Identity, Consumption and Loss: the Impact of Women’s Experience of Grief and Mourning on Consumption in Empty Nest Households

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In this paper we examine how women use consumption to negotiate the four tasks of grief and mourning, as they experience the loss of children in the empty nest household. From our study we identify the double loss faced by empty-nest mothers: the physical and emotional presence of their child; and the tasks central to the motherhood role: daily maintenance and the production of sociability. We discuss how women use consumption to re-establish emotional connectedness with their children who are physically absent; to reconfigure their mothering tasks in order to maintain the sense of family beyond the empty nest household; and to re-create their sense of self in the life long project of identity formation.

INTRODUCTION

Loss is an important life event that affects women’s identities and their patterns of consumption. The empty nest household represents a potentially rich site for researching the dialectic between identity and consumption during periods of transition and loss. In our consumer culture consumption is often used to help negotiate the very difficult life stages including those characterized by separation and loss and the tasks associated with mourning and grieving (Bowlby and Parkes 1970; Kubler-Ross 1969; Worden 1991). Our data illustrates how women’s construction of identity and sense of self as mothers undergoes a series of changes as these women confront the stages of ‘loss,’ experienced as the grief and mourning involved in their children leaving home. We investigate how empty nest women use consumption to help them emotionally re-locate their relationships with their children and to help them refocus and move forward with life (Bowlby and Parkes 1970; Worden 1991, p.10-14). We strive to contribute to the systematic discussion of the dialectic between consumption and the “common elements of loss that are associated with adverse life situations in general” (Murray 2001, p. 219).

We begin with a brief review of the literature on grief, mourning and loss; identity and motherhood; and transition. We then describe our research design and methods; and present the findings. We conclude by discussing how the psycho-social needs of women in empty nest households impact their consumption and market place behavior as their identities evolve in response to changes in their mothering role and their experience of children leaving home.

LITERATURE

Loss, grief and mourning.

As death and its associated emotional, psychological, physical, and economic losses represents one of life’s major events, many major role changes and life status transitions can also be understood in terms of loss and the consequences of suffering a loss. These major life status transitions usually force consumers to negotiate a reconfigured or recreated sense of self. Women entering the parental life stage transition of the empty nest household can also be examined from the informants’ lived experience of suffering a loss. Thus, women’s experience of their children leaving home and its associated impact on women’s identities and sense of self can be understood within the wider literature about grief, loss and mourning (Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson 1976; Worden 1991).

We follow Worden’s distinction between grief (which “refers to the personal experience of the loss”) and mourning (as “the process which occurs after a loss”) (Worden 1991, p. 34). Grief is characterized by acute and episodic ‘pangs’ and “the stages of alarm, searching, mitigation, anger and guilt, and gaining a new identity” (Parks 1998, p. 43 cited in Clear and Burggraf 2002, p. 1). “Mourning has four phases: numbing, yearning and searching” (or pining), “disorganization and despair, and reorganization” (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980, cited in Clear and Burggraf 2002, p. 1). This is very similar to Worden’s (1991) argument that mourning involves the four tasks of: first, accepting the reality of the loss; second, working through the pain of grief and dealing with the feelings; third, adjusting to an environment in which the departed is missing; and fourth, emotionally relocating the departed and moving on with life (Worden, 1991, p. 10-14).

Identity and motherhood.

Children moving out of the home constitute much more than simply the absence of their physical or emotional presence. Our immediate family is a part of our extended self (Belk 1988; James 1890). Not unlike the grieving that accompanies the feelings of self loss experienced during a divorce or with the death of a child or spouse, it seems likely that many women recently in the empty nest stage may also feel a sense of self-lost. Since children are part of a parent’s extended self, a child’s move out of the house may well be seen as a loss of part of that parent’s extended self.

Women’s identities as mothers evolve in response to changes in the parent-child relationship, beginning with the arrival of the new baby, and their socialization as mothers (McMahon 1995). Within feminist sociology McMahon (1995) argued that it was important to understand “what kind of identities” are produced by the processes of separation, independence and autonomy (McMahon 1995, p. 268). According to McMahon, motherhood allows women to feel they have achieved, “a feminine identity as a loving, caring, responsible person.” What was vested in the women’s commitment to motherhood was not simply the social identity of being a mother, but also the character of being a caring, patient, responsible adult person; a positively valued character that may be symbolically expressed for many women through motherhood (McMahon 1995).

Surprisingly, there has been very little research on how women’s experience and understanding of motherhood changes as they reach the major transition point of their children moving from adolescence to adulthood as symbolized by the empty nest household. The necessity, for instance, of renegotiating relationships of dependence (parent-child) to interdependence (adult-adult) (Berne 1961, Pitman 1982) while still maintaining interconnections and a sense of family and its resulting impact on the consumption behavior of the family has remained poorly understood. This represents a gap in our knowledge about subsequent stages of women’s re-socialization as they learn how to mother ‘at a distance’: and importantly, how they use consumption to negotiate this transition and the resulting impact of this transition on their market place behavior. The empty nest is an especially interesting stage at this point in
history because it is a life stage that many of the 76 million baby boomers in the U.S. are undergoing, or will undergo during the decade. Further, we are seeing the same phenomena played out in many other developed countries.

Just as importantly, the nature of the empty nest transition is not just about re-defining the mothering role and the child/parent relationship, it also demands re-definition of the parental partnership, the wife/partner role; and often re-negotiation of the equilibrium of the remaining familial relationships (Worden 1991, p. 126). With the continuity of core relationships thus being rendered unstable, many empty nest women seem to experience a dislocation from past relational reference points. In conjunction with such feelings there is then an overriding sense of loss of identity with a concomitant search for new meaning in their lives.

Transitions and Role Status Change

Transitions or liminal phases (Turner 1969) have been described as “a limbo between a past state and a coming one, a period of personal ambiguity, of non-status, and of unanchored identity” and represent valuable sites for exploring the impact of loss on the dialectic between consumption and identity (Schouten 1991, p. 49). Important role transitions generally occur in three stages: separation; transition; and incorporation (Van Gennep 1960). These rites of passage are traditionally associated with major life transitions and events such as birth, marriage and death. The transformation in the mothering role which occurs as children leave home represents a major disruption to their established world and its associated activities, roles, practices and consumption activities that are constitutive of a central part of many women’s identities. These three stages—of separation, transition, and re-incorporation—are therefore very consistent with the role status change of empty nest mothers as their sense of self and identity is reconfigured and adjusted around changes in the enactment of the parental role.

Role status transitions are accompanied by a liminal phase in which the individual holds an ambiguous non-status, and is between two different role statuses, but not firmly grounded in either. In the modern, secular world people often experience liminoid states (cf. Turner 1974) devoid of supportive formal rites of passage” (Schouten, 1991 p.49). Without some type of societal support system firmly in place, consumers attempt to cope with this difficult transition and their ambiguous self-concepts in a myriad of ways. Contemporary consumers who are left to their own devices create their own personal rites of passage which are carried out, at least in part, through symbolic acts of disposition and acquisition of consumer goods. These acts of consumption and disposition allow consumers to utilize products in their role status transitions and in the transformation of their new concept of self. The reconstruction of self that began with separation from the parental role and the end of the original child-parent relationship, is assisted through the disposition of consumer goods and the rituals consumers play out with material objects.

METHOD

After examining relevant literature we began to explore the lived experience of women consumers in empty nest households. We specifically sought to better understand the experiences of women whose children had left the parental home within the last 18 months. We used a feminist perspective and an interpretive research design with two data sets.

The first data set.

Our first data set consisted of twenty-one in-person unstructured interviews with empty nest women whose children had left the parental home within the last 18 months. The interviews were held in the participants’ own homes and lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, averaging one hour in length and were conducted in Ireland, England and the United States. An informal approach was adopted for the interviews, with the researchers using a broad topic list covering key issues including: changes to daily activities; lifestyle; social networks; consumption patterns; and their role as a mother. We used a purposive approach (Miles and Huberman 1994) to select our sample design, looking for “representativeness by ‘purposefully’ choosing a sample that typifies the population, the theoretical category or the phenomenon to be studied” (McMahon 1995, p. 34). Participants were recruited via friends and acquaintances using a snowball sampling method (Miles and Huberman 1994). The interviews were audio taped and transcribed, resulting in approximately 300 pages of data. Transcribed interviews were read repeatedly by all research team members; themes were identified independently and then discussed amongst the team members. Consensus was reached on each theme discussed in the final manuscript.

The second data set.

The second data set was collected using netnography (Kozinets 2001, 2002) and included participant observation in two online bulletin boards. Our netnographic investigation produced an online data set of over 500 postings to the bulletin boards and also a set of reflexive field notes which represented the written account of the fieldwork conducted in a computer-mediated environment.

We announced on the bulletin boards our presence as researchers interested in the topic of empty nest women, and of our plans to prepare research papers on this topic. Formal observation of the boards lasted for fifteen months, using a mixture of unobtrusive and participant observation. The first board was monitored weekly and more frequently whenever there was a particularly active posting period. New postings usually appeared every day and sometimes there could be up to six postings on the same day. Three hundred and six postings were downloaded for analysis. In addition archival material was also downloaded from this site which produced a further 100 postings for analysis. We monitored the second site for 3 months, and downloaded 95 postings for analysis. We observed that some self selection took place among the members of this second data set, since women having difficulty with this life stage transition are more likely to seek out a site such as these. However, we do not believe this is problematic since we are not suggesting that this is a representative sample. We do believe that the participants in this data set and in our first data set provide insight into the difficulty of this life stage transition for some women.

FINDINGS

Loss in the Empty Nest Stage and the Tasks of Grief and Mourning

“It is a death of sorts... it is the death of life as you know it. Mommy job ending sorta, and you have to grieve” (Online Bulletin Board).

For most of these women their children’s departure potentially represented a double loss: first, the loss of the child, his/her physical and emotional presence and that relationship; and second, the loss of tasks central to the motherhood role: daily maintenance and the production of sociability. The themes of separation, transition and incorporation are interwoven throughout our informants’ stories about the losses they experienced as their children leave home.
Worden (1991)’s four tasks of mourning are also clearly evident as well as the importance of completing these tasks in order to work through this difficult life transition.

Dealing with grief and working through the tasks associated with mourning was clearly evident in our data. Using representative comments, our informants illustrate the many parallels of the losses they felt with those losses described in the literature on grief and mourning. The first task, accepting the reality of the loss (Worden, 1991) was realized by many of our informants, often admitting that this happened before their child even left home. The following woman explains that for her accepting the reality of the loss started during her daughter’s senior year in high school:

This year hasn’t been bad. It’s the second year. The first year was,… (pause) the first year started about Christmas time of her senior year of high school and her graduation of high school and it was just,… (pause) devastating for me. (In-person Interview).

The second task, working through the pain of grief and dealing with the feelings (Worden, 1991) was evident repeatedly, also.

I seem to muddle through for a few days and then something happens to set me back. My daughter came home from college this weekend and it started all over again—remembering how good it was and how awful and lonely it is now. You kid yourself and go about your life as if all is OK until something happens to make you realize it really isn’t. (Online Bulletin Board).

The loss associated with the physical and emotional absence of the child was discussed by many:

“Hello to all, Melissa here, one daughter, Sandy, age 19. Sandy married on July 7 and moved to England to live. …Needless to say—I crashed and burned. It has been 4 months and I am happy to say, I am having some good days, more good days than bad.” (Online Bulletin Board).

This woman’s description illustrates how she has worked through the pain of grief and expressing her feelings (I crashed and burned) and is beginning to adjust to the loss she feels.

There were many examples in our data of the third task, adjusting to an environment in which the departed is missing; (Worden, 1991), although it was met begrudgingly and out of necessity as shown in the following woman’s comments:

…and then we took her to school. I cried all the way home. …I walked in the house and sort of busted up. I cried for days afterwards. I mean, different songs would make me cry. It was terrible! (stresses terrible) And then, with the friends that I had, we sort of commiserated and started doing other things. And in October of last year I got a part time job, (laughter) because I thought, “Okay, I have to do something!” (In-person Interview).

The fourth task, emotionally relocating the departed and moving on with life (Worden, 1991) was also evident in our data. Once women had worked through these very difficult tasks, they often became supportive to others still trying to deal with the pain of this transition. June below provides a succinct overview of her experiences:

My youngest left 5 months ago and just very recently, I’m starting to heal from the pain. I know this doesn’t make sense right now and it probably doesn’t help you at all, but time has a wonderful way of healing us. I suffered a tremendous loss because being a mother was what I loved best about my life. In fact, I couldn’t even imagine a time when all my children would be grown and on their own. But it happens, and the pain for me was excruciating. What has helped me the most is seeing a therapist and learning that it is normal and natural when children grow up and leave. It hurts, but it gets better. I still enjoy a close, loving relationship with all 3 of my grown children. Reach out to friends and professionals for strength to help you through this time. It will pass, I promise, and on the other side you will feel a new freedom and a softer, kinder person inside. Reading this board really helped me and there are others as well on the Internet. If I can offer my friendship, I would be happy to do so. It’s important to allow yourself to cry. I cried every day and sometimes more than that for several weeks. It does get better. Please write, if you’d like. I’d like to be here for you if you need me. (Online Bulletin Board).

In describing her loss and subsequent adjustment, another informant talked about how she had found the first six months after her children left very traumatic. Once her children had been away for a while they established a routine for the holidays, and things have become more tolerable. Her relationship with her children has changed and is now more similar to that of adult friends (In person interview) (Berne 1961; Pitman 1982). The next informant also exemplifies the idea of how things have improved over time:

“This year hasn’t been bad. It’s the second year. The first year was…just devastating for me. … I mean, I stopped eating. I stopped sleeping…. we took her to school and I thought I was going to die. I cried all the way home. I literally made it from her dorm room to the elevator, which was probably about 6 yards and completely came unglued” (In-person interview).

Using Consumption to Negotiate the Physical and Emotional Loss

Objects Providing Comfort

Women used consumption in various ways to negotiate these stages of separation and transition in order to cope with the physical and emotional absence of their children. As children moved away from home, they took certain belongings with them that involved strategic decisions about creating an identity in their new lives (Silver 1996). They took many meaningful personal items (CDs, clothes, photographs, duvet covers) and useful items of general furnishing (chairs, televisions, and sometimes even their bed). Some mothers felt the need to substitute for the missing items whenever possible to maintain a home atmosphere. This was particularly true in the case of replaceable items such as furniture and decorations. In this way mothers may keep a child’s bedroom almost as if it were a shrine to that child.

“Her room is basically, she left it like it would be when she came back …She left her room as intact, as if she would be home for the weekends or come for a visit. It’s just there and I can walk in at anytime and feel her presence there and know that she is going to be back. And see her school pictures and know as time has gone by those pictures will be taken down and replaced with other pictures of her new found friends and her new life. (In-person Interview).
This informant’s comments are particularly interesting since it is unlikely that after graduating from college, her daughter will want to move back into her childhood bedroom. This fantasy of sorts, however, seems to have a therapeutic effect, and by maintaining her daughter’s bedroom as it was when her daughter was living at home, this woman has been better able to cope with the empty nest stage of her life.

In the following extract Mary preserves her son’s bedroom and his displayed collection of baseball cards and balls. Mary uses his possessions to evoke proud memories of her son’s achievements and to provide a physical linkage to him:

Mary: “I still have all the baseball cards up there and the balls that are all signed. And they’re still out… And, his flight stuff. He didn’t take that ‘cause he’s not gonna be flying up there. Interviewer: Is there anything in there, that when you see it you just think about the past?
Mary: A memory? His flight bag is lying up against the wall. And every time I walk by, it’s lying up there by the door, and the cats sleep on his bed anyway, and I look at it and think, boy, I’m glad he did that and it was so hard. Because we had to really push him to finish it.” (In-person Interview).

However, children usually left behind items overtly associated with their childhood such as teddy bears and various childhood collections. As demonstrated above sometimes items left behind can emotionally reconnect the mother with her offspring. Other informants related similar experiences. Sheena, for example, played her son’s old cassette tapes as she went about her housework and Mandy wore her son’s t-shirts:

“’So I might sleep in them [the t-shirts] or work in the yard in them, and little favorites of theirs, old school team t-shirts from where they won something, a championship or something... Every time I put it back on again, I can remember them racing in that t-shirt in a special road race, I can remember them wearing it, getting dirty, washing it for them … there’s something warm and comforting about sleeping in them”’. (In person Interview).

Mandy has appropriated her son’s t-shirts to help her with the separation phase. There were many other examples in our data of our informants finding comfort in objects left behind by their children. Similar to the ability of a blanket to provide security to babies as they start the ‘separation phase’ from their mothers, so adults, too, are often able to feel a comfort with a particularly meaningful possession that helps them deal with the liminal ‘separation’ phase. The role of material objects and their symbolic properties during transition was a common theme found in this data (Belk 1988, 1990; McAlexander et al. 1993; Price, Arnould and Cusati 2000; Silver 1996). This woman, for instance, used her grown children’s rooms as a transitional object, that provided her comfort and made her feel closer to her boys who were away at college.

“Basically, as strange as it may seem, when you walk into their rooms, their rooms smell like them, even this one. When you just pick up something, even the odor smells like whichever boy it is. That’s a strange thing when you walk into there, you think (sniff), that’s them all right.” (In-person Interview).

She simply walked into their rooms and sniffed, and she immediately felt the presence of her sons. Another empty nest mom, discusses how looking through the photo albums that her daughter left behind was comforting:

She has them all at school now but when she doesn’t have them at school, when she brings them home in the summer, yes, I’ll look at them. When she’s not there, I’ll go look at them and relive her senior year, because her friends are awesome, and I like watching her change. (In-person Interview).

Finally, the increased consumption of technology, seen in the use of the bulletin board, also represented attempts to re-establish some degree of connectedness to replace the physical and emotional absence of their children. These discussions highlight the pain of working through the grief and also showed the level of social and psychological support offered by the board:

“I’ve mentioned things on some of these boards that I haven’t talked to anyone about, not even my friends, so this is like therapy!!!” (Online Bulletin Board).

“All your postings and suggestions help so much. I hope a year from now we can all return after successfully getting on with our lives, to help others just starting the process” (Online Bulletin Board).

The second aspect of loss was associated with the daily tasks of mothering. In terms of ‘caring for’ their families women talked about a whole series of production type tasks related to the full nest, such as feeding the family; doing the laundry; taxiing children around. These aspects of mothering largely disappeared with the transition to the empty nest. These mothers regretted the disappearance of the tasks traditionally associated with their mothering role:

“I miss watching her [eldest daughter] perform, singing, and dancing the most… I’m having trouble finding something I enjoy as much as watching her perform. I do plenty of hobbies, church work, and have 3 other girls, but the first one is hard. It seems all the activities I said I would do when I didn’t have to drive her around anymore just don’t seem to be as inviting as I thought they would.” (Online Bulletin Board).

The crucial dialectic between the physical, psychological and emotional aspects of parental love and labor (Rothman 1989 in McMahon 1995) are brought into stark view by the transition to the empty nest. The sense of loss because of the lack of the ‘daily maintenance’ (i.e. caring for) (De Vault 1991) comes through clearly here:

“No one needs me any more. When I get home, John doesn’t really need me, you don’t think your husband needs you, sort of thing. What with the children leaving, no help with homework and things.” (In person interview).

The importance of mother’s co-ordination work round meal times to ‘do family work’ can also be clearly seen. This description reflected the idea of the family as the factory for the family (De Vault 1991):

“I would tend to cook a meal at night, particularly to try and encourage Nick to eat. I would try and get him to come and sit with us but quite often David’s not with us either so it’s hard. I do though try and cook a meal. Actually we sit down more since we’ve put this table here in the sitting room. We used to
sit round the breakfast bar in the kitchen or have things on our knees. Emma coming back has put more pressure on in some ways in terms of set meals because she’s wanted to know what time food’s at so that she can go out” (In-person interview).

Caring for family and caring about family (De Vault 1991) are both captured in this woman’s description of feeding her family. She describes the investment of her time and effort in terms of meal preparation (“I do though try and cook a meal”) and promoting the social setting for its consumption (“I would try and get him to… sit with us”). She revisits the theme of ‘sitting down’ two or three times as she describes the physical setting for creating family life. This description shows again the range of coordinating skills (De Vault 1991) required to produce family life via meal times by accommodating everyone’s different needs, illustrated here by the informant’s catering to one daughter while also recognizing the need to plan around another child’s timetable of social activities.

Many women made a deliberate effort to overcome their feelings of loss by searching out new social networks for themselves. Anne works part-time. She has recently taken up golf, an activity she can also enjoy with her husband. This, in turn, has helped her build a new social life, based partly on her husband’s social networks and golf; thus she has regenerated her social networks by using bridging social capital. In a similar way, Jean has coped well with the adjustment by re-building her networks around social activities. She has developed her own independent social network:

“Yes, it was an adjustment but I adjusted very well I think. I had activities that I wanted to do. I wanted to pursue playing tennis, which I had just taken up about two years before my daughter graduated. I wanted to be a gardener. I love the outside and having more time to just spend there rather than being a chauffeur, so to speak, to the kids.” (In-person interview).

Adjusting to living without those who have gone is one of the central tasks of grief and mourning (Worden 1991). Consistent with role identity theory, this was where women with a role in the workplace, in addition to their role in the home, often benefited when they experienced the empty nest (Thoits 1983; White and Edwards 1990). For many women these changes to the pattern of their daily lives produced deep role insecurity. Adjustment was more difficult for those women who had not worked outside the home and they were especially vulnerable to feelings of insecurity at this time. Mandy recalls her feelings as she realized that she was “losing” her kids. Her uncertainty over her new situation is evident:

“I had arranged my life around them, and it was unconscious, actually, but my money, my time, projects that I worked on, I would check their schedules first. So now that they are gone, it’s very confusing at times, the emptiness that I think is invigorating, for the most part, most days but then it’s the other part about what I didn’t do with my life to prepare myself for now.” (In person interview) [emphases added].

Having spent so much time and energy developing their children’s social capital (“I had arranged my life around them... my money, my time”), suddenly they find that networks held together through children’s activities have diminished. Many women neglect their own social networks during their years of child rearing, and thus lacked ‘bridging’ (Putnam 1995, p.2; Onyx and Bullen 2000) qualities of social capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1987). “One way to learn about the nature of connectedness is to explore its absence...” (McMahon 1995:138). Consequently, feelings of loss and emptiness were commonly expressed.

With children no longer as accessible as they once were, consumption becomes a bridge to connect parents with their children’s new lives, both as a way to communicate more effectively at a distance, and as a way to still share a part of their lives. Consumption is used to re-establish some of the social connectedness which had been disrupted with the departure of their children. Technology, such as mobile phones and computers, enables connectivity across different sites for ‘doing mothering’. Many mothers emphasized the role of mobile phones in maintaining vital contact with their offspring. The ownership of a mobile phone (both for children and parents) provides reassurance that, in the event of an emergency, children can always establish immediate contact. This reassurance is not restricted to mothers, children also find it comforting to maintain contact with family and their home environment. One informant related how her daughter’s mobile bill had been £2000 (approximately $3,000 in U.S. dollars) in the first month that she had been away from home. Computers too gain significance at this time, as a way to maintain email communication and to even facilitate a physical presence through the use of a webcam, an item that was recommended for purchase by one bulletin board poster to her friends in the empty nester online community.

One of the key challenges for the empty nest mother is determining how to maintain this sense of family across a wider range of settings beyond the household in the wake of the loss of tasks and activities associated with caring for her family. Consumption was employed to meet this challenge of ways of mothering at a distance, and to help work through the tasks of grief and mourning. Changes to rituals around meal times and food consumption in our data supports earlier research (De Vault 1991) about the importance of finding intersections of activities for creating family life. Kathleen’s story neatly illustrates the change in family meal time routines. Kathleen related how, when her children were at home, she would dutifully prepare the evening meal every morning before she left for work. She was proud of the fact that she had never relied on any ready made meals, emphasizing the nutritional value of her own home cooking for the children, despite the inconvenience to her in terms of her busy schedule. Kathleen is a good illustration of the sacrificial elements involved in feeding the family (DeVault, 1991) and the importance of the family meal (Miller, 1998). In the empty nest household the consumption scape for feeding the family often moves from the private domain of family mealtimes to the public domain (e.g. We do go out to eat at least once a week sometimes with the youngest daughter joining us). Several other informants indicated that they would also spend less time preparing food, and were more willing to eat convenience foods or eat out at restaurants. This seems to mark a change away from the mundane, nurturing type activities that Miller (1998) has shown can be ways to manifest love and devotion in families.

Loss of Part of Extended Self

Mothers in the empty nest household felt the loss of their extended self (Belk 1988). McMahon’s (1995) study of new mothers had shown how children were seen as “constitutive and integrative of the self in many of the women’s self-conceptions” (McMahon 1995, p. 140). The experience of attachment had been central to these women’s sense of themselves as mothers (McMahon 1995):

“I’ve been pondering this a lot lately, trying to get to the core of what I’m feeling. And I think it’s this...the part of me that has been the intense, Mama Bear, hands-on, super-involved,
watchful mother the past two decades...well, really isn’t needed to do that anymore. There’s no need for it, so where does that part of myself go? It’s not like there aren’t other parts of myself, other parts of my mothering profile even, that aren’t alive and well and functioning fine…” (Online Bulletin Board).

This highlights, first of all, the intense sense of responsibility experienced as part of the mothering role (Thompson 1996). “The intense, Mama Bear, hands-on super-involved, watchful mother the past two decades... really isn’t need ...anymore”. Second, this woman recognizes how her mothering role has evolved: “other parts of my mothering profile... alive and well and functioning fine”. Motherhood does not disappear when children leave home, but experience of motherhood changes dramatically. For our informants, moving from the full nest to the empty nest meant dealing with the fear that being ‘without children’ would mean being disconnected in some way, not just from their children (and thus experiencing loss in the sense of the physical absence of their children). It also meant confronting a sense of loss of their own feelings of motherhood. What they had to explore, as they worked their way through the tasks of grieving, were the different ways to enact mothering across different sites, often using different types of consumption. As women come to terms with the changes they recognize first that “I’ll always be there as their mother” (In person interview) and second, that “you just have to move on” (in person interview).

CONSUMPTION AND GIFT-GIVING

Consumption as gift-giving becomes an important strategy for negotiating the loss of their identities as “loving, caring, responsible” (McMahon 1995) adults. Mothers use consumption to express love (phone calls, cards, care packages, things for apartment or dorm). The following informant describes how she and her husband express their affection and re-create their new role as long distance parents through tangible gifts to their children who have moved away:

“Daddy sent Mandy tons of M&M’s, or m-em’s as she always called them. We sent her four boxes in the past three weeks...I sent her a food box, then she got very sick and I sent her a medicine box! Then daddy sent her a dehumidifier. Then the candy. And I know daddy has sent her $S’s in there, also!” (Online Bulletin Board).

Notice also the use of brands to reinforce familial connections and memories (Olsen 1995). Another mother illustrates how she uses consumption to traverse this liminal period. She talks about gift-giving and the things she has bought for her daughter: “I bought a new rug for her apartment, because we only bought one set and I figured she needed more...And I send her care packages. I send her a card, like once a week and in between I think I’ve sent her two or three care packages, no two. But I have some other things I like to buy for her when I see them, like last time I sent her a care package I sent her a CD and a magnet for her fridge and some jiffin pops...they’re like a kool-aidy stuff...just fun stuff....She loves getting real mail! She says e-mail is great fun and she hears from everybody, but... My mom will send her a card occasionally, sometimes with cash involved—she likes those....And it’s fun for me too.” (In-person Interview). [emphases added]

Mothers help their children to personalize and appropriate their new living spaces (e.g. I bought her a rug). An important opportunity for expressing love and enacting their new identities as empty nest parents was evident with many of our informants who helped their adult children become more comfortable in their new homes. Informants often made purchases of food and more general household items such as furniture and household decorations. They continued to undertake ‘mothering at a distance’ by putting together and sending off care packages; boxes of medicines; sweets; and small fun gifts (e.g. “kool-aidy stuff...just fun stuff”).

DISCUSSION

We can trace themes which relate to the four tasks of mourning and grief (Bowlby and Parkes 1970; Worden 1991) in these women’s stories of their experiences of the empty nest household. Worden (1991, p. 10-14) argued that in order to complete the tasks of grief and mourning successfully, it is necessary to actualize the loss; identify and express feelings such as anger, guilt, anxiety, helplessness and sadness; adjust to living without the departed; facilitate emotional relocation of the departed; and provide time to grieve. Further although both of our data sets include informants from at least three countries, the grief, mourning and the associated consumption behaviors revealed were consistent across the data—regardless of the informants’ country of residence. We suggest that the experience of the empty nest mother, although unique and nuanced for each individual, appear to be a universal phenomena commonly experienced by women new to the empty nest stage in developed countries.

Accepting the reality of the loss: “The idea of being without children was not experienced simply as an absence but as a loss” (McMahon 1995:138), which confirms the themes of mourning and grief (Worden 1991). Women clearly experienced loss across all aspects of their mothering role; and describe it “as a death of sorts” (Empty Nest Bulletin Board). Their stories showed that accepting the reality of the loss was central to allowing them to emotionally re-locate their relationships with their children and move forward with life (Worden 1991, p. 10-14).

Working through the pain of loss. Many of these women’s stories show them working through the pain, and especially the feelings of sadness and helplessness. Many women initially felt quite overwhelmed by the loss of children from the family home and they dealt with the initial trauma, grief and pain in a variety of ways, typically played out with consumption behaviors. Some used drugs (e.g. Wellbutrin) to help them cope with the painful emotions; some used established personal social networks as they worked through the experience; some sought solace outside their established social networks (e.g. on bulletin boards). They missed not just the physical and emotional presence of their children, but also they anticipated the loss of their roles as mothers. Role identity theory suggests that, when children leave their parents’ home, their departure will be associated with a decrease in parental well being (Thoits 1983; White and Edwards 1990). However, this premise rests on the assumption that launching one’s children means that the parent then abandons the parental role. Many scholars reject this premise and believe that once individuals have had children, then they continue to occupy a parental role throughout their lives. Our study supports this as we found evidence that the role of mother evolves and changes, but does not disappear, and we found considerable evidence of how women adapted the tasks of caring for and caring about (De Vault 1991) so that they re-constituted their identities as ‘loving, caring, responsible adults’ (Worden 1991).

Adjusting to the environment without the child. Women’s understanding of motherhood is altered as they experience the transition to an empty-nest household. This has implications for their changing perspectives of sites for production and consumption in ‘doing family work’; and their further re-socialization as
mothers (McMahon 1995) as they adjust to the absence of their children.

As motherhood had symbolized connectedness (McMahon 1995) it was the loss of social connectedness and social capital which was particularly hard to bear. The levels of distress experienced seems to be directly related to the variety and degree of emmeshment of the different role sets and the associated networks that represent the informants’ social capital. In the empty nest stage these parents’ and children’s sets of social capital start to be ‘decoupled’ and the experience of that decoupling process is more or less painful depending on how ‘emmeshed’ these sets of networks are; and the centrality of the children’s social networks to women’s identities and sense of self. As the social networks that had been dependent on children dwindled, many women experienced a concomitant crisis in role identity. Scott (1991) argues that the diversity of networks and their linking to a variety of roles are a major source of self-esteem and that adjustment is easier if not dependent on one role. Thus, one of the major factors to influence the extent of the crisis in role identity associated with adjusting to the environment without the child depends on whether a woman has her own independent social networks that allow her roles outside of her mothering home-based ones. Varied social networks, if independent from those of the children, can offer a stronger support system. These networks may be career, hobby or community-related. For example, several women described the solace they found through their professional activities, their volunteer work, church group, or health club. For others it was a regular coffee morning with friends that had been meeting for many years. This is consistent with other scholars who argue that playing multiple roles in society helps to insulate an individual from emotional threats to a specific role (McAdams 1997).

Emotionally relocating the child and moving on with life. What was vested in the women’s commitment to motherhood was not simply the social identity of mother, but the identity of the extended self of the woman. This emphasizes the importance not just of relocating their children, but also of the women relocating themselves (Worden 1991) in their new world—and learning to ‘mother at a distance’ and thus become re-socialized into a different way of mothering.

CONCLUSION

This interpretive study explored how women used consumption to negotiate the transition phase represented by the empty nest household, and their adjustment to new identities; the re-configuration of roles, tasks and networks; and the experience of and response to the disruption of their social and emotional capital. Our study argues that “there is no single meaning or experience of being a mother” (McMahon 1995, p. 263) or of the experiences of grief and mourning suffered following the loss of children from the family home. What happens during periods of transition—as represented by the empty nest household—is a major readjustment of the tasks associated with the mothering role within the life-long project of identity formation, and we can clearly see the psycho-social needs and its respective impact on consumption and market place behaviors. Future research could usefully explore other aspects of consumption linked to experiences of being a woman and mother at a variety of intersections (e.g. race, class, age, sexuality) in relation to different points of transition and the concomitant potential sources of loss, grief and mourning (e.g. children starting school; divorce; death of child or spouse; career break; (re)-starting work).

REFERENCES


