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Brief Report

Depression and the Empty Nest

Lenore Sawyer Radloff[1]
Center for Epidemiologic Studies, National Institute of Mental Health

The "empty nest syndrome" is a depressive reaction in middle-aged mothers attributed to role loss when all her children have grown up and "left the nest." However, analyses of data from a large community mental health survey found that parents (both mothers and fathers) whose children were not living with them were significantly less depressed than other respondents of comparable age, income, occupational role, and marital status. This suggests that depression is not a typical reaction to an "empty nest."

There is a theoretical and observed association between loss and depression (e.g., see Scott & Senay, 1973). The fact that children leaving home may involve a loss for parents leads to the prediction that depression might follow. Clinicians have observed a "temporal although not necessarily causal, relationship between the termination of child rearing and clinical depression" (Deykin, Jacobson, Klerman, & Solomon, 1966). Bart (1971) studied middle-aged women in psychiatric hospitals and found depression to be associated with "the empty nest," particularly in women who had been over-involved in the mother role and who were not employed outside the home. Both Deykin et al. and Bart suggest that depression would be a function both of the loss of the parental role and the lack of other roles (such as employment).

In contrast to these clinical studies, household surveys using self-report mental health measures have found evidence inconsistent with the "empty nest" syndrome. The presence of children in the home has frequently been associated with more symptoms of distress (Bernard, 1975) and lower life satisfaction (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976). Pearlin and Lieberman (1977) found that married people who reported that their last child had left home and/or

[1] Correspondence should be sent to Ms. Lenore Sawyer Radloff, Center for Epidemiologic Studies, National Institute of Mental Health, 5600 Fishers Lane, Room 18C05, Rockville, Maryland 20857.

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married within the past 4 years were (nonsignificantly) lower on a measure of psychological distress (anxiety and depression symptoms) than parents who did not report these events.

A previous report by the author (Radloff, 1975) described similar results from a large mental health survey. The "empty nest" group reported significantly fewer symptoms of depression than those with no children and than those with children living with them. This held true for housewives as well as employed wives and husbands. However, in the same survey, the young (age 18-25) were significantly more depressed than the older respondents. Low income was also strongly associated with more depression. The main purpose of the present report is to determine whether the low depression scores of the "empty nest" group was an artifact, due to greater age and/or higher income. Since preschool children may be particularly stressful for mothers employed outside the home, employment status of the parents and age of youngest child will also be taken into account.

METHODS

The data are from the Community Mental Health Epidemiology Program, which conducted mental health interviews of about 3000 adults (age 18 and up) chosen to be representative of two communities (Washington County, Maryland and Kansas City, Missouri[2]). The 20-item depression scale (The CES-D Scale) used here has been shown to be a reliable and valid index of depressive symptomatology (Radloff, 1977). The higher the score, the more reported symptoms of depression.

The respondents were classified by parental status (no children; not live with children; live with children, youngest age less than 6; live with children, youngest age 6 or older) and by sex/occupation (employed males, employed females, housewives; the unemployed and students were omitted due to small numbers). The measure of income was total household income, in six broad categories. Those age 65 and over were omitted to avoid confounding of the occupational status variable (housewives age 65 and over usually reported themselves as housewives, while those who had been employed reported themselves as retired). The present analyses include only married whites, age 18-64, for whom all relevant data were available (a total N of 1890).

[2] Epidemiologic Field Station, Greater Kansas City Mental Health Foundation, Kansas City, Missouri, and Johns Hopkins Training Center for Public Health Research, Johns Hopkins University, Hagerstown, Maryland.

RESULTS

Table I shows the relationship of depression to parental status and sex/occupation for respondents aged 25-64. The analysis of covariance (controlling for income) resulted in significant main effects with no interaction. Tests within each main effect (and the pattern of the means) suggested that the effect of sex/occupation was due to the low scores of the working husbands, with no difference between housewives and working wives. The effect of parental status was due to the low scores of the "empty nest" (not live with children) group. The effects of parental status were very similar for working husbands and wives, who had a tendency to be more depressed if their children were preschool age rather than older. The housewives were a little different, with highest scores among those with no children and slightly higher scores for those with older as compared with younger children. However, the interaction was not close enough to significance ($.19 < p < .20$) to make these trends reliable. Note that only 18% of the married women without children were *not* employed outside the home.

Table I. Average Depression Scores (CES-D) by Sex/Occupation and Parental Status: Married Only, Whites Only, Age 25-64

Parental status	Sex/occupation					
	Male worker (MW)		Female worker (FW)		Housewife (HW)	
	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$
No children (NC)	83	6.73	63	8.54	14	10.64
Not live with children (NLW)	163	5.04	99	7.77	104	8.08
Live with pre-school child (LW < 6)	214	8.76	66	10.33	157	8.99
Live with older child (LW >6)	343	6.68	188	9.01	193	9.81

Analysis of covariance

Covariate (income) $p > .01$

Sex/occupation × parental status $p > .19$

Sex/occupation $p < .01$

Parental status $p < .01$

Pairwise: MW vs. FW $p < .01$; MW vs. HW $p < .01$; FW vs. HW $p > .85$

NC vs. NLW	$p < .05$
NC vs. LW < 6	$p > .60$
NC vs. LW > 6	$p > .96$
NLW vs. LW < 6	$p < .01$
NLW vs. LW > 6	$p < .01$
LW < 6 vs. LW> 6	$p > .14$

Table II. Average Depression Scores (CES-D) by Sex/Occupation and Parental Status: Married Only, Whites Only, Age 18-24

Parental status	Sex/occupation					
	Male worker (MW)		Female worker (FW)		Housewife (HW)	
	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$
No children (NC)	27	6.89	33	11.27	8	12.25
Live with pre-school child (LW < 6)	42	10.29	25	13.04	68	11.91
Analysis of covariance	Covariate (income) $p > .14$					
	Sex/occupation × parental status $p > .61$					
Sex/occupation $p < .05$			Parental status $p > .29$			
Pairwise: MW vs. FW $p < .02$						
MW vs. HW $p < .10$						
FW vs. HW $p > .82$						

Table II shows the results for the young (18-24) respondents omitted from Table I. They had, on the average, much higher depression scores than the older group. As previously noted, there were none in the empty nest category. There were also only three (one in each sex-occupation cell) with children aged 6 or more; these have been omitted from Table II.[3] In this age group the main effect of parental status was not significant, although the average depression scores of the working parents were higher than those of the workers with no children. The main effect for sex/occupation was significant, with male workers lowest, and female workers and housewives not different from each other.

Tables III and IV show the analyses separately for age groups 25-39 and 40-64. In the age 25-39 group there were only 13 respondents (including one cell with N of 1) in the "not live with children" group; these have been omitted from Table III (see footnote 3). Their average depression scores were not high, even though some of these younger parents may be living away from their children for reasons other than the normal "empty nest." In the age 40-64 group there were only 44 respondents (including one cell with N of 1) with children aged under 6; these were omitted from Table IV (see footnote 3). Their average depression scores were somewhat higher than the scores for those with older children.

[3] For purposes of confidentiality, data not shown for cells representing fewer than three cases; for statistical reasons, they are omitted from analysis of covariance.

Table III. Average Depression Scores (CES-D) by Sex/Occupation and Parental Status: Married Only, Whites Only, Age 25-39

Parental status	Sex/occupation: Male worker (MW) N	$\bar{X}$	Female worker (FM) N	$\bar{X}$	Housewife (HW) N	$\bar{X}$
No children (NC)	43	6.86	37	10.19	5	6.80
Live with preschool child (LW < 6)	183	8.97	65	10.14	145	8.89
Live with older child (LW > 6)	112	8.27	85	9.48	81	10.17
Analysis of covariance	Covariate (income) $p < .01$					
	Sex/occupation × parental status $p > .53$					
Sex/occupation	$p < .04$		parental status $p > .66$			
Pairwise: MW vs. FW	$p < .01$					
MW vs. HW	$p > .74$					
FW vs. HW	$p > .23$					

Table IV. Average Depression Scores (CES-D) by Sex/Occupation and Parental Status: Married Only, Whites Only, Age 40-64

Parental status	Sex/occupation: Male worker (MW) N	$\bar{X}$	Female worker (FW) N	$\bar{X}$	Housewife (HW) N	$\bar{X}$
No children (NC)	40	6.60	26	6.19	9	12.78
Not live with children (NLW)	156	5.17	94	7.70	103	7.80
Live with older child (LW < 6)	231	5.91	103	8.62	112	9.55
Analysis of covariance	Covariate (income) $p < .01$					
	Sex/occupation × parental status $p > .17$					
Sex/occupation	$p < .01$		Parental status $p < .03$			
Pairwise: MW vs. FW	$p < .04$		NC vs. NLW $p > .14$			
MW vs. HW	$p < .01$		NC vs. LW > 6 $p > .89$			
FW vs. HW	$p < .04$		NLW vs. LW > 6 $p < .01$			

In age 25-39 (Table III) the main effect for parental status was not significant. The effect for sex/occupation was significant, with the female workers higher than the male workers and slightly higher than the housewives. Although the interaction was not significant, the high scores of the childless female workers seemed to account for most of the difference. The workers (male and female) had slightly higher scores if their children were aged less than 6 (as compared with older children), while this was reversed for the housewives. However, this pattern was too slight to be statistically reliable.

The age 40-64 group (Table IV) is probably the purest test of the "empty nest" issue, since the nonnormative groups (younger "empty nest" and older parents of preschool children) have been omitted. The effect of parental status was significant, mainly due to the higher scores of those living with their children compared with the "empty nest" group. Those with no children were not significantly different from the empty nest group, despite the high scores of the few childless housewives. (Note that the significance tests were affected by adjustments for the covariate, income. The housewives with no children and the empty nest housewives had lower income than the other groups, while the working wives living with children had higher than average income). The main effect for sex/occupation was significant and all three groups differed from each other. The interaction was not significant, but was large enough ($.17 < p < .18$) to consider the patterns: all the male workers had low scores; the female workers' scores were moderately low, but increased from no children to "empty nest" to live with children; the housewives with no children had quite high scores, those living with children were next highest (and higher than any of the working groups); the empty next housewives were lowest (and no more depressed than the empty nest working wives).

DISCUSSION

Most conservatively stated, the results of this study indicate that "empty nest" parents were *not* more depressed than those living with children nor than those who never had children. If anything, they were *less* depressed. Furthermore, this was as true for women who were "only" housewives as it was for wives (and husbands) employed outside the home. Adjustments for income, age of children and age of parents did not change this result. There was also some hint in these data that young married women (age 18-24 and 25-39) employed outside the home were slightly *more* depressed than housewives, particularly if they had preschool children. The patterns for those with no children (higher for housewives age 18-24; lower for housewives age 25-39) should be interpreted with caution, because there were very few housewives without children. Older people (age 40-64) with preschool children had higher depression scores than

those with older children, but the significance of this was not tested, due to small numbers.

The results of this study are in agreement with other survey data cited in the introduction. However, all these surveys are cross-sectional, measuring psychological symptoms at only one time. Longitudinal data, comparing distress before and after the last child leaves home would give more clear-cut evidence of the effects of the "empty nest."

The present study cannot be interpreted as demonstrating that parents never become depressed at the time when children leave home. However, it does suggest either that such depressions are rare or of short duration, or that they are so severe as to require hospitalization. On the average, both mothers and fathers living in the community are relatively happy people after their children have left home.

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