

A Comparative Analysis of “Empty Nest Syndrome” in Parents Based on Parents’ Demographic Variables

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ABSTRACT

Empty Nest Syndrome (ENS) is a psychological phenomenon characterized by feelings of loneliness, loss, and emotional distress experienced by parents when their children leave home to pursue higher education, careers, or marriage. This research investigates the comparative impact of ENS among parents, considering key demographic variables such as gender, age, number of children who have left home, and family structure. The study employs the Empty Nest Syndrome Scale to assess distress levels among parents in India. The findings contribute to understanding how ENS manifests differently among various demographic groups, offering insights into potential coping mechanisms and interventions. Understanding these variations is crucial for developing targeted support strategies for parents undergoing this transition. The study aims to fill existing research gaps by focusing on the comparative analysis of ENS within a specific cultural context and demographic variables. The study also highlights potential limitations, such as self-reported biases and sociocultural constraints, emphasizing the need for future research exploring long-term coping mechanisms.

Keywords: *Empty Nest Syndrome, Parental Distress, Demographic Variables, Family Structure, Psychological Well-being*

Understanding Empty Nest Syndrome (ENS)

The term "empty nest syndrome" describes the depressing, loneliness, and solitary emotions that parents often experience after their children move out to live independent lives (Services, 2012). This phenomenon can occur when children go to college, move out for work, or get married. Although it is not a clinical diagnosis, it can significantly impact parents' emotional well-being. Symptoms can vary widely: Emotional distress: This life change is frequently accompanied by feelings of melancholy, loneliness, grief, and loss. Parents could experience a loss of purpose or emptiness (Wooll, 2022). Identity crisis: Being a parent frequently constitutes a large part of a person's identity. Parents who experience a loss of identity or feel unneeded after their children leave the house may be especially affected if their sense of value was strongly correlated with their position as carers. This may result in a struggle to discover new sources of fulfilment and a crisis of purpose.

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Parents' worries for their kids' safety, independence, and general well-being might make them more stressed and anxious (Services, 2012b). Difficulty adjusting: Parents may find it difficult to occupy the time and space that their children used to occupy, which can cause boredom or restlessness. Physical symptoms: Stress can sometimes cause physical symptoms in some people, such as changes in appetite, insomnia, or low energy.

Getting used to an "empty nest" require major adjustments to daily schedules and family dynamics. It could be difficult for parents to get used to the silence and the lack of their kids' activities and presence. It might be challenging for them to adjust during this time as they get used to their new reality and habits (Toshi, 2021).

Empty nest syndrome, while often a normal phase of life, can be challenging for many parents. While there isn't a specific "cure," it can certainly be dealt with. An integrated strategy emphasizing connection building, personal development, and emotional well-being is needed to manage empty nest syndrome. First, loneliness and anxiety can be reduced by keeping lines of communication open and frequent with the children who have moved out of the house. To stay in touch and be involved in their children's lives, parents can arrange frequent phone conversations, video chats, or in-person visits (Smith & Miller, 2020). Resuming previously abandoned hobbies and pursuits can give one a sense of purpose and fulfillment. From joining clubs to volunteering or returning to work and establishing a new routine can help parents re-identify their passions (Johnson, 2019). Improving the marriage is just as crucial as for partners to use this time-to reconnect, try new things together, or attend therapy if it needs them to help work through managing life here in Ohio (Brown & Roberts 2018). Emotional support and a reduction in the feeling of isolation can be facilitated by establishing good social networks with connections that are based on friendship or memberships within groups designed to supply psychological aid (Williams et al., 2021). Parents should not wait to seek professional help if feelings of sadness or depression continue. Counseling therapy to help deal with the emotions of an empty nest (Davis, 2022). This is a real-life passage in which parents embrace strategies to move through it with resilience, and by doing so, they will find new places of joy and fulfillment.

Definition and Conceptualization of ENS

Empty Nest Syndrome (ENS) refers to the emotional distress, loneliness, and sense of loss experienced by parents when their children leave home to pursue higher education, career opportunities, marriage, or independent living (Bouchard, 2014). The term “empty nest” symbolizes the transition where children metaphorically "fly away" from the parental home, leaving behind an emotional void (Harkness, 2008).

Although ENS is not classified as a clinical disorder in the DSM-5, its impact on mental well-being is widely recognized. ENS is often accompanied by feelings of sadness, anxiety, stress, loss of identity, and difficulties in adjusting to the new phase of life (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). It can also be associated with major life changes, such as menopause, retirement, aging, and marital readjustments, compounding its effects (Babu et al., 2024).

While some parents experience ENS temporarily and gradually adjust to their child-free home, others struggle with long-term depressive symptoms, social withdrawal, or marital dissatisfaction (White & Edwards, 1990). The severity of ENS varies across individuals and is influenced by demographic variables such as age, gender, family size, culture, and social support systems (Mansoor & Hasan, 2019).

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Psychological and Emotional Impact of ENS

- Studies suggest that ENS can significantly affect parental mental health. Feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and a loss of self-worth are commonly reported by parents experiencing ENS (Piper & Breckenridge-Jackson, 2017). Psychological distress associated with ENS may manifest in:
 - Depression and Anxiety – Parents, especially mothers, may develop mild to severe depressive symptoms, increased worry, or general anxiety disorder (Bouchard, 2014).
 - Loss of Identity – Parents who primarily identified themselves through their role as caregivers may struggle to redefine their purpose in life post-child departure (Mahdiyar et al., 2017).
 - Marital Strain or Strengthening – Some studies suggest that ENS can lead to increased marital dissatisfaction, while others indicate that couples rekindle their relationship post-child departure (Smith & Miller, 2020).
 - Social Withdrawal – Some parents reduce their engagement in social activities due to emotional distress, worsening their psychological well-being (Williams et al., 2021).

Rationale for the Study

Despite being a well-documented psychological phenomenon, ENS remains understudied in the Indian context. Most existing studies on ENS have been conducted in Western cultures, where family structures, parenting norms, and societal expectations differ from those in collectivist societies like India (Piper & Breckenridge-Jackson, 2017). Given that Indian families are traditionally close-knit, with children often staying with parents until marriage, ENS may have a more profound impact compared to Western contexts (Mansoor & Hasan, 2019).

Moreover, with urbanization and globalization, more young adults in India are moving to different cities or countries for education and work, altering traditional intergenerational living patterns. These shifts highlight the urgent need to study ENS among Indian parents, particularly in relation to factors like family size, age, and gender.

ENS in the Current World Scenario

1. Cultural Perspectives on ENS

ENS is not a universal experience—its severity and impact differ across cultures. In Western societies, where individualism and independence are emphasized, ENS may be a temporary phase, with parents quickly adapting to an empty home by engaging in new activities (Raup & Myers, 1989).

In contrast, Asian and collectivist cultures, such as India, China, and Japan, place a stronger emphasis on filial piety and intergenerational living (Hall, 2023). In these cultures, children are expected to stay with their parents until marriage or longer, making ENS a more profound emotional shift (Babu et al., 2024).

2. Changing Family Structures and ENS

Several sociocultural changes have intensified ENS for many parents, including: Globalization & Migration: More young adults are moving abroad or to metropolitan cities, increasing parental loneliness (Smith & Miller, 2020). Later Parenthood: Parents having children at an older age may struggle more with ENS due to fewer career and social

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reintegration opportunities (Johnson, 2019). Digital Communication: While video calls and messaging apps help maintain contact, they cannot fully replace physical presence, sometimes worsening ENS rather than alleviating it (Toshi, 2021).

This study focuses on four key demographic factors affecting ENS: Parents with one child leaving may experience milder distress than those with all children out of home. Mothers tend to report higher ENS distress due to closer emotional bonds with children (Bouchard, 2014). Fathers may express ENS differently, often through financial concerns rather than emotional distress (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). Younger parents (<45 years) may adjust more easily due to career and social engagements. Older parents (>45 years) may experience greater distress due to longer caregiving roles. Nuclear family parents may experience higher ENS distress due to lack of immediate social support (Kulik, 2006). Joint family parents might have built-in support systems, reducing ENS severity.

Understanding ENS within the Indian demographic is critical for multiple reasons. First, globalization and urban migration are increasing the number of parents experiencing ENS in India. Second, the emotional well-being of parents during this transition phase remains understudied, leading to a lack of targeted psychological interventions. Third, identifying demographic variations in ENS can help mental health professionals develop tailored coping strategies and support systems for affected parents (White & Edwards, 1990). By quantifying ENS distress through the ENS-IF scale and analyzing its association with key demographic variables, this study aims to provide valuable insights for psychologists, social workers, and policymakers working with families undergoing this transition. Parents in nuclear families face greater ENS distress than those in joint families (Kulik, 2006). Parents whose last child leaves experience greater emotional distress (Mahdiyar et al., 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Harkins (1978), many people use the phrase "empty nest" to describe the stage of life when children have finally grown up and moved out. It highlights the effect of the kids' departure from the “nest” (home) on the parents' well-being. The "empty nest" is frequently viewed in both popular and clinical research as having a negative impact on women's physical or mental health, in particular. When we imply a syndrome, the empty nest has psychological factors like stress, anxiety, and even more depression working to develop a phenomenon. This study aimed at a slightly different approach, where instead of magnifying the assumed dramatic effect of the child’s departure from protection, the effect is seen to wear off and become almost non-existent in a certain time period for parents. On the other hand, empty nest syndrome is seen to have even positive effects on mental health. Within five years, 318 women were studied who had children graduating high school from a school in North Carolina, USA. The women were divided into three categories, one “pre-empty nest”, whose children would graduate in the coming year, one potentially experiencing the empty nest with children in the current batch of graduation, and lastly women whose children have “emptied nest” two years prior. The youngest child's high school graduation served as an objective measure of an empty nest. In addition, moms were asked to define the event that they believed to be closest to leaving home in order to provide subjective indicators. Results direct that mothers' psychological well-being is only slightly and momentarily affected by the empty nest transition, but their physical well-being is largely unaffected. Mothers who are pre- or post-empty nesters, as well as those who are not ready for the change, have much lower levels of positive affect than mothers whose children have left home within the last six to eighteen months. This research contradicts research on

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negative effects, but there is a scope for research gaps in this study on the basis of variables studied. There is a cultural difference in empty nest syndrome across Western and Asian countries, the results of this study may not apply to the Indian population context. Moreover, the time frame of this study is the past five decades, after which there is significant levels of increase in globalization, technology development, and mental health awareness in the world. The idea of subjective indicators in this study are based on the definitions of empty nests in women, and not their emotional experiences, the focus hence is shifted to their cognitive understanding of the phenomenon itself and not their emotional inclinations towards potentially feeling the loss that empty nest syndrome claims to contain.

Mansoor and Hasan (2019) investigate the psychological effects of children leaving the nest on middle-aged parents, with a particular focus on coping strategies, life satisfaction, and emotional distress. In this purely quantitative research, middle-aged parents' empty nest syndrome was measured in the study using the Empty Nest Syndrome Questionnaire (ENS), the psychological well-being was measured using the Ryff (1989) psychological well-being scale. It has six subscales with 84 items total. The study results indicated that parents who have ENS frequently express a sense of loss about their function as engaged caregivers and decreased levels of life satisfaction. The main conclusions had more complex implications on the direction of the research, showing that the impacts on Pakistani parents of ENS are moderate rather than severe, and that the experience of empty nest syndrome varies with educational attainment. According to the same, people use a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with the emotional effects of ENS. These mechanisms include reaching out to others for support, taking up new hobbies, and reassessing their objectives. This study directs our investigation of the gap it presents on research methodologies and styles. It was a strictly quantitative study. Qualitative research on the empty nest syndrome phenomenon is also necessary.

Mahdiyari et al. (2017) specifically investigate the differences in ENS symptoms in parents before and after their children leave home with a focus on the psychological and emotional impacts experienced by parents when their children leave home. A detailed picture of how the transition impacts parental well-being is provided by the study, which looks at emotional distress indicators both before and after children leave the house. The comparison approach used highlights the dynamic character of parental adjustment and enables a fuller understanding of ENS as a process as opposed to a static condition. The General Health Questionnaire level and the Loneliness Scale (UCLA, Russell, 1980) were used to collect the data. The dependent and independent t-tests were used to assess the data. The results of the study indicated that both parents had higher levels of anxiety and loneliness; however, mothers experienced higher levels of these emotions than fathers did and fascinatingly a positive correlation was discovered between the quantity of children leaving their parents' home and the degree of despair, anxiety, and loneliness experienced by mothers. There has been an overwhelming focus on research of Empty Nest syndromes in middle aged and elderly parents with all children out of home, a comparative perspective sheds lights on the parental need shifts and gives way for future research in determining the implications of the number of children present and out of home on the emotional state of parents.

Piper and Breckenridge-Jackson (2017) argue that ENS is a significant area of economic study, as it affects individuals both economically and emotionally. This aligns with Marshall's broad definition of economics, which emphasizes the study of human behavior in everyday life. The paper critiques existing literature for often relying on small-scale or

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qualitative studies, which may not provide a comprehensive understanding of ENS. In contrast, this research utilizes a large, nationally representative dataset from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), allowing for a more robust analysis of the phenomenon. A significant focus is on how becoming an empty nester impacts individuals' subjective well-being. The differences in worries and concerns between empty and non-empty nesters are comparatively analyzed, noting that empty nesters tend to worry more about personal problems and unemployment. This is crucial for understanding the broader implications of ENS on individuals' lives. Economic theory, biological perspectives, and methodological advancements are integrated together to enhance understanding of this complex phenomenon.

Bongyoga and Risnawaty (2021) highlight the complexities of empty-nest syndrome, its profound effects on family dynamics and emotional well-being, and the coping strategies parents employ during this transitional phase. It is characterized as a crisis of identity for parents, who experience a sense of loss as their children grow up and become independent. The syndrome is classified into three transitions: when all children live with parents, when one child leaves, and when all children live separately. The study employs a phenomenological qualitative approach, focusing on the subjective experiences of parents dealing with empty-nest syndrome. Data were collected through interviews with three pairs of parents, exploring their experiences and the dimensions of family quality of life. Parents attempt to cope with their feelings by engaging in conversations with their partners, which helps them feel comforted and calm. They also express a desire to spend time with their children, but often suppress these feelings, recognizing their children's new responsibilities. Communication patterns shift from face-to-face interactions to online communication, which can be challenging for parents accustomed to direct contact. The departure of children leads to changes in family interaction, parenting roles, and emotional well-being.

Mahmoudpour et al. (2023) explore the psychological impacts of empty nest syndrome on elderly individuals and the potential benefits of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest approach involving a control group. Participants were elderly individuals with ENS, selected through convenience sampling. The emotional self-regulatory questionnaire developed by Hofman and Kashdan was utilized to assess participants' emotional self-regulation. The results indicated that group-based ACT significantly improved cognitive flexibility and emotional self-regulation among the elderly participants, suggesting its potential as an effective intervention for this demographic. The syndrome can trigger maladaptive responses that may escalate into serious psychological conditions, including major depressive disorder and anxiety disorders. Higher cognitive flexibility correlates with better psychological well-being and lower levels of depression and anxiety, and effective emotional self-regulation is linked to positive self-esteem and better coping strategies in stressful situations, according to the study.

Anthony L. Pillay (1988) described empty nest syndrome in the views of middle aged Indian women with diagnosed depression. Clinical records formed the basis of the retrospective analysis for the patients visiting the psychological clinic at Northdale General Hospital in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. This area of study has not received much attention in the South African circumstance and, more precisely, in cultural settings. The significance of this is seen in the understanding that depressive symptoms can cause cultural distinctions. In light of this, the current study on midlife depression in Indian women was carried out.

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Findings indicated nineteen (59.4%) of the patients indicated feeling lonely because their children have moved away. This is particularly relevant to Indian culture, given an old extended-family structure in which married sons (and their brides) continued to reside in the paternal home. This study presents a unique perspective on empty nest syndrome and its psychological implications. It analyses how cultural expectations, familial roles, and social pressures add to the feelings of loss, depression, and lack of purpose in this phase.

Hall (2023) states in her study that studying can assist the empty nest couples to find strategic strategies that other married couples have used to help them cope with this major shift in lifestyles. A qualitative phenomenological research has investigated the lived experiences of married couples who have passed to the empty nest stage of the family life cycle. Additionally, the researcher hoped to understand the calculated actions the couples had taken to diminish or cushion the effects of the empty nest syndrome or challenges that would ensue during the transition. Data was gathered using the case study method, which aims to investigate one or more cases of a complicated subject over time through in-depth interviews and firsthand observations. The outcomes of this study provide light on the causes of partner interference, relational uncertainty, and relationship transformation throughout this phase of life. Role shifts and role conflicts can also prove relational to empty nest syndrome. This study can further hint the need for studies on couples in different family dynamics like joint or nuclear structures, impacting the role specifications.

Borland (1982) in his cohort analysis on women from three different ethnic backgrounds presented the idea that if the empty-nest syndrome does occur, it might be more prevalent in a specific group of white middle-class women due to their particular set of social circumstances, family values, and social norms surrounding women's "proper" roles.

Research Gap

The primary research gap that can be identified in the previously conducted studies is the lack of research directly comparing the empty nest syndrome in parents at the start of the transition, with only one child out of the home versus the parents at the end of this period, with all children out of the home. Another gap can be seen in the minimal study of variables like the size of the family or the parent’s age and gender that can affect the distress levels in parents. While existing studies have explored the general impact of empty nest syndrome, gender differences, and potential interventions, it has focused mainly on elderly parents with all children having left home a long time ago or on the overall experience of middle aged parents without differentiating based on the nature of their family. Therefore, there is a need to explore the demographic variables that can influence the syndrome and compare the data collected to analyze their impact on the parents’ emotional well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Aim:

To assess the levels of Empty Nest Syndrome in Parents in India on the basis of demographic variables like age, gender, family dynamics and number of children at home.

Research Question

How does the levels of Empty Nest Syndrome vary with regards to the age, gender, family dynamics and number of children in Indian parents?

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Objectives

For the study the objectives are as follows:

- To study the prevalence of Empty Nest Syndrome (ENS) in parents in India
- To determine the levels of Empty Nest Syndrome in parents according to their age.
- To study the association between gender and experience of Empty Nest Syndrome in parents.
- To understand the influence of the number of children at home on Empty Nest Syndrome among parents.
- To understand the influence of family dynamics on Empty Nest Syndrome among parents.

Hypotheses

- **H0:** there is no significant difference in the ENS level in parents based on their family size.
- **H1:** there is a significant difference in ENS level in parents based on their family size.
- **H0:** there is no significant difference in the ENS level in parents based on the age of parents.
- **H1:** there is a significant difference in ENS level in parents based on the age of parents.
- **H0:** there is no significant difference in the ENS level in parents based on the gender of parents.
- **H1:** there is a significant difference in ENS level in parents based on the gender of parents.
- **H0:** there is no significant difference in the ENS level in parents based on the number of children at home.
- **H1:** there is a significant difference in ENS level in parents based on the number of children at home.

Operational Definition

- **Parents:** Individuals who are biological or adoptive parents of children, residing in India.
- **Empty Nest Syndrome:** The syndrome of emotional and psychological experience of parents with children departing their homes.

Data Collection Tools

- **Types of Tools:** Surveys: To collect quantitative data on stress, anxiety, depression, and empty nest syndrome.
- **Scales: Empty Nest Syndrome Scale-Indian Form (ENS-IF):**
- **Measures:** The scale looks at the feelings that come up when children leave home such as loneliness, sadness, and trouble adjusting. These feelings often relate to the Indian way of life.
- **Format:** The scale includes items specifically tailored to capture the emotional and psychological reactions of Indian parents to empty nest syndrome, rated on a Likert scale.
- **Administration:** Participants will complete the ENS-IF via an online survey platform (Google Forms).
- **Scoring:** Scores are summed to provide a total measure of the extent of empty nest syndrome, with higher scores indicating greater emotional impact.

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Sample

The study will involve parents who are experiencing Empty Nest Syndrome, divided into two groups:

Based on the number of children:

1. Parents whose one child has left home.
2. Parents whose children have left home.

Based on the age:

1. Parents with ages below 45.
2. Parents with ages above 45.

Based on the gender:

1. Mothers
2. Fathers

Based on Family size:

1. Parents living in a nuclear family,
2. Parents living in a joint family.

Sampling Method

- Recruitment: Participants will be recruited through online forms for parents experiencing Empty Nest Syndrome.
- Inclusion Criteria: Participants must be parents who live together and whose child/children have recently left home, between 1 to 5 years.
- Exclusion Criteria: Participants must not be parents who are separated or divorced and /or those who only have a single child.
- Stratified Sampling: A stratified sampling method will be employed to ensure representation. This will involve dividing the population into subgroups based on the number of children who have left home and the parent's gender, then randomly selecting samples from each subgroup to ensure diversity and comprehensive coverage.
- Sample Size: The study aims to include an equal number of participants from each subgroup, targeting at least 200 parents in total to achieve statistical significance.

Study Design

This research will employ a comparative cross-sectional design.

- Comparative: The study will compare the levels of emotional distress between two distinct groups of parents.
- Cross-Sectional: Data will be collected at a single point in time from both groups to assess, compare, and to analyze the influence of age, gender, family size, and the number of children who have left home, on these experiences.

Validation strategies

The Empty Nest Syndrome Scale-Indian Form obtained a construct validity. The scale's validity was established from the reviews and opinions of four subject matter experts in counseling and education. Some items were removed, while others were reframed and improvised according to the suggestions of the subject matter experts. Thus, it can be understood that the inferences drawn from the scores of the scales is mainly appropriate for measuring the extent of the Empty Nest Syndrome.

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For the purpose of finding out the reliability of the scale, the developers of the Empty Nest Syndrome Scale-Indian Form conducted a psychometric evaluation of the scale; item-total correlation, and inter-item correlation. These were found with the help of Cronbach’s alpha testing using IBM SPSS 16. The value of Cronbach’s Alpha was found to be 0.919 indicating that the test has high reliability (Jhangiani et al., 2022).

Anticipated concerns/ethical issues

1. Participant Privacy and Confidentiality: Researchers may gather private and sensitive data; hence strict data protection protocols are needed.
2. Research Impact: It's possible that the research findings unintentionally add to the stigma associated with empty nest syndrome. The results might be used to support actions or policies that have the potential to negatively affect families.
3. Vulnerable Populations: Elderly folks who may be more vulnerable could be among the participants. In order to preserve the rights and well-being of older adult volunteers, researchers need to take extra precautions.
4. Informed consent: Before consenting to participate, participants should be fully informed about the objectives, risks, and advantages of the study.
5. Causality: The majority of research will be correlational in nature, which makes it challenging to determine the causes of the variations.
6. Confounding variables: There is a chance that other variables, such as career stage or marital satisfaction, will affect the association between empty nest and results.
7. Contextual factors: The results might be specific to the sociocultural context of the study.

RESULTS

The Empty Nest Syndrome Scale – Indian Form (ENS-IF) was used to assess levels of Empty Nest Syndrome (ENS) among parents. The responses were scored by calculating the mean scores for each participant. Higher scores indicated more significant distress associated with the empty nest phase, while lower scores reflected a smoother adjustment.

For statistical analysis, chi-square tests were conducted to examine associations between ENS levels and demographic factors, including gender, family structure, age, and the number of children living at home. The chi-square tests were performed using Jamovi, with a significance level of $p < 0.05$ set for all statistical tests to determine meaningful associations.

Table 1 Female-Male Parameter

E		A		Total
		Female	Male	
Average	Observed	64	57	121
	Expected	66.51	54.49	121.00
Low	Observed	28	13	41
	Expected	22.54	18.46	41.00
High	Observed	2	7	9
	Expected	4.95	4.05	9.00
Total	Observed	94	77	171
	Expected	94.00	77.00	171.00

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Table 2 Chi-Square value

	Value	df	p
χ^2	7.05	2	0.029
N	171		

Note: The Chi-squared indicates a value of 7.05 at p value 0.029.

The association between gender and ENS levels was examined using a chi-square test for independence. The results indicated a statistically significant relationship, $\chi^2(2, N = 171) = 7.05, p = 0.029$, suggesting that gender influences ENS severity.

Analysis of the distribution showed that a greater proportion of male parents reported higher ENS scores compared to female parents. Fathers exhibited greater distress when children moved out, whereas mothers were more likely to report lower ENS scores. These findings suggest that fathers may experience greater difficulty adjusting to the empty nest phase, possibly due to societal expectations that discourage emotional expression. The results highlight the need for gender-sensitive interventions and support systems that address the specific emotional challenges faced by fathers during this transition.

Table 3 Family Dynamics Parameter

E	B			Total
	Joint family (typically with three or more generations or with extended family members)	Nuclear family (typically only parents with children)		
Average	Observed	53	68	121
	Expected	52.36	68.64	121.00
Low	Observed	16	25	41
	Expected	17.74	23.26	41.00
High	Observed	5	4	9
	Expected	3.89	5.11	9.00
Total	Observed	74	97	171
	Expected	74.00	97.00	171.00

Table 4 Chi-Square value

	Value	df	p
χ^2	0.868	2	0.648
N	171		

Note: The Chi-square is at value 0.86 and at p value 0.648

The relationship between family structure and ENS levels was analyzed to determine whether parents in nuclear families experienced greater distress compared to those in joint families. The chi-square test for independence revealed no statistically significant association, $\chi^2(2, N = 171) = 0.868, p = 0.648$.

Despite the lack of statistical significance, a trend was observed where parents in nuclear families reported slightly higher ENS scores compared to those in joint families. This suggests that while family structure may not be a decisive factor, living in a joint family may provide a buffer against ENS by offering greater emotional and social support. The presence of extended family members could help mitigate feelings of loneliness and loss, which are commonly associated with ENS. These findings align with cultural expectations in India,

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where joint family systems often function as an extended support network. As nuclear families become increasingly common in urban settings, the emotional impact of ENS may intensify, necessitating alternative support mechanisms to aid parents in their adjustment.

Table 5 Age Parameter

E		C		Total
		30-50	Above 50	
Average	Observed	79	42	121
	Expected	78.54	42.46	121.00
Low	Observed	26	15	41
	Expected	26.61	14.39	41.00
High	Observed	6	3	9
	Expected	5.84	3.16	9.00
Total	Observed	111	60	171
	Expected	111.00	60.00	171.00

Table 6 Chi-Square value

	Value	df	p
χ^2	0.0601	2	0.970
N	171		

Note: The Chi-square value is at 0.060 and p value at 0.97

Age is often considered a determining factor in ENS severity, with the assumption that older parents experience greater distress. However, the chi-square test for independence indicated no statistically significant relationship between age and ENS levels, $\chi^2(2, N = 171) = 0.0601$, $p = 0.970$.

The analysis showed that parents in different age groups exhibited similar ENS levels, suggesting that ENS is not solely influenced by age but rather by individual coping mechanisms, expectations, and psychological preparedness. This finding challenges the assumption that ENS worsens with age and instead suggests that factors such as emotional support, employment status, and social engagement may play a more significant role in shaping parental experiences.

These results indicate that ENS is not merely a function of chronological age but rather a psychological response that varies based on personal and environmental factors. Future research could explore whether personality traits or prior experiences influence coping mechanisms more than age.

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Table 7 Number of Children Parameter

E		D		Total
		Atleast 1 child has left home	All children have left home	
Average	Observed	82	39	121
	Expected	82.08	38.92	121.00
Low	Observed	27	14	41
	Expected	27.81	13.19	41.00
High	Observed	7	2	9
	Expected	6.11	2.89	9.00
Total	Observed	116	55	171
	Expected	116.00	55.00	171.00

Table 8 Chi-Square Value

	Value	df	p
χ^2	0.482	2	0.786
N	171		

Note: The Chi-square value 0.482 and the p-value is at 0.786

The number of children still residing at home was examined to determine its impact on ENS severity. It was hypothesized that parents experiencing a completely empty nest would report higher ENS levels compared to those with at least one child still living at home. However, the chi-square test did not reveal a statistically significant association, $\chi^2(2, N = 171) = 0.482, p = 0.786$.

The data indicated that ENS levels remained similar across both groups, suggesting that ENS is not solely dependent on whether all children have left or only some have moved out. This finding highlights that ENS is more related to the emotional transition and the changing parental role rather than the physical absence of children.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of Empty Nest Syndrome (ENS) in the Indian context, highlighting the emotional and psychological experiences of parents whose children have left home. The results indicate that ENS is influenced by multiple demographic factors, including gender and family structure, while age and the number of children at home do not exhibit statistically significant associations. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on parental adjustment and offer insights into how sociocultural factors shape the experience of ENS in India.

The relationship between gender and ENS levels was found to be statistically significant, suggesting that fathers tend to experience higher levels of distress compared to mothers. This result challenges traditional assumptions that mothers are more emotionally affected when children leave home, as they are often perceived as primary caregivers. Instead, the

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findings suggest that fathers, despite societal norms that discourage emotional expression, may struggle more with the transition due to changing parental roles and expectations. In many Indian households, men traditionally assume the role of financial providers, while women are more engaged in the emotional and everyday nurturing of children. As a result, when children leave home, fathers may experience a greater sense of emotional void, particularly if their past interactions with their children were limited due to work obligations. Furthermore, Indian society often emphasizes the emotional resilience of men, discouraging them from openly expressing distress. This lack of social acknowledgment and support could intensify their ENS experiences.

In contrast, mothers in this study reported relatively lower levels of ENS, which may be attributed to their ability to maintain social and familial networks even after their children leave home. Women in Indian families often have stronger emotional ties within extended family structures, which may help mitigate the psychological impact of ENS. Additionally, many mothers continue to play significant roles in household responsibilities and caregiving for elderly family members, allowing them to redirect their focus rather than experiencing a sudden loss of purpose. These findings suggest the importance of gender-sensitive interventions that recognize the emotional struggles faced by fathers and provide them with necessary support systems.

Counseling, support groups, and awareness programs could be beneficial in addressing these unspoken emotional challenges.

The study also examined the impact of family structure on ENS levels, revealing that while there was no statistically significant association, a general trend suggested that parents in nuclear families reported higher distress levels compared to those in joint families. This aligns with sociocultural expectations in India, where joint families serve as an extended support network that can buffer against feelings of loneliness and emotional loss. The presence of other family members, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and siblings, provides a continuous source of interaction and engagement, reducing the emotional burden that parents might experience when their children leave home. The lack of statistical significance, however, indicates that ENS experiences are not solely determined by family structure and that individual psychological resilience plays a crucial role.

The results also challenge the commonly held belief that ENS severity increases with age. The chi-square test did not find a significant relationship between ENS levels and age, indicating that distress levels were similar across different age groups. This finding suggests that ENS is not merely a function of chronological age but rather a complex emotional response influenced by various psychological and situational factors. While older parents might be expected to experience more distress due to longer periods of child dependency and deeper emotional bonds, younger parents may also struggle with the transition, particularly if they had strong emotional attachments to their children. This result underscores the importance of individual coping mechanisms, personality traits, and the availability of social and emotional support in shaping how parents experience ENS. Factors such as employment, hobbies, social networks, and engagement in new activities may have a more significant impact on a parent's ability to adjust to an empty nest than age alone.

Another important finding relates to the number of children still living at home. It was hypothesized that parents with a completely empty nest would report higher ENS levels than

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those with at least one child still living at home. However, the results indicated no significant relationship between these variables. This suggests that the emotional impact of ENS is not solely dependent on the physical absence of all children but rather on the psychological transition associated with the changing parental role. Parents may still experience distress even if one child remains at home, as the departure of another child marks a shift in the family dynamic. The emotional adjustments required to redefine parental roles and personal identity appear to be more relevant factors in ENS severity than simply the presence or absence of children in the household.

These findings highlight the need for further exploration into the psychological mechanisms underlying ENS. It is possible that personality traits such as emotional resilience, adaptability, and coping styles play a crucial role in determining how parents adjust to an empty nest. Parents with a strong sense of self-identity beyond their parental role may be better equipped to handle this transition, while those who derive most of their purpose and emotional fulfillment from their children may struggle more. Additionally, social engagement, career involvement, and the availability of emotional support systems could be key mediators in how ENS manifests across different individuals.

Culturally, ENS in India may differ from Western contexts due to the strong emphasis on family bonds and intergenerational support. While many Western societies encourage children to achieve independence at an early age, Indian culture places significant value on family unity, often resulting in prolonged dependency between parents and children. This cultural expectation may intensify ENS in some cases, as parents might struggle with letting go of their caregiving role. On the other hand, Indian families that continue to maintain close relationships with children even after they move out—through frequent communication, visits, and ongoing involvement in decision-making—may experience lower levels of ENS distress.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of ENS, but they also highlight the need for further research. Future studies could explore the role of personality traits, prior parental expectations, and coping mechanisms in ENS experiences.

Longitudinal research could help assess how ENS evolves over time and whether certain interventions can effectively reduce its emotional impact. Additionally, qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of parents, capturing the nuanced emotions and coping strategies that are not always reflected in quantitative measures.

Limitations

1. Self-Reported Data Bias

The study relies on the Empty Nest Syndrome Scale – Indian Form (ENS-IF), a self-reported survey tool. Participants may overestimate or underestimate their distress due to social desirability bias, emotional suppression, or lack of self-awareness.

In the Indian cultural context, where emotional expression may be stigmatized (especially for men), fathers might underreport distress to align with societal expectations of stoicism. At the same time, mothers might overreport to conform to the nurturing caregiver stereotype. This could skew your gender findings, which unexpectedly showed fathers experiencing higher ENS levels.

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2. Cross-sectional Design

ENS is a dynamic process—some parents may experience acute distress immediately after a child leaves, while others may develop delayed or prolonged symptoms. The finding that age and number of children at home lack significant association might reflect this snapshot approach rather than an actual absence of effect. For instance, older parents might adjust better in the long term due to life experience, a nuance lost in cross-sectional data. The cross-sectional design captures ENS distress simultaneously, limiting the ability to track how it evolves or whether parents adapt over time.

3. Limited Sample Size and Representativeness

The target sample size of 200 parents may lack the statistical power to detect subtle differences across all demographic variables (gender, age, family structure, number of children). Additionally, the recruitment via online forms might exclude less tech-savvy or rural Indian parents, skewing the sample toward urban, educated populations—a small, urban-biased sample risks overgeneralization.

4. Measurement Limitations of ENS-IF

While the ENS-IF is validated for Indian parents, its reliance on Likert-scale responses might oversimplify ENS's complex, multifaceted nature. It may not capture subtle emotional shifts or cultural coping mechanisms (e.g., spirituality, community involvement). The finding that age and number of children lack significance might reflect the scale's insensitivity to specific dimensions of ENS, like anticipatory grief (before all children leave) or resilience factors (e.g., religious faith, common in India). The scale's focus on distress might also miss positive outcomes, like newfound freedom or marital strengthening.

5. Ethical and Practical Constraints

The study involves sensitive, emotional data, yet the methodology doesn't detail how participants' distress (e.g., if completing the survey triggers sadness) will be handled. Online recruitment also raises practical issues like digital literacy and access. Elderly or less-educated parents might struggle with Google Forms, potentially excluding vulnerable groups who could experience ENS differently. Additionally, revisiting painful emotions without follow-up support could harm participants.

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Conflict of Interest

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