

PARENTAL ROLE CHANGES DURING  
THE EMPTY-NEST

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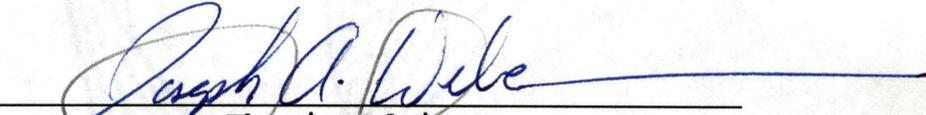
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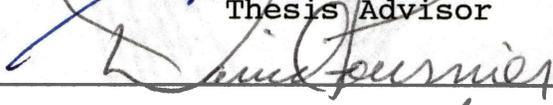
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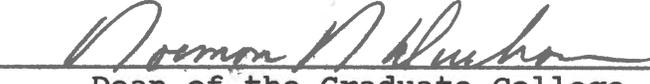
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Family life is an integral part of adulthood. Everybody is born into a family and during the course of a person's life, most people establish a family of their own. Family life is unquestionably an area in which most participate in intimate relationships.

Several role changes and role transitions associated with family life are commonly experienced throughout the life course. Marriage, having children, rearing children and the departure of children from the home are critical periods most families must face. Getting married is a critical role transition for couples and is viewed as the first stage in family development. Initially, a person formulates a partnership with another person in a committed relationship. This is an important milestone in the individual's life cycle as it will alter the way, in which, the person relates to family members, peers and the surrounding environment. The second family role transition that a person will experience is parenthood. Golan (1981) states that "the arrival of the first child changes a spouse into a parent and turns a marriage into a family" (p. 80). The third transition a family will experience is the

departure of the last child from the home. This is often referred to as the "empty-nest" (Hill, 1965; Stevens-Long, 1988; Troll, 1985).

Duvall (1977) defines the empty-nest stage in family development as starting with the departure of the last child from the home. She sees the child's leaving as a turning point for the family. The family as a whole, as well as each member, enters a period in which former habits must be abandoned and new patterns established. Neugarten (1968) refers to the empty-nest stage as representing a phase of adjustment. The parent's primary task is to let go of the child so that the parent-child relationship can continue in a new, more autonomous way; this is a time when the day-to-day parental duties are relinquished. The parental role must go through a state of readjustment until it gains a new balance.

During a lifetime, individuals do not occupy the same statuses or perform the same roles. A role shift can occur in 2 ways. Role shifts that involve the gain or loss of a status is referred to as a role transition; for example when a woman becomes a mother, she experiences a role transition. The woman gains a new role in her life, the role of a mother. A role change refers to a situation, in which, the status is retained while the role expectation changes. This is illustrated by the empty-nest. The mother retains her role as a mother, but the expectations associated with that role change.

### Statement of the Problem

As a child leaves the home, the parental role changes and takes on new characteristics (i.e., the day-to-day child rearing responsibilities come to an end). In a study by Deutscher (1968), parents were asked how their lives had changed since their children left the parental home. Many parents commented that this was a time of freedom. There was freedom from financial responsibility, freedom from housework such as cooking and cleaning, freedom to be geographically mobile and freedom to be oneself. Parents no longer need to be self-conscious about their existence as role models for their children. When the children leave the home, parents are able to re-define their concept of self. This allows parents to become reacquainted with their spouse and self. However, this can also be a time of discontent when parents look at their lives in retrospect. Parents may recognize their failures in the parental role or experience dissatisfaction resulting from their inability to fill the vacancy created when the children leave the home.

At present, there is little information available on how the parental role changes through this transition and how this transition, in turn, affects the relationship with the adult child. The findings of this study will attempt to describe the changes in the parental role associated with the departure of children from the home. Past research shows that the parental role is not relinquished, but rather proceeds through a state of adjustment to a new equilibrium.

Parents are able to experience and view their adult children as new social resources (Hagestad, 1977).

Information concerning the parental role and the parent-child relationship, during the empty-nest phase of the family life cycle, is essential in understanding transitions associated with this period. In order to provide effective treatment, it is imperative that practitioners understand how middle-aged adults handle change and the dynamics involved on a daily basis. Practitioners working with adults will have a better understanding of the transitions and changes that occur in the role of a parent through this study.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to describe the changes that occur in the parental role during the empty-nest stage of the family life cycle. It is also hoped that a better understanding of the changes in the parent-child relationship will be gained. Role theory and family systems theory are used as the frameworks in which these role changes and family relationship transitions will be conceptualized. Although role theory has been used to examine the ease of transitions associated with post-parenthood and the empty-nest, role theory has not been used to study the actual changes that occur in the parental role in regards to the adult child. Family systems theory will be used to examine the way family's interactional

relationships change due to the children leaving the parental home.

### Conceptual Framework

#### Role Theory

Several theoretical ideas in role theory focus on role transitions. Anticipatory socialization (Burr, 1972; Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979; Cottrell, 1942; Merton, 1968; Sarbin & Allen, 1968) is the process of learning the norms of a role before being in a social situation where it is appropriate to behave in the role. When a person does not have an adequate opportunity to experience the appropriate norms surrounding a life cycle role, the person will experience difficulty when it comes time to move into that role. This proposition helps to explain the variation that can occur in the ease of role transitions. A classic study by Cottrell (1942) suggested that the nature of change in the development of the life cycle influences the relative ease or difficulty of role transitions. For example, the more important or clear the procedure into or out of a role, the easier the transition will be.

Cottrell (1942) also stated that the adjustment to a role transition "varies directly with the degree of importance attached to and the definiteness of the transitional procedure used by the society in designating the change in the role" (p. 619). If a person moves into a role that society labels as important and there is a defined

procedure associated with the move, the ease of the transition will be made simpler. However, if the new role is considered unimportant by society and the path needed to move into the role is obscure, a person will experience a difficult transition.

Deutscher's (1962) study of the adjustment to the post-parental role is related to another proposition in role theory. If the role transition is a situation, in which, the person is moving out of a role that facilitates the attainment of a highly valued goal such as parenthood, and into a role that does not facilitate the attainment of a desired goal, the interference with goal attainment would contribute to the difficulty in the transition. However, the effects of this loss would be lessened if there were substitute gratifications to take its place. For example, if the parent had other roles in their life that were meaningful the transition out of parenthood would not be as difficult because the parent could substitute another interest into the role they have recently vacated.

#### Family Systems Theory and the Circumplex Model

Family systems theory, emerging from general systems theory, has contributed to a greater understanding of family dynamics. Family members do not live or act in isolation of each other. A change in any part of the family will affect the other parts of the system; a family member's behavior

has consequences for all the other members in the system (Mattessich & Hill, 1987). It then becomes necessary for the family to restructure its organization in order to maintain balance within the system. According to Minuchin (1974), the family must develop boundaries between its members that will allow for individual differences without forfeiting the identity and loyalty of the system.

Families, as organizations, are resilient. They have the capacity to adapt to changes both internal and external (Mattessich & Hill, 1987). The process of change and adaptation allows for growth within the family system. As a family's composition changes and the needs of family members change, the family must be flexible and incorporate new interactional patterns. If the family does not change and adapt, it will become a stagnant and ineffective system (Bridges, 1989).

The Circumplex Model created by Olson, Sprenkle, and Russell (1979) has its underlying base in general systems theory. The Circumplex Model focuses on two dimensions of family behavior: cohesion and adaptability, and a facilitative dimension, communication. These two dimensions have been used to describe the behavior of families.

Cohesion is defined as the emotional bonding members have with one another and the degree of individual autonomy a person experiences in the family (Olson et al., 1979). Family cohesion assesses the degree families are either separated from or connected to their family. There are four

levels of cohesion families may be categorized into: disengaged, separated, connected and enmeshed. Families that are balanced on cohesion operate more effectively. These families produce conditions that are optimum for individual development and they effectively handle developmental change and situational stress (Olson et al., 1979). Families that display extreme cohesion will have difficulty in functioning.

Adaptability is defined as the ability of a family system to change its power structure, role relationships and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress (Olson et al., 1979). Adaptability relates to the extent a family system is flexible and able to change. The four levels related to adaptability are: rigid, structured, flexible and chaotic. Family communication facilitates the movement between cohesion and adaptability.

#### Research Questions

The information from this study will provide a better understanding of the parental role changes associated with the empty-nest stage of the family life cycle and how this in turn affects the parent-child relationship. In order to better understand these transitions, this study addresses the following questions.

1. How does the parental role change when the last child leaves the home?

2. How does the relationship with the adult child change when they move out of the parental home?
3. Is there any difference in the role changes or relationship transitions, during the empty-nest, associated with the gender of the parent?
4. Is there any difference in the role changes or relationship transitions, during the empty-nest, associated with the length of time the last child has been gone from the home?
5. Is the Empty-Nest Survey a reliable assessment of the changes that occur in the parental role during the empty-nest.

#### Conceptual Hypotheses

Two research hypotheses have been developed that look directly at the changes in the parental role when a child leaves the home.

1. Parents will report fewer authoritarian aspects of parenting when a child has moved out of the home.
2. There will be no change in the nurturing aspects of parenting when a child has moved out of the home.

#### Summary

The empty-nest stage of the family life cycle is becoming more prevalent in our society (Gee, 1987). This is a time when both the parent and child are experiencing role transitions. Changes will occur as the child leaves the

parental home and becomes independent (Erikson, 1963) and the parent withdraws from the active parental role (Peck, 1968). A transition will occur in the relationship between the parent and the child due to the emerging developmental and role changes. The purpose of this study is to ascertain the changes that take place in the parental role due to the departure of the last child from the home and how this, in turn, affects the relationship with the adult child.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Middle-aged couples with no children residing in the parental home are relatively new in this century. In the 1890's, the mother typically died before seeing her first child married or was widowed before the last child left the home. Today, more adults are living longer, healthier lives (Bengston, 1986; Ferrini & Ferrini, 1989; Gee, 1987; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984). Couples are choosing to have fewer children (Connidis, 1989; U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1987) and to delay childbearing (Cohen, 1985; Connidis, 1989; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1989). The period of a couple's middle years usually lasts longer than any other stage in the family life cycle. Parents will be spending more time as middle-aged and older adults in an empty-nest (Duvall, 1977; Hess & Waring, 1980; Riley, 1983).

The post-parental years and the period of the empty-nest are terms to describe the time for parents after the departure of the last child from the home (Duvall, 1977). Earlier research showed that the transition to this stage was considered a time of crisis. It marked the "desertion" of the children from the parental home and the "abandonment" of parents by the children (Pineo, 1968; Rollins &

Feldman,1970). However, more recent research has not supported the previous findings that showed the empty- nest as a time of family crisis (Deutscher, 1968; Spence & Lonner, 1971).

The first section of this review includes studies that focus on mothers and the post-parental transition. The next section will focus on fathers and the post-parental transition. The final section deals with the relationship changes between parents and their adult children during the empty-nest stage of the family life cycle. In order to better understand the changes that occur in the role of parents during this time, the above topics will be reviewed.

#### Mothers and the Post-parental Transition

Duvall (1977) states that a middle-aged wife and mother has given 20 years of herself, if not more, to the time and attention needed to rear her children. The last child to leave the home makes the mothering tasks obsolete. This leads the mother to undertake new roles for the future. Up to this point, a mother has invested a great deal of emotional energy into her children. Once a child has left the home, the mother's first tendency may be to follow the child with her continuing maternal concerns, but this will only delay the full autonomy of her adult children. A mother's first task is to set her children free. This allows the mother to be free from the emotional necessity to be needed by her children. She must convert the dependent

mother-child relationship into one of interdependence. A mother and her adult child should be able to mutually support and encourage one another without intruding into one another's lives.

This task is easier for those mothers that have been releasing their children throughout the years. However, it is a difficult transition for those mothers that cling to their children. In either case, a mother can encourage her child to become autonomous by seeking other outlets for herself such as: returning to work or college. Once a mother has freed herself from the consuming desire to be needed by her children, she can accept them as close friends whose independence is to be respected and promoted (Duvall, 1977).

Spence and Lonner (1971) studied the change that occurred in a woman's life due to the empty-nest stage of the family life cycle. They were especially interested in the perceived change that occurred because of the diminution of the motherhood role. The study focused on 27 women that were undergoing a transition in their major social roles. These women were experiencing a change as their youngest child graduated from high school and began the actual departure from the parental home. It was anticipated that these women would experience a change in the future when the overwhelming focus on their children might become inappropriate and burdensome to both the parent and the child.

It was found that when children were no longer in the home, women saw this as a time of adjustment and release. Although mothers still had concerns for their children, it was perceived that the children were well on their way to independence in terms of education, marriage and growth of character. Once the children departed, mothers were often allowed to pursue goals of their own such as: new interests, peace of mind and leisure activities. There comes a point in time when most women are able to view their children as independently functioning adults rather than as children (Spence & Lonner, 1971).

However, problems can occur in the empty-nest stage of the family life cycle. Even when a child has moved out of the home and the active parental responsibilities have been reduced, the parent may not have a secure feeling that the child is positively pursuing their own life course. The parent may feel that the child will continue to put demands on them in the future. Thus, having one's child leave the home is not synonymous with the cessation of the parental role. If a mother feels that her child's course will not be successful, she cannot be free from her role as a parent. The mother may feel bitterness or distress because the child will not allow her to move to her new life smoothly, or she may feel as though she has failed to prepare her child adequately for a successful life. Other mothers may not have pursued additional goals throughout the child-rearing years and could find themselves at a loss for something to

do when the child leaves the home.

A study by Cooper and Gutmann (1987) looked at the gender identity and ego-mastery of 25 pre-empty nest women and 25 post-empty nest women. Regardless of the other role identities a woman with children take on, her role as a mother is generally one of the major components of her identity. Thus, the end of the daily responsibilities of child care is a significant time in the mother's life. The mother not only loses her major position in the family, but perhaps her identity too (Lewis, Freneau, & Roberts, 1979). Although it is recognized that a parent remains a parent when the child leaves the home, there is no longer a demand for active daily accountability.

Post-empty nest women considered themselves to be more competitive than pre-empty nest women. When the women were asked how they felt their feminine traits affected their behavior, pre-empty nest women emphasized nurturant behaviors concentrating on the home and children; whereas, the post-empty nest women had expanded their responses to a larger field including traits such as: decisiveness, ambition, goal-oriented and more control over their own lives. They also mentioned enjoying outdoor work around the house and yard more.

Of the 24 post-empty nest women who felt they had changed, nine of them attributed the change directly to the diminution of the active parental role. The remaining women saw the change take place within themselves through a re-

examination of values and self-concept brought about by the role transition. Eight of the pre-empty nest women felt they had not changed and the rest attributed the change to the support and encouragement of their spouse or friends.

The results of the study showed that a change in the parental status involves a major psychological change. Post-empty nest women are freer to express masculine qualities, such as assertiveness and aggression, which they had to suppress in the active parental role.

#### Fathers and the Post-parental Transition

In contrast to mothers, little is known about the impact of children's leaving upon the fathers. The post-parental crisis has always been assumed to be greater for women than for men. Changing roles for both men and women are allowing more viable options and opportunities for fathers to care for and to interact with their children (Lynn, 1974). The neglect of fathers, in the literature, is difficult to understand if the assumption is correct that some men have been investing more of themselves and their time into the nurturing and rearing of their children (Fein, 1976; Levine, 1976). Because males are currently increasing their involvement in the home and with their children, it would seem that more fathers will be experiencing unhappiness at the time that their last child leaves the home (Lewis et al., 1979).

Deutscher (1962) looked at the anticipatory

socialization of the post-parental life. At this time in history, the transition to the post-parental role would be difficult for those entering it. Fathers had few role models to look to for guidance, a lack of opportunity to take on the new role as a father and fathers were unable to rehearse the role before playing it.

Most children temporarily depart from the parental home, due to college or the service, providing parents an opportunity to practice the post-parental role. There are also historical events (i.e., war) and cultural expectations (i.e., work) which provide middle-class fathers with an additional opportunity to practice this role.

As Deutscher (1962) discusses, a common experience by the father is the "detachment from his growing children and his lack of involvement in their activities as a result of being on the road" (p. 517). During some phase of their work career, fathers found it necessary to travel regularly. This was defined as alienating the father from his children. Although it is not necessary for all fathers to travel, some fathers may be home in body only. For those fathers whose commitment to work engrosses them day and night, they may actually see their family less than those fathers that travel. In many middle-class families, life goes on without the father when the children are growing up. This allows the father to be in good standing when the children leave the home because the father has had an opportunity to condition himself to the role of the empty-nest. It must be

noted, however, that not all fathers orient themselves so strongly to their work role.

Lewis et al. (1979) studied 118 post-parental fathers. They were concerned with the effect of the last child's leaving the home upon the father's happiness. Twenty-two percent of the fathers reported feeling very unhappy or somewhat unhappy when a child left the parental home. Fathers with fewer children ( $\bar{M} = 2.0$ ) reported significantly greater unhappiness when their children left the home versus those fathers with more children ( $\bar{M} = 2.8$ ). However, the strongest statistical relationship was found between the father's unhappiness and various measures of the quality of their marriages.

The fathers who were most unhappy with their last child's leaving were also apt to be those who felt most neglected by their wives, received the least amount of understanding from her, were most lonely, were least enthusiastic about their wives companionship and had the least empathic wives.

(Lewis et al., 1979, p. 517)

In conclusion, those fathers that reported the most unhappiness had the most to lose. They tended to be older, more nurturing men that mourned the diminution of the father role. They were unable to look forward to the satisfaction of their marriage because their marriage itself was not satisfying.

### Parent-Child Relationship Changes

Independence, a state of not being subject to the control of others, is expected and a necessary developmental task for children making the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Erikson, 1963). Stierlin (1974) stated that parents, not only children, experience a struggle for independence. Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) found that a maintenance of "invisible loyalties" and interdependence are characteristic of relationships among adult family members. The more fused individuals are together the more dependent they are in relationships. As the structure of the family system changes, due to a new sense of its members independence, the system must adapt and reach a new balance.

Parent adult-child relationships are different from parent-child relationships especially, in the area of communication. Adults communicate with each others as equals; whereas, parent-child relationships have an assumed hierarchy of roles which affects the way, in which, they communicate together. As a child moves out of the parental home and takes on the quality of independence, communication between the parent and adult child must move to a level of equality. However, adult children may continue in a "child" role when they communicate with their parents. The child may not utilize the power they now have as adults to establish an adult relationship.

Hagestad and Snow (1977) studied 20 middle-class families in the "launching" phase of the family life cycle.

They were interested in seeing how the departure of a child from the home is viewed as a gain rather than a loss. Secondly, they wanted to show how men and women experience this transition differently by utilizing their adult children as resources.

Subjects were asked about the best part of their present life stage. Common themes revolved around new-found freedoms, stability, and a need for the re-assessment of priorities focusing around the distribution of time and energy. It was argued that these changes were the background of the decreasing parental role demands. When children were referred to at this stage in life, parents spoke of gaining a new type of relationship. Children contributed two kinds of resources to the parents: emotional support and social influence.

Both mothers and fathers felt that their children were emotionally sensitive to their moods and feelings. However, mothers would seek out the children for support more often than the father. Mothers were three times more likely than fathers to discuss personal problems and worries with the children. Parents were also asked how their adult children had influenced them. Seventy percent of the fathers and eighty-five percent of the mothers reported some form of influence from their adult children. This is seen when the children become a bridge to the wider social system. The children help mediate cultural and social changes. For mothers, important social links also came from activities

outside the home such as: work, education and leisure through the influence of a child.

It was found that the mother daughter relationship was the dyad with the highest rate of exchange and the most reciprocity. Mothers reported giving as much to their children as they received. However, mothers reported receiving more support from their children than the fathers. The family dyad with the most imbalance was between the father and the daughter. Fathers reported receiving considerably more support than they saw themselves as giving.

It was concluded that the empty-nest stage of life is not a transition to be seen as a loss, but rather a gain. This is a period of role re-alignment brought about by developmental changes on the part of the child, as well as, the parent. As the child enters adulthood, the parent is also entering middle-age. For most parents, the decreasing parental role demands are a welcome change, in which, the parent gains time and energy to use at their own command. The parent-child relationship is now characterized by exchange. The parent gains a new sense of freedom and finds that their adult child has a readiness and ability to give. This greatly lessens the demand on the parent that the child once placed.

## Summary

Literature was reported on concerning the empty-nest stage of the family life cycle. Research was reviewed pertaining to mothers and fathers in the post-parental transition. Relationship changes between parents and their children were also reported.

Research related to mothers and the post-parental transition showed that this period of the family life cycle does not have to be one of crisis. Mothers that are able to allow their children to become independent adults find that they move to a relationship based on mutuality. The adult child can become a new social resource to the mother and a bridge to the changing cultural environment. Those mothers that are unable to relinquish the maternal role and pursue other interests find the empty-nest transition to be difficult.

Not as much information is known about fathers and the post-parental role. Fathers seem to make this transition easier than mothers because they have focused their time and energy into their careers rather than their children. However, this may change in the future as fathers are investing more of themselves and their time into the care of their children.

Finally, the literature shows that parents view the empty-nest stage as a time of freedom. The parent no longer needs to be a role model for their adult child. In turn, a new type of relationship is obtained with the child in which

the child contributes emotional support and social influence. Although family members struggle for independence through this transition, the system as a whole adapts and takes on new qualities that it did not possess previously.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This study describes the changes that occur in the parental role during the empty-nest stage of the family life cycle. A better understanding of the transitions in the parent-child relationship will also be obtained. Although this stage of the family life cycle is not new, little is known about the actual role changes that affect each parent. As the structure and interactional patterns of the family system changes, the family reaches a new equilibrium and maintains stability (Becvar & Becvar, 1982). The hypothesized relationship between the child leaving the home and the parental role is illustrated in Figure 1.

This is a descriptive and exploratory study. According to Isaac and Michael (1990), the purpose of descriptive research is to collect detailed, factual information that describes a given population or area of interest. The role of a parent, as influenced by the child leaving the home, will be investigated in this study. It will also describe the changes in the relationship between parents and their children during this time.

The parental role can be viewed as an independent variable influencing the transition of a child leaving the

home. An assumption can be made that the child's leaving the parental home can, in turn, influence the parental role. In this situation, the child's departure from the home can be viewed as both an independent and dependent variable. However, this study is concerned with the changes in the parental role, due to the departure of the last child from the home. Therefore, the parental role will be viewed as the dependent variable and the child leaving the home will be viewed as the independent variable.

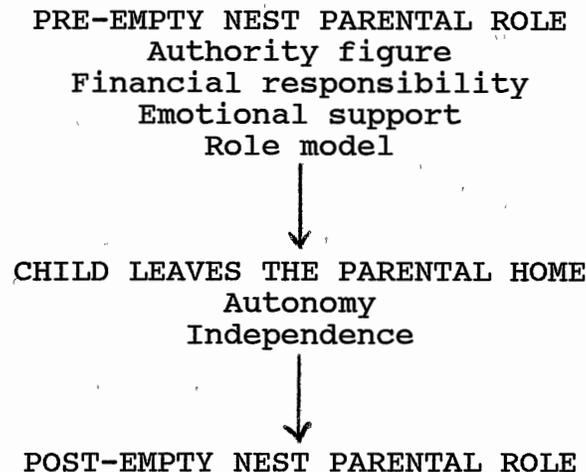


Figure 1. Relationship between the independent and dependent variable.

#### Selection of Sample

Two non-probability sampling procedures were selected for the purpose of this study, purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is defined as the selection of subjects based on the purpose of the research. Subjects are chosen on the basis of specific characteristics

relevant to the research topic (Adams & Schvaneveldt, 1985). Snowball sampling is defined as initially identifying subjects for your study; these subjects can, in turn, refer you to other subjects with like or similar characteristics (Adams & Schvaneveldt, 1985).

Interest in parents experiencing the empty-nest requires a population of middle-aged and older adults that have undergone the departure of the last child from the parental home. For this study, the research population will include married couples that have experienced the departure of the last child from the parental home.

The sample of subjects consisted of 30 individuals (i.e., 15 married couples) living in Stillwater, Oklahoma, a medium sized university town located in central Oklahoma. Subjects ranged from 44 to 73 years of age with a mean of 54.4 years. Thirteen percent of the sample had some college education, thirteen percent held a bachelor's degree, sixty-seven percent had 17 or more years of education and the rest of the subjects held a high school diploma. Eight of the subjects were university professors, seventeen were professionals, one subject was a clerk working for the university and four of the subjects were housewives. Eighty-seven percent of the sample was working and thirteen percent were retired. The four subjects that were retired were still involved in activities related to their professions and in the community in general. Although they no longer had a career, they substituted other interests

into the work role they had vacated. Eighty-five percent of the sample had a yearly family income of over \$50,000. Only one couple had one child, six couples had two children, six couples had three children, one couple had four children and one couple had five children. The age of the last child to leave the home ranged from 18 to 37 years with a mean age of 24.6 years. The last child had been gone from the home three months to 18.5 years with a mean of 4.8 years. For each couple, the last child to leave the home was the youngest child in the family.

#### Instrumentation

The Empty-Nest Survey (ENS) was developed by the researcher to assess the changes in the parental role during the empty-nest. The ENS consists of four major sections. Section one is designed to gather demographic information about the subject. Section two focuses on tasks and roles the parent assumed when the children were living at home. Section three addresses the parental role since the last child left the home. The statements listed in sections two and three are identical, however, the question asked in each section is different. In section four, the subject is interviewed by the researcher with six open-ended questions. Respondents are asked to comment on the changes in the parental role and the parent-child relationship since the last child left the home.

This questionnaire was designed by the researcher to

understand the perceived change in the parental role since the last child moved out of the parental home. To discern how a parents primary responsibilities have changed, parents were asked to rate their primary parental roles while their children were residing in the home. Parents were then asked to rate their primary tasks, again, since the last child moved out. The rating scale consisted of a 5-point Likert scale (1 = almost never, 5 = almost always). This scale was created to provide respondent's answers with a numerical value. Statements from sections two and three were divided into 2 categories: authoritarian characteristics (i.e., discipline child, make decisions for child, teach child the value of money, help educate child) and nurturing characteristics (i.e., provide direction and guidance, encourage child's independence, talk openly with child, give emotional support). Lastly, parents were asked to comment on how they felt the relationship with their child had changed and the transitions they experienced in the parental role by a series of open-ended questions asked by the researcher.

A small pilot study was conducted by the researcher to evaluate and improve the Empty-Nest Survey. The information given and comments made led to the revision of the questionnaire. For further discussion concerning the pilot study and a breakdown of the statements per category refer to Appendix A.

An interview was chosen as one of the means for

gathering data because of its ability to explore a problem area which has insufficient information. It allows the subject to be interviewed in their natural environment, permitting a feeling of security. The researcher is able to gain in-depth information through open and free responses and is able to probe deeper for more information if needed. The interview situation allows for flexibility, in which, each participant can adapt to the situation and environment. The interview allows the data gathering procedure to be on a more personal level (Isaac & Michael, 1990).

The interview, however, has some disadvantages. The process is vulnerable to subtle biases of the researcher or possible personality conflicts between the researcher and the respondent. The respondent may feel intimidated by the researcher or the interview process due to the nature of the personal questions asked. Lastly, personal interviews can be time consuming and expensive, and the information given could be difficult to summarize (Isaac & Michael, 1990).

#### Data Collection

The revised Empty-Nest Survey was filed with the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is designed to review the data collection process by ensuring that the rights and welfare of human subjects will be properly protected. In order to have the ENS approved for use, a consent form was added. The consent form explained the rights of the subject and outlined the

procedure that they would be asked to follow.

The researcher contacted middle-aged and older adults, that had experienced the departure of the last child from the home, by telephone and asked them to participate in the study. An appointment was then made to interview each couple in their home. First, one spouse was asked to complete the Empty-Nest Survey while the other spouse was interviewed by the researcher. Husbands and wives were counter-balanced in this process to eliminate any bias. The ENS took approximately 15 minutes to complete and the interview took approximately 20 to 25 minutes to complete. In total, the entire interview process for each couple took approximately 45 minutes. Data were collected during the last week of February and the first week in March of 1991.

#### Statistical Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used in the analysis. A paired t-test was used to measure the differences in means between the same subjects under two different conditions, when the children were living at home (before) from when the last child moved out (after). A paired t-test was used to compare the total mean score of the nurturing characteristics from before and after; this test was repeated for the authoritarian characteristics. A grouped t-test was used to test the differences in the means between the period when the children were living at home versus when the children had

left home. A grouped t-test was chosen because it allows for testing the differences in means between two independent groups based upon a third variable (Norusis, 1988). In this case, gender and the length of time the last child had been gone from the home were used as a base to compare the two groups. A Chi-Square analysis was used to look at the ease of the transition into the empty-nest based upon gender. Chi-Square statistically answers the question whether the frequencies observed in a sample deviates significantly from some theoretical or expected population frequencies ( Isaac & Michael, 1990). Cronbach's alpha was used as a reliability estimate to assess the different scales, nurturing and authoritarian, in the Empty-Nest Survey. Alpha varies from .0 to 1.0 and indicates whether items have no relationship with each other or are perfectly related.

#### Limitations

The limitations affecting the results of this study include the following:

1. A randomized sample was not used in the sampling procedure. Therefore, ability to generalize about the findings of this study to a larger population is not possible.
2. The total number of families that participated in this study was 15, which contained 30 individual family members. For a descriptive study, a larger sample is preferred for more representativeness of

the population being studied.

3. More diversity is needed in respondents to increase representativeness of couples experiencing the empty-nest. Couples tended to be white, highly educated, religious families with a relatively high income.
4. The instrument may not have tapped all of the roles or tasks parents assume. However, open-ended questions were included to give parents the opportunity to express further information concerning changes in the parental role.
5. Information was gathered from parent's on their perspective of the parent-child relationship changes that occurred during the empty-nest. It would have provided more insight into the relationship changes if comparisons were made between the parent's perspective and the child's perspective.

#### Operational Hypotheses

1. Parents will have significantly lower scores on the authoritarian aspects of the parental role once the last child has left the home.
2. Parents will show no difference in the nurturing aspects of the parental role when the children were living at home versus when the last child had moved out.

CHAPTER IV

PARENTAL ROLE TRANSITIONS DURING  
THE EMPTY-NEST

MANUSCRIPT FOR PUBLICATION

### Abstract

Several role transitions are experienced throughout the life course. Today, more couples are living longer, healthier lives. They are choosing to have fewer children and to delay childbearing. Therefore, parents will spend more time as middle-aged adults in an empty-nest. The purpose of this study is to describe the transitions that occur in the parental role and the parent-child relationship during the empty-nest. Fifteen married couples were interviewed. A grouped t-test was used to look at the parental role when children were living at home compared to when the last child had moved out based upon gender. Gender was found to be significant. A grouped t-test was used to look at differences in parent's responses based upon the length of time the last child had been gone from the home. Significant results were found for those children that had been gone from the home thirty-one months or less.

## Introduction

Middle-aged couples with no children residing in the parental home are relatively new in this century. In the 1890's, the mother typically died before seeing her first child married or was widowed before the last child left the home. Today, more adults are living longer, healthier lives (Bengston, 1986; Ferrini & Ferrini, 1989; Gee, 1987; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984). Couples are choosing to have fewer children (Connidis, 1989; U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1987) and to delay childbearing (Cohen, 1985; Connidis, 1989; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1989). The period of a couple's middle years usually lasts longer than any other stage in the family life cycle. Parents will be spending more time as middle-aged and older adults in an empty-nest (Duvall, 1977; Hess & Waring, 1980; Riley, 1983).

Several role changes and role transitions are experienced throughout the life span. Role theory forms the basis for understanding the process of moving in and out of roles. Factors influencing the adjustment to social roles are anticipatory socialization, transition procedures and substitute gratifications (Burr, 1972; Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979; Cottrell, 1942; Merton, 1968; Sarbin & Allen, 1968).

Earlier research showed that the transition to the empty-nest was considered a time of crisis because it marked the "desertion" of the children from the parental home and the "abandonment" of parents by the children (Lowenthal &

Chiriboga, 1972; Pineo, 1968; Rollins & Feldman, 1970). However, recent research has not supported the previous findings that showed the empty-nest as a time of family crisis (Deutscher, 1968; George, 1980; Hagestad & Snow, 1977; Harkins, 1978; Spence & Lonner, 1971).

Information concerning the parental role and the parent-child relationship, during the empty-nest phase of the family life cycle, is essential in understanding transitions associated with this period. In order to provide effective treatment, it is imperative that practitioners understand how middle-aged adults handle change and the dynamics involved on a daily basis. Practitioners working with adults will have a better understanding of the transitions and changes that occur in the role of a parent through this study.

This study describes the transitions that occur in the parental role during the empty-nest stage of the family life cycle. A better understanding of the changes in the parent-child relationship will also be obtained. Although this stage is not new, little is known about the actual role changes that affect each parent.

## Methodology

### Sample

Respondents were selected by purposive sampling. Interest in parents experiencing the empty-nest requires a population of middle-aged and older adults that have undergone the departure of the last child from the parental

home. For this study, the research population will include married couples that have experienced the departure of the last child from the parental home.

The sample consisted of thirty individuals (i.e., fifteen married couples) that had experienced the empty-nest. Respondents ranged in age from 44 to 73 years with a mean of 54.4 years. Eighty percent of the sample had 16 or more years of college. Fifty-seven percent of the sample were professionals, thirty percent were university professors and ten percent were housewives. Thirteen percent of the respondents were retired; however, they were involved in activities related to their professions and community services. Eighty-five percent of the sample had a yearly family income of \$50,000 or more. One couple had one child; the rest of the couples had 2 to 5 children (see Table I). The average age of the youngest child was 24.6 years. The youngest child had been gone from the parental home anywhere from 3 months to 18.5 years with a mean of 4.8 years. For each couple, the last child to leave the home was the youngest.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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### Instrumentation

The Empty-Nest Survey (ENS) was developed by the researcher to assess the changes in the parental role during the empty-nest. The ENS consists of four major sections.

Section one is designed to gather demographic information about the subject. Section two focuses on tasks and roles the parent assumed when the children were living at home. Section three addresses the parental role since the last child left the home. The statements listed in sections two and three are identical, however, the question asked in each section is different. In section four, the subject is interviewed by the researcher with six open-ended questions. Respondents are asked to comment on the changes in the parental role and the parent-child relationship since the last child left the home.

This questionnaire was designed by the researcher to understand the perceived change in the parental role since the last child moved out of the parental home. To discern how a parents primary responsibilities have changed, parents were asked to rate their primary parental roles while their children were residing in the home. Parents were then asked to rate their primary tasks, again, since the last child moved out. The rating scale consisted of a 5-point Likert scale (1 = almost never, 5 = almost always). This scale was created to provide respondent's answers with a numerical value. Statements from sections two and three were divided into 2 categories: authoritarian characteristics (i.e., discipline child, make decisions for child, teach child the value of money, help educate child) and nurturing characteristics (i.e., provide direction and guidance, encourage child's independence, talk openly with child, give

emotional support). Lastly, parents were asked to comment on how they felt the relationship with their child had changed and the transitions they experienced in the parental role by a series of open-ended questions asked by the researcher.

An interview was chosen as one of the means for gathering data because of its ability to explore a problem area which has insufficient information. It allows the subject to be interviewed in their natural environment, permitting a feeling of security. The researcher is able to gain in-depth information through open and free responses and is able to probe deeper for more information if needed. The interview situation allows for flexibility, in which, each participant can adapt to the situation and environment. The interview allows the data gathering procedure to be on a more personal level (Isaac & Michael, 1990).

#### Data Collection

The researcher contacted middle-aged and older adults, that had experienced the departure of the last child from the home, by telephone and asked them to participate in the study. An appointment was then made to interview each couple in their home. First, one spouse was asked to complete the Empty-Nest Survey while the other spouse was interviewed by the researcher. Husbands and wives were counter-balanced in this process to eliminate any bias. The ENS took approximately 15 minutes to complete and the interview took approximately 20 to 25 minutes to complete.

In total, the entire interview process for each couple took approximately 45 minutes.

#### Analysis and Findings

A grouped t-test was used to determine differences in mean scores in the parental role when the children were living at home versus the mean scores once the last child had moved out of the parental home based upon gender. Gender was found to be significant. Mothers rated higher on providing direction and guidance ( $p < .05$ ), teaching respect for authority ( $p < .05$ ) and giving emotional support ( $p < .05$ ) when the children were living at home (see Table II). Mothers and fathers showed no difference in helping to educate the child and promoting self-esteem once the last child had moved out.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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A grouped t-test was used to determine the differences in parental role mean scores based upon the length of time the last child had been gone from the home. The length of time the last child had been out of the parental home was significant. Parents rated higher on providing direction and guidance ( $p < .05$ ), assisting the child financially ( $p < .05$ ), teaching respect for authority ( $p < .05$ ) providing necessities such as food and shelter ( $p < .05$ ), teaching the value of money ( $p < .001$ ), helping to educate the child ( $p < .001$ ) and teaching responsibility ( $p < .001$ ) when the child

had been gone from the home thirty-one months or less (see Table III). No difference was found in giving emotional support based upon the length of time the child had been gone.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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A paired t-test was used to compare the total mean score of the nurturing characteristics when the children were living at home (before) from when the last child had moved out (after). A paired t-test was also used to compare the total mean score, from before and after, of the authoritarian characteristics. Nurturing and authoritarian characteristics were found to be significant (see Table IV).

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Insert Table 4 about here

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A Chi-square analysis was used to look at the ease of the transition into the empty-nest based upon gender. No significant differences were found based upon gender. Seventeen percent of the sample found the transition to be very difficult or somewhat difficult; sixty-nine percent of the sample found the transition to be somewhat easy or very easy and the remaining fourteen percent thought the transition was neither difficult nor easy.

Cronbach's alpha was used as a reliability estimate. Alpha varies from .0 to 1.0 and indicates whether items have

no relationship with each other or are perfectly related. A reliability of .599 was found for the nurturing characteristics and .853 for the authoritarian characteristics. Reliability coefficients between .35 and .59 are considered to represent a moderate association between items. A reliability coefficient above .60 is considered highly reliable. The nurturing and authoritarian scales were well within the acceptable range.

#### Discussion

The results of this study indicated that mothers perceived themselves as giving more emotional support, guidance, and teaching respect for authority than fathers when their children were living at home. This could partially be due to the fact that mothers have invested more of themselves and their time into the nurturing and rearing of their children than fathers (Cooper & Gutmann, 1987; Reskin & Coverman, 1985). However, no difference was found in promoting self-esteem and helping to educate the child, once they had moved out, based upon gender. In many cases, parents were paying for their child's college education; this may explain why no difference was found. Secondly, parents promoted their child's self-esteem more now that they had moved out and were on their own. Many times children need support and encouragement as they move from the role of a child to one of an adult (Duvall, 1977).

Significant results were found for those children that had been gone from the home thirty-one months or less. In

many cases these children were in college. Although the children had moved out of the parental home, parents still were not able to completely relinquish the parental role. Parents were called upon for financial and emotional support. Some parents felt that it was still their duty to teach and guide their children at this stage (i.e., teach responsibility, teach the value of money, provide necessities and emotional support).

Significant differences were found in the nurturing and authoritarian characteristics parents took on when their children were living at home compared to when the last child had moved out. This is explained by the fact that parents no longer had the day-to-day contact with their children so many of the tasks and roles parents assumed were considered to be obsolete. For example, it was no longer the parents responsibility to set rules, punish the child or provide necessities such as, food and shelter.

Those parents that found the ease of the transition into an empty-nest somewhat or very difficult either had one child or were unable to relinquish the parental role due to the demands of the adult child. Couples that had one child experienced an abrupt change in lifestyle when their child left home; whereas, couples with more than one child experienced a progressive change as the transition period lasted several years. Therefore, by the time their last child left home, couples were anticipating an empty-nest.

Some couples were unable to relinquish the parental role causing tension and stress. In many cases this occurred when the child was having difficulty moving into adulthood and gaining independence. The child would rely on the parent for emotional support and encouragement at a time when the parent was expecting these commitments to be diminished. For example, a daughter was having difficulty in a relationship with her boyfriend. The daughter could not cope with the dissolution of the relationship and was unable to make objective decisions concerning the rest of her life. She, therefore, put a heavy burden on her parents for emotional support and stability.

Parents that rated the transition to the empty-nest somewhat or very easy felt that they had prepared their child, as best they could, for life; therefore, they felt confident about seeing their children leave the home. All of these parents had more than one child; consequently, when the last child was ready to move out of the home the parents were equally ready to have the home to themselves.

#### Parental Role Changes

In two different ways, parents were asked how the parental role had changed now that their last child had left the home. First, parents were asked about things they used to do, as a parent, that they no longer do. Clear themes emerged in the parent's answers. Mothers and fathers stated that they no longer have the day-to-day child rearing responsibilities. Home maintenance issues, regarding the

children, were the first to be eliminated such as: having balanced meals prepared, doing laundry and ironing, keeping the house clean and tidy and staying on top of everybody's daily activities. Financial responsibility was decreased and in many cases diminished; however, parents made it known that they would be there for their children financially if needed. Parents were no longer in contact with their children on a daily basis; they did not have to worry about where their children were, what they were doing and when they would get home. Parents no longer had direct involvement in their children's decision making process; therefore, parents knew less of what their children were doing on a daily basis. In some cases, this created a better relationship between parent and child. Parents gained more time for "personal use" because they were no longer involved in their children's activities. The love, support and affection parents feel for their children has not changed, but the daily contact, supervision and involvement has decreased.

Secondly, parents were asked about things they do now, as a parent, that they did not do previously. Almost all of the parents stated that they moved from a supervisory role to an advisory role. Parents were reluctant to give their children advice unless asked. They did not want to put too much input into their children's lives, but rather respected their children's independence and freedom. Parents were likely to be more supportive and encouraging of their

children's decisions. The parent-child relationship moved to an adult relationship based on equality. In many cases, the relationship moved to one based on friendship. Parents were able to socialize with their children like they would with their own friends.

### Life Changes

Parents were asked how their lives had changed now that their children had left the home. They commented on the new found freedoms associated with their children leaving the home. Parents were now able to get up and go whenever they wanted; parents were no longer on a time schedule in which they needed to fit their children's and their own activities. Parents gained a sense of spontaneity in their lives. Life around the house became quieter and more relaxed. Husbands and wives gained freedom in expressing themselves to each other. It was an opportunity to experience the honeymoon time again (Atchley, 1985; Stevens-Long, 1988; Troll, 1985). They were now able to spend more time with each other and become involved in activities in which they were interested. Couples were able to be selfish in their use of time. As one parent stated, "I am able to do more of what I want to do and less of what others want me to do".

The biggest changes occurred for mothers. Mothers were able to return to work or focus on a career, start college or become involved in activities that they were interested in, but unable to do when they had children living at home.

### Parent-Child Relationship Changes

A common theme emerged when parents were asked how the relationship with their children had changed since they had moved out of the home. Parents stated that the relationship moved to one of adult-to-adult. Parents were now able to discuss adult issues and problems with their children such as: buying a house, marital issues or questions concerning children. In general, parent-child relationships have not changed, but evolved to a new state of equilibrium. The relationship also became more relaxed than it had been previously. The parent is no longer aware of what the child is doing on a daily basis; therefore, the parent does not have the opportunity to become upset over the child's affairs. In turn, less friction occurs between parent and child.

Parents do not have daily contact with their children; they try to compensate, however, by talking on the telephone regularly. For those families that had at least one child living in the same city, parents were able to call or stop by periodically. In many cases, they had dinner together once a week. These parents felt that the transition to the empty-nest would have been more difficult for them if their children lived in other parts of the country rather than in the same city. Some parents stated that when they saw their children, they discussed important issues rather than "nit-picking" about trivial things. One mother summed up the relationship changes in one sentence. "I was fired as a

parent and rehired as a friend."

### Child Changes

Finally, parents were asked to describe any differences they saw in their children since they left the home. Common responses focused on their children becoming more mature, independent and responsible for their own well-being. The children had or were taking on an adult role (i.e., paying their own bills, excelling in a profession, starting a family). Some parents saw their children displaying values they tried to instill in them. Children no longer took things for granted now that they were on their own. Parents felt that their children were easier to get along with now that they did not have the daily interaction together. Consequently, parents and children gained a new appreciation of each other. Lastly by recognizing and relating to their children as adults, parents learned things about their children they did not know previously such as: personal qualities and traits they did not see while their children were living at home.

### Summary

The empty-nest stage of the family life cycle should be viewed as a positive step in the life course. Moreover for most families, the transition is a low-impact event because the parent-child relationship is altered rather than terminated (George, 1980). A variety of benefits are derived when the child moves out of the home. These benefits include: increased freedom, discovering the adult

child as a social resource and a sense of accomplishment as a result of the successful launching of the children to an independent life.

Parents that do not prepare for this transition by finding alternative, meaningful roles may find this transition difficult or stressful. Secondly, those parents that have only one child will experience an abrupt change rather than a progressive transition experienced by couples with two or more children. These couples need to prepare themselves for this transition throughout the child rearing years. Lastly, if a child does not allow the parent to move through the transition smoothly, due to their child's inability to successfully achieve independence, the parent may experience a difficult time. Fortunately, these situations are not the norm.

This study has several implications for parents and practitioners who work with families experiencing the empty-nest. Parents that focus their lives solely upon their children will have a difficult time substituting another gratifying role into the one they have recently vacated. Parents should explore other meaningful interests such as: work or a career, an education, or social and leisure activities. Parents need to find a new interests in order to remain productive.

Practitioners should empower the individual to explore alternative roles to fill the void of their children leaving. They can help the individual discover the new

found freedoms of their own individuality. The practitioner can assist the individual's ease in moving through the transition and creating a new existence for themselves.

A randomized sample was not used in the sampling procedure, therefore, the findings of this study are not generalizable to the larger population. Secondly, the Empty-Nest Survey may not have tapped all of the tasks or roles parents assume. However, open-ended questions were included to give parents the opportunity to express further information concerning the parental role and parent-child relationship. Consequently, these are limitations to the study.

The following recommendations for future research are based on the findings of this study.

1. Studies with larger sample are needed to describe with more assurance the parental role changes experienced during the empty-nest and the parent adult-child relationship changes.
2. Comparisons of the parent's perspective and the child's perspective would provide insight into the differences and similarities in the perception of the parent-child relationship changes during the empty-nest.
3. Studies focusing on families in diverse income brackets, various levels of educational attainment and different types of families (i.e., married couples and single parent families) would be

helpful in examining the empty-nest experience of the general population.

4. Studying ethnically different families would be beneficial in examining the empty-nest experience across cultures.

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TABLE I  
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Variables	Males=15	Females=15	Couples=15
<b>Education:</b>			
12 years		6.7%	
13 - 15 years	3.3%	10.0	
16 years	10.0	3.3	
17 years or more	36.7	30.0	
<b>Employed:</b>			
	40.0%	46.7%	
<b>Retired:</b>			
	10.0	3.3	
<b>Occupation:</b>			
Professional	33.4%	23.3%	
Professor	20.0	6.7	
Housewife		13.3	
Clerical		3.3	
<b>Family Income:</b>			
\$30,000 - 39,999			7.1%
\$40,000 - 49,999			7.1
\$50,000 - 59,999			21.4
\$60,000 or greater			64.4
<b>Number of Children:</b>			
One child			6.7
Two children			40.0
Three children			40.0
Four children			6.7
Five children			6.7

TABLE II  
 PARENTAL ROLE PERCEPTIONS BASED ON GENDER  
 WHEN THE CHILDREN LIVED AT HOME

Variable	Male Mean	Female Mean	t
Provide direction and guidance	4.20	4.67	-2.43*
Teach respect for authority	4.07	4.67	-2.16*
Give emotional support	4.07	4.73	-2.17*

\* $p < .05$

TABLE III

PARENTAL ROLE PERCEPTIONS BASED ON THE LENGTH OF TIME  
THE LAST CHILD HAS BEEN GONE FROM THE HOME

Variable	Group 1	Group 2	t
Provide direction and guidance	3.40	2.73	2.24*
Assist child financially	3.80	2.80	2.39*
Teach respect for authority	3.00	1.30	2.28*
Provide necessities	3.07	1.53	3.57*
Teach the value of money	3.20	1.47	4.18**
Help educate child	3.80	1.67	4.79**
Teach child responsibilities	3.53	1.87	4.61**

Group 1 = Thirty-one months or less

Group 2 = Thirty-two months and greater

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .001$

TABLE IV  
CATEGORY SCORES

Category	Before	After	t
Nurturing characteristics:	44.10	36.33	8.01**
Provide direction and guidance	4.43	3.07	7.49**
Assist child financially	4.43	3.30	5.61**
Give emotional support	4.40	4.20	1.14
Provide necessities	4.97	2.30	10.45**
Show Affection	4.13	4.03	6.91
Encourage child's independence	4.10	3.80	1.47
Talk openly with child	4.23	4.43	-1.44
Provide religious education	4.00	2.03	7.97**
Promote self-esteem	4.40	2.03	1.19
Love your child	5.00	5.00	.00
Authoritarian characteristics:	39.07	19.90	12.23**
Discipline child	3.63	1.13	13.14**
Instill values	4.63	3.10	6.30**
Teach respect for authority	4.37	2.43	7.92**
Set rules for child to follow	4.03	1.53	10.93**
Teach the value of money	4.20	2.33	6.91**
Teach living skills	3.23	1.50	7.55**
Make decisions for child	3.20	1.37	10.57**
Punish child	2.87	1.07	10.26**
Teach child responsibility	4.30	2.70	6.13**
Help educate child	4.60	2.73	5.96**

\*\*p<.001

NS

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**APPENDIXES**

APPENDIX A

PILOT STUDY AND CATEGORY STATEMENTS

A pilot study was done during December, 1990. The Empty-Nest Survey was initially tested on five graduate students attending Oklahoma State University. These students were middle-aged adults, ranging in age from 46 to 56, with at least one child gone from the parental home.

Comments made and answers given by the students on the questionnaire led to the revision of the Empty-Nest Survey. Specific statements were developed for sections two and three rather than open ended questions; general parental roles and tasks were listed in each section. Two parents were later asked what type of roles they assumed in the rearing of their children. The information given was also incorporated into sections two and three (see Table V). This provided respondents a wider range of parental roles and tasks to comment on rather than solely focusing on the information given in the pilot study. Although the statements in sections two and three are identical, the question for each section is different. A 5-point Likert scale was developed (1=Almost Never, 5=Almost Always) to give respondents answers a numerical value. This was done so that statistical analyses could be performed. Finally, follow-up questions were developed to gain in-depth information concerning life changes, parental role changes and parent-child relationship changes.

Table V

## CATEGORY STATEMENTS

---

**Nurturing characteristics:**

Provide direction and guidance

Assist child financially

Give emotional support

Provide necessities - food, shelter, clothing

Show Affection

Encourage child's independence

Talk openly with child

Provide religious education

Promote self-esteem

Love your child

**Authoritarian characteristics:**

Discipline child

Instill values

Teach respect for authority

Set rules for child to follow

Teach the value of money

Teach living skills

Make decisions for child

Punish child

Teach child responsibility

Help educate child

Love your child

---

APPENDIX B  
ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS  
AND HYPOTHESES

### Research Question One

How does the parental role change when the last child leaves the home?

Parents stated that they no longer have the day-to-day child rearing responsibilities such as: preparing balanced meals, doing the laundry and ironing, keeping the house clean and tidy, and staying on top of their children's daily activities. This allowed parents more personal time because they were no longer involved with activities focusing around their children. Financial responsibility decreased, except for those parents that were putting their children through college. Parents were no longer in contact with their children on a daily basis; therefore, they were not directly involved in their children's decision making process. Lastly, almost all of the parents stated that they moved from a supervisory role to an advisory role. Parents were reluctant to give their children advice unless asked because they wanted to show their respect for their children's independence and freedom.

### Research Question Two

How does the relationship with the adult child change when he/she moves out of the parental home?

Parents stated that the relationship moved from one of adult-to-adult rather than remaining a parent-child relationship. Parents were now able to discuss adult issues with their children such as: buying a house, career issues, marital concerns, or questions about rearing children. In many cases, the relationship moved to one based on friendship. The parent-child relationship became more equal and more relaxed, as the child moved to a state of independence and autonomy, because the parent was unaware of what the child was doing on a daily basis. One mother summed up the relationship changes in one sentence. "I was fired as a parent and rehired as a friend."

### Research Question Three

Is there any difference in the role changes or relationship transitions, during the empty-nest, associated with the gender of the parent?

A grouped t-test was used to compare differences in mean scores when the children were living at home versus when the last child had moved out based upon the gender of the parent. Gender was found to be significant. Mothers perceived themselves as giving more emotional support, guidance, and teaching respect for authority than fathers did when the children were living at home. However, no significant gender differences were found once the last child moved out of the parental home. Mothers and fathers rated themselves equally on promoting self-esteem and helping to educate the child once they had moved out. In many cases, parents were putting their child through college and this may explain why no difference was found.

#### Research Question Four

Is there any difference in the role changes or relationship transitions, during the empty-nest, associated with the length of time the last child has been gone from the parental home?

A grouped t-test was used to determine the differences in mean scores in the parental role based upon the length of time the last child had been gone from the home. Significant results were found for those children that had been gone from the home thirty-one months or less. Parents rated higher on providing direction and guidance, assisting the child financially, teaching respect for authority, providing necessities such as food and shelter, teaching the value of money, helping to educate the child, and teaching responsibility when the child had been gone thirty-one months or less. In many cases, these children were in college and parents were still being called upon for financial and emotional support. Some parents felt that it was still their duty to teach and guide their child at this stage.

### Research Question Five

Is the Empty-Nest Survey a reliable assessment of the changes that occur in the parental role during the empty-nest?

Cronbach's alpha was used as a reliability estimate. Alpha varies from .0 to 1.0 and indicates whether items have no relationship with each other or are perfectly related. Reliability coefficients between .35 and .59 are considered to represent a moderate association between items. A reliability coefficient above .60 can be considered highly reliable. The nurturing and authoritarian scales were well within the acceptable range for research purposes (see Table VI).

Table VI

MEASURES OF RELIABILITY FOR THE NURTURING AND  
AUTHORITARIAN SCALES

---

<u>Scale Title</u>	<u>Alpha*</u>
Nurturing:	
All 10 items	.599
Authoritarian:	
All 10 items	.853

---

\* Alpha usually calls for an N of 10 respondents per item for accurate assessment. Since the N of cases in this study was not optimal, these coefficients are considered estimates.

### Hypothesis One

Parents will report fewer authoritarian aspects of parenting when the last child has moved out of the parental home.

A paired t-test was used to compare the total mean score of the authoritarian characteristics of the parental role when the children were living at home versus when the last child had moved out. Significant differences were found in the authoritarian characteristics once the child had moved out. This was explained by the fact that parents no longer had the day-to-day contact with their children so many of the tasks and roles parents took on were considered obsolete.

### Hypothesis Two

There will be no change in the nurturing aspects of parenting when the last child has moved out of the home.

A paired t-test was used to compare the total mean score of the nurturing characteristics of the parental role when the children were living at home versus when the last child had moved out. Significant differences were found in the nurturing characteristics once the last child had moved out. This was explained by the fact that parents no longer had the day-to-day contact with their children and many of the tasks and roles parents took on were considered obsolete. Although not all of the nurturing characteristics changed, the overall mean score decreased because many of the statements focused on the daily contact and responsibility for the child.

APPENDIX C

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The following recommendations for future research are based on the findings of this study.

1. Studies should consider using a larger sample.  
This would help describe with more assurance the parental role changes experienced during the empty-nest and the parent-child relationship changes.
2. Including more questions to the Empty-Nest Survey would contribute to the reliability and validity of the questionnaire.
3. Comparisons of the parent's perspective and the child's perspective would provide insight into the differences and similarities in the perception of the parent-child relationship changes during the empty-nest.
4. Studies focusing on families from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds, various levels of educational attainment and different types of families (i.e., married couples and single parent families) would be helpful in examining the empty-nest experience of the general population.
5. Studying ethnically different families would be beneficial in examining the empty-nest experience across cultures.

**APPENDIX D**

**CONSENT FORM AND THE  
EMPTY-NEST SURVEY**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, voluntarily consent to participate in a research project titled "Parental Role Changes during the Empty-Nest" investigating the parental role changes and the parent-adult child relationship. I understand the purpose of this study is to learn more about middle adulthood and the transitions that are experienced during this period of the family life cycle.

I understand that I will complete a Parent Questionnaire that will take approximately 15 minutes. I will also be asked a series of open-ended questions by the researcher that will take approximately 25 minutes. I understand that I may answer the questions as completely as I feel comfortable, or not at all. I understand that my privacy will be protected and that all information I give will be confidential. My name will not appear on any document.

I understand that I may withdraw from this study without any consequences to myself.

I may contact Jody Wilkinson, the project investigator, at (405) 624-2737, or Dr. Joseph A. Weber, faculty advisor, at (405) 744-5061, should I wish further information about the research. I may also contact Terry Maciula, University Research Services, 001 Life Sciences East, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-5700, concerning my legal rights as a research subject.

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

---

Signature

---

Date

## EMPTY-NEST SURVEY

1. Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_
2. Birthdate: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_
3. Family Income (circle one)
  - a. less than \$9,999
  - b. \$10,000-19,999
  - c. \$20,000-29,999
  - d. \$30,000-39,999
  - e. \$40,000-49,999
  - f. \$50,000-59,999
  - g. greater than \$60,000
4. Level of Education (circle one)
  - a. 1 - 11 years
  - b. 12 years
  - c. 13 - 15 years
  - d. 16 years
  - e. 17 or more years
5. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Number of Children: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Are you retired? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
8. List the present age and length of time (in months) the last child has been out of the parental home.  
Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Length of Time: \_\_\_\_\_

\*\* All information given is held confidential. There will be no identifying names or numbers to identify subjects with their forms.

9. As a parent, you assumed several different parenting roles when your children were growing up. Listed below are some roles or tasks you might have taken on. For each statement, circle the number that best describes you as a parent when your children were growing up.

1=Almost Never    2=Once in a While    3=Sometimes    4=Frequently    5=Almost Always

<u>Statements</u>	<u>When Children Lived at Home</u>				
a) provide direction and guidance	1	2	3	4	5
b) discipline child	1	2	3	4	5
c) assist child financially	1	2	3	4	5
d) instill values	1	2	3	4	5
e) teach respect for authority	1	2	3	4	5
f) give emotional support	1	2	3	4	5
g) set rules for child to follow	1	2	3	4	5
h) provide necessities-food, shelter	1	2	3	4	5
i) teach value of money	1	2	3	4	5
j) show affection-hugs, kisses	1	2	3	4	5
k) teach living skills-cooking, cleaning, laundry	1	2	3	4	5
l) make decisions for child	1	2	3	4	5
m) encourage child's independence	1	2	3	4	5
n) talk openly with child	1	2	3	4	5
o) punish child	1	2	3	4	5
p) provide religious education	1	2	3	4	5
q) promote self-esteem	1	2	3	4	5
r) teach child responsibility	1	2	3	4	5
s) help educate child	1	2	3	4	5
t) love your child	1	2	3	4	5

10. Now that your last child has left the parental home, the roles you assumed as a parent might have changed. For each statement, circle the number that best describes you as a parent now that your last child has moved out.

1=Almost Never    2=Once in a While    3=Sometimes    4=Frequently    5=Almost Always

<u>Statements</u>	<u>Now that Child moved out</u>				
a) provide direction and guidance	1	2	3	4	5
b) discipline child	1	2	3	4	5
c) assist child financially	1	2	3	4	5
d) instill values	1	2	3	4	5
e) teach respect for authority	1	2	3	4	5
f) give emotional support	1	2	3	4	5
g) set rules for child to follow	1	2	3	4	5
h) provide necessities-food, shelter	1	2	3	4	5
i) teach value of money	1	2	3	4	5
j) show affection-hugs, kisses	1	2	3	4	5
k) teach living skills-cooking, cleaning, laundry	1	2	3	4	5
l) make decisions for child	1	2	3	4	5
m) encourage child's independence	1	2	3	4	5
n) talk openly with child	1	2	3	4	5
o) punish child	1	2	3	4	5
p) provide religious education	1	2	3	4	5
q) promote self-esteem	1	2	3	4	5
r) teach child responsibility	1	2	3	4	5
s) help educate child	1	2	3	4	5
t) love your child	1	2	3	4	5

### The (ENS) Parent Interview Schedule

How has the parental role changed now that your last child has left the home? What are some things you used to do, as a parent, that you no longer do? What are some things you do now, as a parent, that you did not do before?

In what ways has your life changed now that your last child has left the home?

How has the relationship with your children changed now that they have moved out of your home?

Now that your last child has left the home, would you describe him/her any differently from when he/she was living at home? If so, how?

how would you rate the transition, in which, you have children living at home versus no children living at home?

- 1 = Very difficult
- 2 = Somewhat difficult
- 3 = Neither difficult nor easy
- 4 = Somewhat easy
- 5 = Very easy

Why did you choose the answer you did?

Is there anything else you would like to add about the parental role or the relationship with your children now that they have moved out of your home?

VITA

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