# CRISIS AND/OR RELIEF? AN EXAMINATION OF MOTHERS' AND FATHERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE EMPTY NEST TRANSITION

by

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# APPROVAL

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# ABSTRACT

A popular belief is that mothers experience an "empty nest syndrome" when their young adult children leave home. Recent research, however, challenges this notion, with its associated time of depression, crisis, and grief. However, there is a lack of research on both mothers' *and* fathers' experiences of this transition, as well as the role of ethnocultural background on this transition. Building upon life course theory, this study examines parental experiences of the empty nest transition and what effects it has on parental emotional health and well-being, while taking into account gender, ethnic background, and other contextual factors. This mixed methods study uses data from telephone surveys (a sub-sample of 316 British, Chinese, Southern European, and Indo/East Indian parents) and sixteen in-depth interviews. Findings reveal variation by gender, ethnic background, and socio-demographic characteristics. Finally, coping strategies and community programs that could help parents who are experiencing this transition will be highlighted.

# DEDICATION

To Eagan – this thesis would not be possible without you. Thank you for providing countless hours of proofreading, discussion of ideas, and unlimited emotional support and encouragement.

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# CHAPTER 1:INTRODUCTION

## Introduction

The empty nest transition – the period when children leave the parental home – is considered by many parents to be a normative event. This is a developmental phase faced by many parents in midlife where they expect their children to leave the parental home, become independent, and to take on more adult roles and pathways (Aldous 1996; Mitchell 2006b). When a child leaves home, it is a significant event for parents as well as their children. Both are entering a new phase of their life. For the child, it is an opportunity to start their adult life and to achieve independence. For parents, it may be a time of pride and accomplishment that their children are leaving home and moving towards becoming independent adults. In short, this transition can be marked by feelings of a job "well-done". However, this transition can also be a difficult time whereby parents lose their day-to-day parental role and they miss their child's daily presence in their lives. Indeed, some research suggests that parents experience ambiguous reactions whereby they feel a combination of happy and sad emotions when their child leaves home. One explanation for this ambiguity is that sometimes children leave the parental home and there is a physical separation, but the child remains psychologically or financially dependent on their parents and their parents' support (Lomranz et al. 1996; Mitchell 2006b).

Parents tend to hold certain expectations about how the transition to the empty nest should unfold. These expectations include the "appropriate" times when a child should leave the parental home and the "appropriate" circumstances or reasons in which the child should leave home. These expectations are usually based on social timetables that are influenced by socially, culturally, and personally prescribed beliefs and norms (Settersten 1998; Settersten & Hagestad 1996; Veevers, Gee, and Wister 1996). For example, parents from the baby boom generation (i.e., those parents born between 1946 and 1964) are more likely to see their children leave home for reasons other than to get married (e.g., to get an education, to seek independence, to live with a partner) than the previous generations (Goldscheider 1997; Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1999). However, with some ethnic groups, the parents expect their children to remain at home until they are married or when they finish college or university (Mitchell 2006b).

Furthermore, parents from some ethnic groups may never achieve an "empty nest". For instance, in many "traditional" Indo/East Indian families, it is expected that the oldest son will remain in the parental home and care for the parents. When the son gets married, instead of leaving home he will bring his wife into the parental home. This often results in three-generation households, and as a result many parents never experience a completely empty nest (Pillay 1988). As there has been increasing immigration to Canada from places other than the United States or Europe in recent years – which creates more diversity in Canadian family life – it is important to examine ethnic or cultural variations in

parental expectations of homeleaving and experiences of the empty nest transition (Boyd & Vickers 2000; Mitchell 2006b).

Overall, studies suggest that parents' expectations about the "appropriate" time and reason for their child to leave home are an important factor in how parents experience the transition to the empty nest. Homeleavings that are considered "off-time" or "inappropriate" can result in negative social and psychological outcomes, and this could affect how parents and their young adult children adapt and cope with this transition (Settersten 2003a). Moreover, in recent years there have been social changes that can have an effect on parental expectations of the homeleaving and how parents experience this transition.

For one, many mothers are now employed outside of the parental home. Women's participation in the labour force began to dramatically increase in the late 1970s as a result of the feminist movement and the rising cost of living (which made it more difficult to support a family on one income) (Baker 2001a; Mitchell 2009). By 2003, 80% of married women were in the paid labour force (Statistics Canada 2003). Also, as more mothers are working full-time, there is a growing need for both parents to share in the domestic tasks and daily child care (Baker 2001b). Russell & Hwang (2004) found that although mothers in Canada and the United States still carry out the majority of housework and child care, fathers are becoming more involved in their children's lives and are taking on more child care over time. These changes in parental roles – with its subsequent changes in family structures and family relationships – can affect how mothers and fathers experience the empty nest transition.

Additionally, in recent years there have been dramatic changes in the circumstances of the homeleaving. Aside from the changes in the reason the child leaves, as mentioned earlier, more young adults are leaving the parental home at later ages (Mitchell 2006b). For example, in 2006, 43.5% of Canadian young adults aged 20-29 lived with their parents – this is an increase from 32% in 1986 (Statistics Canada 2007). Furthermore, when children do leave home, their moves are not always permanent. There has been an increasing trend since the 1970s of young adult children moving back into the parental home after initially leaving – these children are often referred to as "boomerang kids" (Goldscheider 1997; Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1999; Mitchell 2006b). In Canada, the 2001 census revealed that 28% of young women and 33% of young men aged twenty to twenty-nine have returned home at least once (Statistics Canada 2002).

More young adult children are remaining at home longer or returning home for various different reasons including experiencing difficult job markets (with low starting salaries and fewer career jobs), expensive housing markets, rising tuition fees, and higher student loan debt (Goldscheider et al. 1999; Mitchell 2006b). Also, more children today are returning home because transitions out of the parental home have become more unstable since the 1950s. One reason is because cohabitation is becoming more common among young adults and these relationships tend to be more fragile or less permanent than legal marriage relationships (Mitchell 2006b). Another reason is the increased importance of higher education and the subsequent rise in post-secondary enrollment. As a result, the parental home can be seen as a

convenient "home base" when one is single or enduring transitional periods like attending university (Milan, Beaupre, and Turcotte 2006; Mitchell 2006b). As a result of children leaving home later, with the possibility of returning home again, parents today are likely to experience the transition to the empty nest differently than earlier generations.

## Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine parental experiences of the empty nest transition. Building upon life course theory, this study analyzes what factors (e.g., gender, ethnic background, socio-demographic and contextual characteristics) play a role in how parents experience this transition and how it affects their emotional health and well-being. To achieve this goal, a mixed methods approach (i.e., employing both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study) of secondary survey data analysis and in-depth qualitative interviews is employed. This research design is increasingly becoming more popular and favoured in the social and human sciences as a result of more researchers finding legitimacy in both quantitative and qualitative research (Creswell 2003; Greenstein 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998). Through quantitative methods general patterns or trends in parental experiences of this transition are identified, while qualitative data provides a more detailed and contextual understanding of these experiences as well as further elaboration of patterns found in the quantitative analysis. Implications for parental emotional health and well-being as well as practical applications for coping strategies and

community programs that could help families who are experiencing this transition will also be highlighted.

## Research Questions

*Grand Tour Question:* How do parents experience the transition to the empty nest? In particular, how does this transition affect the parent's emotional health and well-being (e.g., did they experience "empty nest syndrome", how difficult was it for them on an emotional level to have their child leave home)?

*Sub-Question 1:* How does one's gender, ethnic background, and other socio-demographic and contextual factors influence parental experiences of the empty nest transition

*Sub-Question 2:* What strategies help parents prepare for or adjust to their child's homeleaving and the experience of the empty nest?

## Definition of Key Terms[1]

*Parent* – For the purpose of this study, a parent is an individual who is at least 35 years old and has at least one child that is aged 18-35 and has left the parental home for at least four months. This child could be biological, adopted, or a stepchild. This also includes individuals who are legal guardians to a child.

*Study Child* – The focal child of the study. The study child had to be at least 18 years old and is currently not living in the parental home. When the participant

[1] As this study involves secondary data analysis of a survey data set collected by Dr. Barbara Mitchell (Simon Fraser University) for a parenting project she is conducting, many parameters of the study (e.g., who were eligible participants for the survey) and concepts were pre-determined and set by Dr. Mitchell (see references: Mitchell 2006a)

had more than one eligible child that could be the study child, the interviewer randomly selected one of the eligible children to be the study or focal child.

*Ethnic Identity/Background* – The ethnocultural group the participant primarily self-identifies with, regardless of country of birth. For the purposes of this study, four Canadian ethnocultural groups (four of the most common ethnocultural groups found in the greater Vancouver area) were examined: British, Chinese, Indo/East Indian, and Southern European.

*British* – Self-identified British origin individuals including those who are English, Scottish, Irish, or Welsh.

*Chinese* – Self-identified Chinese individuals with origins from countries including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and Canada.

*Southern European* – Those who self-identify as Southern-European. This group consists mostly of individuals with Italian heritage, but there are some participants with Greek, Spanish, or Portuguese backgrounds.

*Indo/East Indian*[2] – Those who self-identify with Indo/East Indian ethnic origin. Includes persons with origins from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Canada.

*Empty Nest Transition/Child Launching* – A life event and developmental process that is marked by the change in parental state or role as a result of at least one child leaving home. This is a transitional phase in which the parents are in the process of launching their children toward adult roles and responsibilities – this

[2] Terminology of "Indo/East Indian" referenced from Mitchell 2006a. Also referred to in the literature as "Indo-Canadian" (e.g., see Netting 2006).

usually involves young adult children moving toward residential independence. Those who have launched all their children are further along in the transition (i.e., a complete transition or those considered "empty nest" parents) than those who have only launched some of their children (i.e., "emptying nest" parents). It is also recognized that in some cultures (e.g., Indo/East Indian), the "complete" transition to the empty nest does not always occur if the family practices the tradition of one child (i.e., the eldest son) remaining in the parental home and never leaving.

*Homeleaving* – Process by which young adult children move toward adult roles and responsibilities by leaving the parental home for at least four months.

*Parental Experience of the Empty Nest Transition* – How parents reacted to and handled the transition of their study child leaving the parental home for a period of at least four months. This experience was measured by whether the parent experienced empty nest syndrome (i.e., felt very depressed when their child left home); how difficult it was for them on an emotional level to see their study child leave home; whether they were sad once all their children left home (or will be sad when all their children leave home); and whether their emotional health is currently better, worse, or has remained the same since their study child left home.

# CHAPTER 2:THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this study is the life course perspective. The life course perspective is a multidisciplinary approach (with roots in sociology) to the study of the effects of transitions, trajectories, and pathways on individuals' lives[3] (Macmillan & Copher 2005). Ideas from the disciplines of sociology, gerontology, demography, anthropology, and psychology, to name a few, have been applied to this perspective (Dewilde 2003, Mitchell 2006b). This perspective focuses on the importance of historical time and place, social structure, and family context; as well as its effects on individual and family development (Mitchell 2006b). This approach recognizes the importance of bridging macro and micro levels (i.e., bridging individual biography with the social structure) to better understand life course transitions (Giele & Elder 1998; Macmillan & Copher 2005). The family is considered a micro social group within a macro social context – a "collection of individuals with shared

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[3] Macmillan & Copher (2005:2) define *transitions* as "life events that index changes in a state or role that are more or less abrupt…Examples include getting a job, getting married, or having a child."

*Trajectories* are "the temporal continuity of roles or experience that vary in duration. Examples include marriage, work or a specific occupation, or parenthood."

*Pathways* are "interlocked trajectories of social roles, including education, work, family, and residence that are followed by individuals and groups through society. Pathways aggregate in a given society to define the overall structure of the life course."

history who interact within ever-changing social contexts (Bengston & Allen 1993:470)." The major tenets of the life course perspective that apply well to this study include the interplay of human lives and socio-historical context, heterogeneity in the life course, the importance of timing, the interdependence of lives over the life course, and adaptation and innovation.

*The Interplay of Human Lives and Sociohistorical Context*

The life course perspective emphasizes the importance of sociohistorical context. An individual's life course is influenced by the intersection of personal biography and sociohistorical factors (Elder et al. 2004; George 1993). Changing historical, social, and economic conditions (e.g. war, economic recessions) can affect opportunities, values, worldviews, and family relationships (Putney & Bengtson 2005). Social and cultural ideologies, such as patriarchy, can also influence one's perceptions and choices (Mitchell 2006b). Kim & Moen (2001) argue that in order to understand any transition, one must look at the larger context in which that transition occurred.

The sociohistorical context in which the empty nest transition occurs for parents can influence how they experience the transition. For example, midlife parents today are more likely to experience delays in the transition to the "empty nest" relative to earlier generations because of increased ages of homeleaving and high rates of home returning (Mitchell 2006b). Parents who have a child that leaves home at a later age and those who have had their child leave home before (with the possibility of their child returning again) can experience the

transition differently than parents who have had their child leave at an earlier age and those who have not had any children return home.

Additionally, there have been broad societal shifts in gender norms and expectations in the second half of the 20th century. Those who are now experiencing the empty nest transition have experienced the recent historical trends in the last thirty years including population aging/increase in longevity, changing patterns of family formation and dissolution, and women's increased labour force participation (Putney & Bengtson 2005). Most of the parents who are now experiencing the empty nest transition grew up during the peak of the women's movement in the 1970s, in which new opportunities for women opened up (Moen et al. 1997). With women's increased labour force participation, mothers are now more likely to have multiple roles (i.e., roles outside of the home) (Baker 2001a). As a result, there is a growing need for both parents to share in the domestic tasks and daily child care and consequently fathers are becoming more involved in parental roles (Baker 2001b; Mitchell 2009; Russell & Hwang 2004).

It is important to note that although fathers are more involved in child care and housework than in the past, there is still a dominant discourse of motherhood in society whereby mothers are viewed as the parent most responsible for these tasks. Day-to-day parenting and domestic tasks are still often viewed as a "feminine" role or "women's work" – with the belief that mothers are "better suited" and more competent of these tasks than fathers (Hochschild 2003; Lindsey 2005; McDaniel & Tepperman 2007). In summation, these changing

trends in the second half of the 20th century have altered family structures, functions, and role expectations and this can have an influence on the experience of the empty nest transition.

*Heterogeneity in the Life Course*

This tenet of heterogeneity first assumes that there is no "typical" or "ideal" family and instead there are various family forms (Eichler 1988; Luxton 2001; Macmillan & Copher 2005; Mitchell 2006b). Instead, it is recognized that family forms are socially constructed and historically specific. That which constitutes a "family" has varied across time and place (Luxton 2001). Dorothy Smith (1993) argues that the definition of the "typical" family often reflects the Standard North American Family (SNAF) ideology. The Standard North American Family is defined as a legally married, heterosexual couple sharing a household in which the adult male is the main breadwinner and the wife's primary role is to care for the family and the household (even if she is involved in paid work). SNAF as an ideological code orders how we view families and what we view as the "typical" family. Thus, this study recognizes that there is no monolithic family and the transition to the empty nest is experienced in multiple family settings and structures (e.g., single parents, stepfamilies, gay and lesbian parent families). There are various family structures and relationships which are involved in different stages, roles, values, and contexts, and it is important to take this into account when examining parental experiences of the empty nest transition.

Furthermore, the life course perspective emphasizes that there is heterogeneity in how individuals experience a transition or event (Elder et al.

2004; Mitchell 2006b). Transitional experiences can depend on the parent's gender, age, marital status, and the resources available to them (Demo et al. 2005; Dewilde 2003). For example, gender can be a factor in the experience of the empty nest transition. Sociological perspectives argue that gender is not biological or 'natural'; instead it is formed out of societal beliefs concerning the differing expectations of behaviours, roles, and values for males and females (Chibucos & Leite 2005). This social construction is a basis of inequality and is reflected in men and women's differential participation in the labour force, household labour, patterns of socialization, and the roles ascribed to men and women (Chibucos & Leite 2005, Osmond & Thorne 1993). Men and women can have differential experiences of the empty nest transition due to the different roles they have and prioritize, as well as the opportunities and resources they have to negotiate their experiences of the empty nest transition.

There will also be variation within genders. Not all mothers and all fathers will have the same experiences of the empty nest transition. The experience of an event differs depending on the biography of the individual, their social background, their physical location, their family structure, the resources available to them, and their personality (Dewilde 2003). Putney & Bengtson (2005) argue that class and ethnic differences need to be examined since these factors are central to the understanding of parents' changing life paths. Ethnocultural groups can instill norms, values, roles, and expectations for certain lifestyles, as well as family forms and relationships (Borland 1982). This can result in different

expectations in relation to the "appropriate" timing and reasons for homeleaving and different ways of adapting to this transition (Mitchell 2006b).

### *The Importance of Timing*

The issues of timing and order of different roles or transitions over the life course are very important (Macmillan & Copher 2005). In societies there are expectations of the "appropriate" age for individuals to transition into roles (Mitchell 2006b). Role transitions that are experienced earlier or later than socially prescribed (e.g., teenage childbearing or postponed parenthood) may be perceived as stressful or disruptive compared to "on-time" transitions (Quick & Moen 1998). The timing of a role transition can influence the ease in which the new role is incorporated into one's identity, the social acceptance of the new role, the resources that are available to adjust to the new role, and the effect the new role has on well-being (Williams & Umberson 2004). However, it must be noted that the definition of what constitutes "normative" timing is influenced by changing social and cultural values and norms (Chibucos & Leite 2005). Expectations can vary, for example, by social class, ethnic group, and gender (Demo et al. 2005).

The timing of the transition to the empty nest can influence how one experiences it. If a transition is "off-time" (e.g., the child leaves at a young age), it might have a negative impact on the parents' experience of the empty nest and their subsequent well-being. The parent may feel their child is not ready to experience this homeleaving transition and to take on more adult roles, and this may lead to distress or negative outcomes for the parent and also the child (Settersten 2003a). The reason the child is leaving home also plays a role in

what constitutes the "right" time to leave home. For example, in many North American families it is "normative" for a child to leave home to attend university after graduating from high school (Rubin 1981). Also, as mentioned earlier, parents from the "baby boomer" generation are more likely to expect and accept their children leaving home for non-marital pathways (Goldscheider 1997; Goldscheider& Goldscheider 1999). However, some ethnic groups continue to expect that their children remain at home until they complete university or until they get married. Thus, when these children leave home before completing school or getting married, this may cause distress for the parent and a more difficult time coping with the transition.

*The Interdependence of Lives Over the Life Course*

Individuals in a relationship with each other (e.g., parents and children, spouses/partners) are involved together in mutually influential development trajectories that extend throughout the life course (Greenfield & Marks 2006). The lives of individual family members are intertwined and thus the behaviours of one family member can have an effect on all. Each family member's resources, personality, and actions impact other family members (Demo et al. 2005). Elder et al. (2004) discuss that transitions in one person's life often results in transitions for their family members, as well. This can have implications for roles, responsibilities, and social identities. For example, a child's early transition into motherhood translates into an early transition to grandparenthood for the parents (Elder et al. 2004). Macro-level events can also influence interpersonal relations. For example, economic declines could persuade a mother to enter the labour

force to help address family financial troubles. This event might help the family by providing extra resources or it could change the routine of family life and cause conflict (Putney & Bengtson 2005).

This idea of linked lives has implications for parental well-being in the empty nest transition. As mentioned earlier, the choices the child makes in terms of when to leave and under what circumstances can affect the parents' lives as well. The child's decision can influence how the parent experiences and copes with the transition. The child's leaving could possibly increase parental well-being if the parent feels accomplished and proud launching their child and if they feel they now have more time for other roles or relationships. Conversely, the child's leaving could decrease parental well-being if the parent views this transition as a loss, is unhappy with the reason the child is leaving, and has a difficult time coping. Additionally, the effect of linked lives continues after the child is launched. Research has found that parental well-being may be enhanced if they perceive that they have a close relationship with their child (Allen et al. 2000). Also, how the child manages on their own is also important to parental well-being. There is a negative relationship between the number of problems an adult child has and the parents' well-being. Parents have higher well-being when their adult children are doing well on their own and do not have many problems. The more problems their child has, the more likely the parents will have feelings of distress and experiences of stigma (Greenfield & Marks 2006). Pillemer and Suitor (1991) found that parents whose adult children have problems (i.e., mental, physical, or stress-related problems) experience greater depression than

parents whose children do not have these problems. Parents can experience a lot of stress and worry as a result of their children's problems (Greenberg & Becker 1988).

*Adaptation and Innovation*

The life course is shaped by the interaction of the nature of transitions that occur and how people adapt to them (Giele & Elder 1998). This perspective conceptualizes individuals as active agents in creating their own lives (Allen et al. 2000). Over the life course, families and individuals are confronted with changes and in order to restore their control, they will try to adapt to the requirements of the new situation or role (Dewilde 2003). Settersten (2003b:30) described the "models of agency within structure" in which individuals make choices based on the alternatives that are available to them. They are active agents of their own development, but within the confines of the social world in which they exist (Settersten 2003b). Individuals use their skills and resources to choose roles, environments, and to negotiate social relationships that are beneficial to them (Demo et al. 2005; Elder et al. 2004). For example, parents going through the empty nest transition may come up with strategies to adapt to this new phase in their life. Parents could take on new roles or social activities, they could keep in contact with their child and maintain a close relationship, and they could continue to provide their child with emotional and/or material support in order to help them deal with the transition.

However, it is important to note that the level of adaptation and innovation can vary for different parents. The adaptation can be based on the impact of the

transition – which is dependent on the social context. Whether the event or transition occurs "regularly", is socially accepted, and the extent to which the individual is prepared for the transition can influence the adaptive strategies (Dewilde 2003). Additionally, how one will adapt to these changes and their possibilities for innovation are dependent on the individual's characteristics (e.g., personality, education), available resources, cultural patterns, and social network connections (Giele & Elder 1998). Some parents face more constraints or challenges than others do, especially in the face of limited power and resources to negotiate alternative plans of action (Mitchell 2006b).

In conclusion, the life course perspective is a well-suited framework for this study because it provides a complex understanding of transitions and experiences. This perspective recognizes the importance of macro and micro levels in studying the life course, instead of just focusing on one. As a result, this perspective takes heterogeneity and social context into account. Instead of focusing on single-factor explanations, this perspective considers multiple variables, including cultural, social, and individual variation (Giele & Elder 1998). In addition, this perspective recognizes the importance of the timing of the event and not just the occurrence of the event (George 1993). There is much more complexity when one examines the context of the event occurring. Finally, rather than assuming a homogenous experience, this perspective recognizes that multiple dimensions like gender, culture, and one's place and time have an effect on human experience and transitions. Examining the complexity and variety of

family types, family relations, roles, and coping strategies provides a greater understanding of the diverse parental experiences of the empty nest transition.

## Literature Review

Studies on the empty nest transition began in the late 1950s and started to gain prominence in the 1970s (Borland 1982). Discussion of an "empty nest syndrome" – in which the transition to the empty nest was characterized as an extremely depressing and stressful time for women – began to appear in popular and clinical literature at this time (Harkins 1978). Earlier studies supported the idea of an empty nest syndrome and concluded that the transition to the empty nest can result in depression, identity crisis, and lowered health and well-being for women (Bart 1971; Curlee 1969; Phillips 1957). It was argued that women, and in particular housewives, become more depressed than men when their children leave home because women mostly gain their identity from their mothering role and usually have no alternative roles to take on (Phillips 1957).

However, a majority of empirical studies have not found support for the widespread existence of an empty nest syndrome. Researchers have argued that these earlier studies were based on local or unrepresentative samples (Glenn 1975; White & Edwards 1990). Many cross-sectional studies of the general population have found that individuals in the empty nest transition either have unchanged well-being (Lowenthal & Chiriboga 1972; Neugarten 1970) or increased well-being (Deutscher 1973; Glenn 1975, Harkins 1978; Radloff 1980; Rubin 1981) compared to individuals that still have children living with them. Additionally, research that is more recent indicates that life satisfaction increases

once children leave (Dennerstein et al. 2002; Schmidt et al. 2004). However, this is not to say that crises never happen for parents; instead, these findings support the idea that extreme depression and crises does not appear to happen to a majority of parents during the empty nest transition.

Research has found that more parents are viewing the empty nest transition as a time of increased options and freedom, and not a time of loss (Borland 1982; Rubin 1981). Rubin (1981) interviewed parents that viewed this time as a possibility for adventure and travel, a time for freedom, and a chance to develop who they want to be as a person. Smolak (1993) stated that while parents were glad that they had children, the benefit of increased freedom, privacy, and available resources made the empty nest transition a pleasant time of their life. Harkins (1978) found that parents in the empty nest enjoyed a better financial condition and less responsibility. Smith and Moen (1988) also found that, generally, the empty nest transition increases financial well-being. With more freedom and resources, this time can be an opportunity for parents to pursue interests and roles that provide them satisfaction (Lindsey 2005; Raup & Myers 1989).

The experience of the empty nest can also result in lower parental stress. Dennerstein et al. (2002) found that in the first year women experienced an empty nest, there was an increase in psychological well-being and a decline in the number of daily hassles reported by women. In an examination of the changes in parental role stress before and after the launching of their child (to attend university), 90 percent of both mothers and fathers reported a decline in

role stress. Additionally, parents who launched their children for university reported less role stress than parents that had their child commute to university from home (Anderson 1988).

Studies reveal another possible benefit of the empty nest is an improvement in the partner or marital relationship. Studies that have compared parents (in the same age range) that have launched their children and those that still have children living with them often conclude that those who have launched their children have greater marital satisfaction and happiness (Glen 1975; White & Edwards 1990). A combination of reduced child-related and economic responsibilities, as well as more time for each other during the empty nest can contribute to enhanced marital quality (Mitchell 2006b; Raup & Myers 1989; Umberson et al. 2005). Harris et al. (1986) found that there was increased marital satisfaction when parents entered the empty nest because women felt relieved when their childrearing responsibilities subsided and they had more freedom and opportunities to spend time with their partners.

The empty nest transition can also improve the parent-child relationship. In a study conducted by Sullivan and Sullivan (1980), they found that young adult males who left home for university reported improved communication with their parents. Those who left for university were more likely to report improved communication with their parents compared to those who commuted to university from home. Sullivan and Sullivan argued that the physical distance between the child and the parent allowed the young adult males to freely express affection and open communication without fear that their independence would be inhibited.

Additional studies have also found that young adults report an increase in feelings of affection, intimacy, and decreased conflict with their parents after leaving home for university (Pipp et al. 1985; Shaver et al. 1984). Aquilino (1997) found that parents reported a reduction in conflict and power issues with their children that left home. He argued that "home leaving acts as a catalyst for movement toward a more individuated relationship that is based on the mutual care and respect of two adults" (Aquilino 1997:682).

The increase in well-being after the empty nest transition, however, may be dependent on other factors or certain circumstances. This can include the timing of the homeleaving, the level of worry the parent has about their child leaving, the amount of preparation, and the amount of contact with the child. McLanahan and Sorenson (1985) reported that there was an increase in mothers' self-satisfaction when their child left home "on time" (i.e., when the parent was over 40 years old). Parents may also react negatively to the transition if they feel the child is not yet prepared to live independently. With the homeleaving, the parent could be worried about the child being on their own or they could feel as if they are failures as parents because their child is not ready to live an independent life and contribute to society (in their opinion) and thus feel guilty (Rubin 1981; Smolak 1993). Dennerstein et al. (2002) found in their study that the improvement in parental well-being during the empty nest transition was confined to those who reported that they were not concerned or worried about their child leaving home.

Additionally, Rubin (1981) reported that those mothers who were prepared for the homeleaving had a less problematic transition. She explained how working-class parents could not take for granted that their child would attend university and thus the child's departure date was more unpredictable. This made it more difficult for working-class parents to prepare for separation. While those who can expect their child will leave for university have more time to prepare and adjust. Rubin (1981:19) explains, "Often middle-class mothers speak of the child's senior year in high school as the year in which much of the separation work is done – what sociologists call 'anticipatory socialization'." Parents also seem to handle the transition better if they continue to have good communication with their launched children. White & Edwards (1990) reported that the empty nest only had a positive effect on life satisfaction when there was frequent contact with launched children. Anderson (1988) found that open and effective communication as well as a sense of emotional connectedness between the parent and the child was related to reduced parental stress after the child was launched. This communication also helps to reduce the parents' initial perceptions of stress when their child first leaves home.

Researchers have argued that parenthood is a stressful role and the loss of this role with the empty nest transition should lead to improvements in parental well-being (e.g., Dennerstein et al. 2002; Glenn 1975; Harkins 1978; Rubin 1981). However, other studies reveal there is more ambiguity and complexity involved in child launching. Lomranz et al. (1996) found that parents can experience somewhat contradictory reactions to launching – viewing it both as a

stressful experience of separation and a positive experience for growth and new opportunities for both the parent and the child. Possible explanations for the ambiguity or range of reactions to homeleaving are that children continue to be a part of the parents' lives after they leave (i.e., maintain a relationship and keep in contact) and that many parents continue to provide physical and emotional support to their child (e.g., food, laundry, transportation, encouragement) (Lomranz et al. 1996; White & Edwards 1990).

There have also been studies that have examined the role of employment in parental well-being in the empty nest phase. Research has found that women who are employed at mid-life have higher health and well-being than full-time homemakers (Coleman & Antonucci 1983; Faver 1984; Rubin 1981). Powell (1977) found that women who were employed full-time were least likely to experience the empty nest syndrome, followed by women employed part-time. Women who were not employed were most at risk of experiencing empty nest syndrome. Adlemann et al. (1989) examined the role of employment on well-being for mothers experiencing the empty nest and they speculated that employment would cushion the effects of changes in the maternal role. However, they found that employment had important effects on well-being by itself, but empty nest status had no main effect on well-being. Employed mid-life women had higher well-being than mid-life full-time homemakers – regardless of parental status. Whereas, Radloff (1980), in a study examining depression scores, found that women in the empty nest had significantly fewer symptoms of depression compared to women living with their children, regardless of employment status

(i.e., either employed or homemaker). It was found that homemakers in the empty nest were no more depressed than employed women in the empty nest.

Despite the mixed results on the effects of employment on parental experiences of the empty nest transition, many studies conclude that it is helpful to have roles in addition to parenting. Rubin (1981) found that women who built their lives and identities around the homemaker/mother role were more likely to have a difficult time with the transition, whereas mothers that occupied multiple roles seemed to be happier. Borland (1982) and Harkins (1978) argued that those who had very traditional attitudes towards women's roles in family and society, a significant involvement in the maternal role at the time of the transition, and no alternative roles were more likely to experience empty nest syndrome. Raup and Myers (1989) reported that even when mothers have a strong reaction to their children leaving, it is typically short-lived – especially if women are able to take part in other roles that can replace needs once met through their mothering role.

There is a paucity of literature that examines how fathers experience the empty nest transition. Most of the studies on this transition only examined mothers' experiences. In one of the first studies of fathers' experiences of the empty nest stage, Lewis et al. (1979) found that a majority of fathers were either neutral, somewhat happy, or very happy upon the completion of launching all their children. However, there was not much examination on the reasons for this; instead, Lewis et al. focused on the fathers that felt very unhappy or somewhat happy upon their children leaving. They found that the fathers who were most

unhappy tended to be older, had fewer children, perceived themselves as more nurturing and caring men, and had a less satisfactory marriage. In a study of mothers' and fathers' reaction to the launching phase, Lomranz et al. (1996) found that mothers tended to be more emotionally dependent on their child and the launching was thus more stressful. Fathers, on the other hand, tended to view the transition as fostering the child's maturity.

Although very few in number, some studies argue that it is fathers that have a harder time with the empty nest transition than mothers. Rubin (1981) argued that fathers may have a harder time with the transition because they are less prepared for it and they wish to make up for lost time with their children. She notes that in "traditional" families (i.e., the father is the main breadwinner), men usually have less daily involvement with their children as a result of career priorities and thus they are less aware of the child's gradual movement toward independence. The child's transition may seem sudden and then the father wishes he had more time to spend with his children. Rubin states that mothers do not usually miss any part of the child's development process and so the child's homeleaving does not seem as sudden; the homeleaving provides a sense of accomplishment for mothers rather than feelings of loss. Lindsey (2005) notes that men's increased depression at mid-life is linked to their regrets about not spending more time with their children as a result of career priorities. She adds that in an attempt to recapture the lost parenting experience, many men often turn to grandchildren. Souza (2006) also reported that fathers are more likely to have a difficult time with the transition because they are often less prepared than

mothers to see the child leave. She found that fathers often associate their children's homeleaving with the loss of the child's companionship and the loss of their protector role, whereas mothers associate the homeleaving with reduced stress and responsibility.

There are a few studies that have specifically investigated the role of ethnicity (or culture) in parental well-being during the transition to the empty nest. Research has found distinct norms, values, roles, and expectations for certain lifestyles, as well as family forms and relationships among different ethnocultural groups (Borland 1982; Boyd & Pryor 1989; Glick et al. 1997; Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1993; Mitchell 2007). In a European study conducted by Mazzuco (2003), it was found that Italian mothers experienced the empty nest negatively with decreased health and well-being, while French mothers had a more positive experience of the empty nest stage. Mazzuco argued that French mothers tended to hold less traditional maternal roles and faced the possibility of their child returning to the parental home in the future. Furthermore, Pillay (1988) reported that Indo/East Indian mothers (his study took place in South Africa) can face an especially difficult time with the transition in cases where the oldest son does not follow the extended-family tradition and leaves the parental home (usually a result of acculturation). He argues that these mothers have a harder time adjusting to an empty nest than (non-East Indian) British or American mothers who anticipate that all their children will leave home one day.

In conclusion, there is limited research on mothers' *and* fathers' experiences of the empty nest transition. There are also few studies that explicitly

examine the role of culture/ethnicity on this transition. To more fully understand the parental experiences of this transition, it is important to consider the impact of both gender and culture on how parents experience and adjust to the empty nest transition. Finally, many of the empirical studies on well-being are out-dated and there is a lack of knowledge about the Canadian context. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the experience of the empty nest transition for both mothers and fathers while taking into account the impact of gender, cultural background, and other socio-demographic and contextual factors on this transition.

# CHAPTER 3:RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

## Mixed Methods Approach

This study employs a mixed methods approach. The mixed methods approach to research uses quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study (Creswell 2003). This research design is increasingly becoming more popular and favoured in the social and human sciences as a result of more researchers finding legitimacy in both quantitative and qualitative research (Creswell 2003; Greenstein 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998). The principle behind mixed methods research is that the research problem is the most important goal and using both quantitative and qualitative research can help the researcher to further understand or derive knowledge about the problem (Creswell 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlier 1998).

Creswell (2003:210) explains that the benefit of mixed method research is that it "expands an understanding from one method to another and converges or confirms findings from different data sources." Indeed, some argue that using quantitative and qualitative methods in tandem addresses the weaknesses of each method – quantitative methods allows for more systematic or standardized findings of patterns and statistical relationships, while qualitative methods allows for more nuance and detailed findings that take into account subjective experiences and interpretations (Adler & Clark 2003; Bryman & Teevan 2005). This mixed method study employs a sequential explanatory strategy, in which the

first part of the project involves quantitative research (i.e., secondary data analysis of survey data) followed by qualitative research (i.e., in-depth, face-to-face interviews). Through quantitative methods general trends are identified, while qualitative data provides a more detailed and contextual understanding of parental experiences of the transition as well as further elaboration of patterns found in the quantitative analysis.

## Data Sources

### Data from Telephone Surveys

The telephone surveys were collected as part of a larger parenting project carried out by Dr. Barbara Mitchell (Simon Fraser University). This project examined various parenting issues in mid- and later-life parents. Permission was granted from Dr. Mitchell to use her telephone survey dataset for secondary analysis for this project. Dr. Mitchell's parenting project surveyed 490 parents living in the greater Vancouver area (British Columbia, Canada) in 2006/2007. In order to participate in the study, respondents needed to be at least 35 years of age and have at least one child between the ages of 18 and 35. The participants also needed to self-identify with one of four targeted ethnocultural groups: British, Chinese, Southern European, or Indo/East Indian origin (based on the question, "To which ethnic group do you most closely identify?").

A random sampling technique was used for the telephone surveys in order to recruit one parent per family. Ninety-two percent of the telephone surveys were collected through the use of randomly selected telephone numbers from area telephone directories and 8% of the surveys were conducted using non-

random strategies (i.e., referrals from calls). The sampling goal for the telephone survey was to try to recruit an equal number of respondents from each ethnic group and gender. However, due to differential response rates, there is a slightly higher proportion of some ethnic groups and a higher proportion of female respondents. There are 130 British (26.5%), 107 Chinese (21.8%), 129 Southern European (26.3%), and 124 Indo/East Indian (25.3%) participants. There are 303 females (61.8%) and 187 males (38.2%). More specifically, with the British sub-sample, 30% are male (39) and 70% are female (91); with the Chinese, 37.4% are male (40) and 62.6% are female (67); with Southern European, 37.2% are male (48) and 62.8% are female (81); and with the Indo/East Indian sub-sample, 48.4% are male (60) and 51.6% are female (64).

The telephone survey included both open- and close-ended questions that were directed at understanding parenting and family-related issues. If respondents had more than one child that was eligible to participate as the "study child" (i.e., if the child was between the ages of 18 and 35), the interviewer randomly selected a child to be the focal child. The survey also included several background or socio-demographic questions (e.g. age, marital status, education, income). The telephone survey ranged from 35 to 55 minutes in duration and translators were available to recruit participants and conduct the interviews in the respondent's preferred choice of language.

Respondents for the telephone survey include parents that have all their children currently residing in their home (i.e., full nest parents); parents that have had at least one child leave home for four months or more and is currently not

living at home and also at least one child that is currently residing in the respondent's home (i.e., emptying nest parents); and parents that have had all their children leave home for at least four months and no children currently live at home (i.e., empty nest parents). Three different versions of the main research instrument were administered (depending upon the family arrangement type) and all respondents were given the identical background form questions (e.g., socio-demographic data) (Mitchell 2006a).

For the purposes of this project, only the emptying nest and empty nest parents were included in the analysis, resulting in a combined sub-sample size of 316 (emptying nest, n = 130, 41.4%; empty nest, n = 186, 58.9%). From this point on, this sub-sample of 316 emptying and empty nest respondents will be referred to as the telephone survey sample. As with the main sample (n= 490), due to differential response rates, there is a higher proportion of some ethnic groups and female respondents. There are 106 British (33.5%), 45 Chinese (14.2%), 91 Southern European (28.8%), and 74 Indo/East Indian (23.4%) participants. Also, there are 196 mothers (62%) and 120 fathers (38%). More specifically, with the British sub-sample, 30% are male (39) and 70% are female (91); with the Chinese, 37.4% are male (40) and 62.6% are female (67); with the Southern European, 37.2% are male (48) and 62.8% are female (81); and with the Indo/East Indian sub-sample, 48.4% are male (60) and 51.6% are female (64).

The mean age of the participants at the time of the survey is 59; with the youngest participant being 44 years old and the oldest participant being 86 years

old. The average age of the participants at the time their study child left home is 52 (with a range of 37 to 81). Furthermore, the mean age of the study children when they left home (for the final time, if more than once) is 23, with a range of 15 to 32. [For more detail on the demographic characteristics of the telephone survey sample, see Table 1 in Appendix A].

**Data from Face-to-Face Interviews**

The second part of this project includes sixteen in-depth, face-to-face interviews with emptying and empty nest parents that were recruited from the telephone survey sample. These semi-structured interviews were approximately one to one-and-a-half hour in duration. The goal of the follow-up interviews was to get more in-depth responses to gain a better understanding of parental experiences of the empty nest transition, to complement and further elaborate on patterns found in the quantitative analysis, and to investigate issues that the survey did not address in sufficient depth. Parents were asked questions about the experience of their child leaving home, their relationship with their child, how they feel about the empty nest and empty nest syndrome, what factors or characteristics played a role in their experience of the transition, and what strategies they used to adapt to this transition. The research instrument used for the empty nest parents was very similar to the research instrument used for the emptying nest parents. The questions addressed the same issues but had slightly different wording (e.g., "Describe what the experience was like for you when all your children left home" compared to "What do you think the experience will be like for you when all your children leave home?").

The interview participants for this project were recruited from the sub-sample of participants (n = 118) that indicated in the telephone survey that they would be interested in participating in future research (i.e., qualitative interviews). The sub-sample of those who were interested in participating included 66 British (55.9%), 10 Chinese (8.5%), 21 Southern European (17.8%), and 21 Indo/East Indian (17.8%) participants. Of those who were interested, sixteen participants were recruited for the interviews through purposive sampling.

The interview sample included an equal number of emptying and empty nest parents. Furthermore, an equal number of participants were recruited from each ethnic group and gender (i.e., two males and two females from each ethnic group); as well as an equal proportion of participants that experienced empty nest syndrome and those that did not (based on the survey question "Generally speaking, do you feel that this [the empty nest syndrome, as previously defined as a situation whereby parents become very depressed when their children leave home] was something that you experienced when your study child left home?"). Though empty nest syndrome was the variable used to recruit interview participants, empty nest syndrome is not the only variable examined in this study to assess parental experiences of the empty nest transition. Nevertheless, for the interview recruitment, empty nest syndrome (which is the only dependent variable that is dichotomous) was chosen as the best single indicator of how parents experienced the transition because it distinguishes those who reported having had a more difficult time with the transition from those who did not.

The goal of this sampling strategy (i.e., an equal proportion of males/females, each ethnic group, and those that experienced ENS/those that did not) was to get a diversity of experiences rather than an interview sample that is representative of the telephone survey sample (n = 316). The telephone survey sample included a higher representation of females as well as a higher representation of some ethnic groups (i.e., British), while the interview sample has an equal proportion of participants based on gender and ethnic background. Moreover, in the telephone survey sample, only 28.2% of the respondents reported experiencing empty nest syndrome; however, with the interview sample, 50% of the respondents reported experiencing empty nest syndrome. As a result, the interview sample over-represents those that reported experiencing empty nest syndrome compared to the telephone survey sample. An equal number of those who experienced empty nest syndrome and those who did not was intentionally recruited for the interviews in order to get a better understanding of what the experience was like for those that had a more difficult time with the transition (marked by the occurrence of empty nest syndrome) and what the experience was like for those that did not, and what factors play a role in that difference.

The goal of the interview sample was to have four parents from each ethnic group – one mother and one father that experienced empty nest syndrome, as well as one mother and one father that did not experience empty nest syndrome. However, this initial goal was not met exactly. There were no Chinese males that experienced empty nest syndrome (out of the four Chinese

fathers that agreed to participate in the second phase) and there were no Indo/East Indian females that did not experience empty nest syndrome (out of the eight Indo/East Indian females that agreed to participate in the next phase, there was one that did not experience empty nest syndrome – however, she decided she did not want to participate in an interview). As a result, both of the Chinese males interviewed did not experience empty nest syndrome and both of the Indo/East Indian females interviewed did experience empty nest syndrome. There are still an equal proportion of participants that experienced empty nest syndrome and those that did not, though it is not equally divided among gender and ethnic group as initially desired.

The average age of the participants is 59; with the youngest participant being 52 and the oldest participant being 73. The average age of the participants at the time their study child left home is 51 (with a range of 44 to 63). There are an equal number of male and female study children. The average age of the study children when they left home (for the final time, if more than once) is 20, with a range of 17 to 24. [For more detail on the demographic characteristics of the interview sample, see Table 2 in Appendix A].

From the in-depth interviews, it was found that those interview participants that reported experiencing empty nest syndrome did not necessarily have a completely negative experience of the transition, and those that did not report experiencing empty nest syndrome did not necessarily have a completely positive experience either. Those that reported experiencing empty nest syndrome also found benefits or things they liked about launching their

child/having an empty nest and those that did not experience empty nest syndrome discussed downsides or things that made them sad about launching their child/having an empty nest. All of the sixteen participants discussed some positive aspects of the empty nest transition. There was only one participant out of the sixteen that expressed an extremely negative or difficult experience of the empty nest transition, marked by clinical depression and the need to seek medical intervention (i.e., medication, therapy). However, this participant also discussed some positive things about the empty nest transition.

## Data Analysis

The survey data was analyzed using the statistical program SPSS (version 16). Both univariate and bivariate statistical analyses were employed. Frequencies were carried out for univariate analysis (using measures of central tendency and variance wherever appropriate). Cross-tabulations between the independent and dependent variables and tests of statistical significance (and correlation coefficients where appropriate) were used for bivariate analysis. These bivariate statistical tests include chi-square (for nominal variables), Kendall's tau-b (for ordinal variables with an equal number of categories), Kendall's tau-c (for ordinal variables with an unequal number of categories), and Pearson's R. Though none of the dependent variables in the study were interval/ratio variables, Pearson's R was used in the analysis of dichotomous variables (e.g., examining gender and the occurrence of empty nest syndrome) (De Vaus 2002). This systematic analysis identified general patterns and trends in parental experiences of the empty nest transition.

For the qualitative data, the open-ended responses from the telephone survey and the in-depth interviews were coded and analyzed by thematic categories. This contextual research allowed for a greater understanding of the multiplicity and complexity of individual experiences. The thematic qualitative analysis helped to elaborate on the participants' social-psychological experience of the empty nest transition. Verbatim quotes from the interview data and open-ended responses from the telephone survey were also used to provide further insight and understanding of how parents experience the empty nest transition. These quotes provided specific examples or contexts, which helped to further elaborate the emergent themes.

**Measures for Analysis**

For the quantitative analysis, the parent's experience of the empty nest transition was measured by four dependent variables: whether they experienced empty nest syndrome (yes or no[4]); how difficult it was for them on an emotional level to see their study child leave home (extremely difficult, somewhat difficult, or not difficult at all); whether they were sad once all their children left home/will be sad when all their children leave home (disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree); and whether they believe their overall psychological and emotional health is currently better, worse, or has remained the same since their study child left home.

[4] The original survey question on empty nest syndrome had the response options as "yes", "no", or "other" (with room for specification). Only 22 respondents reported "other". Further inspection of these participants' open-ended responses suggested a less serious form of empty nest syndrome (e.g., only somewhat, to a small degree, sad but not depressed). As empty nest syndrome was described in the question as feeling "very depressed", those participants that reported "other" were placed in the "no" category.

Independent variables for the quantitative analysis include: gender, ethnic background (British, Chinese, Southern European, or Indo/East Indian), living arrangement type (empty nest or emptying nest), living with a partner/spouse (yes or no), employment status (working a paid job, homemaker, retired, or other), education (high school or less, some college/university, or have attained college/university degree), total household income ($50,000 or less; $50,001-$100,000; or more than 100,000), participant's age at the time their study child left home (37-44, 45-54, 55-64, or 65+), total number of children the participant has (1, 2, or 3+), the study child's gender, the reason the study child left home (to go to school, for work, to get married/partnered, or to seek independence/other), the age the study child left home (17 or less, 18-24, or 25+), whether the study child has ever been a "boomerang kid" (i.e., returned home for at least four months after being away from home for at least four months – yes or no), the amount of non-face-to-face contact (i.e., phone, e-mail, text, written) the parent has with the study child at the present time (daily, weekly, monthly, or several times per year or less), and the current relationship the parent has with the study child (not very close, somewhat close, close, or extremely close).

For the qualitative analysis, a thematic analysis of emergent themes based on the open-ended questions from the telephone interviews (n = 316) and the follow-up interviews (n = 16) were used. Open-ended questions used from the telephone survey include why it was difficult/not difficult for them (and also their spouse) to see their study child leave home, why they believe empty nest syndrome exists/does not exist, and why they believe their emotional health was

worse, better, or the same when their study child left home. Verbatim quotes from these open-ended responses and interviews were also used to provide specific examples or contexts for the emergent themes [See Appendix B for the qualitative research instruments].

## Limitations of Methods

Although analysis of a cross-sectional survey and qualitative interviews are used for this project, there are limits to these methods. With a cross-sectional survey, data is only collected at one point in time. As a result, an examination of the *changes* in a parent's well-being, before and after the empty nest transition, can only be measured retrospectively. Thus, the researcher is unable to make the same claims of causality that is possible with longitudinal studies. Additionally, as the experience of the empty nest transition is measured retrospectively, it is dependent on the participant's memory – which may not provide as accurate or detailed of a description that could come with interviewing the participant as the transition occurs. Interviewing the participant at one point in time may result in those participants that recently experienced a homeleaving or the empty nest being more likely to categorize the experience as difficult because it just recently occurred and the emotions of the child leaving are still present. However, those that have experienced the empty nest for a longer period of time have had more time to adjust to the transition and are reporting the experience from hindsight, which may not be as representative of how they felt when they first entered the empty nest. However, a longitudinal study is not well-suited for the time constraints of a master's thesis project. Though there are limits to cross-

sectional surveys, they can still provide a wealth of information on the experiences of the empty nest transition and various associations can be examined.

There are also limits to interview research. Interviewing is a method that relies on a participant's ability to remember and verbalize their experiences – which is not easy for everyone. Another possible limit is that a participant may be uncomfortable or shy sharing certain personal experiences face-to-face with an interviewer. However, steps can be taken to help the participant feel more comfortable with the interview and the interviewer; such as, allowing the participant to select an interview location that they are comfortable with, informing the participant of the purpose and benefits of the study, and ensuring the participant confidentiality. Additionally, as one-on-one interviews tend to be more intimate, the participant may feel more comfortable sharing their personal experiences in this interview setting compared to a group interview setting such as focus groups.

It is also important to note that as this study uses quota and purposive sampling without weighting, it is not representative of the mid- and later-life population (that is experiencing the empty nest transition) of the greater Vancouver area or Canada. As this sample is not representative, that limits the generalizability of the findings. However, this study was carried out more for exploration purposes (i.e., to examine what the experience of this transition was like for parents) and not to estimate prevalence rates. There is still a lot of important information that can be taken from this study to help describe and

explain how parents experience this transition; as a result, the findings from this study can be transferable (though not generalizable) to the population (i.e., the experiences of the empty nest transition given in this study are not unique simply to this sample of parents).

## Ethical Considerations

This project was conducted with permission of the Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board. One ethical consideration taken into account was the issue of consent. The participants provided verbal consent to Dr. Mitchell's parenting project by agreeing to participate in the telephone survey. At the end of the telephone survey, the participants were asked if they would be interested in participating in future research (i.e., qualitative interviews). Only those who expressed interest in participating were considered for the face-to-face interviews. Before the interview was conducted, the participant was informed of the procedures, the possible risks (this project was classified as "minimal risk" by the ethics board), and the benefits of the study. The participants gave their written consent that they voluntarily agreed to participate in the interview. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any questions and they could withdraw from the project at any time.

Another important ethical consideration is the issue of confidentiality. As this research deals with personal information and experiences, it is important to ensure confidentiality to the participants. To address this issue, each participant was assigned a code number that was used instead of the participant's name during the data collection and analysis process. Additionally, no identifiable

information was written on the survey, interview transcripts, or interview notes (e.g., names, addresses, telephone numbers). Confidential research materials were kept in a secure location maintained by the investigator and they will be destroyed after the project is completed. In any reports or write-ups of the research, names were omitted and code numbers or pseudonyms were used in place of the participant's name.

# CHAPTER 4:RESULTS

## Quantitative Results

The quantitative analysis of the survey data revealed that, overall, most participants did not report having a very negative experience of the empty nest transition. When asked if they had experienced empty nest syndrome when their child left, 71.8% said no. Only 19% of the participants found it to be extremely difficult on an emotional level to see their study child leave. The majority of participants reported that they did not experience a change in their emotional or psychological health since their study child left home (60.8%). Parents, however, were divided on their reaction as to whether they felt sad when all their children left home (or will be sad when all their children leave home): 43.4% of parents agree they were sad when all their children left home/they will be sad and 37.9% disagree. [For more detail, see Table 3 in Appendix A].

Bivariate analyses were then used to examine differences in parental experiences and what factors played a role in the experience of this transition. The analyses revealed that the variables or factors that played the biggest role (all had correlation coefficients of 0.10 or higher[5]) in parental experiences of the empty nest transition included the participant's gender; ethnic background; the parent's age and the study child's age at the time the study child left home; the amount of contact the participant currently has with their study child and how

[5] Referenced from De Vaus 2002

close the relationship currently is with their study child; and the participant's living arrangement type. [See Tables 4-13 in Appendix A for detailed tables of quantitative analyses].

The participant's gender had an effect on whether the participant felt their emotional health is better, worse, or has remained the same since their study child left home [see Table 12]; how emotionally difficult it was for the participant to see their study child leave home [see Table 8]; and whether the participant reported experiencing empty nest syndrome [see Table 4]. Gender had a moderately weak, negative relationship[6] with whether the participant felt their emotional health is better, worse, or has remained the same since their study child left home (tau-c = -0.24***[7]). Females were more likely than males to report that their psychological and emotional health was worse at the time their study child left in comparison to now (40.2% for females, 15.8% for males). Additionally, the participant's gender had a moderately weak, negative relationship with how emotionally difficult it was for the participant to have their study child leave home (tau-c = -0.23***). Females were more likely to find it extremely difficult to see their study child leave home (23.0%) compared to males (12.6%). Finally, there was a weak, negative relationship between gender and the occurrence of empty nest syndrome (Pearson's R = -0.10). Females were more likely to report experiencing empty nest syndrome than males (31.6% for females, 22.5% for males).

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[6] Male is assigned the lower value and female is assigned the higher value. Also see tables in Appendix A for further detail on the direction of the relationships. The variables are listed in the table in order of their value (i.e., lower value variable categories are listed first)

[7] * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

As the telephone survey sample had an unequal distribution of gender by ethnic background (e.g., with the British sub-sample, 30% are male and 70% are female; however, with the Indo/East Indian sub-sample, 48.4% are male and 51.6% are female), further analysis was carried out to examine gender and ethnic background in conjunction. When analyzing gender and empty nest syndrome while controlling for ethnic background [see Table 6], it was found that the relationship was stronger than the original association (Pearson's R = -0.10) for all ethnic groups except the British participants: for Chinese participants, Pearson's R = -0.26; for Southern European participants, Pearson's R = -0.24*; for Indo/East Indian participants, Pearson's R = -0.13; and for British participants, Pearson's R = -0.05. Gender and empty nest syndrome is non-significant for all groups but Southern European participants. Given that the British participants constitute the single largest ethnic group in the sample, this gendered relationship was initially suppressed when ethnicity was not controlled for[8].

The participant's ethnic background had a significant effect on the occurrence of empty nest syndrome (chi-square = 42.89***), how emotionally difficult it was for the participant to have their study child leave home (chi-square = 17.03**), and whether the participant was sad when all their children left home/will be sad when all their children leave home (chi-square = 39.22***). Indo/East Indian respondents were considerably more likely to report experiencing empty nest syndrome (58.1%) compared to British (19.8%),

[8] However, it is important to note that some cells had less than five participants (e.g., there is only one Chinese male and two Southern European males that experienced empty nest syndrome) which, given the overall sample size, makes certain statistical tests unstable.

Chinese (17.8%), and Southern European (18.7%) respondents [see Table 4]. Furthermore, Indo/East Indian respondents were more likely to report that it was extremely difficult to see their study child leave home (32.4%) compared to British (16.0%), Chinese (6.7%), and Southern European (17.8%) respondents [see Table 8]. Finally, Indo/East Indian parents were more likely to agree they were sad (or will be sad) when all their children left home (62.2%) compared to British (43.7%), Chinese (14.0%), and Southern European (41.8%) parents [see Table 10].

Again, as the telephone survey sample had an unequal distribution of gender by ethnic background, further analysis was carried out to examine ethnic background and gender in conjunction. When analyzing ethnic background and empty nest syndrome while controlling for gender [see Table 7], it was found that the original relationship was replicated for both males and females (chi-square = 25.18*** for males, chi-square = 24.01*** for females). The relationship between ethnic background and empty nest syndrome remains when gender is controlled for. Indo/East Indian participants, regardless of their gender, are more likely to report experiencing empty nest syndrome than the other ethnic groups.

There was a significant relationship between the parent's age at the time the study child left home and the occurrence of empty nest syndrome [see Table 4]; whether the participant was sad when all their children left home (or will be sad) [see Table 10]; whether the participant felt their emotional health is better, worse, or has remained the same since their study child left home [see Table 12]; and how emotionally difficult it was for the participant to have their study child

leave home [see Table 8]. Additionally, the study child's age at the time of the homeleaving had a significant effect on whether the participant felt their emotional health is better, worse, or has remained the same since their study child left home [see Table 13].

There was a weak, positive relationship between the participant's age at the time of the homeleaving and the occurrence of empty nest syndrome (tau-c = 0.16***). Participants that were younger when their study child left home were more likely to experience empty nest syndrome than participants that were older when their study child left (34.4% for participants that were 37-44, 34.4% for those that were 45-54, 18.4% for those 55-64, and 12.5% for those 65 and older). Furthermore, there was a weak, negative relationship between the participant's age at the time of the homeleaving and whether the participant was sad when all their children left home (tau-b = -0.16***). Parents that were younger when their study child left home were more likely to agree they were sad when all their children left home compared to parents that were older when their study child left home (59.4% for those who were 37-44, 48.1% for those that were 45-54, 32.0% for those 55-64, and 33.3% for those 65 or older).

Moreover, there was a weak, positive relationship between the participant's age at the time of the homeleaving and whether the participant felt their emotional health is better, worse, or has remained the same since their study child left home (tau-c = 0.14**). Parents that were younger when their study child left were more likely to report their emotional health was worse at the time their study child left compared to those participants that were older when their

study child left (38.7% for participants who were 37-44, 40.1% for those who were 45-54, 15.7% for those who were 55-64, and 25.0% for those who were 65 or older). Also, there was a moderately weak, positive relationship between the age of the study child at the time of the homeleaving and whether the participant felt their emotional health is better, worse, or has remained the same since their study child left home (tau-b = 0.19***). The younger the study child was when they left home, the more likely the parent reported that their emotional health was worse at the time their study child left in comparison to now (53.3% for those whose study child was 17 or less when they left, 36.6% for those whose study child was 18-24, and 16% for those whose study child was 25 or older).

Additionally, there was a weak, positive relationship between the participant's age at the time of the homeleaving and how emotionally difficult it was for the participant to see their study child leave home (tau-b = 0.13**). Participants that were younger at the time their study child left were more likely to find it extremely difficult to see their child leave compared to those that were older when their study child left (31.2% for those that were 37-44, 21.7% for those that were 45-54, 11.7% for those aged 55-64, and 18.8% for those aged 65 or older).

The amount of non-face-to-face contact the participant currently has with their study child had a significant effect on the occurrence of empty nest syndrome [see Table 5], how emotionally difficult it was for the parent to have their study child leave home [see Table 9], and whether the participant agreed they were sad when all their children left home (or will be sad) [see Table 11].

Furthermore, the relationship the participant currently has with their study child has a significant effect on whether the participant was sad when all their children left home (or will be sad) [see Table 11]. There is a weak, positive relationship with the amount of contact with their study child and the occurrence of empty nest syndrome (tau-c = 0.15**). The more frequent the contact with the study child, the more likely the participant was to experience empty nest syndrome (38.3% for those with daily contact, 25.3% for those with weekly contact, 12.5% for those with monthly contact, and 30.8% for those with contact several times per year or less). Interestingly, those with the least amount of contact had the second highest percentage of experiencing empty nest syndrome. It could be that those with frequent contact have a harder time "letting go" and thus they may be more likely to experience empty nest syndrome, and those that have little contact could be likely to experience empty nest syndrome due to the lack of contact with their child.

Additionally, there was a weak, positive relationship between the amount of contact with the study child and how emotionally difficult it was for the parent to have their study child leave home (tau-c = 0.13**). The more frequent the contact with the study child, the more likely the participant was to find it extremely difficult to see their child leave (26.6% for those with daily contact, 19.3% for those with weekly contact, 3.2% for those with monthly contact, and 15.4% for those with contact several times per year or less).

Also, there was a weak, negative relationship between the amount of contact with the study child and whether the participant agreed they were sad

when all their children left home (tau-c = -0.11*). The more frequent the contact with the study child, the more likely the participant was to agree they were sad when all their children left home (51.1% for those with daily contact, 43.3% for those with weekly contact, 32.3% for those with monthly contact, and 33.3% for those with contact several times per year or less). Furthermore, there was a weak, positive relationship between how close the relationship is with the study child (currently) and whether the participant agreed they were sad when all their children left home (tau-c = 0.14**). Participants that currently have a closer relationship with their study child were more likely to agree that they were sad when all their children left home (49.7% for those with an extremely close relationship compared to 33.3% for those who are not very close with their study child).

The participant's living arrangement type (i.e., emptying nest or empty nest) had an effect on the occurrence of empty nest syndrome [see Table 4], how emotionally difficult it was for the parent to have the study child leave home [see Table 8], and whether the participant agrees they were sad when all their children left home (or will be sad) [see Table 10]. There was a weak, negative relationship between the participant's living arrangement type[9] and the occurrence of empty nest syndrome (Pearson's R = -0.13*). Emptying nest parents were more likely to report experiencing empty nest syndrome when their study child left home compared to empty nest parents (35.4% and 23.1%, respectively). Moreover, there was a weak, negative relationship with how

[9] Empty nest is assigned the lower value and emptying nest is assigned the higher value

emotionally difficult it was for parent to have their study child leave home (tau-c = -0.11). Empty nest parents were more likely to say it was not difficult at all on an emotional level compared to emptying nest parents (49.2% compared to 37.7%). Additionally, there was a weak, positive relationship between living arrangement type and whether the participant agrees they were sad when all their children left home (tau-c = 0.10). More empty nest parents (43.2%) disagreed that they were sad when their children left home compared to emptying nest parents that disagreed they would be sad when all their children left home (30.5%).

## Qualitative Results

An examination of the open-ended responses from the telephone surveys (n = 316) and the interviews (n=16) was then carried out in order to provide deeper insight into the processes by which parents experience this transition and how context shapes these experiences[10]. The qualitative data provided greater understanding and elaboration of the gender and ethnic background variations found in the quantitative data. The qualitative data provided insight into what participants' said about the role of gender and ethnic background in this transition, as well as further elaboration as to why mothers and Indo/East Indian participants were more likely to have a harder time with this transition than fathers or the other ethnic groups, respectively. Additionally, the qualitative data revealed the importance of context in shaping parental experiences of this transition. The following five themes or issues also seemed to play an important

[10] Participant responses (quotes) used from the telephone survey will be indicated with the participant code number.
Participant responses used from the interviews will be indicated with the participant's pseudonym.

role in how parents experience and handle the empty nest transition: the circumstances of the homeleaving, the level of adjustment/acceptance to the child leaving, concern with the child's well-being, involvement in other roles/activities, and maintaining a relationship with the child.

As previously mentioned, it is important to note that the interview sample over-represents those that reported empty nest syndrome in comparison to the telephone survey sample. In addition, the interview sample did not include any Chinese men that experienced empty nest syndrome and similarly included no Indo/East Indian women that did not experience empty nest syndrome. However, participant responses from the interviews are not the only responses used to further elaborate parental experiences and patterns – open-ended responses from the 316 telephone surveys are also used. Furthermore, interview participants that reported empty nest syndrome did not necessarily have an only-negative experience of the transition. Those that reported experiencing empty nest syndrome also provided insight into positive aspects of the transition, and those that did not experience empty nest syndrome also provided insight into difficult or negative aspects of the transition.

### *Gender Variations in Parental Experiences*

The qualitative responses on gender revealed that more participants seem to believe that mothers are more likely to have a difficult time with the transition than fathers. There were few participants that argued fathers are more likely to have a difficult time with the transition than mothers. There were recurring themes in the responses, among both male and female participants, that in

general mothers are more likely to have a harder time with the transition than fathers because it is "natural" for mothers to have a difficult time simply because she is a mother; that mothers are more emotional or sensitive and so they are affected by the transition more; and that mothers tend to be more attached to the children than is the father.

### *"Natural" Experience for Mothers*

The idea that it is "natural" for mothers to have a difficult time with the transition was brought up by participants as an explanation for why mothers have a more emotionally difficult time with this transition. Responses like "As a mother it is obviously difficult" (female participant, G337), "It is natural for a mother to feel sad" (female, G349), and "I think it's normal that it's hard for a mother when her child leaves" (female, R960) illustrate this belief. One father (J470) stated that his wife found it extremely difficult on an emotional level to see their study child leave; when he was asked to explain why it was extremely difficult for his spouse, he simply responded, "She is a mother." Another father ("Mike") reported, "There is no question in my mind that men and women by nature react differently to this empty nest. And I wouldn't say all men react the same or all women, but definitely men go down one side of the road, women go down the other...and, you know, it's your make-up."

For male participants that had a difficult time with the transition, their responses did not include this sentiment that it was "natural" for fathers and that they had a difficult time simply because they are fathers. Conversely, participants (mostly women) reported that fathers did not have a difficult time with the

transition simply because they are males. These participants made statements such as, "He is a man, they don't feel the same way" (J456), "Because he is a man and for them it's always easier than for mothers" (R897), and "It wasn't difficult for him, maybe because he is a man" (R998).

*Belief that Women Are More Emotional, Men are More Pragmatic*

Another belief among the participants was that mothers are more likely than fathers to have an emotionally difficult time with the transition because women are more emotional or sensitive than men. As a result, participants believed women are more likely to be emotionally affected by this transition and to react more adversely. Participants stated that mothers are more likely to have a difficult time with the transition because "females tend to have more emotional troubles and they tend to show their emotions more" (male, R869), "they are more sensitive" (male, J470), and "females have a softer personality than males" (female, G344). One father ("Peter") explained, "Generally speaking, they [mothers] are much more emotional and attached than men are. It's a psychological thing. It's a feminine thing. It's in their system. I don't think it can change. It's maternal instinct."

On the other hand, participants reported that males are less likely to have a difficult time with the transition because they are usually less emotional and more pragmatic about the child leaving home. Wives shared that their husbands did not have a difficult time because "It was simpler – the level of emotion was simpler for him" (E237), "My spouse is very strong and very realistic" (J459), "It wasn't as difficult for him as it was for me. He says that it's natural that children

leave" (R857), and "My husband is more pragmatic – he knew it was inevitable and important that my daughter becomes independent" (D164). One father ("Peter") shared, "I was less emotional than she was. She was very attached to him...So for her, his leaving was much more difficult that it was for me...For me it was bound to happen one day or the other and it was easier for me to accept it than for her."

One mother ("Helen"), who was unhappy about her child's decision to leave home, explains how she thought her husband was more rational or calm about the homeleaving, "He was good for me in a way because he was...I'm a very emotional person; he's emotional, but he will think things through. I will just blurt out how I feel and so I was able to do that with him and he would kind of reason out things with me. So that helped…He would say 'oh maybe you should leave her [the daughter] alone. Let her find her way.' You know things like that. My first instinct was to go and find her and bring her back, but you see he realized that she was 19 when she left and there's nothing we could do. You know, even if you bring her back that doesn't mean to say she has to stay with us because she's above age. So he saw that and he would say 'no, you can't do that. Maybe there are other ways you can do. Why don't you phone her? Go talk to her.' And so he used to calm me down a lot."

*Belief that Mothers are More Attached to their Children than Fathers*

Participants also expressed the belief that mothers are more likely than fathers to have a difficult transition because they are more emotionally attached to the children than the father is. Participants explained that mothers tend to have

a stronger bond with their children and are more nurturing; as a result, it is more difficult for them to adjust to the child's absence. There were some participants that reported the fathers had a closer bond with the child than the mother or that the parents were equally attached to the child (and had a similar reaction to the child leaving), but overall parents seemed to express this idea that women are more attached to their children and are more nurturing than men.

Participants stated that it was "natural" for mothers to be more emotionally attached to their children and this was often a result of the mother giving birth to the child. For example, parents stated that it is more difficult for mothers to see their child leave because "mothers are more attached to children" (male, J490), "they are part of their mother's body by nature, so the child has to be more closer to the mother by nature" (male, "Robert"), the closest relationship is that between mothers and sons/daughters" (female, G320), and "mothers bring children into the world and it's not easy to face the separation" (female, M621). One father ("Mike") shares how his wife had a more difficult time because she was more attached, "I definitely had a different experience with it than my wife. My wife was really, really upset. She was really shaken when our son first went off to school. You know, it was her baby and all those emotional ties. She had a hard time letting go; [even] to this day. She's always phoning the guy. Which is fine, but I know it's a bit much because I know what it's like being a first son. And yes, you love your mom, but there's a point where 'ok you got to give me a break. You don't have to phone me every second of every day.' But she's backed off a bit

because now he's involved with somebody, so she's happy for that. She's backed up a bit, but she hasn't backed off though."

Participants stated that fathers are less likely to have a difficult time with the transition than mothers because they were usually not as attached to the children as the mother or did not spend as much time with the children as the mother did. It was believed that the child did not occupy the father's time as much as the mother's; as a result, fathers were able to adjust easier to the absence of the child. One father ("Tom") explained, "The father has always remained paternalistic and a little bit more distant from the children than the mother. And the mother is always much more emotionally involved with the children and their welfare and their happiness and all that... [Therefore, when the children leave] it's easier for the father. And he becomes much more supportive of the mother in relation to the children not being physically present."

Another father ("Jeff") shares, "I think it might be [more difficult for a mother] particularly in a situation where they have been at home a lot with the kids, because they grew up with them...I'm sure they're happy to see them get out on their own and all that too, but I think they have a different connection than fathers do...Well, speaking from my experience, [it is a different connection] because you are away from them most days because you go to work and all that. It's a little easier to get used to the idea of them not being around because that's a big part of what your life has been. Where a mother, if she has been lucky enough to be home with the kids and all that, her day would circulate around what the kids were doing. And so when they're gone, it changes everything."

*Belief that the Transition is More Difficult for Fathers*

Although more participants argued that mothers were more likely to have a difficult transition, there were a few participants that argued that fathers are more likely to have a difficult time with the transition than mothers. These participants explained that because the father was not as involved in the child's day-to-day life, that when the child eventually leaves home the father feels as if it has come too soon. The fathers do not see the gradual development and thus when the child leaves it seems so sudden. For example, one mother ("Rebecca") shared, "I was the one who stayed home with them. I got to see their characters 100%. I saw where they developed, where they didn't develop. I didn't have to ask someone that question because I was looking to see it all...In my husband's case, he could only see the time of when she left the nest." When the children leave home, some fathers may regret that they did not spend enough time with the child. As one mother ("Ann") explained, "Just as a mother I've been nurturing him, you know, so I tend to know him more – about what his thinking will be. And he tends to understand me more, too...It's harder for my husband because his focus has been more on his career. [He felt like] 'Oh I missed out on something that I should have done before.'"

Additionally, some mothers argued that it can be more difficult for the father because he is not as aware as the mother that the child is ready to leave home and be independent. One mother ("Nancy") explained, "I think I know more fathers who discourage their children from going away to school than mothers. I mean, [the thinking is] 'there's a local university here, why is our kid going to

school in another province?' I mean, it could be that they [the fathers] were the providers, not the carers and so they don't think their kids are as ready as the mother – who was the carer and knows the kids." Another mother ("Ann") shares, "And I feel like I'm ready for him to go. As a mother, I believe that I have been doing a good job and nurturing him emotionally. But to my husband, I think it's because he has been quite busy with his career for a while that his concern is he may not have had enough time to role model to him as a father. Even though he has been trying his best. It's just that when [our son] left, [my husband] kind of thought 'oh how do I connect with him?'"

*Paternalistic Issues of Protection and Control*

Participants tended to report that the reason mothers had a difficult time with the transition was because they were very emotionally attached to their child. Conversely, participants tended to report that fathers had a difficult time with the transition was because they were worried about the child being on their own and that they weren't able to protect the child anymore. One mother (N751) explained that it was difficult for her husband when their study child left because "He didn't want her to leave us. He wanted to protect her. He wanted her to be by our side." Another mother (B070) reported, "He's very much a protective father. He wants to do everything for everybody. I think it was a bit more difficult for him." One mother ("Ruth") explained, "I think fathers are more protective. The experience is different. I think for mothers there's a strong sense of companionship [that is missed]. I think fathers probably worry more about well-being and economics of survival."

Sometimes fathers were more worried when their daughters left home compared to when their sons left. One father ("Jeff") shared, "I think fathers find it a little easier maybe to let go particularly with the son. You know, because we understand the sons more. Again, this is a generalization, but men like to have that freedom... [But when a daughter leaves] you just always think that you have to protect your daughter. I think that's just human nature. Even though you know they're quite capable of taking care of themselves. I think that's just ingrained in our nature."

Similar to that, some fathers found the transition difficult due to paternalistic issues of control since they no longer had the family together "under one roof". One mother ("Rebecca") explained how it was difficult for her husband to see their daughter leave home, "It brings on an overwhelming feeling because his whole thoughts when he goes to work is 'Oh, it's for my family that I go to work' and all of a sudden his family is broken down. Something happened to his nest and there's panic." Different fathers mentioned how it was hard for them to give up control or hard to accept that the children are adults and making their own decisions. One father ("Don") shared, "I didn't like seeing him going for various reasons. I was like a female lion protecting the cubs...I think I'm always being difficult to allow – I don't think 'allow' is the right word but I guess it's the best I can find – to allow freedom because I'm always thinking the worst case scenario, right? I think the main thing is protection. I'm over-protective. I've always been like that. [When they left] it was difficult for many reasons, like the

worrying aspect. And I guess also losing control in a way. Not a bad control. But all that sprang from that over-protection thing."

He further explains, "I would never have been ready to pass on to them the responsibility; like some parents probably do that too early. They say 'you're big enough, you decide what to do'. I wasn't that type, right? So that made it hard to get used to – to see that they are growing and to see that they are responsible adults." While another father ("David") explained, "The reality is hitting me now when I see parents with young children, that those days are gone. And I'm watching my son become more independent...there are things that he already does better than I do. So I have to face the reality: Am I important in his life any more? Does he still need me? ... My head tells me of course he's still going to need me. He tells me 'dad, you're always going to be there for me.' But then emotionally you kind of miss those days when he comes up to you and talks to you about everything and asks you about everything and he needs 50 cents to go to the corner store. And a male always needs significance. And I find that in my children a lot."

*Same Emotional Experience, Different Reaction*

Some participants mentioned that mothers and fathers are both sad and have an equally difficult time when their children leave home; the only difference is they express their emotions differently. More specifically, both parents are sad but the difference is that mothers are open about their emotions and let them show, whereas fathers do not often show their sadness. One mother ("Julie") stated, "Fathers never show their feelings much, but of course he did feel a little

sadness." Another mother ("Helen") explains, "I think it was traumatic for him too. You know, because she was our only daughter...I think emotionally it affected both of us but I was more vocal than he was. Men don't show their emotions...I think the father feels the same emotion that the mother does but they may react differently. I cried but men don't show crying so much. But he probably kept it within himself knowing that I needed support." One father ("Mike") reported, "I think a male is more stoic and staunch on an outward appearance and might hold back his inner feelings towards it, where women are just going to show her emotions on her sleeve...A man would tend to be more reserved. You know, like he talked a good story."

*"Atypical" Fathers*

Furthermore, it was interesting that when some fathers reported that they did find it difficult or somewhat difficult to see their children leave home, they noted how their situation was atypical and they often qualified their statements – as if it was not normal or typical for a father to simply state that the transition was difficult for them. Statements reflected this pattern of "I know men do not usually feel this way, but...." As one father ("David") reported, "Generally speaking, I think it affects the mother more because there is that mother-child bond; but with us, we rejoiced and struggled together. I wear my emotions on my sleeve." One mother (J464) reported that she and her husband had an equally difficult time, but explained that "Men don't show their feelings, but it's tough (for him) as much as for me."

One father ("Peter") explained how his role as a father was atypical, "See my background is the father is usually, in a manner of speaking, aloof from everything else because he shoulders the responsibility of providing for the family and taking care of the family. And so for things related to the children and their upbringing it does not get him a lot involved, unless there is a problem...But in my case, I did play a role. I was there for them all the time. You see one reason for that is my wife refused to drive. She doesn't like driving; she refused to do it. So it was my duty to take them to school, take them to church, or wherever they wanted to go. And besides I was self-employed – I was working out of my home – so whenever they needed me I was always there and available. So I was very much involved with their up bringing unlike my father who was never there. So I was exactly the opposite. I'm an atypical case because I was more involved in their upbringing all the time and I was there all the time for them."

Another father ("Robert") explained how his situation was atypical because he had to stay at home due to a disability while his wife worked, "I think basically mothers are more close. Mothers should be by nature more close to the child. But, in our case, because I was home and I played a part – Mr. Mom – I was at home making lunches, reading books to them, and all that. So in our case, there was not much difference probably [in how we experienced the transition]."

### *"Bad" Mothers and Feeling Guilty*

There also seemed to be a standard for how mothers were supposed to react to the transition and when they did not react accordingly, mothers could feel guilty. The participant responses revealed that some mothers felt guilty or

believed they must be a "bad mother" for not having a more difficult time when their child left home. For example, one mother ("Wendy") explained how her expectations of the empty nest were different from what she experienced, "When they were young, when they were about teenagers, I was really worried about that part [the empty nest]. I thought oh, my kids are growing up now; one day they will all leave me and I will be a lonely old woman. And I was kind of upset and a little bit depressed. But actually, life keeps going on and it's not that bad. I can tell you I really enjoy my life right now. I have my freedom. I can do whatever I like to do. I feel more energized now. I can go and do exercise. And planning just for myself. I don't have to worry if they're happy or if they're not happy. So actually, I really enjoy where I am now. I feel really good...I thought it would be really bad, but it wasn't like that. It was not as bad as I thought it was going to be. It's not at all. Totally different. Yeah, so far I really like it." However, after explaining how much she enjoyed the empty nest and all the benefits that came with it, she felt the need to make statements like "[The empty nest is a positive experience] For me, maybe I'm weird..." and "I really, really enjoy it [the empty nest]...that sounds really bad, I must be a bad mother...but, I still miss them, I still love them." This sentiment illustrates the perceived "appropriate" ways women should react to this transition.

### *Ethnic Variations in Parental Experiences*

The qualitative data provided further explanation as to why Indo/East Indian participants were more likely to have a difficult time with the transition than the other ethnic groups, as well as why Chinese parents were the least likely to

have a difficult time with the transition. In the qualitative data Indo/East Indian parents mentioned that in the Indo/East Indian community families are very close and parents are very attached to their children. As a result, it can be very difficult to see their children leave home. Many Indo/East Indian parents explained that empty nest syndrome is common for Indo/East Indian parents because in their culture the family unit is very strong. One Indo/East Indian father (J719) explained, "In our community we are very close to our children. Our life revolves around our children. It gets lonely as they are gone." Other Indo/East Indian parents offered responses that reflect this idea that children are very important to their lives and it is hard to see them go: "We will miss our children and the activities we do with them. We feel complete with our children around us" (male, J723) and "Our children are our lives – we will be empty without them" (female, J726). Sometimes children were viewed as the parents' sole source of support and it was difficult for them when their child left home. One father (J475) explained that after his son left with his wife and after his daughter got married he had "nobody for support or to talk to."

Additionally, it was hard for Indo/East Indian parents when their child's leaving violated cultural norms. Indo/East Indian parents expressed difficulty when their child left before getting married and when their oldest son did not remain in the parental home according to traditions. As one Indo/East Indian father (J466) shared, "You never want your child, especially your son, to move out." Another father ("Peter") expressed what it was like for him when his child left to seek independence, "It was difficult for both of us because traditionally our

children don't move out until they are married. Where we grew up, our families are around all the time and so we grew up in that kind of a tradition. So this is not an easy thing for us to deal with. It's difficult."

One mother ("Julie") expressed the difficulty and shame she faced when her only son left home, "In the Indian community, kids don't leave their house – especially sons – and daughters move out after marriage. And so that was really shamed...shame from relatives because everybody is living here in town, like cousins and stuff. When he left, everybody else's son is living at their parents' [house]...Moving out and not following your parents' advice, it's bad. It's considered a bad thing on the children's behalf. It's culturally considered wrong that your son is not available or obedient. They want to keep extended family. The children take care of the parents by living with them. It's a shame in India and even here too if your son leaves, even married with children. The mothers and the fathers they still get ashamed of it. It's culturally that their children are not good because they are moving out."

Another mother ("Helen") reported that she had an emotionally difficult time when her daughter left at a young age to seek independence. It was very upsetting to her and her husband that the daughter did not sit down and discuss it with them that she was planning on leaving. They did not like that the child did not listen to them. Strong familistic ideals and strict guidelines about appropriate times to leave home could help explain why Indo/East Indian parents tended to have a more difficult time with the transition.

For Chinese parents, having close family bonds seemed to help with the transition instead of the reason why it was more difficult to let the child go (which seemed to be the case with Indo/East Indian parents). Chinese parents mentioned that even when the child leaves, they are still an important part of the family. Indeed, some Chinese parents did not feel as if their child had left them, instead they felt as if their child is just simply somewhere else. One Chinese mother ("Wendy") explained, "It was just like she was working in a different town. It's that kind of feeling. It's not really she's leaving me, you know? ... They're still with me, they're just not right beside me. But it's still the same. I still can hear their voice, I still know what they're doing. So nothing is different. When they were here, they still did their own thing and I do my own thing – so not much is different. It's just not their body in front of me."

Once the child leaves, the parent does not feel the connection to their child is lost simply because the child does not live at home. Quite often Chinese parents mentioned that they visit and/or talk often with their child and they are still involved in their child's life. One mother ("Ann") explained, "We have a strong belief about family ties...even though he's away from us, we still accept him as a member and we're not cutting the connection. And he still has his own room; any time he can come home and get it back...We're still quite close to one another. We talk about each other's experiences and lots of sharing...If he needs a rest, he can come home. He knows that we're always open for him to come home."

One Chinese father ("Tom") stated that Asian families rely on family much more than Western families do, "Having witnessed both Western and Oriental

societies, I think the Western is not as close in family ties as the Asian or Eastern society...In Western society you tend to rely on yourself much more than on the immediate family." He argued that Asian families being closer and relying on each other more is an advantage to adjusting when their children leave home. He explained that because they are more reliant on family, Asian young adults leave later and more gradually than Western young adults that usually leave around the ages of 18 to 22: "For Western children leaving they say 'I'm on my way, I can go off and be independent and that's what I want.' In Asian society I think the children tend to grow up slower and less independent...so it's much softer and not so abrupt. The changeover is not as abrupt."

Additionally, many Chinese parents did not find it difficult to see their child leave because they seemed more involved in the child's decision to leave. The child usually discussed with the parents when they were planning to leave home and what their plans were. Parents mentioned that it is not usually an individual decision to leave, instead it is a well-communicated decision. As one Chinese father (I364) explained, "The children will discuss with the parents when they plan to move out. The parents have enough time for emotional preparation." A Chinese mother (L562) shared, "My son was quite stable and was willing to follow our guidance. I didn't have any psychological or emotional problem at all." Another mother ("Ann") explained the comfort she felt when her son discussed with her and her spouse his plans to leave home for work, "When he was leaving us, we talked about stuff and had things sorted out...He shared with us his plan

and what will his back-up be in case the first doesn't work out. So he has his plan and he also has a back-up plan and that makes us feel at ease."

Also related to this, many Chinese parents did not have a hard time with the transition because their children left under the "right" circumstances. From the quantitative analysis, it was found that conformity to desired trajectories often related to school, work, and marriage were common in the Chinese sub-sample. The two most common reasons why Chinese study children left home was to get married or to go to work. Out of the four ethnic groups, Chinese parents were most likely to have their study child leave home in order to go work. For many Chinese parents, their child's homeleaving represented their child going in the "right" direction and something to be proud of. One father ("David") explained, "Generally speaking, with Chinese, the children do not become adults until they graduate from university...And then when they do leave, then they should be prepared with a university degree to make good money...so when the kids leave it's what is supposed to happen. This is good...Because the parents' ultimate goal is that their children become a success. So that's one step toward that success."

### *The Circumstances of the Homeleaving*

With the analysis of the quantitative data, the reason the study child left home (per se) did not have a statistically significant effect on the experience of the empty nest transition. However, with the qualitative data, many parents mentioned that an important factor in their experience of the transition was their assessment of the circumstance of their child leaving in conjunction with the

specific reason. Most parents reported that the primary reason it was not difficult (on an emotional level) to see their study child leave home was because they were happy with the reason the child was leaving (e.g., to go to school, to go to work, to get married). Statements such as, "My daughter was leaving for positive reasons – to go to university – I was happy for her" (British mom, D162) and "I was glad that he was getting married; when it's time to go, it's time to go – marriage is a good reason" (Southern European mom, R890), reflect this theme. One Chinese mother ("Wendy") explains that it was a happy time for her when her daughter left home because "They're grown up already. And she finished her university and she found a job in the states. I'm glad for her that she found a job that she liked and they pay better, and that's the field she wants – that's what she studied. The right title. Yeah, I'm happy for her."

Conversely, parents that were unhappy about the circumstances of the homeleaving seemed to have a more difficult time coping with the transition. Parents were usually unhappy with the circumstances if the departure occurred too soon or too late (i.e., "off time") based on their cultural/social lens or if the child was leaving for the "wrong" reasons. This is consistent with the quantitative results whereby the younger the participant and the study child was at the time of the homeleaving, the more likely the parent experienced a negative transition. The parent's and study child's age at the time the child left home can be a proxy for an "on-time/off-time" transition.

For example, as one British mother (A008) reported, "I just did not want her to leave – I thought she was too young." A Chinese father (I374) explained

how he found it difficult to see his child leave because it was not for the "right" reasons, "The son hadn't finished school when he left home, I expected my son to finish school and then leave home." An Indo/East Indian mother ("Helen") also found it difficult when her child left in order to seek independence because "in my culture, children only leave to get married." She further explained, "It was very traumatic. Because she did not sit down and discuss it with us. She did it without our knowledge. If we had sat down and talked we probably would have helped her to find a place and stuff like that. I think she had peer pressure and she listened to her peers more than her parents at that point."

### *The Level of Adjustment/Acceptance to the Child Leaving*

Parents that were prepared to "let go" and accepted their child's homeleaving tended to have a less difficult time with the transition. Some parents were prepared for the child to leave because they actually wanted the child to leave home (e.g., due to conflict). Most parents, however, said they were prepared to let their child go because a child leaving home is a "natural" event and they always knew the child would leave one day. "It was something that we had been expecting and preparing for. We knew that it was going to happen. We wouldn't have done our jobs as parents if we didn't expect him to leave," shared a British father (B064). A British mother ("Nancy") explained, "You give them wings, you've got to let them fly...This is what happens and this is a good thing. As long as they're in a good place where they are, then it's not for me to be unhappy about. You got to be happy that they're in a good place. I figured that was my job to make them productive members of society and so if I had it done

right, I should be able to let them go and it should work. So far it's good...I didn't have children to own them. My job was to train them, to raise them to be productive members of society who could stand on their own two feet." An Indo/East Indian father (J478) also stated he was prepared for his child's homeleaving, "It was expected. In our culture girls get married (and leave home) to start their own family."

Other factors that seemed to help with the parent's preparation and acceptance of the child leaving was if a child of theirs had already left before, if the parents were involved in the child's decision to leave home (i.e., the child discussed their plans with the parents), and if they focused on the benefits of the child leaving. Many parents mentioned that benefits of their child leaving included having less responsibilities (e.g., housework, child care, less financial burden); more time and freedom for themselves; more time, privacy, and better communication with their spouse/partner; and a new adult relationship with their child. One British father ("James") shares how the relationship with his children got better once they left home, "Your relationship changes because they're adults. And because they've left home, they are independent, and so they're more equal than children...In fact, it [the relationship with the children] has been, in some respects, closer...yeah, it gets better in the 20's and probably better in the 30's too. They're much more tolerant of their parents and they understand the strengths and weakness of their parents, so they're able to tolerate the things that as teenagers they didn't like very much perhaps."

One Southern European mother ("Alice") explained what she is looking forward to when she experiences an empty nest, "I will have all my time to myself. I'm not going to be cleaning up after other people. I think probably until one is a parent you don't actually quite have a clue what it involves. So there's just huge amounts of stuff that I won't have to do anymore. I can concentrate on my art work or just have blocks of time that are not interrupted...I don't even know what I'm going to do. I mean, I may move to Italy. I don't know what I'm going to do. But I'm not picking up socks unless they're mine."

Those parents that seemed to have a hard time accepting and adjusting to the child's leaving were more likely to find the transition difficult. Parents that had a hard time adjusting to their child leaving often said that it was because they were very emotionally attached to their child. Statements like "We were so emotionally attached to each other, it was hard to let her go" (British mother, E240), "Because she was leaving and I felt a part of me was leaving" (Southern European mother, G313), and "I didn't want her to leave. I want her to be by my side" (Chinese mother, N751) illustrate the difficulty some parents face when their children leave home. These parents reported that it was difficult to adjust because they miss the companionship and/or support from their child. As one Chinese father ("David") shared, "My son is quite a bit into sports – very much like me, into hockey and things like that. And so I would rise to the challenge to go and play with him or with them, you know who he was with. Being around him kept me younger. I could be more creative, more fun. And my health was more

alive. And now I have to push myself more to be active, and fun-loving, and creative."

A British mother ("Nancy") explained how it was hard for her to see her children leave, "I think I miss the most though my connection with them. Not that we're not connected, but you can't be as close because you're not involved in their day-to-day life. I always knew what kind of day my kids had by how they said 'hi mom' when they walked in the door. Now on the phone it just doesn't connect quite the same. I mean, you can talk on the phone but you're talking about *something*. Either something that's bothering them, or something that's bothering you, or something you need to do, or something you're happy about, or some good thing that's happening, but you stay on topic. You throw out all the stupid little things – which are the fun parts... My friends would say 'Oh I can hardly wait till they leave home.' I never said that. I loved having my kids at home. I enjoyed the company of my children."

It was also difficult for some parents when their children left because they missed their parental role. One Southern European mother (R880) said that empty nest syndrome can occur because "you're a mom and that is the most important thing in your life and then all of a sudden your children leave the house." An Indo/East Indian mother ("Helen") shared, "Personally to me, there is a void in there because you have done all the caring and nurturing and all of a sudden there's no one there. Even though you know in your head that it is time for them to go, but when it actually happens it's very hard on your emotions – like in your heart you feel it's hard to let go... I guess I'm a nurturing person, so

there's no one to nurture anymore. I mean, if not anything, at least I could cook and clean the house and keep the house clean. But you know, now I have to do it for myself. A lot of people would look at it as a blessing. But I don't. I feel there should be somebody else to share it [with]." A British mother ("Nancy") stated, "This whole being a hands-off parent has been a learning experience for me. I had to be. And I think that's more my transition with empty nest, not so much empty nest, which I guess it is, but being a distant parent, a not hands-on parent...It's better now, it's easier now. But at first it was kind of difficult."

It is important to note that it was not always the case that parents *either* accepted the child's leaving and thus did not have a difficult time *or* they had a hard time adjusting to the child's leaving and thus had a negative experience. There was more nuance and ambiguity to many parents' qualitative responses. Parents mentioned that it was hard to let the child go and they were sad, but they also realized that it was a positive experience for the child to leave. They seemed to experience both happiness and sadness at the same time when their child left home. One Indo/East Indian mother (J463) shared, "It's very hard to express – you are happy that she got married but it's also difficult to be separated."

One Southern European father ("Mike") explained the mixed feelings he had when his child left home, "I wouldn't say it was really stressful, I'd say it was happy because she was going to go and have an experience of what it was like living away from home, going to university. And I guess I was a little...not disappointed, but I was sort of like...I would not say apprehensive, but I was maybe sad that she was leaving home. You know it would have been nice if she

was initially starting school at home, but I knew what it was like having to go to university myself. I knew what the stress would be of trying to come where we live, driving and everything else, so I knew it would be easier for her." He further explained, "Well I guess the biggest positive was having the house just for myself and my wife again....That was one of the things. Freedom, once again. Freedom of like prior to having kids and that I guess took an adjustment. And then there were times of course when I would wish they were there just to have a conversation with them as opposed to on the phone, right?"

A British mother ("Nancy") also explained the ambiguity she experienced, "Probably I liked and disliked some of the same things. Like I liked that I didn't have to make meals on schedules but I disliked that I didn't have to make meals on schedules because then I never ate [*laughter]*. I liked that I didn't have be driving people around but I disliked that nobody needed me to drive them around....I liked that it was quiet and I didn't like that it was quiet." Furthermore, some parents mentioned that it was difficult to see their child leave and it was hard for them to adjust, but only for a short period of time. They may have a difficult time at first accepting the child leaving, but with time it does seem to get better for parents.

### *Concern with the Child's Well-Being*

Parents also reported having a difficult time with the transition or experiencing emotional distress as a result of being worried about the child's well-being once they left home. As one Indo/East Indian mother ("Helen") explained, "I guess it's a kind of fear you have about your children going out into

the world. I mean if you have given them the tools, you have given them the education, you have taught them everything but when it actually happens, it's scary for parents if you really care about them." One area of concern for parents was the child's safety or well-being when they are on their own: "She was moving in with friends. I was worried about her safety. I went to install locks on her doors and stuff" (British father, B066) and "Her marriage was arranged and I was worried how her husband and in-laws would treat her" (Indo/East Indian father, H404). One Chinese father ("Tom") explained, "Sometimes there's a bit of a worry about their health and how they're getting on. Because when they were around you they would come and discuss their personal problems with you, but when they're away they do this less often. And things really get a little bit more distant...you are in two different places so there's a sort of a distance and not as close as before."

Moreover, parents were concerned about their child's ability to manage on their own. A Southern European father (R965) worried about his child being on his own because "I wasn't so sure he was financially stable". A Chinese mother (I374) shared, "I worried about the child; he didn't know how to take good care of himself." An Indo/East Indian mother ("Helen") explained, "It was traumatic because she was young and she was working part-time. And our concern was how was she going to pay her bills, eat well...we were worried about her welfare. That was more traumatic for us. We knew that she wasn't financially secure."

On the other hand, one of the reasons why parents said they did not find it difficult to see their child leave was because they were not necessarily worried

about their child living away from home. Many parents said they were not worried because they felt the child was responsible and would do well on their own. One Chinese mother (L552) explained why it was not difficult to see her son leave, "My son has a good job, he is financially independent, and he was well-prepared when he left." A British father (B073) also found it not difficult because "He has been away for shorter periods of time and survived. He's a smart kid – we're cognizant of his strengths." Another Chinese mother ("Wendy") shared that it is important to have faith in your children managing on their own and to not become consumed with worry, "Some people really over-handle the kids. And they think they cannot go on when the kid leaves. But that's not true. When they understand the kids actually learn more today, they have more education, they're smarter than them, and they're surviving better than them. But a lot of people don't think that way. Because they still think it's just like a baby; but they're not, they grow up already. So that's why they feel bad because they worry so much...They just worry about all these details. 'Oh they don't know how to take care of themselves, they miss stuff, maybe they cannot sleep good or something...', they worry about those things. Actually, the kids are not having it [those problems]. When they worry, they make themselves sick."

Additionally, parents were less likely to be worried or have a difficult time with the transition if they felt someone else was there to "watch over" their child for them. This could be because the child was going to live with someone else (i.e., partner) or because the child was moving to where other family members lived – either way, the parent took comfort in knowing someone else was there

for the child. As one Southern European mother ("Rebecca") shared, "At this point she has her fiancé living with her, which gives me more comfortability. I would probably feel worse if she was there by herself. I would probably be a little less happier. But with the fiancé – that I've known for two years – I know he cares for her really well...When she left the nest I felt secure with him being there."

### *Involvement in Other Roles/Activities*

In the quantitative analysis, the parent's employment status did not have a statistically significant effect on the experience of the empty nest transition. However, insight from the interviews suggest that it could be that employment status did not play a significant role because it is not employment *per se* that helps with the transition; rather it is keeping busy in general that helps. Quite often parents mentioned in the interviews that the transition was not very difficult for them because they had other things to focus on. Whether it was paid work, community service, engaging in hobbies, or being involved in social activities – keeping themselves busy and their time occupied seemed to helped many parents with the transition.

For example, one Southern European mother ("Rebecca"), who is a homemaker, explained that she did not believe she was at a disadvantage nor had a more difficult experience of the transition because she did not have a paid job to go to. She shared, "I'm a person that looks for things to do. I'm very creative...My vantages of creativity helped." She discussed how just because she doesn't have a paid job, it doesn't mean her time is empty. She likes to attend

seminars, babysit her grandchildren, go out to shows with her friends, go on dates with her husband, and even participate in research studies. She adds, "Now I can travel. If I want to go to Ontario to see my daughter, I just get my air miles and I get on a plane to see her. So I'm free. I don't let myself get depressed. Like, I don't let myself have time to do that. Being depressed is a waste of time... Do something."

One way this strategy of keeping busy seemed to help a lot of parents is that having other roles or activities kept them busy or "distracted" so that they did not have time to focus on their child not being there and missing them. One British father (G311) explained, "Many parents work and the world is rushing by – people don't have time to miss their children." A Chinese mother (E205) stated, "If parents are busily engaged in other things, they won't feel empty." A Southern European father ("Mike") shared, "I had my job so I was at work…Working seven-and-a-half hours a day and like three hours of traveling – yeah, there wasn't very much time to sit back and say 'oh I wish the kids were here to talk to'. Yeah, it definitely helped... I try to occupy my time – whether it was watching more types of televisions shows, or the odd reading of a book or something, or socializing more with my friends...Yeah, trying to make life physically, mentally occupied so I wouldn't be thinking about it [the children being gone]. Not that I would be bad for thinking about it, but it would probably be easier not to think about it."

Another way this strategy of being involved in other activities was beneficial to parents is that many parents believed that having other roles prior to their child leaving helped them to be prepared for the transition. Parents reported

that having other roles meant that they did not solely identify as being a mother or father, so they did not feel too much loss of identity when their child left. One British mother (E219) explained, "I think that for women who have made their primary focus as mother in the home it must be very difficult. I am a professional so I have other roles and interests. I have lots going on. I've seen girlfriends who've made taking care of their kids their only focus and so they were really affected when they left."

A Chinese father ("Tom") reported the benefits of having other roles, "It was no problem [when the children left home] because we were busy doing other things without the children around. And if both parents are working – that's quite important in terms of not having the emotional wrenching that might occur. Because then each parent becomes much more involved in their work which takes up some of the time – emotional time – that was devoted to the child or children. Because you're preoccupied and you can also sort of transfer some of your attention that you originally devoted to children away from them towards this other work that you're doing, whatever it might be...Because your timesharing part is being transferred from the children to other activities and so you're still involved in things. The thing is that if you were involved for the family unit, say just totally involved in themselves [the family/the children], and then the children suddenly move out and then the parents in that case have really lost themselves."

Additionally, having other children still at home seemed to help ease the transition of the study child leaving home. A lot of these parents felt that focusing

on the fact that they still have at least one child at home and that this keeps them busy and involved with their parental role seemed to help them deal with the study child leaving. One Indo/East Indian father (G322) explained, "I had another son (living at home) who never made me feel the lack," while an Indo/East Indian mother (J727) shared, "I have two sons and a daughter-in-law that are living with me. I feel it is still a full house." Another Indo/East Indian father ("Peter") said, "See my daughter lives downstairs in the basement [with her family], so we have the grandchildren coming here every day, spending time with us and it's a pleasurable situation every day. So we've never really felt lonely in that sense, you see."

### *Maintaining a Relationship with the Child*

Another commonly reported reason why parents did not have a difficult experience of the empty nest transition is because they have maintained a relationship with their child. One Chinese father (C110) said it was not emotionally difficult to see his child leave because "We have developed a strong bond with our children, so we have a strong relationship that will always be there." It also was not as difficult for a parent to see their study child leave if the child remained close to where the parents live. Since the parents are still able to see the child often, it does not feel like a "cut" for many of these parents. One Southern European mother (R866) states, "I see her almost every day – she lives close. It hasn't been a major life-changing happening for me." A Southern European father (G659) explains, "Nothing has really changed. My daughter still comes home every week and we are still as close." One Indo/East Indian mother

("Helen") shares, "You do feel sad because you would want them close to you where you could walk and visit with them. But I know I can drive down there in a good day and just spend a few hours and come back. That kind of uplifts me...Because when children leave and go far away, away from the city or the country, it's harder on parents because they know in their heart that they're not going to see them ever – like they will see them, but not as often as if they were in town. So personally, because they're around me, it's not so bad because now I get to see them and my grandchildren."

Additionally, many parents continue to provide support to their child (i.e., emotional, material) even after the child leaves. If the child remained close to home, many parents mentioned how they would still have the child over for meals. Some parents even mentioned doing their child's laundry, buying them groceries, helping with transportation, and babysitting the grandchildren. Even if the child moved far away, most parents still provided emotional support and sometimes financial support to their child. A lot of parents stated that they like providing support to their child because it helps them stay connected to their child and it makes them feel good to help out the child and know they're being taken care of.

For example, one Southern European father ("Mike") explains the support he gives to his child, "I talk to my daughter weekly. And up until she just went off to school and when she was working, I would see her minimum bi-monthly for lunch. And then they [the daughter and her partner] would come for dinner. Both of them twice a month, you know, like Saturday, Sunday dinner... [Also] I'm

always slipping my daughter a few bucks under the table. You know, 'Maybe you need a hair cut' – 'oh dad, don't worry' – 'I got it…here'. As far as emotional support, I'm always there if she wants to talk...If she ever needs anything she knows she can come and talk to me and see me. So from that stand point, I think I supply her with all the support that she needs from her dad, if she needs or wants. But sometimes she doesn't want, and that's when I have to stick the money in her purse *[laughter]*."

Regardless of whether the child remained close to home or moved further away, having good communication with the child helps a lot of parents with the transition. Parents are still able to maintain a close relationship with their child through phone calls, emails, or even chatting online. One British father ("Jeff") discussed the benefits of keeping in communication with his children, "If you're staying in touch, you know the goods and the bads and what's happening and if they need or want your help or vice versa." There were some parents who even argued that in the modern world, with all its communication advances, empty nest syndrome is less common because parents and children are able to stay in contact much easier and more frequently than in the past. As one British father ("James") explains, "I mean, we always missed them and we find that partings are always difficult, especially when they move a long ways away. But on the other hand, what you got now is very, very good communication: Skype and email. And I mean sometimes we're talking to them everyday. Phone calls, no problem. I mean, when I immigrated, I exchanged a letter with my parents once

a week or once every two weeks or whatever. So there is a lot more communication and closeness now than there was 30-40 years ago."

# CHAPTER 5:DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This study explores parental experiences of the empty nest transition. Quantitative results [see Table 3] support more recent research in that the majority of parents did not report adverse reactions of feeling very depressed when their children left home (e.g., Dennerstein et al. 2002, Glenn 1975, Harkins 1978; Rubin 1981). Qualitative results were consistent with studies that found that many parents looked at the empty nest transition as a time of increased freedom, more privacy, more available resources, and less responsibilities (e.g., Borland 1982; Raup & Myers 1989; Rubin 1981, Smolak 1993). Participants also stated the empty nest transition was an opportunity to have more time, more privacy, and better communication with their partner or spouse (e.g., Glen 1975; Harris et al. 1986; Mitchell 2006b; Raup & Myers 1989; Umberson et al. 2005; White & Edwards 1990). In support of the earlier studies conducted by Sullivan & Sullivan (1980) and Aquilino (1997), parents also reported that they enjoy having a new, adult relationship of mutual respect with their child.

Quantitative and qualitative findings indicate diversity in the experiences of this transition and that some parents are more vulnerable or are struggling more than others during this transition. Furthermore, quantitative and qualitative findings support the idea that cultural/social context is critical in shaping parental experiences of this transition. One's gender, ethnicity, and other socio-demographic and contextual factors can influence perceptions of this transition

and how parents handle it with respect to relational bonds, social timetables (i.e., appropriate conditions and times for separation), and adjustment strategies.

Quantitative results indicated that mothers and Indo/East Indian parents were more likely to have a difficult experience of the transition than fathers and the other ethnic groups, respectively. Additionally, parents who were more likely to have a difficult time with the transition were those: in the emptying nest; who were younger at the time their study child left home; who had their study child leave home at an earlier age; with a closer relationship with their study child; and with more non-face-to-face contact with their study child [see Tables 4-13 in Appendix A for more detail on quantitative results].

Qualitative results found that gender, ethnic background, the circumstances of the child's homeleaving, the parent's level of acceptance or preparation for the homeleaving, the amount of worry participant's had about their child living away from home, whether the parent was involved in other activities or roles, and if the parent maintained a relationship with the study child were all relevant to how parents experienced this transition. Those parents that were happy with the reasons and/or the timing of the child leaving home, were prepared or accepting of the child's homeleaving, had less worries about the child leaving home, were involved in other activities or roles, and maintained a relationship with their child after they left home tended to have a more positive experience of the empty nest transition and adjusting to it.

This chapter will discuss the results in further detail. First, there will be a discussion of the role of gender in the experience of the empty nest transition;

then, a discussion of the role of ethnic background; finally, the role of various other socio-demographic and contextual factors in the experience of the empty nest transition will be discussed.

## Gender Variations

Contrary to research conducted by Rubin (1981), Lindsey (2005), and Souza (2006), quantitative analyses revealed that mothers were more likely to report a negative experience of the transition than fathers. Most parents (both mothers and fathers) did not report having a very negative experience of the empty nest transition, but mothers (23.0%) were more likely than fathers (12.6%) to report that it was extremely difficult on an emotional level to see their study child leave home [see Table 8]. Additionally, mothers were more likely to report their emotional health was worse at the time their study child left in comparison to now (40.2% versus 15.8% for fathers). Fathers (73.3%) were more likely than mothers (53.1%) to report that their emotional health stayed the same [see Table 12]. Furthermore, a higher percentage of mothers (31.6%) reported empty nest syndrome compared to fathers (22.5%) [see Table 4], but as indicated in the previous chapter, the gender difference is marginal for British participants (the largest ethnic group in the study), and higher for all other ethnic groups [see Table 6]. To further explore these quantitative findings on gender, an examination of the participant's qualitative responses was carried out.

### *Belief that the Transition is More Difficult for Mothers*

The qualitative responses on gender revealed that more participants believe that mothers are more likely to have a difficult time with the transition

than fathers. There were recurring themes in the responses that in general mothers are more likely to have a harder time with the transition than fathers because it is "natural" for mothers to have a difficult time simply because she is a mother; that mothers are more emotional or sensitive and so they are affected by the transition more; and that mothers tend to be more attached to the children than is the father. These beliefs reflect socially-prescribed traditional gender roles and stereotypes. What is thought to be inherent gender differences – that women have a closer attachment to their children and are more emotional than men – are actually a result of gender socialization (Fox 2001; Gustafson 2005; Lindsey 2005; McDaniel & Tepperman 2007; Nelson & Robinson 2002). Gender socialization – which begins at birth and continues throughout an individual's life – is a process in which people learn gender-based behaviours that are viewed as "appropriate" for their gender (what is considered "appropriate" varies throughout time and culture). The major agents of socialization (e.g., family, peer groups, schools, and the media) reinforce the conventional definitions of what is considered masculine and feminine behaviours and attitudes (McDaniel & Tepperman 2007).

Participants argued that it was "natural" for mothers to have a more emotionally difficult time with this transition. A mother has a difficult time with the transition simply because she is a mother. However, there was not this same sentiment with fathers – that it was "natural" for fathers to have a difficult time with the transition. Instead, participants reported that males did not have as difficult as a time simply because they are males. This sentiment reflects the

belief that there are "natural" differences between males and females that the only explanation needed to explain a behaviour is to label it as a masculine or a feminine behaviour. However, this sentiment often fails to recognize these distinctions are socially created (Lindsey 2005; Macionis 2001). Additionally, these statements – that it is "natural" for mothers to have a difficult time and "natural" for fathers to not have a difficult time – seem to overemphasize the differences in mothers' and fathers' experiences of the empty nest transition. The quantitative findings indicated that although mothers are more likely to have a difficult experience than fathers, the majority of mothers did not have a negative experience just as the majority of fathers did not have a negative experience [see Tables 4, 8, and 12].

Another belief among the participants was that mothers are more likely than fathers to have an emotionally difficult time with the transition because women are more emotional or sensitive than men. As a result, women are supposedly more likely to be emotionally affected by this transition and to react more adversely. Whereas, fathers handle the transition better because they are more reasonable or pragmatic about the child leaving home. Additionally, some participants argued that mothers and fathers have the same emotional experience of the transition (i.e., both are equally sad to see the child leave home), the only difference is that mothers show their emotions and fathers do not. These ideas tap into traditional gender stereotypes and roles whereby women are viewed as more emotional and men are more pragmatic or reasonable. Men are socialized to not let emotions get in the way of rational

action and these expectations often cause men to suppress their emotions (Coleman & Cressey 1999; Kornblum & Julian 2001; Lindsey 2005). As a result, women are socialized to believe it is acceptable to react emotionally to their child leaving, whereas men are supposed to be more reserved and "logical" in order to be the "rock of support" for the wife and the family in this time of transition.

Mothers were also believed to have a more difficult time with the transition than fathers because mothers are more attached to their children than fathers are. Participants reported that mothers were "naturally" more attached and nurturing, often because they gave birth to the child. It was believed that fathers were less likely to have a difficult time with the transition because they were usually not as attached to the children as the mother or did not spend as much time with the children as the mother did. As a result, the father was able to adjust easier to the absence of the child. This sentiment reflects the dominant discourse on mothering whereby mothers are considered "naturally" more attached to the child and "more suited" for caring for the child than the father is (Eshleman & Wilson 2001; Fox 2001; Gustafson 2005; Lindsey 2005; McDaniel & Tepperman 2007; Nelson & Robinson 2002). Lindsey (2005) argues that girls are socialized early in life to believe that their maternal role will be their ultimate fulfilment and that these motherly responsibilities will come naturally to them (i.e., a "maternal instinct", which does not have empirical support). This socialization accounts for the different responsibilities, work, and priorities that parents take on; with mothers usually prioritizing child care responsibilities while fathers usually prioritize the financial support of the family (Fox 2001; Nelson & Robinson 2002).

As mothers are socialized to believe their ultimate fulfillment will be their role as a mother, that they have a stronger connection to their children, and that they are the primary caretakers of children, this explains why many participants believe that women are more likely to have a harder time with their child's homeleaving than men do.

*Belief that the Transition is More Difficult for Fathers*

Some mothers stated in the interviews that they believe their husbands had a more difficult time with the transition because they were not as involved in the child's life or development. This argument is contrary to the belief that it is easier for fathers to adjust to their child being gone because their day did not revolve around their children as much as it did for mothers. Consistent with some earlier research (Lindsey 2005; Rubin 1981; Souza 2006), these participants explained that they believe fathers have a more difficult time with the transition because they are not as involved in the child's day-to-day life and so they are less prepared. These fathers may regret that they did not spend as much time with the child and they wish to make-up for lost time (e.g., Rubin 1981; Lindsey 2005). Furthermore, fathers may be less prepared for the child to leave because they are less aware of the child's gradual movement toward independence and their ability to be on their own (e.g., Rubin 1981; Souza 2006). Participant responses revealed that fathers can have a difficult time with the transition because they are worried about the child being on their own and that they are no longer able to protect the child (e.g., Souza 2006). Some fathers also found it hard to see their children leave home because it was hard to give up control or

hard to accept that the children are adults and making their own decisions (i.e., the fear that they are no longer needed).

*"Atypical" Fathers and "Bad" Mothers*

The qualitative responses revealed the idea that there are "appropriate" ways for men and women to react to their children leaving home. Some fathers that reported having a difficult time or a somewhat difficult time when their child left home noted how their situation was atypical (i.e., as if it was not "normal" for a father to have a difficult time with the transition) and they often felt the need to qualify their statements (e.g., "men do not usually feel this way, but..."). There also seemed to be a standard for how mothers were supposed to react to the transition. Participant responses revealed that some mothers felt guilty or believed they must be a "bad mother" for not having a more difficult time when their child left home. Gustafson (2005) argues that "master discourses" on mothering create social expectations for what constitutes a "good" or "bad" mother. If a mother does not put her children first and selflessly devote her life to caring for her children, she is considered a selfish, bad mother (Gustafson 2005; Lindsey 2005). This mandate can instill guilt in mothers if they do not meet these expectations. For example, mothers can feel guilty for having a difficult or frustrating time caring for a newborn child and not "naturally" tapping into their "maternal instinct", as well as for putting their young children in daycare (Lindsey 2005). Since "good" mothers are supposed to have a strong connection with their children and their most important role is being a mother, mothers can feel guilty

when they do not have an emotionally difficult time when their children leave home.

In conclusion, quantitative and qualitative data reveal gender differences in how parents experience the empty nest transition. However, many of these ideas from the qualitative responses (e.g., that it is "natural" for mothers to have a more difficult time, that they are more emotional, that they are more attached to their children) seem to be rooted in socially prescribed gender roles and stereotypes. Statements given by the participants reflect the notion that there are "appropriate" roles for men and women and "appropriate" ways to react to their child leaving. Are mothers genuinely more likely to have a harder time with the transition than fathers? On one hand, mothers may be more likely than fathers to have a difficult time because, as a result of socially prescribed traditional gender roles, women are usually regarded as the main caregivers for their children (Eshleman & Wilson 2001; Fox 2001; Hochschild 2003; Lindsey 2005; McDaniel & Tepperman 2007; Nelson & Robinson 2002). Consequently, more of their time is usually devoted to their children and a stronger bond between the mother and the child may actually form as a result of spending more time together and being more involved in their day-to-day life. As a result, it may be more difficult for mothers to see their child leave home.

However, on the other hand, fathers are very attached to their children as well and it could just be that the quantitative findings revealed that mothers are more likely to have a negative experience because mothers are more likely to *report* feelings of sadness or a difficult experience with the transition. Due to

gender role socialization, it may be viewed as more socially acceptable for women than for men to be emotional when their children leave or to share those emotions (e.g., Coleman & Cressey 1999; Kornblum & Julian 2001; Lindsey 2005). Indeed, some mothers may over-report how emotionally difficult the transition was for them because it is viewed as the "appropriate" way mothers should react to their children leaving home and if they don't, they may feel guilty (e.g., Gustafson 2005; Lindsey 2005). Perhaps fathers feel just as sad as mothers (or possibly more sad) when their children leave home, but they feel less comfortable sharing this as men are usually regarded as being more pragmatic, less emotional, and responsible for being the "rock of support" for their wife or family who may be having a difficult time with the transition (e.g., Coleman & Cressey 1999; Kornblum & Julian 2001; Lindsey 2005).

## Ethnic Variations

Quantitative analyses found that ethnic background did play a role in shaping parental experiences of the empty nest transition, consistent with earlier research (e.g., Mazzuco 2003; Pillay 1988). Indo/East Indian parents were more likely than parents from the other groups to report empty nest syndrome [see Table 4], to find it extremely difficult on an emotional level to see their study child leave home [see Table 8], and to agree they were sad when all their children left home/will be sad when all their children leave home [see Table 10]. Qualitative responses provided possible explanations for these findings. Indo/East Indian participants reported that in the Indo/East Indian community families are very close and parents are very attached to their children, and thus it is very

emotionally difficult when the child leaves home. Consistent with research from Pillay (1988), the homeleaving can also be difficult for parents when the homeleaving violates cultural norms. Indo/East Indian parents can have strict guidelines about the appropriate times to leave home (e.g., for school, to get married), and some families have the tradition of the eldest son remaining in the parental home. When these standards are not met, it can cause stress, sadness, or shame for the parents.

*Chinese Parents*

Conversely, the quantitative results revealed that Chinese parents were the least likely to have a difficult time when their child left home compared to the other groups. Chinese parents were least likely to report empty nest syndrome (17.8% compared to 58.1% for Indo/East Indian parents) [see Table 4], the least likely to report it was extremely difficult on an emotional level to see their study child leave home (6.7% compared to 32.4% for Indo/East Indian parents) [see Table 8], and the least likely to agree they were sad or will be sad when all their children left home (14.0% compared to 62.2% for Indo/East Indian parents) [see Table 10]. To further explain this pattern, the qualitative participant responses were examined. Chinese participants reported that it was not very difficult to have their child leave home because they still remain an important part of the family and the connection with the child is not cut simply because they do not live at home. Moreover, the child's decision to leave home was usually a well-communicated decision with the parents. The parents were usually involved in the child's plans to leave. Related to this, Chinese parents often had their

children leave home for the "right" reasons (i.e., conformity to desired trajectories), such as going to school, getting a job, or getting married (e.g., see Lim and Lim 2005). The parents were often proud of their children becoming a successful adult and moving in the "right" direction.

*British Parents*

There was a belief among participants that British parents would be the least likely to have a difficult time with the transition. British parents, as well as parents from other ethnic groups, often explained that for British parents the child leaving home was a normative transition, their children are expected to leave, and they are prepared for it. Some participants reported that British parents could not wait for their children to leave home and that British parents sometimes make their children leave home once they get to a certain age (which some parents from other ethnic groups reported is unheard of in their culture).

The quantitative results indicated that British parents overall did not have the most difficult time with the transition (it seemed to be Indo/East Indian parents that had the most difficult time) but they also did not have the least difficult time (it seemed to be Chinese parents that had the least difficult time). British parents were the most likely out of the other groups to report an ambiguous experience of the transition. British parents were most likely to report that it was "somewhat difficult" on an emotional level to see their study child leave home [see Table 8] and the most likely to "neither agree nor disagree" that they were sad when all their children left home (or will be sad when all their children leave home) [see Table 10]. This could be a result of British parents

accepting and expecting that their children will leave home (and thus they are prepared for it and view it as "normative"), but still having feelings of sadness when the child leaves home and missing the child.

### *Southern European Parents*

There was also a belief among participants that Southern European families, and especially Southern European mothers, would have a difficult time with the transition. This sentiment was expressed by Southern European parents as well as parents from other groups. It was argued that Southern European parents, or more specifically Italian parents, would have a difficult time because they have very strong bonds with their children and family is very important to them. Statements like "Being an Italian it is typically hard to let children go. Family is everything for us Italians" (female, R857), "Because we Italians love to have our children at home" (male, R872), and "Italians are more tied to their children" (male, R990) are examples of this belief.

However, from the quantitative findings, Southern European parents (as a whole) seemed to have a relatively similar experience to British parents. In most cases, there was not much difference between British and Southern European responses (the difference between the two groups was usually less than 5%). For example, 19.8% of British parents reported empty nest syndrome compared

to 18.7% of Southern European parents [see Table 4][11]. It could be that although Southern Europeans have strong familistic ties, it is more normative or expected that their children will leave home compared to Indo/East Indian families. Additionally, more Italian families are accepting their children leaving home before getting married, as Southern European participants shared.

## Variations by Other Socio-Demographic and Contextual Factors

Quantitative results indicated that parents in the emptying nest were more likely than empty nest parents to have a difficult time with this transition [see Tables 4, 8, and 10]. This may be because emptying nest parents tend to be younger. As a result, their study child may have left more recently than those in the empty nest, and thus the emotions of their child leaving are possibly more prominent than for a parent that has had years to adjust. Also, the qualitative data revealed that parents often felt it was more difficult for them when their first child left home because it was a new experience and the beginning of a new transition, which could be stressful. Parents often found that it was subsequently less difficult for them when the other children left home because they were prepared for the transition and knew how to adjust better. For emptying nest parents, their study child might be their only child that has left so far and so they

[11] Though it was found that overall British and Southern European participants have similar response rates, the multivariate analysis (the relationship between gender and ENS when controlling for ethnic background) revealed that gender played a larger role in the occurrence of empty nest syndrome for Southern European participants than for British participants (i.e., the gender variation was much larger for Southern European parents compared to British parents. For example, 21.1% of British mothers experienced empty nest syndrome compared to 17.1% of British fathers; while 25.4% of Southern European mothers experienced empty nest syndrome compared to 6.2% of Southern European fathers).

may not have had the more "positive" or prepared experience that seems to occur when the remaining children leave home.

Quantitative findings also revealed that parents who were younger when their study child left home were more likely to have a harder time with the transition than parents that were older when their study child left [see Tables 4, 8, 10, and 12]. This could be because it is easier for parents to handle the transition when their children leave "on-time" (e.g., McLanahan & Sorenson 1985; Mitchell 2006b). Parents that were younger when their study child left (which implies their study child left home at a younger age) may not be as prepared for their child leaving because they figured it would happen at a more "appropriate" time based on their social timetables. The parent may feel added distress because they feel the child is too young to leave and thus they worry about the child's well-being when they are on their own. This idea supports research that has found those parents who are more prepared for their child leaving and those that have less worries and concerns about their child leaving are more likely to experience the transition in a positive way (e.g., Dennerstein et al. 2002; Rubin 1981; Smolak 1993). This could also explain the finding that those parents that had their study child leave home at an earlier age were more likely to report that their emotional health was worse when their study child left home (in comparison to now) [see Table 13].

Quantitative results also revealed that parents that have more non-face-to-face contact with their study child and have a closer relationship with their child (at the present time) were more likely to have a difficult experience with the

transition [see Table 5, 9, and 11]. As mentioned earlier, it could be the case that parents with more frequent contact with their child have a harder time "letting go" of their child. Parents that had a very emotionally difficult time with their child leaving – either because they deeply miss their child and/or they worry about their child being on their own – are probably more likely to contact their child frequently.

Additionally, these findings could also be a result of the character of the parent-child relationship. The close relationship between the parent and the study child now and the more frequent amount of contact at the current time are probably a result of having had a close relationship with their child when they lived at home. Parents that had a really close relationship and strong attachment with their child may be more likely to report experiencing a difficult transition because they were really saddened by the child leaving home because they were so close. These parents may feel the loss more than parents that were not as close to their child or did not spend as much time with the child when they lived at home.

Consistent with earlier studies, qualitative results found that if parents were prepared (and thus not worried) and if the homeleaving occurred "on time" for the "right" reasons, they had a better experience of the transition (e.g., see Dennerstein et al. 2002; McLanahan & Sorenson 1985; Mitchell 2006b; Rubin 1981; Smolak 1993). Furthermore, consistent with research conducted by Adlemann et al. (1989), Borland (1982), Raup & Myers (1989) and Rubin (1981), many parents reported that keeping busy with other roles or activities helped

them to adjust well to the empty nest transition. Employment status, per se, did not seem to be the most important factor in the level of adjustment. These findings are consistent with the study conducted by Radloff (1980) that concluded that unemployed or homemaker parents in the empty nest were no more depressed than employed parents in the empty nest. It appears as if keeping busy and being involved in other roles and activities (whatever they may be) is more important of a factor in adjusting to the transition than simply being employed.

Finally, the qualitative analysis revealed that parents who maintained a relationship with their child through continuous support and/or communication seemed to have a more positive experience of the transition than those that did not maintain a relationship with their child (e.g., see Anderson 1988; Lomranz et al. 1996; White & Edwards 1990). Maintaining a relationship helped parents to stay connected with their child and to continue their parental role (i.e., continuing to provide emotional and sometimes material support to their children). This continuous caregiving and communication with their children could help explain why some parents reported ambiguous or mixed reactions to their child leaving where they viewed it as both a positive and negative experience – where the child has left home, but is not completely out of their lives (e.g., see Lomranz et al. 1996; White & Edwards 1990).

In conclusion, this study examined patterns and diversity in parental experiences of the empty nest transition. Many earlier studies on this transition did not take into account mothers' *and* fathers' experiences, as well as how one's

ethnic identity could influence the experience of the transition. Drawing from the life course perspective, this study acknowledges that it is important to take into account individual factors, the time and social setting in which the individual lives, and the timing of the transition when examining parental experiences of the empty nest transition. The findings from this study revealed that the majority of parents did not report a very negative experience of the empty nest transition where they felt very depressed and had a very emotionally difficult time with the transition. This study also found diversity in the experiences of this transition by specific cultural, socio-demographic, and contextual factors.

# CHAPTER 6:IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

## Implications and Practical Applications

The knowledge gained in this study could help parents that are dealing with the empty nest transition or with parents who will soon experience this transition. Those who are about to experience their first homeleaving could gain insight into how others have experienced this transition, what to possibly expect during this transition, and strategies for preparation and adjustment. In addition, parents that are currently experiencing the empty nest transition could benefit from knowing what strategies other parents employed and found to be helpful when they experienced their children's homeleaving.

Furthermore, those who are currently experiencing the empty nest transition could benefit from the knowledge that they are not alone in their experiences and that other parents are going through similar things. From the in-depth interviews, it was found that all the interview participants (even those that did not report experiencing empty nest syndrome) experienced at least a little bit of sadness or anxiety about their child leaving home. Reframing parents' feelings of sadness, worry, or anxiety about their children leaving home as "typical" or "normal" experiences that parents go through could help to ease the stress that parents may feel when experiencing this transition.

One strategy parents found helpful was to stay busy with various activities (e.g., paid work, volunteering, community service, engaging in hobbies). Many

parents found that staying busy helped keep their time occupied and their mind focused on something other than their child not being at home and missing them. They also felt that having other activities or roles prior to the child leaving helped them be prepared for their child leaving because they had other roles to rely on when their child left. As one mother ("Ann") explains, "They have to prepare themselves as a parent. They have to establish their social activities and networks. Have friends to talk about issues with and get emotional support. And be more involved in the community because it's the time for parents to feel life is still meaningful. Not just to constrain themselves in the family, in the house. Get out of the house and get into the community and use their time wisely and meaningfully. I encourage those empty nest parents to volunteer in different kind of areas or in the neighbourhood."

In fact, many parents expressed that the empty nest transition is a time to take advantage of having more free time and to get involved in different activities. As one father ("Tom") shared, "When you're empty nesting, you become more involved in community work. And also there's more social interaction with your peers as the empty nesting occurs." Another mother ("Julie") stated, "[Since my child left home] I've done volunteering at a woman's centre and the community. I've done fundraising and helping with stuff like that. Those were positive effects. If my son didn't move from here, I wouldn't be that much connected to the community, with the people."

Another strategy parents found helpful was to focus on the positives of their child leaving home. It was advantageous for parents to think that this was a

good opportunity for their child and themselves to grow and that there are benefits of the child leaving (e.g., less laundry, less financial expenses, more time for themselves). As one mother ("Nancy") explains, "[I] like not having to make meals, and not having to be on anybody else's schedule, and sharing the computer and the TV... [And now when the children come home for a visit from university] after two weeks it gets a little...it's too noisy, it's too structured, it's too somebody else's timetable... [When the children were gone,] I ate when I was hungry and I slept when I was tired." Another mother ("Ruth") shared, "I can come and go with impunity. I don't have to answer to anybody. I can behave any way I like in my own home...I also enjoyed the quiet. Just being at home, being quiet. I think I learned to...I actually got to really enjoy living alone. I adapted."

Some parents also felt this was an opportune time to figure out who they are as individuals. One mother ("Nancy") stated, "I think my advice would be enjoy. You have to spend some time remembering, re-identifying who you are, who you want to be. This isn't the end of you, this is just an age and stage. That age and stage is over; close that book and open the next one. You may need to spend some time considering... because again you're older and wiser and more mature...The experience of having kids and having kids at home has changed you more than you think it has. So allow yourself time to find out who you are now compared to who you were when you started that journey. And then consciously consider who you want to be in the next part of the journey."

Parents additionally found that maintaining a relationship with their child was a helpful strategy. It was comforting for many parents to know that even

though the child was gone, they could still talk with their child on the phone, e-mail them often, and even chat online. As one father ("Jeff") suggests, "I would say stay in touch with your kids. Again, you have full intentions of being in touch on a regular basis but then you go 'oh they're busy, they're at work...' and next thing you know it's two weeks and you haven't talked to them and it's so easy to do. So stay in touch with them, but don't over-do it. You know, you talk to people, young people, and every time there's a message on their cell phone, it's from mom. They don't even answer them any more. But yeah, don't lose contact; keep up with what they're doing and what you're doing...Make sure that they know that you are there if they need you, but know the chances are they you don't. Remember what you were doing at that age." Many parents also found it helpful to continue to provide some form of support to their child (i.e., emotional, financial, material). Parents reported that it made them feel good to continue to provide support because it helped them stay connected to their child, it allowed them to keep their parental role even after the children have left home, and it was comforting to know their child is being taken care for.

The knowledge gained from this study could also help health professionals and community programmers to better understand how parents experience this transition. These individuals could benefit from the knowledge of how parents experience the empty nest transition, how it affects their emotional health and well-being, what strategies and coping mechanisms other parents found useful during this transition, and what sub-groups of people are possibly more at risk or more vulnerable than others to have a difficult experience. Additionally, it should

be recognized that some parents may be reluctant to express negative emotions or experiences with the empty nest transition due to shame or embarrassment because they may believe it is not "acceptable" for them to feel this way as a result of gender and cultural standards. Hopefully with further knowledge of this transition and other parents' experiences, individuals can feel more comfortable in their reaction to the empty nest transition and would not hesitate to seek assistance or support if they are having a difficult time.

Community programs could also be set up to help parents who are experiencing the empty nest transition, especially those that are having a difficult time with the transition. One mother ("Ann") suggested that it would be helpful if workshops or seminars on this transition existed for parents to help them deal with it. She explains, "I guess another thing is if say the church or community can organize a seminar or that kind of thing to educate the parents on how to prepare for it and how to face it. That will be very helpful." These seminars could be a helpful resource for parents to get suggestions or advice on how to cope with this transition. This mother further suggested that the information from these seminars or workshops could also be made into a video and made accessible to rent from the local library so that parents can "learn things their own way", in case they do not feel comfortable attending a seminar.

In addition, support groups could be set up that would give parents an opportunity to share their experiences and the issues they are facing with a group of their peers. This could also be a beneficial opportunity to hear other parents' testimonies and coping strategies. Knowing that they are not alone in

this transition, that they have an outlet to express their feelings, and that they have resources of support could be very therapeutic for parents in the empty nest transition. One Chinese parent ("Ann") said support groups like these would be beneficial, "When they're in depression, [these support groups would] help them out of it, particularly those Chinese [parents] because it's difficult for Chinese to seek psychotherapy or this kind of thing – they see this as a stigma. Forming some support group, they can go to this support group and listen to one another. So then they learn, 'oh I'm not abnormal. It's just something that I have to get through in time.'"

Another program that could be helpful for parents in the empty nest transition is a community program that would organize activities or events for emptying and empty nest parents (e.g., physical activities, entertainment events, group dinners, service projects). Since many parents in the study reported the benefits of keeping busy with other activities, this social group could be an opportunity for parents that would like to engage in more activities or roles outside of the home. These programs could also be a beneficial social network for parents to develop new friendships, to develop new support systems, and to feel a sense of connectedness with their community.

## Limitations and Future Research

In this study, a mixed methods approach was used because it utilizes the effectiveness and benefits of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative data and analysis in this study provided a more systematic analysis of general patterns and trends in parental experiences of the empty nest

transition, while qualitative data and analysis provided a more detailed and contextual understanding of these patterns and how parents experience this transition. However, it is important to note there are limitations to the research design used in this study.

There are limits to the quantitative portion of the study (i.e., the survey data and its analysis). This study uses quota and purposive sampling without weighting, and thus it is not representative of the mid- and later-life population (that is experiencing the empty nest transition) of the Greater Vancouver area or Canada. As this sample is not representative, that limits the generalizability of the findings. However, this study was carried out more for exploration purposes (i.e., to examine what the experience of this transition was like for parents) and not to estimate prevalence rates. As a result, the findings from this study can be transferable, though not generalizable, to the population (i.e., the experiences of the empty nest transition given in this study are not unique simply to this sample of parents).

Aside from using a more representative sample, further research on this topic could also be carried out using a larger sample size. Relationships that were not statistically significant in this study may prove to be significant with a larger sample size. Relationships could also be re-examined using more complex, multivariate statistical methods. When employing a multivariate statistical technique, such as logistic regression, some of the relationships in this study that were examined using bivariate analyses may no longer be significant when you control for other factors. Additionally, further studies could examine

more ethnocultural groups beyond the four looked at in this study (including, but not limited to, Japanese, Korean, First Nations, Persian, Arabic, and Latino parents). Further studies could also include parents that report mixed heritage or those that identify just as "Canadian".

There are also limits to the qualitative portion of the study (i.e., the in-depth interviews). One limit is that the in-depth interviews only included those parents who speak English, as a result of the language limitations of the researcher. Excluding those who do not speak English from the interviews result in a loss of further information and insight into how these parents experience the transition. Those that do not speak English could be recent immigrants or those with more traditional cultural values and norms. It would be interesting to carry out in-depth interviews with this population to see how those factors play a role in their experience of the transition. These parents may have a more difficult time with their child leaving because they depend on their child for language support. They may need their child for translation to keep them connected to people outside of the community (e.g., doctors, bankers, cashiers). Additionally, they may rely on their children as their primary source for creating and maintaining social networks and relationships outside of the home. This may result in a loss of social capital when all their children leave home (Mitchell & Lovegreen 2007).

Another limit is that there was no representation of Chinese males that experienced empty nest syndrome and Indo/East Indian females that did not experience empty nest syndrome in the interviews. Though the lack of these participants does reveal cultural and gender differences in the occurrence of

empty nest syndrome, it would be helpful to compare Chinese males that experience empty nest syndrome with Chinese males that did not (and the same with Indo/East Indian females). In-depth interviews with these excluded groups could provide more understanding of within-group variations. As the majority of Chinese fathers did not experience empty nest syndrome, it would be helpful to examine what the experience was like for Chinese fathers that did experience empty nest syndrome and what factors played a role in the difference. This would also provide further insight as to why some parents experience empty nest syndrome and others do not, while still taking into account cultural differences.

Additional research could also be done to further investigate some of the issues brought up in this study. For example, more research could be done to examine the duration of empty nest syndrome or the amount of time it takes for parents to cope with the transition. These studies could further examine why the length and depth of distress vary for different people and why some parents instantly adjust, some face distress only for the short-term, while others seem to deal with a more long-term clinical state of depression. A more long-term or longitudinal study could examine the changes in parental well-being throughout time as they occur and claims of causality could be made.

Further research is also needed to uncover whether other aging-related changes (e.g., chronic health conditions, menopause) and other transitions (e.g., retirement, caring for an elderly parent) have a positive or negative effect on the parents' experience of the empty nest transition (Mitchell & Lovegreen 2007). These issues were not addressed in the interviews as it was beyond the scope of

the project, but these factors are important to examine as they may influence how parents experience the empty nest transition. These issues may in fact play a bigger role in parents' emotional health and well-being in the empty nest phase than child launching did. Some interview participants mentioned that retirement was a more stressful transition for them than launching all their children. Additionally, some parents noted that the benefits they experienced during the empty nest (e.g., less stress, more time to focus on themselves, more time and better communication with their spouse/partner) were more of a result of retirement than their children leaving home. Further studies could more closely examine these relationships.

Future studies could also further examine heterogeneity within groups. For example, additional research could more closely examine social class variations, diverse family types (e.g., single-parent families, step-families, gay and lesbian families), as well as recent immigrant families compared to those who have lived in Canada longer. Though the survey and interview samples did include a diversity of social class backgrounds, family types, and more-recent as well as long-term immigrants, further research could be carried out with more of these participants. This would allow for more diversity and experiences to draw from, as well as the ability to focus on these variations in more detail. Moreover, as the sample for this study includes mostly urban participants (i.e., from the greater Vancouver area), further research could include participants from rural areas. Examining experiences of parents in rural areas could reveal differences in terms

of social timetables and expectations of homeleaving, the reasons for homeleaving, and available resources for coping or adjusting to this transition.

In conclusion, this study takes an important step towards advancing our understanding of how parents experience the empty nest transition, what effect this has on their emotional health and well-being, and what factors contribute to their experience of this transition. Additionally, this study examined how parents adjust and cope with their children's homeleaving. Based on this knowledge, practical applications for transition seminars, support groups, and social programs for parents experiencing the empty nest transition were suggested. Finally, suggestions for future research were made that could help further our understanding of the empty nest transition and how parents experience it.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Quantitative Results Tables

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Telephone Survey Sample (n = 316)**

| Variable | N | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| **Study Child Gender** | 316 | |
| Male | 146 | 46.2% |
| Female | 170 | 53.8% |
| **Education Level** | 316 | |
| HS or Less | 125 | 39.6% |
| Some College/University | 57 | 18.0% |
| College/University Degree | 134 | 42.4% |
| **Employment Status** | 316 | |
| Working a Paid Job | 150 | 47.4% |
| Homemaker | 40 | 12.7% |
| Retired | 107 | 33.9% |
| Other (e.g., disabled, student, unemployed) | 19 | 6.0% |
| **Total Household Income** | 314 | |
| $50,000 or Less | 151 | 48.1% |
| $50,001 - $100,000 | 107 | 34.1% |
| Over $100,000 | 56 | 17.8% |
| **Marital Status** | 316 | |
| Never-Married | 5 | 1.6% |
| Married | 244 | 77.2% |
| Living with a Partner | 4 | 1.3% |
| Divorced/Separated | 37 | 11.7% |
| Widowed | 26 | 8.2% |
| **Number of Children** | 316 | |
| One | 28 | 8.9% |
| Two | 138 | 43.7% |
| Three | 99 | 31.3% |
| Four | 32 | 10.1% |
| Five or More | 19 | 6.0% |

**Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Interview Sample (n = 16)**

| Variable | N | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| **Education Level** | 16 | |
| HS or Less | 2 | 12% |
| Some College/University | 3 | 19% |
| College/University Degree | 11 | 69% |
| **Employment Status** | 16 | |
| Working a Paid Job | 6 | 38% |
| Homemaker | 3 | 19% |
| Retired | 6 | 38% |
| Other (e.g., disabled, student, unemployed) | 1 | 6% |
| **Total Household Income** | 16 | |
| $50,000 or Less | 8 | 50% |
| $50,001 - $100,000 | 7 | 44% |
| Over $100,000 | 1 | 6% |
| **Marital Status** | 16 | |
| Never-Married | 0 | 0% |
| Married | 11 | 69% |
| Living with a Partner | 0 | 0% |
| Divorced/Separated | 3 | 19% |
| Widowed | 2 | 12% |
| **Number of Children** | 16 | |
| One | 0 | 0% |
| Two | 8 | 50% |
| Three | 7 | 44% |
| Four | 1 | 6% |
| Five or More | 0 | 0% |

**Table 3. Univariate Analysis of Selected Variables**

| Variable | N | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| **Occurrence of ENS** | 316 | |
| Yes | 89 | 28.2% |
| No | 227 | 71.8% |
| **How Emotionally Difficult to See SC Leave** | 315 | |
| Extremely Difficult | 60 | 19.0% |
| Somewhat Difficult | 115 | 36.5% |
| Not Difficult at All | 140 | 44.4% |
| **Sad When All Kids Leave Home** | 311 | |
| Disagree | 118 | 37.9% |
| Neither Agree nor Disagree | 58 | 18.6% |
| Agree | 135 | 43.4% |
| **Emotional Health at the Time SC Left, in Comparison to Now** | 314 | |
| Worse | 97 | 30.9% |
| Same | 191 | 60.8% |
| Better | 26 | 8.3% |

**Table 4. Empty Nest Syndrome by Parental/Demographic Factors**

*Was ENS [feeling very depressed] something you experienced when your study child left home?*

| | Yes | No | Statistic | Stat. Sign. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | | Pearson's R = -0.10 | NS |
| Male | 22.5% [27] | 77.5% [93] | | |
| Female | 31.6% [62] | 68.4% [134] | | |
| **Ethnic Group** | | | $\chi^2$ = 42.89 df = 3 | p <.001 |
| British | 19.8% [21] | 80.2% [85] | | |
| Chinese | 17.8% [8] | 82.2% [37] | | |
| Southern European | 18.7% [17] | 81.3% [74] | | |
| Indo/East Indian | 58.1% [43] | 41.9% [31] | | |
| **Living Arrangement Type** | | | Pearson's R = -0.13 | p < .05 |
| Empty Nest | 23.1% [43] | 76.9% [143] | | |
| Emptying Nest | 35.4% [46] | 64.6% [84] | | |
| **Partner Status** | | | Pearson's R = -0.08 | NS |
| Married/Cohabitating | 26.2% [65] | 73.8% [183] | | |
| Not married/Cohabitating | 35.3% [24] | 64.7% [44] | | |
| **Employment Status** | | | $\chi^2$ = 3.53 df = 3 | NS |
| Working Paid Job | 25.3% [38] | 74.7% [112] | | |
| Homemaker | 40.0% [16] | 60.0% [24] | | |
| Retired | 27.1% [29] | 72.9% [78] | | |
| Other | 31.6% [6] | 68.4% [13] | | |
| **Education** | | | Tau-c = 0.06 | NS |
| HS or Less | 30.4% [38] | 69.6% [87] | | |
| Some College/University | 31.6% [18] | 68.4% [39] | | |
| College/University Degree | 24.6% [33] | 75.4% [101] | | |
| **Total Household Income** | | | Tau-c = 0.03 | NS |
| $50K or Less | 29.8% [45] | 70.2% [106] | | |
| $50,001-$100,000 | 27.1% [29] | 72.9% [78] | | |
| More than $100K | 26.8% [15] | 73.2% [41] | | |
| **Age (when SC left)** | | | Tau-c = 0.16 | p < .001 |
| 37-44 | 34.4% [11] | 65.6% [21] | | |
| 45-54 | 34.4% [54] | 65.6% [103] | | |
| 55-64 | 18.4% [19] | 81.6% [84] | | |
| 65+ | 12.5% [2] | 87.5% [14] | | |
| **Number of Kids** | | | Tau-c = 0.03 | NS |
| 1 | 35.7% [10] | 64.3% [18] | | |
| 2 | 27.5% [38] | 72.5% [100] | | |
| 3+ | 27.3% [41] | 72.7% [109] | | |

**Table 5. Empty Nest Syndrome by Study Child Factors**

*Was ENS [feeling very depressed] something you experienced when your study child left home?*

| | Yes | No | Statistic | Stat. Sign. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SC's Gender** | | | Pearson's R = -0.06 | NS |
| Male | 25.3% [37] | 74.7% [109] | | |
| Female | 30.6% [52] | 69.4% [118] | | |
| **Reason SC Left** | | | $\chi^2$ = 5.49 df = 3 | NS |
| School | 26.6% [21] | 73.4% [58] | | |
| Work | 25.5% [12] | 74.5% [35] | | |
| Married/Partnered | 35.3% [41] | 64.7% [75] | | |
| Seek Independence/Other | 20.3% [15] | 79.7% [59] | | |
| **Age SC Left** | | | Tau-c = 0.04 | NS |
| 17 or Less | 20.0% [3] | 80.0% [12] | | |
| 18-24 | 30.8% [60] | 69.2% [135] | | |
| 25+ | 23.8% [24] | 76.2% [77] | | |
| **SC Boomerang Kid** | | | Pearson's R = 0.02 | NS |
| Yes | 29.9% [20] | 70.1% [47] | | |
| No | 27.7% [69] | 72.3% [180] | | |
| **Amount of Contact with SC (phone, e-mail)** | | | Tau-c = 0.15 | p < .01 |
| Daily | 38.3% [36] | 61.7% [58] | | |
| Weekly | 25.3% [42] | 74.7% [124] | | |
| Monthly | 12.5% [4] | 87.5% [28] | | |
| Several Times per Year or Less | 30.8% [4] | 69.2% [9] | | |
| **Relationship with SC** | | | Tau-c = 0.01 | NS |
| Not Very Close | 40.0% [4] | 60.0% [6] | | |
| Somewhat Close | 20.5% [9] | 79.5% [35] | | |
| Close | 32.4% [34] | 67.6% [71] | | |
| Extremely Close | 26.8% [42] | 73.2% [115] | | |

**Table 6. Gender and the Occurrence of Empty Nest Syndrome, Controlling for Ethnic Background**

**Original association between gender and ENS: Pearson's R = -0.10*

| | Yes | No | Statistic | Stat. Sign |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **British** | | | Pearson's R = -0.05 | NS |
| Male | 17.1% [6] | 82.9% [29] | | |
| Female | 21.1% [15] | 78.9% [56] | | |
| **Chinese** | | | Pearson's R = -0.26 | NS |
| Male | 5.6% [1] | 94.4% [17] | | |
| Female | 25.9% [7] | 74.1% [20] | | |
| **Southern European** | | | Pearson's R = -0.24 | $p < .05$ |
| Male | 6.2% [2] | 93.8% [30] | | |
| Female | 25.4% [15] | 74.6% [44] | | |
| **Indo/East Indian** | | | Pearson's R = -0.13 | NS |
| Male | 51.4% [18] | 48.6% [17] | | |
| Female | 64.1% [25] | 35.9% [14] | | |

**Table 7. Ethnic Background and the Occurrence of Empty Nest Syndrome, Controlling for Gender**

| | Yes | No | Statistic | Stat. Sign |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Male** | | | $\chi^2 = 25.18$ df = 3 | $p < .001$ |
| British | 17.1% [6] | 82.9% [29] | | |
| Chinese | 5.6% [1] | 94.4% [17] | | |
| Southern European | 6.2% [2] | 93.8% [30] | | |
| Indo/East Indian | 51.4% [18] | 48.6% [17] | | |
| **Female** | | | $\chi^2 = 24.01$ df = 3 | $p < .001$ |
| British | 21.1% [15] | 78.9% [56] | | |
| Chinese | 25.9% [7] | 74.1% [20] | | |
| Southern European | 25.4% [15] | 74.6% [44] | | |
| Indo/East Indian | 64.1% [25] | 35.9% [14] | | |

**Table 8. How Emotionally Difficult by Parental/Demographic Factors**

*How difficult was it for you on an emotional level to see your study child leave home?*

| | Extremely Difficult | Somewhat Difficult | Not Difficult at All | Statistic | Stat. Sign. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | | | Tau-c = -0.23 | p < .001 |
| Male | 12.6% [15] | 28.6% [34] | 58.8% [70] | | |
| Female | 23.0% [45] | 41.3% [81] | 35.7% [70] | | |
| **Ethnic Group** | | | | $\chi^2$ = 17.03 df = 6 | p < .01 |
| British | 16.0% [17] | 41.5% [44] | 42.5% [45] | | |
| Chinese | 6.7% [3] | 33.3% [15] | 60.0% [27] | | |
| Southern European | 17.8% [16] | 40.0% [36] | 42.2% [38] | | |
| Indo/East Indian | 32.4% [24] | 27.0% [20] | 40.5% [30] | | |
| **Living Arrangement Type** | | | | Tau-c = -0.11 | NS |
| Empty Nest | 17.8% [33] | 33.0% [61] | 49.2% [91] | | |
| Emptying Nest | 20.8% [27] | 41.5% [54] | 37.7% [49] | | |
| **Partner Status** | | | | Tau-c = -0.04 | NS |
| Married/Cohabitating | 17.3% [43] | 37.9% [94] | 44.8%[111] | | |
| Not married/ Cohabitating | 25.4% [17] | 31.3% [21] | 43.3% [29] | | |
| **Employment Status** | | | | $\chi^2$ = 3.54 df = 6 | NS |
| Working Paid Job | 17.4% [26] | 36.9% [55] | 45.6% [68] | | |
| Homemaker | 17.5% [7] | 42.5% [17] | 40.0% [16] | | |
| Retired | 19.6% [21] | 33.6% [36] | 46.7% [50] | | |
| Other | 31.6% [6] | 36.8% [7] | 31.6% [6] | | |
| **Education** | | | | Tau-b = 0.01 | NS |
| HS or Less | 20.2% [25] | 35.5% [44] | 44.4% [55] | | |
| Some College/University | 19.3% [11] | 36.8% [21] | 43.9% [25] | | |
| College/University Degree | 17.9% [24] | 37.3% [50] | 44.8% [60] | | |
| **Total Household Income** | | | | Tau-b = 0.10 | NS |
| $50K or Less | 20.7% [31] | 41.3% [62] | 38.0% [57] | | |
| $50,001-$100,000 | 19.6% [21] | 30.8% [33] | 49.5% [53] | | |
| More than $100K | 14.3% [8] | 35.7% [20] | 50.0% [28] | | |
| **Age (when SC left)** | | | | Tau-c = 0.13 | p < .01 |
| 37-44 | 31.2% [10] | 34.4% [11] | 34.4% [11] | | |
| 45-54 | 21.7% [34] | 36.9% [58] | 41.4% [65] | | |
| 55-64 | 11.7% [12] | 36.9% [38] | 51.5% [53] | | |
| 65+ | 18.8% [3] | 25.0% [4] | 56.2% [9] | | |
| **Number of Kids** | | | | Tau-b = 0.05 | NS |
| 1 | 39.3% [11] | 28.6% [8] | 32.1% [9] | | |
| 2 | 18.2% [25] | 34.3% [47] | 47.4% [65] | | |
| 3+ | 16.0% [24] | 40.0% [60] | 44.0% [66] | | |

**Table 9. How Emotionally Difficult by Study Child Factors**

*How difficult was it for you on an emotional level to see your study child leave home?*

| | Extremely Difficult | Somewhat Difficult | Not Difficult at All | Statistic | Stat. Sign. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SC's Gender** | | | | Tau-c = -0.05 | NS |
| Male | 15.9% [23] | 38.6% [56] | 45.5% [66] | | |
| Female | 21.8% [37] | 34.7% [59] | 43.5% [74] | | |
| **Reason SC Left** | | | | $\chi^2 = 6.47$ df = 6 | NS |
| School | 17.7% [14] | 38.0% [30] | 44.3% [35] | | |
| Work | 14.9% [7] | 36.2% [17] | 48.9% [23] | | |
| Married/Partnered | 23.5% [27] | 29.6% [34] | 47.0% [54] | | |
| Seek Independence/Other | 16.2% [12] | 45.9% [34] | 37.8% [28] | | |
| **Age SC Left** | | | | Tau-b = 0.03 | NS |
| 17 or Less | 6.7% [1] | 33.3% [5] | 60.0% [9] | | |
| 18-24 | 20.5% [40] | 39.0% [76] | 40.5% [79] | | |
| 25+ | 18.8% [19] | 31.7% [32] | 49.5% [50] | | |
| **SC Boomerang Kid** | | | | Tau-c = 0.003 | NS |
| Yes | 17.9% [12] | 38.8% [26] | 43.3% [29] | | |
| No | 19.4% [48] | 35.9% [89] | 44.8%[111] | | |
| **Amount of Contact with SC (phone, e-mail)** | | | | Tau-c = 0.13 | p < .01 |
| Daily | 26.6% [25] | 39.4% [37] | 34.0% [32] | | |
| Weekly | 19.3% [32] | 32.5% [54] | 48.2% [80] | | |
| Monthly | 3.2% [1] | 48.4% [15] | 48.4% [15] | | |
| Several Times per Year or Less | 15.4% [2] | 30.8% [4] | 53.8% [7] | | |
| **Relationship with SC** | | | | Tau-c = -0.07 | NS |
| Not Very Close | 30.0% [3] | 40.0% [4] | 30.0% [3] | | |
| Somewhat Close | 14.0% [6] | 25.6% [11] | 60.5% [26] | | |
| Close | 12.4% [13] | 45.7% [48] | 41.9% [44] | | |
| Extremely Close | 24.2% [38] | 33.1% [52] | 42.7% [67] | | |

**Table 10. Sad When All Kids Left Home by Parental/Demographic Factors**

*How much do you agree with the statement: "I was sad when all of my children had left home"/ "I will be sad when all of my children leave home"*

| | Disagree | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Agree | Statistic | Stat. Sign. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | | | Tau-c = 0.04 | NS |
| Male | 39.0% [46] | 20.3% [24] | 40.7% [48] | | |
| Female | 37.3% [72] | 17.6% [34] | 45.1% [87] | | |
| **Ethnic Group** | | | | $\chi^2$ = 39.22 df = 6 | p < .001 |
| British | 31.1% [32] | 25.2% [26] | 43.7% [45] | | |
| Chinese | 74.4% [32] | 11.6% [5] | 14.0% [6] | | |
| Southern European | 38.5% [35] | 19.8% [18] | 41.8% [38] | | |
| Indo/East Indian | 25.7% [19] | 12.2% [9] | 62.2% [46] | | |
| **Living Arrangement Type** | | | | Tau-c = 0.10 | NS |
| Empty Nest | 43.2% [79] | 15.3% [28] | 41.5% [76] | | |
| Emptying Nest | 30.5% [39] | 23.4% [30] | 46.1% [59] | | |
| **Partner Status** | | | | Tau-c = -0.02 | NS |
| Married/Cohabitating | 37.4% [92] | 18.7% [46] | 43.9%[108] | | |
| Not married/ Cohabitating | 40.0% [26] | 18.5% [12] | 41.5% [27] | | |
| **Employment Status** | | | | $\chi^2$ = 6.99 df = 6 | NS |
| Working Paid Job | 35.1% [52] | 16.2% [24] | 48.6% [72] | | |
| Homemaker | 40.0% [16] | 20.0% [8] | 40.0% [16] | | |
| Retired | 44.2% [46] | 20.2% [21] | 35.6% [37] | | |
| Other | 21.1% [4] | 26.3% [5] | 52.6% [10] | | |
| **Education** | | | | Tau-b = 0.10 | p < .05 |
| HS or Less | 46.8% [58] | 17.7% [22] | 35.5% [44] | | |
| Some College/University | 26.8% [15] | 19.6% [11] | 53.6% [30] | | |
| College/University Degree | 34.4% [45] | 19.1% [25] | 46.6% [61] | | |
| **Total Household Income** | | | | Tau-b = 0.05 | NS |
| $50K or Less | 40.3% [60] | 17.4% | 42.3% | | |
| $50,001-$100,000 | 39.4% [41] | 18.3% | 42.3% | | |
| More than $100K | 30.4% [17] | 21.4% | 48.2% | | |
| **Age (when SC left)** | | | | Tau-c = -0.16 | p < .001 |
| 37-44 | 25.0% [8] | 15.6% [5] | 59.4% [19] | | |
| 45-54 | 33.3% [52] | 18.6% [29] | 48.1% [75] | | |
| 55-64 | 49.0% [49] | 19.0% [19] | 32.0% [32] | | |
| 65+ | 46.7% [7] | 20.0% [3] | 33.3% [5] | | |
| **Number of Kids** | | | | Tau-b = -0.08 | NS |
| 1 | 28.6% [8] | 7.1% [2] | 64.3% [18] | | |
| 2 | 36.3% [49] | 22.2% [30] | 41.5% [56] | | |
| 3+ | 41.2% [61] | 17.6% [26] | 41.2% [61] | | |

**Table 11. Sad When All Kids Left Home by Study Child Factors**

*How much do you agree with the statement: "I was sad when all of my children had left home"/ "I will be sad when all of my children leave home"*

| | Disagree | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Agree | Statistic | Stat. Sign. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SC's Gender** | | | | Tau-c = 0.04 | NS |
| Male | 39.2% [56] | 19.6% [28] | 41.3% [59] | | |
| Female | 36.9% [62] | 17.9% [30] | 45.2% [76] | | |
| **Reason SC Left** | | | | $\chi^2 = 7.68$ df = 6 | NS |
| School | 27.8% [22] | 25.3% [20] | 46.8% [37] | | |
| Work | 44.7% [21] | 21.3% [10] | 34.0% [16] | | |
| Married/Partnered | 41.7% [48] | 14.8% [17] | 43.5% [50] | | |
| Seek Independence/Other | 38.6% [27] | 15.7% [11] | 45.7% [32] | | |
| **Age SC Left** | | | | Tau-b = -0.09 | NS |
| 17 or Less | 42.9% [6] | 7.1% [1] | 50.0% [7] | | |
| 18-24 | 32.6% [63] | 22.8% [44] | 44.6% [86] | | |
| 25+ | 47.5% [47] | 13.1% [13] | 39.4% [39] | | |
| **SC Boomerang Kid** | | | | Tau-c = -0.07 | NS |
| Yes | 27.3% [18] | 25.8% [17] | 47.0% [31] | | |
| No | 40.8% [100] | 16.7% [41] | 42.4%[104] | | |
| **Amount of Contact with SC (phone, e-mail)** | | | | Tau-c = -0.11 | $p < .05$ |
| Daily | 30.9% [29] | 18.1% [17] | 51.1% [48] | | |
| Weekly | 37.4% [61] | 20.2% [33] | 42.3% [69] | | |
| Monthly | 45.2% [14] | 22.6% [7] | 32.3% [10] | | |
| Several Times per Year or Less | 66.7% [8] | 0.0% [0] | 33.3% [4] | | |
| **Relationship with SC** | | | | Tau-c = 0.14 | $p < .01$ |
| Not Very Close | 66.7% [6] | 0.0% [0] | 33.3% [3] | | |
| Somewhat Close | 48.8% [21] | 11.6% [5] | 39.5% [17] | | |
| Close | 44.2% [46] | 19.2% [20] | 36.5% [38] | | |
| Extremely Close | 29.0% [45] | 21.3% [33] | 49.7% [77] | | |

**Table 12. Emotional Health Comparison by Parental/Demographic Factors**

*Thinking back to when your study child left home, how do you recall your overall psychological and emotional health at that time in comparison to now?*

| | Worse | Same | Better | Statistic | Stat. Sign. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | | | Tau-c = -0.24 | p < .001 |
| Male | 15.8% [19] | 73.3% [88] | 10.8% [13] | | |
| Female | 40.2% [78] | 53.1%[103] | 6.7% [13] | | |
| **Ethnic Group** | | | | $\chi^2 = 4.93$ df = 6 | NS |
| British | 35.8% [38] | 56.6% [60] | 7.5% [8] | | |
| Chinese | 22.2% [10] | 73.3% [33] | 4.4% [2] | | |
| Southern European | 30.3% [27] | 59.6% [53] | 10.1% [9] | | |
| Indo/East Indian | 29.7% [22] | 60.8% [45] | 9.5% [7] | | |
| **Living Arrangement Type** | | | | Tau-c = -0.12 | NS |
| Empty Nest | 32.4% [60] | 58.9%[109] | 8.6% [16] | | |
| Emptying Nest | 28.7% [37] | 63.6% [82] | 7.8% [10] | | |
| **Partner Status** | | | | Tau-c = -0.12 | p < .05 |
| Married/Cohabitating | 26.8% [66] | 64.6%[159] | 8.5% [21] | | |
| Not married/ Cohabitating | 45.6% [31] | 47.1% [32] | 7.4% [5] | | |
| **Employment Status** | | | | $\chi^2 = 2.76$ df = 6 | NS |
| Working Paid Job | 33.6% [50] | 59.1% [88] | 7.4% [11] | | |
| Homemaker | 32.5% [13] | 55.0% [22] | 12.5% [5] | | |
| Retired | 27.4% [29] | 65.1% [69] | 7.5% [8] | | |
| Other | 26.3% [5] | 63.2% [12] | 10.5% [2] | | |
| **Education** | | | | Tau-b = -0.06 | NS |
| HS or Less | 25.0% [31] | 66.9% [83] | 8.1% [10] | | |
| Some College/University | 40.4% [23] | 49.1% [28] | 10.5% [6] | | |
| College/University Degree | 32.3% [43] | 60.2% [80] | 7.5% [10] | | |
| **Total Household Income** | | | | Tau-b = 0.04 | NS |
| $50K or Less | 32.2% [48] | 61.7% [92] | 6.0% [9] | | |
| $50,001-$100,000 | 29.9% [32] | 59.8% [64] | 10.3% [11] | | |
| More than $100K | 30.4% [17] | 58.9% [33] | 10.7% [6] | | |
| **Age (when SC left)** | | | | Tau-c = 0.14 | p < .01 |
| 37-44 | 38.7% [12] | 51.6% [16] | 9.7% [3] | | |
| 45-54 | 40.1% [63] | 51.6% [81] | 8.3% [13] | | |
| 55-64 | 15.7% [16] | 76.5% [78] | 7.8% [8] | | |
| 65+ | 25.0% [4] | 68.8% [11] | 6.2% [1] | | |
| **Number of Kids** | | | | Tau-b = 0.07 | NS |
| 1 | 42.9% [12] | 53.6% [15] | 3.6% [1] | | |
| 2 | 31.4% [43] | 59.9% [82] | 8.8% [12] | | |
| 3+ | 28.2% [42] | 63.1% [94] | 8.7% [13] | | |

**Table 13. Emotional Health Comparison by Study Child Factors**

*Thinking back to when your study child left home, how do you recall your overall psychological and emotional health at that time in comparison to now?*

| | Worse | Same | Better | Statistic | Stat. Sign. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SC's Gender** | | | | Tau-c = -0.06 | NS |
| Male | 26.4% [38] | 66.7% [96] | 6.9% [10] | | |
| Female | 34.7% [59] | 55.9% [95] | 9.4% [16] | | |
| **Reason SC Left** | | | | $\chi^2 = 7.50$ df = 6 | NS |
| School | 38.0% [30] | 58.2% [46] | 3.8% [3] | | |
| Work | 27.7% [13] | 66.0% [31] | 6.4% [3] | | |
| Married/Partnered | 25.9% [30] | 64.7% [75] | 9.5% [11] | | |
| Seek Independence/Other | 33.3% [24] | 54.2% [39] | 12.5% [9] | | |
| **Age SC Left** | | | | Tau-b = 0.19 | p < .001 |
| 17 or Less | 53.3% [8] | 46.7% [7] | 0.0% [0] | | |
| 18-24 | 36.6% [71] | 54.1% [105] | 9.3% [18] | | |
| 25+ | 16.0% [16] | 77.0% [77] | 7.0% [7] | | |
| **SC Boomerang Kid** | | | | Tau-c = 0.08 | NS |
| Yes | 40.3% [27] | 52.2% [35] | 7.5% [5] | | |
| No | 28.3% [70] | 63.2% [156] | 8.5% [21] | | |
| **Amount of Contact with SC (phone, e-mail)** | | | | Tau-c = -0.02 | NS |
| Daily | 31.2% [29] | 55.9% [52] | 12.9% [12] | | |
| Weekly | 30.9% [51] | 61.8% [102] | 7.3% [12] | | |
| Monthly | 25.0% [8] | 68.8% [22] | 6.2% [2] | | |
| Several Times per Year or Less | 30.8% [4] | 69.2% [9] | 0.0% [0] | | |
| **Relationship with SC** | | | | Tau-c = 0.08 | NS |
| Not Very Close | 50.0% [5] | 40.0% [4] | 10.0% [1] | | |
| Somewhat Close | 36.4% [16] | 61.4% [27] | 2.3% [1] | | |
| Close | 33.3% [35] | 56.2% [59] | 10.5% [11] | | |
| Extremely Close | 26.5% [41] | 65.2% [101] | 8.4% [13] | | |

## Appendix B: Qualitative Research Instruments

### Open-Ended Questions Used From the Telephone Survey

1. For what reasons was it difficult [for you on an emotional level to see your study child leave home]?

2. For what reasons was it not difficult [for you on an emotional level to see your study child leave home]?

3. For what reasons was it difficult [for your spouse/partner on an emotional level to see your study child leave home]?

4. For what reasons was it not difficult [for your spouse/partner on an emotional level to see your study child leave home]?

[Do you believe that ENS exists in today's society? Response options: Yes, it is very common; Yes, but it only occurs for some mothers; No, it is not pervasive and hardly ever occurs]
5. Why do you think this?

6. Could you elaborate on why your emotional or psychological health was worse, the same, or better at this time [when your study child left home for the first time in comparison to now]?

### Follow-Up Interview Research Instrument for Emptying Nest Parent

First we'll start out with a couple of questions on the experience of your study child leaving home. Did your study child leave home more than once (i.e., did they return home and then leave again)?

*[If study child left more than once ask 1a and 1b. If not, just ask 1b and ignore italics]*
1a. Tell me about the first time your study child left home for a period of four months or more: What were the circumstances behind them leaving (i.e., what were their reasons for leaving)? And how did you feel about them leaving – for example, was this a happy or stressful time for you?

1b. Tell me about when your study child left home *for the final time*: What were the circumstances behind them leaving (i.e., what were their reasons for leaving?) And how did you feel about them leaving – for example, was this a happy or stressful time for you? *Was this experience different compared to the first time they left? How?*

2. What do you think the experience will be like for you when *all* your children

leave the home? (What do you think you'll like about having an empty nest? What do you think you won't like about it?)

3. In comparison to how you felt when your study child was still at home, has your physical and emotional health become worse, better, or has it remained the same since your study child has left (for the last time, if more than once)? Could you elaborate as to why?

4. "Empty nest syndrome" has been described in the past as a condition in which parents become very depressed when their children leave home. Do you believe Empty Nest Syndrome exists in today's society?
-If no, why not? Who do you think is most likely to experience this syndrome (e.g., what types of people or what characteristics do they hold)? *(could follow up with What does "very depressed" mean to you?)*
-If yes, could you elaborate as to why? Who do you think is most likely to experience this syndrome (e.g., what types of people or what characteristics do they hold)?

5. Describe the relationship you currently have with your study child.
(Do you see them or talk to them often? Do you provide them with support? Do they provide you with support?)

*[If they have a partner]*
6. Do you think the relationship with your partner improved, got worse, or remained the same once your study child left home? Why?
Do you think the relationship will improve, get worse, or remain the same once *all* your children leave? Why?

7. Out of the following three statements on parental gender roles, which do you agree with the most?

1. The father should be responsible for providing for the family, while the mother should be responsible for caring for the family and the household.
2. Fathers and mothers should equally share the responsibilities of providing for the family *and* caring for the family and the household.
3. Both fathers and mothers can work and provide for the family, but the mother still has the main responsibility of caring for the family and the household

(Is this the case in your family?)

8. Do you think that being a *mother* rather than a *father (or vice versa)* influenced how you experienced your study child leaving and how you handled the transition? How?
(Do you think it will influence how you experience the empty nest?)

9. Do you believe your ethnic/cultural identity (i.e., the traditions and values of your ethnic/cultural group) played a role in how you experienced your study child leaving and how you handled the transition? How?
(Do you think it will play a role in how you experience the empty nest?)

10. When your study child left home (for the final time, if more than once), were you involved in paid work or other social roles (e.g., involved in social activities outside of the home)?
If yes, could you briefly describe the activities and roles you were involved in? Do you feel this helped you during the transition of your study child leaving?
If not involved, do you think this played a role in how you experienced your study child leaving?

11. What coping mechanisms or strategies did you use to deal with or adapt to this new phase in your life (i.e. with your child leaving and experiencing an emptying nest)?
(e.g., take on new roles, continue to provide support to your child)

12. Looking back, what could have made the transition (of your child leaving and experiencing an emptying nest) better or easier for you? (What would have improved your experience?)
(e.g., support groups, more contact with your children, more support from spouse)

13. For a parent that is just about to experience their child leaving – knowing what you know now and having experienced your child leaving home – what advice or suggestions would you give them, or cautionary tales to avoid, on how to best handle this experience?

**Follow-Up Interview Research Instrument for Empty Nest Parent**

First we'll start out with a couple of questions on the experience of your study child leaving home. Did your study child leave home more than once (i.e., did they return home and then leave again)?

*[If study child left more than once ask 1a and 1b. If not, just ask 1b and ignore italics]*
1a. Tell me about the first time your study child left home for a period of four months or more: What were the circumstances behind them leaving (i.e., what were their reasons for leaving)? And how did you feel about them leaving – for example, was this a happy or stressful time for you?

1b. Tell me about when your study child left home *for the final time*: What were the circumstances behind them leaving (i.e., what were their reasons for leaving?) And how did you feel about them leaving – for example, was this a

happy or stressful time for you? *Was this experience different compared to the first time they left? How?*

2. Describe what the experience was like for you when *all* your children left the home.
(What was the empty nest like for you? What did you like about it? What didn't you like about it?)

3. In comparison to how you felt when you had at least one child still at home, did your physical and emotional health become worse, better, or did it remain the same once all your children left? Could you elaborate as to why?

4. "Empty nest syndrome" has been described in the past as a condition in which parents become very depressed when their children leave home. Do you believe Empty Nest Syndrome exists in today's society?
If no, why not? Who do you think is most likely to experience this syndrome (e.g., what types of people or what characteristics do they hold)? *(could follow up with What does "very depressed" mean to you?)*
If yes, could you elaborate as to why? Who do you think is most likely to experience this syndrome (e.g., what types of people or what characteristics do they hold)?

5. Describe the relationship you currently have with your children.
(Do you see them or talk to them often? Do you provide them with support? Do they provide you with support?)

*[If they have a partner]*
6. Do you think the relationship with your partner improved, got worse, or remained the same once all your children left home? Why?

7. Out of the following three statements on parental gender roles, which do you agree with the most?

1. The father should be responsible for providing for the family, while the mother should be responsible for caring for the family and the household.
2. Fathers and mothers should equally share the responsibilities of providing for the family *and* caring for the family and the household.
3. Both fathers and mothers can work and provide for the family, but the mother still has the main responsibility of caring for the family and the household

(Is this the case in your family?)

8. Do you think that being a *mother* rather than a *father (or vice versa)* influenced your experience of the empty nest and how you handled the transition? How?

9. Do you believe your ethnic/cultural identity (e.g. the traditions and values of your ethnic/cultural group) played a role in your experience of the empty nest and how you handled the transition? How?

10. During your transition to the empty nest (i.e., when you were first entering the empty nest and dealing with this change), were you involved in paid work or other social roles (e.g., involved in social activities outside of the home)?
If yes, could you briefly describe the activities and roles you were involved in? Do you feel this helped you during the transition?
If not involved, do you think this played a role in how you experienced the transition to the empty nest?

11. What coping mechanisms or strategies did you use to deal with or adapt to this new phase in your life?
(e.g., take on new roles, continue to provide support to your child)

12. Looking back, what could have made the transition to the empty nest better or easier for you? (What would have improved your experience of the empty nest?)
(e.g., support groups, more contact with your children, more support from spouse)

13. For a parent that is just about to experience the empty nest – knowing what you know now and having experienced the empty nest – what advice or suggestions would you give them, or cautionary tales to avoid, on how to best handle this experience?

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