

Life Satisfaction and Psychological Well-Being among Empty Nesters and Non-Empty Nesters in Kerala

Haripriya A.^{1*}, Sharmili C.²

ABSTRACT

Getting older is a part of life that everyone goes through at their own pace. Exploring aging from a broader standpoint reveals it as a representation of life's continual evolution, with the possibility of individuals experiencing Empty Nest Syndrome as they grow older. This study investigates the relationship between Empty Nest Syndrome, Life Satisfaction, and Psychological Well-Being among older adults in Kerala, India, exploring how the presence or absence of adult children influences their overall well-being and satisfaction. Conducted with 300 participants aged 60 and older, comprising equal numbers of empty nesters and non-empty nesters, the research employs standardized measures to collect data. Findings reveal that Empty-nest parents exhibit lower levels of Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction compared to non-empty-nest parents and educational qualification emerged as a significant predictor of the variables among empty nesters. These results emphasize the importance of addressing psychological needs during the empty nest transition and promoting educational opportunities for older adults, with implications for intervention and practice.

Keywords: *Empty Nest Syndrome, Life Satisfaction, Psychological Well-Being, Older Adults*

Getting older is a part of life that everyone goes through at their own pace. It encompasses the various transformations that occur throughout one's lifetime (Amarya et al., 2018). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), aging is a biological process that initiates at conception and concludes at death. As people grow older, they encounter a growing array of notable life occurrences, including retirement, career transitions, children leaving home, bereavement, health challenges, and the loss of autonomy. Successfully navigating these changes often defines the concept of healthy aging. (Smith et al., 2023).

At every phase of life, with particular emphasis on later stages, it's crucial to prioritize mental well-being, as older individuals face an elevated risk of experiencing mental health concerns. (Kang & Kim, 2022). However, such challenges are not an inevitable aspect of aging.

The United Nations Fund for Population Activities' India Ageing Report 2023 predicts that 22.8% of Kerala's population will be over the age of 60 by 2036, compared to a predicted 15%

¹Student, MSc Clinical Psychology, Dept. of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College Affiliated to Bengaluru North University, Bengaluru.

²Assistant professor, Kristu Jayanti College Affiliated to Bengaluru North University, Bengaluru

*Corresponding Author

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for the entire country. (Sudha, 2023) The reports of 2021 revealed that Kerala has the highest percentage of residents aged 60 and older in India, rising from 5.1% to 16.5% over the past 60 years.

The family structure in Kerala is firmly based on the close bonds between the parents, children, and relatives. However, the 21st century is seeing significant problems with children and parents who are getting older. The lack of employment opportunities or the inability of educated youth to work in their homeland makes them trust foreign nations. The literature indicates that it may be challenging for parents when their children leave the family for higher education, a career overseas, or to live separately from them (Abraham & Joseph, 2023).

When children leave the parental house and move out, a family life course shift known as the "empty nest" takes place (Mitchell, 2019). The empty nest phase signifies a period of transition in which parents encourage their children to take on adult responsibilities. When children depart from home, both parents may undergo the psychological phenomenon referred to as Empty Nest Syndrome. This is marked by emotions such as sadness, apprehension, a feeling of helplessness, challenges in adjusting to new roles, and alterations in their relationship dynamics (Bougea et al., 2019). As they are vulnerable and are getting close to the end of their lives, this time period demands the most care and attention (Abraham & Joseph, 2023). Empty-nest older individuals are emerging as a noteworthy social phenomenon in Kerala.

The empty-nest syndrome is a mental health condition that affects both parents. When children depart from the family home, parents experience emotions such as sadness, grief, anxiety, a sense of helplessness, challenges in adjusting to new roles, and alterations in their parental relationships. (Bougea et al., 2019; Badiani & Desousa, 2016). Although American writer Dorothy Canfield Fisher initially proposed the idea of Empty Nest Syndrome in 1914, it wasn't until the 1970s that it became widely accepted (Jhangiani et al., 2022). The Empty Nest Syndrome is not classified as a clinical disorder or diagnosis; rather, it represents the mixed emotions commonly felt during a typical life transition. The intensity of these emotions can differ from person to person (Bougea et al., 2019). It poses a threat to both societal stability and the quality of life for older adults (Chen et al., 2012). Anxiety, aggression, loneliness, guilt, annoyance, depression, sadness, physical discomfort, dissatisfaction, and impatience are among the symptoms seen in empty nesters (Song et al., 2023).

This life transition to empty nesters unfolds a complex interplay of emotions, necessitating adjustment and often inducing feelings of loss, while simultaneously affording newfound freedoms (Mitchell & Wister, 2015; Badiani & Desousa, 2016). Significantly, the Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction of those undergoing this transition are intricately intertwined with the process (Liu & Guo, 2008; Mansoor & Hasan, 2019). As the nest empties and roles evolve, individuals navigate a terrain where their Psychological Well-Being is both challenged and reshaped (Mansoor & Hasan, 2019). Simultaneously, it offers an arena where fresh opportunities for heightened Life Satisfaction may emerge (Arora & Khanam, 2023).

The concept of an empty nest and its undeniable connection to older adult's Psychological Well-Being serves as a compelling subject of investigation, as it explores the profound influence of life transitions on the mental and emotional health of individuals. Literature indicates a connection between Empty Nest Syndrome and Psychological Well-Being, which

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is a fundamental aspect of mental health, and suggests a negative correlation between the two. (Bougea et al., 2019; Mansoor & Hasan, 2019; Tang et al., 2019).

Ryff's Model of Psychological Well-Being provides a valuable framework for comprehending the impact of the empty nest phase on an individual's overall sense of well-being. The empty nest phase approached as a life transition, can exert a considerable influence on various dimensions of Psychological Well-Being as delineated in Ryff's model. The departure of children from the home can lead to a heightened sense of autonomy for parents. They may gain greater control over their daily routines and life decisions, which can significantly influence their self-determination and Psychological Well-Being.

The empty nest phase can prompt a reevaluation of one's sense of purpose. Parents may discover new passions and ways to contribute to their communities or continue to play significant roles in their adult children's lives in different capacities, all of which can bolster their sense of purpose and overall well-being. The contemplative nature of the empty nest phase can provide an opportunity for parents to reflect on their life choices and achievements.

The Psychological Well-Being of parents during this phase is influenced by various factors, including the quality of their relationship with adult children, living arrangements, the presence of a social support system, and individual coping strategies. (Singh & Misra, 2009, Thomas et al., 2017, Wang et al., 2020, Nayak et al., 2022).

The most important factor for an individual's productive and efficient functioning is their Psychological Well-Being. It supports living a prosperous and satisfying life (Kalonias et al., 2023). Literature demonstrates a positive association between Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction. They are closely related but distinct concepts (Kalonias et al., 2023; Fatima et al., 2021). They both pertain to an individual's overall sense of contentment and happiness, but they focus on different aspects of well-being.

American Psychological Association (APA) defined Life Satisfaction as the extent to which a person perceives their life as rich, purposeful, fulfilling, or of high quality. Various standardized evaluation instruments have been developed to gauge an individual's Life Satisfaction relative to various comparison groups. Older adults who reside with their families report markedly greater Life Satisfaction compared to those who live independently. Those with better financial circumstances and who actively engage in physical activities and maintain social connections exhibit elevated Life Satisfaction levels in contrast to those who do not (Tian & Chen, 2022).

The academic literature indicates an adverse correlation between the presence of Empty Nest Syndrome and individuals' Life Satisfaction. In other words, as Empty Nest Syndrome becomes more pronounced, there is a corresponding decline in Life Satisfaction. (Arora & Khanam, 2023). The empty nest situation can also exert a significant influence on one's sense of competence. Parents may have dedicated a substantial portion of their lives to the upbringing and nurturing of their children. As their children depart, parents may need to adapt to new roles and activities. Successfully adapting and achieving competence in these new areas can positively impact Life Satisfaction. Conversely, encountering challenges in finding meaning and competence in post-parenting roles may lead to a reduction in Life Satisfaction.

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Parents' ability to navigate the empty nest phase, including maintaining meaningful relationships, embracing newfound autonomy, and adapting to new roles, profoundly impacts their Life Satisfaction and Psychological Well-Being in old age. Understanding and addressing the emotional and psychological aspects of Empty Nest Syndrome are crucial for older adults' well-being. By studying both empty nesters and non-empty nesters, this research aims to identify the key factors influencing happiness, life contentment, and mental well-being in old age.

Kerala, known for its progressive social indicators and high life expectancy, provides an ideal backdrop for this study. As the state undergoes rapid demographic changes, including an aging population, understanding the well-being of its older citizens becomes increasingly important for policymakers, healthcare providers, and families alike. According to surveys, Kerala is one of the states in the nation that has a very high percentage of migration, and studies have been conducted on Kerala turning into a 'land of old people' (Vivek., 2022). However, there is limited research on the mental health of parents experiencing Empty Nest Syndrome. Previous studies highlighted potential negative impacts like depression and marital conflicts, but recent research suggests benefits such as strengthened relationships and newfound opportunities. This study aims to explore how the mental health of parents in Kerala, both empty nesters and non-empty nesters, is affected during this transitional phase.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives:

- To examine the level of Empty Nest Syndrome, Psychological Well-Being, and Life Satisfaction among older parents whose children have moved out of their homes.
- To examine the relationship between Empty Nest Syndrome and Psychological Well-Being among parents in their late adulthood.
- To examine the relationship between Empty Nest Syndrome and Life Satisfaction among parents in their late adulthood.
- To examine the gender difference in the level of Psychological Well-Being among parents experiencing Empty Nest Syndrome.
- To examine the gender difference in the level of Life Satisfaction among parents experiencing Empty Nest Syndrome.
- To examine the difference in the level of Life Satisfaction among empty nesters and non-empty nesters.
- To examine the difference in the level of Psychological Well-Being among empty nesters and non-empty nesters.
- To understand the impact of education on the Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction of empty nesters.

Hypothesis

- H₁: Middle-aged parents whose children have left home would experience higher levels of Empty Nest Syndrome and lower levels of Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction.
- H₂: There is a significant relationship between Empty Nest Syndrome and Psychological Well-Being among parents in their late adulthood.
- H₃: There is a significant relationship between Empty Nest Syndrome and Life Satisfaction among parents in their late adulthood.

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- H₄: There is a significant relationship between Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction among empty-nesters.
- H₅: There is a significant gender difference in the level of Psychological Well-Being among empty nesters.
- H₆: There is a significant gender difference in the level of Life Satisfaction among empty nesters.
- H₇: There is a significant difference in the level of Life Satisfaction among empty nesters and non-empty nesters.
- H₈: There is a significant difference in the level of Psychological Well-Being among empty nesters and non-empty nesters.
- H₉: There is a significant impact of education qualification on the Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction of empty nesters.

Method

Parents from Kerala, aged 60 years and older are the sample population considered for the study (both who have children with them and whose children have left home). The sample consisted of 300 participants (150 empty nesters and 150 non-empty nesters, where the population is divided equally in terms of gender). The current quantitative study employed a correlational research design and used convenience sampling to select its participants.

Inclusion criteria

- Participants are parents aged 60 years and older and reside in Kerala
- Participants include both the parents.

Exclusion criteria

- The study excluded parents with any form of mental disturbances from participation.
- The study did not involve empty nest parents who live in close proximity to their children.

Procedure

The data collection process involved the utilization of both Google Forms and manual methods. The initial part of the form gathered demographic information, followed by sections containing a consent form and three questionnaires assessing the study variables.

Several challenges were encountered during the data collection phase, particularly concerning the limited technological proficiency of older adult participants and their unfamiliarity with using smartphones and filling out Google Forms. Literature also indicates that older adults have difficulty in filling up forms online. Studies highlight the older adult's preference for face-to-face interactions over online form-filling (Money et al., 2008). Thus, to address these challenges, individuals with a background in psychology were selected to aid in the data collection process. These peers underwent training sessions, which included instruction on relevant technical terminology necessary for effectively communicating study concepts to participants. A structured interviews were conducted in many instances, utilizing the same questions as those in the Google Form, to ensure the collection of required data from participants who faced difficulties with the online survey format. This method ensured consistency with the questions asked in the Google Forms, allowing for comprehensive collection of socio-demographic information. By employing both online and manual data

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collection methods, the study aimed to accommodate diverse participant needs and ensure the completeness and accuracy of the gathered data.

Measures:

- **Empty Nest Syndrome Scale- Indian Form (ENS- IF)** comprises 50 self-report items, with responses rated on a Likert Scale ranging from '0 – Never' to '5 – Always'. Developed in 2022, the scale demonstrated acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.919.
- **Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)** developed by Diener et al., comprises 5 self-report items aimed at assessing individuals' overall satisfaction with their lives. The scale demonstrates very good internal consistency, with an alpha coefficient of 0.87, and excellent test-retest reliability, with a correlation coefficient of 0.82.
- **Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (RPWBS)** developed in 1995, consists of 18 items designed to assess Psychological Well-Being. The test-retest reliability coefficient was determined to be 0.82.

Statistical Techniques

The employed statistical analyses including Pearson Correlation to assess the strength and direction of the linear relationship between variables, Independent Samples t-test to compare the means of two independent groups, specifically to examine differences in variables such as Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction between empty nesters and non-empty nesters, as well as between genders and Regression Analysis to explore the predictive relationship between variables, particularly the impact of educational qualification on Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction among empty nesters.

Ethical considerations

The researcher prioritized participant well-being by ensuring full informed consent, safeguarding privacy through anonymization and secure data storage, and respecting participants' rights to withdraw without consequence. Special attention was given to minimizing harm or discomfort and providing necessary support throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research investigated the level of Empty Nest Syndrome among older individuals aged 60 and above, whose children have moved out of their homes for diverse reasons. Demographic details of the participants are outlined in Table 1. The study involved a total of 300 older adults, consisting of 150 empty nesters (74 males and 76 females) and 150 non-empty nesters (72 males and 78 females). The participant's ages ranged from 60 to 90 years. Results showed that out of 150 parents surveyed, there was an average level of Empty Nest Syndrome ($M=123.06$), indicating a generally stable relationship with their children. While these parents experienced feelings of loss and loneliness, they did not display neurotic or detached traits. Rather, they exhibited a more pragmatic understanding of their Empty Nest Syndrome of loss. It was also evident that they experienced an average level of Psychological Well-Being, ($M=89.25$) and slight Life Satisfaction ($M= 25.8$).

Consistent with previous researches (Gao et al., 2017; Piper & Jackson, 2017; Atay & Hatice, 2022), the results revealed significant negative correlations between Empty Nest Syndrome and both Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction, suggesting that parents experiencing Empty Nest Syndrome may be at greater risk of lower Psychological Well-Being

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and decreased Life Satisfaction. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the variables which is shown in Table 2. There was a negative correlation between Empty Nest Syndrome and Life Satisfaction where $r(148) = -.313^{**}$, $p = <.001$ and with Empty Nest Syndrome and Psychological Well-Being $r(148) = -.281^{**}$, $p = <.001$. Additionally, the results also indicate that there was a positive correlation between Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction where $r(148) = .715^{**}$, $p = <.001$. Therefore, the study accepted the alternative hypothesis. (H_2 , H_3 , and H_4). These findings underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing the psychological challenges associated with the empty nest transition. There was a positive correlation between Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction of empty nesters indicating that when Psychological Well-Being increases, Life Satisfaction also increases. Literature on the contrary also indicates that there is no correlation between Empty Nest Syndrome and both Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction (Mansoor & Hasan, 2019).

Gender disparities were evident in the research, indicating that among empty nest parents, males exhibited higher levels of Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction than females, as depicted in Table 3. An independent-sample t-test was conducted to determine the gender difference in the level of Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction among Empty Nest parents. For Psychological Well-Being, the mean value for males is 95.23 and SD is 13.89 and the mean and SD obtained by females is 90.14 and 11.24 respectively. The $t(148) = 2.467$, $p = .046$, indicating significant difference. For Life Satisfaction, there was a significant difference in the scores. For males, $M = 27.34$, $SD = 2.71$, and for females $M = 24.3$, $SD = 4.86$, where $t(148) = 4.702$, $p = <.001$, indicating significant difference. Since the t value is more than 1.96 there is a specific difference in the level of Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction among the male and female empty nesters. Therefore, the study accepted the alternative hypothesis (H_5 and H_6). The results contradict with existing literature highlighting no gender disparities in coping strategies and emotional responses to life transitions (Arora & Khanam, 2023; Kumari, 2021; Mansoor & Hasan, 2019; Mbaeze & Ukwandu, 2011). The Mean values indicate that males have higher Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction. Additionally, existing literature acknowledges the presence of gender disparities in various contexts (Joshanloo & Joshanloović, 2019; Matud et al., 2019).

The results indicated variations between empty nest and non-empty nest parents concerning Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction, as illustrated in Table 4. An independent-sample t-test was conducted to determine the difference in the level of Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction between empty-nest and non-empty nest parents. For Psychological Well-Being, the mean value for non-empty nesters is 92.65 and SD is 12.83 and the mean and SD of empty nesters is 89.25 and 7.78 respectively. The $t(148) = 2.78$ and $P = <.001$. For Life Satisfaction, in empty nesters $M = 25.8$, $SD = 3.79$, and for non-empty nesters $M = 27.5$, $SD = 4.22$, where $t(148) = 3.67$ and $P = .004$. Empty nest parents demonstrated lower levels of Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction compared to their non-empty nest counterparts indicating that the alternative hypothesis was accepted (H_7 and H_8). Literature also shows supporting results (Thapa et al., 2018; Piper & Jackson, 2017). This discrepancy suggests that the empty nest transition may pose unique challenges to parental psychological health and overall satisfaction with life.

Educational qualification emerged as a significant predictor of both Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction among empty nesters shown in Table 5. Simple linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the impact of educational qualification on the Psychological Well-

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Being and Life Satisfaction of empty nesters. A significant impact was found for Psychological Well-Being, where $R = .515$, $F(1,148) = 53.447$, $p = .000$. The R^2 was .265, indicating that educational qualification explains approximately 26.5 % of variance in Psychological Well-Being.

For every improvement in educational attainment, Psychological Well-Being is expected to increase by approximately 8.878 units. With confidence intervals indicating a 99% certainty, the slope to predict Psychological Well-Being based on educational qualification falls between 6.478 and 11.278.

The results also indicated a significant impact of educational qualification on Life Satisfaction of empty nesters, where $R = .234$, $F(1,148) = 8.600$, $p = .004$. The R^2 was .055, indicating that educational qualification explains approximately 5.5 % of the variance in Life Satisfaction.

For every enhancement in educational standards the predicted Life Satisfaction is expected to increase by 1.329 units. Even though it is a small impact we should also consider the sample size considered for the study. Confidence intervals indicate a 99% certainty that the slope for predicting Life Satisfaction from educational qualification falls within the range of .434 to 2.225. Thus, the alternative hypothesis (H_0) was accepted. Higher educational attainment was linked with greater Psychological Well-Being and increased Life Satisfaction (Papi & Cheraghi, 2021; Mansoor & Hasan, 2019).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study contributes to our understanding of the Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction of parents experiencing the empty nest transition. The findings emphasize the significance of catering to the specific requirements of this group and emphasize the beneficial impact of education in fostering Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction. By recognizing the challenges associated with the empty nest phase and implementing targeted interventions, healthcare professionals and practitioners can support parents in navigating this significant life transition and ultimately enhance their overall quality of life.

While this study's strength lies in its focus on a rapidly expanding vulnerable demographic—the rural older adults—several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting our findings. The cross-sectional design limits our capacity to determine causal relationships among the variables examined. Furthermore, certain variables that could impact the relationship between the study variables, such as the quality of the parent-child relationship, were not examined in this study.

Implications:

The findings of this study have several implications for practice and intervention. Firstly, healthcare professionals and practitioners should be attentive to the psychological needs of parents experiencing the empty nest transition, offering support and resources to facilitate adjustment and promote well-being. Future research endeavors should prioritize the inclusion of more diverse populations to improve the external validity of the findings. Additionally, there is a need to delve deeper into the coping mechanisms utilized by older parents, which can provide valuable insights for developing intervention strategies. Additionally,

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interventions aimed at enhancing educational attainment among empty nesters may serve as a valuable avenue for improving psychological outcomes and overall quality of life.

TABLES:

Table 1 Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

Gender	N		n %
	Empty Nesters	Non-Empty Nesters	
Male	74	72	49%
Female	76	78	51%

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Empty Nest Syndrome, Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction

Variables	n	M	SD	1	2	3
Empty Nest Syndrome	150	123.06	28.185	-		
Psychological Well-Being	150	89.25	12.832	-.281**	-	
Life Satisfaction	150	25.8	4.224	-.313**	.715**	-

** $p < 0.01$. ** correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2 tailed).

Table 3 Mean, SD, and t-test results of the variables Psychological Well-Being and Life Satisfaction among empty nesters

Variables	Male		Female		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Psychological Well-Being	95.23	13.89	90.14	11.24	2.467	.046
Life Satisfaction	27.34	2.71	24.3	4.86	4.702	<.001

Table 4 t-Test Analysis of Difference in Psychological Well-being and Life Satisfaction between Empty-Nest and Non-Empty Nest Parents

Variables	Logistic parameter	n	M	SD	t	P
Psychological Well-Being	Empty nesters	150	89.25	7.78	2.78	.001
	Non-empty nesters	150	92.65	12.83		
Life Satisfaction	Empty nesters	150	25.8	3.79	3.67	.004
	Non-empty nesters	150	27.5	4.22		

Table 5 Regression Analysis of the Impact of Educational Qualification on the Psychological Well-being and Life Satisfaction of Empty Nesters

Variables	Std Beta Value	t	Model Summary
Psychological Well-being	.515	7.311	R= .515 R ² = .265 Adjusted R ² = .260 F =53.447 p = .000
Life Satisfaction	.234	2.933	R= .234 R ² = .055 Adjusted R ² = .049 F =8.600 p = .004

Note: $p < 0.01$

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Conflict of Interest

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