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The Lived Experience of Iranian Mothers in Empty Nest Period: A Phenomenological Study

Samin Baharshanjani¹ , Marziyeh Dindoost² , Roya Montazeri^{3*} 

1. Department Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran. Email: s.bahar@modares.ac.ir
2. Department of Psychology, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran. Email: m_dindoost@mail.um.ac.ir
3. Corresponding Author, Department of Counseling, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. Email: rmontazeri6@gmail.com

Extended Abstract

Aim

Families evolve through various stages, facing emotional challenges and essential tasks that can lead to conflicts during transitions (Nichols & Schwartz, 2016; Barros et al., 2019). One significant stage is the "empty nest" period, which occurs when children leave home to marry. Families often experience difficulties adapting to these developmental changes, and research on this period shows mixed findings: some studies indicate improved emotional relationships, while others highlight a decline in marital quality (Gorchoff et al., 2008; Bouchard, 2014). Additionally, there is debate over whether parents focus more on themselves or continue to be concerned about their children during this time (Dahl & Dahl, 2013; Hsiao, 2017).

Exploring the empty nest period is crucial due to these contradictory results, especially within the context of Iranian culture. While some research addresses midlife challenges that include this period (Falihat-Pisheh Baboli et al., 2021), there is a notable gap in studies specifically focusing on Iranian mothers' experiences. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how Iranian mothers experience the empty nest phase, with the goal of enhancing understanding and providing insights for families and therapists to improve parent-child and spousal relationships during this time.

Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of mothers regarding the empty nest phenomenon. The study population included all mothers in Tehran whose children had married. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants, resulting in a sample of eight mothers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using the Smith & Osborn (2008) method.

Findings

Based on the results of the study, the experiences of Iranian mothers during the empty nest period were categorized into six main themes: the mother's perception of the child, the child's choice of spouse, the child's departure from the parental home, parenting after the child's marriage, the relationship with the spouse during the empty nest period, and the requirements of aging and old age. These themes were further divided into 21 sub-themes.

main themes	sub-themes
Mother's Perception of the Child	Mother's Responsibility
	Child's Need for Mother's Support
	The Child as the Most Beloved Person in the Mother's Life
	Difference Between Single and Married Children
Child's Spousal Choice	Pre-marriage Concerns
	Advice During and After Marriage

main themes	sub-themes
Child Leaving the Parental Home	Positive Changes in the Child After Marriage
	Negative Changes in the Child After Marriage
	Mother's Emotions
	Mother's Behaviors
	Mother's Thoughts
Parenting After the Child's Marriage	Life Without Children
	Mother's Key Role
	Perceptions of the Daughter-in-Law/Son-in-Law
	Perceptions of the Daughter-in-Law/Son-in-Law
	Negative Aspects of the Relationship with the Daughter-in-Law/Son-in-Law
Relationship with Spouse During the Empty Nest Period	Grandchildren's Place
	Strengthening the Relationship
Requirements of the Aging and Elderly Period	Weakened Relationship
	Physical Dimensions
	Emotional Dimensions

Conclusion

One of the critical life milestones is the empty nest syndrome, a period of sadness and grief experienced by many parents when their children leave home, leading to a redefinition of their self-identity (Pia & Birgid, 2014). This stage in the life cycle is crucial for human psychological development, and the family's inability to readjust and transition through this phase is associated with specific psychological symptoms and physical, cognitive, and social changes (Mansour & Hassan, 2019; Thapa et al., 2018). Since mothers typically assume the primary caregiving role (Pia & Birgid, 2014) and, based on traditional role norms, experience greater distress when their children leave home (Sadok, Sadok & Ruiz, 2013), this study aimed to identify their lived experiences during the empty nest period.

Based on the research findings, it appears that children and matters related to them are the most sensitive issues for parents, especially mothers, and that all stages of parents' lives, including the empty nest period, are organized around this concern. The results of this study can be used by families and therapists to enrich parent-child and spousal relationships during the empty nest period.

Keywords: Empty Nest, Iranian Mothers, Phenomenology.

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting the interviews, participants were informed about the ethical principles of the research, such as confidentiality and recording. After obtaining their consent and explaining their right to withdraw from the interview and the confidentiality of their identities throughout the research process, the interviews began.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest have been reported by the authors in this study.

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