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The Empty Nest Syndrome in Midlife Families

A Multimethod Exploration of Parental Gender Differences and Cultural Dynamics

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This study explores parental health and well-being in relation to "empty nest" transitions. Focus is placed on the purported empty nest syndrome (i.e., self-reported experiences of depression and emotional distress when children leave home) and variations by parental gender and cultural background. This study is primarily based on in-depth telephone interviews conducted in 2006 and 2007 with a subsample (n = 316) of parents from four cultural groups (British, Chinese, Southern European, and Indo/East Indian) living in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia. A mixed-methodological approach is used whereby both quantitative and qualitative strategies are combined. Findings reveal that overall only a minority of parents report having experienced the empty nest syndrome. However, cultural background and other sociodemographic and relational processes are found to influence the likelihood of reporting this condition. With increasing cultural diversity in North American society, these results have the potential to shed light on a significant life course transition.

Keywords: *empty nest; midlife families; child launching; multimethods*

The process of "launching" children from the parental home (i.e., the transition to the empty nest) and the response parents have to their children's leaving (i.e., the empty nest syndrome [ENS]) have garnered the attention of researchers in recent years. However, although much has been written about this phenomenon, empirical findings are equivocal. On one hand, research demonstrates that parents—especially mothers—experience deleterious effects when their children leave home. In this sense, it is

assumed that parents experience a loss that is significant and profound—one that results in negative outcomes such as depression, alcoholism, identity crisis, and marital conflict (Bart, 1971; Curlee, 1969; Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, & O'Rand, 1998). On the other hand, empirical evidence suggests that the empty nest is a positive time for parents (Rubin, 1992), an opportunity for reconnection and a time to rekindle interests (Dennerstein, Dudley, & Guthrie, 2002; White & Edwards, 1990). Yet others go so far as to question the very relevancy of the ENS as a key concept in understanding the midlife experiences of parents (McQuaide, 1998). Indeed, midlife is a very extensive and diverse stage of the life course that can span up to at least 30 years (Lachman, 2004).

Despite these divergent findings, there is strong evidence that in recent years dramatic changes have occurred in the transition to the empty nest. Recent cohorts of mothers are more likely to be continuously employed outside the home, engage in multiple roles, and have alternative sources of self-definition, whereas young adults tend to leave home to pursue nonmarital pathways, such as to attend college or achieve independence (Goldscheider, 1997; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). Many young people are also delaying leaving the parental home (partly because of economic conditions and also attributable to increased cultural diversification and immigration patterns in North American society), and when they do leave, their moves are not always permanent. Thus, the transition period to the empty nest is becoming elongated and not always marked by a single launching per child as they transition to adulthood (Mitchell, 2006).

So we might ask, given these conflicting findings and the recent changes shaping nest-leaving patterns, how can we make sense of the experiences surrounding the empty nest? As a first step, we can explore the relevancy of the ENS by establishing the degree to which the concept of the ENS resonates with parents, and if it does, for whom and under what conditions is this concept salient? Second, we can explore previously overlooked factors (such as cultural background) that might shed light on the types of responses parents may have when experiencing the empty nest.

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This study draws on the principles of life course theory, particularly that of our understanding of *how* families age, which is anchored in time and place. Thus, experiences of individuals are shaped by the timing of events and forces at the societal and cultural level and are linked to other family developmental tasks, such as engaging in education pursuits, entering the workforce, getting married, and having children (Elder, 1985, 1998; Hagestad, 1990; Mitchell, 2009; Settersten, 2003a).

Background

The empty nest transition, or the period when children permanently leave the parental home, is a normative event—a developmental phase faced in midlife whereby parents expect their children to leave, become independent, and to successfully negotiate the demands associated with this life stage (Havighurst, 1953). When a child leaves, it is a significant event for both parents and child. And although many parents view it as a highly positive event, for others it is a conflicted time: a period of loving and letting go and a time when the day-to-day parental role is surrendered. For the child, it is a step toward independence; a symbolic marker of adulthood. However, "achieving balance between closeness and autonomy is not always an easy one for children or their parents" (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006).

Although normative, aspects of the empty nest can be ambiguous (Boss, Pearce-McCall, & Greenberg, 1987). Parents hold certain expectations about how pathways to adulthood should unfold. Such expectations are based on social timetables relating to when a child should leave the parental home, the reasons for leaving, and the congruence of these factors with socially, culturally, and personally prescribed beliefs and norms (Settersten, 1998; Settersten & Hagestad, 1996; Veevers, Gee, & Wister, 1996). For example, baby boomer parents (those parents born between 1946 and 1964) are more likely to expect their children to leave home for nonmarital pathways (e.g., to attend school) than the previous generation. However, some traditional ethnic groups continue to expect that their children remain at home until they complete college or when they marry (Mitchell, 2006). Thus, expectations and meanings about the timing of, and reasons for, home leaving are important factors in shaping how parents respond to their children's leaving home. The failure to comply or cope effectively with these normative demands may produce negative social and psychological outcomes for young adults as well for their parents (Settersten, 2003b).

Early research on transitions to the empty nest has focused primarily on midlife role loss, particularly among women and, more specifically, stay-at-home mothers (Harkins, 1978). Based on traditional role norms, the prevailing

thought was that mothers, compared with fathers, experience greater distress when children leave home because they put in a greater amount of time and effort into child rearing and thus have a stronger bond to their children. As a result, launching of a child was viewed as a particularly unhappy time for mothers (Glenn, 1975). In fact, until recently the ENS was considered a psychiatric condition (Newman & Grauerholz, 2002) and medical journals used to run full-page advertisements for antidepressants that could be prescribed as treatment (Harkins, 1978).

Later research suggests that when children move out, parents—and especially mothers—are not as unhappy as once was presumed (Radloff, 1980; Rubin, 1992). In fact, more recent research indicates that marital and life satisfaction increases once children leave (Dennerstein et al., 2002; Schmidt, Murphy, Haq, Rubinow, & Danaceau, 2004), especially for parents who recently launched their children and for parents who maintained regular contact with their children once they have left (White & Edwards, 1990). However, we know very little about how fathers respond to and experience the transition to the empty nest. Moreover, few studies have explored the role culture plays in shaping the experience of nest emptying, particularly among cultures with strong familistic orientations. Such omissions have led some to argue that to fully understand the complete spectrum of parental experiences we must consider the impact of culturally based beliefs and expectations (Mazzuco, 2003).

Indeed, mounting evidence suggests that cultural processes are particularly salient to understanding how families negotiate the empty nest. For example, in a cross-national study, Cherlin, Scabini, and Rossi (1997) found that delayed home leaving was more pronounced in Southern European countries such as Italy compared with Central European countries (i.e., Germany). In other studies, ethnicity was shown to be associated with delayed home leaving (Beaupré, Turcotte, & Milan, 2006; Boyd, 2000). Children from an ethnic background (i.e., mothers were foreign born) and those who were more religious were more likely than their counterparts (i.e., children with mothers who were non–foreign born, children who were less religious) to leave home at a later age (Beaupré et al., 2006). Similarly, Boyd (2000) found that children from certain ethnic backgrounds such as South Asian and Southern European were more likely to delay home leaving.

Although few in number, these studies suggest the importance of more carefully considering cultural contexts when examining empty nest processes and the responses of parents. Most notable is that differential sociodemographic trends in nest leaving suggest a corresponding variety of meanings attached to the transition to independence, which may affect parents' self-perceptions and mental health. For example, in Western cultures, nest leaving

is typically indicative of parents' success in raising well-adjusted children because adult children who remain at home are often unable to live independently. Conversely, children's nest leaving in non-Western cultures may be reflective of a breakup of family ties and parents' failure in instilling familistic values in their children (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). Thus, given that North American society is increasingly characterized as an ethnic mosaic given global patterns of immigration (especially from many familistic or family-centered societies), cultural processes, in tandem with parental gender variation, become increasingly important to explore.

Design and Method

The data for this research are a subset (n = 316) of those collected as part of a larger study focused on selected parenting issues in mid- or later life. This project surveyed 490 parents (who have children between the ages of 18 and 35) living in the Metro Vancouver area (British Columbia, Canada) in 2006 and 2007. To participate in the study, respondents also had to self-identify with one of four targeted ethnocultural groups—British, Chinese, Indo, or Southern European origin—based on responses to the question "To which ethnic group do you most closely identify?" The British group consists of persons who self-identify as English, Scottish, Irish, and/or Welsh; the Chinese group includes individuals with origins in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Mainland China; the Indo group includes persons with origins from India, Pakistan, or Sri Lanka; and the Southern European group consists of persons of predominantly Italian heritage but also some with Greek, Spanish, or Portuguese backgrounds.

A random sampling technique was used to recruit one parent per family. Ninety-two percent of the interviews were obtained through the use of randomly selected numbers from area telephone directories, and 8% of the interviews were conducted using nonrandom strategies (i.e., referrals from callers). The telephone interviews ranged from 35 to 55 minutes in duration and translators were available to recruit participants and conduct the interviews in the respondent's preferred language. Follow-up, face-to-face in-depth interviews (approximately 1.5 hr each) were conducted with 24 parents from the telephone survey (6 from each cultural group, half-emptying nest, half-empty nest) who agreed to be recontacted and reinterviewed at a later date. These interviews were conducted in the spring or summer of 2008 and allowed further elaboration of ENS themes gleaned in the main study.

Respondents were classified according to one of three stages experienced in transition to the empty nest: (a) full nest (all children currently reside in the respondent's home), (b) emptying nest (at least one child has left home for 4 or more months and is not living at home), or (c) empty nest (all children have left home for at least 4 or more months and none currently live at home). If respondents had more than one child eligible to participate, the interviewer randomly selected a focal or "study child." Three different versions the main research instrument were administered (depending on the transition state) and all respondents were given the identical background form questions (e.g., sociodemographic data). For the purpose of this study, the full nest subsample is excluded from the analysis because of a lack of comparable measures tied to mental health and child-launching processes across each living arrangement, resulting in a combined total subsample size of 316 (emptying nest, $n = 130$; empty nest, $n = 186$).

Our sampling target for the telephone survey was to try and recruit equal numbers of respondents from each cultural group. However, because of differential response rates, our initial targets were only approximately met, resulting in the following subsample sizes: British, 106 (33.5%); Chinese, 45 (14.2%); Indo/East Indian, 74 (23.4.5%); and Southern European, 91 (28.8%). We also tried to recruit roughly equal numbers of fathers and mothers, although mothers were more likely to respond, resulting in a subsample of 196 mothers (62%) and 120 fathers (38%). The parent's mean age at the time of the survey is 59 (with a range of 45-86), and their average age at the time of the child's home leaving is 53 (with a range of 37-81). Almost equal numbers of sons ($n = 146$, 46.2%) and daughters ($n = 170$, 53.8%) were included as focal or study children, and virtually all were biological children ($n = 306$, 96.2%) whereas only 10 (3.2%) were step or adopted. Given that divorce is relatively rare in these cultural groups (with the exception of the British group) it is not surprising that a majority of children are biologically related.

With respect to parental educational attainment, 125 (39.6%) had high school or less, 102 (32.3%) attained some college or university, whereas 89 (28.2%) had a university degree. Similarly, household income exhibited diversity, with 150 (47.5%) reporting less than $50,000, 110 (34.8%) $50,000 to $100,000 (34.8%), and 56 (17.7%) making more than $100,000. The marital status distribution (at the time of the survey) includes 5 (1.6%) single, never-married; 244 (77.2%) married; 4 (1.3%) common-law relationship; 37 (11.7%) divorced or separated; and 26 (8.2%) widowed.

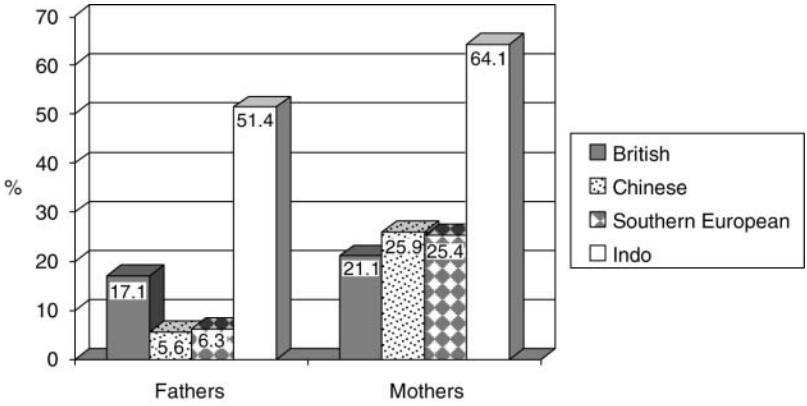
Measures and Analysis

The dependent variable for the quantitative analysis "experience of empty nest syndrome" is based on a question that asks respondents, "Generally speaking, do you feel that this [the empty nest syndrome, as previously defined as a situation whereby mothers become very depressed when their children leave home] is something you experienced when your study child left home?" Respondents could state, "yes," "no," or "other." Because relatively few (n = 18) stated "other" when presented with the three response choices, and the "other" specific reasons clearly suggested a less serious form of the syndrome (e.g., feelings of sadness), these responses were combined with the "no" category. Respondents were also asked, "How difficult was it for you on an emotional level to see your (study) child leave home (for the first time, if left more than once)?" and were given an opportunity to elaborate on their reaction. These open-ended data were collected and later coded thematically to elaborate on their social–psychological experience of the empty nest transition.

Independent variables for the quantitative analysis include ethnicity (British, Chinese, Southern European, Indo/East Indian), gender (male or female), living arrangement type (emptying vs. empty nest), parent's age when child left, partnered (yes or no), immigration status (born in Canada or born outside of Canada), household income level (less than $50,000, $50,000 to $100,000, more than $100,000), religiosity, total number of children, health status at time of home leaving, child's gender (male or female), biological child (yes or no), reason child left (independence, school, partner or marry, work), boomerang child (yes or no), relationship with child (not at all close, somewhat close, or extremely close), frequency of face-to-face contact (at least weekly, monthly, several times per year, rarely or never), and frequency of non–face-to-face contact (daily, weekly, monthly, or less).

Analyses entailed an examination of several bivariate relationships, a logistic regression analysis (which is well suited for binary dependent variables), and a thematic analysis of emergent themes based on the open-ended question described above. A preliminary logistic regression was conducted in which main or job activity of respondent, highest level of education, and importance of ethnic traditions were included. These three variables were not statistically significant and were therefore omitted to reduce the number of variables in the analysis. A small number of missing values—empty nest syndrome (ENS; n = 1), age child left home (n = 5), reason child left (n = 3), frequency of face-to-face contact (n = 34), frequency of non–face-to-face contact (n = 35), and household income (n = 49)—were

Figure 1



recoded using a multiple imputation method based on valid responses for parental gender and ethnicity, given the salience of these factors.

Results

A cross-tabulation (not shown) of the dependent variable, ENS (i.e., whether respondent experienced empty nest syndrome), by parental gender reveals a weak but statistically significant relationship (chi square = 3.13, Fisher's exact test, $p = .05$). Mothers (31.6%) are more likely than fathers (22.5%) to state that they had experienced ENS. A bivariate relationship between ENS and cultural background also results in a statistically significant association (chi square = 42.89, $p < .001$). Indo/East Indian respondents are considerably more likely to report this condition (58.1%) compared with British (19.8%), Southern European (18.7%), and Chinese (17.8%) respondents. Other cross-tabulations between the dependent variable and parental main or job activity and the reason the child left does not produce statistically significant results. However, it is interesting to note that parents who worked part-time or were homemakers were slightly more likely to report ENS than those employed in full-time work (a 5% to 8% difference).

Figure 1 presents the results of ENS by ethnic background, controlling for gender of parents. Here, gendered variations also occur across the

cultural groups and produce statistically significant findings (Mothers, chi square = 24.10, $p < .001$; Fathers, chi square = 25.18, $p < .001$). Interestingly, some ethnocultural subgroups of fathers are more likely to report the condition than some mothers. That is, Indo fathers are about twice as likely to report (51.4%) ENS as mothers from the other ethnic groups (e.g., 25.9% of Chinese mothers, 21.1% British mothers, 25.4% Southern European mothers). However, these results should be viewed with caution because the number of fathers reporting "yes" to ENS is quite small in both the Chinese and Southern European subsamples (British fathers, 6/35 report yes; Chinese fathers, 1/18 report yes; Southern European, 2/32 report yes; Indo/East Indian, 18/35 report yes).

Results of a logistic regression analysis are shown in Table 1, in which ENS is regressed on three blocks of independent variables. In the first block, ethnic background, parent's gender, and living arrangement type are entered as key sociodemographic factors, which are assumed to be sequentially prior to the other independent variables. Two of these variables are statistically significant. Specifically, the likelihood of reporting ENS is increased by a factor of 6.15 for Indo/East Indian respondents compared with the British reference group ($B = 1.82$, $p < .001$). Also, the likelihood of experiencing ENS is increased by a factor of 2.15 ($B = 0.77$, $p < .01$) if the respondent is a mother versus a father. This model is statistically significant (chi square = 48.77, $p < .001$).

In the second block we enter a number of parental characteristics: parent's age when child left home, whether the parent is partnered, immigration status, household income, religiosity, number of children, and health status at time of child's home leaving. Gender is no longer statistically significant, although ethnic background remains statistically significant for Indo/East Indian respondents compared with the British reference group ($B = 1.55$, odds ratio = 4.70, $p < .01$). The likelihood of experiencing ENS is decreased by a factor of 0.70 for each additional child ($B = –0.36$, $p < .05$) and increased by a factor of 2.6 ($B = 0.96$, $p < .05$) if health status of the parent was fair or poor compared to excellent.

It should be noted that parent's age at the time of the survey (which may reflect cohort differences rather than age-related maturation changes) as well as parent's age at the child's home leaving was grouped into three discrete categories (less than age 50, 50-64, 65+) in separate analyses and revealed similar linear patterns with ENS. In addition, it is interesting that gender differences are no longer statistically significant after adjustment for parents' other characteristics (although there is still some indication of gender variation because the gender coefficient is still relatively large in magnitude). Specifically,

Table 1
Logistic Regression Analysis of Empty Nest Syndrome Experience

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Independent Variables	*B*	*SE*	OR	*B*	*SE*	OR	*B*	*SE*	OR
Block 1: Ethnicity, gender, empty nest type									
Ethnocultural Identity (ref = British)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Chinese	−0.12	0.47		−0.45	0.61		−0.94	0.70	
Southern European	−0.09	0.37		−0.27	0.47		−0.32	0.52	
Indo/East Indian	1.82***	0.36	6.15	1.55**	0.51	4.70	1.72**	0.57	5.60
Parent's gender (ref = male)	0.77**	0.30	2.15	0.55	0.32		0.55	0.35	
Living arrangement (ref = emptying nest)	−0.37	0.28		0.18	0.36		0.17	0.38	
Block 2: Parental characteristics									
Parent's age child left				−0.04	0.02	–	−0.06*	0.03	0.94
Partnered (ref = yes)				0.27	0.37		0.29	0.39	
Immigration status (ref = born in Canada)				0.26	0.44		0.32	0.47	
Household income (ref = less than $50,000)				–	–	–	–	–	–
$50,000 to $100,000				−0.09	0.37		−0.10	0.38	
More than $100,000				−0.07	0.45		0.08	0.48	
Religiosity (ref = not at all, somewhat not)				–	–	–	–	–	–
Somewhat religious				0.10	0.36		0.10	0.39	
Very religious				0.50	0.44		0.71	0.46	
Number of children				−0.36*	0.19	0.70	−0.40*	0.21	0.67
Parental health status (ref = excellent)				–	–	–	–	–	–
Good				0.22	0.35		0.19	0.36	
Fair or poor				0.96*	0.40	2.62	0.99*	0.42	2.70
Block 3: Child characteristics									
Child's gender (ref = male)							0.27	0.33	

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Independent Variables	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	*SE*	OR	*B*	*SE*	OR	*B*	*SE*	OR
Biological child (ref = yes)							–0.27	0.91	
Child's home-leaving age							0.06	0.06	
Reason child left (ref = independence)							–	–	–
School							0.04	0.52	
Partner or marry							0.05	0.45	
Work							0.21	0.55	
Boomerang kid (ref = yes)							–0.25	0.40	
Relationship closeness (ref = extremely close)							–	–	–
Not very close							0.75	0.48	
Somewhat close							0.88*	0.37	2.41
Face-to-face contact (ref = weekly or more)							–	–	–
Monthly							–0.37	0.46	
Several times per year							–0.71	0.47	
Rarely or never							0.27	0.53	
Non–face-to-face contact (ref = monthly or less)							–	–	–
Daily							0.89	0.59	
Weekly							1.14*	0.54	3.13
Constant	–1.11			1.78				1.45	
Overall model chi square	48.77***			66.15***				82.16***	

Note: OR = odds ratio.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

a separate stepwise regression procedure (not presented here) reveals that age of parent slightly accounts for the relationship between ENS and gender. However, when relationship with child is entered, the relationship between ENS and gender is not statistically significant, suggesting that this variable accounts for some of the original association between ENS and gender.

Several characteristics of the focal child are included in the third block. Four previous associations are replicated from earlier blocks. The likelihood of experiencing ENS is increased by a factor of 5.6 ($B = 1.72$, $p < .01$) for Indos versus British; by 2.7 ($B = 0.99$, $p < .05$) if health status of the parent at the time of the home leaving is fair or poor compared with excellent; by 2.41 ($B = 0.88$, $p < .05$) if the relationship with the child is somewhat close compared with extremely close; and by a factor of 3.13 ($B = 1.14$, $p < .05$) if non–face-to-face contact is weekly compared with monthly or less. Conversely, the probability of ENS is decreased by a factor of 0.67 ($B = –0.40$, $p < .05$) for each additional child of the parent and by 0.94 ($B = –0.06$, $p < .05$) for each increment in parent's age at the time of home leaving.

Finally, we examined open-ended responses from the main and follow-up study to contextualize the quantitative analysis and provide deeper insight into the subjective processes by which parents experience ENS. Three general themes emerged (discussed in rank order of importance and which are not necessarily mutually exclusive): (a) attachments matter in cultural and social context, (b) unfinished business and the importance of parental expectations and social timetables, and (c) parental anxiety or worry and the real world.

Parental Reasons Given for Experiencing ENS

Attachments matter in cultural and social context. Many parents reported that the primary reason it was extremely difficult (on an emotional level) to see their study child leave home was that their previous relationship was now perceived as severed. This experience of significant emotional, social, and physical loss is particularly pronounced in the Indo community (for both mothers and fathers) and among parents with ambiguous attachment ties to their child. For example, as one Indo father (aged 61) states, "Men don't show their feelings but it is as tough and as much for me." Moreover, this appears particularly traumatic in families in which they have practiced the tradition of having the eldest son remain at home (even after marriage because the son and daughter-in-law provide an important source of support to aging parents). However, with the adoption of more Westernized individualist behaviors, more and more sons are living independently with

their wives. As one Indo father (aged 59) states, "I'm not used to the son's leaving home."

Other parents articulated feelings about missing the day-to-day or regular social contact and companionship (e.g., feeling great loneliness) and the loss of identity associated with the transition to becoming an empty nester. Many women (regardless of ethnic background) mourned the loss of their motherhood role, as illustrated by one British mother, "It was a bitter-sweet experience—I was happy for her to go to school but also sad—I felt: Who am I if not a mother—I identify strongly with my role as mother." Interestingly, Indo and Southern European parents (unlike British or Chinese parents) typically framed their loss in terms of their familistic heritage. For example, one Italian mother (aged 66) told the interviewer, "I am from South Italy and so my bond to my children is very tight." Fathers also discussed how the departure was difficult for them, although it was more linked to paternalistic issues of control because they no longer had the family together under one roof. As one Southern European father (aged 63) stated, "For me it was more difficult than for my wife. It has to do with my personality. I was a strict father and it has to do with the way I grew up and my background. I wanted to be in control so it was hard to let him go."

Finally, consistent with the quantitative analysis, parents with fewer children and only children, as well as those who lacked other forms of social support, also displayed greater challenges. For example, one widowed immigrant mother states, "I am very depressed, life just seems empty. I do not have any other family" (Indo mother, aged 62).

Unfinished business: Off time launches and violations of social scheduling expectations. Parental expectations regarding the preferred or appropriate timing of their child's departure greatly influenced experiences of ENS. If the departure occurred too soon or too late (i.e., "off time") based on their cultural and social lens, parents seemed to have a particularly difficult time coping with the transition. As one Southern European mother (aged 66) reported, "I thought he could have stayed with us, that being 25, it was pretty early for him to leave." Conversely, a British mother (aged 54) was depressed over her son's departure, because of his reluctance to launch on time, as reflected in her statement: "I bloody well had to get a team of oxen to pull him out of the house. I had to move to a one bedroom apartment to force him out. This was hard on me." Many parents also reflected back on their own home-leaving experience and were less likely to report ENS if children followed in their footsteps. In this way, personal experiences of social timetables became the standard by which parents gauged their children's timing.

Similarly, when children met parental or normative expectations about leaving under the right circumstances, parents were less likely to report difficulty. Statements such as "She was ready to go. She had all her ducks in a row. She was mature enough" (British mom, aged 54) and "All Indian parents are happy when their daughters (leave home) and they are happy to see them get married" (Indo mother, aged 59) reflect this theme. Conversely, when daughters leave home to seek independence rather than to marry in the Indo community, ENS is more likely to occur. In the Chinese subsample, conformity to desired trajectories often related to school, work, and marriage and these expectations were often clearly communicated prior to the child's leaving home. This reduced the likelihood of experiencing ENS, as illustrated in the words of one Chinese father (aged 72), "She left home because she went to work. She got a good job, so I felt happy," whereas another Chinese mother (aged 64) states, "Getting married and living apart are the natural processes for they are adults. I don't see any difficulty with that."

Finally, verbatim responses also indicate that older parents—consistent with the quantitative findings—seemed to adjust better to the transition to the empty nest than younger-aged parents. In some cases this was because children stayed home later rather than leaving home at a very young age (e.g., to live with other kin, because of conflict at home). Or the child had returned home as a "boomerang kid," thus prolonging the transition and making it easier to accept (this variable was statistically significant in the empty nest subsample but only borderline at $p < .10$ in the combined sample). In other situations, it was a smoother adjustment because the respondents had a longer period of mental preparation for the transition or had refocused their personal or professional life, such as by making plans for retirement, traveling, downsizing, or pursuing new social roles or leisure activities. Some of these older-aged parents (i.e., age 60+) were also beginning to face elder care responsibilities such that their child's independence reduced competing sandwich generational demands. Indeed, our data suggest that it is not employment status per se that predicts a lower likelihood of ENS, but rather the extent to which parents (especially moms) keep busy and successfully engage in work, family, and social roles as unencumbered parents without dependent children.

Parental anxiety or worry and the real world: Flying the coop and unfeathered landings. Many parents expressing ENS claimed that their child's departure caused great emotional distress because they had deep-seated worries about their child's health and well-being and his or her ability to maintain independence. These concerns were typically less tied to gender and cultural background (although mothers generally worried more

than fathers) and often centered on real or perceived issues of personal safety (particularly when the child moved far away), the perceived ability of the child to be self-sufficient (e.g., given the high cost of living and housing), and diet or lifestyle. One British mother (aged 66) reports, "He was so impulsive that I didn't know how he could handle himself when he was so far from home with no one to back him up now that he lives in Toronto." Another British father (aged 55) states, "We were concerned for her well-being and safety," whereas a Southern European mother (aged 62) told the interviewer, "He is disabled so I was concerned about him moving away." Conversely, when children were perceived as being looked after, extreme emotional difficulty was less prevalent. As one Chinese mother (aged 58) states, "My eldest son had gone to Hong Kong for work before my other child left. I thought that they could take good care of each other, if needed." However, in the Indo community, arranged marriages—which remain a cultural tradition although children increasingly have more say in the process—can sometimes cause a great deal of concern. One Indo father (aged 56) states, "Her marriage was arranged. . . . I worried how her husband and in-laws will treat her," whereas another Indo father of a daughter who had been in an arranged marriage (aged 58) states, "When kids leave the nest you become worried about their safety and . . . is she eating right?"

Overall, many parents articulated concern over the safety, security, and well-being of their children in the real world. Perhaps this is not surprising, given our culture of fear in modern society (Glassner, 2000). For example, the media increasingly saturates today's parents with a constant barrage of possible safety threats, ranging from such sources as terrorism, road rage, health epidemics, environmental disasters, and predatory behavior from strangers.

Discussion and Implications

This article explores parental experiences of ENS during the child-launching phase of family development in aging families. Results support recent research in that the majority of midlife parents do not report strong adverse reactions such as feeling very depressed or emotional distress when their children leave home. Moreover, contrary to previous studies (e.g., see Souza, 2004), mothers are not significantly more likely than fathers to report ENS, although gendered differences and processes appear, especially when comparing across cultural groups. Indeed, most parents in this study reveal positive psychological consequences after their children leave, such as increased personal growth, improved marital relations and leisure time, and feelings of mastery in successfully raising and launching their children.

Quantitative findings also indicate diversity in expressions of self-reported negative feelings by specific cultural, relational, and sociodemographic factors. Notably, Indo/East Indian parents (both mothers and fathers) are more likely than other parents (i.e., British-origin) to report this condition. Also, parents in poorer health, with more ambiguous relational attachments and moderate non–face-to-face contact after children leave, with fewer children, and who were younger at the time of their child's home leaving are more likely to report ENS. These findings clearly indicate that some parents are struggling more than others—a finding that should not be ignored given that certain subgroups are more vulnerable to adverse psychological consequences than others after children leave home.

Supplemental qualitative analysis highlights the strong value in a mixed or multimethod approach to studying family life. These data elucidate and elaborate key findings gleaned from the quantitative analysis—that is, that the cultural and social context is critical in shaping parental experiences of ENS. Not only does ethnic background influence perceptions of how this transition should unfold with respect to changing relational bonds and social timetables (i.e., the appropriate conditions for separation) but it can also create specific cultural and gendered discourses (i.e., a type of vocabulary to rationalize and express parental role loss).

For example, our qualitative data support the idea that cultural background shapes the meanings and expressions of child-launching experiences and adjacent emotional reactions. These interpretive processes can be positive, negative, or ambivalent because they are embedded in cultural norms that subject to social change (i.e., immigration patterns and exposure to Western lifestyles). For example, Indo reports of ENS do not necessarily allude to such states as clinical depression. Rather, ENS may be reported to positively express and reflect a strong familistic orientation that is normatively shared within this community.

In other cases, Indo reports of ENS reflect ambiguity and distress given the rapid change that has occurred in this community, such as rising individualism and the tendency to live in nuclear families (Singh, 2005). For example, some parents reported that they experienced ENS because they felt shame from the larger community because of the violation of normative expectations (e.g., when daughters leave home to seek independence rather than to marry or when their oldest son chooses not to remain in the home). These parents perceive that they are losing an important source of social and economic support as they age. Related to this is that parents may feel a loss in social capital when their children leave home. Activities such as developing new friendships and maintaining a sense of connectedness to

their community may become more challenging for parents who have historically relied on their children as the primary mechanism for creating and maintaining their social network system.[1]

Conversely, it is striking that the Chinese parents (particularly fathers) report relatively low levels of ENS compared with the Indo families. This finding lends further support to cross-cultural studies and to our qualitative data that establish diversity in expressions of emotion, gender roles, parenting styles, and filial expectations. For example, previous research shows that displays of emotion are not always encouraged in men and within Chinese families (especially traditional ones) and children tend to follow formal and clearly prescribed role relationships (e.g., see Lim & Lim, 2005). Indeed, our sample of Chinese parents suggests less ambiguity and emotional distress in child-launching processes, which reduces the likelihood of reporting the ENS, despite being a strongly family-oriented culture. However, it should be noted that our sample of Chinese parents (especially fathers) is small and should be increased in future studies to examine these trends in more detail.

We also need to examine the duration and depth of ENS using longitudinal data sets—for example, some parents in the study indicated that their feelings of sadness, distress, or depression were relatively short-lived, whereas others clearly pointed to a more serious state of depression that requires medical attention. This research is limited by retrospective data, and our available measures could be affected by parents' current mental health and their present relationships with their children. Moreover, it is striking that parents with somewhat close (rather than either extremely or not at all close) and moderate non–face-to-face contact patterns (rather than daily or less than monthly) report higher levels of ENS and emotional distress. Future research is required to tap into the root source(s) of this attachment ambiguity (because it is neither definitively weak nor strong). These processes could also be tied to concepts such as intergenerational ambivalence or the notion that family relationships can be contradictory or paradoxical in nature. Another consideration is that because a child's move out of the parental home is not always a clear-cut and final exit (Mitchell, 2006), uncertainty can arise as to role expectations held by family members. With this uncertainty comes the potential for boundary ambiguity, or the incongruence between the child's physical and psychological presence or absence (Boss et al., 1987). That is, when a child physically moves out but the parent strongly feels his or her child's psychological presence (e.g., the parent is very preoccupied with his or her sense of loss or unresolved circumstances, the child's well-being, or that the child may move back home), parental distress occurs.

Additional research is also needed that further explores gendered and cultural differences in the psychological reactions to children's home leaving using multiple mental health outcomes (e.g., clinical measures of depression, well-being, and life satisfaction). This could be done in conjunction with uncovering other aging-related changes (e.g., chronic health conditions, menopause) and role transitions (e.g., to retirement, caring for an elderly parent). Moreover, it should be recognized that cultural barriers may exist because of the reluctance of some ethnic groups to express negative emotions because of shame or embarrassment. Understanding these dynamics becomes critical once we consider recent demographic trends, particularly in North America. In this case we have witnessed dramatic increases in the foreign-born segment of the population (Statistics Canada, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Health professionals (e.g., family doctors) and community programmers could benefit from the knowledge that a significant number of parents do experience some degree of sadness or depression when children leave home and that this reaction is relatively normal. From a health promotion perspective, intergenerational programs such as transition workshops could target parents who have difficulty coping (e.g., recent immigrants, some parents of college students) and provide resources such as support groups and information. Moreover, the presence of poorer mental or physical health can be linked to, and contextualized in recognition of, a potential life course stressor. This knowledge has important treatment and community support implications. It can be used to encourage the adoption of healthy lifestyle coping mechanism behaviors. For example, research shows that older women may self-medicate with alcohol or prescription drugs to deal with loss and feelings of loneliness—behaviors that pose additional health risks (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2005). In conclusion, this study takes an important step toward advancing our theoretical and empirical understanding of a key family transition and its health-related implications. Indeed, this transition will be faced by an increasing number of aging "baby boomer" parents in North American society—albeit with seemingly diverse and possibly more ambiguous health and well-being–related consequences.

Note

1. In this sense, children and their associated activities (school, sports, and community activities) are a parent's primary link to the outside world. Thus, children are the conduit for making and maintaining a sense of social connectedness for parents. This can also be useful when immigrant parents have language barriers.

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