

Acknowledging Empty Nest Syndrome: Eastern and Western Perspective

Received: 14 November 2021

Accepted: 06 December 2021

* Mandeep Randhawa

**Jaismeen Kaur

Abstract

Dorothy Canfield coined “Empty Nest” terminology in her book (*Mothers and Children*, 1914). Empty Nest is the phase that begins along with the contraction stage of the family life cycle in which children move out of their parental home to relocate either to a different city or country for educational and professional purposes. There are two sides to Empty Nest: some parents grow as individuals and as a couple after the contraction phase, while others struggle to adjust during this time. Therefore, when parents struggle to adjust to the contraction phase, they experience Empty Nest Syndrome. There is a stew of studies explaining the psychological and physical symptoms that predict the manifestation of Empty Nest Syndrome among parents. All the studies are from various parts of the world, with different perspectives and approaches to parenting and the Empty Nest Phase. Despite differences, the world has followed the same family pattern for generations. Hence, the objective of the present piece of paper is to analyse the extensive review of literature about different perspectives on Empty Nest Syndrome for a better understanding of the Empty Nest phase in the eastern and western world.

Keywords: Empty Nest, Empty Nest Syndrome, Parents, Eastern and Western Perspectives.

The family cycle is composed of different stages, each of which begins and ends with transitions and a wide spectrum of emotions. Changes in the family life cycle are inevitable; the desire to maintain the same status while simultaneously hoping for change are stress-inducing factors known as transitional or maturational crises, according to Scherz (1971). This paper focuses on the “Empty Nest” phase, which begins and ends with the departure of the family’s first and last child, respectively (Barber, 1989). Glick (1977), considered this phase as one of the most “dramatic change” in the family life cycle. Barber (1979, 1980, 1981) encountered the possible reasons for the children’s departure in his interview study, and the majority of the parents mentioned “marker” events such as higher education, marriage, and starting a new job. Besides which, according to Barber (1980), empty nest is associated with gradual changes encompassing independence rather than a specific event.

Launching of child is accompanied by a period of emotional distress, identity conflict, depression, guilt, anxiety, stress and loneliness known as “*Empty Nest Syndrome*” (Mitchell & Lovegreen 2009, Bouchard 2014, Grover & Dang 2013). Empty Nest Syndrome

was first studied in the 1960s and 1970s. The existence of Empty Nest Syndrome has been proven by a plethora of evidence measured by life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and overall happiness has been unsatisfactory (Axelson, 1960; Campbell, 1975; Lowenthal & Chiriboga, 1972; and Rollins & Feldman, 1970). The activity theory of ageing, which proposes that a person’s social self emerges through interaction with others, theoretically supports the Empty Nest Syndrome. The loss of intimate and regularly enacted roles reduces reaffirmation of the self-concept and affects role identities, resulting in demoralisation, isolation, and a decrease in subjective wellbeing. However, researchers have been polarized on whether the post-parental phase has a beneficial or detrimental impact on parents. Several studies support the idea, parents with limited social relations and/or involvement outside the home, and also those who became parents at a young age, professes a higher severity of Empty Nest Syndrome. (Bouchard, 2014; Grover & Dang, 2013; Harkins, 1978; Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). The empty nest, on the other hand, has been shown in studies to be a positive development experience for parents, with reconnection with spouses, enhanced self-care,

*Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab, India

**Research Fellow, Department of Psychology, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab, India
Certified Choice Theory and Reality Therapy (CTRTC), William Glasser Institute, USA

and increased flexibility to engage in desired activities (Bouchard, 2014; Grover & Dang, 2013). Spence and Lonner (1971) revealed in their study that, despite the fact that all of the participants were in the transition to empty nest phase because their youngest child was about to graduate, all of them were approaching the same event, but each parent responded in a distinctive way. Some of the most significant differences in parental responses to the empty nest have been associated to gender.

Gender Differences: Empty Nest Syndrome

Loneliness, depression, worry, stress, and dissatisfaction have all been identified in the literature as common reactions of women to the empty nest phase. However, little is known about how men respond to this change. The lack of research suggests that men may be unaffected by the departure of their children, or that it does not affect their mental health in the same way that it does for their wives.

One of the many reasons why the term “Empty Nest” has come to refer solely to women is that in society, mothers’ only identity is as Primary Care Givers, whose primary role is to care for their children, making the post-parental transition difficult and stressful for them.

In his study, Philips (1957) found that the loss of a mother’s intimate and frequently played role, i.e., as a primary giver, causes women to be more dissatisfied than men. William (1977) added that women who experiences the loss their maternal role, have been an overprotective mother, have been overly involved mothers, and have subordinated their needs to their children’s needs to feel satisfied are more prone to Empty Nest Syndrome. Bart (1971), Curlee (196), and Lurie (1974), found the empirical evidence that empty nest transition is indeed the most painful and dreadful period for women. On the contrary, According to Axelson (1960), Campbell (1975), Lowenthal and Chiriboga (1972) empirical evidence supporting Empty Nest Syndrome is inconsistent and that empty nest phase is equally satisfying for women than previous stages.

Back (1971) proposed that being free of family responsibilities may make it easier for mothers to acknowledge themselves; whereas for men departure of the children make them more dependent on the work role in which they have difficulty presenting their real image. In addition, there is some evidence that the transition is difficult for some them. Due to the men’s role of primary economic provider, they fail to take the advantage of the time to build relationship with their

children when they were still at home (Barber, 1980) the feeling of guilt is more painful which makes it difficult for the fathers to cope with this phase. Fathers who found the empty nest transition stressful were more likely to have fewer children, a higher caring and loving perception, and were mostly lonely due to strained marriages and feelings of neglect, as well as a lack of empathy and understanding from their wives (Barber, 1980).

Women are more expressive and better at articulating their emotions than men, according to Lowenthal and Chiriboga (1972), making it difficult for fathers to express their emotional distress.

One possible conclusion from these evidences is that Empty Nest Syndrome is not only associated to mothers; the transition to the empty nest can also have an impact on the subjective well-being of fathers. Furthermore, many studies have proposed that cultural factors and processes play a vital role in the meanings and experiences of significant life decisions and events (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1993, 1999). This paper will examine the cultural differences in Empty Nest Syndrome from an Eastern and Western perspective.

Cultural Differences: Eastern and Western Perspective

Due to urbanisation, there is an increase in rate of immigration leading to increased diversity in culture. Every culture follows a different set of norms, value, obligations and expectations which highly shape the perceptions towards family system and relationships. (e.g., Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1993, 1999). Mitchell and Lovegreen (2009) concluded that cultural background, socioeconomic status, and relational processes all affect the probability of reporting Empty Nest Syndrome.

Western parents place a high value on raising independent children. In the West, for example, it is usual for young children to sleep in a different bedroom, with teen moving out of the parents’ home once they reach the age of 18. South Asian parents, on the other hand, are more protective of their children. It is common in Indian families for children to live with their parents until they marry, and even after that, in family units.

Individualism and independence are regarded as admirable qualities in most Western societies. Parents in collectivist Eastern societies, on the other hand, expect obedience and cooperation from their children.

According to research, parents in more collectivistic cultures (e.g., Asian countries) have completely distinct emotional reactions, aspirations, or social schedules

40/ Acknowledging Empty Nest Syndrome: Eastern...

when it comes to their children's "proper" nest-leaving behaviour (e.g., Pyke & Bengtson, 1996). In familistic cultures, leaving home under the "right" circumstances (e.g., marriage vs. seeking independence) is more socially acceptable than in more individualistic cultures. In highly traditional ethnic eastern families, where some children (typically the eldest son) are expected to remain at home, intergenerational living may be a socially preferred living arrangement (for both cultural and economic reasons). However, research on how societal expectations of home leaving facilitate these experiences is limited to date, with the exception of some limited research on age norms and the purported "empty nest" syndrome (e.g., Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). Nest-leaving is constantly believed to impact parental identities (including self-concepts), roles, and responsibilities in Western cultures, and is generally reflective of a parent's achievement in bringing up independent children (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). For parents, having an "empty nest" can mean more flexibility, recreation, and less daily emotional challenge and pressure. In contrast, in eastern cultures, children leaving home (especially in non-normative situations) may indicate a break - down of family ties and parents' inability to inculcate traditional cultural values, which can lead to anxiety and stress for these parents (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). In Western society, the empty nest transition is widely regarded as a normal thing. Parents generally expect their children to leave home, become independent, and successfully negotiate the new roles and status demands that come with this stage of life on a set of social timetables and expectations about when and how the pathways to adulthood should unfold. Violations of these expectations can have negative social, emotional, and psychological consequences for family members (Mitchell, 2007).

As a result of a stronger emphasis and tradition on multigenerational cohesiveness and co-residence, it is expected that parents from more family oriented cultures (e.g., eastern) may face greater emotional distress with nest-leaving than parents from western cultures.

Discussion

The impact of cultural diversity on Empty Nest Syndrome was analysed in this paper. Normative events linked to home leaving and the empty nest phases of adult development embedded within families have strong cultural dimensions. Empty Nest families in eastern countries are on rise. It is related to eastern

countries' overall economic environment, such as the accelerated process of urbanization and the imbalance of economic development. Rural population has established their careers in cities becoming urban dwellers leaving their parents behind in rural homes.

In India too change in socio economic scenario of the country has led to emergence & popularity of nuclear family system both in, rural and urban areas. Migration of younger generation in search of better opportunities has created a situation where older persons are compelled to live in their houses without their young family members. They feel isolated and alone in absence of their own adult children and grandchildren.

As majority of older persons had spent their active life in joint family, they find it very difficult to live alone or with their spouses alone. However, a trend of living in isolation, particularly in old age is emerging especially in metros. In general, elderly population has grown at large due to advancement of health care system and education. They face numerous physical, psychological and social role changes that challenge their sense of self and capacity to live happily. A study in Wuhan (China) showed that, due to the change in society there is a rise in the numbers of empty nesters. The researchers (Zhe & Jun, 2016) exhibited the rise in depression among empty nesters followed by several studies indicating the association between empty nester mothers and depression (Zhai et. al., 2015; Zang et. al., 2020). There are number of studies available in Eastern and Western culture but there is dearth of literature in Indian Context because majority of the parents are in denial due to the lack of knowledge about Empty Nest Syndrome.

An Indian study on Empty Nest mothers reveals that mothers high on Empty Nest Syndrome came out high on loneliness, depression and low on resilience (Sinha et. al., 2017). The studies on Empty Nest syndrome can be traced back to the 1960s, indicating that western countries began experiencing Empty Nest syndrome in the 1990s. Guthrie (2020) indicated the increase in the number of women living alone, and a reduction in number of households in which parents are living with children. On the average, couples today experience the launching of their last child during middle age and can expect to remain in the empty-nest period for at least thirteen years and often much longer (Glick 1997). The empty nest experience can be an arousal roller-coaster, repeatedly hurtling you from the depths of depression to the pinnacles of unfettered joy. This

trek might take 3 months, it might take 3 years, it's different for every parent (Schaffer and Wasserman 1991). Because of permissive parenting and individualistic society in Western countries, children are prepared to make their own choices, make their own life decisions, and independent at a young age. Although, parenting in eastern and western cultures is diametrically opposite, parents in both cultures are affected by Empty Nest Syndrome. Even though there are numerous studies explaining the factors that lead to Empty Nest Syndrome and the effects it has on parents' mental health, only a few are intervention-based (Kaur & Kaur, 2021). The study by Mehrabi et. al. (2021) reported that using intervention can be one of the efficient ways to manage Empty Nest Syndrome.

The majority of the time, parents find it difficult to get out of this phase due to a lack of knowledge about

empty nest syndrome, particularly, in India, where the family structure has shifted from joint to nuclear. This is an issue that is being overlooked, and parents are bearing the brunt. As a result, finding therapeutic ways to help parents cope with the emptiness phase is critical.

Conclusion

The Empty Nest Syndrome has become a worldwide phenomenon. This is a phase that every family with children goes through. However, it can be difficult for parents to cope with such a difficult situation, particularly in India, where people are still unable to adjust to this empty phase due to deeply ingrained family values and a lack of knowledge. As a result, it's critical to hold workshops to raise awareness about family structure and coping mechanisms, as well as to train counsellors to deal with parents who are experiencing emptiness so that they can enjoy their lives because they have earned it.

References

- Fisher, D. C. (2010). *Mothers And Children (1914)*. Kessinger Publishing, LLC.
- Axelson, L. J. (1960). Personal adjustment in the post parental period. *Marriage and Family Living*, 22 (February), 66-68.
- Barber, C. E. (1989). Transition to the empty nest. *Aging and the Family*, 15-32.
- Bart, P. B. (1972). Depression in middle-aged women. In V. Gornick and B. K. Moran (Eds.), *Women in Sexist Society* (pp. 163- 168). New York: The New American Library, Inc.
- Bouchard, G. (2014). How do parents react when their children leave the home? An integrative review. *Journal of Adult Development*, 21, 69–79. doi:10.1007/s10804-013-9180-8
- Campbell, A. (1975). The American way of mating: marriage yes, children only maybe. *Psychology Today*, 8 (May), 37-43.
- Curlee, J. (1969). Alcoholism and the empty-nest. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 33, 165-171.
- Glick, P. C. (1977). Updating the Life Cycle of the Family. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 39(1), 5–13.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/351058>
- Grover, N. & Dang, P. (2013). Empty nest syndrome vs empty nest trigger: Psychotherapy formulation based on systemic approach - A descriptive case study. *Psychological Studies*, 58(3), 285–288. doi:10.1007/s12646-013-0207-9
- Harkins, E. B. (1978). Effects of empty nest transition on self-report of psychological and physical well-being. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 40, 549–556.
- Lichter, D. T. (1996). Leaving Home Before Marriage: Ethnicity, Familism, and Generational Relationships. By Frances K. Goldscheider and Calvin Goldscheider. University of Wisconsin Press, 1993. 242 pp. \$27.50. *Social Forces*, 74(4), 1459–1460. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/74.4.1459>.
- Lowenthal, M. R., & D. Chiriboga (1972). Transition to the empty-nest: Crisis, challenge, or relief? *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 26 (February), 8-14.
- Lurie, G. E. (1974). Sex and stage differences in perceptions of marital and family relationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 36 (May), 209-269.
- Mehrabi, N., Yousefzadeh, S., Asghari Nekah, S.M , & Saki, A. (2021). Effect of Solution-focused Group Counseling Approach on the Happiness of Postmenopausal Women Suffering from Empty Nest Syndrome. *Journal of Midwifery and Reproductive Health*, 9(1), 2548-2554. DOI: 10.22038/jmrh.2020.44554.1534.

42/ Acknowledging Empty Nest Syndrome: Eastern...

- Mitchell, B. A., & Lovegreen, L. D. (2009). The empty nest syndrome in midlife families: A multimethod exploration of parental gender differences and cultural dynamics. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30(12), 1651–1670. doi:10.1177/0192513X09339020.
- Mitchell, B. A., & Lovegreen, L. D. (2009). The Empty Nest Syndrome in Midlife Families. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30(12), 1651–1670. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X09339020>.
- Mount, S. D., & Moas, S. (2015). Re-Purposing the “Empty Nest.” *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 26(3), 247–252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08975353.2015.1067536>.
- Phillips, B. S. (1957). A role theory approach to adjustment in old age. *American Sociological Review*, 22, 212–217.
- Pyke, K. D., & Bengtson, V. L. (1996). *Caring More or Less: Individualistic and Collectivist Systems of Family Eldercare. Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58(2), 379. doi:10.2307/353503.
- Rollins, R. C., & Feldman, H. (1970). Marital satisfaction over the family life cycle. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 32 (February), 20–28.
- Scherz, F. H. (1971). Maturational Crises and Parent–Child Interaction. *Social Casework*, 52(6), 362–369. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104438947105200603>
- Spence, D., & Lonner, T. (1971). The “empty nest”: A transition within motherhood. *The Family Coordinator*, 20(4), 369–375. <https://doi.org/10.2307/582168>
- The Changing Transition to Adulthood: Leaving and Returning Home. (1999). *SAGE Publications, Inc.* Published. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452234014>
- Williams, J. H. (1977). Middle age and aging. In *Psychology of Women: Behavior in a Biosocial Context* (pp. 362–364). New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc.
- Wolf, D. B. (1998). The Vedic personality Inventory: A study of the gunas. *Journal of Indian Psychology*, 16(1), 26–43.
-

