

Review Ανασκόπηση

Empty-nest-related psychosocial stress: Conceptual issues, future directions in economic crisis

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The empty-nest syndrome is a transitional stage, when middle-aged parents are in the process of encouraging their children to take up their obligations as adults. The empty-nest syndrome is a psychological condition that affects both parents, who experience feelings of grief, loss, fear, inability, difficulty in adjusting roles, and change of parental relationships, when children leave the parental home. This syndrome has gained special interest in a world where the current economic crisis has not only deepened global poverty but also a crisis of values reflected in the dynamic model of the family. The purpose of this review was to appraise the impact of psychosocial stress of the empty-nest syndrome on the parents' well-being through the years, during the current socio-economic crisis, taking into account gender, national and cultural background, socio-demographic and other context factors. We addressed the phenomenon of the "Boomerang Kids" and crowded nests as a result of current financial instability. Finally, we focused on the strategies which the family can employ to retain their resilience, according to the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping Family resilience framework and self-efficacy models. A literature review was conducted using web-based search engines provided by Medline, Scopus, Embase, Cochrane and PsychINFO. The term "empty nest syndrome" was combined with women, men, economic crisis, parenthood, stress, menopause, midlife crisis, Boomerang kids, crowded nests, resilience, self-efficacy, well-being, and cultural differences. Women and men from diverse cultural groups have a different experience of the empty nest, as well as ways of coping. Distress caused by empty nest results in the incidence of symptoms of depression, behavioral symptoms and cognitive impairment. In most of studies, low marital quality and lack of social support affected negatively on a parent's well-being particularly for those experiencing the return of their "Boomerang kids". However, the financial crisis can transform an empty-nest into a "dynamic nest" by community health promotion services. Social support programs should be designed to strengthen family resource and improve family well-being.

Key words: Empty-nest syndrome, family, economic crisis, resilience, well-being.

Introduction

The empty-nest syndrome is a transitional stage experienced by middle-aged parents (45–65 years old) when their children leave home.¹ The percentage of empty-nest elderly (aged <60 years) ranged from 50–78% in different populations.^{2,3} The empty-nest syndrome is characterized by feelings of sadness, loss, fear or difficulty in redefining roles with negative effects such as depression, alcoholism, identity crisis, and marital conflict.⁴ However, there is also evidence that the empty nest can be a positive time for parents, an opportunity for reconnection and a time to rekindle interests.⁵

Despite these conflicting findings, evidence in recent years has shown that transition to the empty nest has undergone dramatic changes. Since the beginning of the global financial crisis in 2009, poverty has not only deepened significantly and unemployment has risen dramatically but also the crisis of values reflected in the dynamic model of family.⁶ However, data are lacking on how empty nest parents redefine their new role in such situations.

The purpose of this first review was to analyze the definitions, historical and theoretical background of empty-nest syndrome through the main components of the parental role. We then proceeded to examine the effect of stress on the emotional health and well-being of empty nest parents taking into account gender, national and cultural differences. Furthermore, we examined the impact of the current economic crisis on empty-nest syndrome and strategies on how the family can retain their resilience.

Material and method

We conducted a review of original articles retrieved in Medline, Scopus, Embase, Cochrane and PsychINFO without time restriction. A literature review was conducted using web-based search engines provided by Medline, Scopus, Embase, Cochrane and PsychINFO. The term “empty-nest syndrome” was combined with the words: women, men, economic crisis, parenthood, stress, menopause, midlife crisis, Boomerang kids, crowded nest, resilience, self-efficacy, well-being, cultural differences.

Definition, history and theoretical background

The term “empty-nest syndrome” owes its origin to the theory of role identity.⁷ It describes the impact that the children’s departure from the parental nest has on the welfare of the parents. According to this theory, which was most popular in the late 50s, the loss of a very important role brings alienation and loneliness and dissatisfaction.⁷ The more roles one has, the less threatening the prospect of empty-nest syndrome.⁸ However, this approach is based on the questionable assumption that the departure of children from the parental home also implies the simultaneous loss of the parental role, an assumption which researchers have generally rejected. It is thought that the parental role can change, or adapt to the new situation, but by no means can it be lost.⁸

The theoretical approach to the role change is associated with the study of Rahe and Holmes who have created a list of 43 events which are considered as sources of stress and require a degree of adaptation.⁹ The child’s departure from parental home is positioned at 23rd place, scoring 29 points.⁹ Consequently, the extent to which the change in the parental role disrupts the life of the parent and requires adjustment can also influence his/her prosperity. The impact of the parental role change on his/her prosperity may be reinforced by other stressful events taking place around the same period of time. For example, retirement may coincide with the stage of empty nest; consequently, the required adjustment effort is intensified with an increased risk of exhaustion of homeostatic mechanisms.⁹

Empty nest during the early 70s affected mainly women and was a strong predictor of depression.¹⁰ In contrast, other researchers found that the experience of empty nest had no effect on well-being. A study in the United States indicated that women empty-nesters showed greater life satisfaction and happier marital relations, in comparison with age-matched women who have a child at home.¹¹ Moreover, the departure of the youngest child, indeed, was generally anticipated with a sense of relief.¹²

The effect of empty nest on the relationship of the couple has long become the object of research. Deutscher¹³ found an improvement in the couple’s relationship following the departure of children from the parental home. In contrast, Glenn¹¹ found

no positive correlation with marital satisfaction of empty nest parents. The explanation given by the researcher was that the parental role is very stressful and most likely responsible for reduced marital satisfaction.

The finding that the experience of the empty nest is not the same for all parents, given that for some it proved to be a highly stressful situation while for others it was anticipated with pleasure, was constituted the thread guide of research in the 80s and 90s. Research interest was focused on establishing the parameters which rendered the experience of the empty nest as a stressful event. Women have spent more time raising the children and as a result they have a stronger bond with them. Because of the salience of the mother role, women experience more stress in their parental role compared to men,¹⁴ who tend to show competitiveness and more tension with sons rather than daughters, while stepchildren may cause greater family pressure compared to biological children.¹⁵ This competitiveness is important because triggers more conflict in the family making the transition to empty nest more difficult. There is a lack of evidence between the relationship with stepchildren and empty nest because of the complexity of the subject. Stepchildren are most likely to leave from their home maybe because they have the option to live with an alternative parent.

Research in the new millennium dealt with the experience of the empty nest in older adults who live alone and had infrequent contact with their children. Older adults who are experiencing the situation of the empty nest suffer from loneliness, physical and mental decline, and less life satisfaction compared to those who have regular contact with their children.¹⁶ Low social support, low socio-economic status, divorce and widowhood were found to be predictors of loneliness and decreased life satisfaction.^{17,18} Depressive symptoms were associated with education level/employment status, negative coping style, low support utilization, and economic status.^{19,20}

Thus, it can be concluded that the main difficulty in clearly defining the effect of empty nest syndrome is that there is no specific pattern that can adequately describe this experience. It may depend on factors that cannot be easily investigated, such as the personality of the individual, psychosocial develop-

ment, interactions of the family system and perception of the parental role.^{14,15,21}

The impact of gender on stress of the empty-nest syndrome

Social approaches agree that gender does not refer to the biological and physiological characteristics that define man and woman, but to their socially constructed roles that have been judged as "appropriate". It is more "natural" and suitable for women as mothers to be more clinging to their child than men as fathers. Men and women have a different experience of the transitional stage of the nest because of their different roles and priorities, as well as ways of coping.

The risk of depression increases when the loss of the parental role coexists with the lack of other roles.^{22,23} Adlemann²⁴ concluded that work acts as a protective factor against changes in the maternal role. However, the researchers showed that while work per se has a significant impact on well-being, the state of the empty nest has no major effect on the well-being of women.^{25,26}

Given that the majority of evidence focuses on women, few studies support that men experience greater difficulty than women in the transitional period of empty nest. The most affected fathers were those with fewer children, higher self-nurturance scores, older in years, and in marriages which evidenced lower quality.²⁷ In traditional families, men relate the departure of children to the loss of their protective paternal role, while women report improvement in well-being and reduction in daily hassles.⁴ Reduced parental role stress following college entrance was significantly related to the quality of parent-adolescent communication and the degree of emotional connectedness (for fathers) present in the family prior to the transition.²⁸ Fathers, as opposed to mothers, considered the children's departure as a step toward encouraging child maturity.²⁹ Fathers' satisfaction at having raised successful children was negatively related to both spouses' levels of perceived stress.³⁰

Few studies have associated psychological symptoms with the physical changes of middle-aged empty nest women, particularly menopausal, even if the timing of the transition of the nest varies widely

in relation to the life of each woman as a mother. The physical symptoms are related to hormonal changes including hot flushes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, and breast tenderness. Dennerstein⁵ found that return of children to home during the menopausal transition was associated with decline of positive mood and decline in the frequency of sexual activity for women. A very recent research showed that empty-nest-related psychological distress is associated with white brain matter lesions and loss of memory in the elderly.^{31,32}

The impact of ethnic and cultural differences in the empty-nest syndrome

Various cultural groups adopt different norms, values, roles, and expectations regarding family types, relationships and ways of coping.^{33–37} Indo-Eastern origin parents have strict principles regarding the appropriate withdrawal time (i.e. for studies, or marriage) and some families maintain the tradition of older male descendants remaining with their wives within the family in order to care for elderly parents.³⁶ In Africa, India, Middle East, and East Asia, older parents are held in very high esteem and it is virtually considered a child's duty to care for and respect them.³⁸ When these principles are not respected, it causes stress, sadness, or shame to the parents. In British families, the departure of children from the family is an indicator of parental success in raising children equipped face the challenges of autonomous adult life.³⁹ Conversely, in south-European families in Italy and Spain, the patriarchal model considers the empty nest as a loss of family heritage.³⁹ Italian mothers react negatively to the empty nest and feel a loss of wellness, while French mothers experience empty nest more positively retaining less traditional maternal roles and recognizing the potential return of children to the family home. There are no published data regarding Greek families and empty nest so far. Greek families have many common cultural characteristics with other southern European countries like Italy or Spain. Greek children for instance, delay their departure from home or parents experience more negative the empty nest syndrome. It is important to investigate more specific empty nest syndrome in Greek families, because even though they have many in common

with southern European countries they also have Mediterranean cultural characteristics.

The return to the empty nest in the era of crisis

The current global economic crisis, which started unexpectedly in 2009, has radically changed the labor market. The crisis has dramatically reduced the personal income, forcing many into unemployment while the number of unstable and fleeting job opportunities has risen without providing, in many cases, any social health insurance. The unemployment rate in the USA reached 10% (October, 2009) while in Europe the situation was even more severe with Greece reaching 27.9%, Spain 26.3% and Italy 13% (Eurostat 2013). It is noteworthy that to date, after all these years of economic crisis, Greece is the only country among the southern European countries that after all these years of crisis continues to be in a precarious economic situation under memorandum obligations.⁴⁰

The “Boomerang kids”

The term “boomerang kids” was first coined by Okimoto and Stegall³⁷ to describe young adults that return to the parental home following residential independence. It is not a rare phenomenon and almost 40% of young adults return to their parental home at least once after self-reliant living.⁴¹ One of the most common reasons for returning home involves financial constraints due to unemployment or low income.^{41,42} A partner break-up or a mental health ailment such as depression or drug/alcohol addiction can also lead to a young adult to return home and may well be the result of job loss in itself.⁴²

We could divide the returners into two groups: young adults and those aged above 30 years. The unemployment rate of young adults, aged 15–24 years, is higher than the general population accounting for 47.4% in Greece and 44.5% in Spain.⁴³ In Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States unemployment rates during the financial crisis for those aged 16 to 24 were notably higher than for the rest of the working population.⁴⁴ Although the financial crisis in Australia was relatively mild, well-being is significantly affected by economic shocks.⁴⁴ However, studies on empty-nesters during the financial crisis are lacking. Over the past decades, certain significant

structural and cultural changes have influenced the course of family life. For instance, the age at which couples choose to marry has risen, higher levels of education are sought and study years are longer and the unstable labor market is making it harder to gain financial independence.⁴⁵ Most young people find themselves in a semi-dependent situation, receiving financial assistance from parents and rendering the prolonged stay in the parental home or the return to home after college a predictable fact.⁴⁶ Despite the lack of specific data, the economic crisis is affiliated with a moral and value crisis, a rise in criminality, nationalism, individualism, exploitation and hostility, making it more unstable and stressful for young people to live on their own.

On the other hand, adults aged above 30 face a more complex situation. Unemployment, in this group tends to be viewed as a failure, thereby adding to the pressure to become earners and leading to feelings of anomie in terms of social roles and age-linked expectations, which are linked to cultural norms.⁴⁷ Adults aged 30–55 years may have children or their own business, a house mortgage or loans, all of which increase stress and anxiety levels. Albeit the return to the parental home has become relatively common nowadays, independence and self-accomplishment remain highly rated by a society that still supports social timetabling norms.⁴⁸ Economic stability and residential independence are crucial to the transition to adulthood. A return to the parental home may question their status as adults. It is noteworthy, that this age group may have had already “boomeranged” once before (e.g. after studies) and only to find themselves again in the same situation.¹

Regardless of their age, the adults return is often accompanied by multiple losses: loss of work, self-esteem and independence leading to feelings of hopelessness, depression and anxiety. Joblessness affects psychological well-being, cognitive performance, motivation and perception of self-worth places a strain on personal relations.⁴⁶ In turn, this affects cohabitation on many levels, with both adults and parents having to adapt to changes and redefine their new role. The return to the nest, due to such a life changing factor as the current economic crisis, may even strengthen and encourage more quality relationships between family members.

The crowded nest

The transition from the empty to the “crowded” nest, as a result of current financial instabilities, is not an easy process. Returning home could compromise the relationship between child and parents and carry the risk of conflict, but at the same time, sharing time may also provide the opportunity for quality relations to develop.⁴⁸ One of the greatest challenges is the redefinition and negotiation of adult roles and identities, the individuation from parents. There are two psychological criteria that characterize the transition to adulthood: the equal relationship with parents, and independent decision making.⁴⁸

Sassler⁴⁸ found that even though the returners strive to establish a relationship in such a way that they are considered as an equal adult and not as a dependent member, parents continue to perceive them as children. Furthermore, even though returners endeavor to make independent decisions, the parents tried to amerce their opinion over decisions about jobs, social life. It is as though the parents recreate childhood patterns to keep them in a dependent state, which inevitably provokes conflict.

Prominent changes, such as sudden unemployment and “boomeranging”, question the adult’s social and personal identity and idea of self, placing returners in a stigmatizing position. There is no specific data on how modern unemployed “boomerang kids” seek to re-establish their social status. According to social studies, potential coping strategies could include self-promotion (making other believe that they are capable), blarney (persuading others that they are likeable), intimidation, exemplary (showing that they are respectable/responsible) and pleading (to be shown pity as they are helpless).⁴⁹

The return into the parental home may also affect the satisfaction with the living arrangement⁴⁸ as well as midlife parental marital satisfaction,¹ poor quality of life and well-being.⁴⁶ Parents risk lack of privacy and autonomy with the children’s return.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the return may originate feelings of disappointment and self-blaming end even question their status as adequate and successful parents. Parents feel that it is their obligation to financially support their boomeranged child.⁴⁵

Although research often considers that “crowded nest” adults cause major problems, such as marital friction, disputes and financial defalcation.⁵⁰ Other findings suggest low levels of conflict between parents and returning young adults.⁴⁵ Only 18% reported having had three or more disagreements.¹⁵ These studies refer to recent decades, but current reality is different. It is not only boomeranged kids that face financial difficulties but also their parents, who may be unemployed or have a reduced pension and no social insurance. Families are hence called upon to overcome vital issues, which leads to greater and deeper conflicts.

Transactional model of stress and coping

According to the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, introduced by Lazarus and Folkman,⁵¹ stress coping can be achieved either by focusing on the problem (control and solve the problem by defying it, seeking a solution, reconsidering) or by focusing on the emotion (avoidance, quitting, acceptance, alcohol/ drug abuse). Which strategy is used will depend on the conditions and individual personality. They can be used separately or combined.

Unemployed “boomerang kids” can relieve stress either by perceiving the problem and trying to acquire new skills that will lead them to employment and independence, e.g. (free online educational seminars, learning a new language etc.) or by accepting the situation, maintaining sangfroid, recognizing the opportunity of renaissance and trying to establish harmonic relationships with the relatives. Accordingly, their families could either assign the house chores (to help children assume responsibility) or either accept the fact that unemployment is not their fault.

Family resilience framework model and recommendations

Family resilience is a term to describe how a family system can rise up, cope with stress and promote mental health. The interactions between the family members can be very dynamic when it is associated with how the members deal with the problems in their lives.⁵² The people change when they successfully cope with life changing events.

Walsh⁵³ developed the family resilience framework model for stress relief, to overcome family crisis and promote growth and functional family unit. It is organized into three determiners: belief system, organizational patterns and communication/problem solving. According to Walsh this framework works as “conceptual map” that helps families to recover from challenging situations, overcome stress and be empowered.

Based on this model, unemployed boomerang kids and their parents need to find the meaning of their crisis and view it as a shared challenge. Keeping a positive view of the facts, will not perhaps, dissipate unemployment, but it can lead to more positive relationships – develop a new social network – and more constructive alternative ideas. Adaptability (flexibility and stability) and connectedness are essential for family resilience. Modern boomerang families need to find a new way of fitting with the current global reality. They have to abandon the age-old standards that are associated with employment, marital age, and starting a family. Stability, which can be established by developing an everyday routine, will balance friction of young adults returning, and create a “safety” net on which individuals can rely.⁵² Open conversations and expression of emotions will enable better communication and help each other’s differences within the family to be respected. The family has to support each other, by trying to find alternatives (e.g. change working field, continue education, increase job opportunities by relocating to another city), all of which can promote innovative business or career ideas, and the setting of goals.

Self-efficacy model

The self-efficacy model⁵⁴ is about one’s belief in his ability to achieve anything. This belief affects the way people, think, feel and behave. According to Bandura “the higher the level of self-efficacy, the higher the performance accomplishments and the lower the emotional arousal”. Self-efficacy model operates as a cognitive mechanism and helps individuals in stress coping and in life changing events.

Families with both parents and boomerang kids unemployed with low expectations regarding their abilities to act effectively in life, will experience frustration and act weakly and passively. On the other

hand, the higher the expectations, the more likely they are to achieve their goals and overcome failure. Unemployed boomeranged kids, can achieve higher self-efficacy by learning from their experiences, observing role models, acquiring verbal skills and developing a more positive somatic-emotional state.

Conclusions and recommendations for future research

The economic crisis has not only deepened global poverty but also the crisis regarding values reflected in a dynamic model of a family. Family resilience is not an easy process in the current changing context of life. The government should pay more attention to community social support-health promotion programs (broad coverage of health services, sense of coherence, maintaining healthy lifestyles and extensive social communication).⁵⁵⁻⁶² Only when these social policies are based on family functions and demands can they provide effective help to members of society, particularly regarding the family's responsibilities in raising children and supporting the elderly.⁶² Modern family acts like the Greek god Proteus: change the status to cope with the crisis and the straits by creating psychosocial ways

of adaption. Stress management aims at strengthening and encouraging the growth of new skills in order that people are better equipped to face these stressful life challenges and to acquire self-reliance and self-efficacy in recommendations that rely on their health and environment. Some practical transactional, family resilience framework and self-efficacy models include: (a) recognition that unemployment is not their fault and that they must have self-worth, (b) open conversations and expressing the emotions which will bring about better communication, (c) maintaining a positive attitude by finding motivation throughout education, online courses, art, hobbies, volunteering and physical exercise, (d) remembering that no one is alone and that they can always ask for help via counseling and psychotherapy. The empty nest can be transformed to a safe nest where family members develop themselves, support each other, and keep strong bonds in every aspect of life. Future enrichment programs should be designed to strengthen family resources and improve their life-long well-being and quality of life.

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Το ψυχοκοινωνικό στρες της άδειας φωλιάς: Εννοιολογικά ζητήματα, μελλοντικές κατευθύνσεις κατά την οικονομική κρίση

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Το σύνδρομο της άδειας φωλιάς αποτελεί ένα μεταβατικό στάδιο, κατά το οποίο γονείς της μέσης ηλικίας βρίσκονται στη διαδικασία της προώθησης των παιδιών τους στην ανάληψη των υποχρεώσεών τους ως ενηλίκων. Το σύνδρομο της άδειας φωλιάς είναι μια ψυχολογική κατάσταση, η οποία επηρεάζει και τους δύο γονείς που ενδέχεται να βιώσουν συναισθήματα λύπης, απώλειας, φόβου,

αβεβαιότητας, δυσκολία στην αναπροσαρμογή των ρόλων τους και τη διαφοροποίηση των σχέσεών τους, όταν τα παιδιά αποχωρούν από την πατρική εστία. Αποκτά ιδιαίτερη σημασία σε έναν κόσμο όπου η τρέχουσα οικονομική κρίση έχει οξύνει την παγκόσμια φτώχεια και έχει οδηγήσει σε κρίση των αξιών, όπως αυτή αντανακλάται στο δυναμικό μοντέλο της οικογένειας. Σκοπός της παρούσας ανασκόπησης είναι να εξετάσουμε τις επιπτώσεις του ψυχολογικού στρες του συνδρόμου στη συναισθηματική υγεία και ευημερία των γονέων, λαμβάνοντας υπόψη το φύλο, το εθνικό και το πολιτιστικό τους υπόβαθρο, κοινωνικο-δημογραφικούς και άλλους παράγοντες πλαισίου μέχρι τη σύγχρονη οικονομική κρίση. Εξετάσαμε τις ψυχοκοινωνικές συνέπειες της επιστροφής στην κενή φωλιά των παιδιών "Boomerang", ως αποτέλεσμα των τρεχουσών οικονομικών ασταθειών. Τέλος, εστιάσαμε στις στρατηγικές με τις οποίες η οικογένεια μπορεί να διατηρήσει την ανθεκτικότητά της, σύμφωνα με το μοντέλο της ανθεκτικότητας και τα μοντέλα αυτο-αποτελεσματικότητας. Διεξήχθη ηλεκτρονική αναζήτηση στο Medline, Scopus, Embase, Cochrane and PsychINFO. Ο όρος empty-nest syndrome συνδυάστηκε με τις λέξεις: women, men, economic crisis, parenthood, stress, menopause, midlife crisis, Boomerang kids, crowded nest, resilience, self-efficacy, well-being, cultural differences. Γυναίκες και άνδρες από διάφορες κοινωνικές και πολιτιστικές ομάδες, έχουν μια διαφορετική εμπειρία της κενής φωλιάς, καθώς και των τρόπων αντιμετώπισής της. Το στρες της άδειας φωλιάς έχει ως συνέπεια την εκδήλωση καταθλιπτικών και συμπεριφορικών συμπτωμάτων και νοητικής εξασθένησης. Σύμφωνα με τις περισσότερες μελέτες, οι διαταραγμένες οικογενειακές σχέσεις –συγκρούσεις, συναισθηματική απόσταση, εχθρότητα– και η ελλιπής κοινωνική υποστήριξη επηρεάζουν αρνητικά την ευημερία των γονέων. Η χρηματοπιστωτική κρίση δύναται να μετατρέψει την άδεια φωλιά σε «δυναμική φωλιά» μέσω της ενδυνάμωσης των υπηρεσιών της κοινότητας. Προγράμματα κοινωνικής υποστήριξης θα πρέπει να σχεδιαστούν για την ενίσχυση των οικογενειακών πόρων και τη βελτίωση της ποιότητας της οικογενειακής ζωής.

Λέξεις ευρετηρίου: Σύνδρομο άδειας φωλιάς, οικογένεια, οικονομική κρίση, ανθεκτικότητα, ευημερία.

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