"Once a mother, always a mother": Making sense of the Empty Nest Transition

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I declare that the research contained herein was granted approval by the SPAIS Ethics Committee.

Abstract

This study investigated how mothers make sense of the empty nest transition. It sought to understand the impact of children leaving home within the context of gendered parenthood. Using qualitative interview data, it will explore women's understandings, experiences and interpretations of the empty nest transition. Semi-structured interviews were used, with a sample of 10 women whose children had left home for an extended period. The study found that the empty nest transition is complex and fragmented and cannot be thought of simply as loss or gain. Structural factors of social class, marital status and individual mothering ideologies profoundly shape this.

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1. Introduction

Motherhood is made to be a core part of women's lives, one which is fraught with narrow moral boundaries and gendered expectations leading to mothers "being loved so much and blamed so intensely" (Thomson, 2011, p. 5). This gendered experience markedly shapes women's identity, expectations and social roles in life. But where does this leave women when their children leave home? The empty nest transition occurs when adult children move out of the parental home, ending the years of dependency (Mitchell, 2019). It is a comparatively under-researched area of motherhood. Therefore, this study will answer the question of 'how do mothers make sense of the empty nest transition'. This investigates mothers' experiences, understandings and interpretations of the empty nest transition and the impact it has on their identity. For decades feminist scholars have been researching, deconstructing and critiquing motherhood as an experience and a social institution (see Rich, 1997; Hochschild and Machung, 2012; Smart, 2013). Motherhood is socially constructed; it is part of the performance of femininity with its own set of cultural norms which are socially and historically specific (Choi *et al.*, 2005; Butler, 2015). Little attention however has been paid to the 'end' of motherhood when children fly the nest.

Sociological research on the empty nest transition shows the transition is a time of both gain and loss for women (see Mitchell, 2019; Herzberg-Kurasz *et al.*, 2024). The literature looks at changing roles and the reconfiguration of mothering tasks after children leave home. However, what this fails to appreciate is how gendered expectations of mothering shape this process and the impact of increasingly precarious youth transitions. Using qualitative interview data, this study will seek to understand women's experiences, understandings and interpretations of the empty nest transition. It will focus on themes of class, marital status and individual mothering ideologies, to explore the impact of these structural factors. A social constructionist, relativist approach will be used to understand women's personal interpretations rather than seek universal answers to the empty nest transition. I will investigate women's experiences, understandings and interpretations of the empty nest transition and how this impacts their identity within the context of gendered parenthood.

To begin with Chapter 2 will examine the existing literature on motherhood, empty nesting and youth transitions. This chapter will review key areas of research into the construction of motherhood, the expectations of mothers and youth transitions before exploring the specific empty nesting literature. Chapter 3 explores the methodological choices this study took, explaining the findings process. Chapter 4 then goes on to discuss the findings of how mothers make sense of the empty nest transition. This chapter examines how participants experienced areas of continuity and change finding two main themes: fragmented transitions and room for growth. In Chapter 5 I conclude with the implications of this study and what it means for academic and public consciousness of the empty nest transition. Overall, we must understand that the empty nest transition is not a simple gain or loss but a complex and fragmented transition consisting of continued responsibility and evolving roles which coincide.

2. Conceiving of motherhood and the empty nest

Empty nesting is "a family transition whereby children have grown up and have left the parental home" (Mitchell, 2019, p. 1,). Literature on empty nesting is not expansive and tends to conceive of the transition in terms of either gain or loss. It does not fully explore how the gendered experiences of parenting interplay with women's roles, perceptions and identity and how these shifts when children leave home. My study, however, will engage with the sociological and feminist literature on motherhood and the social construction of femininity to explore how mothers make sense of the empty nest transition. First, I must outline the construction of women as primary caregivers, the moral scrutiny of mothering, the intersections of mothering and work, the transition to motherhood and youth transitions before applying these to the existing literature on empty nesting.

Women as primary caregivers

A recurrent theme which underscores much of the literature on motherhood is the construction of women as natural primary caregivers. Motherhood is constructed as a key tenet of femininity. As Rich says, "women's status as child bearer has been made into a major fact of her life" (Rich, 1997, p. 11). This caregiving role is all-consuming, giving women little space to be anything else. They are expected to provide love and selflessness. Rich goes as far as to suggest motherhood ghettoises women curtailing their potential due to the burden of societal expectations (1997). This essentialisation is even present in the literature which critiques it, seen with Gullette's use of 'post-maternity', synonymous with empty nesting, which perpetuates the assumption of motherhood as a salient part of women's lives (1995).

Similarly, Hochschild presents the idea of a stalled revolution. In this phenomenon, while women have entered the workforce in high numbers, the burden of domestic, care and emotional labour has remained almost wholly theirs (Hochschild and Machung, 2012). This work on top of a labour market role is called the second shift, which entails not just housework and childrearing but emotional labour and moral responsibility. This second shift is something which is culturally expected of women and while many heterosexual couples attempt to share this work, it is rarely an even split (Hochschild and Machung, 2012).

More recently, greater expectations of gender equality within heterosexual marriage are present, whether realised or not. This is especially true in Nordic countries like Finland, which has seen many gains in equalising parental leave (Perälä-Littunen, 2007). However, while many heterosexual couples perceive their relationships to be gender-neutral, 'mother' is still seen as the default parent. So, while women are usually constructed as the 'other' gender when it comes to parenting, they are the default which all else is compared to. While this may be presented as empowering, it serves to further essentialise women's roles as primary caregivers (Perälä-Littunen, 2007).

This can be understood through the lens of Butler's gender performativity (Butler, 2015). Maternal identity is part of the social construct of femininity. Butler theorises that gender appears as a concrete identity due to repeated gendered acts; this creates a dynamic 'script' people must follow to stay within a masculine or feminine identity boundary. This can be applied to motherhood as a core value assigned to women (see Choi *et al.*, 2005; Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009; Thomson, 2011; Smart, 2013).

Good and bad mothers

Due to the primacy of women as caregivers, mothers experience a moral and cultural imperative to be ultimately responsible for their children. There is a high expectation for women to be 'good mothers' or face social repercussions (Miller, 2005). Miller used a narrative approach to explore how women perceive their own lives as mothers (2005). The study found that women struggled to cultivate their own identity away from motherhood or risk feeling judged as not selfless enough. Women's interests and identity outside of motherhood are held as antithetical to the 'good mother' as living one's own life was felt to be in direct conflict with "being there for others" (Miller, 2005, p. 142). This is consistent with other studies which found maternal performance is constantly under scrutiny (Smyth, 2012).

Perceptions of good and bad mothering are culturally and historically specific; this divide continues to be a site of contested meaning. The scrutiny of mothers can be seen as part of the performance of gender. Normalising discourses of motherhood as natural creates

feelings of inadequacy (Smart, 2013). The discursive creation of norms of femininity, theorised in Butler's Gender Trouble, is partly enacted through practices of motherhood (Butler, 2015). The rules of 'good' mothering are enforced through social stigma. This is also classed with working-class and unmarried mothers constructed as less likely to adhere to the calibrated rules of motherhood (Smart, 2013).

The division of 'good' and 'bad' mothering is a highly classed and racialised divide (Smart, 2013). Perrier explores the dichotomy between natural growth associated with working-class mothers and concerted cultivation associated with middle-class mothers (2013). Concerted cultivation structures children's lives, to encourage more interactions with adults to develop social skills such as negotiation and reasoning through children's activities. Natural growth on the other hand, gives children the autonomy to choose how to play and what activities to take part in, which is associated with less social profits (Lareau, 2011). This reveals the complex power relations in which middle-class women both enact power on working-class mothers and have power enacted on them by wider socio-cultural expectations of motherhood. 'Natural growth' of the working class is presented as irresponsible, consumerist and uninvolved, whereas the 'superior' middle-class 'concerted cultivation' is focused on involvement and development. While middle-class mothers navigate having enough involvement to not be seen as 'bad' natural growth mothers, they also must balance this with not being too overbearing (Perrier, 2013). All mothers must navigate the narrow moral boundaries of mothering practices.

Women, work and mothering

The work women perform operates in a continuum of unpaid and paid labour instrumentalised with the concept of the second shift. Women work in the labour market in high proportions but still have the 'second shift' of childcare, emotional labour and housework. Hochschild found women do, on average, a month of extra work in unpaid labour a year (Hochschild and Machung, 2012). Hochschild goes through the example of Ann, a mother who is trying to balance the needs of her child, her job and her husband. To balance these, Ann goes through several strategies by curtailing work, redefining her personal needs and redefining the needs of the home. None of these include distributing work to her husband despite being dissatisfied with his involvement (Hochschild and

Machung, 2012, pp. 96–110). In other examples, Hochschild shows how many women believe their husbands share the duties of the second shift, but observations reveal they do not. Because of the demand for their time and energy, women often find parenting as a source of identity when career ambitions are diminished. This is what Hochschild observed with Ann (2012).

Motherhood is also presented as the remedy to a competitive neoliberal world according to Hays (1996). Motherhood is constructed as oppositional to the market. The more individualistic and competitive the market, the more intensive ideologies of mothering get (Hays, 1996). This places an undue burden on women and reproduces patriarchal capitalism. Intensive mothering ideologies are used as a rationale for neoliberalism as it 'combats' the issues of a lack of public funding into care (Hays, 1996). Intensive mothering is conceived of a middle-class phenomenon (Fannin and Perrier, 2016). It is emotionally involving, time-consuming mothering ideology, which is constructed to be critical for children's development and portrayed as a measure of love (Hays, 1996). This is relevant now with the individualisation and privatisation of care work creating a care deficit (Fannin and Perrier, 2016). Fannin and Perrier explore how neoliberal ideology has transformed social responsibilities into the burdens of individuals (2016). This places an undue burden on mothers, who are also depoliticised due to women's inclusion in the formal labour market. Women's affective work is both devalued as private and valorised as a superpower to combat the pressure of the market.

In a more gender-equal world, fathers are increasingly involved in childcare. However, fatherhood appears to also be the work of women, who actively cultivate the involvement and image of fathers in their children's lives. This creates an even heavier workload as women plan and organise both their and their husband's engagement with the children (Fox, 2009). For many, as Hochschild observed, the home has become a second work place, with people increasingly finding identity and comfort in the formal work environment instead (2001). She found for many mothers, work was an escape from their home life, acting as a site of recognition and structure which they lack at home (Hochschild, 2001). Work, both paid and unpaid, interacts with and forms a part of women's identities.

Understanding this highlights the role of work in how women make sense of the empty nest transition as their workloads shift and change.

Becoming a mother

The transition to motherhood has a profound effect on women's identity as the social organisation of the home changes. MacMahon found that the social organisation of family life and everyday gendered practices create a gendered sense of self, forming the identity of mothers (1995). However, this identity remains consistent as the 'situation' of motherhood changes, and women no longer care for dependent children. Maternal identity therefore is not just about workload but about a gendered consciousness, one which may change and morph after children leave the home.

Everyday practices of mothering can also be understood to constitute a 'common maternal culture' (Thomson, 2011). Maternal culture, although varied, is made and remade by successive generations of women (Thomson, 2011). Meanings of motherhood are both personal to the individual and also shaped by preceding generations. Thomson's study explored how first-time mothers use this common culture to find their own identities as mothers within them, finding motherhood to be a site of profound personal change (2011). The study used Butler's performativity (2015) to explore how women form their identities as mothers within the parameters of what is socially intelligible. This can be understood as the normalising principle. This determines what practices are norms and which lie outside (Butler, 2015). Maternal identity is formed through the relationship between the social and the individual. Personal narratives are derived from women's negotiations with the definition of what is normal, this is constructed through the repetition of gendered performances of motherhood (Thomson, 2011).

Motherhood is constructed as a critical aspect of femininity (Choi *et al.*, 2005). This means that women's gender identity is inextricably tied to their performance as mothers. Choi et al explored how mothers with young children understood their experiences of motherhood within the ideology of motherhood (2005). The study found that women struggled both with feelings of inadequacy from not meeting the 'myths' of motherhood and from the loss of personal identity due to the all-consuming role of the mother. The women were reluctant to

show this conflict as it would threaten their identity as women. With the social construction of women as caregivers, being a failing mother is incongruent with feminine identity (Choi *et al.*, 2005). For these women, their performance of intelligible womanhood was to hide their true feelings (see Butler, 2015). This means that if women don't feel they identify with the label of 'mother' it can be very distressing (Fox, 2009). Similarly, Sevón, found that even women who may not believe in traditional mothering ideas often identify with them as it provides a sense of coherent identity (2012). This identification can help women deal with not feeling 'naturally' maternal which is constructed to be inherent to femininity (Fox, 2009).

Understanding the meaning of motherhood is often conceived of in two parts; the personal and the socio-political which shapes the former (see Rich, 1997; Miller, 2005; Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009). This is important for not universalising the experiences of women who have unique personal stories, but instead investigating how the socio-political institutions shape their experience. The literature goes through how becoming a mother has a profound constitutive effect on women's identities in a gendered way as their roles, perceptions and behaviours change. My study will carry on from this to cover the other end of the spectrum – an empty nest.

Youth transitions

The present study connects to the research on youth transitions as the pathways of children have knock on effects for mothers. Youth transitions have become increasingly protracted and delayed, with partial dependence lasting longer (Irwin and Nilsen, 2018). This is due to the difficult job markets, increased costs and the reduced welfare system of a neoliberal UK (Irwin and Nilsen, 2018). Because of this, family transitions are less linear, instead swinging back and forth. This means that, after leaving home young adults are more dependent on their parents and their lives continue to be linked (Mitchell, 2006).

Austerity has made intergenerational support vitally important for the success of youth transitions. This means that parental involvement is prolonged (Irwin and Nilsen, 2018). Vulnerability and risk is much higher, which in turn compromises young people's autonomy and social independence (Irwin, 2018). Irwin also identified class differences, with differing

expectations of what youth transitions entail (2018). Middle-class families were likely to structure and manage their children's future and independence, whereas working class families afforded their children more latitude in deciding their future paths (Irwin, 2018). This will inevitably have an impact on how women make sense of the empty nest transition, as their supporting role becomes protracted. My study will integrate these findings which are not fully realised in the empty nesting literature.

Empty nesting

While the literature on the transition to motherhood is well established, an area of motherhood comparatively under-researched empty nesting. Bouchard reviewed the current literature on empty nesting to uncover what has been studied on this under-researched area of life transition (Bouchard, 2014). The review found work on well-being, marriage stability and economic transition, however, the area of study closest to my research is role loss versus role relief. This is the balance between the loss women feel when their tasks of mothering reduce and the relief this brings them, increasing time and decreasing mental load (Bouchard, 2014). This avenue looks at both the positive and negative aspects of an empty nest, this is what I will engage with concerning mothers' experiences, understandings and interpretations (Bouchard, 2014).

Since Bouchard's study, there has been new research of role loss versus role relief found in Herzberg-Kurasz *et al* which looks at the reconfiguration of maternal roles after children leave home in Poland and France. They found that the role of mothers evolve and shift in an empty nest. Material aspects of their mothering role reduced while the relational and emotional aspects persisted remotely (2024). This study is useful for understanding women's changing roles however, this does not interrogate the impact increasingly fragmented youth transitions have on women, something which my study will seek to address.

Sheriff and Weatherall also highlight a lack of attention to empty nesting in academic literature however, they did find it was well represented in popular culture and mass media which they analysed (Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009). The study first identified that the positive aspects of empty nesting, for example having more time for yourself, used to be

taboo. This is consistent with Gullette's study, which found stereotypes of post-maternal women being perceived as in decline and no longer serving a purpose, in literary media (1995). However, as gender equality has progressed, the modern woman discourse has prevailed allowing women to have lives outside of mothering (Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009). This does not come without limits as women must not seem 'too positive' about their children leaving the home. This is discursively mitigated through 'adjustment' allowing a period of mourning before women go on to live fulfilling lives. This is because of the inextricable link between maternal identity and feminine identity. Women are not allowed to celebrate empty nesting as it would undermine the social mandate of mothering which creates an ideal of women solely finding happiness in children (Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009).

The empty nest transition is being increasingly established as a positive experience, with an increase in personal opportunities, as well as a negative experience from a sense of loss (Mitchell, 2019). In line with perceptions in popular culture, there used to be an academic view that the empty nest transition was one of profound loss for women, however now more evidence points towards it having positive impacts on women's wellbeing and employment (Mitchell and Lovegreen, 2009; Mitchell, 2019). This is due to mothers being more likely to stay engaged in employment and have multiple roles and sources of self-definition outside of motherhood (Mitchell and Lovegreen, 2009). As Rich points out, mothers have the opportunity to return to themselves and their individual sense of self after their children leave home (1997). With the increase of the 'boomerang' generation, the empty nest transition is less linear and more drawn out as children re-renter the home periodically due to market conditions (Mitchell, 2006). I found the literature on empty nesting does not fully address the non-linear transitions of young people out of the home. My study will investigate whether this makes transitions easier by extending the adjustment period or harder by increasing women's caring responsibilities.

Women's transition to later life is less clear-cut than men as caring responsibilities continue after retirement (Smith and Moen, 1988; d'Albis, Doorley and Stancanelli, 2022). This is emphasised with a 'sandwich' generation when women are stuck in care responsibilities from both not-yet fully developed adult children and ageing parents (Grundy and Henretta,

2006). As women age their caring responsibilities change but don't go away, this could cause a continuity in identity after the years of dependence from children are over. This fragmented transition is not fully realised in the current discussion on empty nesting and its impact on mothers.

Motherhood is constructed as a core part of feminine identity. Because of the social mandate of mothering, being a mother has a profound effect on the identities of women. The empty nest transition is a comparatively under-researched area of motherhood, which tends to view the transition in terms of simple gain or loss. The literature that does exists often lacks insight into the heteronormative structures of motherhood, the social construction of femininity and how this impacts women's roles and perceptions. My study will investigate how women make sense of the empty nest transition. It will bridge the gap on empty nesting by investigating the changing nature of youth transitions, the increasing prevalence of double burdens of care and looking at how this affects how mothers make sense of the empty nest transition.

3. Methodology

In order to understand how mothers make sense of the empty nest transition this project used qualitative semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This approach was used as it captures the participants experiences, interpretations, and understandings of the empty nest transition. Qualitative interview data is the best way to understand lived experiences and insights into everyday life, exploring the inner emotional world of participants. The exploratory nature of semi-structured interviews meant that mothers could narrate their own lives and experiences. They are led by the participant enabling rich insight into their interpretations of the transition and what emotions and meaning they attach to this. The balance of flexibility and structure allows for in-depth, nuanced data, which covers all areas of interest. This means the data speaks to how mothers interpret, understand and assign meaning to the empty nest transition.

For this project, 10 mothers whose children had left home for an extended period of time took part in in-depth one-to-one interviews. These took place over Microsoft teams for scheduling flexibility. The interviews were transcribed using Otter AI which were then manually checked and fixed. The interviews were semi-structured, using a guide of facilitating questions and prompts leaving room for the participant to speak freely. Points were followed up as they emerged throughout the interview, using the participants phrasing to ask for expansion on points of interest. The interview guide was split into four topics: personal life, work, involvement and identity and mothering ideology. I used open questions such as ‘what does being a good mother mean to you?’ followed by prompts to elicit more detail: ‘has this changed’ and ‘is this important to you’. This was in order to understand how their role, behaviours and sense of self have changed and shifted during the empty nest transition. This methodological approach is similar to Choi, et al study on women’s transition to motherhood, which used a semi-structured interview guide with broad topic areas (2005). This worked well to elicit candid and detailed responses, covering areas including taboo subjects. Fox’s study on becoming parents used a more structured set of questions, which allowed them to stringently cover all areas. However, they found it also curtailed some discussions (2009). Therefore, my study used a guide with prompts to cover

all topic areas but allowed for all points to be realised and discussed freely, more similar to Choi, et al (2005). This technique allowed the researchers to explore women's lived experiences and personal understandings of their new mothering roles and is therefore appropriate for my research objectives.

The present study used convenience sampling within my university peer network and further snowball sampling from there. For recruitment, I initially approached my peers with the information sheets to be passed on to potential participants. This enabled participants to find out what the study would entail and contact me via email if they were interested in participating. Further recruitment was then achieved through snowball sampling. This allowed the study to gather enough appropriate participants within the project timeframe. The sample was 10 single or married mothers which were middle-class, intermediate, or working-class aged 40-60. The single mothers, many of whom had new partners, were categorised by self-identifying as single mothers. Class was ascribed using mothers and their partners (if applicable) occupations combined with their self-identification. While these are imperfect indicators of class, it was sufficient and clear enough to identify class differences across the sample. The sample did have a white middle-class bias, however, the study does not seek universal answers to the empty nest transition, instead uses a relativist ontology (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This means that, while including wider ethno-cultural identities could be a point of interest, the sample adequately answers the research question. The data shows the participants lived experiences navigating the empty nest transition, showing similarities and differences across the sample.

One challenge the study faced was the participants existing colloquial relationship with the researcher. However, this was managed by maintaining professionalism throughout the recruitment and interview process. This was upheld by using a formal yet approachable tone, letting the participant lead the conversation and structuring it with the interview guide. In order to avoid assumptions based on shared knowledge I asked open questions and inquired for further explanation even on familiar topics. Follow up questions stemmed from their previous responses and not prior knowledge. My positionality as a women aided the openness of the conversation, especially when discussing gendered expectations. However, my age being similar to the participants children may have impacted what they

did and did not say in interview. Reflecting on the interview process, the participants answered questions with a surprising openness. The topics explored were, at times, emotional and highly personal. However, this did not dissuade candid answers with the participants speaking freely about their emotions and experiences. One participant stated "it is so nice to be listened to" exemplifying the comfortability of the interview environment. This meant that the data produced was rich and informative, exploring all aspects of mother's experiences and interpretations. Additionally, the distance created by my positionality as a younger person, facilitated authentic data analysis by avoiding assumptions based on my own experiences. This allowed the data to speak for itself, enabling more rigorous inductive analysis.

Informed written consent was obtained before the interviews with an information sheet provided to participants prior to meeting. Due to the relation to my personal network, confidentiality was an area of core ethical concern. The confidentiality of the participants involvement was highlighted to them, explaining how the data will be anonymised and kept secure. Once initial contact was made, all exchanges were private and independent meaning their participation in the study was kept confidential. The transcripts were anonymised using pseudonyms, and identifiable information was removed. Information such as social class is given only when relevant throughout the discussions to disguise identifiable details, protecting participants anonymity. The interviews were handled with respect and empathy with confidentiality being clearly communicated at the beginning and end.

The transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis with inductive coding following Braun and Clarke's guide (2022). The analysis takes a social constructionist and relativist approach to explore how the participants themselves make sense of the empty nest transition. All transcripts were first read thoroughly in order to be emersed in the data. The transcripts were then coded inductively, with codes emerging throughout the process. Open codes were documented throughout the process, with similar quotes being grouped together. These codes were then related to the existing literature to identify commonalities and divergences from previous findings. This allowed all areas of the data to be explored, including emergent themes which were not present in the established literature.

The open codes identified were then grouped together into axial codes informed by the literature. These axial codes were phenomenological, explaining what the experience meant for the participant (Saldaña, 2024). Throughout the analysis process, the axial codes were rearranged and redrafted to form the most accurate and analytical narrative of the data. At the end six axial codes were identified: gradual transition, enduring identity of mothers, pull of involvement, managed independence, freedom and self-discovery, and alternative identities. During the coding and thematic process, higher order themes emerged from the data of continuity and change. These broad higher order themes were then developed into more descriptive phenomenological themes of 'fragmented transitions' and 'room for growth'. This thematic ordering pays salient attention to the literature with a social constructionist theoretical framework. These methods allow for an in-depth and nuanced exploration of women's experiences, allowing this study to investigate how mothers make sense of the empty nest transition.

4. How do women make sense of the empty nest transition: Findings and discussions

The empty nest transition cannot be thought of in terms of simple gain or loss, instead it is a complex interplay of continuing responsibilities and evolving roles. Women's experience of the empty nest is shaped by family structure, individual values, and neoliberal pressures. Motherhood and subsequent maternal identity, remains a central and enduring part of women's lives after their children leave home, this role shifts and adjusts but does not disappear. This chapter answers the question of how mothers make sense of the empty nest transition. Examining mother's interpretations, understandings, and experiences of an empty nest.

This chapter is structured into two sections, each with three subsections. The first section discusses women's experiences of the empty nest transition as a continuity that persist with 'fractured transitions'. This section encompasses the subsections of gradual change, enduring maternal identity and the pull of involvement in their children's lives that mothers continue to experience after their children leave home. Section two looks at the interpretation of the empty nest transition as a change or 'room for growth'. Within this it explores managed independence, self-discovery and alternative identities that occur around the empty nest transition. This structuring of this chapter does not represent an either / or divide but explores experiences which occur simultaneously. While the literature tends to understand it in terms of simple gain or loss, the data here suggests the empty nest transition is complex and fragmented, constituting of both continuing responsibilities and evolving roles. Moreover, in order to understand how women, make sense of the empty nest transition we need to pay attention to how it is shaped by their marital status, social class, and individual mothering ideologies.

Fragmented Transitions

The empty nest transition is not a clear end to the role of a mother. Parenting is a highly gendered experience, one in which women are constructed as 'natural' primary caregivers.

This social practice places undue burdens on mothers on the basis of "motherhood's immediately apparent naturalness" (Smyth, 2012, p. 39).

Gradual change

Many of the women felt the empty nest transition was just one small part of a gradual transition into adulthood. This meant that their children leaving home was not a pivotal moment in their life, with young people's transition to adulthood becoming an increasingly protracted process.

> *"As children get older, they become more independent anyway. So, I think life changed probably around, sort of 13,14, I feel like they were pretty independent before they left anyway." (Anne, married)*

This was a sentiment all of the respondents shared, that "it wasn't a sudden kind of change" (Isabel) rather it happened "gradually from them getting older" (Milly). This highlights the complexity of family transitions as adult children's independence swings back and forth. Transitions to adulthood are becoming increasingly flexible with parent and child continuing to have linked lives after departure from the home (see Mitchell, 2006). The soft transition into adulthood is reaffirmed by adult children's continued presence in their parents' everyday lives, particularly with the rise of social media and digital technologies. As one mother explained:

> *"I think I did want to say about the social media FaceTime thing, because I think it makes it a lot less like they've left home than it would have been for say, my parents. And I think that's a massive difference in generations." (Milly)*

> *"My time is still quite taken up with communicating with them… I think that it is a bit of a burden" (Milly)*

Though Milly's children have physically left home, their presence, and the need to support them is still constant, especially with the intimacy enabled through digital technologies. This creates an expectation for her to be constantly accessible, shouldering the 'burden' of her

children's issues *(Smyth, 2012)*. Intergenerational support is increasingly more important for young people's transition into adulthood, with wide recognition that youth transitions are more precarious and uncertain in a neoliberal Britain (Irwin, 2018). Mothers like Milly have their caring role stretched to compensate for a difficult financial world, enabled through ever closer digital connections. This prolongs the empty nest transition, as mothers continue to provide for their children after they've left home.

Another reoccurring theme in the interviews was the continuation of multi-generational care work, with many women expressing their ongoing care duties for ageing parents.

> *"So, where my role as a mum to the children kind of changed. I then took on extra responsibilities with my dad, so my time is really busy, because I'm with him a lot, and I manage his finances, and his care, he has a care team, wrapped around him but it's keeping on top of that" (Linda, single)*

> *"As your kids become more independent. Maybe your parents become a little bit more dependent" (Jemima, married)*

Here Linda and Jemima express the continuation of their caring responsibilities. While their children became more independent and left home their elderly parents became more dependent on them. This is the case for many women in a 'sandwich generation' who are left simultaneously caring for semi-dependent children and ageing parents (Grundy and Henretta, 2006). The empty nest transition can therefore be conceived of as gradual, as women's caring roles morph and change while their children slowly gain independence.

<u>Maternal identity endures</u>

Motherhood is constructed as an integral part of femininity, portraying women as primary caregivers (Rich, 1997). Perhaps it is not surprising then that the majority of respondents feel their identity as mothers has endured after their children leave home.

> *"That responsibility doesn't feel any less, although on a practical level, there is less time spent on it. I mean, I would never think that there's a point at which that the*

fact that you're their mother, that disappears or somehow becomes less important, but at a practical level, it just takes less time." (Janet, married)

Here Janet explains that while her situation has changed, and her caregiving role has reduced, the responsibility she feels for her children is the same. Motherhood is an entrenched part of her identity, or as Dania put it: "Once a mother, always a mother." Many of the respondents, particularly single mothers, were resistant when asked if their mothering values have changed as their children got older. This resonates with the essentialist idea of an unbreakable and unchallengeable maternal bond. Any discrepancies with this becomes a moral issue, going against women's 'innate' ability to mother (Miller, 2005).

"Yeah, you've got to be a good mum, but you don't always get it right. There's no book, there's no guidance. " (Linda, single, middle-class)

"I'm quite used up because I try and be everything for them" (Milly, single, middle-class)

Milly and Linda, both single mothers, highlight the pressure put on mothers to be perfect. Here, the tension between the needs of their children and their own needs is apparent, something which has endured post nest-leaving. Both mothers express ideas of not being good enough and not fulfilling the mothering ideal. This highlights the tight moral boundaries mothers must navigate, with a narrow space for acceptable mothering practices (Perrier, 2013). Within this small margin for error, these single mothers, with the added pressure of being sole parents, must "try to be everything" (Milly) for their children. As identified by Herzberg-Kurasz *et al,* the ultimate responsibility for their children's academic achievement, emotional wellbeing and social success is on their shoulders (2024). After their children leave home, what continues to be salient is "giving them guidance, lots of emotional support, and making them feel safe" (Amy, single). The relational aspects of mothering do not disappear post nest-leaving. This moral ultimate responsibility placed onto mothers entrenches their identity, meaning "you can't stop being a mother" (Dania, single).

Pull of involvement

For many women, after their child leaves home they still feel a pull of involvement. This is especially true of single mothers, with many not perceiving their child as having actually left.

> *"Because I don't actually see them as leaving. I see them as, I see it as a kind of, they've gone to explore something." (Linda, single mother)*

> *"My child has gone to university, but she hasn't left home." (Amy, single mother)*

While their children do not live in the house currently, neither view their children as having 'left'. They are reluctant to let go, and they feel their role as mothers has not changed. This manifests itself in wanting to nurture their children when they do come back. "When she's back here, you tend to want to do a lot of things for her and she tends to want the comfort" (Dania, single). These single mothers experience a significant pull to be involved in their adult children's lives. Though usually applied to early childhood, the participants experience echoes ideas of 'intensive' mothering, which constructs intensive, self-sacrificing maternal love as crucial for a child's development (Arendell, 2000; Fox, 2009).

Married mothers too felt this pull, though they negotiated it differently, stressing the split between preserving their child's autonomy and supporting them. As one married mother put it: "It's really tempting to interfere" (Sandra, married).

> *"The biggest thing for me is the kind of the split, you want your children to leave home and you want them to be kind of grown and independent and not need you, and then there's very much part of you that actually apparently doesn't want it at all." (Isabel, married, middle-class)*

> *"Because we're so close, maybe, maybe that makes it harder for to go away from home" (Jemima, married, intermediate class)*

Isabel and Sandra are caught in the tension between supporting their children's independence and being needed. They must carefully navigate the narrow boundaries of

'too much' involvement or 'not enough'. In my research it was the married mothers who felt this tension the most. Similarly, Jemima reflects here on if her close relationship to her children, which she deeply values, has impacted their autonomy and social independence. Here, the pressure on mothers to be perfect is exemplified, where they must avoid being pathologized as a "helicopter" (Isabel) mum or viewed as uncaring. Intermediate-class mother Jemima is an outlier in the general pattern of married mothers being less involved in their adult children's lives. Jemima is heavily involved in her adult children's lives, providing them with as much support as possible and staying in contact throughout the day.

> *"I think I am perhaps a bit of a control freak, perhaps a bit too much, sometimes bit of smothering, not mothering. " (Jemima, married, intermediate class)*

Here Jemima expresses the continuing involvement she has in her children's lives, also revealing the pressure and judgement she feels to get it right. Her tentative comments about "smothering" and "control freak" show unease and uncertainty over the validity of her mothering practices. Jemima's divergence from the other married mothers portrays class as an affective process on the empty nest transition. Presumptions of 'good' mothering are reflective of class hierarchies, mounting increased moral pressure on working class and intermediate mothers (Fannin and Perrier, 2016). This is particularly pertinent in an increasing culture of 'mother blame' or maternal determinism (Miller, 2005).

Room for growth

As well as continuity, the respondents grappled with changes to their role and identity. I found this is profoundly shaped by social class, marital status, and individual beliefs. A stark contrast between married and single mothers appeared in the data. The single mothers repeatedly insisted that "nothing's changed" (Amy) while married mothers emphasised their newfound "flexibility and freedom" (Janet). The data shows that single mother's role and identity was more static and rigid, compared to the reflexivity and flexibility of their married counterparts. This means that the way mothers roles shift and evolve were experienced differently according to family structure.

Managed independence

A core part of children leaving home is the negotiation of independence. Both single and married mothers supported their children's independence, with married mothers having a heightened awareness of this structuring.

> *"I've helped them to begin with, but I'm increasingly letting them do it themselves now… permitting them to make the initial explorations of life with a safety net and then you are having to, as part of your role as mother, you are having to remove elements of the safety net and let them fly. " (Shelia, married, middle-class)*

> *"We thought that moving out would be a really good thing for them and for us (...) but we also felt that it would, it would begin that process of separation." (Janet, married, middle-class)*

Here, Shelia demonstrates the process of gradually structuring adult childrens' independence, helping them then removing 'the safety net'. This can be understood in the framework of Lareau's concept of concerted cultivation (2011). A classed mothering practice whereby middle-class parents actively structure their children's lives for social gain (Lareau, 2011). Many of the participants conceived of university as "a good bridge" or a "halfway house" (Milly) towards an independent life. Janet expressed the mutual benefit for her and her children in supporting their social independence and autonomy. Married mothers like Shelia and Janet shared the sentiment of a shifting role towards a more hands-off parenting approach: "I've moved out of a relatively high demands stage of the role of mother into a maintenance stage of the role of mother" (Shelia, married). Here Shelia is reflecting on the fading of her material mothering role to one that is more relational, a role which can continue remotely.

Single mothers on the other hand, were more likely to emphasise the ways in which they still provide support for their children emotionally.

> *"I try not to interfere too much, but I'll always be here." (Dania, working-class)*

“I still remind them to take care of themselves.” (Amy, working-class)

"They're quite emotionally dependent on me" (Milly, middle-class)

Single mothers Dania, Amy and Milly emphasised the continuing emotional support they give to their adult children. This is especially true when their children are struggling to adapt to independent life with Dania and Milly expressing the continued emotional labour, they do daily to ensure their children’s wellbeing. As Dania explained: "My whole day revolves around her." This sentiment from Dania and Milly reflects ideologies of intensive mothering. The literature on intensive mothering assumes it is a middle-class phenomenon (see Perrier, 2013). However, both Amy and Dania are working class, showing that the notion of working class mothers being less involved, is simplistic and lacks nuance.

In my research, single mothers showed more signs of intensive mothering ideologies while married mothers showed more signs of concerted cultivation, though these are not mutually exclusive. Both of these sentiments reflect the construction of women as primary caregivers and the and the emotional labour mothers must continue to provide their children. This also contrasts to the literatures view of intensive mothering as a middle-class phenomenon, showing class is not a decisive determiner of involvement (Hays, 1996; Fox, 2009; Perrier, 2013). My findings resonate with Hays’ work which found that intensive mothering ideologies increase in times of financial hardship (1996). This could explain single mothers, with less resources for themselves and their children, exhibit higher levels of involvement within the context of increasingly protracted youth transitions (Irwin, 2018).

Individual beliefs affect the parenting styles of empty nest mothering, particularly in regard to negotiating their children’s independence. One striking difference I found was between married mother Janet and single mother Linda, who are both middle-class and share children of similar ages but had oppositional views on intrusion into their adult children’s homes. On the one hand Janet expressed “I would never dream of dropping in on them without notice.” Whereas Linda said (in relation to her son’s house): "I've got keys to the house, so I let myself in and put something in his fridge." This shows the diversity in approaches towards setting boundaries and separation between mother and child in order

to maintain their autonomy and independence. These represent differing mothering ideologies, continuing the distinction between married and single mothers.

Freedom and self-discovery

For many, particularly married mothers, the empty nest transition can trigger reflexivity. With more time and "brain space" (Sandra, married) for themselves. This allows new explorations in their interests, sense of self and identity.

> *"I'm not sort of thinking of myself as much as just a mother. I'm thinking of myself in, dunno, broader terms." (Sandra, middle-class)*

> *"Flexibility and freedom now I suppose that there's nobody relying on us." (Janet, middle-class)*

> *"Trying to find a new sense of self when you don't define yourself first as a mother." (Isabel, middle-class)*

For these women, their children leaving home gave them freedom to pursue other social roles. Their sense of self widened, allowing them to identify in ways other than just a mother. Many started or continued existing hobbies, spent more time with friends and had more time with their husbands. This is in keeping with the established literature on the positive changes women experience in post-maternity (Mitchell, 2019). These mothers are also all middle-class. Having more financial resources affords them more freedom by having greater access to services for themselves and their children. This is reflected clearly by married, middle-class mother Janet.

> *"We have always had a housekeeper, even when we couldn't afford to have one." (Janet)*

> *"We had bought apartments for each of them, and we rented them until they were ready to move into them" (Janet)*

Due to Janet's high household income, she was able to buy apartments for her children to move into and maintain a housekeeper during and after the years of their dependence. This means that in her empty nest house she has more time for herself, allowing her to pick up new hobbies, see friends and reflect on her sense of self. This also means that her children are less financially vulnerable affording them more autonomy and social independence (Irwin and Nilsen, 2018).

Single mothers too felt their roles change in response to this transition, reflecting on the ways their children have developed.

> "You go from being someone that does everything for them to them sort of doing so much more on their own. So, there's, I suppose, there is a shedding of responsibility in a way." *(Amy, working-class)*

> *" I think now that she's an adult, she's her own person so I can be my own person." (Dania, working-class)*

However, unlike the married mothers, they did not feel this impacted much on their identity. The change in their roles felt minimal, as the support they provide for their children continued to a greater extent. Unlike Janet, Dania and Amy are also working-class, affording them less access to resources. This will have a knock on affect to their children making their transition to adulthood more precarious, reducing their social independence (Irwin, 2018). This leaves many still struggling to find time for themselves.

> *"I'm not much of a natural at doing things for myself… Spare time is not a thing that I have… I spend really, really little time on anything for myself." (Milly, middle-class)*

I found the single mothers were more likely to experience role strain when balancing between areas of life. They continued to struggle finding time for themselves and their interests despite their children leaving home, something which is true for both working and middle-class single mothers. This reflects the conflict between living one's own life and being there for others Miller expressed (2005).

Alternative identities

At the time in women's lives that their children leave home, many other transitions occur simultaneously. Many of the respondents felt that these transitions, including patterns of work changing and new relationships, impacted their sense of self more than their children leaving home. For around half of respondents, work was an important part of their identity, this cut across marital status and social class.

> *"I'm mum and I'm a wife, and then I would say my sort of role as (profession) is, you know, sort of equally as big." (Anne, married, middle-class)*

> *(On work) "I feel as though it's helped to get my identity back, from being a mother." (Dania, single, working-class)*

> *"I value work, and I would miss it, and I think my self-esteem would suffer if I didn't work, because it's an important part of what I do. "(Janet, married, middle-class)*

Clearly for these mothers, work is of high importance for their role in life. And as Dania explains, an avenue for identity outside of their mothering role. This reflects Hochschild's findings in *Time Bind*, where mothers are increasingly finding identity through the workplace as a site of recognition, structure and comfort (2001). Additionally, the data shows that for married mothers Anne and Janet, work is much more embedded in their identity than it is for single mother Dania. For Dania, work is more of a fall back, something which has replaced the time she once spent on her dependent child. For married mothers on the other hand, work is an integral part of their sense of self. This further speaks to the contrast between married and single mothers. For these married mothers who find work a key source of identity, the thought of leaving or retiring is more daunting than the empty nest transition.

> *"I think when I retire, I'll probably struggle a bit more in what my identity is, because I don't think there's much time left for me or has been throughout from when the kids were born, actually." (Anne)*

For Anne, she predicts the coming years will be a bigger transition, after working long hours for two decades, she will have to grapple with how to make sense of her free time. During the empty nest transition, work can provide an alternative identity to mothers. With changes to working roles occurring at similar times in a mother's lives, these shifts interact with their interpretations of the empty nest transition.

As well as work, relationships provide alternative sources of identity for mothers. The empty nest transition does not just impact the mother-child relationship but other relationships around it. Single mothers Milly, Dania and Linda all moved in with their partners around the same time as their children leaving. This gave them an alternative identity and role after their children left home, something which was not experienced by married mothers. However, one married mother Shelia expressed a negative impact on her marriage. This meant her marriage represented another gap in her life, creating an absence of identity.

> *(After children left home) "There was a realisation that that's been an important joining point which isn't there in the same way and won't be there in the same way... Um. Yes, slightly uncomfortable spotlight shone on that, I would say. " (Shelia, married)*

Here Shelia expresses the impact her children leaving home as had on her marriage, with less conversations about their children being had, they struggled to relate to one another. Where new relationship create a new path of identity formation, the breakdown of existing ones creates a gap. This furthers the contrast between married and single mothers. While instances of divorce post nest-emptying are documented in the empty nest research (Mitchell, 2019), the impact of new relationships is absent.

> *"I think my sense of self has changed more in response to negotiating a new relationship." (Milly)*

> *"It's changed more because I got a partner um and uh, he moved in with me." (Dania)*

For these single mothers, the empty nest transition has enabled them to embark on new, or develop existing, relationships. With more time, they have more freedom to pursue other social roles. This creates an alternative source of identity outside of mothering. This can be an empowering experience, allowing for a renewed life outside of having children. For Milly, the decision to be in a new relationship was of huge importance to her, something which she did in order to prioritise herself after her children left home.

> *"It's important for me to get on with my own life, and, you know, not refuse to be in a new relationship, because I want to be with them." (Milly)*

However, a new relationship can also create an increased workload and use a lot of energy, as Milly expressed "it takes a lot of nurturing". When asked if their daily domestic workload had changed, both Dania and Milly expressed that because of their new partners it has stayed the same or even increased. The impact of new relationships is absent from the empty nesting literature. I found that new relationships are another way that mother's interpretations of the empty nest transition are shaped by marital status. Having the potential to be an outlet of alternative identity for single mothers. They can represent both an expression of self and an increasing workload. Changing identities within work and relationships reflect the increasing availability of multiple roles for women outside of mothering found in Mitchell and Lovegreen (2009). This contributes to the shifting roles and identity which occur in the empty nest transition.

In summary, the empty nest transition consists of continuing responsibilities and evolving roles occurring simultaneously. The transition is gradual with a pull of involvement still present and maternal identity enduring throughout. It can also be a time of profound personal growth and freedom as mothers support the independence of their children allowing other aspects of their lives to flourish. Social class, marital status and individual mothering ideologies profoundly shape how mothers make sense of the empty nest transition, leading to diverse experiences across the sample. While the literature tends to conceive of the empty nest in terms of simple gain or loss, it is far more complex and fragmented. Stark differences between marital statuses have emerged with married mothers experiencing a greater change in workload and sense of self compared with the

pull of involvement and continuing responsibilities that were more profound for single mothers. Classed differences were also apparent throughout, with middle-class mothers having more resources for themselves and their children, leading to more free time. Mothering ideologies, which are also tied to class and marital status, affect how involved mothers are in their children's lives, leading to differing levels of contact and continued support. Motherhood has been made into an important faucet of a women's life, this role shifts and changes but does not go away in the empty nest transition.

5. Conclusions

This study explored how mothers make sense of the empty nest transition. Using a social constructionist approach it asked how women experience, interpret and understand an empty nest and how this impacts their identity within the context of gendered parenthood. Motherhood is constructed to be one of the most important aspects of a women's life making it a rich area for sociological and feminist research. This research contributes to the literature on the social construction of motherhood, extending the research area to look at the 'end' of mothering when children leave home. The empty nest transition is a comparatively under-researched area of motherhood and tends to be conceived of in terms of simple gain or loss. The empty nest transition, however, is not an end to motherhood but a fragmented and complex transition consisting of a mix of evolving roles and continuing responsibilities, experienced simultaneously in overlapping ways. It cannot be thought of in terms of simple gain or loss. Mothers make sense of the empty nest transition in diverse ways, shaped by structural factors of social class, marital status and individual mothering ideologies.

The implications of this is that motherhood cannot be thought of as a role that starts and ends but rather a gendered consciousness that endures overtime. Motherhood is a gendered experience which continues to be significant in women's lives after the departure of their children. This is especially true as youth transitions become increasingly prolonged, in a difficult financial environment and with digital technologies allowing for a continued daily presence of adult children in their parent's lives. Structural factors shaped this experience, most notably stark differences between married and single mothers were apparent. Single mothers felt the pull to be involved in their children's lives most strongly, with the responsibility for their children's wellbeing remaining despite their departure. However, this stage of life can be a time of profound change, where roles evolve, and identities shift as the expectations of motherhood begin to lift. Married middle-class mothers with more resources for their self and children, felt this lifting of responsibilities most strongly. This indicates that the expectations of what is socially intelligible may differ between single and married mothers. The empty nest transition therefore cannot be

thought of in simple terms of loss or gain, instead represents a complex transition with both continuity and change. This is a significant finding, which should reshape academic literature and public discourse on the empty nest transition to transcend the binary of loss and gain. It should also take into account that in addition to children leaving the home, other transitions are taking place simultaneously which have equal impacts. This deconstructs the notion that motherhood is the most important facet of women's lives.

The empty nest transition is often overlooked in sociological and feminist research into motherhood. In future research, motherhood and youth transition scholars should work together, exploring the symbiotic relationship between the trajectory of children's lives and the impact this as on mothers and other parents. Methodologically, exploring both mother and child's perspective of the empty nest transition would be beneficial to understand how they relate and interact. This joint approach could reveal insights on a deeper level than the scope of this study. Further attention should be given to the differences between single and married mothers that were identified in this study. Researchers should look at heterosexual norms of motherhood and identify and the ways this impacts different family structures. This would create further understanding of the impact family structure has on children's transition to adulthood and the subsequent effects on mothers.

In conclusion, the empty nest transition is a complex, fragmented transition which consists of both continuing responsibilities and evolving roles. The way mothers make sense of the transition is profoundly shaped by class, marital status and individual mothering ideologies which create diverse experiences. An empty nest can be a time of personal growth for mothers with freedom to pursue new social roles and identities. It can also be a continuation of responsibility and emotional labour as mothering roles continue remotely. Positive, negative and neutral experiences occur simultaneously and overlap. Motherhood is a gendered consciousness constructed by norms of heterosexuality and femininity. These gendered expectations do not end when children fly the nest. While mothers' roles shift and evolve the gendered consciousness remains: "Once a mother, always a mother" (Dania).

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Appendix 1

Transcript of interview number 8: Isabel, married, middle-class

Ok, tell me about your children.

I have three children. Um aged 23, 21 and 19.

And how had your day to day life changed since your children left home?

My house is emptier and quieter and cleaner and tidier. So it's more not having their presence. um and um I guess it's given there's space now for more time um as particularly comp when compared to the children um being toddlers or um school age years, um, it was a lot busier running to clubs and running to um and uh kind of organizing uh and looking after the children um the last couple of years, obviously adult children, uh has it kind of decreases over time. until they kind of until children then uh are more often not at home than at home.

And what do you do in your spare time and has this changed at all?

Um absolutely having three children and a kind of a full-time job throughout um I spare time um I didn't have much spare time we would see the kind of work you're looking after children so I now find I do have spare time. So it's definitely changed. I'm sure I had spare time before children, but that was so long ago that I kind of forgotten what I what my hobbies were. um so it it's now kind of finding time for me again. So it's spending time with my friends and my husband um and uh going for a longer dog walks, um they kind of the weekends, uh finding go back to kind of uh in things like joy like theater or plays or dance. um and socializing a more without having to worry that you've better be back for 11 o'clock to go and pick up whatever time to go and pick up from a club or activity or the train station where kids are stuck.

And have you started any new hobbies or interests?

I guess um I mean, no, not yet so I am starting to kind of think about it. uh I'm definitely booking more holidays for my husband myself are with friends um that I hadn't gone away without the children for a very long time or more than overnight for a very long time so kind

of starting um to think about that again. Um I'm fairly full on with work, so I guess I haven't done very much kind of spare time lately.

And has your marriage changed at all since your children left home?

Um, I guess we are more time for each other again rather than just kind of logistics, um throughout years when the busy years we were there was a lot of kind of tagging, like to kind of go, okay, I'm back you can go out or we can go and pick up children whatever whereas now we can actually spend time together. So yeah, no it's nice to be able to spend more time not talking about logistics but actually just enjoying each other's company. Yeah.

So has it changed what you talk about together?

Um, absolutely. Yes, it's as I said, uh less about kind of logistics and, you know, who needs to pick up children what, where, when, and you can actually talk about, um the things that have happened during the day or, you know, the other bigger topics of conversation as well.

And in a given day, roughly what proportion of time do you spend on yourself versus uh things for others?

Um, I'm assuming work isn't myself. I guess, um I guess evenings I would have um to myself um I often catch up with friends either kind of, um lunchtime or pre-work or something so that might have an hour a day catching up with people um and then evenings I went to the theater last night um so maybe kind of four hours a day now

So do you work and has this change at all?

Um Yes, I do. I have my own business so it's quite full on um and it's in the city so I often not today, but I often travel into the city. Um, has it changed? Um if you're talking kind of since (youngest) recently left or less so, but if we're talking more since I had children full time and looking after them, then yes, I've changed my working arrangements over the last 20 years. as you in a different kind of phase of childcare. So initially pre-children I worked full time and I'm now back to working full time. and over the years I have worked kind of more part time, say three days a week or could of work in the evenings to kind of catch up so that you could pick up children or spend some time with them. So kind of actual logistically, kind of

physically, it has and then also how much energy you can kind of put into work. I can put more kind of time and headspace into work than I could, particularly in the early years when you're very busy. In fact, I put kind of promotion and things on hold when I had three children under four because my head didn't have any time to anything other than yes, you doing client work and looking after children. So over the years, yes, I mean, it wasn't a sudden kind of change and you know, less since university started in September.

And what sort of age was that when you went back up to more full on work?
I have had a number of different arrangements over the years, so when I had my first so I was working full-time pre children and then when my children were um not yet at school, I worked more kind of three days a week um so three and half days a week um when there were a secondary school, I went up to four days a week um and then when they were fairly self-sufficient, so probably by the time they were kind of 15, 16 or all of them or the youngest um it was I then and well it stayed at four days it was more when I set up. I said like 2019 said, yeah, more and they were kind of 15, 16 when (youngest) was 15 ,16. and they went back to a full time.. But that wasn't just children. It was kind of um of work as well, how much work, you it was to do and where it was in my career.

And how important is working for you?
Um, well, it's a mixture of providing money for three children who aren't yet ear their own all bunch of their own money. Um so that is important and I guess it is a lot of who I am as well. So yes, first financially probably is first and second, um for being, who I am. I'm not sure it'd be very good just sitting around at home. Um entertaining myself.

Does it feel like um it's a big part of your life then?
I set up my business two years ago, so it more than more than ever it's a big part of my life yes.

How much time do you spend on work within the home and how do you share this or with your husband or partner? I have a husband.

Sorry, not actual work but domestic tasks.

Um, my husband has been working for the last couple of years. um so initially we were uh very equitable, we very much split the work the domestic and of work load 50/50. whoever was around whoever was in that night would do the washing or the cooking. So it was shared. um and um at the moment because he's not working and I am he does the majority of it.

and so that has that changed it been a changed at all since your kids went to uni?
um no that's more to do with kind of like living arrangements you know work life arrangements rather than that although there's just less um domestic chores required when no well, it's just the two of us at home. less cleaning, less cooking and less washing.

Has your children leaving home impacted your business?
Um Yes, I couldn't I think maybe it's because my children being older, absolutely whether it's to do with them not being in the house, probably less so. It's more when there was small and you needed to do a lot for them. I couldn't have spent the amount of time that I do dedicated to work. I think of my 23 year old came and lived back home, it wouldn't take up that much time. I would still have been able to carry on the work, but I mean it's definitely the age of my children and the phase that they're in.

How often do you have contact with your children?
Um, I would say a lot so, um youngest I would say most days, um so that 19 year old most days are 21 year old three or four times a week and the 23 year old two or three times a week. So, um that's phone conversations and actually seeing them um I see my eldest couple of times a month, um middle child, uh, once every, well, whilst at university, I'd see them once during a during a term, so either I would go up or they would come down because he's in (city), which is further away. um (youngest) in (city) who I would see maybe two or three times a term.