

# Transition to the Empty Nest: A Phenomenological Study

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research was a pilot study, which was designed with the aim of exploring the experience of empty nest from two women's perspective. The transcripts were analyzed followed the procedures and techniques of ground theory. The theoretical perspective of the study was based on Parse Theory. Results addressed that women undergoing the empty nest experience encountered complicated emotions, in which the following themes were elicited: feeling sad, feeling relieved, wondering about oneself, loving children, dealing with missing someone, dealing with transition, coping with anxieties and denial, seeking supports, and feeling positive. In general, the empty nest gave the subjects mixed feelings. The study suggests that developmental counseling for middle-aged women cannot exist in standard programs with same aims for all participants, but should begin with individuals and situational determinants of each woman. (Tzu Chi Nursing Journal 2002; **1(3)**:88-94)

Key words: phenomenology, empty nest phase, ground theory, Parse's theory.

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## Introduction

Nowadays, research on women's mid-life psychological well-being has been drawn from two theoretical models: biomedicine and behavioral science. The biomedical model emphasizes hormonal changes at mid-life, and the related knowledge is well-known and widely applied. However, the behavioral science model focuses on environmental stressors; particularly, the departure of children from the home is somewhat known, especially from women's per-

spective of the experiences (Wilbur & Dan, 1989). Empty nest syndrome has been described as a salient factor that affects mid-life women's wellness because it was assumed that might cause depression from loss (Kelleher, 1992); however, some other research articles address that the empty nest period can be a happy and productive time for women (Mitchell & Helson, 1990) because they are no longer needed for full-time parenting (French, 1992). A review of literatures indicate that there were no references in the women's experience of empty nest. Therefore, it is

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essential to use investigator oneself as a tool to collect the essence of living experience to understand the real women's experiences of empty nest.

Qualitative research is particularly useful for studying phenomenon or event, about which little is known. Phenomenology, which attempts to study the human experiences as it is lived, is not just a research method but is also a philosophy and an approach. The theoretical perspective of the study is based upon Parse's theory of human-living-health (Parse, 1981). Parse's assumptions underlying the nursing paradigm of man-living-health also reflect the intergrality and rhythmicity of the human-environment interchange. Specially, "man is an open being, freely choosing meaning in situation, bearing responsibility for decision; health is an open process of becoming experience by man; and health is a rhythmically constituting process of the man-environment interrelationship, as experienced in the paradoxical rhythms of connecting-separating, enabling-limiting.

Through a clearer understanding of the meaning of empty nest from women's living perspective, nurse will be better prepared to illuminate meaning in a situation and mobilize persons in making health choices. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore women's subjective experience of empty nest through an individual interview by the author.

## Method

### The Participant

The participants consisted of two women encountering an empty nest in which their last child left home within the past one to one and one-half years. The participants were recruited for this study when the interviewer announced for volunteers at a church. The subjects were selected according to the following criteria (a) length of time from the last child left home within the past one to one and one-half years (b) ability to articulate personal experiences and feelings (c) ability to speak English. The interviewer contacted subjects via telephone to make an appointment of the interviews and to explain the detailed information about the informed consent.

Before the interview began, the informed consent was verbally explained by the interviewer and signed by the participants. The rights to participate in or withdraw from the study at any time were explained prior to data collection. The subjects were given a clear explanation of the purpose of the study and the data collecting method. The subjects' rights to confidentiality were protected by using code numbers on descriptions. Prior to data collection, an institutional review board approved this study.

### Data Collection

The interviews, which lasted around 90-120 minutes for each case, were scheduled for the convenience of the participants and took place in their own home. The interviews began with general questions to create a relaxed atmosphere, such as the surroundings of the house, the weather, and so on. The subjects were encouraged to include all of their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions related to the experience they had to describe. No attempt was made to influence the subjects' experience. Probes were used to help the participants to describe their own experience.

### Data Analysis

The in-depth interview was recorded on audiotape and transcribed verbatim. The process followed the procedures and techniques of ground theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which were developed in mid-1960s by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Wells, 1995). Data analysis was started immediately after the interviews. The transcription was read through to gain an understanding of the whole; then a line-by-line analysis was conducted using the technique of ground theory. The natural meaning units were expressed in the subjects' own words. The units were analyzed for emerging themes. This process preserved the uniqueness of each living experience of the phenomenon, while permitting an understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon itself.

### Results of the First Case Analysis

This study addressed that women undergoing the empty

nest experience encounters complicated emotions, in which the following themes were elicited from the first case: feeling sad, wondering about oneself, loving children, dealing with missing someone, coping with anxieties and denial, seeking supports, and feeling positive. The aspects of the woman's experience of empty nest are summarized hereon.

### **Feeling Sad**

Sadness is always a common perception in mothers at the beginning of their child's departure. The quotations below show the perceptions of the participant:

" I cried when they left for college. Yes I really missed them.... I just feel so sad you know he never left...."

However, her sadness was reduced by her busy daily life as she mentioned that:

".... a lot of housework, you know, more responsibilities.... kind of releasing my sadness and you know, on the missing they're gone, so, um.... made it easier to pass those months and years."

### **Loving Children**

Food is always a symbol for a mother to express love to her children. The participant mentioned several times in the interview that she prepared extra dishes for her child, such as:

" .....even he is on call dinner is always ready for him... I always prepared a lot of food in the day I know he is coming back.."

In addition, she paid close attention to her child's safety, as she mentioned

" ...I always watch him drive all the way down the driving I make sure they are okay..."

This theme of loving children was frequently mentioned throughout the interview in succession:

"I really like him to be at home"

"I think the children are the center of the daily life"

"I am very protecting my children try to take care them every detail"

".....if we decided to eat outside...I don't want to just go out without him"

### **Dealing with Missing Someone**

The participant's older boy was a medical student who can come back home every weekend; however, the participant still demonstrated her longing vividly. For instance, she said:

"..... I was missing him a lot so in the first couple days or even the couple months wrote him a lot or called him a lot..."

On the other hand, the participant tried to keep herself busy and in contact with her children to reduce this kind of strong feeling of missing or ....., as she mentioned:

" ..... I think.... um I still missed my boys when they are not home but I just um keep myself busy um and them keep them in contact talk to them keep in touch so you know what's going on... I misses them but in a different way if you think you know I think mother is always think about children"

### **Coping with Anxiety and Denial**

During the first week after her child left, the participant could not accept the reality and tried to deny it, as she mentioned:

"..like the first week he was gone... I still cooked for him..".

In addition, the participant expressed a high level of anxiety about her son's daily life, as shown in the quotations below:

"I worry a lot in the way .. he doesn't live at home I don't know his schedule it keep me worry every minute.. I think about them think how they are doing and wondering about them I have to keep of thinking and I called them all the time.....to find out they are okay..."

### **Seeking Supports**

The participant was a well-educated person who knows how to get support to reduce her suffering. She accommodated her thinking and tried to tell herself such things as:

".....you have to let them go yeah when they are not home doesn't mean they are not safe.....you can't just lived on the past you have to keep on going and doing something... you are feeling very sad it is not healthy..."

In addition, she tried to seek other related information to support herself as she said: "I read the article about

people how hard is that for them to pass those months..... I am kind of to compare my feeling with ladies you know in the articles...."

Furthermore, once the participant found out that her child could take good care of himself, it was also a kind of support to release her worries.

".. in the meantime I know they grew up they handle it pretty well because when I went to his apartment he seems like he his room very nice and neat I think he can take care for himself so I am glad.. he is handling and taking care very well.. he has no problem adjusting to..."

### **Feeling Positive**

Through the supports being sought, the participant felt positive and could accommodate herself to keep going in her normal daily life. An important impact of support was feeling more positive, having less negative emotions, overcoming sadness, having a good feeling inside, feeling glad and happy, feeling encouraged, and able to look on the bright side. These supports make it easier for the mother to pass out of the stage of sadness. Results of the Second Case Analysis

The following themes were elicited via the data analysis, including feeling sadness, loving child, dealing with missing someone, feeling positive, dealing with transition, and feeling relief.

### **Feeling Sad**

The case mentioned that she really felt sad and started crying because of the departure of her son. However, this theme was mentioned only in the beginning of the interview because she had other kinds of positive feeling in her mind that could dilute the sad feelings.

### **Loving Child**

The theme of living child also means the feeling of concerning safety and welfare. Like the first case, this theme was frequently mentioned through the whole interview. She was afraid of losing touch with her child, and she worried about if her child had enough money or if anything bad happened to her child. Furthermore, she wanted her child to have good emotions at that moment of

their separation, as she mentioned

"I didn't want him to have this picture of saying goodbye and me crying and so I tried to make it that time up-beats and .."

She also went to the West to visit her son in order to make sure everything was going smooth.

### **Dealing with Missing Someone**

This case was from the West where her son is living now. She felt, therefore, a little glad because she thought that was a part of her son's roots, but just like she said:

"the down side of that was missing him."

However, on the other hand, she had positive attitudes to face the separation. She recognized that the separation was a part of the normal developmental process in our life. For instance, she said:

"... growing up is a part of life and so I really wanted to have confidence in himself...it was kind of balanced with knowing that he is fine..."

### **Feeling Positive**

This case could accommodate herself pretty good. She had very positive attitudes toward the change of her lives, as she mentioned

" my basic feeling is that experiences should be positive I don't think we should dwell on negative things."

The theme of feeling positive was fully demonstrated in the transcripts since she knew her son was doing things fine,

"..where he's living is very nice so that was positive.."

"he has a really nice girlfriend.. had a wonderful time with his roommate.... he is happier than has ever been in his whole life...."

Furthermore, she thought that the change could be a kind of new life, and the time for rethinking what life was and who she was, as she mentioned

"basically what we did was we spend a lot more time planning our free time and like planning vacation."

"..that's good and I think the relaxation piece the less rapid life now is really neat...."

### **Dealing with Transition**

Since the departure of her son, she got a lot of extra time for herself. She had several plans for her and her husband. They also spent time for rethinking and exploring who they were.

"I though I still think the important thing is to get things in priority and to talk with D (her husband) about what is important to me and to see what's important to him..."

"our reminiscence time now is spending time thinking about how life was and how we were together and we can't go back."

Through the discussion with her husband, they had clear goals for their next stage and current phase of their life.

### Feeling Relieved

This case was one of the women had strong positive feelings toward empty nest. She mentioned that the change was a sense of relief because her son was growing up and became a mature adult, as she mentioned:

"in a way it sort of was a relief because I wondered if I had had this all of this pent-up inside...so probably my relief was maybe just really letting all of my emotions out"

"I guess and a relief, in a way, that he had made it to adulthood"

On the other hand, the relief could come from the reducing of responsibility, such as:

"we didn't even have to worry about a baby sitter"

## Discussions

From the interviews the subjects demonstrated both negative and positive feelings to the empty nest experience. Negative feelings covered sadness, strong longing, wondering, anxieties, and denial. In general, the first participant adjusted herself very well. On the other hand, she gained support from diverse resources; for instance, she tried to find some related articles to support herself. She talked to her coworkers and husband about the situations. She also got positive feedback from her son, and all of this support made her feel better in dealing with the empty nest syndrome. The second case had a little more positive feel-

ing to the empty nest than the first case. Even though the second case still had a little bit sadness missing her son, the feeling of relief made her regain their own new life with her husband.

According to Hinson Langford (1997), supports can be distinguished among four types: emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental support. Based on the interview the first case receives three types of supports, which are everything except instrumental support. Emotional support involves the provision of caring, empathy, love, and trust (House, 1981; Cronenwett, 1985; Krause, 1986). Both subjects received the emotional support from both her coworker and husband to deal with the negative feeling of empty nest.

Additionally, the first case provided informational support for herself. For instance, she tried to find some articles to compare her situations to others. This kind of support could assist one to problem-solve (Cronenwett, 1985). The two cases also gained appraisal support from their self-evaluation of their sons' daily life. Appraisal support can be referred to as affirmational support (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), which involves the communication of information that is relevant to self-evaluation, rather than problem-solving (House, 1981). Each of these three supports was helpful and protective of the participants to assist them in going through the empty nest syndrome with positive feelings.

## Summary and Implications

Both of the cases had the positive attitudes toward the empty nest in different way. Basically, they had diverse family background. However, the same feeling between the two cases was feeling sad (in different levels), loving children, dealing with missing someone, and feeling positive. In contrast, the first case demonstrated some experiences that were different from the second case, which was wondering about herself, coping with anxieties, denial and seeking supports. The second case illustrated the feeling of relief and positive transition that did not appear in the first case.

Empty nest is a complex feeling among women whose

last child left home within a defined period. Mixed feelings were the common experiences between the cases, but in different way, including feeling sadness, feeling relief, wondering about oneself, loving children, dealing with missing someone, dealing with transition, coping with anxieties and denial, seeking supports, and feeling positive. They also had different feelings elicited through the data analysis, such as wondering about herself, dealing with anxiety and denial, and seeking supports for the first case. The second case had the feelings of positive transition and relief. In general, the empty nest gave them mixed feelings, and they could accommodate themselves to achieve a condition of wellness.

There were some implications arising from the study, which are important for nursing research and practice. As a nurse, the researcher believes that in order to be effective as a caring helper, one must understand the meaning of empty nest from women's perspective. The experience of facing the empty nest is individualistic for each woman due to her own biographical and actual factors of life context. This is particularly important for a person who has not experienced the empty nest.

Further empty nest research should define the term "empty nest" more thoroughly for quantitative studies and include numerous variables about mothers' and children's life situations. Additional studies investigating support of Parse human becoming theory are encouraged. Nursing is being sensitive to the other in a way of co-creating patterns supportive of self-exploration and revelation. The findings of this study validate nursing practice in healing by way of being present with a person. The healing intention in this way of being with the other is to illuminate meaning in the experience.

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# 過渡到空巢期：現象學研究

## Transition to the Empty Nest: A Phenomenological Study

賴惠玲

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### 摘 要

本質性研究是一個先驅研究，主要在分析兩位中年婦女面對空巢期的經驗。本研究以帕西斯理論觀點為基礎，以巨觀理論的過程和技術進行資料分析。結果顯示婦女面對空巢期時有複雜的情緒反應，包括憂傷、解放、自我懷疑、真愛、懷念、交戰過渡期、調適焦慮與否定，尋找支持，和正向的感覺。一般而言，空巢期給個案複雜的感覺。研究建議提供給中年婦女的諮詢須著重個別化與個人的情境因子。(慈濟護理雜誌 2002; **1(3)**:88-94)

關鍵語：現象學、空巢期、巨觀理論、帕西斯理論。

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