

## An Exploration of Generation Y's Experiences of Offshore Fly-in/Fly-out Employment

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*Offshore fly in/fly out (FIFO) employment creates unique challenges for personnel working in this capacity and the impact of these challenges on personnel who are navigating the social challenges of early adulthood, or those belonging to Generation Y (Gen Y) is relatively unknown and deserving further investigation. This qualitative study explored the experiences of Gen Y employed offshore in a FIFO capacity using a social constructionist framework. Ten male offshore FIFO personnel aged between 18 and 28 years old participated in this study. Thematic content analysis of the in-depth interviews revealed three broad themes; these included the challenges of FIFO lifestyle, Self-identity and Relationships. It was concluded that even though the men were satisfied with benefits associated with the lifestyle there were none the less many challenges which they were attempting to address that were specific to the lifestyle generally and not unique to Gen Y.*

The oil and gas industry with resources located in offshore locations has historically employed a workforce that has been required to fly-in and fly-out (FIFO) from the work location or oil and gas platform (Houghton, 1993). Together with land based mining, offshore mining plays an important role in Australia's economy, and employs 52,000 individuals directly and a further 156,000 people indirectly, in Western Australia. Overall the mining industry employs an estimated 21% of the WA workforce (Chamber of Minerals and Energy of Western Australia [CMEWA], 2006). Of this workforce 15,195 individuals are aged between 15- 34 years of age (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006) making the mining industry a significant employer of those currently navigating the challenges of early adulthood, colloquially known as Generation Y (Gen Y). (Eisner, 2005; McCrindle, 2006). Attraction to the industry and impacts of work based practices such as FIFO on the psychosocial well-being of this age group is poorly understood and generally is becoming a source of interest, particularly for the mining industry, who against a backdrop of negative community and political attitudes toward FIFO, are concerned with work place retention and maintaining a viable and skilled workforce to meet the resource needs of the community (Sibbel, Sibbel & Goh, 2006).

### *FIFO and Employment Practices*

FIFO operations have been used internationally by the offshore oil and gas industry since the late 1940s and in Australia since the 1960s for both onshore and offshore production (CMEWA, 2006; Houghton, 1993). FIFO employment can be defined as "all employment in which the work is so isolated from the workers' homes that food and accommodation are provided for them at the work site, and rosters are established whereby employees spend a fixed number of days at the site, followed by a fixed number of days at home" (Storey & Shrimpton, 1989, p.2). At present, such practices are used to service offshore oil and gas and also land based mining sites in Australia. While certain differences in employment conditions, e.g., employment roster, transport to the work place, exist between them (CMEWA, 2007; Parkes, 2007; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997), similarities can also be observed e.g., shift work, monotonous and repetitive work (Parkes, 2002; Sutherland & Cooper, 1996).

### *Offshore and Onshore FIFO Research*

Research into FIFO employment has demonstrated that this lifestyle can impact both positively and negatively on the workers overall psychological functioning (Houghton, 1993; Keown, 2005). Some positive aspects

associated with the FIFO lifestyle included high financial remuneration, work schedules that allow for a period of time at home which enables workers to partake in extensive leisure activities and provides residential stability and an opportunity to spend a solid period of time with family (Gallegos, 2006).

The impacts of the lifestyle on the family and the workers' partners has received considerable attention with some evidence that the stress created by this lifestyle can have negative effects on the employee's partner as they juggle the repeated comings and goings of the worker, loneliness and forced independence (Reynolds, 2004; Taylor, 2006; Watts, 2004). However, Parkes, Carnell and Farmer (2005), concluded that partners of offshore oil rig workers generally adapt to the lifestyle.

Recent research focusing on the children of land based FIFO workers has demonstrated that employment related absence does not impact on a child's depressive symptomatology, levels of anxiety or their perception of family functioning (Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008). Additionally, similar research found that having a parent employed in a FIFO capacity was not typically problematic for children and that parents can implement certain strategies to help children successfully adjust and manage the FIFO lifestyle (Gallegos, 2006).

With respect to mining personnel, Venables, Beach and Brereton (2002) demonstrated that FIFO lifestyle was perceived as putting substantial pressure on forming and maintaining personal relationships and promoted social isolation as the worker was unable to participate in social and community activities due to their work rosters. Furthermore it has been highlighted that on site factors pertaining to the physical needs of the workers (food, comfort, use of drugs and alcohol) and fatigue that can be as a consequence of roster and shift length, can impact on the health and well being of the employee, and potentially their perception of long term involvement (or retention) in the industry (Beach, Brereton & Cliff, 2003; Sibbel et al., 2006).

Studies focusing on the specific psychosocial impacts of offshore employees have demonstrated that offshore workers experience an increase in symptoms of anxiety, more sleep problems and a higher workload. The offshore working environment is characterised by several elements that can create stress for individuals (Parkes, 1992, 1998; Sutherland & Flin, 1989). As highlighted above these elements include exposure to adverse physical conditions, the remoteness of installations, restricted working and living arrangements, lack of privacy, perceived dangers of the offshore environment including the requirement of helicopter travel, demanding shift schedules and the separation from support networks (Cooper & Sutherland, 1987; Parkes, 1998; Sutherland & Cooper, 1991). These negative factors have been shown to adversely impact on the psychological health and well-being of personnel, with employees experiencing pervasive tension and apprehension, decreased job satisfaction and minor health problems such as sleeping difficulties and stomach complaints (Parkes, 1992, 1998; Parkes & Clarke, 1997; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997).

#### *Early Adulthood and Gen Y Research*

The Australian population is ageing and one of the outcomes of this demographic shift has been an increasing interest in the social and economic role that Gen Y or the current cohort of young adults are assuming in our community (McCrindle, 2006). The available research on Gen Y appears to be limited; however what is available is primarily concerned with common characteristics exhibited by this group of young people, their work aspirations, perceptions and how to retain them in the workplace (Eisner, 2005; McCrindle, 2006; Sheahan, 2008). Sociological and human resource researchers have sought to identify the ecological forces that have shaped the characteristics and qualities of Gen Y. However, whilst it is problematic to generalise the characteristics of an entire generation of individuals, these generalisations and descriptions provide a foundation for further

psychological investigation particularly from a community psychology perspective as fundamental to this approach is a critical awareness of ecological and systemic factors that impact on the individual's sense of self identity and ultimately their well-being (Gridley, Fisher, Thomas, & Bishop, 2007; Keyes, 2007).

According to Eisner (2005) Gen Y has a strong sense of morality, are sociable, willing to fight for freedom and are arguably patriotic. They are the most technically literate, educated and ethnically diverse generation in history and tend to have more disposable income. However against this Gen Y have a reputation for poor job commitment and little company loyalty. They are three times more likely to change jobs in a year compared to older generations with movement being underpinned by their desire for variety, challenge, success, change and seeking out people who will further their development (McCrindle, 2006).

All generational cohorts pass through the formative years of early adulthood which entails the developmental tasks of connecting to others and their community, completing education or training, finding a job, establishing a home, potentially partnering and starting a family (Arnett, 2000). However, each generation possesses a unique set of experiences, attitudes, beliefs and expectations about a variety of situations, including personal relationships shaped by their community and socio-political conditions (Eisner, 2005; Prilleltensky, 2003). Such forces shape personal identity (Stets & Burke, 2003). The current generation of young adults, or Gen Y, have had opportunities to benefit in wealth and capital that has been accumulated by their parents. Furthermore they have also directly benefited from this as they are the most materially endowed, and entertained generation to date (Sheahan, 2008).

However, they may have also witnessed the cost of their parents' success in terms of absentee parenting and parental divorce (McCrindle, 2002; Sheahan, 2008). Arguably this may be instrumental in young adults commitment to relationships, known to be one of the key tasks

associated with early adulthood. Specifically Dafoe-Whitehead and Popenoe (2000) demonstrated that Gen Y's experience of their parents' relationship was instrumental in forming beliefs about permanence of relationships, and the need to cohabit prior to long term commitment. Additionally, the negative advice received from parents and relatives regarding marriage has made them cautious of committing to another (Dafoe-Whithead & Popenoe, 2000; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

#### *Gen Y and FIFO*

At present, literature focusing on generational issues within the FIFO industry appears to be scarce. Research in this area has characteristically focused on the effects of FIFO and families, as well as accident rates among workers, attrition, absenteeism and the effect of roster schedules on stress and physical health (Chen, Wong, Yu, Lin & Cooper, 2003; Gallegos, 2006; Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008; Parkes, 1998; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997). This research has commonly been directed towards males who are in established relationships or marriages, and those employees who have children. However, little research has been undertaken on the new generation of employees entering the FIFO work force. Specifically the impact of the lifestyle, and the workers' perceptions of community support for the lifestyle on their well-being is deserving of further investigation.

#### *Research Aims*

In order to determine the overall psychological impact offshore FIFO employment has on Gen Y, their individual perceptions of this lifestyle need to be explored. Thus, gaining insight into how Gen Y involved in oil and gas based FIFO employment can successfully navigate developmental and psychosocial challenges while dealing with extended absences from community and support networks. This research will build on the current body of psychological knowledge that surrounds this area (Chen et al., 2003; Gallegos, 2006; Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008; Parkes, 1992, 1998;

Parkes & Clarke, 1997; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997) and act as a foundation to further research focusing on generational issues for people working in a FIFO capacity. Additionally, this study could also provide valuable information to oil and gas companies on how to assist and support Gen Y workers facing these challenges, with the aim of creating a more productive young workforce. The question this study aims to address is what are the psychosocial challenges experienced by Gen Y when employed offshore in a FIFO capacity?

### **Method**

#### *Research Design*

Due to the exploratory nature of this study an in-depth qualitative research design was utilised to gain insight into the experiences of Gen Y workers employed on an offshore FIFO roster. The study adopted a social constructionist framework (Berg, 2001). This design enabled the unearthing of subjective meanings and interpretations that the FIFO workers assigned to their experiences (Daly & McDonald, 1992). It also acknowledged that the workers are active agents who construct their own way of understanding the world through social processes and interactions with others in their social world throughout their life and that the data that emerges is the result of a co-construction between the participants and the researcher (Burr, 2003). By using a social constructionist framework in the current study a greater understanding of how those belonging to Gen Y involved in FIFO construct and give meaning to their experiences as well as how they view their self-identity while working offshore and when back onshore during their rostered time off from work.

#### *Participants*

Ten adult male participants aged between 18 – 28 years of age who were currently employed offshore on a FIFO basis were recruited to participate in this study. The number of participants was sufficient to achieve saturation of content (Beanland, Schneider, LoBiondo-Wood, & Harber, 1999). The majority of participants worked on an oil rig in differing

capacities and as shown in Table 1, roster patterns also varied across participants, ranging from 2 weeks on/2 weeks off to 5 weeks on/5 weeks off. The amount of time each participant had been involved in FIFO employment ranged from seven months to eight years. Four of the participants indicated that they had been in a long term relationship, and three indicated that they were currently living with a partner. Only one of the participants had children.

#### *Materials*

A semi-structured interview schedule with open ended questions and a demographic information sheet were used to obtain information on the workers and their experiences of FIFO employment and lifestyle.

#### *Procedure*

Following approval from the Human Ethics Committee at Edith Cowan University, participants were recruited through local media sources and interviewed. The information letter and consent form informed the participants about ethical considerations namely; confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and freedom to withdraw without prejudice from the study at any time.

#### *Data Analysis*

Each interview conducted by the primary author (TC) was transcribed verbatim from the recordings to ensure authentic records for analysis. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data in order to identify central patterns and themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During the process of reading the transcripts salient words, phrases and passages were highlighted. These were translated into codes in order to give meaning to the descriptive information and facilitate the grouping together of themes. Themes representing the meaning underlying a group of codes were identified.

To ensure rigour was maintained while conducting this research several methods were employed; interpretive rigour, methodological rigour, triangulation and saturation. Interpretive rigour was ensured through providing extensive segments or complete primary texts in the final report, and also by allowing the secondary

Table 1  
*Participant Details*

Pseudonym	Amount of time employed FIFO	Roster cycle
Alex	7 months	2wks/2wks
Anthony	18 months	5wks/5wks
Brett	3 years	2wks/2wks
Nick	8 years	2wks/2wks
Matthew	8 years	2wks/2wks
Peter	2.5 years	2wks/2wks
Robert	4 years	2wks/2wks
Christian	2 years	2wks/2wks
Chris	6 years	2wks/2wks
John	3 years	4wks/4wks

researcher (EK) to verify the conclusions drawn from the coding process (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Methodological rigour was achieved in the current study by outlining how access was obtained to participants, how the researcher presented herself to the participants, how data was collected and how the data was coded and analysed (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Furthermore, triangulation was utilised to ensure the accuracy of conclusions. This was achieved by emailing four participants an interim results sheet and asking them to provide feedback. The feedback that was obtained from the participants endorsed the interpretations of the study. Finally, interviews were conducted until saturation was reached; meaning that no new data was emerging, this ensured that all the information was captured.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

The analysis of the experiences of this sample of Gen Y employees working offshore in a FIFO capacity revealed the presence of three dominant themes in the data. As shown in Table 2 these themes included: FIFO lifestyle, Self-identity and Relationships.

#### *FIFO Lifestyle*

Issues related to aspects of the FIFO lifestyle emerged as a dominant theme in the interviews. The majority of participants interviewed were unified in their identification of

the issues that arise for them as a result of their FIFO employment. Four main issues associated with the FIFO lifestyle included: financial rewards, workplace culture, adjustment and time off.

*Financial rewards.* The men in this study reported that financial remuneration was an important factor in both attracting and retaining them in the industry and that their wages enabled them to have a degree of financial freedom. This is similar to previous research which suggests that the financial gains generated by FIFO employment are considered one of the positive aspects of this lifestyle (Collinson, 1998; Gent, 2004; Houghton, 1993; Keown, 2005). For example, Christian commented:

*The money is good...obviously the money is what takes me that way, and Matthew also stated It's the main reason you do it really; I would say would be for the money.*

Consistent with the work of Shrimpton and Storey (2001) this study highlighted that while the offshore workers generally have a high disposable income they have few expenses or opportunities to spend the money during their time at work. This appeared to allow the majority of the participants to spend money on return from their work offshore on items for recreation. For example, Alex stated that I

Table 2  
Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
FIFO lifestyle	Financial rewards Workplace culture Adjustment Time off
Self-identity	Aspirations Others' perception of self and work Beliefs and attitudes about self
Relationships	Trust and importance of regular contact within relationships Difficulty forming and maintaining relationships Influence of others experiences about relationships

*spend a fair bit of money on just getting stuff I have wanted to get, and Matthew highlighted that he spent his income on toys, motorbikes and things... Holidays, drinking, things you don't really need. Just a waste of money, clothes. It's not really a waste of money but it could have been used a lot more wisely. Casinos...*

Although participants spent their money on items that enhanced their sense of well being, many of them also valued their income as a means for providing a stable future and used their money to invest in assets such as property and stock market shares. As Peter stated *I've got the houses as investments and some shares.*

*Workplace culture* The workplace culture described by the participants indicated that while there was a sense of camaraderie and mateship among employees there was also an element of trying to establish a social hierarchy within the workplace. Similarly, Ulleberg and Rundmo (1997) suggested that individuals seek support from colleagues while at work and found that social support from a supervisor or co-worker appeared to reduce employees' level of job strain. For example Brett commented:

*When I am out at work there are people there to support me because sometimes it can get lonely and I mean us guys we*

*speaks about everything out there... it's not unusual to feel counted out there when you are a couple of days into a trip you know, you're just getting used to being out there and a couple of guys come up and they will slap you on the back, just the contact you know, it helps.*

The need to get along with others was highlighted as important. Matthew stated that sometimes the work experience was *just like being with your mates a lot of the time*, and Chris indicated that *everyone gets along really well... if you don't get along with anyone out there you sort of get weeded out. It's a pretty close knit sort of thing.* The value placed on the social connection at work is consistent with McCrindle's (2006) observation of Gen Y as a cohort of people who regard highly a workplace environment where they can interact socially and work collaboratively with others. The unique environment of drilling rig and FIFO roster allows employees to potentially satisfy both of these facets as employees typically work in teams while on shift and socialise with others during meal times, in accommodation facilities and when engaging in recreational activities on the rig.

In contrast to the positive aspects of

working in such a close environment the men indicated that sometimes the environment fostered or intensified negative experience. Adjustments in group hierarchy, competitiveness and dominance amongst the workers could lead to difficulties in the workplace. For instance Nick stated,

*You know what guys are like... if they find a chink in someone's armour they will just keep chipping away at it until they break you, and especially in that environment (on the rig), it's just guys trying to stamp their authority on things and be the dominant male.*

The potential for competitiveness also featured in interviews as Robert highlighted that the guys get out there, they see what you are doing and then they ask you what money you are on. It all becomes a competition... they will be on the computer saying these are my toys and this and that.

At present, little research seems to exist exploring the social dynamics of the offshore workplace. This finding is important as they way workers interact with each other has the potential to significantly impact on their feelings of satisfaction and well being whilst at work.

*Adjustment* It was evident from the interviews that offshore FIFO employment was accompanied by the challenge of periods of adjustment for the workers both prior to departure and on arrival at work. This finding supports research conducted by Gallegos (2006) who identified that FIFO employees, particularly those with families and in relationships, can experience an emotional cycle that occurs when the worker arrives home and departs for work. Consistent with the findings reported by Gallegos (2006) participants in this study reported depressive feelings in the time leading up to their return to work and during the first few days of their trip. For example Peter remarked that *it's kind of depressing sometimes....* Robert also highlighted that returning to the work routine on the rig was also a significant challenge:

*...returning to work and living on the platform pretty much feels like you're going back to prison... You don't have any windows in your room. Just wall to wall, that's it. And you wake up a certain time, you have got to do things at a certain time, lunch certain time. However once the first few days were negotiated getting back into the swing as Anthony mentioned seemed to occur for all.*

The disappointment during their last few days prior to returning to work was exacerbated if the workers believed they were going to miss out on perceived important social events. Peter indicated that his negative feelings were often due to *missing out on things like parties or whatever*. Although this was viewed as an inevitable aspect of the job, it still generated unfavourable feelings for the workers in this study a finding consistent with research on mining personnel irrespective of stage of life (Gallegos, 2006). Furthermore, the participants tried to avoid thinking about what was going at home as a way to cope with this challenge, for example Nick commented *if you don't think about it, it doesn't bother you*. For the participants in this study important social events included weddings, concerts and other social gatherings with friends or activities that support peer socialisation characteristic of those in early adulthood or Gen Y (Eisner, 2005).

#### *Time off*

The amount of time off generated by FIFO employment emerged as a significant positive aspect of this lifestyle. This finding supports that of Gallegos (2006) who found that second to financial gains, time away from work was the most frequently reported reason for continuing with FIFO employment. The men in this study reported that this time off enabled them to engage in activities which increased their sense of well-being. These included opportunities to travel and partake in social activities without being concerned about work commitments. When discussing what he enjoyed about the FIFO lifestyle Brett stated:

*The time off and the time I get to spend with my friends is a big one for me... it's*

*given me the opportunity to travel and do things you don't normally get to do... the freedom to move and do what I like when I like when I'm not at work is the biggest draw card for me.*

Travel was frequently mentioned as an activity that was undertaken by the individuals in this study. Consistent with the research of Storey and Shrimpton (1989), the financial remuneration and lack of family commitments was highlighted as making this possible as Anthony implied; *Five weeks off paid for and yeah, living on your own watch, doing whatever you want... With five weeks I can travel... I can do a lot of things.*

In contrast to engaging in positive activities to increase well-being many participants reported using alcohol and illicit drugs during their time off as Christian commented, *I think I have been drunk just about every day.* Although they did not identify as drug users many commented that they consumed illicit drugs recreationally while at home. Peter provided a description of his use *I like to take drugs and stuff... [I use] pretty much anything I can get my hands on... because you are sort of doing nothing at home so yeah you just smoke pot all day... it ends up being every day and before you know it every trip... I would probably have pills on the weekend, probably every weekend... and ice if that's going around.*

While Collinson (1998) suggested that FIFO employees typically consume higher levels of alcohol during their time off compared to the general population, the available research that explores illicit drug use among offshore personnel appears limited. Keown (2005) has however commented that mining personnel will utilise substances such as alcohol to help them sleep and Frone (2008) reported that illicit drugs are more likely to be used in response to work stressors rather than induced by them.

Additionally, due to the exploratory nature of the present study it is difficult to distinguish between whether the participants' drug use is a result of their work practices or a generational effect that can be witnessed across all industries.

#### *Self-identity*

The development of a sense of identity is a

complex process and involves the formation of personality identity and identity constructed through social interaction with others (Stets & Burke, 2003). Self-identity was a significant factor that emerged from the interviews. Some common issues which could be characterised as belonging to this theme included: aspirations, others perceptions of self and work and beliefs and attitudes about self.

*Aspirations* The majority of the individuals in this study commented that they did not want to continue working offshore for a long period of time as Brett indicated, *it's not forever for me either... but it's providing a means to an end at the moment to help me get where I would like to be later.* Such statements are consistent with the current Gen Y research that suggests members of this generation have shorter tenure in jobs than the generations that came before them (McCrinkle, 2006). However it has also been recognised that FIFO workers, irrespective of age, generally may have aspirations for working in this role for a finite period of time (Watts, 2004). Some noted that they were unsure what the future held for their careers but many suggested that they did not envisage themselves being employed in a job that required them to work 9am to 5pm. Brett further elaborated that *I still would never envisage working full time 9 to 5 ever. I just can't see myself getting injected into that sort of life,* and Matthew also stated that *something I always said I wouldn't do is work 9 – 5.* In addition many of the participants also aspired to retire at an early age as Matthew implied. *I'll maybe retire when I'm 50 or something like that... I've got the option of doing that if I want to.* Comments provided by the men demonstrated that they believed the FIFO lifestyle facilitated their current goals and aspirations thus, influencing their construction of personal self-identity.

*Others' perceptions of self and work* The perceptions other people form and express about individuals influence the formation of the social self (Stets & Burke, 2003). Participants in this study felt other people not involved in FIFO



employment viewed their work and lifestyle negatively, with many choosing not to disclose their occupation to others in an attempt to avoid being judged unfavourably. When discussing how he felt others viewed his occupation Nick reported:

*I think some people are actually quite jealous of it, the fact that you know, you don't really go without anything.*

Additionally, Alex commented:

*I just feel like sometimes people are like oh yeah... you just go up there and are on holidays for two weeks.*

Some of the men in the study did not discuss their occupation with others for fear of others forming negative opinions about them. As Brett stated; *I don't like speaking about it because sometimes you get people thinking you are talking it up... so I just tell people I fix light bulbs or something like that.* Robert also supported this view when he said: *When people ask me what I do I just say "oh I deliver milk, that's all I do"... I don't like to tell them.*

The negative perceptions of the FIFO lifestyle by others appeared to have potential implications for the formation of identity for these individuals. Many of the men in this study indicated that people not involved in the industry, and the community generally, viewed the work as overly simplistic and often expressed feelings of jealousy and resentment towards them because of the work they do and their financial remuneration. This appeared to impact the participants as there is a discrepancy between how the workers view the lifestyle and how they feel others perceive it. *People think we are slack, we are just watching movies all the time... I have done a 16 hour shift on a drill before. It isn't an easy job* (Christian). Brett highlighted that he felt a social perception of FIFO workers creating problems for others was also apparent ...[others think] *that you have got no responsibilities, you just don't give a shit, you have got all this money, you are causing problems with all you guys spending hard and large and big and that's causing problems down here for*

*everybody else.* The sacrifices that the participants felt they were making were not being acknowledged.

*Beliefs and attitudes about self* The belief's an individual holds about themselves is an integral component of self-identity (Tyler, Kramer & John, 1999). Typically, the men in this study shared similar beliefs about themselves. They viewed themselves as relatively hard working, easy going and resilient and felt that it was these characteristics that enabled them to effectively cope with offshore FIFO employment. As Matthew stated, *I wouldn't say everyone could work offshore... I would say it takes a certain type of person... I mean you've got to be an easy going and pretty open and not offended too easily.* Robert also added to the importance of the need to be "easy going" when he commented, *well I'm just a pretty laid back person. I just get on with anybody because you have to.*

The ability to be able to deal with the pressure of the job was also highlighted as important and consistent with some studies (Gent, 2004). There was also evidence of positive emotions experienced at the work place too. As a part of negotiating the lifestyle successfully work pressure needed to be dealt with in a particular way as Anthony indicated, *you just take it on the chin. If you don't let stuff like that worry you, you will be alright.*

Many of the men also reported witnessing other people fail to effectively manage the pressures of the FIFO lifestyle. They attributed this to several reasons, some of which included; lack of knowledge around what to expect prior to arrival at the workplace, failure to get along with others at work and an inability to be resilient when confronted with obstacles. Watts (2004) also reported that those inexperienced with, or new to, the lifestyle were certainly at risk of poorer psychological outcome. Thus, it can be suggested that the beliefs and attitudes these individuals hold about themselves has enabled them to successfully overcome challenges that have arisen for them whilst working offshore.

### *Relationships*

The impact of land based and off shore FIFO employment on personal relationships has frequently been identified in the literature as a source of stress for personnel (Clarke, McCann, Morrice & Taylor, 1985; Collinson, 1998;; Reynolds, 2004; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001; Sibbel & Kaczmarek, 2005). Consistent with these studies, relationship issues emerged as a dominant theme amongst the men in this study. Less than half of the men in the study were currently in a relationship at the time of the interview, however were willing to recall their experience of past relationships. Some viewed the lifestyle as a positive for relationships such that, the separations generated feelings of appreciation for each other. However, the majority of men indicated that the FIFO lifestyle places considerable pressure on personal relationships. The main issues to emerge under this theme included: trust and importance of regular contact within relationships, difficulty forming and maintaining relationships and the influence of others' experiences about relationships.

*Trust and importance of regular contact within relationships* In this study, trust and regular contact emerged as a significant factor for the men. If trust was not apparent within relationships they felt that the relationship was unable to be maintained. Additionally, the contact between partners enabled the worker to cope with the periods of separation. When disclosing a time his girlfriend broke his trust Peter commented:

*She cheated on me once... the big thing was trust and especially while I am away it was really hard and I suppose that is one of the reasons why I ring her every day. Just to know where she is... If your relationship is going to work you have got to trust each other.*

The regularity of contact was also important for those in a relationship consistent with the research by Reynolds (2004). When discussing the issue of contact with his partner Anthony said:

*I am big on it, even if it is just talking about nothing... and it helps during the day as well to know that you have got like an email to read and reply to or a phone call or something like that.*

Alternatively, Chris felt that he had little to contribute when he spoke to his partner as his daily activities did not vary greatly, he stated:

*I don't like talking to her on the phone out there, not much happens during the day so it makes it hard.. it's just another day. Woke up went to work. You only ring up because you want to hear them talk. so it gets frustrating for her when you are out there and you just get in the zone and you are eating, working, sleeping and that's it.*

Even for these young adults the periods of separation resulted in the ability to spend extended periods of quality time with their partners when not at work. However if the relationship was characterised by little trust the FIFO employee was left ruminating about what their partner is doing at home, thus impacting on their overall feeling of well-being.

*Difficulty forming and maintaining relationships* The ability to form and maintain close personal relationships is a challenge that must be confronted in order for the young adult to successfully navigate the developmental stage of early adulthood (Arnett, 2000). The men in this study highlighted that the FIFO lifestyle places pressure on forming and maintaining relationships. It was frequently cited that this difficulty was a result of the recurring absences required by FIFO employment consistent with the research that generally supports the view that the lifestyle presents challenges for all in relationships (Parkes, 1998; Reynolds, 2004). Brett commented:

*Throughout the majority of my offshore lifestyle I haven't been in a relationship... the worst part is the um, going away... especially at the start of the relationship because you didn't know how things were going to turn out and you have got to be there to inject yourself into a relationship and people are very fast and frequent*

*nowadays.*

Furthermore, when discussing his experience with relationships Chris stated:

*It's hard to be single out there because you come home and especially try and establish a relationship and two weeks off goes so quick and then you are back at work and then you see them going 'oh,' you know, just freaking out.*

Some men thought that the FIFO lifestyle gave them a lot of time to reflect on their relationships and what their partners were doing at home and thus, chose to avoid them. When discussing his relationship experience Alex reported:

*I sort of tended to avoid them... I didn't want to have to think about what was going on down here and I didn't want to have my mind occupied even though it sort of was anyway but I did try to keep a distance in the relationship... it's just so easy for your mind to wander up there.*

The inability to establish close relationships in early adulthood can lead to feelings of isolation (Arnett, 2000). This has implications for FIFO employees as the difficulty experienced in forming relationships can potentially impact on the successful navigation of early adulthood and transition to the next stage of adulthood.

*Influence of others stories/experiences about relationships* The men in this study reported that the close nature of the working environment facilitated the sharing of others personal stories and experiences of relationships. These stories predominately revolved around negative experiences that were being passed on by those older than the participants. This had the effect of influencing the participants' attitudes towards relationships as Chris stated,

*You don't get a good view of marriage because they [the other men] are going 'oh we are paying this much for to about three kids' and your sitting there thinking oh fuck is this what I have to look forward to?*

Anthony also said:

*A lot of the guys out there are all split up and they have got stories and stuff like that... they love ripping into you about it as well, they tell you when you get home, knock on the front door and run around the back.*

Research has generally supported that information about longer term intimate relationships is often provided by parents. For example, Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) found that young adults who had witnessed their parents' divorce were openly pessimistic about marriage and divorce and sought to avoid both. The men in their study had a desire for love but a wariness of being hurt. They were more likely to withdraw from involvement in current relationships and a significant number of young men avoided relationships altogether (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Additionally, as Dafoe-Whitehead and Popenoe (2000) have suggested, young people are receiving negative advice about marriage from parents and relatives and as a result they are becoming cautious about forming intimate relationships.

However, for the men in this study these negative stories and experiences were not coming from their parents or relatives but instead the "older" men at work. This sharing of stories among colleagues could be indicative of a generational effect across industries and not one specific to FIFO employment.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Gen Y employed offshore in a FIFO capacity to determine the psychosocial impact of this lifestyle. The utilisation of a social constructionist approach facilitated valuable insight into how these individuals constructed their self-identity and gave meaning to their experiences. A series of semi-structured interviews facilitated open and honest discussion about personal experiences and the men seemed enthusiastic and willing to convey their thoughts and opinions. As a result of this several themes were identified. These themes included the FIFO lifestyle, self-identity and relationships.

Overall the results obtained from this study support those obtained from other studies conducted on land based and offshore based personnel and their families in national (Kaczmarek, & Sibbel, 2008; Reynolds, 2004; Watts, 2004 ) and international contexts (Parkes & Clark, 1997; Storey & Shrimpton, 1989). Specifically the key finding of this study was that generally the men were satisfied with their employment and the lifestyle, despite the many challenges that FIFO presents. Overall, the men seemed to have adjusted well to the stressors associated with offshore FIFO employment and had positive attitudes and beliefs about themselves as individuals.

This study has implications for the current body of knowledge around how FIFO employment impacts on the psychosocial development of Gen Y employees. Firstly, it provides evidence to suggest that the men belonging to Gen Y are successfully navigating developmental issues and the current community perspectives to FIFO and Gen Y. Despite some of the negative community perceptions towards FIFO as an employment option, and Gen Y as having poor job commitment, many of the participants have successfully held their jobs for a period of time. Furthermore they have demonstrated ability to negotiate their employment, social networks and relationships (Arnett, 2000).

Secondly, this study contributes to current research highlighting that FIFO employment requires individuals to confront a unique set of challenges. Some of these include the confined work and living conditions, demanding shift patterns and isolation from community and social supports (Cooper & Sutherland, 1987; Parkes, 1992; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997). Previous studies (Chen et al., 2003; Clarke, McCann, Morrice & Taylor, 1985; Cooper & Sutherland, 1987; Parkes, 1992, 1998; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997) identified that the negative factors associated with offshore FIFO employment adversely affect workers psychological well-being. The

perspective offered by the Gen Y workers in this study did not entirely support this conclusion. Instead it was found that although these elements can be viewed as unfavourable, they are also considered an inevitable characteristic of the job. Furthermore the view was offered by these participants that the individual must be willing to effectively confront these challenges in order to benefit from the positive aspects that FIFO employment offers and to establish a community of fellow FIFO workers as part of their support network. However it must be considered that the fact that the majority of the workers had been engaged in this type work for longer than 18 months, with a few having spent more than 6 years performing this work could have influenced this perspective.

From this study it is evident that amongst the employees there is a perception that one must have a particular attitude toward offshore FIFO employment and that this is part of the coping strategy that is employed by personnel generally and not just Gen Y. If employees generally, do not have the right attitude and an effective coping style they are unlikely to remain in the industry due to the impact this can have on their psychological functioning. This finding is consistent with the view espoused by Watts (2004) who indicated that individuals and their partners are likely to experience a series of stages of adaptation to FIFO and that eventually through a process of redefining self, and changes in their emotions and relationships may be left to either accept or reject the lifestyle.

Lastly, social researchers have speculated that Gen Y is perhaps the most materially endowed generation (Sheahan, 2008) and that interpersonally they are cautious about long term relationships and commitment as a consequence of witnessing conflict in preceding generations' relationships (Dafoe-Whitehead & Popenoe, 2000). The financial rewards offered by FIFO employment was valued and appeared to suit the participants, consistent with the Gen Y research. Their high disposable income meant that they could afford regular expensive holidays and recreational pursuits.

Interpersonally the vast bulk of the young men in this study had previously or were currently living in a committed relationship, however in support of the research (Dafoe-Whitehead & Popenoe, 2000) on those navigating early adulthood, there was evidence that indicated that they were suggestible to the perspectives and experiences that those more senior to them had about relationships.

As this was an exploratory study, it was difficult to differentiate what was a result of FIFO employment and what was a result of generational effects that may be present across all industries. Consequently, further investigation into generational effects and FIFO employment is warranted. It is recommended that future research in this area utilise both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to gain a greater understanding of the issues confronted by this cohort. Specifically interviews and questionnaires that focus on the values placed on company loyalty, mobility in the workforce, and retention consistent with Beach et al. (2003) may be able to tap how those qualities presumed to belong to Gen Y actually impact on psychological (mental health and substance use) and occupational health of this emerging generation of workers. Longitudinal research would facilitate an appreciation of how Gen Y navigate the demands of the lifestyle, the changing community perceptions about FIFO and how these impact on psychological and social maturation.

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