

A Phenomenological Enquiry

## **Empty Nest Syndrome**

**How do female Humanistic Person Centred  
Psychotherapists experience the Empty Nest Syndrome  
when their daughters leave home and what impact if any  
does this have on their work with female clients?**

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## On Children

And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said, speak to us of children.

And he said:

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and he bends you with His might that his arrows may go swift and far.

Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;

For even as he loves the arrow that flies, he also loves the bow that is stable.

The Prophet: Kahlil Gibran (1998)

## **Abstract**

This phenomenological study was designed to understand how female Humanistic Person Centred Psychotherapists experience the Empty Nest Syndrome (ENS) when their daughters leave home and what impact if any does this have on their work with female clients?

Eight Psychotherapists from various areas around the UK took part in semi-structured interviews and then meaning statements were analysed and extracted from the data to find key themes.

Themes that presented within the findings included; personal meaning of Empty Nest Syndrome, Loss of Role, Impact on relationships, and change to family life, new beginnings and impact on client work. An exhaustive description has been written to provide an insight into the female Humanistic Person Centred Psychotherapists experience of the Empty Nest Syndrome when their daughters leave home and the impact this has on their work with female clients.

These results indicated that a collection of symptoms can arise in a woman when their daughter leaves home. The symptoms often termed as Empty Nest Syndrome include feelings of emptiness, loss, and depression. Within this study all eight participants experienced these symptoms, however there is no set pattern; cycle or duration of these symptoms and each person shared their own unique story.

This shows that every experience is valuable to each individual and as Humanistic Person Centred Therapists we must embrace our theory and be willing to meet and build a relationship led by the unique human being.

## **Introduction**

How can it be that successful 40 year old professional career women can be lying on the bathroom floor in floods of tears feeling that she has no reason to carry on with life, holding one toothbrush?

Following a summer of having the house full of people, my son, daughter and their partners and my husband, the house seemed very empty as they gradually all left to go to University and my husband on a business trip. I went to the bathroom late at night to clean my teeth and as I saw just one toothbrush in the holder I felt an overwhelming emotion of loss, sadness, anxiety and emptiness that made me feel that my life and all I held dear had disappeared.

'The Empty Nest' can be described as a period of depression, identity crisis, adjustment, confusion, role loss and a lowered sense of well being which occurs when the last child leaves the parental home (Borland 1982).

Upon processing my journey through this time I realised that as well as it being the impact of my last child leaving home it was also for me the separation from my daughter as she went off into the wide world. I felt a part of me had gone forever and that my life would need to change to adapt to the transition and a different stage in my life cycle. There was a realisation that the current life that I had was not fulfilling me and that the important role of mother that I cherished was no longer going to be needed in a full time capacity.

Considering my peers and friends I was not aware of any one else experiencing this and I remember being unable to discuss it and feeling a failure that I may be unable to separate my own self from my children. However I did not believe that I was the only person feeling that way but understood that some people just did not discuss

this. At this time my self worth, self esteem, identity and life purpose felt challenged with the consequence of a diagnosis of mild depression.

At this point I left a senior management role within the NHS and pursued a career in a field that interested me and would hopefully give me job satisfaction. I commenced training as a Psychotherapist with the Sherwood Institute.

This journey and experience has left me with a personal desire to research and share knowledge about the 'Empty Nest Syndrome' (ENS) and research how female therapists experience their daughters leaving home and what impact if any it has on working with female clients.

Throughout my career I have always worked in areas whereby building a relationship with another person has been important, therefore when I decided to become a therapist my first priority was to be able to work in a compassionate way, in relationship with another human being. I chose the Humanistic Person Centred (HPC) modality as I felt it would allow and encourage me to build a relationship and rapport with a client that would encourage trust between two people and enable and empower the client to develop and heal themselves.

I ascribe to a set of values that match the Person Centred Approach, whereby I do believe that there is good in all people, that people have experiences that can alter their life journeys and that social mediation makes them live their life in a way where they are not reaching their true potential and adaption is necessary to survive (Mearns and Thorne 1999).

My professional aim is to research the phenomena of ENS and provide evidence on this transition in a women's life, be it positive or negative, and question can it affect



the well being and be the reason that women present to therapy with low self esteem, loss and existential crisis (Deurzen 2001).

Thereafter to inform the practice of therapists who are seeing female clients experiencing this transition phase within their lives, and to inform the Therapy Profession regarding women requesting therapy for a number of reasons with the underlying issues of loss of role and self concept during the transition period of their children leaving home. As future regulation may commence for the Profession I feel it is important that we provide evidence based research into our role and show that we are able to disseminate findings to inform the profession as to the extent of our skills and knowledge. Qualitative research has its own distinctive role to play in the creation of a knowledge base for practice and policy and is vital for the profession to assert itself as a true profession (McLeod 2001).

The study starts with a review of the existing literature on the subject and related subjects then discusses the research methodology stating my underpinning philosophical framework including research design and ethical issues.

The findings are presented with comparison to the literature reviewed, followed by discussion and the implications for Humanistic Person Centred (HPC) Psychotherapy. Final writings include a critique of the study and potential areas for future research. The conclusion includes my reflections and personal learning from the study and the process.

Throughout this study I use feminine pronouns when referring to people in general.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Search Process**

A literature search was carried out on the Birmingham university e library website and Google Scholar, searching proquest, psyche articles and psyche net. The keywords I used for the search were empty nest, Humanistic Person Centred approach to empty nest, loss, attachment theories, life transitions, letting go, loss of Mother role.

Relevant literature that was reviewed included the areas of Empty Nest Syndrome, loss of identity, loss of mother role, Feminist critique of Mother role, The Mother role, attachment theory and Humanistic Person Centred theory related to empty nest and attachment and self actualisation.

The initial literature search that included the themes of empty nest syndrome produced very little material and none relating to the Person Centred theory. The majority of the literature appeared to be American literature written for women in an anecdotal format with no in depth research specifically about the syndrome and Person-Centred Therapy.

Although this was interesting reading there was a glaring gap in the literature around the Person Centred Theory and clients presenting with the collective symptoms of ENS.

### **Inclusions**

An overview of the ENS literature is reviewed including arguments for and against and the negative and positive effects it may have on women. The most relevant

research is critiqued in detail; considering why and how the research has been carried out, the methodological choices and interpretations made including findings. Literature regarding related subjects that naturally arise and pose questions is reviewed in less detail but highlights interesting findings that feed into the research study.

## **Exclusions**

There is an immense amount of literature and research regarding loss, the feminist view of the role of the mother and loss of identity , therefore for this study the review was narrowed down to the subject of loss being related to the mother role as well as the attachment literature being critiqued briefly. Due to the large amount of literature within the Person Centred approach the review was limited to self actualisation, self concept and development in relation to the mother role and midlife women.

The word count did not allow me to delve deeply into the Feminist research and their view around the subject of the mother role and identity therefore again I have reviewed a narrow section of the literature relating to my research question.

## **Overview**

Within the literature search there was limited research and writings on the ENS and Humanistic Person Centred Therapy.

There are a small number of of books within the literature focussed on just Empty Nest Syndrome; however there is a distinct lack of quality research in this area with most of the literature coming from America and drawing upon case studies, personal experiences and writing from interviews with mothers and daughters.

There are a small number of research papers around the ENS both challenging and supporting the theory of the syndrome.

The mother-daughter role has a great deal of literature written about the special bond and links between the relationship also literature on separation and letting go with narrative from both the mothers and the daughter Perspective.

The literature around attachment and loss is huge and therefore this review briefly focused on the attachment patterns and the impact on the separation from child and mother during teenage years.

Due to the word count and the amount of literature available the Feminist theory is very briefly reviewed in relation to the study, together with the impact on working with clients as a Humanistic Person Centred therapist. Within the field of HPC therapy there was no literature relating to ENS or the loss of the mother daughter role; this provides a clear gap for research to be carried out within this area especially within the British culture and in today's changing society.

## **Review of Relevant Literature**

### **Humanistic Person Centred Approach**

Within the Humanistic Person Centred School of Psychotherapy, Rogers (1957) proposed a process model of development in which the individual continuously changes and grows, revisits developmental issues continuously and has the capacity to be ever changing in the light of experience. There is limited literature within the HPC approach that discusses the actual separation of mother and child within the teenage years and the loss of the Mother role; however the HPC approach focuses

on the self concept and self actualisation which is relevant theory to the changes that a mother will experience during the transition period of the children leaving home.

The writings of Carl Rogers (1951), present the actualising tendency, self concept and self structure, these writings compliment the research study as it is the very essence of what the women may experience as her role changes and there is conflict between experience and self concept. Writings around the locus of evaluation (Rogers 1961) will also support the women's self concept and how during the life transition she judges herself and her beliefs and behaviours.

However reviewing the literature there was no research papers or books related specifically to the ENS and Person Centred theory, this supports the importance of the therapeutic alliance and relationship and not focussing on a diagnosis or a syndrome.

Hamilton (1999 ) writing from the Person Centred perspective looks at how the first 4 years of motherhood influenced her work as a Person Centred therapist, and how it has tested her beliefs and challenged and expanded her self concept development. On being a mother she feels that she has grown in transparency, empathy and acceptance. Bettelheim (1987) proposed that empathy involves a transformation of the clients experience into self knowing on the part of the therapist and Hamilton (1999) feels this has occurred within her transition into motherhood.

Hamilton (1999) discusses working with a young female client where she was only partly present whilst wondering if the client would be a 'very nice daughter', this led her to congruence within the relationship and Rogers (1959) position of endeavouring to voice any persistent feelings that one is experiencing toward an individual. Hamilton (1999) discusses the core conditions (Rogers 1959) within the

therapeutic relationship and her own experience of becoming and being a mother honestly and openly, questioning her congruence and non judgemental attitude within her clinical practice during this time. This work provides some evidence that being a mother has brought change within the therapeutic relationship and the way of working with clients, however it is not research but a narrative of the phenomena.

Suzanne Spector (1999) writes that historically a women's life was totally defined by child bearing and rearing, stating that a women's life was considered over at forty or so and that menopause and the empty nest became milestones to be dreaded for they signalled the end of a women's usefulness.

Spector (1999) suggests that as women of the age of fifty and forty, they are now able to make life choices to determine how they wish to live the second half of their lives with self expression and self satisfaction becoming their priority. Writing from a Person Centred perspective she states that the first model of adulthood are our parents and how difficult it can be to deviate from their pattern and how as Person Centred Therapists the task is to help our clients find their internal locus of evaluation (Rogers 1959) and set real expectations for themselves as they explore the myriad and sometimes conflicting paths to self fulfilment and actualisation.

Rose (1999) discussed Roger's (1959) attitudes to women and how the actualising tendency related to women was vital for anyone accustomed to seeing themselves of secondary importance. The therapeutic relationship providing congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy (Rogers 1959) was of major importance to women undergoing life transition and changes within her role and her self concept. Rose (1999) concludes that studying the Freud approach and the Person Centred

approach she felt that her place could only be within the PCA in order to be seen and met as a woman.

Wolter-Gustafson (1999) also appraised Rogers (1959) work with women relating that he did not construct differential pathways for the development of females and males but consistently related to the human being, holding the belief that each person is the best source of knowledge on her own experience. Roger's (1951) grounded his theory of development in the relationship between infant and caregiver which include the conditions for optimal development including respect, empathy and authentic being with the care giver. Although Wolter-Gustafson (1999) is writing about the core conditions within the approach the focus is on the gender split and human development and does not include research regarding HPC theory and the potential work with women.

### **Empty Nest Experience**

Research undertaken within the 1970's showed that most women accepted the departure of their children with equanimity if not relief (Neugarten and Datan 1974), conversely Glenn (1975) indicated that the symptoms of the ENS may be prevalent enough to warrant public concern with women experiencing depression conversely in other circumstances the departure of the children brings both an increase in marital satisfaction for women and an increased sense of well being (Fuchs 1977 Lowenthal et al 1975).

Rubin (1979) suggests that a woman may become depressed after her children leave home with it seen as a loss and the normal processes of grief and mourning would produce the healing effect. Women during this time could be seen as neurotic

with an inability to separate from their children and incapacity to manage internal conflict without breakdown (Rubin 1979).

Sales (1977) noted that since one of the major requirements of women's role is adaptability to the needs of others they are constrained from making long term plans for their own lives, thus many women experience long-term satisfaction only in their maternal role and view their children's progress to maturity and achievement as their most substantial contribution in the world, and the most important evidence of their own personal worth.

Rubin (1979) undertaking research with 160 women aged from 35 to 54 produces evidence that the children leaving is difficult as an ending not because the children are gone, but because it brings with it a beginning. This beginning has the potential for excitement and adventure but also the possibility of failure. Rubin (1979) suggests that sometimes the failure will be on the mothers part but more often it will lie in the social constraints by which women's lives have been hemmed in, however the question revealed by the women in the research was 'what am I going to do with the next 30 years of my life?'

Rubenstein (2007) discusses the American perspective on how to live happily ever after, after the kids leave home. The experiences and feelings shared in the book are taken from interviews with over a thousand women who are redefining themselves, reconnecting to friends, jobs and spouses and creating full, rich lives after their Mommy roles have waned.

Rubenstein (2007) breaks down the post motherhood launch into 3 stages: Grief, Relief and Joy stating that when mothers make it to the final stage they will experience friendships that blossom work thriving and develop a renewed sense of



well being and confidence. She also related these experiences to the life stages of menopause and discusses how female friends can be of great support in this transitional period, stating that life can be just as enriching post motherhood as during motherhood.

Rubenstein (2007) challenges the existence of the syndrome and writes that there is no empty nest syndrome, it does not exist, that American mothers as good mothers are those who have subsumed their own needs and goals to those of the family and so parallel expectation is that mothers will be devastated when their children no longer need them. This supports then her writings that the feelings of grief, loss and despair are short lived, with the stages of grief and relief lasting no longer than 1 year and then the joy of the new found freedom takes over.

This is supported by Rubin (1979) who suggests there is a wide variation of the stage of empty nest syndrome and feelings of loss with the duration being days, weeks or months however depression is not always imminent, with the challenge that the syndrome is a myth.

Rubenstein (2007) has carried out a study of middle class American women who are able to access literature, professional support and a network of friends to support them through this short period. Rubenstein (2007) states that the 'children leaving home' is a crucial point in a mother's life, 'It's a mothers entry into another level of adulthood, one that is more about her and less about the children (Rubenstein 2007 p32). There is a discussion around how other issues may be present in the women's lives and the trigger of the children leaving at times can be the final event that brings midlife issues, depression, relationship issues all acutely into view and all get labelled within the Empty Nest category.

Learner (1998) writes a narrative from a personal experience about ENS and the new phase of her life without children discussing all the symptoms of the empty nest and advice on overcoming the inevitable stage. Learner (1998) writes about the shock of the emptiness of the home and her life when her own children left home, this is a personal experience with friends thoughts shared to emphasis points, ending the chapter with advice to empty nesters finally stating 'don't hesitate to seek professional help'. As in Rubenstein's (2007) work the idea is promoted that the emptiness is short lived followed by a feeling of pride, new confidence and freedom for the mother.

Stabiner (2007) collated 31 parents stories telling the truth about relationships, love and freedom after the kids fly the coop. Stabiner (2007) writes that mothers hate this period of transition when the children leave home, this rite of passage, that mothers anticipate it, telling themselves that they are going to love the new found freedom, trying to make plans, but no matter how they approach it, mothers are never quite prepared. All of the contributors have faced ENS with the writers representing full range of experience from traditional nuclear families to single parents and gay parents. The research is anecdotal with no further analysis or conclusion, the book just relaying the phenomena of people undergoing the empty nest transition in their own words.

Two main papers informed my knowledge around the area of loss of women's role' and the concept of the empty nest and related empty nest syndrome.

The paper by Oliver (1977) paper has the assumptions that

- The conflict is an outgrowth of the socialization of women; mothering becomes the major source of self esteem for many women.

- The abrupt termination of the role constitutes a forced unprepared retirement from her major role in life
- The conflict centres on her sense of loss of power.

The problem is not the empty nest. The problem is the empty women. (Oliver 1977)

The conclusion states that the post mothering conflict is related to the women's inability to cope with a critical situation in which she is called upon to face her own needs rather than the vicarious gratification she has learned to expect from sustaining the physical and emotional needs of others.

The paper also concludes that it is not primarily the separation from the mother's children which underlies her possible depression, but the feeling of not being needed which created the sense of emptiness. This paper details women's needs and loss of power and role in case studies taken from women who presented with depression following children leaving home. The study only used 3 case studies and the findings are written about in conjunction with RET therapy which the clients were undergoing.

Oliver (1977) suggests in her writing that depression may be the over controlling mothers ultimate complaint, however if this is dealt with the process of self negation can be reversed, this supports Rubenstein's (2007) thoughts on there being an additional trigger that causes depression within the women and labelled ENS.

Lowenthal 1972 et al, French 1992 and Deykin et al (1966) produced research papers with the essence that Empty Nest was a stage to go through and that underlying factors i.e. depression, relationship difficulties and culture would have an impact on the severity of the empty nest stage.

Myers and Raup (1989) paper views the syndrome from a counselling point of view and takes account of the counsellor's interventions within this life period of transition. It suggests that empty nest syndrome is the maladaptive response to the post parental transition (Borland 1982) which is stimulated by reactions to loss. Mothers may experience overwhelming grief, sadness and depression. The post parental period with all of its positive and negative potential represents a major life change or transition

The paper states that the counsellor needs to be aware of the impact of language, media, factors affecting adjustment and the transition of the life cycle. Also counsellors should acknowledge the ambiguous and demeaning implications of the term 'empty nest syndrome'. The areas focused on may include lack of self esteem and worth, lack of independence or marital satisfaction and loss of major life role. However this paper is reviewing the literature around the syndrome and does not undertake an original study.

According to Fingerman (2002), most parents enjoy greater freedom, a reconnection with their spouses and more time to pursue their own goals and interests once their children have left home. One major point stated within the research is that the parent child relationship improves when the child has left home. For this American study Fingerman interviewed women in their 20s and their mothers and women in their 40s and their mothers.

Fingerman (2002) in conclusion, acknowledged that people may worry about losing their child when they leave home but this is a fear that often does not happen. This is a fairly recent piece of research that has undertaken a study with 100 women interviewed, and the research published 2003.

Clay (2003) has summarised pieces of qualitative research that suggests that many parents get a new lease on life when their children leave, although again she acknowledges that parents do feel a sense of loss when their nest empties, researchers are finding that this period can be one of increased satisfaction and improved relationships.

Clay (2003) states there have been many changes that have influenced the degree of the ENS and parents experience. These include cheaper long distance charges, email and lower airfares. These changes have made it possible for the parents to feel more freedom without feeling guilty. This work is a review of other writers research including Fingerman (2002), with a conclusion from Rebecca Clay based on reviewing the literature.

A phenomenological study by Lai (2002) proposed that women undergoing Empty Nest experience encountered complicated emotions and that counselling needed to be individual and related to the women as a whole not the syndrome experience.

Mitchell (2009) proposed that the ENS is no longer a syndrome but a short lived transitional stage that the mother will go through ending in freedom, which agreed with Lowenthal (1992) who concludes that the leaving of the last child from home was generally anticipated with a sense of relief.

### **Mother Role, Loss and Attachment**

From a Transactional analysis view point, Erskine (1977) touched on the women's loss of role when he wrote about open ended scripts within the TA Literature. Erskine and Selser (1977) stated that women who adopted a stereotypical role might be able to sustain a pseudo sense of okness as long as they follow the script compulsion, to

maintain their role as caretaker. Conversely as children leave home and youth diminishes, the open ended scripts run out, producing a lack of structure that for some women may result in depression or in a milder sense of loneliness and uselessness. For other women, completion of the script bound role may open avenues for self fulfilment.

Shandler (2001) wrote an American account of loving and letting go of an adolescent daughter. This book discusses issues around parenting a teenage daughter and follows her daughter's book Shandler (2001) which is the writings of her teenage daughter about growing up. This book gives the mother a voice to reveal the pride, hurt and experience of the mother role alongside the teenage daughter growing up and the need to let go and discover a complimentary life to that of being a mother.

This book again is written from an American perspective with short stories, poems and interviews to highlight experiences; however it is not a research study. It provides the reader with the opportunity to reflect on the universal experience of mothers facing one set of challenges alongside their daughter facing another. It discusses the inevitable experience of letting go and loss of the mother role using women's experiences which make up a narrative revealing the phenomena of mother daughter relationship and changes within the transition.

Fischer (1986) highlights the complex and variable ways that the mother-daughter relationship changes as daughters mature and mother's age. It identifies two key turning points in the mother-daughter relationship: when the daughter becomes a mother herself and when the mother becomes frail. The study commenced with a pilot study however this was abandoned upon the sudden death of the authors own mother.

Two years later a larger qualitative – Life history study was carried out on forty young adult daughters and most of their mothers, the study focusing on the mother daughter relationship. Findings revealed that attachment between the mother and daughter is a strong bond with women defining themselves through relationships with others; daughters develop as females by continuing their identification with their mothers (Fischer 1986 p 4). They have a process of holding on and letting go, arguing that separation is more difficult for daughters than for sons. Attachment and separation were researched revealing patterns that separation is achieved by either censorship, withholding information about life from their mother or conflict and then emotional withdrawal.

The study carried out in the eighties provided findings related to the mother daughter roles within that era however these study findings may be very different if undertaken today with the changing roles of women and the feminist perspective. The conclusion of the study was that the family roles of women provide a meeting ground for the interweaving of generations with the centrality of mothering in both of their lives providing the meaning that mother daughter lives are linked from generation to generation.

To reveal that a mother does not have feelings or emptiness when her child leaves home may be due to the pressure of not being seen as a good enough mother, supporting society's view that womanhood and motherhood are synonymous and that motherhood is a women's ineluctable destiny (Rubin 1979). The idea of the natural mother image, a Raphael painting where the image is a woman fulfilled, who asks nothing more than to nurture and nourish is an unattainable ideal against which women measure, not only their performance, but their feelings about being mothers. (Deutsch 1973)

Rubin (1979) discusses the pressure of external sources on mothers and that during the upbringing of the children they aborted their own dreams and invested them in their children, however suggesting that women who work have other ways of relating to the world and to themselves and have an emerging sense of their own separateness.

Bassoff (1988), from a Mothers perspective, discusses how the emerging womanhood of her daughter dramatically changes the once exclusive Mother Daughter relationship, producing feelings of anxiety, rejection and loss. Within the book she draws on case studies from her own psychology practice and describes ways which mothers have successfully worked through this period to achieve greater growth and happiness as well as a deeper, albeit different bond with their daughters. By loving and letting go, mothers can give their adolescent daughters both roots and wings and transform their own lives as well (Bassoff 1988 p246).

The study acknowledges that just as daughters must separate from their mothers to grow, so mothers must modify their care taking roles and separate from their daughters in order to pursue their own lives, in order to develop as individuals. An American study written from the mother's perspective it gives the mother a voice to discuss and attempt to understand the special bond of the relationship and all the issues that accompany separation and letting go.

Bowlby (1969) developed the theory of attachment stating three principal patterns of attachment, secure, anxious resistant and anxious avoidant stating that many presenting issues are linked to attachment difficulties. This theory is not within the HPC theory however, it provides a vital child development theory that can be used to provide knowledge and understanding of relationship issues in adult hood.



Holmes (1993) provides the feminist critique that Bowlby (1969) wrongly assumed that anatomy is destiny. Chowdrow (1978) wrote about the problems facing modern families stating they are not so much about maternal deprivation but paternal deprivation due to weak, absent or abusive father. Girls remain tied into their mothers often taking on their pain and depression and feeling intense guilt if they try to assert their independence and autonomy. The Bowlbian concepts of avoidant and ambivalent attachment capture roughly these male and female patterns of anxious attachment within the modern family.

Feminist research has examined a broad range of women's experiences as mothers. However, relatively few studies exist on the 'empty nest'. One study reviewed is a feminist discourse analysis of the variable ways post maternal experiences were described in popular-press accounts (Sherriff & Weatherall 2009).

The analysis identified individual differences for interpreting different responses to the departure of adult offspring. Two discourses of womanhood, 'modern' and 'traditional', produced an ideological dilemma where the subject position 'fit adult' conflicted with that of 'good mother'. 'Adjustment' was used rhetorically to manage that dilemma. The results show that longstanding cultural beliefs about women as mothers still exert a powerful discursive force. However, women can now be represented as having lives beyond the domestic sphere. A dilemma arising in accounts of contemporary women at postmaternity is the conflicting identities of socially fit, well-adjusted adults and good mothers who mourn the loss of their children.

Bowlby (1979), termed attachment theory as a way of conceptualizing the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others and of

explaining the many forms of emotional distress and personality disturbance, including anxiety, anger, depression and emotional detachment, to which unwilling separation and loss give rise. Bowlby's work (1969) was around child development with loss and separation focussing on bereavement and attachment patterns, there was no literature around the loss of the mother role when teenage daughters left home.

A paper in the International Journal of Aging and Human development however focussed on the role of attachment style in coping with job loss and the empty nest in adulthood, Hobody et al (2007) employed a life events perspective to examine the relationship between attachment style and both adjustment and coping processes in adults during the two specific life events involving both the loss and renegotiation of an attachment relationship; the launching of children (an American term for children leaving home) and job loss, which represent both normative and non-normative transitions.

Findings suggested that to a certain extent, the impact of attachment style and life events is moderated by gender. The data supported the notion that securely attached individuals (Bowlby 1979) may be more equipped to meet developmental life challenges in adulthood.

Rubin (1979) in her study stated that some women revealed fears for the marriage questioning whether they will know how to relate to each other without the children mediating.

Reflecting on this literature review there is one glaring gap for my research and that is any evidence around the ENS written about within the Person Centred theory of Psychotherapy. Although Roger's (1957) states quite clearly the necessary and

sufficient conditions for therapeutic change and growth none of his work included the role of the loss of the mothers parenting role.

Within the literature review limited HPC authors concentrated on this work, but did focus on areas including relationships and the therapeutic alliance including the importance of the core conditions. The majority of the literature written is American and this provides a gap for research to be undertaken into the British culture of ENS and the Humanistic Person Centred approach to the therapeutic relationship working with female clients who have undergone this life changing transition.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Aims**

My overall aim of this phenomenological study is to understand the experiences and the phenomena of the period of life when daughters leave home and what impact this has on the Mother and the Humanistic Person Centred (HPC) therapist. Secondly, to explore if this has any impact on the therapists work with female clients.

My audience will include the Therapy Professions who are seeing people throughout life crisis and transitions daily and may identify with the research findings and clients linking theory to practice as well as women everywhere who have been interested in the life transition experience when their daughter left home.

## **Research Question**

How do female Humanistic Person Centred Psychotherapists experience the Empty Nest Syndrome when their daughters leave home and what impact if any does this have on their work with female clients?

## **Philosophical Framework**

My philosophical framework within this study is important for the reader to understand my world view and also to determine the most appropriate method of enquiry for this research.

My ontological stance is constructionist (McLeod 2001), that is, there is no objective social world and that society has constructed my perceptions of things. Without these socially constructed ideas there would be no fixed way of knowing or explaining matters, however much of reality is not able to be set in stone. Reality is 'subjective and multiple' as seen by participants in a study (Creswell 1994). I believe that there are multiple possibilities of reality and that these can be based on history, culture, gender and experience

Social constructionism insists that we take a critical stance toward our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world, including ourselves (Burr 1995 pp2-3).

I now realise that a lot of my views have been constructed around the beliefs of others and influences on how I should see things coming from a certain background with a history. I am conducting my research from a white working class background with a personal view of relationships and the life cycle and therefore I must be critical of my views from this stand point and suspicious of my assumptions on how the world should be (Burr 1995).

My views are changing constantly and so my world view comes from the position that people can live very diverse lives that I do not understand or would not choose to live myself, but the fact that I have choice to determine how I live and people respect that choice. I believe that all people are individual and unique and that it is not about gender, sexuality, religion or race but that people's issues are about experiences and being able to live an authentic life. However I do acknowledge that my constructions of the world may be bound up with power relations (Burr 1995) being aware of the implications from this of what it is permissible for people to do and how we may treat others.

I agree with the social constructionism stance that there can be no such thing as objective fact (Burr 1995), a view point is a subjective reality and truth and is unique to each individual. Therefore my research enquiring around the experience of Empty Nest Syndrome will certainly reveal subjective findings that will include historical and cultural knowledge. Within my research this will need to be acknowledged that different cultures and decades will have had different understandings of the Empty nest, the period when the children leave home. Social constructionism (Burr 1995) stated that we should not assume that our ways of understanding are necessarily any better in terms of being nearer the truth than other ways and I accept this as part of my philosophical stance in order that I can immerse myself in the findings but yet bracket my own experience and accept that all experiences are equal and of the same importance.

The Primary aim of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of how the world is constructed (McLeod 2001) with the epistemological assumption is concerned with knowledge and truth (McLeod 2001) and concerns the relationship between the researcher and the participant.

Conducting my research as a white heterosexual women who is in a long term relationship I acknowledge and accept that I will have many views that have been formed from this position. As a researcher if I believe there is one reality then I would have the objective of seeking one truth, conversely I believe that reality is defined subjectively and therefore I need to be open to multiple truths.

This stance also correlates with my approach to therapy and the Person Centred approach (Rogers 1957) whereby I acknowledge that all human beings are unique and have their own subjective experiences of life providing them with their own truths and reality. My epistemological belief is that knowledge and understanding is based on our subjective reality, our phenomenology that is constructed internally linking experience to existing knowledge. Outside what we think and feel, or perceive (noema), based on our experience (noesis) nothing is certain (Moustakas 1994).

Having gone through the life transition of my daughter leaving home it is obvious that my own experience will have some influence on the study and this awareness influenced my choice of research method, choosing the qualitative method which is underpinned by phenomenology as a way of knowing.

Qualitative methods of inquiry are intrinsically both social (in demanding that the researcher takes account of the social and historical context of their work) and philosophical (in demanding that researchers position themselves in relation to core issues of being and knowledge (McLeod 2001 p 19).

In qualitative research the researcher must try to distance herself (Creswell 1994) and bracket off her own experiences in order to gain meaning and truth in the study. Conversely the qualitative researcher needs to admit the value laden nature of the study and actively report her biases (Creswell 1994). But in order to obtain rich data I

feel I must immerse myself in the data stepping in and out so that I can see things afresh that will further inform my knowledge and world view. The qualitative method allows me to explore a phenomena and why and how this happens by placing me in the text and posing research questions that can change in order to gather the rich data.

An important aspect of phenomenology in qualitative research is that there is common or shared knowledge which is developed through constructionism, a social system of building an agreed meaning between people, this reality can be viewed as multiply constructed (McLeod 2001) conversely I accept that the individuals have their own perception of reality and internally constructed knowledge.

Both individually and collectively we create the world we live in, an assertion common with humanism, phenomenology and qualitative research (McLeod 2001). Undertaking the research study from my philosophical stance and epistemological view with a phenomenological enquiry I need to accept my own subjective experiences but bracket my own experience of the phenomenon and act as a social constructionist (Gergen in McLeod 2003).

My own reflexivity is essential within this study as reflexivity urges us 'to explore the ways in which our involvement with a particular study influences such research (Nightingale and Cromby 1999 p228). Reflexivity in research promotes transparency and addresses the ethical issues between researcher and researched (Etherington 2004). It is obvious that my research study holds a very personal nature and a quest for understanding of my own process as well as other women's therefore reflexivity will be a thread throughout my work.

Traditional research is usually quantitative research based on a positive view, a belief in a single reality or truth and designed to scientifically prove or disprove a hypothesis about that reality which is objective, absolute and generalisable (McLeod 2003;Creswell 1998).

Quantitative research is based on rigorous, well-controlled designs which provide and allow statistical data of the study. (Feltham & Dryden 2004) Quantitative study would be seeking to explain or predict events, representing the findings as numerical data.

Qualitative research is based on 'observation, participation, interviews etc and is usually presented descriptively. (Feltham & Dryden 2004 p 198). Generally used to gain a detailed view of how and what of experiences rather than why, and often involves exploring a phenomena in its organic, natural setting (Cresswell 1998). The aim is to get to the rich data and understand the full meaning of human behaviour (Moustakas 1994).

Acknowledging the importance of the two approaches my own belief is that reality is subjective and numerical data and one truth cannot be delivered when everyone is unique and have their own experiences within the world. This aligns my beliefs and ontological approach with the post modern, believing each individual can only know their own reality and multiple realities exist (McLeod 2001).

The activity of qualitative research has the power to allow the minority voice to be heard; therefore seeking to deconstruct dominant discourse (McLeod 2003) in relation to my research study the dominant discourse may influence the research findings whereby the culture of the phenomena may influence the findings.



## Method

The qualitative approach to research fits with my philosophical stance that the world is open ended and appreciates the constant change of reality and knowledge. Qualitative research has the underlying stance of 'not-knowingness' which means that there is no correct way to look at the subject (Creswell 1998) and this appealed greatly to me as I felt the research subject did not have a correct answer.

E Husserl (1931) attempted to create a phenomenological understanding of the world. Throughout his life he produced writings to seek a method of arriving at the ultimate truth. Many writers following Husserl's offered interpretations on his work but all with the commitment that any phenomenologist would have to be willing to question and 'bracket' all and every assumption they might hold, in the hope of finding something new, real and worthwhile at the end (McLeod 2003)

Phenomenology refers to both the fundamental underpinning philosophy of the qualitative research paradigm, and a distinct research method (McLeod 2001, Moustakas 1994). The aim of phenomenology is to produce an exhaustive description of the phenomena of the everyday experience, thus arriving at an understanding of the essential structures of the thing itself, the phenomenon (McLeod 2001)

Phenomenology is not only a description, but it is seen as an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences (Creswell 2004)

Within this study I feel it is vital to gain the exhaustive description of the phenomena of the empty nest syndrome and provide some interpretation of the meaning of the

lived experience. I intend to fully immerse myself in the participant's stories, whilst bracketing off my own views in order to reach a new fresh view of the experience.

However within the phenomenological approach the rules and procedures are not fixed, therefore this may require a lengthy study with a researcher who is willing to take risks with an ambiguous procedure (Creswell 2004). A further critique of the qualitative research paradigm is that it is unscientific and entirely full of personal bias (Denzin, Lincoln 1998)

Bor and Watts (1993) suggest that psychotherapists/counsellors conducting research employ a methodology which is congruent with their theoretical framework and therapeutic approach. I agree with this statement acknowledging that as in HPC therapy all people and phenomena are unique. The phenomenological choice supports my view that there is no correct way to look at the subject and aligns to qualitative research that has a diverse, complex set of traditions because of the implicit 'not knowingness'. My choice of phenomenology evolved because I wanted to understand the phenomena of the Empty Nest Syndrome and represent these experiences in their multiple voices, as well as through my reflexive understanding (Etherington 2004).

Husserl (1931) adopted a transcendental attitude in order to go beyond the 'natural attitude' to a phenomenon in an attempt to get to the essence of experience, to do this he eliminated supposition and used a form of bracketing called Epoche (McLeod 2001, Moustakas (1994). To adhere to the principle of Epoche (McLeod 2001, Moustakas 1994) I carefully reflected on my personal experiences of the phenomenon of ENS and the effect it may have on me working with female clients and I noted any biases and pre judgements. Using my learning journal I reflected on any issues that

had touched my own issues and used my internal supervisor (Casement 1985) and the principle of Epoche (McLeod 2001, Moustakas 1994) to bracket these. In the Epoche (McLeod 2001, Moustakas 1994), the everyday understandings, judgements and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena revisited, freshly. Naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure transcendental ego (Moustaka 1994 p33).

McLeod (2003) states that the overall aim of phenomenological research is to create an 'exhaustive description' of the phenomenon in question, reaching an understanding of its essential structures. It is governed by the following set of principles (Cresswell 1998, Mcleod 2001, Moustakas 1994):

- The bracketing of our own assumptions, adopting a transcendental attitude
- Engagement in horizontalisation, of the data, initially giving all meanings equal validity
- Consideration of the phenomenon from all angles, differentiating between essential structures, (horizons) and those are circumstantial or variable, a process known as 'imaginative variation'.
- Finally themes are grouped together and a coherent description of the phenomenon created.

## **Research Design**

For the study I decided on the type of person I needed to interview and then sent out an invitation to Female Therapists (Appendix One) who have had the experience of their daughter leaving home. In an attempt to understand some of the field issues and create safe and stimulating interactions (Kvale, 1996: P6) I did undertake a pilot

study with one Psychotherapist who met my criteria. This enabled me to check out my semi-structured questions, recording and timing and gaining consent and generally conducting a research interview. The pilot study proved that my questions were able to retrieve meaningful data and gave me an opportunity to refine my interview skills and my questions.

My sample required 8-10 participants all of whom were working as therapists and willing to talk about their experience. Following the Invitation/Flyer I sent a letter detailing the study (Appendix Two) and the next steps. Once the participants were willing to engage in the study I asked them to complete a consent form (Appendix Three) prior to being interviewed. All of my participants were Female Humanistic Person-Centred Psychotherapist who had had the experience of their daughter leaving home. My study included semi-structured open ended questions providing prompts to allow participants to talk freely and honestly about their process and experiences.

Upon reflection of my pilot study I revisited my questions and added further prompts that may prompt the participant into revealing more information regarding the impact of her experience on her client work, these included focusing on the therapeutic relationship.

Prior to my sending out the invitations a copy of my research proposal and appendices including the invitation and informed consent form were seen and agreed by the Sherwood Training Institute to ensure that I adhered to the Research ethics as stated by the Institute. Informed Consent ethically involved obtaining voluntary participation and ensuring that the participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

In order to offer the most effective and ethical means of exploring subjective experience and meaning I chose to undertake semi-structured interviews (Masson 1996). This way would also be consistent with my epistemological and ontological view as a HPC psychotherapist. In engaging sensitively and intuitively with my participants I felt able to attune to their experience and respond empathically to their process (Rogers 1957).

Etherington (2004) suggests researcher self-disclosure can lead to a level of reciprocity and mutuality in the research process in the research process that allows more risks to be taken by participants, potentially leading to a 'more intimate' exploration of a person's lived experience and therefore perhaps, greater potentiality for understanding (Etherington 2004, p57.)

## **Ethical Considerations**

Research project ethics should be paramount in the researchers mind and must work within the ethical guidelines (BACP 2002) and in planning a piece of research consider the ethical and moral implications of the study. This statement was paramount within my study as I am dealing with people's private and very personal stories and therefore maintaining confidentiality is vital. Confidentiality was raised within the transcripts and reassurance given throughout. (3:15:475, 1:12:377).

As well as confidentiality, there are issues such as informed consent, power, harming and excluding. The need for knowledge within the research study can always have a potential to push boundaries with the participants especially where qualitative data is being collected and it is very much the participants story. This is supported by the knowledge that the participants that I interview will have support mechanisms in place and understand the language and the process of research. The

responsibility lies with me the researcher to protect the rights of the participants and ensure I protect them from harm (Walsh 2001).

The SPTI (2005) code of ethics, UKCP (2009), and BACP (2002) ethical frameworks for research, as well as the writings of Bond (2004) underpinned this study.

The primary ethical principles of fidelity; autonomy; beneficence; non-maleficence and justice (BACP 2002) were addressed.

Regarding fidelity, participants were provided with an honest and transparent view of the nature and purpose of the study. This was stated clearly in the invitation and agreement to participate letter, together with clarification on use of data and confidentiality.

In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity all names and identifiable material was removed from the interviews at the transcript stage. Participants then had the opportunity to check the transcript, deleting or changing any material.

Data was only used for the purposes described, locked in a metal filing cabinet and a commitment to the material being destroyed after the dissertation is marked.

A process of informed consent (Bond 2004) was agreed with the participant including the ownership of data which gave them the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point up to printing.

Beneficence (Bond 2004) whereby there was a commitment to the client benefiting from the study was met by allowing the participant to tell their story and giving them the choice to reveal their experience for future learning within the profession.

Non-Maleficence (Bond 2004) was a major ethical principle within the study and any potential risks to the participants were assessed (BACP2002) and all areas explored regarding and including confidentiality, painful emotional material and the need for ongoing support.

As a further support the participants had my contact numbers and were invited to contact me at any time following the interview.

Emphasis was placed on respecting participant's human rights and right to dignity (Bond 2004) and this was to achieve justice in the research process which supports equity of power within the researcher-participant relationship. All participants had the choice of venue, time and date in order to achieve this and a complaints procedure was included in the informed consent document (Appendix Four).

Carrying out and maintaining ethical guidelines and best practice will only enhance and support the validity of the researchers work and provide valuable knowledge for all professionals (Bond 2004).

Within a small scale study and with such sensitive information being shared by the researcher and the participant it is important to understand the micro ethics (Guillam and Guillam 2004) that may occur between the two parties and involve very personal issues erupting changing the dynamics and relationship and the need for these to be acknowledged and managed.

Many of the risks can be eradicated by careful design of my study. Bond (2004) state competence in design, planning and conduct of the research is necessary to safeguard the well being of the participants and to ensure that the investment of time

made by them will result in meaningful and valid contributions to knowledge (Bond 2004 p16).

I remained reflexive (Etherington 2004) and transparent throughout the whole process and whilst acknowledging my inevitable influence on the co-creation of data, sought to avoid unduly distorting the interview or analysis process and therefore undermining the validity of my findings and research ( McLeod 2001, Moustakas 1994, Meltzoff 1998).

During the process I kept a research journal where I recorded my reflective thoughts following the interviews and any relevant information and literature that related to my study, this also helped me to monitor and organise my research process. Another vital support was that of my research supervisor (Bond 2004) and this support helped me to maintain high ethical standards and process the personal nature of the material. I was aware that I needed to address this through reflexivity (Etherington 2004), self care and personal therapy. (BACP 2008, Bond 2004). Since the material may have touched on vulnerable areas, I considered it an ethical requirement that my participants were in therapy and could therefore seek support after the interview (BACP, Bond 2004, and SPTI 2009).

## **Data Analysis**

The Data will be analysed in line with the Duquesne method (McLeod 2001). The Duquesne studies proposed a research method that has embraced the main traditions of phenomenological research first introduced by Husserl (1931). The Durnesque School built its success on its ease of being taught to students by methods of codifying and systematising the method.



The adopted method used in this study is the set of procedures described by Colaizzi (1978) who outlined a number of steps to be followed by phenomenological researchers. The Duquesne School of Empirical research, developed by Giorgi in (1970) offered the most appropriate set of principles and procedures for my research project. It also very clearly informed how I would collect and analyse my data. The following 6 steps show this:

- Collection of verbal or written data
- Careful reading of data to reach an understanding of the whole
- Drawing out significant statements
- Discarding of irrelevant duplication
- Extracting the implicit meanings
- Integrating the meanings into an 'exhaustive description' of the phenomenon

The above principles of 'phenomenological research' methods are applied throughout all of these steps. This involves empathic and intuitive involvement from the researcher in attuning to the expressed experience of the participants. (Etherington 2004, McLeod 2001, Moustakas 1994).

Eight female Humanistic Person Centred therapists were interviewed in my study. All eight participants had had children leave home, one being a daughter, however some had left to go to University and others left to live with a partner or work in a different area of the country.

All of the Female therapists received personal therapy and Supervision within their clinical roles. This was important as I needed to accept that the interviews and revisiting the experience may affect their practice and emotional well being.

Semi-structured interviews (Kvale 1996, Mason 1996) were undertaken whereby I attempted to enter the participants field of perception or frame of reference (Mearns & McLeod 1987) and I used skills of paraphrasing, summarising and reflecting to extract the experience and check out that I had understood the language (Patton 1990). Upon reflection, the use of empathy was the most important skill that I used to encourage the participants to tell their story knowing that I was interested and understood their own unique experience.

The interviews were then transcribed ensuring that the transcriber completed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix Five) and then sent to the participants for member checking (Bloor 1997).

Grafanakis (1996) provided the concept of 'process consent' whereby participants were offered the opportunity to change or delete any material on sight of the transcript; this was the member checking process (Bloor 1997). However Bloor (1997) felt that the process of member checking may present difficulties including informants disagreeing with the material but inhibited from expressing their doubts or criticism and find it difficult to engage in the task of reading the transcription closely.

Within the study I emailed the eight participants the transcripts (Appendix Six) asking for any changes or omissions to be provided by a certain date. 6 out of the 8 participants agreed the transcripts by email.

Once the transcripts had been checked and agreed by the participant the data was stored in a locked metal filing cabinet together with the computer that it was stored on.

To commence data analysis all the taped interviews and transcriptions were listened to and read through to immerse myself within the data without making notes and to get a sense of the whole. The transcriptions were then read through again and all meaning statements were highlighted, adhering to the principle of horizontality; where no one meaning is considered more important than others (Colaizzi 1978).

Significant statements were extracted by repeatedly going through the transcript attempting to magnify, amplify and pay special attention to detail. During this process I as the researcher always attempted to bracket off my assumptions, develop an open-ness and an empathic presence to the described situation, doing this proved to be a very emotional process and required me to immerse myself fully, slow down and imagine the lived experience that my participants described. The process of extracting meaning statements was done many times; I then eliminated irrelevant repetition statements and discarded any statements that did not have any relevance to the phenomenon. This provided me then with 'creative insight' (Colaizzi 1978p59) and this in turn drew upon intuition (Wertz 1984). However I was always aware of my need to bracket off my own assumptions and Epoche (McLeod 2001).

Central themes were then identified from these statements which would provide insight into the phenomena and provide material for discussion. The findings have been collated into an exhaustive narrative( McLeod 2001) which is made up of the participants own language and words in order to ensure that it is the participant's meanings and experiences that are alive in the exhaustive narrative and provide the reader with the opportunity to read the rich data collected.

Finally the exhaustive narrative (McLeod 2001) was discussed in line with relevant literature and a general condensation (Fischer and Wertz 1979) which often presents

the ultimate statement of what has been found was explored and discussed. The condensation must be detailed enough to carry a sufficient sense of the complexity and texture of the phenomenon, but brief enough to communicate and be assimilated by the readers (McLeod 2001).

My exhaustive description is based on the participants numerous experiences in order to offer a composite range of experiences. Triangulation (McLeod 2001, 2003) was not able to be carried out as each individual would not identify with each personal experience expressed.

## **Research Findings**

### **Introduction to Findings**

As a result of analysing the data on the female participants that were interviewed about how they experienced the ENS when their daughters left home and what impact if any does this have on their work with female clients, six main themes were identified. The themes have been provided in a table on page 44, followed by verbatim participant statements to illustrate the meaning for each theme. Finally these themes have been integrated into an 'exhaustive description' on the phenomenon (McLeod 2001), using the language of the participants to ensure authenticity.

### **Method of Referencing**

The participant statements have been referenced using the following system: Interview Number, followed by Page number and the line number of where the extracted text begins e.g. (1:30:242)

## Themes

<b>Main Themes</b>	<b>Sub Headings</b>
1. Personal Meaning/Account of Empty Nest Syndrome	
2. Loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Physical feelings</li> <li>b. Emotional Feelings</li> <li>c. Loss of Mother role/Good Mother</li> <li>d. Existential Crisis</li> </ul>
3. Impact on Family Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Changes in routine</li> <li>b. Empty House</li> </ul>
4. Impact on Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Rediscovery of relationships</li> <li>b. Concern over future of relationship</li> <li>c. Support from other friends</li> </ul>
5. Letting Go	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Children not yours forever</li> <li>b. Preparation for letting go</li> <li>c. New beginnings</li> </ul>
6. Impact on Client work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Wanting to be Mother</li> <li>b. Guilt of working</li> <li>c. Working times</li> </ul>

## Themes

### 1. Personal Meaning/Account of Empty Nest Syndrome

All of the participants had their own description of what Empty Nest Syndrome meant to them; however it was interesting that the majority used the analogy of the actual birds nest.

Straight away I have this metaphor, this imagery of a bird's nest, and like I can just see like Mum bird, Mummy bird, peeping over and nobody there. They've all gone and all this space. And it's like 'gosh, they've flown, they've gone'. **7:1:9**

### 2. Loss of Role

All eight candidates discussed the loss of the role and Identity that they related to for many years.

#### a. Physical Feelings of Loss

It feels like something's cut within you or your hearts torn. Or limbs were cut off.

**2:1:33**

Emptiness, sometimes churning **2:2:66**

#### b. Emotional feelings of loss

It's just as much about emotional adjustment of including them in your life and then including them into your life in a completely different way. **2:6:173**

You know, like the whole of life's meaning seemed to have disappeared. **4:2:51**

### **c. Loss of Mother Role/Good Mother**

If half my family have gone, what is the meaning of life? It was that bewildering searching for, 'well who am I then'. If I am not a Mother then, who am I? **4:7:204**

What have I done as a Mother? am I a bad mother, does she want to leave because I'm that much of an awful mother she can't wait to get out. **7:5:151**

### **d. Existential Crisis**

I was thinking well what's my point in life now? **2:16:509**

What is the meaning of life? Yeah it was that bewildered searching for, well who am I then? **4:7:204**

## **3. Impact on Family Life**

Changes in family life were highlighted and common amongst the participants. This was a simple change as in what time the children came home for dinner to complex issues such as loss of identity and feeling needed in a future role.

### **a. Changes in family routine**

Every day at 4oclock I would feel this, oh where's xxxx, and then I would remember that actually no, she's at Uni and so every day at 4oclock I had this feeling. **2:2:54**

I had this really powerful sense, uh, that um, in a way, that things would never be the same again. **6:2:512:**

## **b. Empty House**

It was a cold empty house; there was no child in it and I just felt horrible and I did have that feeling so what's my life about then? **4:8:261**

You can feel the emptiness in the house....., when a child leaves home, some life goes with them. **4:7:228**

## **4. Impact on relationships**

All candidates discussed in some way the impact that the Empty nest syndrome had on relationships, partners, husbands and friends.

### **a. Rediscovery of relationships**

There was kind of my husband and I looking at each other and saying, 'Hello!'

**6:4:105**

A different quietness settled on the house and there was more time for, for relationships I suppose. **5:6:183**

### **b. Concern about future of relationship**

I wondered what would happen, you know, whether we would just spin off in our own directions, whether it was just the children keeping us together, but in some ways it was the children keeping us apart. **6:12:375**

As I see the empty nest syndrome, and how with that loss of role I think sometimes there is the loss of role within the couple's relationship as well. **5:6:186**



### **c. Support from other friends**

Whereas, other people who have suffered, it is usually people who have suffered who want to hear how you are doing, you know. **4:9:284**

## **5. Letting Go**

A major part of the discussions included thoughts and experiences about letting the daughter go, whether it is the preparation for their own future or the future of the children to go out into the world.

### **a. Children not yours forever**

My belief is I am lucky to have my children and enjoy them and do the best I can with them. But they are only mine to look after and at some point I know that they'll be, you know having their own independent lives. **1:9:288**

### **b. Preparation for letting go**

Because at some point they are going to move away and then you are left with nothing. So I have always been conscious of that, and always made sure, that I don't completely leave everything, um completely abandon all the things I would want to do. **1:7:232**

I think something else about the empty nest is that no-one actually, um, teaches how to let go, how to do it and you know I sometimes wonder am I, you know letting her go sufficiently? **8:18:574**

### **c. New beginnings**

I can just, I do feel it very strong rising up in me that's saying, and 'it's my time and my turn'. **2:10:309**

She is getting on with her life; I've got to get on with mine **2:3:71**

## **6. Impact on Client Work**

Impact on client work was revealed with many different factors including practical working times but also the impact that working when the daughter was at home had on the participant and how they now worked with clients.

### **a. Wanting to Mother**

And any young person comes in, it's almost like I want to put my wings around them and kind of like, just hold them for a bit more, maybe because we have so much to give as Mothers. **7:17:524**

### **b. Guilt at working**

I still feel a pang of guilt that I am not giving her time when she rings up and needs me because I have somebody else coming who is paying me, who needs me.

**8:11:352**

Gosh all that time I spent on my career, I've missed, I've missed the time to be with the children. **1:11:362**

### **C. Working times**

Early evening I'll work whereas I wouldn't. I had, I had a few years when I didn't work between 4 and 6 or something. **6:9:277**

You know being with clients and all that stuff, it was very much dictated around her need, her need y'know, somebody to be here for her. **2:4:105**

## **Exhaustive Description of Findings**

Female Humanistic Person Centred Therapists experienced to some degree the Empty Nest Syndrome when their daughters left home and this experience has had an impact on their work with clients both practical and emotional.

The personal meaning of Empty Nest for the majority included a metaphor and imagery of a bird's nest and the chicks leaving as a very strong emotional image, stating that the birds had flown and gone. Empty Nest brought about feelings of wanting the chicks in the nest with the parent birds where they knew they were safe, on occasions waking up in the night having a lovely feeling knowing that all the chicks were in the house or the nest.

Bad feelings that you get when your children leave home included physical feelings and the Empty Nest related to the household where the children have moved out and the feeling of emptiness within the house. The children have gone off and done their own thing and the parents or parent is left alone in the house, this emptiness appeared more at times for the mother when it was the daughter that left home.

The syndrome was viewed both positively and negatively with it being seen as the glass either half empty or half full, some parents seeing it as a new time with time for themselves now, others feeling that their life's role is over. The ENS is a painful period and one mother used the term a 'heavy word' to describe the emotional feeling, repeatedly saying how much this period hurt, it really hurts.

The feelings of loss was experienced by all the participants , it was experienced as a physical sensation, a tearing sensation and described a feeling like something's being cut or a limbs been cut off. A broken heart was also described and the whole Empty Nest experience as being traumatic and extremely painful with participants stating that they will always feel that tearing. It is very much the end of something, similar to the menopause when fertility came to an end and the absolute loss of the children and life as it had been, a grieving process needed to be done and attended to, feeling that it was the death of a role.

One participant stated it would be a shadow on her life, knowing it would lift but knowing that she had to go through it, with another participant describing the dark side similar to the experience when she felt her fertility was over.

Emptiness was a part of the physical and emotional experiences, feeling empty, with a career seeming meaningless compared to being a mother. A feeling that the going away of the children made something in the mother die, the mothering bit. The whole meaning of life seemed to have disappeared with the child leaving home, having all the joy of loving her but the pain of letting go. Questioning what was there in the mother's life if half the family had gone, searching for something, the meaning of life, if not a mother then what role would she play? The role of the Mother was also seen as the loss of self esteem and purpose with a sense that women's feelings, women's needs were ignored. They don't have enough of a voice for people to listen to them and what they are experiencing.

Discussions around family life changes included change of routine, empty house and a sense that things would never be the same again. The portrayal of cold empty houses with no music playing or the smell of the daughter and the sounds she

makes in the house were poignant images. Tea time 4-5 o'clock is a difficult time when the cooking of the dinner or the discussion of the day would be a family event but with the daughter gone this routine changed. The loss of cooking a family meal was poignant and when a meal was cooked, there was enough food made and shopping bought for all the family regardless of whether the daughter was home or not, stating that even setting the table and eating together appeared to change when the child left home and some life then goes with the child.

There appeared to be an impact on relationships when the daughter left home. Participants felt that they saw their husband/partner with different eyes and for the first time properly for years after the children had grown up. Relationships with husband /partner changed in some cases for the better, feeling that when the child left quietness settled on the house and there was more time for relationships.

However some relationships changed negatively with the female partner feeling that the husband/partner didn't deal with the emotion and they didn't sit down as a couple and deal with the emotions. Future concerns for the relationship were voiced with couples not understanding if it was the children that were keeping them together, or the children that kept them apart, with feelings of uncertainty of the relationship dynamics now that they were a couple again.

Other significant friends appeared to show some support to mothers especially if they had gone through the transition and ENS. Friends identified with the experience of the child leaving home however there was often no-one to talk to about the experience and the mother felt she was going nuts!

Letting go was a strong theme and there seemed to be a popular opinion that children are not ours forever but will then leave and lead independent lives, not

looking at children as possessions, but a gift from God supported the letting go experience. The children were lent to me, they are not mine gave a reason to let them go into independent lives.

There was a great sense of pride at the daughter leaving the nest but also a sense of dread of her not being around, meanwhile preparation for the daughter leaving was sometimes not able if the decision to leave was quick however it was felt to be needed, most importantly practical preparation was dealt with but busy lives did not allow the emotional issues to be dealt with. Emotional adjustment is often about bringing the daughter into the world and the corresponding letting go out into the world. The mother daughter relationship was related to as special, with the mother seen as a role model who prepares her daughter for the wide world which forms a special connection

A feeling of new beginnings was apparent with participants undertaking courses and new careers. It was portrayed as this is my time now and the need to develop a new role in their lives. Facing up to looking inward and really seeing who the person was rather than just a mother, portrayed a sense of freedom and the ability to no longer hide behind the role and begin to feel that other things could be achieved. A revelation that came from seeing the mothers and grandmothers experience provided the motivation to gain a sense of purpose for themselves otherwise feeling that they would not be in good shape in the future. The feeling of the daughter getting on with her life provided again the motivation for the mother to get on with her life.

The impact on clients was around practical timing of when the therapist would work and the guilt of a working mother. Therapists would often organise the working day

around the children in order to be home early evening for them, conversely when there was no children at home therapists tended to work longer hours offering appointments after normal working hours.

There was an element of guilt expressed when working mothers had not had time for their children and saw paying clients when their child needed them; they did not want the client's to push their daughter out. Finally the therapist at times felt the desire and need to want to mother the young clients that were seen, wanting to wrap the wings around them and offer them love that may be for their own child and their own need. The feeling of wanting to hold the client and give a bit more, maybe because we have so much to give as Mothers was voiced.

Some clients will remind the Therapists of their daughter and this will require holding and attending to however something comes forward and provokes the thoughts that this is my stuff not the clients. Seeing the Empty Nest as a loss provided experience when working with client's providing the ability to be empathic with clients experiencing any kind of loss and promoting far more understanding of what a women may be going through, sensing that women are dying to talk about it.

## **Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This discussion considers the findings of the study and compares them with the literature review and the implications for Humanistic Person Centred Therapy and practice, also offering some reflection and leanings. The critique of my study is included outlining the limitations of the project and suggestions for future research.

## **Comparison of Findings with Literature**

All the themes in this study were present in the literature review to a greater or lesser extent. Themes majorly present were the experience of Empty Nest Syndrome, Loss of Mother role and Women's identity, impact on relationships, the mother/daughter relationship and the letting go of the daughter alongside new beginnings for the mother.

Themes that were presented less in the literature review due to the lack of research were the impact on family life and the impact on client work as a HPC therapist.

In comparing the results of the study with the literature it was important to consider that there was limited literature around Person Centred theory and the ENS, however key words such as self worth and self concept were reviewed.

### **Personal meaning/Account of Female Humanistic Person Centred Therapists experience of Empty Nest syndrome**

This study has shown that all the participants to some degree have experienced the collection of feelings that make up the Empty Nest Syndrome.

These feelings have included the loss of self esteem and a challenge to the harmony between experiencing and self structure so that the actualising tendency is questioned. When the actualising tendency is out of balance we may experience pain, distress, discomfit and anger (Tolan 2003) and in this study this is apparent within the women's experiences where women describe the pain of emptiness and loss.

Rogers (1959) Person centred theory was developed around the therapeutic relationship and identified three primary principles. The actualising tendency, the



necessity and sufficiency of six therapeutic conditions and the non-directive attitude within the relationship. People have an inbuilt motivation to change and with the right environment and conditions, hence the six conditions in place throughout therapy, a person will move towards self actualisation (Tolan 2003). Self actualisation is the concept of the actualising tendency emerging in the self. (Bozarth 1988). Relating this to the ENS it may be seen that a woman's actualising tendency is out of balance and there is a need for her to explore her own changing experiences in order to discover her true authentic self in a safe environment and therefore move towards self-actualisation. This experience appears to be highlighted during the transition years when the children leave home and the role that she has had for many years changes.

In the study this change within the life of the mother posed the question who am I and what is my role now? Therefore it revealed that the women within this stage experienced existential crisis (Deurzen 2001). Existentialism (Tudor et al 2004) prizes the values of freedom, choice, and responsibility and sums them up as authenticity which may be the Person Centred Synonym for congruence. Rogers (1961) suggested that a mature and fully functioning person portrays a sense of self responsibility for his problems and becomes autonomous being able to choose what he is and what he wants to do, this relates to the women in the study who acknowledged the transition they were going through but needed time and support to accept this new role and undergo personality changes and new beginnings.

It was during this time however that they felt at times to be misunderstood and judged by partners/husbands and peers, with people not really being aware or understanding what they were going through. Many of the participants felt that you had to experience the feelings to understand how painful it was.

The research has revealed how the mothers identified with their children as chicks leaving a nest empty, which has left them with both physical and emotional feelings of emptiness, loss and depression. Actually seeing the nest as empty with that great impact of loss came as a shock after many years of caring for the young and left the mother feeling lost.

The ENS has been both upheld and challenged in the literature, with early research by Neugarten and Datan (1974) suggesting that most women accepted the departure of their children with relief. More recent studies have agreed with this research whereby Rubenstein (2007) states it is a short lived stage divided into 3 stages of grief, relief and loss, promoting the challenge that it is transient with the outcome again of relief and new beginnings. Interestingly within this study no participants used the word relief at their children leaving nevertheless they did speak of acceptance and pride of seeing their daughter going into the wide world. Time scale of experiencing symptoms was not discussed in the study.

The fear of future relationships was highlighted in the study with the concern how the relationship would progress without the children around, Fingerman (2001) research suggests that most parents enjoy greater freedom, a reconnection with their spouse and more time to pursue their own goals. Clay (2003) stated that ENS was an anticipated fear that did not happen and implies that there are practical changes in society that make ENS a thing of the past as there are easier ways to keep communication with the children. The use of technology was mentioned in this study as a way of keeping in touch however this did not in any way replace the daily face to face communication, it was the daily routine that affected the women not the ability to talk to their daughter at intervals.

## **Loss**

Conversely within this present study all the eight women had experienced a sense of loss which at times was not seen as a short lived stage but a real life changing experience with consequences to them and their family.

The findings did not reveal how long this stage lasted but suggested that when the ENS commenced the feelings were acute and amounted at times to depression, in comparison Rubin (1979) stated that ENS may still be a myth with people unwilling to disclose the relief that the child had left home and that realistically this stage lasts for a very short period and does not cause depression. Within this study however it was apparent that all eight women had experienced the collection of symptoms known as ENS when their daughter had left home and certainly had felt it was a reality to them.

The Study findings revealed that the participants felt it was a necessary and vital stage to go through which also touched on other events happening in their lives i.e. relationship difficulties and menopause and stated it was a period of time that they just had to go through.

Literature also suggests that it is an inevitable stage that women need to pass through and although it is short lived at times other triggers and factors would influence the severity and length of symptoms (Mitchell 2009). The literature review revealed challenges to whether the ENS really exists; Oliver (1977) wrote 'the problem is not the empty nest. The problem is the empty women.'

Conversely within the study all of the eight participants were professional women who had roles outside of the maternal role and were not prepared for the strong

emotions that the child leaving had produced. Sales (1977) suggest that the maternal role and the maturity and achievements of the children are the most important evidence of the women's personal worth. Similarly this is supported within the study where some participants felt that their most important role was as a mother and the career was meaningless against this role. This is supported by Hamilton (1999) who felt that when she had become a mother her clinical practice and her way of being had changed Rubin (1979) refutes this idea and suggests that working women have a greater sense of themselves in the world, have a sense of their own separateness and therefore may not experience the ENS.

The actualising tendency (Rogers 1961) may be halted or challenged during a life transition or crisis however Maslow (1973) believed that there were 'self-actualised' people that experienced peak experiences within their lives with self-actualisation not being seen as a state but rather as a process (Wilkins 2003). The self structure is everything that a person holds about herself and about the world, some beliefs being built through our own experiences; others based on legacies and handed down views within families.

During the transition of the daughter leaving home and experiencing the symptoms of ENS it can be seen that the world view of the mother is challenged and there is a need to evaluate her experiences for herself rather than the way the family, peers or society view her. As the conflict between the self structure and experience of being a mother and the loss of the role occurs there is a need to become more self accepting and change the self structure accordingly (Tolan 2003). This study supported the above theory whereby the mother felt she was lost during the period when her children left home and all that she had believed in and held dear had gone.

The loss of the mother role was a major theme that presented in the study with the majority of the participants using language such as loss and emptiness. The mother daughter relationship was highlighted in regards to the mother teaching the daughter about the world and being a role model for her, this created a special bond between them.

Within the study a minority of participants felt that their daughter leaving home had a different impact than their son leaving as they had a special connection to their daughter due to the female legacies that had been passed down within the family. Bassoff (1988) wrote about the mother daughter relationship and the feelings of anxiety, rejection and loss when her daughter left home. This was also evident within the literature of letting go where attachment and separation (Bassoff 1988) were discussed as an important factor in the ability to separate from the children.

The loss of the mother role was evident in the study and even practical areas of cooking the dinner and being needed at home to greet the children from school produced feelings of loss and separation within the participants. Bowlby (1969) termed attachment theory as a way of conceptualising affectional bonds to others and of explaining the many forms of emotional distress that unwilling separation and loss give rise to. The participants within the study talked about the strong bonds that they had with their children and the length of time that they had been in the mother role which gave rise to great feelings of loss and a physical and emotional tearing and separation. The study did not focus on the attachment patterns between the Mother daughter however this would have been useful information to collect which would have correlated with the self structure concept within Person Centred theory and the values, introjects that had been passed down through their own mothers and generations.

## **Good Mother**

Elements of being a good mother were discussed within the study with the feelings of guilt that their daughter had left home at a young age and that they had been working mothers, leaving the mothers with the question have I done enough for my daughter?

Within the feminist research the role of the good mother were discussed alongside the discourse of womanhood 'modern' and traditional' (Sherriff and Weatherall 2009). Adjustment was used to rhetorically manage the dilemma and the study agreed with these suggestions whereby the Mothers were filled with a sense of pride that their daughters were leaving but a sense of loss and guilt that they were wanting to go into the wide world which brought up feelings of Am I a good enough mother?. Hobody et al (2007) wrote about the findings within their research that the impact on the attachment is moderated by gender and Sherriff and Weatherall (2009) felt that women could be represented as having lives beyond the domestic sphere.

Rubin (1979) also recommended that the idealistic picture of the Good enough mother was designed by society and that women fulfilled was a myth with the unattainable idea against which women measure their feelings about being mothers. The findings did not reveal where the feelings of being a good enough mother had come from, however the majority of the participants did disclose briefly about their own mothers and their own upbringing.

## **Letting Go**

Fischer (1986) suggested that the process of letting go and holding on is more difficult for daughters than sons due to the generational bond that is passed on by

females within the family, there was findings in the research stating that the mother daughter relationship was special however the participants did experience difficulties when their son left home.

New beginnings within the study was discussed with participants embarking on University courses and new phases with their lives, this seemed to be the focus for some of the participants to make meaning out of the role change and discover a new role within themselves that met their needs.

Shandler (2001) writes about the new discovery stage of a complimentary life to that of being a mother, but research undertaken in the 1970's revealed that the mother is in this exciting adventurous stage but has the fear of failure, suggesting that this lies with issues with societies constraints on the women's role. Relating to Person Centred theory this would also include the introjects that the women had experienced from birth and the locus of evaluation (Rogers 1961) being seen as external whereby she evaluated and judged her own experiences herself or external whereby she evaluates her experiences by external means and views.

### **Impact on relationships**

Impact on relationships was marginally discussed with findings revealing that as the children left home it was at times like uncovering the relationship between the couple. Women talk of fears for the relationship concerns about the future together without the children. These fears and statements were mirrored within this research study as couples felt they had more time for each other but had concerns around being alone without the children at home.

Comparing this with recent research Rubenstein (2007) suggested that the women is likely to look at the marriage/partnership in a new way once the children have gone stating that half of marriages improve, a third stay the same and one in ten marriages get worse, these figures are stated from her interviews with more than a thousand women, which correlates with the experience shared with the eight women within this study.

### **Impact on Client work**

This study produced the findings that when the participants had experienced the children leaving home there was a propensity to want to mother the client and revealed the nurturing side of the mother's role, in order to make it better for the client and possibly fulfil a need in the women. Limited literature discussed this concept Hamilton (1999) writing from the HPC perspective agreed that being and becoming a mother had influenced her clinical work and that she had grown in transparency, empathy and acceptance and her need to bracket when she saw female clients that would remind her of her daughter.

This study highlighted how at times there was a feeling of guilt about working when the children were at home and a sense of not giving enough time to the daughter when clients were being seen, also around women adapting their working times to suit the family so that they could be present for the child at important family times. Rubin (1979) compares these feelings of guilt to a mother who has taken all the responsibility of the child's upbringing and development and growth upon herself with pressure that working may have not enabled the mother to have been enough for the child. Rubin states these pressures are from external sources and within this research study the women voiced that they felt they had to do the right thing for the



daughters in order for them to be able to leave as mature adults. Stabiner (2007) concurs that we teach the child to flee and cannot hold them back for our own need, but give them confidence to develop freely.

## **Implications for Theory and Practice**

This research study has valuable findings and discussions which will influence and possibly have implications on the practice of the HPC Therapist.

Women presenting to therapy with symptoms including depression, loss of identity, existential crisis (Deurzen 2001) may have issues relating to the Empty Nest and the feelings that are associated with the so called ENS.

The findings will impact on the work between therapist and client. The potential effect of Rogers (1957) Core conditions and a therapeutic space where every part of the self is understood accepted and respected facilitated self acceptance and self actualisation and therefore provides the women with a voice and the chance to be heard.

It is hoped that as a result of this research, female therapists will be made aware that symptoms relating to Empty Nest and the transition period when the children leave home is vital within the women's life cycle and that this time although may be short lived can provide an experience similar to bereavement and loss of identity.

The Impact of the experience of ENS on client work is evident within the therapeutic relationship and the therapeutic alliance between client and therapist.

Within Person Centred theory the condition of Unconditional positive regard is a vital condition and the therapist works with the client to explore both growth and potential of the client. The omission of labelling and diagnosing a syndrome is paramount and

meeting the client in the here and now provides congruence, UPR and the ability to examine the self concept along side the experiences.

The therapist is required to offer the conditions (Rogers 1951) and if seen as necessary and sufficient there is no further need for theory to hang the client's issues on and therefore be labelled.

Within this study it has been evident that all the women have experienced a collection of symptoms that may be grouped under the ENS umbrella however the impact of the phenomena is that the women are requiring support from the therapist to grow and self actualise within the therapeutic relationship without the therapist having to provide theory but relying on the clients unique knowledge of herself and Rogers (1959) main point that within everybody there is the innate desire to grow.

### **Critique/Limitations**

The self selection of Female HPC Therapists may have caused a bias towards the findings agreeing with the ENS. Conversely there was evidence that the participants had experienced the symptoms to a greater and lesser extent but just wanted to tell their story not wanting to put forward a definitive statement on ENS or prove or disprove the myth or reality of ENS. The stories were told in order to assist the participants in making sense of the life transition and self concept and therefore the experiences were all unique but revealed common threads.

All of the participants were white, able bodied women and although this is representative of the majority in counselling and psychotherapy it does mean that the results of this study does not represent minority groups based on race, gender,

sexuality and disability to name a few, recruiting a wider group would have had an impact on the findings of the study as the Mother role is open to interpretation.

As a researcher, I was unable to completely exclude myself from the study as my own personal experience had been a vital turning point within my life therefore the constant bracketing of my own experiences and assumptions, beliefs and values was necessary in order to obtain rich data unique to the 8 participants. Therefore I am aware that my study cannot be seen as completely unbiased and although I have alluded to this throughout the study I may have unintentionally introduced bias in to all areas of the research study.

### **Validity/Critical Reflection**

Ensuring that the data and results within this small qualitative phenomenological study was a main consideration but difficult to verify in a traditional way such as generalisability (Creswell 1994). The results reflected the views of the participants as closely as possible with a key aim to provide credibility and dependability (Creswell 1998; Denzin & Lincoln 1998).

Every effort has been made to verify the data with the participants including member checking (Bloor 1997) at the appropriate stage of the research. The findings and discussion was shared with colleagues and supervisors. The researcher bias has been acknowledged and reflexivity and transparency strengthen the credibility and dependability (Etherington 2004) which is also confirmed by the use of participant verbatim statements and extracts from the study.

In order to verify this study overall the writing has been portrayed as accurately as possible acknowledging the usefulness of the results, how they can be used to inform practice and provide inspiration for further research.

## **Future Research Suggestions**

Future research would be valuable within the Profession as it would inform and support other theories around loss, mother role and the self actualisation process for mothers whose daughters leave home. Research on whether it is the first or last child to leave home would highlight the impact of the completely empty nest acknowledging that it is not a gender issue but a relational issue again with regards to the impact on the mother and the family.

It would also be interesting to carry out research on Males/fathers who have undergone similar symptoms as described within ENS and the impact on their lives and self concept.

Further research may be interesting around the mothers self concept during parenthood and then during and after the transition period when their children leave home.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

### **Mother:**

**My baby girl was born from my womb and into my arms. I looked over her tender newborn face and felt my heart would break. 'I'll always hold you close,' I whispered in her ear. (DuBose 2004)**

### **Daughter:**

**Finally, College, I was happy to go away. My Mother and I gave each other stiff hugs goodbye at my dorm room door. I thought I saw tears in her eyes. (DuBose 2004)**

The purpose of this study was to research how female therapists experience the ENS when their daughter leaves home and what impact if any does this have on their work with female clients. It is hoped that gaining further understanding of the ENS will help therapists and women to be aware of and acknowledge that a collection of symptoms can be experienced during this transition period and that it may be the reason that women present to therapy, also that if Female therapists have experienced the syndrome the impact it may have on working with clients and the therapeutic relationship.

In highlighting the syndrome the aim was that women were able to talk about this transition period more freely and that therapists may recognise issues within the therapy sessions that may have the underlying reason of the child leaving home.

All the participants stated how much they had enjoyed being interviewed and all felt emotional whilst telling their story, finding it therapeutic to discuss what had happened during this time and the impact it had had on them personally and within

their practice. The majority had definitely experienced some symptoms and felt that it was a vital stage that they had to go through and that in doing so it had supported them in being empathic with clients. A minority of participants although they had had minor symptoms had felt that their children had been lent to them and so had been preparing for this transition whilst the children were growing up, however all the participants felt the shock and deep emotion of emptiness albeit short lived but painful at their daughter leaving.

From my own perspective undertaking this study has been both emotional and painful but a very healing process, listening to other mothers tell their story with honesty and passion at times made me revisit my own experience and the memories of this challenging period in my life. The participants at times touched on my own experience in such depth that I felt very close to them and wanted to reach out and support them, feeling extremely grateful and humble that they were willing to share with me.

With the help of personal therapy, family friends and colleagues this has been an overwhelming process to write and my desire to reveal how it can affect women still stays strong with the motivation to spread the word for all women, not just therapist or professionals but for women who go through this transition not understanding how they may be affected by symptoms of loss etc.

In the future I would like to disseminate knowledge and raise awareness of the stage and symptoms of Empty Nest by writing articles for journals, magazines and communication via different media routes, this has already begun when I presented the topic of Empty Nest on the local Radio Nottingham.

I have been able to reflectively understand my needs in the phenomenon, but also used my internal supervisor (Casement 1985) to understand when it is affecting my practice and learnt to deepen the therapeutic relationship by being congruent, non judgemental and empathic with regards to my own experience.

For the 4 years leading up to this study I had a desire to write about the ENS and collected many pieces of writings, songs, poems etc regarding the subject. Sadly it cannot all be included in this study but my experience has been made richer by the preparation for the research, the research process and meeting with the participants.

Research in counselling and psychotherapy is extremely important for the profession, and is lacking in many areas. This one area that women may go through is a very personal experience with the research still challenging whether or not the syndrome exists and to what degree, however within this very small study, my own experience and some research we can hear very real stories of women living this phenomena.

The findings in this research suggest that women at times do not have an arena to discuss this painful transition period and the symptoms associated with it, so they just carry on through it, at times with minor problems but others experiencing a deep sadness, emptiness and occasional depression. Sharing this with therapists and the psychotherapy profession is important to expose distinctive phenomena but also to portray the need for us to accept that all women are unique and at times will present to therapy with issues that have an underlying thread of ENS.

I acknowledge the limitations of this study, as well as contributing to a body of research within the profession, I hope it can be seen as valuable to people in its own right. Further research is needed to increase the understanding of the appropriate

support and awareness necessary to enhance client work and the therapeutic relationship.

Person Centred theory (Rogers 1951) and the core conditions especially congruence, UPR and empathy parallels my study and provides the necessary conditions for working with clients without labelling, diagnosing or judging and just allowing the women to tell it as it is and grow to their own potential. I believe that the Person-Centred Approach (Rogers 1959) will allow women to have their voice heard and be supported to reach their true potential in whatever role they choose.

As I finish writing this dissertation and the time to hand it in and let go draws near, I am again experiencing the feelings of Empty Nest, the loss of something that I have spent a lot of time and energy on and the feeling of it going out into the wide world for all to see. It has brought up the similar feelings of what is my role now that the course and dissertation is finished and the challenge to my self concept of will it be good enough, am I good enough and the knowledge that a part of me again will change and find a different way of being as a women.

To finish I would like to use a quote from one of my participants that touched my heart and summed up the feelings of Empty Nest Syndrome, whether it exists or not!

**Something about me that dies. Their going away made something in me die. I think the mothering bit or something. 4:6:172**



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## Appendices - Appendix One

### Request for Research Participants

## The Empty Nest Syndrome, Myth or Reality?

Are you a female Psychotherapist?

Did you experience 'Empty Nest Syndrome' when your daughter left home?

If so, would you like to participate in my phenomenological research project, which will explore the following question?

How do female Humanistic Person-Centred Psychotherapists experience 'Empty Nest Syndrome' when their daughters leave home and what impact if any does this have on their work with female clients?

I am interested in women's experiences of 'Empty Nest Syndrome' i.e feelings of depression, identity crisis, role loss and adjustment, when their daughter left home and wish to explore if this has any impact on therapy work with female clients. I hope to gain an insight into whether this life transition is a positive or negative experience and how it can affect a women's well being.

The research will be conducted by taped interview which will take approximately 50 minutes plus time for debriefing and clarification. These will be arranged at a place and time of mutual convenience with any information given being treated as confidential.

It will be necessary for participants to be supported within ongoing therapy in order to explore any issues arising from the interview.

If you would like to participate or wish to discuss the research further, please contact me.

Sharon Vesty. Mob: 07824448210 or email [Sharon.vesty@btinternet.com](mailto:Sharon.vesty@btinternet.com)

Thank you for your interest Sharon Vesty

## Appendix Two

Date

Dear

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research study. Further to our conversation I am writing to confirm the details of the interview which are as follows:

Date:

Time

Venue:

The interview will be informal, and I would like to discuss a range of topics around your experience of empty nest syndrome and your daughter leaving home, and I will feed these into the interview as appropriate.

The main purpose of the study is to explore how do female Humanistic Person Centred Psychotherapists experience 'empty nest syndrome' when their daughters leave home and what impact if any does this have on their work with female clients?

I am therefore interested in your thoughts and feelings and how this phenomenon impacts on you personally and professionally. As we discussed your anonymity is assured and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the whole of the research process.

I look forward to meeting with you. Thank you for your time and interest.

Kind regards

Sharon Vesty



# Appendix Three

## Informed Consent Form

### Informed consent to participate in a Research Study

How do female Humanistic Person Centred Psychotherapists experience 'empty nest syndrome' when their daughters leave home and what impact if any does this have on their work with female clients?

### Purpose of the Consent

For you to give written informed permission for your participation in this study

### Aim of the Research Study

To understand the female Humanistic Person Centred Psychotherapist experience of empty nest syndrome when their daughters leave home and the impact if any this has on their work with female clients.

### Procedure

Participation in this study will involve tape-recorded, in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting approx 1 hour.

### Potential Risks

There are no known risks to participants of this study, however if any potential risks arise during the meeting they will be addressed at the time.

### Confidentiality

The taped interview will be transcribed verbatim and excerpts may be quoted and paraphrased in the write up of the research project. I will be using a transcriber who will sign a confidentiality statement stating that they will abide by SPTI, UKCP and BACP code of ethics for confidentiality. Names will be altered to provide anonymity of the participants and no information leading to the identification of the participant will be published.

The transcript will be sent to you to read and ensure it is an accurate representation of the interview and to ensure that you are happy that your anonymity has been maintained. When not being worked on the original tape and the transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, until the dissertation has been submitted and marked, at which time both will be destroyed.

### Data and Results

Once the study is completed it will be written up and submitted to the Sherwood Institute where it will be accessible by member of the Institute including tutors, therapist, supervisors and trainees. It will also be seen by an external examiner who adheres to the SPTI, UKCP and BACP code of ethics.

**The following conditions are to protect you as a client:**

**Participation**

This is voluntary and greatly appreciated

**Withdrawal of Participation**

You are entitled to withdraw from the study any time up to binding of the dissertation; all data held on you will be destroyed immediately.

**Debriefing**

There will be time before and immediately after the interview to discuss any questions you may have and you are free to contact the researcher after the interview if you need to. If you experience any discomfort or distress as a result of the interview, the researcher will be happy to support you in taking this to your therapist or supervisor.

**Study contact details:**

This study is being carried out by Sharon Vesty. Contact details: 07824448210. Email: [sharon.vesty@btinternet.com](mailto:sharon.vesty@btinternet.com)

As a Student psychotherapist at the Sherwood Institute I agree to work within the SPTI, UKCP and BACP ethical guidelines in order to ensure I work safely within my level of competence.

**Complaints Procedure**

The research project will be reviewed and approved by the Sherwood Institute.

If for any reason you wish to make a complaint please contact the research supervisor at;

The Sherwood Institute

Thiskney House

2 St James Terrace

Nottingham

NG1 6FW

I understand the nature and purpose of the study and confirm that the study procedure have been explained to me. I have read this consent form carefully and my signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study.

Please sign below:

**This is a contract between Sharon Vesty and .....**

**Signature**

**Signature**

**Date**

## **Appendix Four**

### **Complaints Procedure**

The research project will be reviewed and approved by the Sherwood Institute.

If for any reason you wish to make a complaint please contact the research supervisor at;

The Sherwood Institute

Thiskney House

2 St James Terrace

Nottingham

NG1 6FW

## Appendix Five

Sharon Vesty

Address

Date

### **Transcribing Tapes on behalf of Sharon Vesty of the above address**

I agree to adhere to the code of ethics on research of the SPTI, UKCP and BACP code of ethics in terms of ensuring participant confidentiality and anonymity,

Signed..... Date.....

## Appendix Six – Email to Participants

Hello xxxx

I hope you are well?

Please find attached transcript of the interview we did together.

Please check the transcript and email your agreement that I can use the transcript or email me with any changes/ omissions you would like me to make.

If I do not hear from you by the xxxxxxxx I will assume that you are happy with the transcript.

Thankyou once again for agreeing to take part in my research study

warm regards

Sharon Vesty