

Empty-Nest Syndrome, Gender and Family Size as Predictors of Aged's Adjustment Pattern

¹I.C. Mbaeze and ²Elochukwu Ukwandu

¹Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Science, ²Diamond Bank IT Centre, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria

Abstract: The study investigated the effects of empty-nest syndrome on the aged's adjustment pattern. Three hypotheses were postulated and tested as follows: There will be no statistically significant effect of empty-nest syndrome on aged's adjustment pattern there will be no statistically significant effect of empty-nest syndrome on the aged's adjustment pattern across gender and there will be no statistically significant effect of empty-nest syndrome on aged's adjustment pattern across families. The research study involved a total of ninety one participants (45 males and 46 females) who volunteered themselves for the study. They included aged from various ministries and Imo state secretariat and Central Bank of Nigeria, Owerri. Their ages ranged from 45-87 years of age with a mean age of 66 years. Data for the research were collected using a 5 point Likert scale divided into three sections. The first is a scale which dwelt more on the personal data of the respondents and their eligibility for the research. The second one is the empty-nest syndrome scale consisting of sixteen items. The third is an adjustment pattern scale which consisted of thirteen items. Survey design was employed and the data collected were analyzed using a three-way ANOVA. The first hypothesis was rejected based on the findings that the calculated value of 137.71 is greater than the critical values of 3.96. The other two hypotheses were accepted based on the findings that the calculated values of 1.32 and 0.01 were lower than the critical value of 3.96. Significance of the study, implications and recommendations of this study were made.

Key words: Empty-nest, syndrome, pattern, eligibility, survey, implications, recommendations

INTRODUCTION

Empty nest syndrome is a pathological disorder that occurs when a parent's child/children have all grown into adulthood and moved out of the house. The loss of a child's dependency on a father or mother can be quite devastating to parents. Most parents don't even realize how many of their children's maturity is going to affect them until the day comes for the children to leave. Empty-nest syndrome can occur with either parents but it is most common among mothers. A depression and feeling of loneliness wash over the parents. Without their children staying with them to guide and nurture they are lost. This occurs because so many years were spent identifying themselves as parents. Parents who were especially close to their children will suffer from empty-nest the most. There are serious side effects with this depression that should be treated and taken seriously. The western civilization cares less about extended families unlike the culture; this empty-nest syndrome is prevalent in many countries. The elderly are shuffled to nursing home not cared for by loved ones. A similar condition to empty-nest can occur when a close child gets married.

A strong maternal or paternal bond between the parent and child worsens the condition. The role of the parents while the child is still living with them is more hands-on and immediate than is possible when they have moved out become more prevalent in many cultures such as Africa, India etc. as a result of change in values and industrialization. These changes thus made it impossible to cater for one's parents unlike the ancient times where they were cared for and respected. Any major life change requires some adjustment and it may take a few days to get used to the new development.

Adjustment pattern entails the way an individual adapts to a set of circumstances. These circumstances may include adjusting to death of spouse, accepting one's life, developing a point of view about death and adjusting to independent children., etc. Among the problems associated with the aged are being subjected to cultural stereotypes having minority group status and the desire for rejuvenation. The most striking problem is that of adjusting to newly independent children. Parents face new developments and adjustments as disequilibrium is created by a child's absence (Bassoff, 1988). Disequilibrium is also created or experienced when a loved

one dies, the grief of empty-nest syndrome often goes unrecognized because an adult child moves out of the house and becomes independent. Empty-nest syndrome is compounded by other difficult life events or significant changes happening around the same time such as retirement or menopause.

Research suggests that some parents are more susceptible than others in adjusting to empty-nest syndrome. People who experience empty-nest syndrome tend to have things in common. They face challenges such as establishing a new kind of relationship with their adult children, becoming a couple again, after years of sharing the home with children, filling the void in the daily routine created by absent children, lack of sympathy or understanding from others who consider children moving out to be a healthy and normal event. The grief of empty-nest syndrome may be compounded by other life events such as retirement, redundancy and menopause. How they choose to adjust to empty-nest syndrome depends on the individual it differs across gender. It is commonly associated with mothers because it coincides with menopause which wreaks its own special havoc on the women's emotional state. If a woman has largely shaped her personal identity as that of mother then an end to the reproductive years accompanied by a child leaving home can be traumatic. Women who place a high value on a traditional maternal role experience it also.

Among the problems associated with old people are being subjected to cultural stereotypes having minority groups status and the desire for rejuvenation the most striking empty-nest syndrome. Empty-nest syndrome is as a result of emptiness in an individual's life. This could be due to loss of spouse, loss of routine work, retirement and grown children becoming independent.

Since, the proportion of the aged appears to be on the increase, apparently due to improved health care delivery system and increased attention and care for the aged, the problems of empty-nest syndrome require removed attention and research given to this situation as true and obtainable, this investigation appears timely and consequently justified.

It is the aim of this study to discover if empty-nest syndrome exists among the aged; to understand if those who have less children experience empty-nest syndrome more than those who have more children to find out if men experience empty-nest syndrome more than women, to make appropriate suggestions and to explore and recommend areas for further investigation.

Theoretical framework: Some theories have been put forward to explain or examine the existing inter relationship among the variables of this study.

Social learning theory: Social learning theory by Bandura (1977) focuses on the learning that occurred within a social context. It explains human behaviour in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural and environmental influences. The assumption implies that behaviours such as adjusting to empty-nest syndrome can be learned. Parents and friends are the socializing forces most often indicated by the aged as having largely influenced their adjustment pattern. In relation to adjustment pattern, social learning theory states that the aged learns to adjust to empty-nest syndrome by observing their friends, peer group and their parents that have been passing through it. Adjustment patterns are also social behaviours that can also be learnt through imitation and observation of others. People/parents/aged learn to adjust to the exit of their independent children by reading books, self reinforcement, etc.

Maturation theory: Arnold Gessel puts it that the chief principle of developmental change is maturation which means physiological ripening especially of the nervous system. Gessel maintained that the growing child's behaviour seems to follow a set of developmental pattern. In relation to the effect of empty-nest syndrome has on adjustment pattern, this theory states that behaviour follows a set of developmental patterns, this adjustment to empty-nest syndrome follows a developmental pattern. The adjustment to empty-nest syndrome differs from one person to another as a result of heredity. An individual that is aged is able to adjust to empty-nest syndrome the way his/her parents adjust to it.

Rogers is of the view that each person operates from a unique frame of reference in terms of building self regard or self concept. Self concept is one's own belief about him/herself. Roger's theory states that psychologically healthy people enjoy life to the fullest hence they are seen as fully functional people. In relation to adjustment pattern, individuals adjust to empty-nest syndrome on their own free will and determination. The aged adopt and adjust quickly to empty-nest syndrome to avoid its effect on their self-esteem and their personal development.

In a study carried out by Ihaji on how the aged spend their time, data were obtained from interviewing 144 aged men and women from the Nsukka metropolis, he found out that the aged complained of empty-nest syndrome especially due to separation from children who are away from home, weakness of the body that tie them down and lack of strength to move about. The syndrome according to him results in detachment from social function due to bad adjustment to new events (i.e., death of spouse, separation from children who are away from home and weakness of the body that weakens them). According to

him, the aged in Nsukka showed significant preference to remain in their traditional homes. They feel more comfortable in the villages where noise is less and where they are accorded high social status as custodians of their traditions.

In a study by Kivett (1979) using 418 rural elderly individuals in Canada aged between 65-99 years, he found that empty-nest syndrome in the elderly was associated with widowhood, empty-nest, poor vision and self rated health, problems with transportation, frequent use of the telephone and low participation in organized social activities that the syndrome was also typical for persons whom health and transportation were not major problems but for those who had neither children nor mate around.

Kitson (1982) found that 42% of divorced aged women who expressed moderate or showing attachment were associated with greater difficulties of empty syndrome and doubts about being able to cope with single life.

Kitson (1982) in a study of two women experiencing empty-nest syndrome found that these women encountered complicated emotions in which the following themes were elicited, feeling sad, feeling relieved, wondering about one-self, loving children, dealing with missing someone, dealing with transition, coping with anxieties and denial, seeking supports and feeling positive.

Pagarri (1962) in a study of institutionalized aged in New York found that the sense of empty-nest syndrome could be fostered by the incapacity of the relatives to cope with the needs and wishes of the aged.

From the foregoing, the empty-nest syndrome elderly could have mental health problems and could also feel unsatisfied with their life. Therefore, Neugarten (1991) called for more activity to avoid loneliness and a few signs of mental illness.

Hypotheses:

- There will be no statistically significant effect of empty-nest syndrome on aged's adjustment pattern
- There will be no statistically significant effect of empty-nest syndrome on aged's adjustment pattern across gender
- There will be no statistically significant effect of empty-nest syndrome on aged's adjustment patterns across families

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants: A total of ninety one individuals were employed in conducting the study. The participants for this study volunteered themselves from various ministries

in Imo state. These ministries included finance, works, information and communication. Others included Imo state secretariat, Owerri and the workers of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Owerri branch. The participants' ages ranged between 45 and 87 years with a mean age of 54 years.

Instruments: A self-developed questionnaire on the feelings of the aged on the empty-nest syndrome was employed for data collection in this study. The instrument was divided into three parts (A, B and C). Part A consisted of five items which dwelt more on the personal data of the participants to confirm their eligibility for the research such as age, gender, marital status and number of children. The B part consisted of sixteen items, a 5 Point Likert scale of SA, A, U, D and SD which sought information on the feelings of empty-nest syndrome. The part C consisted of thirteen items which sought information on the adjustment pattern of the aged.

To establish validity of the instrument two experts in the fields of developmental and clinical psychology, respectively were consulted for a critical examination of the items. Of course, the items were critically examined and retained for use in the final copy of the questionnaire.

In the same vein to determine the reliability of the scale, a pilot study was conducted using twenty participants drawn from ministries of lands and survey and education. The questionnaires were filled and returned for data analysis. For the empty-nest syndrome scale, Cronbach's Alpha was used to achieve a correlation coefficient of 0.81 while that on the adjustment pattern of the aged was 0.72. With the establishment of the content validity and the Cronbach Alpha above, the instrument is now made valid and reliable enough for the study.

Procedure: The questionnaires were carried to the various ministries mentioned above with the help of research assistants. It wasn't easy getting them to respond as many of them inquired on what the questionnaires were used for. Some of them responded immediately and others were given some days to return the questionnaires. At various ministries of the state, participants were got and with the help of the workers that worked there, the questionnaires were distributed, most of them responded immediately and others were given some days to return the questionnaires. A total of hundred questionnaires were given out only ninety one were returned and were used for the study. The questionnaire contained sixteen questions designed to measure empty-nest syndrome and thirteen questions designed to measure adjustment pattern. The first instrument

Table 1: Summary table showing mean difference and standard deviation across empty-nest syndrome, gender and family size

Mean	Mean difference	SD
55.40	10.69	4.19
44.71	-	3.78

demanded a Likert format graded from strongly agree to strongly disagree hence SA has 5 points, agree has 4 points; undecided has 3 points; disagree has 2 points and Strongly Disagree (SD) has 1 point. The second instrument followed the same format except some questions that were scored reversely due to their nature being negatively stated. Thus, the minimum score was 33 and the maximum score was 80. Any individual that scored below 50 being the norm was considered not to be experiencing empty-nest syndrome while those who scored above. The 50 were considered to be experiencing empty-nest syndrome. Those who had 0-4 children were placed as small families while those with 5 and above were placed as large families.

Design/Statistics: The study adopted a cross sectional survey in order to have a wider view of the responses/opinions of the elders across ages, gender and families.

The statistic employed for the study is a three way analysis of variance (a 3 way ANOVA) because the opinions/responses of the participants were in interval scale (Table 1).

RESULTS

Hypothesis one states that there will be no statistically significant effect of empty-nest syndrome on the aged’s adjustment pattern. Since, the calculated F value of 137.71 is greater than the critical value of 3.96 at $p < 0.05$, researchers reject the null hypothesis. This implies that there is a significant effect of empty nest syndrome on the aged’s adjustment pattern (Table 2).

From the mean differences of 10.69, the aged who experienced empty-nest syndrome found it extremely difficult to adjust to new events.

Hypothesis two posits that there will be no statistically significant effect of empty-nest syndrome on the aged’s adjustment pattern across gender. Since, the calculated F value of 1.32 is less than the critical value of 3.96, the null hypothesis is accepted. This implies that empty-nest syndrome has no significant effect on the aged’s adjustment pattern across gender.

Hypothesis three states that there will be no statistically significant effect of family size on the aged’s adjustment pattern. Since, the calculated F value of 0.01 is less than the critical F value of 3.96, the null hypothesis is accepted. This implies that family size has no significant effect on the aged’s adjustment pattern.

Table 2: A summary table of 2x2x2 ANOVA showing the effects of empty-nest syndrome, gender and family size on the aged’s adjustment pattern

Source of variance	SS	df	MS	F	Critical values	p-value
A	2371.39	1	2371.39	137.71	3.96	0.05
B	22.67	1	22.67	1.32	3.96	-
C	0.21	1	0.21	0.01	3.96	-
AB	29.45	1	29.45	1.71	-	-
AC	0.51	1	0.51	0.03	-	-
BC	0.00	1	0.00	0.00	-	-
ABC	1.85	1	1.85	0.11	-	-
S/ABC	1429.05	83	17.22	-	-	-

DISCUSSION

Results of the study indicate that the empty-nest syndrome does have an effect on the aged’s adjustment patterns. Some empirical reviews back up this finding. Findings of Ihaji argued that aged suffered empty-nest syndrome as a result of detachment to new events (i.e., death of spouse and separation from children who are away from home). Bassoff (1988) found that adjustment to empty-nest syndrome was more difficult for the aged widow, separated, divorced and unmarried than those in the intact marriage group. Kivett (1979) found that empty-nest syndrome in the elderly was associated with widowhood, empty-nest, poor vision and self-rated health, low participation in organized social activities and problems with transportation. Researcher maintained that empty-nest syndrome was also typical for persons with health and transportation issues.

The second hypothesis indicated that empty-nest syndrome affects both males and females differently thus, they experience it differently. There are some empirical supports for this finding. In the findings of Kitson (1982), she found that there were few differences in the way mothers and fathers felt and that many of the changes were positive despite the perception that mothers in particular fell apart and experience empty-nest syndrome. Furthermore, Kitson (1982) in the study of two women experiencing empty-nest syndrome found that these women encountered complicated emotions in which the following themes were elicited: Feeling sad, feeling relieved, wondering about oneself, having children, dealing with missing some one, dealing with transition, coping with anxiety and demand, seeking supports and feeling positive. In general, empty-nest gave the subjects mixed feelings.

The third finding indicates that empty nest syndrome affects, ageds of larger and smaller families differently. This finding is backed up by certain empirical supports. The findings of Kivett (1979) and Hurlock (1975) revealed that the difference between the aged of larger and smaller families may be connected with the warmth, social interactions as well as support provided by the children

who the aged feel their absence. The role of social support and attention in the effect of empty-nest syndrome on the aged was emphasized by Kivett (1979) when he argued that interventions to alleviate the problems of the aged should be in dimensions of social activities and relationships, health and transportation. Pagarri (1962) found that the sense of empty-nest syndrome can be fostered by the incapacity of the relatives to cope with the needs and wishes of the aged. The effective role he posited performed by the family in the support and care of the aged can determine the situation of isolation of subjectively judged by the aged. Researcher concluded that some aged were asked if they were satisfied with what the effects have done to them, majority were satisfied with the help they recurred.

CONCLUSION

The following conclusions were made concerning this study. There was a significant effect of empty-nest syndrome on the aged's adjustment pattern. Male and female aged do not differ in experiencing empty-nest syndrome and its effects on their adjustment pattern. Ageds of larger and smaller families do not differ in experiencing empty-nest syndrome and its effects on their adjustment pattern.

IMPLICATIONS

This study has been able to call to consciousness the various problems of the aged with special emphasis on the effect of empty-nest syndrome on ageds' adjustment pattern. It could be considered an important milestone or hallmark on which the society could be based.

Another important implication of this study draws heavily from the findings that men and women (aged) experience empty-nest syndrome differently and it affects their adjustment pattern differently. Also aged people who have larger or smaller families experience it differently. The finding of their research would be particularly relevant to parents, educators and the health authorities in their attempts to understand the syndromes that surround empty-nest syndrome.

The embedded implication is critical to its important suggestion that mature/young adults should tend to social assistance, support, attention and warmth to their aged parents by visiting them as often as necessary thus the need for good parents-child relationships is grossly implicated.

LIMITATIONS

A major difficulty encountered during this study was the inability of the researcher to directly manipulate the

independent variable in this study. Another, limitation was the response demand to know what the questionnaires were for. This was partly because they felt the researcher could be invading their privacy and that those around them might see how they responded to a particular item. The time constraint was also another limitation to this study as there was not enough time to cover more areas for this study; besides lack of funds was also another limiting factor to this research study.

The misconception that the researcher being a psychologist is a mind-reader influenced the research process adversely as most of them were worried on divulging and disclosing their age range.

SUGGESTIONS

Although, this study is one of the few in this area and even after the researchers covered vital parts of the variables, the researchers agree that the investigation does not provide an exhaustive exposition of this research. Therefore, the following areas have been found researchable in order to further expand this psychological investigation:

- Effect of empty-nest syndrome on emotional capability
- Influence of educational attainment on empty-nest syndrome
- Influence of social status, educational attainment, amount of social support and empty-nest on the attitude of the aged towards institutionalization
- Influence of socio-economic status and empty-nest syndrome on the launching of children

SIGNIFICANCE

This research work would prove important in the areas of developmental, social and clinical psychology especially in the area of adjustment pattern.

Understanding empty-nest syndrome and adjustment pattern can help improve policies addressing adulthood and ageing behaviour among the ageds in different countries.

It would help contribute to making the individual and health authorities more aware of the need to educate adult which in turn would lead to decreased symptoms of empty-nest syndrome including depreciation and loneliness which will allow for a healthier generation of families. Also this research would further help in getting the aged educated on the need to prepare themselves while their children are still around. This would enable them adjust properly when their children launch. It would also educate them on how to cope with the feelings of empty-nest syndrome.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this research study, the researcher made the following recommendations:

- Educational programmes should be initiated to educate parents on how to cope with the feelings of empty-nest syndrome and how to adjust properly
- Clinics and hospitals should provide free therapy classes for those experiencing empty-nest syndromes and help them adjust adequately
- The media should actively partake in the dissemination of information on empty-nest syndrome and adjustment pattern

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