

Empty Nest Syndrome and Psychological Wellbeing among Middle Aged Adults

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The study was carried out to investigate the empty nest syndrome and psychological wellbeing among middle aged adults. Empty nest syndrome (ENS) refers to clinical depression experienced by parents with the cessation of their child rearing roles when their children leave home (Kearney,2002). Sample of study consisted of 40 fathers and 41 mothers with an age range of 40-55 years. Empty Nest Syndrome questionnaire developed by Mbaeze and Ukwandu (2011) and psychological wellbeing scale by Ryff (1989) were administered on middle aged parents who have experienced the departure of children. To measure the impact of type of departure and parent's education in terms of empty nest syndrome, a rating scale ranging from 1-10 was administered on middle aged parents. Findings of the study indicated that mothers and fathers did not differ in terms of empty nest syndrome and psychological well-being while less educated parents differed significantly in experiencing empty nest syndrome than more qualified parents. Furthermore, the departure of children due to marriage and pursuance of education of children did not affect their level of empty nest syndrome. The findings have wide implications for the parents, children and developmental psychologists.

Keywords: empty nest syndrome, gender, middle aged parents and psychological well-being.

Family love is just like love of birds living together in a nest. In life, there comes a point where young one's fly away and start living their lives independently. Launching of children is a cycle in which children move into adulthood and set their goals, develop their identity and become more independent. Parents usually deal with the absence of their children when they leave the house to establish their own families. Sometimes children leave home due to marriages, or in pursuance of higher education or career. Previous studies have indicated that parents react differently on the departure of their children. Kearney (2002) postulated that parents especially women become depressed when their children leave their homes forever. Empty nest syndrome is an unhappy sad feeling and negative emotional disturbance which parents experience when their children leave them. Cavan (1965) years back described empty nest stage as the withdrawal of children from home, the most drastic transition in the lives of parents which leaves husband and wife together as a family unit. Empty nest syndrome mostly affects the women as their lives are centered around home responsibilities. Lopata (1966) named this transition in middle age as "shrinking circle stage" during which a middle aged housewife no longer gets gratification from her roles as a wife and mother and she tries to get herself engaged in community services as a replacement for the loss of these roles.

Westberg (1971) proposed that parents encounter great loss and feeling of grief when their children leave apart. He described the empty nest syndrome as "Another grief situation may center on the children of a family. A child is lost not through death but through marriage. He takes all his belongings from his room and the house is lifeless. A house once filled with laughter and joy is now as quiet as a tomb" (p. 17-18). He stated that grief is the reaction on the departure of the children. Grief is expressed as being upset, lack of emotional expression, feelings of depression and loneliness, distress, guilt and then acceptance. He postulated that all, some or none of the parents may demonstrate these grief reactions while

passing through empty nest syndrome.

Mbaeze and Ukwandu's (2011) study indicated that people experienced empty-nest syndrome not only due to departure of children from home but their own physical health issues did not let them move on to new adjustment. Furthermore, the study indicated that empty nest syndrome was an outcome of death of spouse, retirement, children leaving their homes, and menopause. Similarly, Kitson's (1982) study indicated that 42 percent of divorced women were at a high risk of empty nest syndrome and had concerns regarding how to deal with a single life. Horn (1976) also postulated empty nest syndrome as a hard blow to widows and the divorced women.

The effect of the empty nest syndrome can be critically reviewed in the light of the perspectives on role identity and role change. Role identity perspective postulates that more the role identities one has the better one off is. As we lose roles in life, we encounter psychological disturbances (Thoit, 1983). This leads us to predict that the children's departure from home will decrease parental psychological wellbeing. Role change perspective postulates that change in role whether assuming or giving up can have an adverse effect on physical and psychological health (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Studies have found that parenting is a stressful task (MacLanahan & Adams 1987) whereas decades ago a survey reported that empty nest mothers were happier as compared to mothers who had their children at home (Horn, 1976).

There are many factors affecting empty nest syndrome in mothers and fathers. Among them, gender of parents, education, single parenting, aging and cultural variations are significant. There are many reasons of child's departure from home, it might be due to marriage, higher education and career. A study was conducted on almost one thousand children who had left home. It was found in the research that approximately 93 percent of children left home since 1960 due to marriage and 25 percent of children left home to pursue higher studies and for establishing their career. It was also found that daughters are on higher percentage of leaving home due to their marriages and sons prefer to leave home in the pursuance of their career (Young, 1984). Nowadays many researches are undertaken to explore the myth that empty nest syndrome create feelings like depression, anxiety and loss of some goal in life. Research indicates that parents experience some kind of loss but

that does not lead them towards depression or any other severity. Research has shown that parents feel more satisfaction and share positive relationship with one another. There are also some studies which indicated that fathers experienced more sense of loss and grief instead of a primary caregiver. Significant number of mothers are now working outside their homes. Nowadays e-mail, face book, video calls and economical airfares have made it convenient for parents to stay in contact with children after they have left home and started independent lives (Rebecca, 2003). Alubaidi (2017) also reported that parents can stay in touch with their children by making calls regularly, texting, sending emails and talking to them through video calls.

On the other hand, Fingerma (2002) found that empty nest syndrome does not exist the way as it has been described. Obviously parents do feel emptiness around them but that does not cause empty nest syndrome. Moreover, the study also reported that parents felt more sense of freedom, strong bonding with spouse and positive relations with their own siblings and explored new purpose and goals in life. Particularly parent and child relationship improves after the departure of children. Fingerma interviewed women in their 20's, living independently and their mothers who were in their 40's found that both enjoyed positive relationship because there was an absence of day to day stress caused by living together.

Previous literature has indicated a relationship between psychological wellbeing and empty nest syndrome. Psychological wellbeing is concerned with how our lives are going because it is the mixture of healthy emotions and effective functioning. Psychological well-being is marked with the increased ability of an individual to handle long term negative emotions in a more positive or constructive ways that makes their functioning more efficient to tackle these emotions (Huppert, 2009).

Role identity perspective by Thoit in 1983, states that loss of role can adversely affect the emotional and psychological well-being. This theory suggests that departure of off spring from house causes greater levels of depression, anxiety and emotional instability. Studies have also shown that parenthood may have negative impact on the psychological well-being of middle aged adults. On the contrary, MacLahans and Adams (1987) reported that parents who have their children at home feel less happiness, boundaries and more worry as compared to those parents whose children are away from home. Duestcher (1969) investigated empty nest and psychological well-being and found that parents felt more comfortable with one another with the departure of the last child. They become more expressive and affectionate. Their relationship improves however parents slightly have feeling of sadness which is a natural phenomenon.

In short, empty nest syndrome and psychological well-being may or may not have an effect on middle aged adults and their family cycle. However, where child's leaving home has many positive outcomes, it also has negative outcomes as well. It was indicated in one study that 42 percent of middle aged parents said that they had conflicts with their resident child, which affected their psychological well-being and made them distressed (Clemens & Axelson, 1985). Harkins (1978) study indicates that empty nest syndrome is a transitional state and its effects disappears after two years of its occurrence and it has a positive effect on the psychological wellbeing. In the light of conceptual framework, it can be concluded that empty nest syndrome is a transitional state which middle aged parents experience, which may affect their psychological wellbeing in a positive and negative way.

Rationale of the study

Previous literature shows that empty nest syndrome is a universal phenomenon. Study based on chinese, east indians and europeans indicated that middle aged parents do encounter empty nest syndrome (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). Western literature has addressed this issue where as scarce literature is available on this subject with reference to Pakistani cultural context. So there is a need to explore the empty nest syndrome in Pakistani mothers and fathers. There is also need to investigate the relationship between empty nest syndrome and psychological well-being. It is much needed to investigate the impact of child's departure from home due to marriage or in pursuance of a career and role of parents' education in causing a difference in the intensity of empty nest syndrome.

Objectives

1. To explore the relationship between empty nest syndrome and psychological wellbeing
2. To investigate the empty nest syndrome and psychological well being of middle aged mothers and fathers.
3. To determine which type of departure of a child i.e. due to marriage or pursuance of a career makes their parents experience more empty nest syndrome.
4. To investigate the impact of parental educational qualification in experiencing of an empty nest syndrome.

Hypotheses of the study

1. There is an inverse relationship between empty nest syndrome and psychological well-being.
2. Middle aged mothers experience more empty nest syndrome and have low psychological wellbeing than middle aged fathers.
3. Marriage of children will make parents experience high level of empty nest syndrome than the departure of children from the family in pursuance of a career.
4. Less and more educated parents differ in terms of experiencing an empty nest syndrome.

Method

Sample

A purposive sample consisting of 81 middle aged adult with the distribution of 40 fathers ($M=47.50$, $SD=6.5$) and 41 mothers ($M=48.83$, $SD=7.6$) from different areas of Lahore was drawn. Their age range was 40 to 55 years.

Inclusion Criterion

Only those middle aged parents were included in the study whose children have left their homes due to marriage or in pursuance of their career.

Exclusion Criterion

Young and elderly parents were not the part of the study. Middle aged parents having their children at home were also not included in the study.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 81)

Variable	Mother (n=41)		Father (n=40)	
	F	%	F	%
Family system				
Nuclear	11	13.6%	18	22.3%
Joint	30	37.0%	22	27.2%
Departure of children				
Marriage	33	40.7%	31	38.3%
Career	8	9.9%	9	11.1%
Family size				
Small	10	12.3%	8	9.9%
Moderate	23	28.4%	25	30.9%
Large	8	9.9%	7	8.6%
Education				
Inter	15	18.5%	3	3.7%
Bachelors	16	19.8%	32	39.5%
Masters	10	12.3%	5	6.2%

Instruments

Empty Nest Syndrome Questionnaire (ENS) developed by Mbaeze and Ukwandu (2011) was used to measure empty nest syndrome in middle aged parents. The ENS scale consists of 16 items. Responses were elicited on five point likert scale. In ENS scale item no "1, 2, 3, 5,6,8,10,11,12,13,14, and 15" were positively scored whereas item no "4, 7, 9, 16" were reversely scored. The few examples of the reversed items included in the scale are "Seeing all of them once a year is good enough", "I don't see anything wrong for my staying in old people home", and "with the exit of all my children, I feel younger than I am now". Few positively scored items are "I feel happier when all my children are around" "I like attending parties and group meetings of my club to avoid being alone". The reliability of the scale was .65. Rating Scale ranging from minimum (1) to maximum (10) was used to measure the overall intensity of experiencing an empty nest syndrome.

Psychological well-being scale developed by Ryff (1989) was used to measure the psychological wellbeing. It consists of 84 items having 6 sub scales. The 6 dimensions of this scale measures autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others and purpose of life & self-acceptance. The higher the score on the multi dimensions of the scale the better would be psychological well-being. The reliability of the psychological well-being scale was .81.

Procedure

Informed consent was first taken from the participants by giving them clear instructions about the nature of the study. Both participants, mothers and fathers belonged to different areas of Lahore. After taking their consent the demographic information sheet was given to them. Empty nest syndrome scale, rating scale

and psychological wellbeing scales were administered to the middle aged parents. Purposive sampling technique and snow ball sampling technique was used to draw the sample. Correlational research design was followed in this study. After the data collection questionnaires were scored according to the key.

Analysis

Pearson product moment correlation was used to measure the relationship between empty nest syndrome and psychological well-being and its sub scales. Multivariate analysis of variance was used to examine the effect of gender of parents on empty nest syndrome. One way analysis of variance was used to determine whether parents with varying levels of education differ in terms of experiencing an empty nest syndrome. t- test for independent samples was applied to determine the differences in intensity of experiencing an empty nest syndrome in parents due to marriage and pursuance of career of their children.

Results

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics of Middle Aged Mothers and Fathers on Empty Nest Syndrome and Psychological Well-being (N=81)

Variables	Gender	N	M	SD
Empty Nest Syndrome	Father	40	47.50	6.56
	Mother	41	48.83	7.61
	Total	81	48.17	7.10
Autonomy	Father	40	52.70	7.73
	Mother	41	52.46	5.89
	Total	81	52.58	6.82
Environmental Mastery	Father	40	57.65	5.97
	Mother	41	56.51	6.65
	Total	81	57.07	6.31
Personal Growth	Father	40	58.10	5.81
	Mother	41	56.05	5.99
	Total	81	57.06	5.95
Positive Relations	Father	40	56.82	7.71
	Mother	41	57.63	8.41
	Total	81	57.23	8.03
Purpose in Life	Mother	40	52.35	7.31
	Father	41	50.05	7.38
	Total	81	51.19	7.39
Self-Acceptance	Father	40	54.10	6.78
	Mother	41	52.29	4.63
	Total	81	53.19	5.83
Psychological Well- Being	Father	40	331.72	28.69
	Mother	41	325.00	28.54
	Total	81	328.32	28.63

Table 3
MANOVA for Effects of Gender on Empty Nest Syndrome and Psychological Well-being (N=81)

Source	Dependent Variables	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Gender	Empty Nest Syndrome	35.77	1	35.77	.70	.40	.00
	Autonomy	1.13	1	1.13	.02	.87	.00
	Environmental Mastery	206.21	1	206.21	.65	.42	.00
	Personal Growth	85.18	1	85.18	2.24	.12	.03
	Positive Relations	13.52	1	13.25	.20	.65	.00
	Purpose in Life	107.22	1	107.22	1.98	.16	.02
	Self-Acceptance	66.13	1	66.13	1.96	.16	.02
	Psychological Well-Being	915.67	1	915.67	1.18	.284	.01
	Error	Empty Nest Syndrome	3999.80	79	50.63		
Autonomy		3722.59	79	47.12			
Environmental Mastery		3163.34	79	40.04			
Personal Growth		2755.50	79	34.88			
Positive Relations		5155.28	79	65.25			
Purpose in Life		4269.00	79	54.03			
Self-Acceptance		2656.08	79	36.62			
Psychological Well-Being		64691.97	79	818.88			
Total		Empty Nest Syndrome	192006.00	81			
	Autonomy	227663.001	81				
	Environmental Mastery	267043.00	81				
	Personal Growth	266580.00	81				
	Positive Relations	270508.00	81				
	Purpose in Life	216590.00	81				
	Self-Acceptance	231844.00	81				
	Psychological Well-Being	8796976.00	81				

There is no main effect of gender of middle aged father ($M= 47.50, SD= 6.56$) and mothers ($M= 48.83, SD= 7.61$) on empty nest syndrome and psychological well-being.

Table 4.
Comparing Middle Aged Parents Experiencing an Empty Nest Syndrome due to Departure of Children Because of Marriage and Career (N=81)

Group	N	M	SD	t	P	Confidence Interval		cohen's d
						UL	LL	
Due to marriage	64	1.52	.50					
Due to career	17	1.47	.51	.32	.74	-.23	.32	1.49

p= n.s.

There is no significant difference between middle aged parents in terms of empty nest syndrome who have experienced departure of children due to marriage and career.

Table 5.
Descriptive Statistics of Empty Nest Syndrome in Middle Aged Parents with Varying Levels of Education

Educational Level	N	M	SD
Intermediate	18	1.83	.38
Bachelors	48	1.33	.47
Masters	15	1.67	.48
Total	81	1.51	.50

Table 6
One-Way ANOVA on Empty Nest Syndrome in Middle Aged Parents with Varying Levels of Education (N=81)

Sources of Variance	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	3.7	2	1.87	8.85*
Within Group	18.50	78	.21	
Total	20.24	80		

p<.05

One-Way analysis of variance revealed that there is a significant effect of education on the empty nest syndrome on middle aged parents ($F= 8.85^*, p< .05$).

Post hoc comparisons also indicated that less educated parents are more likely to experience empty nest syndrome than the more educated parents

Table 7

Inter-correlation Between Psychological Well-being and Empty Nest Syndrome (N=81)

Variables	M	SD	Ens	Aut	EnvMas	PerGr	PosRel	PiL	SelfAc	PW
SumENS	48.17	7.1	-	.11	-.68	-.80	.09	.07	-.03	.03
Autonomy	52.58	6.82		-	.29	.44	.26	.47	.34	.66
EnvMas	57.07	6.31			-	.57	.43	.45	.57	.76
PerGrowth	57.06	5.95				-	.34	.56	.41	.76
PosRelation	57.23	8.03					-	.08	.60	.65
PurLife	51.19	7.39						-	.35	.68
SAcceptance	53.19	5.83							-	.75
PW	328.32	28.68								-

ENS=empty nest syndrome, Aut=autonomy, EnvMas=environmental mastery, PerGrowth=Personal growth, Pos relation=Positive relation, Pur life =Purpose in life S acceptance= Self acceptance.

Results in Table 7 indicate that there is no significant relationship between empty nest syndrome and psychological well-being and its subscales.

Discussion

The present study was designed to explore the phenomenon of empty nest syndrome and psychological wellbeing among middle aged parents. The findings of the study indicated no significant relationship between empty nest syndrome and psychological wellbeing. This finding contradicts with the extensive previous literature which has indicated an inverse relationship between empty nest syndrome and psychological well-being. Thoits (1983) reported that the departure of off spring from house causes greater levels of depression, anxiety and decrease in psychological well-being. However, the findings support Deutscher (1969) that the departure of children from home makes the parents more comfortable as their parental responsibilities are over and then the couples enjoy an affectionate relationship again with one another.

Secondly the findings have indicated no significant difference in mothers and fathers when it comes to the experience of an empty nest syndrome. This indicates that parents equally experience an empty nest syndrome and we can infer on the basis of the findings that both Pakistani mothers and fathers experience the loneliness and emptiness on the departure of their children from home. The findings partially support Harkins (1978) who postulated that empty nest syndrome is a transitional non enduring state and its effects disappear after two years of its occurrence. Similarly, the findings also contradict with Olson (1993) who views on one hand empty nest syndrome as an emptiness state in mothers on the departure of their children from home and on the other hand findings also support Olson's (1993) assumption that both parents express sadness and grief on the departure of their children and they need to deal with an empty heart not nest. The findings challenge the assumption about women as a primary caregiver are more likely to experience empty nest syndrome which results into the loss of their salient role identity of a mother (Barber,1989). The findings of the study make us to ponder that no difference in the experiencing of empty nest syndrome among the middle aged mothers and fathers could be attributed to both Pakistani parents concern to settle down their children in careers and family life. The mean values on an empty nest syndrome scale indicates that Pakistani parents do not experience this transitional state intensely. This finding supports Alubaidi's (2017) study, which reported that parents can stay in touch with their children by making calls regularly, texting, sending emails and talking to them through video calls. So we can infer that

texting, sending mails and making calls and video calls keeps parents connected with their children and help parents to cope with an empty nest syndrome an effective way. The findings also indicated no significant difference in the psychological well being of middle aged fathers and mothers. This finding contradicts role identity perspective that loss of roles adversely affects the psychological well being (Thoits,1983).

Thirdly findings regarding the impact of type of departure of children from home i.e. due to marriage or career in terms of an empty nest syndrome indicated no significant difference in the intensity of the empty nest syndrome of middle aged parents due to type of departure of children. The reason behind these findings may be the fact that the parents accept the reality that their children have to leave their parents' home one day to establish their family life and career. In Pakistan, every parent is aware of the fact that the daughters have to leave their parent's home one day after their marriage, so parents accept this reality open heartedly. Similarly, parents also accept this reality that their sons have to leave the home for their career.

Lastly, the findings indicated that there is significant effect of education on the experience of empty nest syndrome. Liu and Guo (2007) indicates that level of education is positively related with the loneliness related to empty nest syndrome. Our findings of the study also indicated that less educated parents experience more empty nest syndrome when their children leave home. Perhaps one possible explanation could be that less educated are more involved with their children and they have less sources of gratification and recreation than more educated parents.

Limitations and Implications

The study was purely quantitative. The empty nest syndrome phenomena should also be explored qualitatively. The present study can help the parents in better understanding of the empty nest syndrome phenomenon. Seminars on the awareness of empty nest syndrome must be conducted for parents. Parents should get themselves involved in voluntary activities to deal with empty nest syndrome.

Conclusion

We conclude the following on this basis of this study

- No relationship exists between empty nest syndrome and psychological well-being of middle aged parents.
- Pakistani parents both mothers and father experience the empty nest syndrome. The effects of this transitional phase of life are moderate and not severe.

- No significant effect of the type of departure of children on experience of empty nest syndrome of middle aged parents.
- Levels of Education affect the experience of empty nest syndrome in middle aged parents.

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