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TRANSITION TO THE EMPTY NEST:
CHANGES IN PARENTAL OPTIMISM
AND PARENTAL FATALISM

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
Karen Gegner Rohr, B.A., M.S.

*****

The Ohio State University
1984

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background

Family development theorists have defined certain stages across the life span of families and have identified critical transitions between these stages (Aldous, 1978; Duvall, 1977; Glick, 1977; Hill & Mattessich, 1979; Rodgers, 1973). Rapoport (1963) characterizes such transitions as "normal crises" or "points of no return" and argues that "If they are handled advantageously, it is assumed that maturation or development results; if not, old tensions may be renewed and new conflicts may arise" (p. 68). A poignant no-return point for parents is the departure of their last child from the home, often referred to as "the transition to the empty nest."

The commonly held myth that parents experience the launching of the last child from the home as stressful is unfounded. Rather, most research suggests that most parents adapt successfully to this transition. Cross-sectional studies have found that empty nest parents, when asked about their marriages and general well-being, characterize this stage in their lives as "happy" or "happier" than other life stages (Burr, 1970; Campbell et al., 1976; Deutscher, 1959, 1964; Glenn, 1975; Rollins & Cannon, 1974; Rollins & Galligan, 1978). To date, study of the transition to the empty nest has
essentially focused only on marital and general quality of life satisfaction of middle-aged respondents; how satisfied they are as parents or how they adapt as their parental obligations shift during the process of launching children into adult society has not been addressed.

This transition to the empty nest is a normative, scheduled event which parents expect (Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976; Rubin, 1979; Spence & Lonner, 1971). Children do grow up and leave home -- all parents know that, but how parents experience the launching of their children is not as apparent. Is it an abrupt event -- children "here today and gone tomorrow" -- or is it a more gradual process for parents? Certainly the task of parenting changes gradually as children grow and develop (Aldous, 1978; Lowenthal et al., 1975; Pearl, 1980; Rapoport, et al., 1977; Rosow, 1976). Changes within the parental role evolve as children grow from infancy to adulthood. The child once so dependent on parents to meet his or her every need struggles for individuation and autonomy during adolescence, and eventually is launched into adult society.

"Launched" has been defined by Rapoport, Rapoport, and Strelitz (1977) as the beginning of the child's adulthood. The feeling of both parents and children that the latter are "launched" provides a turning point in the experience of most parents who may then feel less directly responsible for their children. This may occur when the child moves out of the parental home to attend college, to begin military service, to take a full-time job, or to marry. Rapoport et al. (1977) maintain that "the actual point is variable, and the
experience fluid rather than ritually marked and culturally prescribed" (p. 308). Launching, then, implies a lessening of active parenting concomitant with a gradual progression of child from dependency to more equal status as an independent, self-supporting adult.

From a developmental point of view, parents are to accept and even to encourage this shift from dependence to independence. Duvall (1971, 1977) has labeled this stage in the family cycle as "the launching center." She conceptualizes the essential family developmental task associated with this stage as "releasing children" so they can become autonomous adults. Aldous (1978) labels the task at hand, "letting go," and characterizes it as the process whereby parents socialize their adolescents to become adults. Parent-child ties are loosened. Parents are mandated to give their adolescents more power to make their own decisions. Aldous ties parental satisfaction to "letting go" by arguing that to the extent parents are able to engage in anticipatory socialization of their adolescents for independence, the more adaptive it is for the parents (and for the adolescents).

In order for adolescent children to become autonomous adults, Aldous (1978) argues that both parents and children must go through this process of "letting go." She suggests that parents can prepare their adolescents for adult status by gradually letting go of their control over the adolescent and allowing the adolescent to exercise some autonomy. According to adolescent development theorists, the adolescent's developing autonomy and the loosening of parent-child
ties can be expressed in several ways: (1) emotionally, as the adolescent relaxes ties to the family and begins to establish bonds of love, support, and confidence elsewhere; (2) behaviorally, as the adolescent acquires skill and courage to decide (on his/her own) what he/she will or will not do; and (3) ideationally, as the adolescent grapples with basic values and beliefs (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Sebald, 1977).

It is not at all clear in the literature what exactly "letting go" means for parents. Certainly, forces outside the family exert influence on the adolescent and consequently parental influence becomes less dominant. Coleman's (1961) study of adolescents in ten high schools documents the extent to which the socializing agents shift from the family to "outsiders." Newman (1978) points out the adolescent's tremendous need for peer identification and for participation with other adults in a variety of other settings -- the high school, work, church, etc. -- as the adolescent moves toward becoming an autonomous adult. Rapoport et al. (1977) suggest that parents who feel particularly powerless and unable to influence their children may have "given up" on their children by this time, relying on sources outside the family, social services or the police, for example, to control their adolescents who are beyond their reach.

Is "letting go," then, by default or by design? Are parents aware of an appropriate distancing in the parent-child relationship that they then take so that their adolescent children can be successfully launched into adulthood? Family development theorists argue that there are fundamental family developmental tasks --
"growth responsibilities" associated with certain stages in the life of a family. These tasks, they contend, are defined by societal needs as well as the needs of individual family members. Failure to achieve these tasks results in unhappiness, societal disapproval, and interference in achieving future tasks (Duvall, 1977; Hill & Mattessich, 1979; McCullough, 1980). In the context of launching children, if parents fail in the developmental task associated with this family stage, parents and children will be unhappy and the societal need for a new generation to carry out its proper functions will not be fulfilled.

Whether it is called the developmental task of "releasing" or the process of "letting go," there exists in both the family development literature and in the adolescent development literature the clear mandate that middle-aged parents need to lessen control, i.e., to "let go" or "release" their adolescent offspring into greater independence if these children are going to make it as adults. If parents fail to do so, it is implied that they will feel some dissatisfaction with how they have parented up to this point. Thus, prior to and during the transition to the empty nest there is a shift from dependence of child on parent to greater independence between adult child and parent that requires that middle-aged parents "let go."

Unanswered Questions

Two basic questions regarding the parental experience during the transition to the empty nest have not been explicitly addressed in
the literature: (1) how satisfied these parents are as parents, and (2) whether these parents are attending to the family developmental task of "letting go." Certainly many changes are occurring for parents at mid-life but what changes specific to the launching of their children are they experiencing? Are parents feeling optimistic about their parenting at mid-life? And, secondly, are parents indeed attending to the developmental task of "letting go"? In this study, longitudinal data are employed to address these two basic questions. More specifically, this research examines factors related to initial levels of parental optimism and parental fatalism (cross-sectional design), and it also examines factors related to changes in parental optimism and parental fatalism over time (longitudinal design). Thus, there are four major dependent variables in this analysis: initial level of parental optimism, initial level of parental fatalism, change in parental optimism, and change in parental fatalism.

**Major Dependent Variables**

PARENTAL OPTIMISM is assessed by a scale constructed from estimates of relative difficulty in the experience of parenting — with the optimistic parents feeling that being a parent has become much easier over time, that it will become easier in the future, and that they have had fewer problems than other parents with children of the same age as theirs. PARENTAL OPTIMISM is assumed in this study to be a measure of parental satisfaction. Optimistic parents are assumed to be parents who are satisfied in their parental role. When they are asked to compare their current experience to the past, they
They expect parenting to become easier in the future and they judge their experience of parenting less problem-prone than that of parents whose children are the same age as theirs. Factors related to the initial level of optimism are examined as well as factors related to change in optimism over time. It is assumed that what relates to the initial level of optimism is merely a "snapshot" of a process that began at an undetermined point in time in the experience of parenting. Looking at change in optimism over a period of four years will give us a better understanding of that process.

PARENTAL FATALISM is assessed by a scale constructed from items which asked parents how much they agree with statements assessing their beliefs about how much control they had over their children's behavior. PARENTAL FATALISM is assumed in this study to be an indication of "letting go" and is thought to be an adaptive response when children grow up and leave home. It is the belief that there is little parents can do to change their children's behavior and that the only recourse is simply to accept them as they are. Such fatalism, then, refers to a conscious effort to restrict parental responsibility -- a "hands-off," non-intrusive attitude toward problems related to childrearing. Factors related to the initial level of fatalism are examined as well as factors related to change in fatalism over time. As with optimism, it is assumed that what relates to the initial level of fatalism is merely a "snapshot" of a process that began at an undetermined point in time in the experience of parenting. Looking at change in fatalism over a period of four years should give us a better understanding of that process.
Three fundamental dimensions emerge as relevant to how fatalistic and how optimistic parents are and will become over time: (1) the age of the youngest child; (2) whether all children are launched (no longer living at home) or some children are still at home; and (3) the parent's own sense of personal mastery. These three Time One dimensions are the major independent variables of this study.

**Independent Variables**

AGE OF YOUNGEST CHILD IN THE FAMILY (a range of 10 to 30 years of age in this sample) is the variable used to capture the parenting demands placed on parents. It serves as an index of how psychologically exacting the parenting task is — the overall responsibility of parenting that would generally hold true until youngest children in the family are old enough to be more independent and no longer require active engagement of parents. AGE OF OLDEST CHILD was not used because, by definition, there would be younger children to engage the parents in an active way. For example, parents whose youngest child is 20 years of age are likely to feel the more active-involvement-with-children-phase of their role is near completion whereas, if the oldest child is 20 and has younger siblings, parents are still "responsible" to and for those children. It was assumed then that the youngest child in a family places pressure on parents to maintain active engagement in childrearing on a regular basis. AGE OF YOUNGEST CHILD was used as a continuous
variable to examine the notion of launching as a gradual ongoing process in which continuous change is occurring. The focus, however, will be that of changes in parental attitudes as these youngest children (a range of 10 to 30 years of age in this sample) get older over the four years of the study. This study tests how optimistic and how fatalistic parents are and how optimistic and how fatalistic parents become over time in relation to how young the youngest child in the family.

WHETHER ALL CHILDREN ARE LAUNCHED OR SOME CHILDREN ARE STILL AT HOME: the physical presence of children in the parental household is thought to place more pressure on parents to be actively involved in childrearing than the absence of children. Children living in the parental household actively engage parents on a daily basis and represents more of the time-consuming aspects of parental responsibility. The variable AT HOME is used as a dichotomous variable that indicated whether there were any children at home at Time One. Overall, cross-sectional studies (often retrospective in design) have found that empty nest parents (no children living at home), when asked about their marriages and general well-being, characterize this stage in their lives as "happy" or "happier" than other life stages (Burr, 1970; Campbell et al., 1976; Deutscher, 1959, 1964; Glenn, 1975; Rollins & Cannon, 1974; Rollins & Galligan, 1978). It can be concluded from these studies then that generally empty nest parents are optimistic about their lives. This study tests how optimistic and how fatalistic parents are and how
optimistic and fatalistic they become over time depending on whether all their children are launched or not at Time One.

PERSONAL MASTERY conceived by PearlIn and colleagues (1981) as a more or less stable personality construct is examined because one of the dependent variables is parental fatalism. PERSONAL MASTERY refers to the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as being in control of the important circumstances of their lives. Persons high in mastery will feel competent, effective, able to influence the events of their experience. Persons low in mastery will feel a sense of having to submit fatalistically to external forces that appear to control them (PearlIn et al., 1981; PearlIn & Radabaugh, 1976). Because one's sense of personal mastery may affect one's sense of parental fatalism, the relationship between mastery and parental fatalism and the relationship between mastery and parental optimism is examined. Persons low in mastery are described as fatalistic, believing that what happens to them is beyond their control. Parents who are fatalistic feel there is nothing they as parents can do to change child outcomes, believe that how their children turn out depends on their inner nature, and accept their children as they are.

Because mastery has been found to be an adaptive response in the face of many life events (Kobassa, 1979; Lefcourt, 1976, 1980; PearlIn et al., 1976, 1978, 1981; Wheaton, 1983), it is hypothesized that parents who possess a high sense of personal mastery will be more optimistic than parents low in mastery. That is, the more masterful as a person, the more likely a mother or father will feel
optimistic about his or her parenting. It is also hypothesized that parents who possess a high sense of personal mastery are less fatalistic as parents than those who possess a low sense of personal mastery. The view that parents who feel masterful about life in general are more likely to feel more masterful as parents assumes that this general attitude is translated into the more specific attitude towards one's parental role. This view was tested.

Interaction Effect

The interaction of AGE OF YOUNGEST CHILD and level of PARENTAL FATALISM (at Time One) in predicting CHANGE IN PARENTAL OPTIMISM over time was tested.

It is reasoned that parents of younger youngest children (within the range of 10 to 30 years of age) who are fatalistic will become less optimistic over time than those who are not. It is believed that if parents feel that they no longer have any influence over the behavior or their young adolescents, that they have lost control over these children, they will become more pessimistic about their role of parent over time. Fatalism in the case of young adolescents is thought to be maladaptive -- an indication of giving up, of helpless resignation. Consequently these parents who "throw their hands up" in despair will feel pessimistic about their past and/or future parenting, and they will feel they have more problems than other parents with children of the same age. The lagged effects of this
Interaction were examined, assuming that it takes some time for the maladaptiveness of fatalism to take its toll.

On the other hand, it is reasoned that fatalism is an adaptive response when one's children are older adolescents and about to be launched into adulthood (or young adults already launched). Because older children are either pushing for or have achieved more independence, their parents, either by design or default, will lessen their control over their child's behavior. Here fatalism is an indication of appropriately attending to the developmental task of "letting go," and it is believed that these parents will become more optimistic over time than those parents who fail to let their children go. The lagged effects were examined because it is believed that it takes some time for the adaptiveness of fatalism to be realized by these parents as they evaluate whether their intentional taking "hands off" pays off — that is, that their children are able to assume adult roles successfully, to be independent in ways sanctioned by society.

**Assumptions**

1. The transition to the empty nest is a normative, scheduled event for most parents.
2. Parenting changes gradually as children grow and develop.
3. The family developmental task for middle-aged parents is to launch their young adult children from the parental household.
4. The essential developmental task for adolescents is to achieve self-identity and to develop an appropriate autonomy -- appropriate for the status and roles of young adulthood.

5. Failure to achieve either family or individual developmental tasks results in negative outcomes.

6. The youngest child in the family indicates how much pressure is placed on parents to maintain active psychological engagement in childrearing.

7. The physical presence of children in the parental household indicates how much pressure is placed on parents to be actively involved in childrearing on a daily basis.

8. Personal mastery is a more or less stable personality construct.

Statement of the Problem

The present study attempts to understand parental adaptation in the middle years by focusing on the optimism and fatalism experienced by parents as their children grow up and leave home.

The objectives of this research were to:

1. Investigate whether the stage-specific demands of parenting and/or their own sense of personal mastery predict initial levels of optimism and fatalism experienced by middle-aged parents.
II. Investigate whether the stage-specific demands of parenting and/or their own sense of personal mastery predict change in optimism and fatalism over time as experienced by middle-aged parents.

III. Examine whether there are adaptive or appropriate levels of parental fatalism depending on the age of the youngest child in the family.

Research Hypotheses

To meet these objectives, the following research hypotheses were tested:

1. Parents whose youngest children are older at Time One are more optimistic than parents whose youngest children are younger.

2. Parents whose children are all launched at Time One are more optimistic than parents who still have children at home at Time One.

3. Parents who possess a high sense of personal mastery are more optimistic than parents who possess a low sense of personal mastery.
4. Parents whose youngest children are older at Time One are more fatalistic than parents whose youngest children are younger.

5. Parents whose children are all launched at Time One are more fatalistic than parents who still have children at home at Time One.

6. Parents who possess a high sense of personal mastery are less fatalistic as parents than those who possess a low sense of personal mastery.

7. Parental optimism will increase as children grow up; parents whose youngest children are older at Time One will become more optimistic over time than parents whose youngest children are younger.

8. Parental optimism will increase as children leave home; parents whose children are all launched at Time One become more optimistic over time than those with children still at home initially.

9. Parents who possess a high sense of personal mastery at Time One will become more optimistic over time than parents who initially possess a low sense of personal mastery.

10. Parental fatalism will increase as children grow up; parents whose youngest children are older at Time One will become more
fatalistic over time than parents whose youngest children are younger.

11. Parental fatalism will increase as children leave home; parents whose children are all launched at Time One will become more fatalistic over time than those with children still at home initially.

12. Parents who possess a high sense of personal mastery at Time One will become less fatalistic as parents over time than those who initially possess a low sense of personal mastery.

13. There is an expected interaction effect between age of youngest child and level of parental fatalism at Time One in predicting change in parental optimism:

   a. Parents of younger youngest children who are initially more fatalistic will become less optimistic over time than those who are not.

   b. Parents of older youngest children who are initially more fatalistic will become more optimistic over time than those who are not.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Transition to the Empty Nest

The transition to the empty nest refers to the departure of children from the home. It begins when the first child (not necessarily the oldest) leaves, and it ends when the last child (not necessarily the youngest) leaves the parental household. Although parents with more than one child deal with the leave-taking more than once, the departure of the last child is viewed as particularly significant because, as George (1980) points out, "it marks the end of day-to-day child-rearing responsibilities and the return of the marital partners to a one-generation, couple-based household" (p. 82).

Historically, "the empty nest" is a relatively recent phenomenon (Chudacoff & Hareven, 1979; Hareven, 1976). Over the last ten decades the average number of years a couple lives together after their children leave home has increased greatly. Factors that have contributed to this earlier and longer post-childbearing and post-childrearing period are: (1) increased life expectancy; (2) decreased age of childbearing (at least until 1977; more recent census figures are ambiguous about whether a new trend toward later average age of having the first child is a temporary effect of one
cohort's delay or the beginning of a new long-term effect); (3) decreased number of children per family as a partial consequence of recent birth control practices; (4) children are born within a few years of each other instead of being spaced throughout the women's fertile years. This conjugal post-childbearing-and-rearing period can last for 30 or 40 years, if the child leaves home when the parents are in their forties and their life expectancy is 70 or 80 years (Glick, 1977; Troll et al., 1979).

Many family development theorists view the transition to the empty nest as one in which major role and structural changes occur in the family when the last child leaves the home and the couple are again alone together (Aldous, 1978; Duvall, 1971, 1977; Hill & Rodgers, 1964; Rodgers, 1973). The changes brought on by this transition are thought to not only influence the roles and the structure of the family but also psychological adjustment and identity reworking of individuals within the family.

Most research suggests that most parents adapt successfully to the transition, pointing to positive effects on life and marital satisfaction (Burr, 1970; Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Deutscher, 1959, 1964; Glenn, 1975; Rollins & Cannon, 1974; Rollins & Galligan, 1978). How is it that many (or perhaps even most) parents are able to adjust positively to the transition from their active parenting role? Some researchers would argue that it is a gradual, normative, scheduled transition which parents expect and, in a sense, "are ready for." Parents watch other parents go through it, they expect to go through it themselves, and they actively rehearse for
what role exists and entrances will be part of the transition in their lives, and usually this is not experienced as stressful.

Neugarten and Hagestad (1976) argue that this transition is normative and expected by parents, especially if the event is believed by the parents to be "on-time," with respect to the normatively-defined "social clock." For events or transitions which are "on-time," there is likely to be anticipatory socialization which is the process of preparation for a change in role or status. It involves exploring the new norms and expectations that will be associated with the new role or status once the transition is made — practicing and trying out a new role before the actual shift occurs (Kimmel, 1974).

Deutscher (1959) developed several hypotheses to explain why parents may view the postparental stage positively. One such hypothesis postulates a positive relationship between satisfaction and the degree of continuity in role sequences individuals experienced from previous stages. Deutscher was interested in how much anticipatory socialization or role rehearsal for the children's leaving had occurred while the children were still at home. He suggested the temporary absences of children (such as college or the armed forces) as examples of occasions for parents to play roles that continue after children leave home for good.

Spence and Lonner (1971) found that women who had anticipated this transition to the empty nest appeared to undergo little stress and to have few adjustment problems. These women not only held expectations concerning the development of a life-course for
themselves but also for their children. It was as important for their children to be "on time" as it was for themselves. The woman's perceived success or failure in mothering was brought into focus. If she perceived her children as falling to progress as she expected, she felt threatened and pessimistic. On the other hand, if she perceived her children as progressing in a manner congruent with her expectations, she made the adjustment to the empty nest more smoothly.

Among the 318 empty nest mothers studied by Harkins (1978), the only variable showing a negative relationship to adjustment was "being off schedule." Harkins concluded, "The only threat to well being may be in having a child who does not become successfully independent when expected" (p. 555). In Rubin's (1979) study, regardless of socioeconomic class, those women who experienced the most stress with the launching of children were those whose children failed to meet their mothers' expectations and the mothers blamed themselves for that failure. It was expressed as, "If my main task in life is to raise these children and they turn out badly, who else can be blamed but myself?". One of three reasons Targ (1979) cited from her research to explain a positive adjustment to the empty nest was anticipatory socialization including the issue of mothers feeling "on time" for themselves and feeling that their children are also "on time."

Adult development scholars view the launching of children, especially for women, as a time in the life span which critically calls into question the issue of identity (Aldous, 1978; George,
Bart (1974) found that a disproportionate number of women hospitalized (for the first time) for depression were mothers whose last child had recently left home. Bart used the phrase "Mother Portnoys" to describe women who had put "all their eggs in one basket" and ended up the most prone to a midlife depression. This research is problematic in that it uses a restrictive clinical sample (women undergoing psychiatric treatment) and does not inform us about fathers (depressed or otherwise) nor about depressed mothers who did not seek therapy. Laws (1971) argues that the assumption that a mother would find her life empty and meaningless when her children left home is probably inspired (before 1970) by a traditional sex-role ideology.

It appears then that the few women who experience distress when the nest is emptied are those for whom mothering is a major (or only) source of personal identity and/or who have not adequately anticipated their children's leaving. However, most women do not view the empty nest as a crisis but as an opportunity for increased personal freedom (Lowenthal & Chiriboga, 1972; Neugarten, 1968); they feel a sense of accomplishment resulting from the successful launching of their children to an independent life-style (George, 1980); and they perceive their adult children as a new social resource (Hagestad, 1982).

It is often suggested that women are most affected by the transition to the empty nest since they are thought to have greater investment in being parents and to be closer to family changes than men are (Aldous, 1978; George, 1980; Rapoport, Rapoport, & Strelitz,
Primary role issues at mid-life for the male, it is argued, have to do with his occupation (Rosenberg & Farrell, 1976). His present job is the farthest point on the job trajectory that he is likely to attain since promotions generally go to younger men and since retirement is in the near-horizon. The middle-aged male may realize that he no longer has the time or the ability to accomplish all he had once planned — a nagging awareness that he is no longer "that promising young man." The meaning of this later parental stage to fathers has been virtually ignored. Very few empirical studies have examined how fathers have adapted to the transition to the empty nest. In fact, nearly all studies of the empty nest have been focused on mothers.

Rubin (1979) conjectures that it may be fathers more often than mothers "who are pained by the children's imminent or actual departure -- fathers who want to hold back the clock, to keep the children in the home for just a little longer" (p. 31). Her sample consisted only of women. For evidence she cites Glenn (1975) who found that, on the whole, fathers are more likely to suffer a loss in psychological well-being as a result of the children's departure; and Lowenthal et al. (1975) who contend that men have some problems with this transition to the empty nest, and they regret not having spent more time with their children.

Lewis, Freneau, and Roberts (1979) hypothesized that because fathers are currently increasing their involvement with child care, they will experience unhappiness when the last child leaves the home and that unhappiness will be associated with having fewer children,
being older, scoring higher in personal nurturance, and having lower quality marriages. Twenty-two percent of the 118 fathers studied reported feeling unhappy over their last child having left home. Only two variables were statistically significant in association with reported unhappiness: having fewer children and being in unsatisfying marriages. The findings were not at all conclusive regarding the stated hypothesis.

Rodgers (1973) suggests that the experience of the postparental wife-mother in being "lost without her children" or of the retired husband-father being "lost without his work" represents some kind of failure to anticipate and to prepare for the necessity of taking on new roles or of enlarging the scope of already existing ones. In the present study, the focus is exclusively on the parental role for both fathers and mothers in the middle years, and it is argued that any maladjustment experienced by parents in the transition to the empty nest represents some kind of failure to anticipate and to prepare for the launching of their children and, thereby, adapt to the consequent altering of their parental role as their children grow up and leave home. The longitudinal data used in the present study allow for an investigation of the changes (over a span of four years) experienced by parents during the transition to the empty nest.

In sum, almost all the evidence regarding adjustment to the transition to the empty nest cited above is based on cross-sectional studies that have assessed marital satisfaction and general quality of life. There is little attention given to any assessment of parental satisfaction over time. We do not know how satisfied
middle-aged persons are as parents nor how they adapt as their parental obligations shift when their children grow up and leave home.

Rosow (1976) makes a distinction between transitions based on pure age criteria and those transitions between life-stages that are often more indefinite and blurred than changes within them. Those transitions based on pure age criteria are the most specific, as when one's birthday qualifies one to obtain a driver's license, vote, or forces one to retire. Other specific status changes, role acquisitions and losses are highlighted by public or private "rites of passages" that clearly denote the transition -- for example, ceremonies of graduation and marriage. Such role losses as widowhood or retirement may change one's status but not necessarily one's life stage. Other role changes tend to be more blurred and are loosely linked to certain stages in the life cycle -- for example, the gradual changes within the parental role through time as children grow from infancy to adulthood.

These gradual changes within the parental role are dependent upon the gradual changes in the child's development. Lowenthal et al. (1975) liken the gradual type of intrapsychic change of an individual's evolving awareness that he or she has become an adult to a similar evolving awareness that his or her children are becoming adults. This gradual development of one's children can provide some order for the Interactional processes and role alignments of all members of the family system. There is a reciprocal influence and
one can expect significant changes in role complexes and styles of interacting as children grow up and leave.

Because understanding where the child is developmentally is critical in understanding how that child will be parented, the next section of this review of literature will focus on the developmental stage of adolescence and more particularly on the developmental tasks assigned to the adolescent prior to his/her launching into adult society and into adulthood.

**Developmental Tasks of Adolescence**

Adolescence refers to the experience of passing through the unstructured and ill-defined phase between childhood and adulthood; it terminates socially "when the consensus of the socio-cultural environment declares the individual an adult ... when informal customs lift the last restrictions on adult privileges" (Sebald, 1977, p. 8). The concurrent psychological aspect of adolescence deals with the process of self-identification. Friedenberg (1973) describes adolescence as "the period during which a young person learns who he is and what he really feels; he differentiates himself from his culture, though on the culture's terms ..." (p. 114).

These definitions assume that the adolescent must experience or do something in order to get from dependent child to independent adult. The notion of developmental tasks is based on such an assumption. It is argued that tasks arise at or near a certain time in the life of an individual -- if achieved, happiness and success with later tasks result; if not achieved, unhappiness, disapproval by
society, and difficulty with later tasks result. Physical maturation and cultural pressures and privileges are the origins of these "growth responsibilities" (Duvall, 1971, 1977; Havighurst, 1972).

Although Erikson (1963, 1968) has outlined a number of developmental tasks of adolescence — such as adjustment to the physical changes of puberty, the establishment of effective social and working relationships with peers, preparation for a vocation — it is clear that he considers the development of identity the most "essential." Work on identity, defined as "the integration of past identification, contemporary competencies, and future aspirations" (Erikson, 1968, p. 91) is a process not expected to be achieved during adolescence but to continue into early adulthood. Identity formation begins with the self-object differentiation at infancy and reaches its final phase with integration at old age (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Erikson, 1963, 1968; Marcia, 1980). Erikson (1968) views the identity crisis as "the psychosocial aspect of adolescence," which assumes that not until adolescence does the individual develop the prerequisites in physiological growth, mental maturation, and social responsibility to experience and pass through the crisis of identity.

In order for adolescents to achieve successful identity formation they must experience some separateness from others (Balswick & Macrides, 1975; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Eisenberg, 1969; Josselson, 1980; Marcia, 1980; Newman, 1982; Newman & Murray, 1983). Exercising gradual separateness or distance from others in order to find one's "real self" has been termed "individuation." Individuation suggests
a clear sense of personal boundaries, a capacity to recognize one's own values, and an ability to reflect on one's own thoughts and behaviors (Josselson, 1980; Newman, 1982).

The struggle for Individuation primarily occurs within the family -- and from the family, particularly from the parents. Josselson (1980) argues that it is not necessary for the adolescent to be observably different in values and attitudes from his parents for Individuation to have occurred; "what is necessary is for the organization of experience to be sifted through the adolescent's own increasingly differentiating ego" (p. 192). The adolescent's desire and need to establish some distance from parents stimulates an affiliation with peers, loosening dependence on parents and allowing some space to try out new norms and values.

Leaving Home

There comes a time when most children begin to break their dependent connection to their family or origin. As argued earlier, separation from parents is a valued, normative, expected experience for most adolescents and their parents. Separation from parents in a concrete sense takes the form of the actual departure of the child from the parental household. Douvan and Adelson (1966) refer to this leaving home as "the pull of the future, a forward movement toward adult status, its privileges and obligations" (p. 125). "Leaving home," then, can be thought of as a concrete expression of the adolescent's developmental task of "distancing" implied in Individuation.
For most middle-class adolescents, leaving home means going away to college. The college or university environment usually takes a *laissez-faire* stance toward students and avoids acting in *locus parentis*. College freshmen, therefore, suddenly find themselves organizing almost every aspect of their lives — what courses to take, when and what to eat, what to wear, what hours to keep — i.e., how to make independent decisions (Margolis, 1981). Sullivan and Sullivan (1980), comparing groups of male college students living at home and at college, report that those living away from home perceive better communication with and increased affection for their parents as a result of living independently. No measure of autonomy, however, was used in this study.

Moore and Hotch (1981) studied how college students defined home-leaving or separation from family and what subjective meaning these definitions held for them. Economic independence was the most highly regarded mode of separation and was characterized as being "competent, realistic, practical, and smart." (Because of the lengthened amount of time for advanced schooling, children continue to be economically dependent upon their parents until they reach their early twenties). Indicators of emotional separation (including "feeling of being a visitor when at home," "feeling of not belonging at home anymore," and "don't feel close to family") were found to be associated with difficult or troubled home-leaving. Gaining more personal control ("make own decisions," "feel mature enough," "less parental control," and "must do things for self now") was perceived as an acceptable means for separating from the family.
A clinical study by Murphey and her colleagues (1963), based on parent and adolescent interviews, focuses on separation from home among freshmen college students during the transition from high school. The sample consisted of only 19 students and their parents. Arguing that late adolescents are faced with ways to develop their own autonomy without, at the same time, heavily sacrificing parental relationships, they used the term "autonomous-relatedness" to describe the integration of independent behavior and maintenance of parental ties. Parents of the nine adolescents who rated high in both autonomy and relatedness placed a high value on autonomy (for themselves and for their children) and provided their children with situations for developing independent behavior. Parents of the three adolescents who rated low in both dimensions tended to view their offspring as extensions of themselves, to lack confidence in their children's ability to achieve autonomy, and to accept major responsibility for their children's behavior (which the children reciprocated). It was concluded that these parents had not been able to respond to their children's growth by a shift in their own image of them from dependent children to young adults.

No clear characterization emerged for the parents of the six adolescents who rated high in autonomy but low in relatedness nor for the parents of the one adolescent who rated low in autonomy but high in relatedness. Murphey and associates suggest, however, that the high autonomy-low relatedness students, "unsure of their newly exercised autonomy" may find it necessary "to maintain distance from their parents until a sense of consolidation and mastery is
achieved.” They also argue that those students high in autonomy and relatedness may be restricted in their later development if they are too related to their parents — that is too "concerned about maintaining the status quo in relationships with their parents" (p. 652). Murphey and associates found that most of the 19 college freshmen in their sample successfully adapted to separation from parents (i.e., functioned at a more autonomous level than when they were high school seniors) but that easy adaptation occurred most frequently among those who had experiences such as attending summer camp, independent extended travel and summer job away from home — an example of anticipatory role rehearsal for both adolescent and their parents.

Cohler and Geyer (1982) also address the "autonomous-relatedness" issue when they argue that there is a need for balance between the attainment of "appropriate autonomy" and the continuing need that all adults have for some help from others. Family relationships continue to be important throughout later life for most adults in our society (Alpert & Richardson, 1980; George, 1980; Poon, 1980; Sussman, 1965; Troll, 1971; Troll et al., 1979). Despite the preference to maintain separate households, most parents and their adult children have frequent contact, reciprocal emotional ties, and mutual support bonds in a pattern termed by Walsh (1980) as "intimacy at a distance." Conflict between separation and interdependence, termed by Cohler and Geyer "crisis of individuation," is usually resolved when the adolescent attains young adult status, but the conflict can continue into adulthood if both parents and their children fall into either
rigid independence or continued dependence. Arnstein (1980) argues that in most cases, a "rapprochement" (coming near or together -- Interdependence) does occur between child and parents once the young adult child has achieved some inner stability in the adult role, and the parents have more or less accepted the fact that the son or daughter is an independent individual. For some parents, allowing independence may prove difficult. They may want to protect their children from mistakes that they think are being made or they may have some emotional need to keep their children dependent upon them.

Aldous (1978) argues that what it means to be finally launched is the feeling of both parents and children that the latter are launched. An evolving awareness that the once dependent child has become an adult provides a turning point in the experience of most parents who may then feel less directly responsible for their children (Aldous, 1978). How to measure feelings of "launchness" felt by both parents and children has not been addressed in the empirical literature. The sample for this study consists of parents whose youngest children were between 10 and 30 years of age at the time of the first interview. The children they were in the process of launching were not interviewed (unfortunately) so only data regarding how parents experience their launching over time is available. The aim of this study is to understand parental adaptation at the family launching stage focusing on the essential family developmental task parents are assigned as their children grow up and leave home.
Parental Developmental Tasks at Launching

Family development theorists argue that just as there are stage-critical developmental tasks for individuals, there are stage-critical developmental tasks for the family. Family developmental tasks are defined by societal needs as well as the needs of individual family members. Failure to achieve these "growth responsibilities" results in unhappiness, societal disapproval, and interference in achieving future tasks, precisely the same conditions applied to individual developmental tasks (Aldous, 1978; Duvall, 1977; Hill & Mattessich, 1979; McCullough, 1980).

Duvall (1971, 1977) suggests that the developmental tasks of launching families are assisting the young adult to become successfully autonomous while maintaining a home base in which other family members can thrive. Parents are held responsible for getting their adolescents to be autonomous (capable of making decisions and running their own lives) because in American life, Duvall argues, mothers and fathers are expected to observe a "hands-off policy" toward their adult children. Duvall uses the phrase "releasing matured and maturing young people into lives of their own" and characterizes the family at this stage as the "launching center." It is assumed that most families play active roles over a considerable period of time in getting their adolescent children successfully "launched into the world." This process of "cutting apron strings" is thought to characterize the adolescent years and to set the stage for the child's emergence as an emancipated young adult. Parents at
this stage are believed to be breaking the patterns and habits of two decades as they "let their children go" (Duvall, 1971, 1977).

Aldous (1978) also uses the term "letting go" to characterize the process that both parents and children must go through in order for children to become independent adults. Adolescents, she argues, are pressing for more independence in anticipation of leaving the parental family unit. Parents can anticipate their children's entering adult status and consciously prepare them for it by gradually letting go of their control over the adolescent. Norms exist whereby we learn that it is important to free ourselves from our parents when we finish adolescence, just as it is important for parents of late adolescents to "let go" of their children (Troll et al., 1979).

Chilman (1968) argues that definitions of "successful development" generally imply the ability to perceive reality pretty much as it is and act appropriately upon that perception — the capacity to adopt age-appropriate and role-appropriate behavior. If age-appropriate behavior for the adolescent is to be autonomous (in order to work out his/her identity and to "make it" as an adult), then the role-appropriate behavior for that adolescent's parent is to allow, even encourage that autonomous behavior. In other words, parents are mandated to "let up" on their control over their adolescent children in order to "let go."

The task of parenting adolescents is often considered difficult by parents who worry about whether their children are "turning out well" or who find it stressful to interact with offspring who are
questing for their own sense of identity and independence (Lowenthal et al., 1975; Mullan, 1981; Rapoport et al., 1977). However, there is little existing research that has analyzed the differential effects of parenting styles on adolescent autonomy from a developmental perspective. In theory, since autonomy and identity are related personality constructs, parenting style should play a significant role in the adolescent's achievement of ego identity (Enright et al., 1980; Erikson, 1968). Newman and Newman (1978) theorize that parenting styles which encourage independence are best for the achievement of identity, but no data directly pertinent to their hypothesis are presented. Marcia (1966) concluded that adolescents who acquiesce to parental values do not achieve identity but did not demonstrate whether a particular parenting style influenced identity foreclosure.

Baumrind (1971) suggests that it is more meaningful to talk about the effects of patterns of parental authority. The variables used by Baumrind (1966, 1967) to create such patterns include parental warmth, firm control, maturity demands, and communication (listening to child and explaining reasons for enforcement of rules). Baumrind used observational procedures to study preschool children and their parents and categorized parents into three groups based on the degree of control which they maintain with their children: (1) permissive (parent, offering him/herself as a resource to the child, not as an active agent responsible for modifying or shaping behavior, allows the child to regulate his/her own behavior as much as possible); (2) authoritarian (parent values obedience and uses forceful measures to
gain child's compliance with rules); (3) authoritative (parent shares with child reasoning behind limits set on child's behavior).

Relevant defining dimensions of parental behavior were measured and parents were typed according to the three categories described above. Once parents were typed, groups were compared on child characteristics. Differences between parental groups on child characteristics were then discussed in terms of the consequences of differential patterns of parental behavior. Baumrind (1968) contends that neither authoritarian parental control nor permissive noncontrol fosters the optimal development of children in general and of adolescents in particular. The authoritative parent, unlike the authoritarian parent, values and encourages the development of autonomy in the adolescent, and unlike the permissive parent, values setting limits on the child's behavior when necessary. Baumrind's actual research has been solely with preschool children and their parents. It also remains unclear what form of authoritative parenting would take with a three-year-old as compared to its form with a seventeen-year-old.

Elder (1962) contends that the major developmental task of adolescence is the achievement of independence from parental control. His work on the structural differences in child-rearing styles along the dimensions of power has been considered to be classic by many. This typology of parenting styles is based on Elder's (1962) cross-sectional study of white seventh through twelfth graders (living with both parents) who reported how decisions affecting them were made in their families (n=7,356). Parenting styles were
measured by two seven-response category items, one referring to mother and the other to father ("In general, how are most decisions made between you and your mother/father?"). Elder's parenting styles depict a gradual increase in adolescent self-direction concomitant with a gradual decrease in parental power: (1) autocratic ("My parent says what I must do"); (2) authoritarian ("My parent listens to me, but still makes the decisions"); (3) democratic ("My parent has final say although I have considerable opportunity to make my own decisions"); (4) equalitarian ("My parent's opinions and mine are equally important in decision-making"); (5) permissive ("I can make my own decisions but my parent would like for me to consider his/her opinion"); (6) laissez-faire ("I can do what I want regardless of what my parent thinks"); (7) ignoring ("My parent doesn't care what I do"). According to the perceptions of these adolescents, parents vary on the amount of influence they attempt to exert: 35% reported that their fathers were either autocratic or authoritarian, but only 22% similarly described their mothers; 42% reported that their mothers were either permissive or equalitarian, whereas 32% thought of their fathers in these ways; 36% and 31% considered their mothers and fathers respectively as democratic. Very few (1% or less) adolescents characterized either parent as ignoring or laissez-faire. When type of childrearing structure was related to the age of adolescent, both mothers and fathers, it was reported, "are more likely to treat their older child permissively than they are their younger children" (p. 247). This age difference -- that parents
exert less influence over their older adolescent's behavior -- supports the basic thesis of this study.

In Elder's (1963) study of adolescent autonomy as it relates to perceptions of their parents' level of power over them (and frequency of parental explanations used as a measure of the degree of power legitimation), the seven categories were collapsed to three measures of high, moderate, and low parental power: (1) autocratic (parent does not allow the adolescent to regulate his behavior in any way); (2) democratic (adolescent's opinion relevant to his behavior is encouraged but final decision is approved by parent); (3) permissive (adolescent has more influence in making decisions which concern him than does his parent). (There is no consensus in the parenting literature on the labels attached to the various parenting styles -- for example, Baumrind's "authoritarian" category is more like Elder's "autocratic" category; her "authoritative," his "democratic;" her "permissive," his "laissez-faire" or "ignoring" category).

In a later analysis of the same data, Elder (1963) found that adolescents who perceived their parents as "democratic" or "permissive" were most likely to be autonomous if their parents explain their rules often. Those who perceived their parents as "infrequent explainers and autocratic" were least likely to display confidence and independence. Adolescent autonomy is negatively related to level of parental power, although frequency of parental explanation seems to be an ameliorating variable (Baumrind, 1968; Elder, 1963). The only age-related finding reported was that younger
adolescents, seventh through ninth graders, were "inclined to be less confident and more dependent."

Enright, Lapsley, Drivas, and Fehr (1980) used cross-sectional data in two studies to examine the relationship of adolescents' perceptions of parenting practices (defined according to Elder's 1963 categories) to measures of autonomy and identity development in early and late adolescents. Older adolescents (eleventh graders), they found, had higher autonomy and identity achievement than younger adolescents (seventh graders). (Longitudinal data is obviously needed to examine the shift over time in autonomy and identity achievement of these adolescents). Only fathers were perceived as having a significant influence on identity achievement: male adolescents' identity was best achieved with democratic and worst achieved with autocratic fathering, whereas, female adolescents' identity was better achieved with autocratic fathering. No significant results regarding perceptions of parenting by either mothers or fathers and autonomy were found. A breakdown of age of adolescent by perceived parenting style for autonomy was not reported.

In a study of white middle income families in Ohio and Georgia, McKenry, Price-Bonham, and O'Bryant (1981) assessed the perceptions of fathers, mothers, and their adolescent children in regard to the use of six methods of discipline in their family. It was found that fathers and children agreed as to how the father disciplined most often (verbal reasoning) but that mothers perceived themselves differently than their children perceived them in regard to what
method the mother used in discipline. This study is unique in that it gathered perceptions of both parents as well as of adolescents about parenting techniques and demonstrates that perceptions of what type of parenting is occurring in a particular family can differ considerably and, therefore, reports of only one parent or of only the adolescent can be misleading.

Data consisting only of adolescents' perceptions of parenting may well indicate the child's understanding of parental behaviors rather than actual differences in parenting styles. Also, parenting style may well be a response to adolescent behavior rather than the reverse. Parents of more "autonomous" adolescents who want to please their parents, who are not at all "rebellious" can well afford to be democratic, even permissive, in their parenting -- there is no reason to be autocratic when children commonly comply with parental wishes. Rollins and Thomas (1979) argue that a static unidirectional model of parent causation is unrealistic. (Direction of causality in most research is difficult to assess). A static model, they maintain, ignores the prior history of interaction as well as specific immediate antecedent responses of the child that influences both parenting and consequent responses to that parenting. To date, the research literature on parent-child relationships assumes this static model and does not inform us as to whether differences of parenting style are contingent upon the age of the child(ren) parented.

Although family development theorists contend that significant changes in the development of children provides some order for understanding significant changes in role complexes and styles of
Interacting at critical stages in the family life cycle, they do not describe those changes in any operational way. How does a parent get an adolescent to be autonomous? What twenty-year-old parental patterns are being broken in order to "release" children? How do parents anticipate their children's taking on adult status and consequently lessen their control over their children? Do parents "let go" by default or by design? Perhaps the lack of parental guidelines regarding how to do so by design or how to cope with the default is what makes parenting adolescents potentially stressful. What indication do we have that parents are in fact "letting go" as their children grow up and leave home? The thrust of this study is the testing of the theoretical notion that parents are in fact attending to the developmental task of "letting go."

One of three reasons cited by Targ (1979) for a positive adjustment to the empty nest was the difficulties in living with teenagers. For the mothers she studied coping with adolescent children at home was more taxing and stressful than having their children launched into adult society. George (1980) suggests that the years immediately preceding the departure of children from the home are more likely to be viewed as stressful than either the transition stage itself or its long-term consequences. Pearl (1980) also contends that the confrontation by parents of the daily problems of child care and training is considerably more stressful than those transitional events signal the growing independence of children and their final departure from the household.
Rapoport et al. (1977) suggest that tensions between adolescents and their parents may be socially functional in that they allow the adolescent to leave the family setting and enter the wider society where he or she may activate internalized societal norms and contribute to social continuity. I would argue that it is not tension in the parent-child relationship that allows the leaving but "appropriate distancing" between adolescent and parent that aids the launch into the wider society. Attitudinally, appropriate distancing on the part of parents can be thought of as parental fatalism (an indication of "letting go") which is operationalized in this research. Ackerman (1980) concludes that it is "impossible to raise teenagers ... in the end they must use what they have and meet their world on their own as best they can" (p. 148). Such a conclusion captures a feeling of parental fatalism -- the belief that there is little parents can do to change their children's behavior and that the recourse is simply to accept them as they are. Such an attitude when dealing with younger adolescents still some years away from leaving home would be a sign of giving up, of resignation. When dealing with older adolescents who are leaving or have left home, it is a stage-appropriate feeling, indicating that parents recognize that they have done what they could and other forces are now at work influencing their children's behavior.

**Personal Mastery**

Personal mastery (as conceptualized by Pearlin and his colleagues) refers to a sense of self as a competent, effective
person in control of the forces affecting his/her life — the extent to which a person sees him/herself, at one extreme, as being in control of the important life circumstances, or, at the other extreme, as having to submit fatalistically to external forces (Pearlin & Lieberman, 1979; Pearlin et al., 1981; Pearlin & Radabaugh, 1976). Because one's sense of personal mastery (a general personality trait) may affect one's sense of parental fatalism (a role-specific trait), the relationship between mastery and parental fatalism and the relationship between mastery and parental optimism (a role-specific satisfaction measure) are examined in this study.

Pearlin (1980) argues that adult emotional development does not represent the gradual surfacing of conditions that happen to reside within individuals but rather, a continuing process of adjustment to external circumstances, many of them rooted in the organization of larger society and, therefore, distributed unequally across the population. Findings regarding the association of mastery to demographics from Pearlin data serve as examples to his argument: (1) mastery declines as income declines and as economic strain increases; (2) mastery is more substantially related to level of
educational attainment than to level of income, suggesting that mastery probably does not result directly from having money but indirectly from opportunities and achievements that are concomitants of economic resources (Pearlin & Radabaugh, 1976); (3) being male, currently married, better educated, and having higher income were also associated with a greater sense of personal mastery (and with higher self-esteem) (Pearlin et al., 1981; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). The central point of these findings, Pearlin et al. (1981) suggest, is that those who are most exposed to conditions provocative of strain and distress may also be those least in possession of mastery -- an important psychological coping resource. Lefcourt (1966, 1976) found that groups deprived of reinforcement opportunity because of prejudice (Blacks, Mexican-Americans, American Indians) or deprivations (lower economic classes) held external control expectancies. That is, the less access to opportunity that persons had, the more external were their locus of control scores. (That external locus of control can be judged to be similar to a low sense of mastery will be discussed later).

Kobasa (1979) studied how highly stressed executives (n=86) who remained healthy differed from those who showed illness along with high stress (n=75). Personality was examined as a conditioner of the effects of stressful life events on illness onset. The high stress/low illness executives showed, by comparison with high stress/high illness executives, more "hardiness." "Hardiness," similar to Pearlin's concept of personal mastery, is defined as "a personality structure that generates a stronger commitment to self,
an attitude of vigorousness toward the environment, a sense of meaningfulness, and an internal locus of control" (p. 3). Hardy persons, like persons high on mastery, believe that they can control or influence the events of their experience. Kobasa, in explaining why she felt the responses of high stress/high illness executives were not simply reflective on the psychologically debilitating effects of illness, she cites the finding (discussed in a 1977 report) that the low stress/high illness subjects were lower on nihilism, alienation from self, vegetativeness, and external locus of control than were high stress/high illness subjects. This finding indicates that lack of hardiness is not merely a response to illness. Kobasa notes that a perspective, longitudinal study in which stress and personality scores at Time One are used to predict illness scores at Time Two is obviously necessary.

It was suggested earlier that Pearlin's mastery construct bears some similarity to the locus of control construct. This theory posits that individuals who are externally controlled (low sense of mastery) see their successes and failures as resulting from chance, fate, or other sources outside and beyond their control. Individuals who are internally controlled see reinforcement as resulting from their own behavior. Locus of control, then, refers to individuals' subjective evaluation of whether or not they are responsible for their behavior. Early locus of control research was experimental and attempted to measure the effect of manipulated situational variables on expectancy changes (Lefcourt, 1966; Phares, 1957; Rotter, 1966). If tasks were construed as skill-demanding, subjects were more likely
to use their experiences for making estimates of their future performances than if the tasks were viewed as chance-determined. Subjects operating under skill conditions were judged to be reflective of internally controlled persons, who believe their failure or success is a product of their ability. Externally controlled persons whose orientation to success was related to chance were likely to reflect expectancy changes which they believed to be outside their power.

Lefcourt (1980) argues that a person's orientation toward his/her own life plays a part in altering the events of his/her life. This "orientation" pertains to the belief that one can or cannot affect the course of one's life described in terms of the personality construct, locus of control. "Locus of control" refers to the ways in which causation is attributed — i.e., the source of outcomes. Is that source or cause internal or external to the actor? Extremes of causal belief are excessive fatalism ("what will be will be") to extreme beliefs of potency, that events occur largely as a function of how one acts. This theory posits that individuals who are externally controlled (low sense of mastery) see their successes and failures as resulting from chance, fate, or other sources outside and beyond their control. Individuals who are internally controlled see reinforcement as resulting from their own behavior. Locus of control, then, refers to individuals' subjective evaluation of whether or not they are responsible for their behavior.

Lefcourt (1980) in summarizing his review of locus of control literature notes that "Internals" have commonly been found to be more
eager assimilators of personally relevant information than "externals" whether that information pertained to obtaining parole, to having tuberculosis, to being severely injured in a plane crash, to recovering from surgery, to influencing others, or to understanding another person. Internals have also been found to be more ready to encounter potentially negative experiences and to prepare themselves so that they might avoid accidents and illnesses, while externals seem to be more oblivious or fatalistic with regard to possible negative events. When aversive events can no longer be ignored, however, externals have been found to suffer from those events more than Internals. Lefcourt then hypothesizes that "persons who hold internal-control beliefs are more insulated against potentially stressful events" (p. 218).

Cohen and Lazarus (1973), however, argue that Internal locus of control is not necessarily more effective when coping with aversive events. Externals, for example, were found to recover more quickly from heart attacks than Internals. Recovery was associated with acceptance of enforced passivity. White (1974) confines the use of mastery to problems of cognitive or manipulative complexity and not to anxiety-laden problems. He argues that there are many situations in life that can be met only by compromise or even resignation. There is no recourse but to give in, to accept the situation as is, and to try to make the best of it. Although it appears that general measures of Internal locus of control do predict better outcomes because they encourage a more rational, optimistic problem-solving stance (Lefcourt, 1976), the evidence is still not completely
conclusive. There is a need to look at the interaction of all relevant variables.

In an exploratory study of 132 Anglo adults 21 to 60 years of age living in El Paso, Texas, Wheaton (1983) focuses on two "dispositional characteristics" or dimensions of personality, fatalism and inflexibility, as they relate to the impact of stress and symptom outcome (schizophrenic, depression, and anxiety symptom clusters). Low fatalism and low inflexibility are conceptualized as personal resources that may increase an individual's potential for dealing effectively with stress.

Fatalism is defined by Wheaton as a tendency to attribute "bad" and "good" outcomes to chance factors. Wheaton's fatalism scale is based on eleven of Rotter's Internal-External Control Items. Wheaton argues that fatalism as an organizing construct is similar to such related concepts as "personal mastery (deCharms, 1968, is cited), learned helplessness (Seligmann, 1975, is cited), feelings of powerlessness (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1970; Fried, 1975, are cited), and locus of control (Rotter, 1966, is cited)" (p. 214). The likely result of fatalism is judged to be impairment in coping effort tendencies because of less motivation and less persistence in situations that require a coping response. (Because only fatalism is of interest here, Wheaton's dimension of inflexibility will not be described). Findings related to fatalism were: In high stress situations low fatalism was found to have the effect of reducing chances of developing depressive and schizophrenic symptoms (there was no effect for anxiety). Lowering fatalism was found to reduce
vulnerability to acute stresses but had little effect on moderating chronic stresses. Among those low in fatalism, acute stress had little or no impact at all on depression. In sum, previous findings that support the hypothesis that increasing personal resources (such as mastery or low fatalism as in this case) will reduce effects of environmental stressors was found to be true for schizophrenic and depressive symptoms, but not for those of anxiety.

Because conceptually low mastery is similar to fatalism as a general facet of personality and because parental fatalism, as a role-specific trait or attitude, is of particular interest in the present study, both measures are examined in relation to the launching process.

**Parental Satisfaction**

Much attention has been given to the consequences of being parented and relatively little attention has been paid to the effect of parenthood on parents themselves (Gutmann, 1975; LeMasters, 1974; LeMasters & DeFrain, 1983, Rapoport et al., 1977). Furthermore, in spite of our recognition that parents and children are related throughout their lives, research on parent-child relationships has been overwhelmingly focused on the beginning of the family life cycle (Chilman, 1968; Hagestad, 1982; Troll, 1971; Walters & Stinnett, 1971; Walters & Walters, 1980). More recent, still exploratory, research has investigated the relationship of aging or aged parents and their adult children (Blenkner, 1965; Hill, 1970; Poon, 1980; Shanas, 1967, 1973; Streib & Beck, 1980; Sussman, 1965, 1976; Troll
et al., 1979). Between these two extremes of bodies of work of the family life span, there is an obvious void regarding what it means to be a parent.

Hagestad (1982) has suggested that our ways of thinking about parents and children lag behind current demographic conditions:

"... the phrase, 'parents and children' is likely to evoke a picture of adults between the ages of 20 to 40 when offspring 1 to 16 ... not an image of individuals who all have grey hair and are all over the age of 60. Parent-child relationships can last 60 years or more; only for on quarter of that time will 'the child' fit the chronological referent of the term (as a person in the first stage of life rather than the referent to a person in a family role, reciprocal to the role of parent)" (p. 486).

Given the extent of the life span and restriction of childbearing years, it is misleading to focus only on the childbearing and active childrearing stages of parental roles. Alpert and Richardson (1980) argue that the experience of later stages of parenting is both more common and more important than it once was in its interaction with adult development. Socialization in adulthood has been conceptualized in terms of roles adults enact (Brim, 1966). As a role, parenthood is a process that actually begins before the birth of the first child and continues throughout life. The nature of the parental role provides a framework for viewing continuity and change over the life cycle (Alpert & Richardson, 1980).
Very little, if any, empirical work using longitudinal data has been devoted to the study of parental satisfaction over time. The few studies that have addressed the issue of parental satisfaction have used cross-sectional data. For example, using a national sample of married couples in which the wife was under 40, Hoffman and Manis (1978) examined the effects of children on their parents at different stages in the family cycle focusing on parental satisfactions and dissatisfactions. Family stage (defined in terms of the age of the oldest and youngest child) was broken down into four age groupings: preschool, elementary school, teenage, and over 18. Hoffman and Manis argue that the transition from nonparent to parent clearly bears the most universal or generalizable impact and that the only other stage that may be almost as clearly marked is when the children leave home. However, none of their subjects had reached this point in their parental career. By adolescence, the restrictions of parenthood were reported to be greatly reduced but the worries about their children's safety and future had increased. It was suggested that as parents of adolescents "see the almost finished product of their efforts," they may feel confident and reaffirmed in their childrearing or disappointed and guilty. No data pertaining to this opinion were presented. In summarizing their data on parental satisfactions and dissatisfactions, Hoffman and Manis conclude that most parents cite the preschool stage as the happiest and yet the most restrictive -- children were more likely to be seen as interfering with other things parents wanted to do. When asked how children change one's life, it was the mothers in the more advanced
stages who were more likely to report only positive changes. None of these mothers were over 40 years of age, therefore, we have no indication how satisfied parents are when they are in some phase of launching their children into the adult world.

In their 1957 study, Gurin, Veroff, and Feld (1960) assessed how satisfied 2,460 Americans were in their major adult roles of marriage, parenthood, and work. They had to use indirect approaches to measure satisfaction with the experience of being a parent after they found that a direct question (in the pretest) was uniformly answered in highly positive terms. No significant associations between parental satisfaction and the kind of problems respondents said they experienced with their children and the kinds of inadequacies they felt as parents were found. Overall, mothers felt more restricted by parenthood (and, therefore, more negative) than did fathers. Mothers also indicated more difficulties in parental role functioning than fathers. Men and women did not differ in the kinds of problems they reported but they did differ in sources of their feeling of inadequacy as parents: fathers were concerned about physical and material provision and expressed guilt over lack of a warm relationship and not spending enough time with their children; mothers felt badly about their exasperation and loss of temper from too much interaction with their children. More educated parents were more likely to feel inadequate as parents than those less educated. Older persons were more positive in their general orientation to life changes related to parenthood and reported fewer problems as parents. (This finding was interpreted as either due to a cohort effect or to
older parents forgetting what the problems were like when they more actively engaged in childrearing).

In a follow-up study twenty years later, Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981) again analyzed the satisfactions, feelings of adequacy, and problems experienced within the marital, parental, and work roles. They argue that the evaluation of performance and satisfaction in parenting have increasingly come to depend on the development of warm relationships with one's children. They found their 1976 respondents (n=2,267) viewed parenthood with greater realism -- recognizing both its positive rewards and its costs and problems -- than did the 1957 respondents. Parents interviewed in 1976 were found to be no longer overly invested in the parental role and more often thought of it as a major but not all-encompassing aspect of their lives. Overall, however, the 1957-1976 comparisons on the experiences in parenting yielded remarkably parallel findings for both samples. There were two minor trends but very little real differences: (1) slight increase in reports of feeling inadequate as a parent, and (2) a slight increased emphasis on the emotional tie between parent and child in both satisfactions and problems. Traditional definitions of father as "material provider and moral authority" and mother as "socio-emotional provider and daily caretaker" were still prevalent in 1976.

Veroff et al. (1981) argue that since the parents' age and developmental stage of the child vary together, one would expect to find significant age differences in responses to parenting. The effect of parent aging can never be disentangled from the effects of
the child's developmental status. Older parents have finished the hardest work of parenting -- the twenty-four hour tending of young children and the turmoil of adolescent's struggle for independence --- they contend. Older parents tended not to report restrictive or negative aspects of parenting but more often focused on not having enough money to provide adequately for their families. Financial demands were greatest when children were in late adolescence and early adulthood. The special difficulties of raising teenagers was the reason cited for the finding that middle-aged parents were more likely to admit both to problems and feelings of parental inadequacy than other parents. The positive adaptation of older parents was attributed to their being able to distance themselves from their children.

Summary

The family development perspective suggests that at certain stages in its life cycle, the family is assigned particular and essential developmental tasks. For middle-aged parents in the launching stage, their task is to "release" or "let go" so that their adolescent offspring in turn can achieve their individual development task of becoming autonomous adults.

Although this developmental task has been outlined for parents, there has been no empirical evidence that parents are indeed attending to the task mandated to them. This study focuses on the changes middle-aged parents' experience as they launch their children into adulthood -- change in fatalism which addresses the degree of
their "letting go" and change in optimism which addresses the degree of satisfaction they feel about their parenting.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research is presented in four sections. The first section provides the description of the study sample and the second section provides the description of the analytic sample. In section three, the variables are defined and the measures described. The final section describes the analytic procedure used with the data.

Sample

The data were drawn from a large two-wave panel study of a representative sample of Chicago area respondents interviewed in 1972 and again in 1976. This panel study, entitled "Life Events and Adult Adaptation," was directed by Morton A. Lieberman and Leonard I. Pearlin, the principal investigators. The original interviews were conducted in 1972 with 2,300 adults in households sampled to be representative of the census-defined urbanized area of Chicago (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1972), which includes sections of northwestern Indiana as well as some of the surrounding suburbs. A cluster sampling technique was used, each cluster consisting of four households per block (a total of 575 blocks). There was an overall response rate of approximately 70%.
Age and gender were the two criteria used in choosing respondents within sampled households. The principal investigators were interested in studying, among other things, the occupational role of subjects; therefore, only those between the ages of 18 and 65 were included in the sample. Secondly, in order to have as equal a number of females and males as possible, the sex of the person to be interviewed in each household was predetermined. Nonetheless, the final sample contained more women than men (59% versus 41% in 1972, and 61% versus 39% in 1976) (Pearlin & Lieberman, 1979; Pearl & Radabaugh, 1976).

In 1976-77, follow-up interviews were conducted with 1,106 persons of the original sample who agreed to be reinterviewed and who could be located. Social characteristics of these 1,106 individuals differed slightly from the original 2,300. Compared to those who were not reinterviewed (because they had died, refused, could not be located, or had not agreed in 1972 to a follow-up interview), the 1,106 respondents were more likely to be female, white, married, slightly older, more educated, and from the higher socioeconomic brackets. They also reported more happiness and more positive self-images, had fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression, and possessed a greater sense of mastery. Mullan (1981) concludes, "Overall, those reinterviewed were likely to come from the relatively stable, well-off and less stressed portion of the original sample" (p. 25). The bias that results from attrition will mean, however, that any findings may not apply to those respondents who are from the lower end of the socioeconomic portion of the original sample. (See

The first scheduled interview had three major foci: (1) the respondents' assessment of strain occurring in their roles as workers, marital partners, and parents; (2) the identification of resources and responses they bring to bear in coping with the strains they experience in these roles; and (3) their general well being including symptoms indicative of emotional distress and psychological disturbances, such as depression and anxiety. Many of the strains and coping repertoires about which respondents were questioned were initially identified in open-ended, unstructured discussion with over 100 subjects. As people would describe some of the problems they experienced in various areas of their lives, they were asked how they dealt with these problems. Questions were developed out of these discussions, then pre-tested which resulted in the final scheduled interview (Pearlin & Lieberman, 1979).

The interviews were conducted at the respondent's home by trained interviewers and took approximately an hour and a half to complete. At both time points respondents were asked identical close-ended questions encompassing the three major foci of the inquiry. The 1972 interview emphasized the social stresses and persistent problems of everyday life. Identical measures of role-related difficulties, coping strategies, and overall psychological adaptation were included in the 1976 survey. In addition, the 1976 interview asked subjects whether any of the twenty-two possible transitions or other life events had occurred in the intervening four years (Menaghan, 1982).
Both normative transitions (such as marriage, births, emptying of the nest) and more eruptive, non-scheduled events (such as divorce, job loss, early deaths) were asked about.

The analysis used a subsample of 381 mothers and fathers whose youngest child was between 10 and 30 years of age at the time of the first interview. The age parameters of 10 and 30 for the youngest child in the family was used in order to include families who were relatively close to the launching stage of the family cycle -- either approaching it, in the midst of it, or through with it. Thornburg (1982) contends that "In contemporary terms, adolescence is the age range of 11 years to 22 years" (pp. 7-8). The traditional age range of adolescence, 13-18, he argues, is based on physiological growth and pubertal changes, whereas the contemporary definition reflects social as well as physical pressures on youth across a broader age span. For example, some children aged 11 and 12 of today imitate older adolescents in such behaviors as drug use, delinquency, sex, drinking, and smoking. Thornburg contends that 19-22 years of age are included in adolescence because the increased number of years required for education and occupational training beyond high school that have prohibited these youth from an active and integrated role in the larger society. If adolescence does indeed begin earlier and end later, then parental responsibilities on a more daily basis are extended as well. It is assumed that by age 30, children have been launched from the parental household and that they are securely established in adult roles of their own. Significant demographic differences among the respondents were expected. To avoid
confounding these social characteristics with the effects of family stage, statistical controls for the effects of sex, race, marital status, educational level, income, whether the parent made the transition to the empty nest between 1972 and 1976, and number of children in the family were employed.

The Analytic Sample

The analytic sample contains 381 parents whose youngest children were between 10 and 30 years of age at Time One. The parent's mean age in 1972 was 50.56 with a standard deviation of 8.30. As with the total sample, there were more women than men (61.2% versus 38.8%), and preponderantly more whites (81.1%). Despite the biases caused by attrition, there was still variability in the indicators of socioeconomic status: 32.5% of the 381 had less than a high school education and about 18.9% made less than $8,000 a year. Of these 381 parents, 72.7% were stably married during the four years of the study. At Time One, the average age of the youngest child in the family was 17.66 and the average age of the oldest child was 24.38. Family size averaged 2.96 children with a range of one to 14. Nearly 28% of the parents studied had undergone the transition to the empty nest by 1972 — that is, there were no children living at home at the time of the first interview, and 16.5% of the parents studied made the transition to the empty nest during the interval between the two interviews. (See Table 1 that displays the characteristics of the analytic sample).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Time One</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>50.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>28-70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (% female)</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race (% white)</td>
<td>81.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education (years)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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</tr>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Range</td>
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<td>6.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt;$29,999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital Status (% stably married)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.96</td>
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<tr>
<td>Range</td>
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<td>14.2%</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
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<td>13.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children at Home (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 (Empty Nest)</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition to the Empty Nest</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Youngest Child</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>17.66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Range</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age of Oldest Child</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>24.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measures

The following measures were used in this analysis: parental optimism, parental fatalism, and personal mastery. Personal mastery is a dimension of self-concept -- a world view -- that refers to the extent to which persons see themselves as being in control of the forces that significantly affect their lives overall. Parental optimism and parental fatalism are role-specific -- perceptions specific to the parental role rather than reports of general well-being or overall adaptation.

Personal Mastery

Pearlin and his colleagues use the personality construct that they term "personal mastery" to refer to "the extent to which people see themselves, at one extreme, as being in control of the important circumstances of their lives or, at the other extreme, as having to submit fatalistically to external forces." The measure of mastery was derived from seven items to which persons indicated either strong agreement, agreement, disagreement, or strong disagreement:

1. There is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have.
2. Sometimes I feel that I'm being pushed around in life.
3. I have little control over the things that happen to me.
4. I can do just about anything I really set my mind to.
5. I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life.
6. What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me.
7. There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life.

Responses to at least five of the seven items were required.

**Parental Optimism**

Parental adaptation was assessed by a scale constructed from estimates of relative difficulty in the experience of parenting. The following three Items comprise the parental optimism scale:

1. As time goes by, has being a parent generally become much easier for you, somewhat easier, has it stayed about the same, has it become somewhat more difficult, or much more difficult? (5 choices).

2. What about as you look into the future? Would you guess that in the next year or so being a parent will generally: become easier for you, stay about the same, become more difficult for you? (3 choices).

3. When you think of your experiences as a parent so far, how would you compare yourself with other parents having children about the same ages as yours? Would you guess you have had: fewer problems, about the same, or more problems? (3 choices).

Responses to all three items are required.

**Parental Fatalism**

Parental fatalism refers to the belief that there is little parents can do to change their children's behavior and that the recourse is simply to accept them as they are. A scale of parental fatalism was constructed from the following two items:
1. How strongly do you agree or disagree with this: "The way my child(ren) is/are turning out depends on their inner nature and there is little I can do about it."

2. How strongly do you agree or disagree with this: "There is only so much I can do as a parent, and after that I just accept my child(ren) as he/she/they is/are." (Four response choices to both items: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree).

There was no intent in this study to measure in any objective sense how "good" or "effective" parents were in their task of parenting nor to assess any actual gauge of parenting conditions that they encountered in rearing children. Rather, the focus was on middle-aged mothers' and fathers' subjective evaluations of being parents. For example, one question asks how much the parent agrees that there is only so much he or she can do to change his or her child(ren)'s behavior. Here the parent is not asked what kind of behavior the child is engaged in, only how much control the parent feels he or she has over the child(ren)'s behavior. The response, then, is the parent's interpretation of his or her childrearing experience. Specifically, this study examined optimism and fatalism which seem to capture meaningful aspects of parenting as children are launched into adult society. Although these two aspects of parental experience clearly do not encompass all of the complexity of parent-child relationships, they do appear to be important indicators of how parents are adapting to changes in the parental role at this stage of the family life cycle. For each respondent at both time
points, there were questions about these beliefs or attitudes related to the parental role. Neither of these parental scales, it should be noted, were related specifically to launching or to particular children in the family.

**Reliability**

Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, and Mullan (1981) point out that error can result when concepts in social and behavioral science are measured. This error can result from "response predispositions, the manner in which interviewers present questions, the defense-arousal properties of some items, ambiguities in meaning, and the mix of social characteristics of interviewer and respondent. When the error introduced by these problems is random, the unreliability can result in a serious underestimation of the impact of the independent variables. On the other hand, nonrandom or correlated error is especially likely to occur in longitudinal studies, for the error underlying an answer at one time may be repeated when the same question is asked a second time. In this case one would overestimate the real correlation" (p. 352). Therefore, Pearlin and his colleagues used the statistical procedure LISREL which employs maximum likelihood confirmatory factor analysis to address these reliability problems (Joreskog, 1969; Joreskog & van Thillo, 1972 are cited). LISREL was used to develop measurement models of all the constructs from both interviews. This procedure allowed them to estimate the degree to which their scales were affected by correlated errors and to test explicitly the invariance of factor structure at
their two time points. They compared measurement models that constrained factor loadings to equality over time with models permitting the two sets of loadings to vary. They concluded, "In no case was the unconstrained model found to be a statistically significant improvement. Thus, we feel confident that the relationship between our constructs and indicators has remained stable over time. We did find some evidence of error over time in all of our scales, but the errors are small in magnitude and do not influence the stability of the estimates to any degree. Thus, we have a reasonable degree of confidence in the reliability of the measures" (p. 352).

The three measures employed in this study (personal mastery, parental optimism, and parental fatalism) were subject to these LISREL procedures in the PearlIn et al. study and, therefore, can be viewed as having commensurate reliability. Reliability for these three scales for the original sample (n=1106) was then established from estimates from the LISREL measurement model. The reliability coefficients for Personal Mastery are .85 at Time One and .83 at Time Two. The reliability coefficients for parental optimism are .66 at Time One and .70 at Time Two. The reliability coefficients for Parental Fatalism are .56 at Time One and .64 at Time Two. The reliability coefficients were also computed for the analytic sample (n=381) using Cronbach's alpha model: Alpha = .77 for Personal Mastery at Time One, and .83 at Time Two. Alpha = .50 for Parental Optimism at Time One, and .46 at Time Two. Alpha = .53 for Parental Fatalism at Time One, and .63 at Time Two.
Validity

The two parental measures used in this study are thought to be valid assessments of attitudes that parents hold regarding their childrearing experiences. Mullan (1981) argues that there are two ways of validating scales used in the survey format: (1) "by demonstrating that the scales are related to other variables in expected ways, that they correlate in a plausible way with demographic variables or other attitudes," and (2) "to demonstrate that the measures predict to an outside criterion" (p. 79). Mullan (using the PearlIn and Lieberman panel data) found that those who ended their marriages looked more distressed at Time One and were more likely to feel the relationship was inequitable, that it constricted their self-growth, and that it was not close or warm enough. This finding, he argues, implies that the general survey format and checklists of feelings, such as measures of role-specific attitudes, are capable of picking up important feelings. There is no such criterion as divorce or separation for the parental measures. However, Mullan contends, "Unless one has a strong reason to suppose that a particular kind of question interacts with a specific role, once our questions prove valid in one role area, there is little reason to believe they are not valid for other roles" (p. 80).

Mullan (1981) offers another demonstration of validity. In the follow-up interview, respondents were asked if they sought help for problems they were experiencing within a role. Again, if the
measures are valid, those who sought help should differ from those who did not. In most cases, those who sought help at Time Two were more distressed four years earlier than those who did not. Only twenty people sought help for problems with older children and only parental distress predicted to helpseeking for these problems. (For all role areas, specific role distress was found to predict to helpseeking for role-related problems).

The parental measures that were employed in the present study were used earlier by Menaghan (1982) in a study of parental coping, using Pearlin and Lieberman's panel data and a subsample of 292 married parents who had children five years of age or older living at home and who had not experienced changes in their household composition through additional births, children's launching, or the loss of spouse. (It should be noted that Menaghan's subsample of parents differed from the subsample that was used in this study which also included parents whose children left home but excluded children younger than 10 years of age). Menaghan's outcome measures were problems parents encounter in childrearing and distress felt in the parental role. Four parental coping efforts were assessed by Menaghan: discipline, optimistic comparisons ("one's situation relative to the past and relative to one's peers"), selective ignoring, and resignation ("a conscious restriction of feelings of parental responsibility and resignation to parental problems").

The present study employed two of these measures, optimistic comparisons and resignation, which were called "parental optimism" and "parental fatalism," respectively, and, therefore, Menaghan's
findings related to these two measures are of particular interest. The four parental coping strategies assessed by Menaghan were found not to be entirely independent of one another, nor independent of levels of problems and distress — for example, resignation positively correlated with selective ignoring (.22) and only minimally with parental distress (.06). Of the four coping efforts, only optimistic comparisons was correlated with fewer later problems (-.09) and less initial distress (-.25). These coping efforts were also found to be modestly associated with some of the demographic or contextual variables; for example, those with smaller families showed greater use of optimistic comparisons (-.11) and lesser use of resignation (.09). Parents with older children were more resigned (.33) and used less discipline than parents with younger children (-.24). In the multiple regression analysis, resignation was the only coping effort of the four that did not significantly influence parental distress; however, optimistic comparisons reduced parental distress (and the other two increased distress). The only impact of coping on later problem level was found to be indirect, through the reduction of parental distress through optimistic comparisons (and less discipline).

Pearlin and Schooler (1978) used the Time One data to assess how effective specific coping efforts in the role areas of occupation, economic life, marriage, and parenting were in reducing distress in each role separately when compared to the effectiveness of particular psychological resources (mastery, self-esteem, and self-denigration). In marriage and childrearing, coping was found to be more effective
than psychological resources. In the parental role, resignation (parental fatalism), selective ignoring, advice seeking, and discipline were found to be related to greater parental distress at any given level of strain. Lesser use of these four coping strategies along with the greater use of optimistic comparisons in parenting, predicted to lower distress.

Based on the findings of Menaghan (1982) and on those of Pearlin and Schooler (1978), it is concluded that parental optimism (used as an outcome measure in this analysis) is related to fewer problems and less distress experienced by parents and indicates a valid measure of positive adaptation in the parental role. Resignation was not related to parental distress nor problems in the Menaghan sample of parents whereas it was related to greater parental distress in the Pearlin and Schooler cross-sectional study. Resignation was found by Menaghan to be exercised by parents with older children more often than by parents with younger children and also by parents with more children. These findings suggest that parents lessen their control in childrearing when their children are older and more independent and when there are more children to keep track of. These more resigned parents could be adapting well given these conditions. In sum, it can be concluded that the measures that were used in this analysis were both reliable and valid.

Data Analysis

The two-wave panel design has several important advantages. First, since identical information about the parental experience was
obtained at both time points, prior parental experience and initial level of personal mastery can be controlled in assessing the effects of the launching process over time. The Time One data provided an assessment of the parents' response to the reality of their children's growing up and leaving home and allowed for what predicts to parental adaptation at this family life cycle stage. Second, the study design provided information about both baseline conditions and changes in parental optimism and parental fatalism over time so that effects of the launching process could be separated from such changes.

Multiple regression was the statistical technique used to test the research hypotheses. Multiple regression was employed in order to separate the effects predicting to the four dependent variables (which are continuous scales) while controlling for confounding variables. Three fundamental dimensions were thought to be relevant to the four outcome measures being investigated: (1) the age of the youngest child in the family; (2) whether any children are living with the parents; and (3) the parent's own sense of personal mastery. These three Time One dimensions were the major independent variables of this study. The effects of the major independent variables were estimated within a multiple regression equation to allow statistical separation of their influence from effects due to such confounding variables as sex, race, marital status, family size, education, income level, and whether the parent made the transition to the empty nest during the four years of the study.
Estimating the differences among the three dimensions with controls for these variables assured that it was either one (or both) of the indicators of the launching process (age of the youngest child in the family or whether all children were launched at Time One) and/or initial level of personal mastery that best predicted the initial level of parental optimism and then the initial level of parental fatalism and not some other characteristic which was responsible for the effects.

The following characteristics were treated as background or situational variables in the following analyses:

1. sex
2. race
   white
   non-white (83% of whom are Black)
3. educational level (years of education)
4. marital status (whether respondents were stably married or not during the four years of the study)
5. family size (number of children)
6. family income (used as a measure of the family's financial resources. It was recoded in thousands of dollars to the midpoint of the categories in the questionnaire. At the upper end of the scale $40,000 was used as the value and at the lower end, $2,000).
7. Whether the parent made the transition to the empty nest during the four years of the study.
Similarly, change in parental optimism and change in parental fatalism over the four years of the study were regressed on the three independent variables controlling on the seven background variables and also on the Time One levels of fatalism and optimism. When predicting changes in parental optimism and parental fatalism, Time One levels of these measures were included in the multiple regression equation. Wiley and Harnischfeger (1973) argue that when assessing change over time, using Time-One-level-subtracted-from-Time-Two-level is simplistic and badly biased "because the measurement errors of gain and of its basis, initial status, are correlated" (p. 2). In order to "strip off this biasing correlation" and to get the "true, actual relations between explanatory variables and gain or change," the inclusion of the initial status of the change measure is required in the equation as one of the controls (p. 2).

The interaction effect between Time One level of parental fatalism and age of youngest child in predicting change in parental optimism was tested by entering the multiplicative term (the product of the two variables of interest) into the regression equation last with all the controls. The multiple regression technique can also simultaneously demonstrate whether the effect of age of youngest child varies depending on such variables as whether all children were launched at Time One, the respondent's gender, marital status, and educational level, when predicting initial levels and change in the two parental measures. Therefore, in addition to the hypothesized interaction effect (age of youngest child*initial level of parental fatalism), other two-way factor interactions were also tested by
entering them into the equation last and separately to look for any trends that they might suggest. Generally, these unhypothesized interaction effects were not statistically significant. However, when such an interaction effect was significant, it will be noted; otherwise, a main effects model was assumed.

It should be noted that when level of income was included in the multiple regression equations, 48 cases were lost. Thus, the analysis was done twice -- with income included and again with income excluded. The findings were unaffected either way. Therefore, to gain cases, the multiple regression analyses that are reported are those which excluded income.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

The findings of this study will be reported in three sections, corresponding to the three research objectives. The first section reports results based on predictions of initial levels of parental optimism and parental fatalism focusing on the stage-specific demands of parenting (age of youngest child and whether children are living at home at Time One) and focusing, also, on the parent's own sense of personal mastery. The second section reports results of how these three factors predict changes in parental optimism and parental fatalism over the four years of the study. The third section reports findings related to interaction effects that were also tested by multiple regression - and, particularly, the hypothesized interaction effect between age of youngest child and initial level of parental fatalism in predicting change in parental optimism. Results are presented following the research hypotheses which address each objective. Each corresponding table displays the unstandardized regression coefficients, standardized beta coefficients, and probability level for each factor included in the multiple regression equation.

Table 2 displays the basic statistics and intercorrelations of the variables considered in the analysis. It is evident that the
Table 2
Basic Statistics and Correlations of Variables Considered in the Analysis

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<td>11. FAMILY SIZE</td>
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<td>12. EDUCATION</td>
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<td>13. INCOME</td>
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Mean: 3.92 2.69  .26  .10 3.58 17.66 .72 .59 .81 .73 2.96 12.4 16.02 .17
Standard Deviation: 1.21 .90 1.46 1.06 .76 5.89 .45 .49 .39 .45 1.67 3.06 9.81 .37

* No children at home
b Female
c Non-White
d Unstably Married

* p<.05  ** p<.01  *** p<.001
three fundamental variables are not completely independent of one another, nor independent of levels of parental optimism and parental fatalism. For example, there is a strong relationship between age of youngest child and whether there are any children at home (-.65). As would be expected, the older the child the more likely he or she will be launched. Parents are more likely to be optimistic if their children are older (.40) and no longer living at home (-.33). Respondents who feel more masterful as persons tend also to feel more masterful as parents, although the relationship is moderate (-.25). A sense of personal mastery is also related to several of the background variables: those who are high on mastery tend to be male, stably married, better educated, earn a higher income, and have fewer children.

It is assumed that one could expect the outcomes of parental optimism and parental fatalism to be influenced by situational characteristics as well as by the pressures/demands parents encounter at a certain stage in the family life span. The simultaneous consideration of these variables in multivariate regression equations is necessary to disentangle the independent effects of these variables.

Section 1

OBJECTIVE 1: To investigate whether the stage-specific demands of parenting and/or their own sense of personal mastery predict
initial levels of optimism and fatalism experienced by middle-aged parents:

Predicting initial level of parental optimism:

**Hypothesis 1**: Parents whose youngest children are older at Time One are more optimistic than parents whose youngest children are younger.

**Hypothesis 2**: Parents whose children are all launched at Time One are more optimistic than parents who still have children at home at Time One.

**Hypothesis 3**: Parents who possess a high sense of personal mastery are more optimistic than parents who possess a low sense of personal mastery.

As Table 3 shows, the three fundamental dimensions of interest (controlling for the background variables of sex, race, marital status, number of children, education, and transition) explain about 24 percent of the variance in initial level of parental optimism. Hypothesis 1 is supported in that age of youngest child bears a positive relationship to optimism -- parents whose youngest children are older are initially more optimistic than parents whose youngest children are younger.
Table 3

Factors Predicting Initial Level of Parental Optimism: Regression Analysis (n=352)

<table>
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<th>Factors</th>
<th>B</th>
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<td>Age of Youngest Child</td>
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<td>Children at Home</td>
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<td>Mastery</td>
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<td>Marital Status</td>
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<td>Number of Children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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$R^2 = .24$
Hypothesis 2 is also supported, indicating that parents whose children are all launched at Time One (0=no children at home) are more optimistic than parents who still have children at home. Personal mastery is found to have a positive relationship to optimism, supporting Hypothesis 3, that parents who feel more masterful as persons tend to feel more optimistic as parents.

A main effects model was assumed in this study for all but one of the hypotheses (Hypothesis 13). However, it was reasoned that certain interaction effects ought to be explored to assure that main effects are not misleading. It could be that something more complex is occurring. For example, having older youngest children may impact parental optimism differently depending on whether parents still had children at home. Thus, it seemed plausible to test whether parents who have older youngest children still at home differ from parents who have older youngest children who are all launched. Therefore, the two-factor interaction term, age of youngest child*children at home, was entered last (and separately from other interaction terms) into each of the four multiple regression equations. When predicting initial level of parental optimism, this interaction effect (age*at home) was not statistically significant ($F_{1,341} = 1.26, p<.26$). Therefore, it is concluded that the older the youngest child in the family, the more optimistic parents are initially. This holds true whether children are at home or away at Time One.
Predicting initial level of parental fatalism:

**Hypothesis 4**: Parents whose youngest children are older at Time One are more fatalistic than parents whose youngest children are younger.

**Hypothesis 5**: Parents whose children are all launched at Time One are more fatalistic than parents who still have children at home at Time One.

**Hypothesis 6**: Parents who possess a high sense of personal mastery are less fatalistic as parents than those who possess a low sense of personal mastery.

As indicated in Table 4, Hypotheses 4 and 6 are supported in the main effects model. Parents whose youngest children are older at Time One are more fatalistic than parents whose youngest children are younger. Also, parents who are more masterful as persons are less fatalistic as parents than those less masterful. It was hypothesized that parents whose children were launched would be more fatalistic (a negative relationship); however, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

When the initial level of fatalism was regressed on the interaction of age of youngest child and whether any children were at home at Time One (with all the controls), the interaction effect was not statistically significant ($F_{1,343} = 1.35, p<.25$). Therefore, it is concluded that the older the youngest child in the family, the
Table 4  
Factors Predicting Initial Level of Parental Fatalism: Regression Analysis (n=354)

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<td>Sex</td>
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<td>Transition</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Intercept</strong></td>
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<td>+3.20</td>
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<td><strong>R^2</strong></td>
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more fatalistic parents are initially. This holds true whether children are at home or away at Time One.

Section II

OBJECTIVE II: To investigate whether the stage-specific demands of parenting and/or their own sense of personal mastery predict change in optimism and fatalism over time as experienced by middle-aged parents:

Predicting change in parental optimism over time:

Hypothesis 7: Parental optimism will increase as children grow up; parents whose youngest children are older at Time One will become more optimistic over time than parents whose youngest children are initially younger.

Hypothesis 8: Parental optimism will increase as children leave home; parents whose children are all launched at Time One become more optimistic over time than those with children still at home initially.

Hypothesis 9: Parents who possess a high sense of personal mastery at Time One will become more optimistic over time than parents who initially possess a low sense of personal mastery.
As Table 5 shows, of the three fundamental dimensions tested by the main effects model, the only one that predicts change in parental optimism is the age of the youngest child: the older the youngest child in the family, the more optimistic parents become over time. Thus, Hypothesis 7 is substantially supported. There is no evidence to support Hypotheses 8 and 9 with a main effects model: neither how masterful a parent deems him or herself to be as a person nor whether children were at home at Time One predicts how optimistic the parent will become over time. However, the interaction between age of youngest child and whether children were at home when predicting change in parental optimism over time was also tested in the multiple regression equation. As indicated in Table 6, this interaction effect is statistically significant ($p < .009$). Age of youngest child is not related to change in parental optimism when all children are launched by Time One ($-.02$, non-significant estimated regression weight, $p < .58$). However, when there are still children at home at Time One, the older the youngest child, the more optimistic parents become over time ($+.08$, significant estimated regression weight). Thus, testing the interaction between age of youngest child and whether children are at home shows that age of youngest child predicts change in parental optimism (Hypothesis 7) only when children were still at home at Time One. Figure 1 depicts the graphic presentation of the predicted values of change in Parental Optimism for this disordinal interaction effect.
Table 5

Factors Predicting Change In Parental Optimism: Regression Analysis (n=346)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>P-level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age of Youngest Child</td>
<td>+.06</td>
<td>+.25</td>
<td>.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children at Home</td>
<td>+.24</td>
<td>+.07</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>+.02</td>
<td>+.009</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Optimism at Time One</td>
<td>-.87</td>
<td>-.72</td>
<td>.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Fatalism at Time One</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>+.24</td>
<td>+.06</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>+.08</td>
<td>+.02</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
<td>+.006</td>
<td>+.007</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>+.15</td>
<td>+.04</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>+2.41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R^2 = .45
Table 6

The Interaction Between Age of Youngest Child and Whether Children Were at Home Predicting Change In Parental Optimism: Regression Analysis (n=346)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>P-level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age of Youngest Child</td>
<td>-.0186</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children at home(^a)</td>
<td>-2.3787</td>
<td>-.70</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction (Age*At Home)</td>
<td>+.0991</td>
<td>+.62</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>+.04</td>
<td>+.02</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Optimism at Time One</td>
<td>-.86</td>
<td>-.71</td>
<td>.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Fatalism at Time One</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>+.25</td>
<td>+.07</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>+.06</td>
<td>+.02</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
<td>+.01</td>
<td>+.01</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>+.002</td>
<td>+.0006</td>
<td>.99.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>+4.61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R(^2)=.46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) 0=no children at home
Figure 1

Predicted Values of Change in Parental Optimism for Age of Youngest Child by Children at Home and Away
Predicting change in parental fatalism over time:

**Hypothesis 10:** Parental fatalism will increase as children grow up; parents whose youngest children are older at Time One will become more fatalistic over time than parents whose youngest children are initially younger.

**Hypothesis 11:** Parental fatalism will increase as children leave home; parents whose children are all launched at Time One will become more fatalistic over time than those with children still at home initially.

**Hypothesis 12:** Parents who possess a high sense of personal mastery at Time One will become less fatalistic as parents over time than those who initially possess a low sense of personal mastery.

When, employing the main effects model, no statistically significant predictors of change in parental fatalism were found. (See Table 7). When the interaction between age of youngest child and whether children were at home was tested in the multiple regression equation predicting change in parental fatalism over time, it was not statistically significant ($F_{1,335} = 1.13, \ p<.29$).
Table 7
Factors Predicting Change in Parental Fatalism: Regression Analysis (n=348)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>P-level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age of Youngest Child</td>
<td>+.02</td>
<td>+.11</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children at Home</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Fatalism at Time One</td>
<td>-.76</td>
<td>-.65</td>
<td>.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Optimism at Time One</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>+.09</td>
<td>+.03</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>+.16</td>
<td>+.06</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>+2.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 = .39$
The two variables, age of youngest child and whether all children were launched by Time One, as reported earlier, were found to be correlated with each other (-.66) -- i.e., the older the youngest child, the more likely that child was launched by the time of the first interview. In predicting change in parental fatalism multicollinearity appears to be present due to this intercorrelation.

When either variable (age of youngest child or whether all children were launched at Time One) was entered into the multiple regression equation separately without the other variable included, each predicted to change in parental fatalism over time: the older the youngest child in the family at Time One, the more fatalistic parents became over time (Beta = +.14, p<.006), and parents who had launched all of their children by the time of the first interview became more fatalistic than those parents who still had children at home (Beta = -.10, p<.04). When both of these variables were in the regression equation simultaneously, neither was statistically significant which indicates multicollinearity. When multicollinearity is avoided by entering the two variables separately, both Hypotheses 10 and 11 are supported. However, there is no support for Hypothesis 12.

Section III

OBJECTIVE III: To examine whether there are adaptive or appropriate levels of parental fatalism depending on the age of the youngest child in the family:
Hypothesis 13: There is an expected interaction effect between age of youngest child and level of parental fatalism at Time One in predicting change in parental optimism:

a. Parents of younger youngest children who are initially more fatalistic will become less optimistic over time than those who are not.

b. Parents of older youngest children who are initially more fatalistic will become more optimistic over time than those who are not.

There is no evidence for this interaction effect ($F_{1,333} = 1.06, \ p<.30$), therefore, Hypothesis 13 is rejected. How optimistic parents are becoming over time was not found to be related to whether these parents were "appropriately fatalistic." It was thought that parents of older children "ought to be" fatalistic in order to successfully launch these older children into adulthood. If they were, they would become more optimistic over time. On the other hand, to feel fatalistic as a parent of younger children would indicate a giving up -- a sense of helpless resignation -- that would have maladaptive consequences over time.

The interaction of age of youngest child and initial level of fatalism was also tested when predicting initial level of optimism in order to assess whether there was any indication that this relationship existed at one prior point in time. This interaction effect was also statistically non-significant ($F_{1,340} = .42,$
A third interaction effect was tested -- age of youngest child*change in fatalism -- when predicting change in optimism in order to assess whether parents who increased in fatalism over time differed from those that decreased in relation to the age of their youngest child. This interaction effect was also found to be statistically non-significant ($F_{1,331} = .03, p<.87$).

It has been established that a main effects model was generally employed in this study, but that when interaction terms seemed plausible, they were tested in the multiple regression analyses. It was also reasoned that subgroups within the sample could differ on the fundamental dimension that was used as an index of how psychologically exacting the parenting task might be -- the age of the youngest child. For example, it has been suggested in the literature that mothers have greater investment in being parents than fathers, whose primary role is that of "breadwinner" (Aldous, 1978; George, 1980; Rapoport et al., 1977). Others contend that fathers undergoing the transition to the empty nest regret not having spent more time with their children (Lowenthal et al., 1975). Rubin (1976) conjectures that it may be fathers "who want to hold back the clock, to keep the children in the home for just a little longer" (p. 31). Thus, the experience of parenting may be different for fathers and mothers.

Likewise, parental pressures at mid-life may differ for married versus single respondents and for more highly educated versus less educated parents. Therefore, the following interaction terms were entered last and separately into the four multiple regression
equations: (1) age of youngest child*sex of parent; (2) age of youngest child*martial status of the parent; and (3) age of youngest child*educational level of parents. None of these two-factor interaction terms were found to be statistically significant when predicting any of the four dependent variables. Below is a summary of change in the $E$ values for these interaction terms:

Predicting Initial level of Parental Optimism ($n=352$):

1. Age of youngest child*Sex of parent ($E_{1,341} = 3.00$, $p<.08$).
2. Age of youngest child*Education of parent ($E_{1,341} = 2.99$, $p<.08$).
3. Age of youngest child*Martial status of parent ($E_{1,341} = .37$, $p<.54$).

Predicting Initial level of Parental Fatalism ($n=354$):

1. Age of youngest child*Sex of parent ($E_{1,343} = .07$, $p<.80$).
2. Age of youngest child*Education of parent ($E_{1,343} = 1.01$, $p<.31$).
3. Age of youngest child*Martial status of parent ($E_{1,343} = .27$, $p<.60$).
Predicting change in Parental Optimism (n=346):

1. Age of youngest child*Sex of parent ($E_{1,333} = 1.93$, $p<.17$).
2. Age of youngest child*Education of parent ($E_{1,333} = .20$, $p<.66$).
3. Age of youngest child*Marital status of parent ($E_{1,333} = .69$, $p<.41$).

Predicting change in Parental Fatalism (n=348).

1. Age of youngest child*Sex of parent ($E_{1,335} = .51$, $p<.47$).
2. Age of youngest child*Education of parent ($E_{1,335} = .00008$, $p<.99$).
3. Age of youngest child*Marital status of parent ($E_{1,335} = .39$, $p<.53$).

It should also be noted that analysis of covariance assumes that the slopes are the same across subgroups. When predicting change in
parental optimism and change in parental fatalism, this assumption was tested by entering the following four interaction terms last and separately in the regression equations: age of youngest child*initial level of optimism, age of youngest child*initial level of fatalism, children at home*initial level of optimism, and children at home*initial level of fatalism. None of these interaction effects were statistically significant, therefore, it is assumed that the slopes are the same across these subgroups of interest. The change in the \( F \) values are reported below:

Predicting Change in Parental Optimism (\( n=346 \)):

1. Age of youngest child*initial level of optimism (\( F_{1,333} = .83, \ p<.36 \)).
2. Age of youngest child*initial level of fatalism (\( F_{1,333} = 1.06, \ p<.30 \)).
3. At home*initial level of optimism (\( F_{1,333} = .009, \ p<.43 \)).
4. At home*initial level of fatalism (\( F_{1,333} = .31, \ p<.58 \)).

Predicting Change in Parental Fatalism (\( n=348 \)):

1. Age of youngest child*initial level of optimism (\( F_{1,335} = .47, \ p<.50 \)).
2. Age of youngest child*initial level of fatalism (\( F_{1,335} = .00005, \ p<.99 \)).
3. At home*initial level of optimism ($E_{1,335} = 1.21, p<.27$).
4. At home*initial level of fatalism ($E_{1,335} = .009, p<.82$).
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Review of the Study

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand parental adaptation in the middle years by focusing on the optimism and fatalism experienced by parents as their children grow up and leave home. This involved an investigation of two basic questions that have not been explicitly addressed in the literature: (1) Are parents satisfied with their parental role at this stage in the family life cycle? and, (2) Are middle-aged parents attending to the family developmental task of "letting go" (Aldous, 1978) — of "releasing" (Duvall, 1971, 1977) their children to be more autonomous as they assume the role of young adult? Certainly many changes are occurring for parents at mid-life, but of particular interest in this study are the changes specific to the launching of children into adulthood and into adult society. "Launching" has been described as more of a gradual process rather than an abrupt event (Aldous, 1978; Rapoport et al., 1977; Rosow, 1976) — children are launched over a period of time that has no clear demarcation by child-age. Most American parents can expect that their adolescent children will secure a driver's license at age 16 and a high school diploma at age 18, and most American parents can
expect that "someday" their children will leave home. No particular age, however, is attached to the child's leave-taking nor do children seem to do it all at once. Their first venture outside the small family circle could be overnight at Grandma's or at a friend's house -- followed in a couple of years by a week at summer camp. The bigger break into the wider world comes when the child leaves home to attend college, join the army, take a full-time job, or get married (Rapoport et al., 1977). A socialization process occurs over many years to get both parents and children ready for the big break, the final launch -- when the child is "all grown up" and finally can be "on his or her own." Certain norms inform parents and children alike that age 10 is "too young" to set out on one's own to conquer the world, and likewise, to be 30 years old and still living with Mom and Dad is "too old" and "not normal."

Given that parents at mid-life are involved in this fluid process of launching their children into greater independence, how are they adapting? This study was designed to answer four questions specific to adaptation to the launching process: of three fundamental dimensions -- parent's sense of personal mastery, age of youngest child in the family, and whether children are launched or not at Time One -- (1) What predicts how optimistic parents are? (2) What predicts how fatalistic parents are? (3) What predicts how optimistic parents become over time?, and (4) What predicts how fatalistic parents become over time? The findings of this study will be summarized and discussed by attempting answers to these four questions.
Predicting Initial Level of Parental Optimism

All three fundamental dimensions predict initial level of parental optimism. The older the youngest child, the more optimistic parents are initially. The more masterful they feel as persons, the more optimistic they feel as parents. If parents had launched all their children by the time of the first interview, they tend to be more optimistic than those parents who had all or some children still at home. Also, less educated parents are more optimistic than those who are better educated. These effects are independent of the other situational variables and also independent of each other.

The finding that optimism is positively related to having already launched one's children concurs with earlier research that found that empty nest parents report that this stage in their lives is as "happy" or "happier" than other life stages (Burr, 1970; Campbell et al., 1976; Deutscher, 1959, 1964; Glenn, 1975; Rollins & Cannon, 1974; Rollins & Galligan, 1978). However, these cross-sectional studies (often retrospective in nature) essentially focused on marital and general quality of life satisfaction of postparental respondents. In this study, the focus is explicitly that of parental role satisfaction, and with some confidence, it can be concluded that empty nest parents (regardless of the age of their youngest child) are more optimistic about being parents than those parents who still have some or all of their children at home. The commonly held myth that parents experience the launching of their last child from the home as stressful is not substantiated by the cross-sectional finding
of this study. On the contrary, empty nest parents in this sample are satisfied with how they have reared these children who are now living independently. These parents now have fewer demands on their time related to the daily exchange associated with parenting offspring still living at home — furnished "bed and board" — and no doubt laundry services! As Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981) maintain, the hardest work of parenting is over for these parents — "they have finished the twenty-four hour tending of young children and have survived the turmoil of the adolescent's struggle for independence."

To say that feeling masterful as a person leads to being optimistic as a person would ignore the other directional possibility — that is, being optimistic about one's parenting could lead to personal mastery. All that can be safely concluded is that persons who feel that they are in control of the important circumstances of their lives also feel more optimistic about their parenting than do those parents who are less masterful, regardless of one's gender, race, education, etc.. In prior research, mastery was found to be an adaptive response in the face of many life events (Kobassa, 1979; Lefcourt, 1976, 1980; Pearlin et al., 1976, 1978, 1981; Wheaton, 1983). Here it is implied that mastery is an adaptive personal resource that parents can draw upon to deal successfully with parental tasks specific to this stage of their lives.

This data show that less educated parents feel more optimistic about their parenting than do more educated parents. Gurin, Veroff, and Feld (1960) found that more educated parents were more likely to
feel inadequate as parents than those less educated. Jacoby (1969) argues that better educated, middle-class persons (when compared to those of lower socioeconomic status) may hold higher expectations for themselves as parents and, consequently, experience the transition to parenthood as more difficult. Perhaps better educated individuals do expect more of themselves as parents, and when they feel they have not measured up to these high standards are more pessimistic as a result.

Of the three major factors related to initial level parental optimism, age of youngest child is clearly the strongest predictor: parents of older (youngest) children are more optimistic than parents of younger (youngest) children. If age of youngest child is, in fact, an index of how psychologically engaged parents are in childrearing, then being less engaged because children are older (and presumably more autonomous) is related to feeling more satisfied about how one has parented, regardless of whether one's nest was initially empty or not.

Predicting Initial Level of Parental Fatalism

Parental fatalism was assumed in this study to be an indication of "letting go" — the developmental task assigned to parents at the launching stage of the family life cycle (Aldous, 1978; Duvall, 1971, 1977). Parental fatalism is the belief that there is little parents can do to change their children's behavior and that the only recourse is simply to accept them as they are. Having older children was found to influence parents' initial level of fatalism: parents of
older children were more fatalistic than parents of younger children. Also, predictive of feeling fatalistic as a parent was feeling fatalistic as a person; respondents low in personal mastery tended to be high in parental fatalism. Which attitude preceded the other cannot be established by this data analysis. Persons low in mastery are described as feeling a sense of having to submit fatalistically to external forces over which they have no control (Pearlin et al., 1981; Pearlin & Radabaugh, 1976). With this sample of middle-aged parents, feeling fatalistic about life in general is associated with also feeling fatalistic as parents — these individuals appear to accept whatever comes to them in life and in childrearing as inevitable.

A sex difference was also found to be statistically significant when predicting initial level of parental fatalism: mothers are more fatalistic than fathers. This finding supports the view that fathers want "to keep children at home for just a little longer" (Rubin, 1979, p. 31). Mothers who have had major responsibility for childrearing may be more ready to "let go" than fathers who have invested in their work role to the neglect of their parental role, and are now less willing to "let go" of children that grew up too quickly.

**Predicting Change in Parental Optimism Over Time**

Although the three fundamental dimensions predict initial level of parental optimism as expected, they are not related to change in optimism entirely as anticipated. The results of the main effects
model indicating that having older youngest children (regardless of whether these children were launched or not) increases parental optimism over time are deceiving. However, that finding holds true only for parents whose children were still at home at the time of the first interview. For parents who had already launched their children by 1972, having older (youngest) children is not related to how optimism changed for these parents over the four years of the study.

However, for parents who still had children at home at Time One — being a parent appears to get better and better over time if one's youngest children are older. These parents, then, who are becoming more optimistic over time are parents who had not launched all their children by 1972 and these unlaunched children are older. This finding suggests that an increase in optimism is associated with less pressure on parents psychologically to be more actively engaged with their children — that is, their children are initially older and presumably more autonomous. Although the presence of these children requires a certain level of active engagement on the part of parents, because these children are older it appears there is less psychological engagement and parents become more optimistic as a result. Personal mastery was not associated with change in parental optimism over time. Regardless of whether parents are masterful as persons, if they still had children at home initially and if these children were older, they were becoming more optimistic over time than parents with younger children still at home.
Predicting Change in Parental Fatalism Over Time

There are two significant predictors of change in parental fatalism over time: age of youngest child and whether all children were launched at Time One (If these variables are entered into the multiple regression equation separately in order to avoid the effects of multicollinearity). Regardless of level of personal mastery and of any of the situational characteristics, parents whose youngest children are older are increasing more in fatalism over time than parents whose youngest children are younger. This finding supports the view that as children are growing older, middle-age parents are "letting go" — parents are adopting the attitude that there is little they as parents can do to change their child(ren)'s behavior and that the only recourse is simply to accept them as they are. This fatalistic stance implies either a conscious effort to restrict parental responsibility — a "hands-off" non-intrusive attitude toward pressures related to childrearing or a "hands-up," helpless resignation to problems that are beyond the parent's sphere of control. Clearly the data show that these parents are "letting go" as their children grow up. What is not revealed is whether parents engage in this process by design or by default.

If fatalism is an indication of "letting go" as assumed in this study and since this "letting go" is associated with children getting older — with this sample of parents this data suggest that parents are actively but gradually "letting go" (In a psychological sense). The "snapshot" at Time One is of parents with older children "letting go" — lessening their control over their children in order to
socialize them for becoming adults (Aldous, 1978). It suggests an appropriate distancing in the parent-child relationship that will enable these children about to be launched (because they are older) to exercise some autonomy. Over time the data demonstrated that with all the changes that are occurring for these parents what predicts to whether these parents are attending to the developmental task of "letting go" is that their youngest children were initially older. Regardless of whether these older youngest children were at home or away at the beginning of the study, their parents are becoming more fatalistic over time than those parents with younger children (at home or away). This view of what is occurring over time supports the view that launching is a lessening of the more active psychological demands associated with parenting concomitant with a gradual progression of child from dependency to more equal status as an autonomous adult based on that child's being older regardless of whether that child has actually left home. Gradual, continuous changes are occurring in parenting as children grow and develop, and launching is empirically shown here to be a more fluid process rather than abrupt event. This view has also been argued by others (Aldous, 1978; Lowenthal et al., 1975; PearlIn, 1980; Rapoport et al., 1977; Rosow, 1976).

Likewise, regardless of level of personal mastery and of any of the situational characteristics, and independent of the age of child, parents who had already launched all of their children by Time One became more fatalistic over time than those parents who still had children at home. Thus, another predictor of whether parents are
attending to the task of "letting go" is the actual departure of all the children from the parental home. The physical presence of children actively engages parents on a day-to-day basis. Once these children are launched into adult society, parents "let go" even more. This finding suggests that parents are even more reticent to exercise control over the behavior of children who are "on their own." How these children "turn out" is no longer the parent's responsibility, and the parent accepts his or her children on their own terms.

Conclusion

Clearly middle-age parents are experiencing changes in optimism and in fatalism during the transition to the empty nest. However, the optimism and fatalism they are feeling are not connected to each other in any plausible way. Nor does the data support the view that appropriate, age-related fatalism leads to greater parental optimism. At Time One, empty-nest parents are more optimistic than parents who still have children at home. Over time, these empty-nest parents do not become any more optimistic suggesting that by Time One they had reached an optimal level of optimism. They are as satisfied as they will ever be. Parents with older children not yet launched at Time One are becoming more optimistic over time than their counterpart whose children are younger. Increase in parental optimism is clearly related to the child's age only when parents are still actively engaged in the launching process.

At Time One, parents of older children are more fatalistic than parents of younger children. Over time, these parents become even
more fatalistic. Whether children were all launched by Time One bore no relationship to how fatalistic parents were initially but if children were all launched by Time One, parents became more fatalistic over time than those parents who still had children at home.

Problems in the Study

To what extent are the findings reliable and valid? One problem in this study is that the data was collected ten years ago (in 1972, and again in 1976). Due to cohort effects, these findings may not be generalizable to middle-aged parents who are in the throes of launching their children in 1984. Societal circumstances today may be sufficiently different from those in the 70's to offset these findings. The popular literature has drawn attention to the "not-so-empty-nest," in which parents experience stress when adult children move back into the home. Middle-age parents in 1984 may be more pessimistic because those children once launched have returned to the home port or because children in their late 20's have not yet left. Consequently, this study should be replicated to investigate some of these issues.

Although the study design is an improvement over those used in previous research since information was available from the same parents at two points in time, four years is possibly too short a time to track the developmental process of launching. A developmental trajectory from a short-term panel design has been inferred. Older respondents are from another cohort, reared with
different values under different societal circumstances. It cannot be concluded that more recent cohorts will follow the same pattern. Further empirical work is necessary in order to substantiate the findings.

A third problem lies in the measures used in this study. The reliability coefficients for parental optimism are rather low: .50 at Time One and .46 at Time Two. The reliability coefficients for parental fatalism are somewhat higher and considered moderate: .53 at Time One and .63 at Time Two. However, one would have much more confidence in these measures if their reliability coefficients were at least .80. It is plausible, then, that the parental measures used in this study are inadequate measurements with respect to reliability.

A fourth problem in this study relates to the possibility that the launching process was not critically tapped with this sample of parents whose children were ten years of age or older. This problem could account for the lack of the hypothesized interaction between age of youngest child and initial level of fatalism when predicting change in parental optimism over time. It is plausible that the "letting go" process begins even earlier. Americans are purported to be "rugged, independent individuals." It could well be that parents begin even at birth to socialize their children towards such rugged independence. Nonetheless, this study has demonstrated that significant parental changes are occurring at mid-life and should be further examined.
Implications

Family Theory and Research

McKenry and Price (1984), in describing the present state of family relations research, point out that those who presume family life cycle stages are moving from a strictly descriptive framework to an employment of developmental principles in order to study the changes that take place in families over time. Others have become disenchanted with the prospect of using the concept of family life cycle stage to explain anything at all (Elder, 1978; Menaghan, 1981; Nock, 1979). Mulian (1981) argues that "family stage is not the key to understanding changes in marital happiness, at least not in the latter half of the family life cycle" (p. 195). However, Mulian maintains that family stage is not a bad place to begin a study of changes in parental experiences over time. In this study, the family stage of launching and the developmental principle of "letting go" were the foci whereby changes in parental experiences over time were examined. Such an undertaking deserves further exploration including an extension of the investigation to earlier (and possibly later) stages of parenting.

The limitations of this study suggest important implications for future research. There is a need to replicate this study by collecting data from a current cohort of parents who are relatively close to the launching stage of the family cycle -- either approaching it, in the midst of it, or recently through with it. Since divorce rates have escalated considerably over the last decade and many more parents are rearing children single-handedly, more
single parents should be included in the sample to test whether these stage-specific dimensions predict to the outcome measures in different ways today depending on whether a parent is with or without a partner. Although race, marital status, sex, education, and income level were used as controls in this study, future research should also include the working status of mothers as a potentially confounding variable. Increasing numbers of mothers have entered the paid labor force in recent years. Parenting as it relates to launching may differ in families where the mother is gainfully employed outside the home from families in which the mother is a full time housewife and mother. For example, working mothers may be more fatalistic than non-working mother due to the pressures of balancing both family and work obligations.

Secondly, there is a need to maintain the longitudinal design in replicating this study and to gather information over a longer span of time with three waves instead of two in order to better track the developmental process of launching. Such a design would allow for the investigation of the "not-so-empty-nest" phenomenon that has been of interest in recent years. What factors account for adult children moving back to the parental household? How do parents adapt to their nest "filling up" again? are only examples of critical questions that need to be addressed.

And, finally, future research needs to assess adolescents' perceptions of their own launching. Aldous (1978) argues that what it means to be finally launched is the feeling of both parents and children that the latter are launched. A study that gathered
Information from both parents and the children they launch would add considerably to our understanding of the launching stage.

**Summary**

At the onset of this study, two basic questions were posed: (1) Are parents satisfied with their parental role at this stage in the family life cycle?, and (2) Are middle-aged parents attending to the family developmental task of "letting go"? This research found that the parents in this sample were satisfied or optimistic if their youngest children were older, if they had already launched their children from the parental household, or if they felt masterful as persons. These parents became more satisfied/optimistic over time if they had not launched their children by Time One and their youngest children were older.

Secondly, this study demonstrated that the parents in this sample were attending to the developmental task of "letting go." Parents were more likely to "let go" — i.e., be more fatalistic, if their youngest children were older or if they felt fatalistic about their lives in general. Parents were likely to become more prone to "let go" over time if their youngest children were older or if all their children had been launched at the time of the first interview, regardless of whether they felt masterful as persons.
REFERENCES


