

# Empty-nest and Boomerang Children: Impact on Marital Satisfaction and Wellbeing of mid-aged Women

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**Abstract**—Empty nest syndrome is associated with feelings which parents experience when their children leave home. A growing number of young people are failing to launch into self-sufficiency, a characteristic of adulthood recognized by most of the cultural groups. There by returning to their original space of living. This event may affect their parent's life in various ways. Empty nest and boomerang adult children may be a source of emotional and instrumental support for older parents, but also these can be a source of conflict and stress for them. So to get a clear perception on the above issue the present review attempt to find out the impact of children leaving (empty-nest) and returning home (boomerang) on marital satisfaction and wellbeing of women during their mid-life. Research from past 50 years on this area has been reviewed, analyzed and summarized in this review. The review results showed that children leaving home (empty nest) positively influences marital satisfaction of women, but it negatively influences their wellbeing. The result also showed that Children returning home (boomerang) has a negative influence on marital satisfaction and wellbeing of women.

**Keywords:** Empty-nest syndrome, Boomerang child, marital satisfaction, wellbeing, midlife.

## Introduction

The life course perspective describes psychological development in terms of life shifting events. Parents enter the empty nest phase when their last child leaves home to attain self-sufficiency in the world. Although both men and women experience this transition, it has been painstaking uniquely stressful for women since it entails the loss of the major components of the mother's role, a role which has traditionally been a central focus of many women's lives and identities. Women in this phase experience varying degrees of intensity of similar life challenges (Adelmann et al, 1989; Barnett, 1986; diScalea, 2012). These challenges include marital issues, career or employment, physical body and appearance, spiritual direction, end of life issues, midlife crisis, value

changes, ego-resiliency, identity, and sustaining happiness or subjective well-being.

The traditional life stage development of empty nest mothers has been impacted by the recent phenomenon of boomerang children: young adult men and women who leave home to make it on their own in the world, but fail and ultimately return home. The primary reasons for this failure, or retrograde life course development, include a loss of job, a relationship break-up, or financial difficulties, so that living at home with a parent becomes their best or only option. Throughout the period from the 1980 to 2015, the number of young adults living under their parents' roofs has doubled (Parker, 2012), causing disruption in the normal life course transition of their empty nest mothers. Instead of grappling with exigent personal issues, mothers must regress with her boomerang child, putting her plans for rediscovery and advancement on hold. She must re-examine her work as a preparatory agent whose charge failed to launch, regroup and re-evaluate her child rearing acumen, and spend time taking care of the unfinished business of child rearing and promoting self-sufficiency.

## Objectives of the study

1. To study whether children leaving home (empty nest) has any impact on the marital satisfaction of women during midlife years.
2. To study whether children leaving home (empty nest) has any impact on the well being of women during midlife years.
3. To study whether children retuning home (Boomerang Child) has any impact on the marital satisfaction of women during midlife phase.

4. To study whether children returning home (Boomerang Child) has any impact on the wellbeing of women during midlife phase.

#### **Empty nest syndrome; impact on marital satisfaction**

A prime concern of research has been the effect of the empty nest transition on the marital relationship. This is important as marital satisfaction is likely to be a key determining factor of overall happiness (Glenn, 1975). Predictors of what can lead to a satisfactory marital relationship have been viewed as elusive (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983). A good functioning definition of marital satisfaction might be, “the subjective feelings of happiness, satisfaction and pleasure experienced by a spouse when considering all current aspects of his [or her] marriage, from much satisfaction to much dissatisfaction” (Harkins, 1978).

A survey study of 199 fathers and 265 mothers in Washington and Idaho, researchers found the participants regarded the post-parental period as satisfying as earlier periods, especially with regard to financial worries, though the women did report concern with their physical health and increased loneliness (Axelson, 1960). Another study found the empty nest transition serve to increase women’s enjoyment of time with their partners, but not via an increase in the quantity of that time (Gorchoff, John, & Helson, 2008). Clay (2003) found the empty nest phase was a time for parents to reconnect with one another, pursue interests that had been for years on hold. Children who leave home and make it on their own as self-sufficient adults have been shown to facilitate a relationship with their parents that is fuller, more mature and emotionally meaningful (Fingerman, 2001). Respecting the general quantitative data derived from these studies, more in depth qualitative works needs to be done to explore what works and what doesn’t work to enhance marital satisfaction during the empty nest phase.

The few longitudinal studies that have investigated marital satisfaction across middle age have varied widely in design, measurement, and findings. In a qualitative study conducted by Weishau & Field (1988), marital contentment was coded from transcripts of interviews with 17 couples throughout adulthood; the most common pattern of change included increased marital satisfaction after children left home. A study (Van Laningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001) used panel data from a sample spanning ages 17 to 55 at the first assessment and found evidence for a general pattern of decreased marital satisfaction regardless of marital duration. A third study (Vaillant, 1993) assessed couples from their 30s and 40s to their 60s and 70s and found little change. In contrast to these long-term studies, a few short-term longitudinal studies have found that the transition to an empty nest has positive effects on marital satisfaction (Menaghan, 1983; Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005; White & Edwards, 1990).

#### **Empty nest and wellbeing**

Early findings on the empty nest reported this phase of life related to a “syndrome” whereby parents, especially mothers, suffered with grief, sadness, and depressive symptoms. Further, many women revealed greater anxiety, guilt, and stress over concern with their children’s well-being during this transitional stage. The women who were most vulnerable to this syndrome felt they were losing their pivotal role as mother and they lacked other important life roles to identify with (Raup & Myers, 1989).

Devries et al. (2008) suggest middle age is “a more mixed picture of both gains and losses for parents as they move through the midlife transition”. It is a time where many take appraisal of their life’s accomplishments to this point and begin planning and perhaps rethinking what the future holds both individually and as a couple. There is a common expectation that midlife is unpleasant and unwelcome. One significant event that mostly occurs during midlife is when children leave home and go away from parents. Most couples approach the empty nest phase at a time when they are also hitting middle age. Factors that affect individuals in midlife can complicate the added change of the children leaving the home.

Aspects of the empty nest stage include: attachment and separation, subjective wellbeing, marital satisfaction, employment, finances, identity and individuation within cultural and ecological framing. Previous studies have shown that empty nest mothers experience a wide range of emotional and psychological challenges when their last child leaves home and strikes out on their own. These symptoms range from severe separation anxiety and sense of loss to feelings of freedom and liberation (Ajay 2004). The conception of the empty nest phenomenon as a time of stress, anxiety, and depression traces back to Freud. Freud’s notion of melancholia was rooted in replacing a loved person who died or is lost (Freud, 1917). Early psychoanalysts described observations of depressed women, citing the cause to be the loss of parenthood when children left home, leaving the mother with an empty nest. This notion was affirmed in a seminal study of 16 hospitalized middle-aged women (median age 59 years), where the empty nest syndrome was devised to be the “temporal association of clinical depression with the cessation of child rearing” (Klerman & Soloman, 1999)..

#### **Impact of children return home on marital satisfaction**

Home returning behaviours are often affected by other life course transitions, including changes in economic resources, such as unemployment; changes in family circumstances, such as partnership breakdown; or deterioration in the physical or mental health of the child (South and Lei, 2015). New economic constraints, such as job loss or income reduction, increase the need for intergenerational support and are related to children’s decision to move back to the parental home (Kleinepiper et al., 2017; Sandberg-Thoma et al., 2015; Smits et

al., 2010; Wiemers, 2014). Economic difficulties and temporary instability prompt returns to the parental home, particularly among young adults who leave education to find a position in the labour market (Stone et al., 2011, 2014).

Similarly, union dissolution may prompt a return to the parental home as a possible solution to economic, housing, and emotional problems arising from the event (Arundel and Lennartz, 2017; Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen, 2008; Guzzo, 2016; Michielin et al., 2008; South and Lei, 2015). Emotional distress and mental health problems per se make the transition to adulthood more difficult and are correlated with boomerang moves (Sandberg-Thoma et al., 2015).

For parents these events in a child's life may be distressing in themselves, regardless of whether or not they result in the child's return home. The notion of linked lives suggests that parents tend to suffer when they see their children suffer, and previous studies have indicated that children's exposure to problematic and stressful experiences are associated with a decline in parents' well-being and mental health (Elder et al., 2003; Fingerma n et al., 2012; Greenfield and Marks, 2006; Kalmijn and De Graaf, 2012; Knoester, 2003; Milkie et al., 2008; Pillemer et al., 2017). It has been also shown that job loss and family break-ups are factors that exacerbate the negative consequences of living together on parents' well-being, life satisfaction and marital relationship quality (Aquilino and Supple, 1991; Copp et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2016).

Prior research on the association between coresidence with adult children and parental marital quality is mixed, but we expected living with a grown child to be negatively associated with marital quality (P. Nag, 2011). The current study did lend some support to this idea; coresiding with a grown child was associated with lower marital quality but only in 2008 and more so for women. In 2013, living with a child was not associated with marital quality. This finding suggests that coresidence with adult children may be detrimental to parental marital quality, but only under certain conditions.

### **Impact of boomerang child on wellbeing**

In 2008, before the onset of the Great Recession, most grown children were not living with their parents in the United States. However, in 2013, many American families were still struggling to rebound from the economic and financial setbacks of the Great Recession (Desilver, 2014) and social trends towards enlarged co residence with adult children were capturing attention of the popular press (Kingskade, 2013). In fact, the proportion of adult children living at home has continued to increase despite the end of the recession (Fry, 2015), suggesting a shift in cultural norms as well as economic trends that induced co residence.

Returns to the parental home may be especially stressful for parents, when they result in a disruption of the normative empty nest. Previous studies have shown that parental life

satisfaction increases as adult children leave the family nest and achieve adult status. A reverse (negative) effect might be exerted by adult children refilling an empty nest. Home returning may thus be related to a decline in parents' QoL to a greater extent, or only, when all other children have also left home. However, some parents may welcome adult children returning home and enjoy sharing experiences and daily activities under the same roof. Boomerang children may be an important source of support and company for parents living in an emptynest, which would suggest a positive association between returns in the parental home and parents' QoL (S. Mohapatra 2013).

Other sources also point to changing norms regarding coresidence with adult children in India. In a nationally representative sample of emerging adults and their parents, respondents were asked to report the most important criteria for becoming an adult. Only 5% of parents (and 0% of emerging adults) reported "affecting out of the house" as an important criterion for adulthood (Shab, 2012). This is in stark contrast to norms from prior decades, where home leaving was seen as a key marker of adulthood (Hogan, 1980). A shift in norms regarding coresidence may help explain why coresidence and marital quality were not associated in 2013 in the current study.

Additionally, changing coresidence norms may also influence marital functioning through each parent's own wellbeing. Researchers have found that children's achievements and problems shape parental self-evaluations and wellbeing in midlife (Cichy 1996). Parents' sense of "how children turned out" appears to influence parental mental health and could be connected with marital functioning as well. It may be the case that broader social acceptance of intergenerational coresidence allows parents to make more positive attributions regarding their own children's coresidence, which in turn may buffer parents from decrements to their own self-evaluations and wellbeing at midlife.

### **Empty Nest and boomerang child: Crisis or Opportunity?**

It has been found out that couples experiencing empty nest syndrome face challenges and discord in marital satisfaction and adjustment (Deutscher, 1969; Blood & Wolfe, 1960). However, changing marital satisfaction over time has been investigated extensively by cross-sectional studies resolute on the entire course of marriage and by longitudinal studies of the early years of marriage. Cross-sectional research has normally found that older couples whose children have left home reported higher marital satisfaction than younger couples with children at home (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983; Kapinus & Johnson, 2003; Rollins & Cannon, 1974). Similarly, retrospective research has generally found that older couples statement that their marital satisfaction has increased relative to their earlier child-rearing years (Deutscher, 1964; Mackey & O'Brien, 1999).

Family scholars have long been interested in determinants of marital quality over the life course. Some early cross-sectional research on marital quality suggested a U-shaped pattern, with highest marital quality in the earliest years of marriage, declines for the duration of childrearing years, and an upswing in marital quality when children leave the home (Orbuch, House, Mero, & Webster, 1996; Peterson, 1990; Rollins & Feldman, 1970). However, longitudinal studies of marital quality have reported inconsistent findings; most point to a decline in marital quality after the early years of marriage but report either stability or declines in marital quality in the middle and later years of marriage (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; C. O. Vaillant & G. E. Vaillant, 1993; Van Laningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). Further, not all studies have measured parenting transitions as a key feature in marital quality trajectories (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005).

A few studies of the transition to an empty nest have found increased marital quality after children have left the home (Bouchard, 2014; Umberson et al., 2005). Specifically, studies have found marital satisfaction to be higher in the empty nest phase compared to the launching phase, when children are preparing to leave the home (Gorchoff, John, & Helson, 2008; Hagen & DeVries, 2004; White & Edwards, 1990) and these effects persist after the children left the home (Gorchoff et al., 2008). Scholars have suggested that this increase in marital satisfaction was driven by an increased enjoyment of time with partners (Gorchoff et al., 2008) and decreased work-family conflict (Erickson, Martinengo, & Hill, 2010). Further, the transition to an empty nest may also reduce opportunities for parent-offspring conflict (Ward & Spitze, 2007), which may in turn benefit the parental marital relationship via reductions in daily stress and irritations.

However, some scholars have reported that transitions in and out of coresidence with adult children were not associated with declines or improvements in marital quality (Ward & Spitze, 2004; 2007). Ward and Spitze (2004) described increases in time spent with spouses when children left the nest and decreases in time spent if children returned to the home, but no alliance between coresidence with adult children and marital quality or number of marital disagreements.

Notably, studies of marital quality and offspring coresidence have often focused on parental gender. Such studies reported stronger associations between coresidence with adult children and marital quality for mothers (Bouchard, 2014). Other studies focused solely on mothers during coresidence transitions, as mothers are hypothesized to have higher levels of engagement with children and a greater share of parenting responsibilities. In totalling to parent gender, it is important to consider how intergenerational coresidence patterns are situated in a broader social and historical context.

It may be the case that the child problems play a role in parent's marital quality as well. Previous studies have suggested that even one child suffering life problems predict

poorer well-being among parents. Child problems are also linked to greater parental negative affect and greater family relationship strain. Moreover, among parents who report a large number of child problems, married parents experience poorer parent-child relationship quality than do single parents (Greenfield, 2006), suggesting that family dynamics may be especially disrupted in these families. Having children who suffer problems in the home may exacerbate negative feelings and diminished well-being. As such, when a child coresides due to problems, parents may experience poorer marital quality.

### Findings of the review

The result showed that empty nest syndrome has a positive influence on marital satisfaction of women. The result showed increased marital satisfaction after children have left home may be related to lessened role strain; that is, partners who no longer have children at home may engage in few roles and engage in those roles less intensely, freeing up time and energy that can be invested in the marriage. Although role engagement may have both costs and benefits, the costs may outweigh the benefits during early middle age, when role responsibilities, along with their associated stresses and time demands, tend to peak. Therefore, the transition to an empty nest may positively affect marital satisfaction by allowing couples more time together, by improving the quality of that time, or both.

The result also revealed that empty-nest syndrome has negative influence on wellbeing of women. The determining factor of negative effect of empty nest syndrome can be attributed to the person's individual perception of the event. Many mothers experiencing empty nest experience severe depression, separation anxiety and sense of loss to feelings of freedom and liberation. Women most vulnerable to these were the ones who felt they were losing their pivotal role as a mother. Women, who were widowed, separated, divorced and unmarried. Many even experienced identity crisis and became heavily dependent on alcohol.

The result revealed that boomerang children negatively influence marital satisfaction and wellbeing of mid-aged women. The attributed factor behind the negative influence is that boomerang children cause disruption in the normal life course transition of their empty nest mothers. Instead of grappling with exigent personal issues, mothers must regress with her boomerang child, putting her plans for rediscovery and advancement on hold. She must re-examine her work as a preparatory agent whose charge failed to launch, regroup and reevaluate her child rearing acumen, and spend time taking care of the unfinished business of child rearing and promoting self-sufficiency. When a boomerang child returns home, many parents internally feel a sense of guilt, shame, resentment and anger, reflected from the local culture and/or societal group to which the family belongs. The resulting dependency requires that adult roles be renegotiated between parent(s) and child, where broken bonds must be reformed in a new way. This

renegotiation includes practical exigencies such as living space, curfew hours, household chores, and sharing expenses. Marital intimacy and satisfaction can be adversely impacted and in some cases boomerang kids bring children of their own back into the parental home, or boomerang grandchildren which creates financial burden on parents, which in return affect their overall wellbeing.

## CONCLUSION

The present review wants to analyze the impact of children leaving home and children returning home on marital satisfaction and wellbeing of mid-aged women. The review results showed that children leaving home (empty nest) positively influences marital satisfaction of women, but it negatively influences their wellbeing. The result also showed that Children returning home (boomerang) has a negative influence on marital satisfaction and wellbeing of mothers.

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