health, fitness and pleasure for the last 14 years. I am tired!"

"Would like to lead a more balanced life – work 50 hours per week plus, not much time to spend with friends and family. Would like to 'meet someone' but difficult to do so when spend so much time at work!"

Secondly, in the face of uncertainty, they hold onto a core of beliefs about the purpose of their lives. This is manifest in a remarkable consistency to their responses from 1996 to 2004. Financial security and personal relationships with family and friends receive overwhelming support in every survey, and related issues to do with career and lifestyles are measured against these dominant priorities.

As one accountant in our sample put it, *"I work to live, not the other way around – quality outside hours."* One young woman is a qualified fashion designer and *"keenly committed to the Maltese community"* in which she does voluntary work and finds it *"much more rewarding than the paid work."* Others were more expansive on the subject:

"If I continued with the bank it would have meant flying to Sydney three times a week, leaving at 6 am and returning at midnight – this meant I missed out on seeing my nephew and I missed my footy team play. So I worked out my priorities and work didn't come first."

"My concentration on work, partner and family/friends has left my fitness level and personal wellbeing less than where I would have hoped it would be. However I'm currently changing this and allowing myself to be Number 1 priority so that my fitness improves."

"You need a clear focus on personal goals, together with continuing with your own personal development. It is important though to keep a balance of life aspects so that you don't lose things which are of high value in your life i.e. relationships, personal well-being."

"My values are gradually changing. I enjoy working but now try to live a more balanced life and to separate work from home/social life. I think that I will be less likely to 'burn-out' at work if I do this – I like the notion that we are continually learning and no longer have one job for life."

This growing emphasis on achieving a balance in life is shared by both males and females, even though males are more likely to emphasise career goals, while females are more likely to stress family/home life. It is even true of the most successful participants who are now established in their careers. As we noted in our 2003 report:

The proportion who devote most of their time and energy to their work (34%) is slightly higher than for the sample as a whole (29.5%), but out of the 557 with

careers, only 14% or 75 (29 males and 46 females) are in favour of this. They would prefer to be giving more time and energy to other commitments in their lives – again in line with the response profile of the total sample. It is clear therefore that even for the 'successful', their careers are viewed as one part of their lives (albeit important), but in fact too demanding of their time and energy by comparison with the other commitments they have in their lives. This is equally true of both the males and females who have so far succeeded on the career front (Dwyer et al, 2003: 20).

Thirdly, there is for us as researchers the strange realisation of how 'normal' or *ordinary* it all is to this generation. They have grown up into adulthood discovering that, for them, this is the way the world is. They seem to take it for granted that a person 'becomes' an adult by shaping their own identity for themselves. They draw upon the past experience and on-going support of their parents and other family members, but they insist that that is not enough – it is up to them to make their own way in life. Despite their heritage, adulthood is no longer a 'given', it is a quest or an on-going 'project' or journey that even in their late twenties they were still sorting out for themselves.

This brings us back to the defining element of the 'third dimension': *identity formation*. For their parents, in many ways adulthood was pre-defined: you thought that you knew in advance what you might make of your future lives, what your roles were meant to be, and what you could realistically expect given your class, gender, ethnicity, personal skills and levels of education. This new generation too in many ways had thought that the same would be true of them. But, as they entered their twenties – perhaps with even higher expectations than their parents had at the same age – they realised that things were different now and that it was much more up to them than they had been led to believe. Their comments about their careers reflected this.

"My career is a 'mindset' of what I do every day; it's about what I learn, the journey I am on, the big chunks of learning and the relationships I develop. I'm going to be in life, not wait for it to happen! In my twenties I was searching, but now I know myself much better. I am much more confident."

"I spent four years unemployed; the group of friends I had were heading towards drugs and alcohol. I felt I could spiral the same way. It frightened me. It made me realise you can't sit back and wait – you need to go out and find something for yourself; I know that I wanted more."

Table 19. Which Of These Statements Come Close To Your Ideas About Careers?

| | very much or greatly agree |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| <i>A career job offers scope for advancement</i> | 91.5% |
| <i>To be a career your job must involve commitment</i> | 88.1% |
| <i>A career is any ongoing role that offers personal fulfilment</i> | 81.6% |
| <i>Having a single career for life is a thing of the past</i> | 66.6% |
| <i>A career job is one directly related to your area of expertise</i> | 58.6% |
| <i>A career is a permanent, full time job</i> | 48.3% |
| <i>My job one thing, career is something else</i> | 40.0% |
| <i>You don't have to have a job to have a career</i> | 32.7% |
| <i>Your ongoing source of income – that's your career</i> | 29.8% |
| <i>I wonder whether career jobs really exist these days</i> | 24.6% |

"Each job offers something different, and I like becoming more versatile; it helps to also stretch you so you can find your own limits. It's just difficult getting the balance right."

"A career is who you are and what you make of life – who I am personally and professionally and ongoing."

"My mother thinks success is about having my car paid off; she thought leaving to go to a job with less pay was madness."

It is clear that for them the third dimension or their identity formation is exerting a direct influence on the way they are redefining careers for themselves. Table 19 shows that less than half of them nowadays equate career with having a 'permanent full time job', while the vast majority define it in more personal terms: scope for advancement (91.5%), commitment (88.1%) and personal fulfilment (81.6%).

"A career is like a journey, it's the chance to sort out what it is which makes me happy. In general the dollars are not the driving force."

"It's not about flicking a switch, it happens over a period of time. You need to stand back and reflect on what's happened – the big picture I mean."

"It's about discovering who you are and developing some confidence along the way to work out what you want and how you are going to get there."

Most of our participants feel that they have by now sorted out for themselves their life priorities and goals. They appear less dogmatic about what they should demand as their 'entitlement' to adult fulfilment, but at the same time they insist on the importance of the values they have inherited from their parents. Many of their aspirations and expectations about life are at one level quite traditional and conservative, with financial security and family life at the core. At another level though the defining difference with the past has been to fulfil these values by means of an increasing emphasis on personal flexibility. It is paramount for them to display a readiness to reflect on their own life circumstances so that they can face and negotiate the uncertainties of life rather than insist on what 'ought to be'.

Appendices

Appendix A:

Life-Patterns Reports

Over the course of the Project, we have published regular reports that we have drawn on in putting together this final report. Copies of the previous reports are still available for purchase from the Australian Youth Research Centre, and brief summaries of each are provided below.

Participant Pathways and Outcomes in Vocational Education and Training: 1992-1995 (Dwyer, Harwood, Poynter and Tyler), *Research Report 14*, March 1997. Melbourne: Australian Youth Research Centre

This was the initial report on the Life-Patterns Project and it provided detailed information about the original samples on which the project was based. As an ANTA-funded study it concentrated in particular on the findings concerning VET students, but it also reported on the study, work and life experiences of the total Life-Patterns members.

Life-Patterns, Choices, Careers: 1991-1998 (Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler), *Research Report 17*, June 1998. Melbourne: Australian Youth Research Centre

This report concentrated mainly on the career prospects and outcomes of the participants. It highlighted the growing complexity of transitions to adulthood of the post-1970 generation and the ways in which the participants were redefining their choices in life in response to risk and uncertainty. This report made extensive use of the qualitative evidence provided to us in the written comments of the participants and from the transcripts of the interview sub-sample. As with all our reports, we made use of pseudonyms in referring to particular respondents in order to preserve their identities.

Seeking The Balance: Risk, Choices and Life Priorities in the Life-Patterns Project 1998-1999 (Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler), *Working Paper 19*, August 1999. Melbourne: Australian Youth Research Centre

This report was based on the results of the 1998 annual survey of the participants, by which stage most had already completed their initial post-school qualification. It was in this report that the importance of the 'third dimension' of identity formation was documented and the ways in which it was directly influencing the new definitions of 'career' that the participants were beginning to develop for themselves.

Successful Longer-term Career Outcomes for VET Participants: 1992-2000 (Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler), 2001. Leabrook SA: NCVER

This was a report on an ANTA-funded study and it was published by NCVER for the funding body. It was devoted to a sub-sample of participants who had gained vocational education and training qualifications and had then been successful in gaining career positions. The focus of the report was concerned with the question: How do the participants themselves explain their successful career outcomes? While they emphasised the importance of their educational qualifications for gaining a permanent, study-related position that they regarded as a career, most defined their career in much more personal terms: how it fitted in with their overall life priorities, the sense of fulfilment and personal commitment it gave them, and their readiness to move on as their life circumstances changed. Like other reports, this one made considerable use of the participants' own comments and provided a number of case studies that illustrated well their subjective assessments.

Journeying Through the Nineties: The Life-Patterns Project 1991-2000 (Dwyer, Tyler and Wyn), *Research Report 19*, May 2001. Melbourne: Australian Youth Research Centre

Apart from the usual up-date on the latest questionnaire results, this report provided a substantial overview and analysis of the ways in which transitions into adulthood had been transformed for this new generation of young people. It provided evidence on the influence of gender and family background on the lives of the participants but also demonstrated the ways in which elements of flexibility and personal choice had become much more important in determining their outcomes. It reflected on the continuities and discontinuities with established notions of 'youth transition' and raised important issues about how research attitudes needed to change in response to the emergence of a 'new adulthood' in post-industrial society.

Life-Patterns, Career Outcomes and Adult Choices (Dwyer, Smith, Tyler and Wyn), *Research Report 23*, June 2003. Melbourne: Australian Youth Research Centre

Following on from the previous report, this explored further the continuities and discontinuities with the past, and the ways in which the 'third dimension' of identity formation was influencing the choices the participants were making. The theme of 'balance' between career and other aspects of life was becoming increasingly important in their responses to survey questions and in the interview sessions. Again, use was made of a number of case studies, and two appendices returned to issues raised in the previous report about the influence of gender and family background.

The New Adulthood

Claims that since the early 1970s young people have been confronted with more complex choices about their life-paths... are read as a denial that traditional paths continue to be available to them and as an assertion of a complete break with the past. Yet, if we refer back to the evidence about changes in the labour market and the shifts that have taken place in the meaning of careers, we cannot continue to assume a simple linear relationship between qualifications and careers... and it does not reflect accurately the reality of young people's transitions in the current labour market context. As we have seen in our Life-Patterns Project, it is much more a question of a change in the balance between traditional patterns and elements of self-reliance and choice in response to new educational and economic circumstances affecting this generation (Dwyer *et al*, 2001: 40).

In our 2003 report on the Life-Patterns Project (Dwyer *et al*, 2003) we examined the 'careers paradox' of our participants. This drew on an insight of some American youth researchers.

Today's teenagers see their future work lives as filled with promise and uncertainty. They believe in the value of technology, in the importance of being flexible, and in the need for specialisation; they also believe that they will change jobs frequently and change careers occasionally. Teenagers accept the volatility of the labor market and believe that the way to create a personal safety net is to obtain additional education (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999: 11).

When we have looked back over the biographies of our participants we have been made very aware of the ways in which they have adjusted their initial hopes and aspirations about adult life in the face of the 'volatility of the labour market'. In many ways, they had shared the expectations that their parents held for them, and what was 'promised' to them in national policies regarding post-compulsory education and the 'knowledge society' of the future. Our 2002 sample had taken all this so seriously that we concluded that they were a 'success file'. Nine out of ten of them had gained a qualification of some kind, and three-quarters of them were in full-time, 'permanent', 'career' jobs. When we looked more closely at their career and life outcomes, however, the picture was not as simple as that.

For example, since 1996 eight out of ten of them had changed jobs, and a fifth had done this five or more times. Although the vast majority saw their jobs as either directly or indirectly related to their field of study, less than one in five (17%) were willing to say that they had gained the job *because* of their field of expertise. Even more surprising was the fact that as many as 44% of those with 'careers' did not expect to hold onto their current job within the next two years.

They had other uncertainties as well. There were some clear tensions between their own personal hopes and aspirations and what was actually happening in their lives. We noted this in our report.

While 220 of them admitted that work occupied most of their time and energy, only 96 saw this as desirable. By contrast, 225 would prefer to devote most of their effort to personal relationships even though only 74 have found

this possible. This is evident too in the gaps between actual and desired priorities regarding family/home life (186 versus 321), leisure/recreation (28 versus 132) and health and fitness (37 versus 160). When asked how they explained these gaps, 63.5% identified 'difficulties in balancing commitments' and 58% pointed to 'work pressures' (Dwyer *et al*, 2003: 19).

One way of explaining this paradox is to put it down to youthful idealism or ambition confronted by the realities of life that all generations have had to face. There is a kernel of truth in this but it still fails to do justice to the *new* realities that both they *and* even their parents have had to face since the early 1990s. The predictability of the past that promised certain guarantees for the future has been brought into question at the very time that they and their parents had been led to believe that this new generation's future was assured. The contrast between what their parents had grown up with and what now confronted themselves began to hit home. As we indicated in Chapter 5, it is a contrast between a parental achievement-oriented generation and a new generation striving to be balance-oriented.

First, the experience of our female participants is in many cases extremely different from that of their mothers. Almost 9 out of 10 of the daughters have a post-school qualification of some kind – this was true of only a quarter of their mothers. At the time they were born in the early 1970s, 83% of women aged 25 were married and two-thirds of them already had children. Only a quarter aged 25-34 were in full-time paid jobs. For our sample, at the age of 28 in 2002, only 36% were married, 13% had children,

and as many as three quarters were in full-time jobs. It is particularly significant too that these young women are even more ready than the males in our sample to change jobs when they see better opportunities for themselves – something most of their mothers were not even in the position to consider.

This clearly indicates that the 'traditional family roles' which were so common in their parents' early adulthood are not the norm for this new generation. For them having the on-going 'flexibility' to choose between a variety of roles regarding career, relationships and life-style is much more the norm. As we put it in our report

the dominance of pre-set traditional roles has been weakened by the far-reaching social changes that have taken place. There is now more of an onus on individuals to shape their own identities and learn how to cope for themselves. For both males and females *personal flexibility* has become much more crucial for a successful transition to adult life. This is clear from the responses of our participants (Dwyer *et al*, 2003: 24).

Secondly, the experience of the males in our study adds further confirmation of the fact that the meaning of 'career' has changed for this new generation of adults. Again, it is worth remembering that the role of the 'male breadwinner' in a single-income family was still the norm even in the early 1970s. There was still a generally accepted expectation of 'predictable career-paths' that would guarantee a family's financial security through to the age of retirement. At that time, post-compulsory education was a minority experience, so it is not surprising that in our original sample only one in five of male parents of our participants was university-educated. Most young males then had gone straight from school into the workforce at a time when youth unemployment was much

lower than in the 1990s. By contrast, about nine in ten of our original sample have gained some form of post-school qualification, even though as many as 20% had experienced periods of unemployment after leaving school. However, for them gaining a degree has not been the secure guarantee to career success that had been promised, as some of their parents know too well because they too have been faced with the 'downsizing' and deregulation of the labour-market that has occurred in recent years. Even university graduates in the 1990s have been subjected to this and have experienced the uncertainty about their longer-term career prospects in a more 'flexible' restructured workforce. So, in contrast to the norms of the early 1970s, for this generation a readiness to change jobs and cope with unpredictable career paths has become the norm.

Along with the onus placed on individuals to make choices for themselves, there is an increasing need for *a readiness to make on-going career choices for the future*. We have seen that already job-transitions are the majority experience for our participants, that at least one fifth of them have changed jobs at least five times in the past five years, and that 44% of them do not expect to be in their current 'career' position in two years time. The shift towards a more contingent and flexible workforce is not simply a factor affecting the objective conditions under which people are now expected to work, but it has also led to a more contingent or flexible attitude on their part towards their own definitions of success and career (Dwyer *et al*, 2003: 24-5).

Thirdly, this increased onus on individuals to be pro-active about their life circumstances has taken place at a time in which a loosening of structures of 'collective identity' has taken place as well. For young adults seeking to establish themselves in the early 1970s, personal fulfilment in social, workforce, class, church, and local

group membership was still influential in establishing a sense of belonging for them and in shaping the adult choices they would eventually make. People still spoke of 'belonging' to a particular firm and progressing in it to retirement age, and trade union membership still involved a majority of the workforce. Continuity in a single company or locality provided an on-going long-term focus of identity and a network of fellow-workers or neighbours, which provided a sense of stability and mutual support in times of hardship. Company 'loyalty' was still invoked by employers and employees; downsizing, retrenchment and outsourcing lay in the future. Even the welfare system operated in a very different way then – for example, these were the days before the 'work for the dole' scheme which sent a very clear message to this new generation that the onus now lay with the individual. The insistence that post-school education was a 'threshold requirement' for entry into adult life reinforced the message. This means that notions of 'collective identity' have been replaced with a strong emphasis on 'personal autonomy'. Many of the formal support structures of a social, local or workplace kind that existed for previous generations have been weakened or lost over the past quarter-century, and so there is more pressure on today's young adults to create their own portfolios for living. Young adults today need strong personal resources to make difficult individual choices and to survive in a much less predictable and more individualised world.

It is no surprise therefore that, of the 27% of our original sample who had not continued on a study path on finishing school, as many as 80% returned to study within the next five years. Also within our 2002 sample there are now 57% who have gained more than one post-school qualification since leaving school. They are resourcing themselves for the future, which probably explains why they define their careers in terms of personal 'advancement', 'commitment' and

'fulfilment', and profess high levels of satisfaction about their progress in life (Dwyer *et al*, 2003: 25).

Fourthly, one of the taken-for-granted assumptions shared by the parent generation, and underpinning the expectations and heavy investment many have placed in their children, is an ambition for 'upward social mobility'. In the early years of our project, it was obvious that most participants shared in that ambition. In the 1996 responses, 81% believed that there was a strong link between further study and better jobs, and 72% thought that this would be true in their own case. Most also accepted the assumption that their qualifications would ensure highly skilled or professional careers as a result. The participants were asked what type of employment they would like in the future, but also what they would 'realistically expect' to do. Not only did the majority (66%) indicate an ambition for professional or managerial careers, but almost all of these asserted that they 'realistically expect' to achieve this (61%). For those who had graduated by 1998, at one level this had proved to be the case – except that having a 'professional' job did not mean that it was full-time, or permanent, or that it promised a 'career'. As a result many of them were revising their previous expectations.

Before looking at the evidence on this shift of perspective, it is important to insist that in presenting these contrasts between the norms accepted by the different generations we are not suggesting that a complete 'break with the past' has taken place. Our 2003 report emphasised this.

We are not arguing here that the expectations their parents have had about adulthood no longer exist or no longer influence the lives and choices of their offspring. Nor are we arguing that the issues now being faced and the attitudes that are being shaped are totally new and did not influence the lives and choices of their parents when they were young. Nevertheless,

there has been a definite *shift in the weighting* to be given to old and new priorities (Dwyer *et al*, 2003: 25).

The evidence is striking. Take for example the contrast between established definitions of 'career' and what the participants themselves consider important in deciding on a career job. By the year 2000, what mattered the most to over 90% of the sample was that the job 'is a secure one', while a job of 'high status' (39% males, 32% females) was the least favoured item of all. The contrast reflects their responses on a number of broader issues identified in Table 20 which display their life priorities and commitments. The responses revealed a degree of consensus on major items that demonstrate that for our participants occupational destiny is not all there is to life. They define themselves in terms of a blending of 'being' and 'doing', as can be seen from the personal goals they emphasised in our year 2000 survey.

The learning process involved in making the transition from adolescence to adulthood helps us to understand how our participants have arrived at such a remarkable consensus on their life priorities. Traditional family roles have been transformed so that now both males and females need to negotiate for themselves, and between themselves, how to shape on-going relationships that transform those roles. Both males and females are aware that life can no longer be

compartmentalised along gender lines. Each individual is faced with a broader range of adult responsibilities and can no longer assume that they can be left for someone else to fulfil. Alongside this, the 'delaying' effect of prolonging their studies into their early adult years has had the unintended effect of giving them extra time to sort out for themselves how to balance the range of responsibilities that are part of adulthood. Also, the increased emphasis on the need for flexibility in their attitudes towards their careers, coupled with the importance of personal autonomy in taking control of their lives, has heightened for them the need to assess for themselves what their real priorities in life should be.

So, at the level of personal ambition, it is not so much that they have rejected the heavy emphasis on upward social mobility derived from their parents, but that for them 'status' and 'achievement' need to be measured against 'breadth' of experience and a sense of balance between competing demands. While it is evident that there was a strong achievement orientation shared by their parents' generation, for their offspring 'balance' has become a dominant pre-occupation as they shape adult futures for themselves.

Table 20. Important Goals in Adult Life in Year 2000

| <i>n</i> = 1113 | <i>males (%)</i> | <i>females (%)</i> |
|--|------------------|--------------------|
| <i>financial security</i> | 93 | 96 |
| <i>special relationship with someone</i> | 90 | 94 |
| <i>care and provide for a family</i> | 75 | 82 |
| <i>working for a better society</i> | 60 | 68 |
| <i>pursue a life of pleasure</i> | 62 | 65 |
| <i>make a lot of money</i> | 57 | 48 |
| <i>help people who are in need</i> | 42 | 56 |
| <i>enjoy an affluent lifestyle</i> | 49 | 46 |

Putting together all the above considerations on generational contrasts, we can present the shifting priorities in the following way.

Adult Priorities in Life

| Gen A: Post-WW2 Generation | Gen B: Post-1970 Generation |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| traditional family roles | flexibility/reflexivity |
| predictable career paths | on-going career choice |
| collective identity | personal autonomy |
| upward mobility | balancing commitments |

There is an important proviso:

In making the necessary choices... they are weighing up the main priorities of a 'new adulthood' alongside the established characteristics of adulthood represented in the lives of their parents. For purposes of analysis, the priorities are displayed here in the form of a contrast, but this is not meant to point to a 'make or break' experience. What is clear is that a definite shifting of priorities has taken place (Dwyer *et al*, 2003: 26).

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Australian Youth Research Centre

The Australian Youth Research Centre (AYRC) is located within the Faculty of Education at The University of Melbourne. It was established in 1988 in response to a recognised need by the youth affairs sector for relevant and up to date research on the issues facing young people today.

The aims of the AYRC are to:

- conduct relevant, coherent and reliable research on young people in Australia, with a state, national and international focus;
- assist with the development of policy and the implementation of initiatives based on research findings;
- develop strong links with the youth affairs sector, with particular attention to helping to identify and address the sector's research needs;
- facilitate communication between educators, researchers, policy makers and youth workers;
- support the research activities of university staff and post-graduate students who have a specific interest in youth affairs; and,
- enhance the professional development of staff and students by assisting them to be informed about the broader context of young people's lives.

Australian Youth Research Centre Activities

The AYRC has particular expertise in research on education, transition pathways, social justice, gender equity and employment issues as they affect young people.

The main AYRC activities are:

- undertaking research and publishing the outcomes in a manner accessible to policy makers and the youth sector;
- providing information and policy advice to governments and other organisations;
- assisting and encouraging individuals or groups who work with young people.

AYRC ACTIVITIES INVOLVE:

- undertaking small projects for groups lacking the capacity or opportunity to do so themselves;
- providing a base for post-graduate students wishing to undertake Masters or PhD research on topics related to young people and the youth sector;
- enabling academics to participate in established AYRC projects, and/or undertake their own research on youth related issues;
- maintaining a youth sector resource library;
- publishing series of Working Papers and Research Reports;
- conducting public seminars and conferences on a variety of issues relevant to those working in the youth sector.