

Empty nest in relation with Quality of Life and Attachment Styles

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To study Empty nest syndrome in relation to the attachment style and quality of life of parents. A sample of 100 parents whose children had left home to pursue a career, higher education or marriage were surveyed, aged 45 to 65 years. The study used standardised tools pertaining to the Empty Nest Syndrome, Quality of Life and Attachment styles. To compute the findings, descriptive and inferential statistics of a correlational research design as well as independent t test were used. In females, the study showed that there was a negative correlation between the close attachment style and empty nest syndrome ($r=-0.20$, $p<0.05$). Females having anxious attachment styles reported low quality of life ($r=-0.31$, $p<0.05$). There is also intra-correlation reported between the attachment styles in both males and females. A person's experience during the empty nest phase depends on a lot of factors, attachment style being one of them. Females comfortable with being close and intimate are more likely to be adjusted during the changing phases of one's life. Whereas the quality of life would be affected by keeping other things in mind. The difference in the family structure in Indian society is too vast to generalise.

Keywords: Empty nest syndrome, attachment styles, quality of life, parents

Parents often feel proud to send their kids off to college, into the working world, or into marriage. However, there can also be sadness, mainly if it is the final child to leave the house. This feeling of loneliness (Wang et al., 2017; Piper & Jackson 2017; Agimudie et al, 2020), sadness, and inner conflict (Agimudie et al, 2020) experienced by parents after their children have left home, leads to increased risk for poor health and well-being (Xu et al, 2023), typically to attend college or start a life on their own, is categorised as Empty Nest Syndrome. This can be difficult for parents as they adjust to the change in family dynamics and their newfound freedom and may feel a sense of loss and a lack of purpose (Wilkinson, 1989; Hurlock 2011).

Elderly experiencing empty nests reported moderate to high levels of loneliness with social support and family

function being negatively associated with loneliness (Wu et al., 2010). Such negative experiences can affect their social life and daily routine when children migrate either for better education or job opportunities. Indian societies are considered to be part of collective culture (Hofstede 1980; Triandis 1995), where joint families used to fulfil the social needs (IGNOU, 2017). But, over the last two decades people moved to nuclear families (Chadda & Deb, 2013, Randhawa & Kaur, 2021) where the type of attachment plays a crucial role in determining "how an empty nest can impact a person" (Hobdy et al, 2007). Spouses in their later age of life are left behind, and if mutual support is lacking, can affect their quality time during hardships of empty nest phase. Midlife parents commonly report negative reactions like intense sadness or emotional discomfort when their children move out (Ahuja & Panwar, 2023).

This emotional discomfort can be linked to their attachment patterns as the kind of attachment style an individual has can impact the way one views transitions (Mayseless, Danieli, & Sharabany, 1996). Individuals having a secure attachment style may be better able to handle the developmental transitions of life (Bowlby, 1980), such as the launching of children from the family and have a higher quality of life than those with an insecure attachment style (Darban et al., 2020). This would further affect their and their partner's life satisfaction (Thibodeau & Bouchard, 2019), hence the importance of considering both partners' attachment styles when evaluating life satisfaction during the empty-nest stage should be considered.

On the other hand, individuals with an insecure attachment style may struggle with these stressors as they may have negative self-perceptions and a lack of trust in their ability to handle challenges. Those with an insecure attachment style may experience more depression and anxiety (Vivona & Jeanine, 2000) in response to job loss and may have a more challenging time adapting to these changes (Hobdy et al., 2007).

The type of attachment style affects how a person deals with the stressor; it can also affect how parents view the change they experience after they are free of the responsibilities of their children which can further impact the family's quality of life (Bongyoga & Risnawaty, 2021). Therefore, empty nest syndrome was associated with decreased family quality of life, including decreased satisfaction with family relationships, support and emotional well-being, and decreased involvement in family activities.

On the contrary, the Dennerstein et al.(2002) study stated that the empty nest phase did not negatively affect women's quality of life. Instead, the study found that women's quality of life was influenced by

several factors, including their overall health, relationships with their partners, and the level of support they received from friends and family. There is a mixture of both positive and negative reactions to the departure of their children (Barber 1980; Deutscher 1964).

As it is believed that this is faced mainly by women; therefore, most studies are done on them, pointing out a positive association of empty nest syndrome with decreased appetite and lower quality of life among female adults (Nazib & Hamirudin, 2020). Studying patients with midlife depression was also attributed to children leaving home for some women (Pillay, 1998). This can be because females used to be primary caregivers and understood the child's needs. Another reason is the physical factor of menopause, where in Japanese cases of menopausal disorders, postmenopausal patients described empty nest syndrome more (Takamastu et al. 2004). Even though males do not experience these physical factors, in the modern world, both parents have shared responsibilities and do not differ in terms of empty nest syndrome and psychological well-being (Mansoor & Hasan; 2019; Ezeh et al, 2021). As an empty nester, it also brings them to a higher risk of poor mental health than non-empty nesters (Park & Mendoza; 2022).

Moreover, there is limited study on the association between empty nest syndrome, quality of life and attachment styles of an individual. There is more focus on marital problems with empty nest syndrome. Studies are focused on women more, but there can also be an impact on fathers, which needs to be studied. A few of the studies have also shown contrary results. Hence, there is a need to study empty nest syndrome with quality of life and attachment styles in Indian settings. This is because most studies are done on the populations of China and Pakistan, and there is very little research in the Indian context.

Method

Research Design

Correlational research design was used to explore the association between empty nest syndrome, quality of life and attachment styles. This design appears appropriate for the nature of the research question aiming to understand the degree of association between the three variables without introducing experimental manipulations. Further, a comparative study was done to compare the level of empty nest syndrome, attachment style and quality of life between the two parents.

Participants

The sample size of the total participants is 100. The data were collected through purposive sampling, non-probability (non-random) sampling. The respondents consisted of parents whose children had left home to pursue career, marriage or higher education, residing in the city of Agra with their partners having an age range between 45 to 65 distributed as shown in Table 1. The participants have lived alone for an average of 4.8 years, with children leaving home for higher studies or marriage, summarised in

Table 1. Summary of Demographic details

Category	Sub-category	Number	Percentage
Sex	Male	44	44%
	Female	56	56%
Age	45-50	47	47%
	51-55	31	31%
	56-60	12	12%
	61-65	10	10%
Type of Family	Joint	22	22%
	Nuclear	78	78%
Number of Children	One	16	16%
	Two	69	69%
	Three or more	15	15%

Occupation	Full-time	72	72%
	Part-time	4	4%
	Home-maker	21	21%
	Retired	3	3%

Measures

Empty nest syndrome scale [ENSS; I.C. Mbaeze & Ukwandu, (2011)]: Out of the three parts of this questionnaire, Part B comprising 16 items measuring the level of Empty Nest Syndrome, was used. It is a 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (5 to 1, respectively). The score range is 33 to 80, with respondents scoring 50 or greater who were considered to be experiencing Empty Nest Syndrome. Cronbach's α was used to achieve a correlation coefficient of 0.81.

World Health Organisation quality of life scale [WHOQOL-BREF; World Health Organisation, (2004)]: This scale consists of 26 items with four domains: physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, and environment. It is a five-point Likert scale with 5 as strongly agree and 1 as strongly disagree with some items being negatively scored. Cronbach's α for the whole WHOQOL-BREF scale was 0.896. Internal reliability for all domains was above 0.70, except for "Social Relationships" (0.533) whereas the test-retest reliability was significant at p 0.01 level, showing good scale stability.

Revised Adult Attachment style scale [RAASS; Collins (1996)]: This scale consists of 18 items on a 5-point Likert scale with some items being reversed scored. There are separate items for the three types of attachment style in this scale viz, close, dependent and anxiety. The highest score of those items indicated a particular type of attachment for that person. Cronbach's α coefficients in the normal group are higher than 0.7. The discriminant validity in the anxiety and close-dependence dimension is

good. The score of construct-related validity is high.

Procedure

The research started with the development of the research idea, which served as the blueprint for the study. After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB No. 46232223131), data collection commenced, prioritising ethical considerations throughout the process. Consent was provided by each participant before completing the questionnaire and had the option to withdraw from the study at any point.

Participants filled out basic preliminary information and responded to questions selecting the most suitable option. Following the questionnaire, participants were debriefed about the study and had the choice to learn their results in each domain. The collected data underwent scrutiny, with incomplete questionnaires being excluded. Subsequently, the questionnaires were scored based on a scoring key.

The research employed a correlation research design for analysis, and the findings were compiled into a comprehensive report after the completion of the data analysis process.

Results

The objective of this research was to investigate the interplay between empty nest syndrome, attachment styles and quality of life which was done through the Pearson correlation analysis. It also aimed to see the difference in the two parents in the way they experience empty nest syndrome and whether attachment style and quality of life has a relation with it for both the genders. The data revealed that there is no difference in the way they experience the empty nest syndrome or quality of life. Though, there is a statistically significant negative correlation in females between empty nest syndrome and

close attachment style, with a correlation coefficient of -0.26 ($p < 0.05$). There was no correlation found between dependent and anxious attachment style with empty nest syndrome but there was a negative correlation between dependent attachment style and quality of life with correlation coefficient of 0.28 ($p < 0.05$). Whereas a negative correlation between anxious attachment style and quality of life with a value of -0.31 ($p < 0.05$).

Table 2. Summary of inter-correlations (n=100)

	ENS	CAS	DAS	AAS	QOL
ENS		-.26*	-.01	.09	-.18
CAS	-.18		.19	-.25	.15
DAS	-.02	.52**		-.47**	.28*
AAS	.25	-.43**	-.19		-.31*
QOL	.19	-.11	.04	.23	

Note: Above the diagonal is the correlation values of females, below the diagonal, the correlation values are of males. Here, *= $p < 0.05$; **= $p < 0.01$; ENS= Empty Nest Syndrome, CAS= Close attachment style, DAS= Dependent Attachment style, AAS= Anxiety attachment style

On the other hand, males reported no correlation between empty nest syndrome, attachment styles and quality of life. There is intra-correlation reported between dependent and close as well as anxious and close attachment style.

From Table 2, intra correlation can be observed within the three attachment styles, such as there is negative correlation between close and anxious attachment style for both the parents whereas a positive correlation between dependent and close attachment style for males showing that people who are comfortable getting close to others would low on getting anxious when they leave and high on being dependent for males. For females,

there was a negative correlation between dependent and anxious attachment style showing the more dependent a person is in

a relationship, more anxious attachment they have, all reaching the significance level of $p < 0.01$ level.

Table 3 . Summary of independent t test (n1=44, n2=56)

		Mean	SD	t	Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Effect size
ENS	1	48.71	5.13	0.60	.55	.65	1.09	0.01
	2	48.05	5.64					
CAS	1	3.14	.49	0.05	.96	.01	.10	0.10
	2	3.13	.52					
DAS	1	3.05	.60	0.48	.63	.06	.11	0.13
	2	2.99	.54					
AAS	1	2.64	.78	0.66	.51	.11	.16	0.16
	2	2.54	.83					
QOL	1	3.81	.45	0.81	.42	.07	.09	0.12
	2	3.74	.40					

Note: *= $p < 0.05$; **= $p < 0.01$; ENS= Empty Nest Syndrome, CAS= Close attachment style, DAS= Dependent Attachment style, AAS= Anxiety attachment style; 1=males; 2=females

From table 3, the t-test shows that there is no significant difference between the two parents on any of the variables. Cohen's d also showed that there is no practical evidence of gender difference. The internal consistency reliability of Empty nest syndrome and dependent attachment style is moderate whereas for quality of life and anxious attachment style is good. With this, it can be concluded that parents with close attachment style are likely to be low on anxious attachment style, which works as a barrier to facing high levels of empty nest syndrome. Through the results, the null hypothesis is partially rejected, stating that there is no correlation between empty nest syndrome, quality of life and attachment styles.

Discussion

The phrase empty nest syndrome has been around since 1914 (Canfield, 1914) without having any medical diagnosis, nor is

it a thoroughly researched topic in social science. The phrase has remained in common usage in individualistic culture but has recently gained attention in the Indian context, a collectivist culture shifting to individualistic. The evidence for its existence is either anecdotal or, at most, based on samples taken from a few people. While this is becoming more accepted, the changing dynamics can still lead to feelings of emptiness for parents, especially if they are unprepared for this transition.

Empty nest syndrome is experienced all over the world, but the impact it has and the way it is perceived can be influenced by various socio-cultural factors, including those specific to the Indian context. In India, the multigenerational relationships and family bonds are traditionally strong, where children usually play a significant role in their parents' lives, that can both mitigate and exacerbate feelings associated with the empty nest syndrome. Parents may sometimes be more

dependent on their children for emotional and financial support, specially in old age. Therefore, when they leave, those who rely heavily on their support might find it difficult to cope, leading to a heightened experience of empty nest syndrome. They might also have established lives, social circles and responsibilities in their native place and therefore cannot consider moving with their children as it might disrupt those dynamics. They might also have family home, community and cultural roots which might hold sentimental values and connections that have been built over the years, making it difficult to live with them.

On the bright side, people from India often has a strong social support system. They might receive emotional support from their extended family and community ties, potentially reducing its effects. They usually consist of multiple generations living together or in close proximity, fostering a healthy support networks. In a collectivist society, the cultural emphasis on family cohesion often results in individuals developing close attachment styles characterised by strong emotional bonds within the family unit. This also resonates with cultural norms where secure and harmonious family relationships are idealised.

Addressing empty nest syndrome might involve a combination of redefining roles, finding new purposes, and encouraging open dialogue within families and communities to create a supportive environment for parents experiencing this transition. As societal norms continue to evolve, how empty nest syndrome is perceived and managed is likely to change as well. All these can be managed by the type of attachment style that the parents have. This study found a negative correlation between close attachment style and ENS for females, which suggests that individuals with secure attachment with their children and other family members may find solace in the

presence of extended family members and experience fewer negative symptoms. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins can offer emotional support, easing the challenges associated with children leaving home. Though this was not seen for males who have no relation to the attachment style they have with the way they experience this phase. Males and females may have different coping mechanisms in response to life transitions. It's possible that males tend to rely on alternative coping strategies or compartmentalise their emotions, resulting in no relation of attachment and empty nest phase. Females might be brought up in a such a way to place a higher value on close relationships, leading to a relation between the two.

Another possible interpretation of this finding is that those comfortable with emotional intimacy might have a more adaptable psychological framework. Their comfort in forming close bonds might enable them to maintain supportive relationships beyond their parental roles. Consequently, when their children leave home, they might already have a well-established emotional support network, thereby alleviating the impact of empty nest feelings.

Additionally, individuals with a close attachment style might possess effective coping mechanisms, allowing them to adapt to life transitions, such as children leaving home, with resilience. Their capability of forming new connections and maintaining existing ones might serve as a buffer against the sense of loss and loneliness often associated with an empty nest. They may experience this period as an opportunity for personal growth and exploration rather than a source of distress.

Attachment styles are often viewed as adaptive strategies shaped by early life experiences (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). The negative correlation between

anxious and close attachment styles for males observed in this study resonates with the concept of secure attachments serving as buffers against anxiety (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In the Indian context, where family ties are paramount, individuals might develop attachment styles emphasising emotional closeness as an adaptive mechanism to navigate social relationships (Singh & Malhotra, 2016). Individuals characterised by a close attachment style, indicating comfort with emotional intimacy, appear to hold lower anxiety levels in their relationships. Anxious attachment style individuals often seek emotional support and are afraid of being alone (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Because of this, it can lead to lower quality of life as also observed in this study for females where there is a negative correlation between anxious attachment style and quality of life who might seek excessive reassurance and worry about interpersonal relationships which can lead to negatively impacting quality of life.

The observed reduction in anxiety in those comfortable with closeness might act as a protective factor during the empty nest phase. The absence of excessive worry and fear associated with interpersonal bonds could contribute to a smoother transition when children leave home due to well-established family connections. The results of this study support the Attachment theory that proposes that the attachment style developed in early childhood can influence an individual's reaction to the empty nest stage.

When it comes to the quality of life of these parents, the lack of a correlation between empty nest syndrome and quality of life can be attributed to various complex and interrelated factors. There are a lot of individual differences in empty nest syndrome and quality of life. Parents react differently to this phase depending on their personality, coping mechanisms, and

emotional resilience. Some individuals may find new opportunities for personal growth and fulfilment, leading to an improved quality of life, while others may struggle with the transition, impacting their overall well-being. The quality of the relationship between parents and their children, as well as the dynamics within the family, plays a significant role. A positive, supportive relationship can mitigate the negative effects of empty nest syndrome, while strained relationships can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and loss. Individuals employ various coping strategies to deal with problems such as looking for new hobbies, social connections, or meaningful activities eventually finding ways to enhance their quality of life.

Conversely, individuals who lack coping skills or resist change might experience a decline in their well-being. As most of them were college-going students, there was hope that their child would come back and would also be returning during holidays, hence no relation with the quality of life for these people.

Physical and mental well-being also significantly contribute to an individual's quality of life, overshadowing the emotional aspects of empty nest syndrome, making it harder to establish a direct correlation. Economic factors, such as financial stability and maintaining a comfortable lifestyle, or economic concerns, especially if intensified by the departure of children, can contribute to stress and impact overall well-being. Life satisfaction among the elderly participants was related to various factors such as their physical health, economic status, social support, and participation in leisure activities (Li-Juan Liu & Qiang Guo (2008).

All these factors mentioned were not considered in our study; therefore, these are some things that would have affected the quality of life of an individual. As also supported by life course theory, that it is normal to transition like every other chapter

of our life. Hence, there would be no changes in the quality of life of people.

Besides this, the absence of a significant difference between males and females concerning empty nest syndrome aligning with Mansoor & Hasan's study suggests contrary to traditional expectations, both genders may experience similar emotional responses and challenges when their children leave home. Modern Indian society has been witnessing a gradual shift in gender roles, with both having shared responsibilities. With shared economic sufficiency because of females entering economic independence and shared parenting and domestic duties as well there is a more balanced emotional response to the empty nest phenomenon.

Implications and Future Research

A few limitations to be considered in this study could be that the empty nest parent sample was from only one area in the north of India. Thus, the findings may not represent the elderly in other geographic areas within the country. Also, the ratio between males and females is not equally distributed. Thirdly, cross-sectional studies cannot establish the direction of an association. Therefore, further longitudinal studies are necessary to determine the predictors of attachment style and its influential factors among this population and other populations in India. Controlling all related variables will be impossible and unnecessary; future researchers may apply qualitative methods to understand the factors impacting empty nest syndrome.

These findings hold some useful clinical implications. Understanding the intricate relationship between attachment styles and Empty Nest Syndrome has implications for psychological interventions and support systems, including therapy and support groups that address the specific needs and

concerns of the population experiencing empty nest syndrome.

This could also help families better understand and cope with the changes accompanying this phase and provide them with the necessary tools to support one another. Understanding the link between attachment styles and the emotional challenges of the empty nest phase is crucial for designing effective interventions, which would be aimed at mitigating Empty Nest Syndrome, focusing on promoting secure attachment patterns since childhood itself and strengthening individuals' sense of self-worth outside of parental roles. Psychoeducation emphasising the positive aspects of increased personal freedom and opportunities for self-discovery during the empty nest period might help individuals with other attachment styles embrace this life transition with optimism.

These findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive interventions addressing ENS in India. Family-oriented interventions that emphasise communication, emotional openness, and mutual support within the extended family structure could play a pivotal role. These should be designed in alignment with the cultural values of collectivism, preserving the importance of family bonds while promoting individual well-being.

Future research could delve deeper into the underlying mechanisms that mediate the relationship between attachment styles and empty nest experiences. Longitudinal studies might provide valuable insights into how these attachment patterns evolve over time and influence individuals' emotional responses to the empty nest phase. Additionally, qualitative research exploring the narratives of individuals with diverse attachment styles during the empty nest phase could provide rich insights into their lived experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the way people connect with others and handle the Empty Nest Syndrome is quite complex. Feeling comfortable with emotional closeness seems to protect against the tough feelings that come with Empty Nest Syndrome. But relying too much on others, especially in close relationships, might make it harder when big life changes, like kids leaving home, happen. Understanding these complexities is important for creating support systems that can really help people deal with the emotions that come with their children moving out.

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