

A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of Chinese Empty Nest Couples on Their Role Change

Cheuk Yan Chu, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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Abstract

Purpose: In family life cycle theory, each developmental stage means a crucial transition to individual, marriage, and family. However, when discussing on the family life cycle, many empirical studies in Hong Kong only focus on the early stages related to raising children. Studies in the West reviewed that parents in empty nest stage experience identity crisis (i.e. loss of major parental role) and mixed emotions. Maladaptive to role adjustment may result in poorer psychological well-being or even empty nest syndrome. Mental health issue is no longer just an individual focused talk. Instead, we should also instill the aspects of family system and family developmental stages. This study aims to enrich the knowledge on empty nest couple's role change experiences in Chinese community. To provide new perspectives to our social service implementation and policy making. **Methods:** A qualitative case study approach was adopted. Six pairs of empty nest couples were recruited. Face-to-face, zoom and semi-structure interview were used. Both individual and couple interview were adopted depending on the interview location. Emotion cards were also applied during the interviews. **Results:** The interviewed empty nesters reported 'Gain' from more private and carefree moments. They also experience the process of 'Loss' and 'Restoration' towards the major parental role, which could be illustrated by the concept of 'Dual Process Model' from Stroebe & Schut (1999). Lastly, three protective factors (i.e., acceptances, marital companionship, and emotional bond with children) were found for empty nesters to restore their parental role loss. **Conclusion:** This study could provide preliminary information for the family life cycle studies in later stages in Chinese community. Some insights to the Chinese elderly services practices and policy making were discussed.

Keywords: Empty Nest Stage, Role Change Experiences, Protective Factors, Dual Process Model, Family Life Cycle, Elderly Services, Hong Kong

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Introduction

Hill and Rodgers (1964) suggested the family development perspective and proposed family life cycle which emphasizes the significance of expanding awareness on the individual, marital and family development (Nichols & Pace-Nichols, 1993). Rollins & Feldman (1970) had modified and classified the family life cycle into eight stages. It is assumed that each stage as a crucial transition to family and individual development, and with its own marital and parental roles' developmental tasks (Hill and Rodgers, 1964; Nichols & Pace-Nichols, 1993). Stage (VII) 'Families in the Middle Years' (Empty nest stage) is seen as a huge transition and psychosocial changes to the couple, since they need to face individual, marital, and parent-child relationship adjustment (Kumar, 2015; Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009; Nichols & Pace-Nichols, 1993).

According to Nichols & Pace-Nichols (1993), family life cycle theory believes that the family fulfillment is according to the level of integration with specific parental role changes. In empty nest stage, couple need to keep the marital closeness, to realign the family relationships, to support partner in experiencing the fear towards loss of parental roles and prepare for the grief of losing partners in future (Nichols & Pace-Nichols, 1993).

It is reported that numbers of the empty nesters would suffer from Empty Nest Syndrome (ENS). Many studies found that the core reason leading to ENS is the loss of major parental role. An overview of ENS study from Badiani & Sousa (2016) revealed that parents in empty nest stage face the identity crisis and need to have alternative roles to fulfill. The maladaptive role change experiences will lead to anxiety and depression which is labeled as ENS, and negatively affect parents' psychological well-being.

The empirical studies have provided significant proof on the importance of role change in empty nest stage. This study decides to focus and have further exploration on the empty nest couples' role change experiences.

Though not all the parents in empty nest stage experiences negative emotions or ENS, studies identified that they experience mixed emotions in this role adjustment process (Badiani & Sousa, 2016; Kumar, 2015). Some specific experiences in empty nest stages have also been mentioned in related studies, such as the worries on social and economic support, fears of being rejected by children, challenges on the marital satisfaction and together with career and physical challenges (Badiani & Sousa, 2016; Kumar, 2015; Nichols & Pace-Nichols, 1993). The limitation on current studies is that the elaboration of emotion experiences in empty nest stages is fragmented and limited. This study is going to preliminarily explore the experiences of empty nest couple in the view of what they retell their stories with related emotion experiences.

Lastly, in Hong Kong context, our studies mostly discuss on the experiences of parenthood in the earlier family life stages in raising children. However, as searched in the research engine, there are rare Hong Kong research discuss on the parents' experiences in view of the later family life stages. Hong Kong is now facing an aging population problem. Together with the aging phenomenon, we can project that more empty nesters will appear in Hong Kong.

Though numerous of western studies have discussed on the empty nest issue, there are social and cultural differences to Hong Kong empty nest condition (Kumar, 2015; Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). This study would like to enrich the knowledge on Chinese empty nest couple's role change experiences and provide new perspectives to our social service

implementation on frontline social work practice and policy making.

Methodology

Research Design

This was an exploratory nature study. Qualitative case study approach was adopted to obtain primary and subjective information from the interviewees. Both face-to-face interviews and zoom-interviews had been used during the pandemic. Narrative and semi-structure interview approach were used. To facilitate the sharing of stories, emotion cards from Resculpt Centre For Personal & Relational Reconstruction (2016) were applied during the interviews.

Sampling and Participants

The sampling had been collected from different social network groups with a recruitment poster. Participants were recruited in purposive sampling. This study recruited six pairs of empty nest couples, whose children had departed from home for at least one year but not more than ten years.

Participants with confounding factors were excluded (i.e., Parents diagnosed with serious physical illness and mental illness; Children diagnosed with special needs). Each pair of participated couple had read and signed the consent form before starting the interview.

Procedures

Each individual interview was held approximately 75 minutes. Each couple interview was held approximately 150 minutes. All interviews had been audio-recorded and processed with interview guided questions. According to the interviewees' responses, probing questions had been asked.

Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach had been applied. All interviews were transcribed and processed to both inductive open coding and deductive theoretical coding. The links between patterns were further explored and conceptualized into main themes.

Interviewees' Demographic Data

	Couple 1 - P		Couple 2 - T		Couple 3 - F		Couple 4 - H		Couple 5 - I		Couple 6 - G	
	Husband PM	Wife PF	Husband TM	Wife TF	Husband FM	Wife FF	Husband HM	Wife HF	Husband IM	Wife IF	Husband GM	Wife GF
Age	62	60	61	59	71	64	58	60	65	57	70	67
Education level	Degree	High Dip	Secondary	Secondary	Master	Degree	Secondary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary	Master	Degree
Work status	Retired	Retired	Working	Working	Working	Housewife	Retired	Retired	Retired	Retired	Retired	Retired
FOO order	6 th / 7	1 st / 3 *1 st DA	4 th / 5	1 st / 4 *1 st DA	Only child	2 nd / 3	6 th / 8	5 th / 5	3 rd / 4	5 th / 5	2 nd / 3	4 th / 5
No. of children	1 son (aged 25)		1 son (aged 34)		2 daughters (aged 32 & 26)		1 son (aged 34) 1 daughter (aged 29)		2 daughters (aged 30 & 27)		1 son (aged 37) *With 2 grandchildren (aged 7 & 3)	
Empty Nest lengths	6 years		4 years		1.5 years		1.5 year		1 year		10 years	
Reasons of children departure	Overseas study		Married		1 st daughter: Married 2 nd daughter: Work overseas		1 st son: married 2 nd daughter: work overseas		Married		Married	
Lengths of couple's marriage	31years		36years		40years		36 years		35 years		44years	
Subjectively experienced difficulties during the Empty Nest stage?	x	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	x
Subjectively experienced Empty Nest syndrome?						✓				✓		

Figure 1: Interviewee's Demographic Data

As shown in Figure. 1, the age of recruited interviewees was between 57 - 71. Four interviewed couples had 1 - 4.5 years of empty nest experiences, while two interviewed couples had 6 and 10 years of empty nest experiences. The major reason for children's departure was got married, while the other reasons were study or work overseas. Within the participants, two of the parents subjectively reported to have empty nest syndrome.

Findings and Discussion

Finding 1: Experience the "Gain" On More Private and Carefree Moments



Figure 2. The Process of More Private Moments to Carefree Moments

Empty nesters commonly shared their 'Gain' experiences on the major parental role change. They have more private moments, thus become carefree (Figure. 2).

Case 1: Husband

PM54: "I did not have much private time in the past, but I have got more now. I become more relax, since I do not need to concern about his daily cares. That's why I feel more ease and relax."

Case 3: Wife

FF48: "Children do not need for my cares now. I have more private moments."

FF160: "Now I don't need to be that tired. I am now feeling ease and relax. I feel to have much more freedom and without stress."

Relevant to the Role Stress Theory which believes that the effect of role changes is associated with the intensity of stress and conflicts from the role (Barnett and Baruch, 1985; White and Edwards, 1990). Similar with the sharing from interviewees, studies support that parental role is stressful and with role strain (Price, Bush & Price, 2017; Simon, 1992). The change of major parental role may bring positive effects on empty nest's psychological well-being (Barnett and Baruch, 1985; White and Edwards, 1990). According to the sharing from empty nesters, the carefree moments imply the feelings of ease, relax, free, autonomy and fun.

Finding 2: Experience the Process of "Loss" and "Restoration"

'Loss-oriented' and 'Restoration-oriented' are the concepts from Stroebe & Schut (1999) 'Dual Process Model', which is a bereavement theory. 'Loss-oriented' means to cope with the loss by focusing on the loss through some tasks; while 'Restoration-oriented' means to cope with the loss by rebuilding life positively. There are different ways to achieve life restoration (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). There is also a crucial concept of 'Oscillation', which is a healthy grieving by confronting the loss while avoiding the loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

All interviewed empty nesters reported to experience the process of loss and restoration, which may include the experience of oscillation in between. Besides, there are some protective factors on restoring the role change experience.

2.1.1 Types of Loss

(A) Loss of Children's Daily Companionship

Case 5: Wife

IF4: "I was used to chat with my children during their traveling to school, which brought us closeness. They were used to live at home at night, but suddenly, they are no longer at home. Suddenly, no one accompany me to have breakfast."

(B) Loss of Self-worth

Case 5: Wife

IF4: "When children were small, our closeness is that 'they could not live without me'. I was their center, and I felt very satisfied. But they don't need me now"

(C) Sudden Loss: Unexpected Departure of Children

Case 3: Wife

FF66: "I can't accept my younger daughter staying in USA. I don't expect that she studied oversea and would stay there for work... I really can't accept it..."

Mitchell & Lovegreen (2009) suggested that it is the attachment matters for the loss of day-to-day companionship and self-worth, since empty nesters are experiencing the significant loss on social, emotional, and physical domains. Meanwhile, their study found that since every parent have their own expected social time schedule according to personal experiences, off time launches of children might result in the unexpected sudden loss (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009).

2.1.2 Reaction to Loss

(A) Experience Emotional Distress

Case 5: Wife

*IF 5: "Our home turns 'Silent'. I am with **emptiness and loneliness. Upset and lonely.**"*

Badiani & Sousa (2016) supported that empty nesters may experience emotional distress. Emotional distress is also a loss-oriented domain. Allowing the negative feelings to present is a process of grief work.

(B) Continue the Past Daily Routine

Case 5: Wife

IF 5: "After their departure, I kept the habit of waking up at six-thirty and waiting for the making breakfast. But who am I making for?"

Studies explained that parent may continue keeping day-to-day duties, and it is a sign of loss of purpose after children's departure (Morin, 2021, Piper & Jackson, 2017). In the loss-oriented concept, keeping a daily routine may be an unconscious avoidance on restoring past parent-child relationship.

(C) Bargain with the Departed Children on the Unaccepted Sudden Loss

Case 3: Wife

FF66: "I begged her for returning to Hong Kong, but she refused. She said, 'I don't want to return'"

Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2005) also suggested a concept of anticipatory grief. This concept could further explain that since the parent did not experience a good separation process with the child, she felt suddenly loss of her child and had difficulties to cope with the loss.

(D) Feel Inadequate on Their Parental Role When Reviewing the Past Parent-Child Relationship

Case 6: Husband

GM20: "I think I did not do well in time-management. If I could spend more time to accompany my son to do what he like and enjoy, I should not be having a distanced relationship with him. However, history could not be reversed."

Studies explain fathers are prone to have the feelings of inadequate and regret towards the past parent child relationship (Bouchard, 2014; Ruszkowska, 2009; Sheriff and Weatherall, 2009). In the loss-oriented concept, the feelings of inadequate is a normal grieved feeling.

2.2 The "Restoration"

2.2.1 In Self

(A) Enjoyment on Interests

Case 3: Wife

FF65: "I am with fun! I spend the time on reading stock market data and taking photos in parks. I enjoy photography a lot!"

Case 1: Husband

PM47: "The biggest difference is that I have more time now. I enjoy spending the time on doing exercises, hiking and planting. It's comfortable and relaxing."

(B) Enhancement on Knowledges and Skills

Case 5: Wife

IF118: "Right now, I always challenge myself. I feel very excited. I go hiking with harder levels. My initial personality has come back!"

Case 2: Husband

TM58: "I can chase my dream from reading books. I feel like I have gained more knowledges.... It's very happy, with learning and growth."

(C) Self-Nurturing

Case 5: Wife

*IF142: "I feel like **being nurtured**. On the part of daily diet, since I have more time now, I could nurture myself through **making Chinese Soup**."*

Case 6: Husband

*GM62: "My present life is **practicing handwriting and drawing**. It's a **mindful and focusing moment**."*

Present studies have not yet illustrated the contrate experiences of restoring self in the empty nest stage. However, studies had revealed the importance on 'role reconstruction of self' and 're-purposing of individual life' for the empty nesters to cope with the role transitional (Curasi, Hogg & Maclaran, 2001; Mount & Moas, 2015). In the concept of 'restoration-oriented', focusing on self is the process of rebuilding life through attending changes and strengthen role of self.

2.2.2 In relationships

(A) Peer Relationship

Case 3: Wife

*FF65: "I will **hang out with my seniors and enjoy photography**... I will **make bouquets for my friends and relatives**... I have also **met lots of friends in a financial management course**. It's **fun and happy!**"*

Case 2: Husband

*TM58: "My friend introduces me to read books. **We will share and discuss about the knowledge from books**. **Very happy, with learning and growth**."*

Ruszkowska (2009) reported that friendship and peer support can help redevelop the self-image, which are important for empty nesters in this role change transition. In the concept of 'restoration-oriented', focusing on the peer relationship is a way to cope with the loss by attending life change and rebuilding new relationship.

(B) Marital Relationship

Couple 1 - Case 1

Case 1: Husband

*PM62: "Wife and I have **more time to spend and be with together...** Especially in spirituality. We will **explore common interests**. I found that **we became closer.**"*

Case 1: Wife

*PF158: "**Companionship is.. No matter son is here or not, husband and I can company to each other. I am very being loved by my husband.**"*

Couple 3 - Case 5

Case 5: Husband

*IM142: "**We must have companionship. We both turn old. I wish to accompany more to each other and chat more.**"*

Case 5: Wife

*IF92: "**Husband is an essential companionship. After the departure of two daughters, I chat more with my husband. We will have couple time to play table tennis and cycling. Very enjoyable and happy!**"*

Erickson et al. (2010) revealed that couple have more spaces in focusing on the marital relationship after children's departure. The couple may have less work-family conflicts and with more balanced equity within the marital relationship (Erickson et al., 2010). Present studies supported that the departure of children is generally shown increase in marital quality and satisfaction (Bouchard, 2014; Erickson et al., 2010).

In the concept of 'restoration-oriented', the rebuild of marital relationship is a way to cope with the loss by attending life change and rebuilding new relationship.

This study found that there are some core relational elements that indicating the quality of marital relationship in the empty nest stage. As reflected by the empty nesters, those core elements are 'Companionship', 'Being loved and satisfied' and 'Closeness'. This finding can concretize the subjective experiences of the improved marital relationship and contribute to coming related studies.

(C) Parent-Child Relationship

Case 3: Wife

*FF78: "**In the past, we had many conflicts with my daughter. Now, I feel very ease since she is understanding us more after the departure. We chat a lot after she got married. She once said to me, 'I found that I just reconciliated with you two.'**"*

Case 5: Husband

*IM140: "Our family is with **more harmony** now. After their growth and departure, we have **less stress and less tensions.**"*

Ward & Spitze (2007) found that there are little effects on the quality of parent-child relationship. Meanwhile, some studies found that father becomes less authoritarian in the new parent-child relationship, and children become more receptive to father's advice (Bozett, 1985; Ruskowska, 2009).

This study provides new perspective to present studies in the aspect of parent-child relationship. Both father and mother reported to have improved relationship with children. Parents restored the new parent-child relationship in a harmonic perspective.

(D) Patient-Carer Relationship

Case 1: Husband

PM94: "Since my son is not here now, I can focus on taking care of my family members with illness. I can have more contribution and influences in the family...All their physical illness makes you worried."

Case 6: Wife

*GF10: "Right after my son's married, my elder sister developed weak immune system. Also, diagnosed to have **lung cancer**. After retired, I go to **England two to three times a year and take care of her**. I worried about her health condition..."*

This study found that the departure of children can be a triggering event for empty nesters to spend their spare time on taking care of other family members with physical illness.

Focusing on the patient-carer relationship can be a way to cope with role change through attending to new life and build new relationship. Besides, the carer experiences triggered them to have preparation on aging:

Case 2: Husband & Wife

TM83: "I have thought about the topic of 'aging'. Most of the men, after the leave of wife, must be suffered. Since wife take care most of the thing."

*TF83: "Yes, that's why I have to **write down all the important things.**"*

According to Nichols & Pace-Nichols (1993), since empty nesters are entering to the later years in respect to the family life cycle, they need to have a balance between life satisfaction and the forthcoming losses. Empty nesters may also share a deeper marital communication on preparing for the loss of living without spouse (Nichols & Pace-Nichols, 1993).

2.2.3 In Life

Case 1: Wife

*PF157: "In the past I have more worries towards my son, but now he has grown up as an individual. I have individual growth too. Every life stage has its own tasks, **life is with purpose. I would like to use my learnt singing technique to serve God and church.**"*

Case 5: Wife

*IF117: "**I commit more on the environmentally friendly issues. I feel like I am with contribution.** Besides, if my neighbors feel sick, I will ask them if I could **offer help** or not. I believe that I am **valuable.**"*

Similarly, Mount & Moas (2015) shared their 'Re-purposing' counseling interventions on empty nesters cases. They concluded that sometimes empty nesters are hindered by the major 'parent' narrative while neglecting the 'self' narrative, which brings them emotional distress (Mount & Moas, 2015). They suggested that through reauthoring the meaning of life and focus on self needs could help empty nesters to have better adjustment on role change (Mount & Moas, 2015).

To conclusion, this study found that the restoration mechanism of empty nesters can be in various levels of interpersonal relationships (i.e., in self, in relationships with others and in life). All relational domains are restoring tasks in attending changes and building new roles when coping with the loss in major parental role. Besides, as supported by the theory of 'Various level of Health Management and Social Care', it is a natural process for human to maintain good psychosocial well-being by keeping various interpersonal relationship (Education Bureau, 2019).

2.3 Experience the "Oscillation" between Loss and Restoration

Seidel, Yorgason, Polenick, Zarit & Fingerman (2018) explained that empty nesters keeping a certain part of child-rearing role is preliminarily with the emotions of worries and anxiety. While Juduo (2021) explained that Chinese parents are affected by the Chinese traditional belief and believed that it was a responsibility for parents to take care of children for the whole lifespan.

In Structural Family Therapy, there is a concept of 'setting boundary', which can help explain the 'Oscillation' reaction. Minuchin, Nichols & Lee (2007) proposed that a clear boundary can provide spaces for adaptive communication and exchange emotions in a safety basis; a rigid boundary occur when family with disengaged relationships which hinders the clear communication and emotional expressions in family; a diffused boundary occur when the family relationships are enmeshed which hinders clear communication and family members are dependent on the emotional expressions of each other.

When empty nesters oscillating between 'Loss' and 'Restoration', they are in a progress to set boundary with their departed children in the parent-child subsystem. Sometimes they are in diffused boundary when they remain certain parts of child-rearing role. Their relationship is enmeshed and with difficulties in adjusting emotional expression. They also experience a rigid boundary when remaining certain parts of the parent-child relationship. They do not want to change the encountering patterns. Meanwhile, they respect children's maturity, rebuild the new

relationship with departed children and attending to new family condition, which is attending to a clearer boundary.

2.4 Protective Factors for Restoring the Role Change Experiences

2.4.1 Acceptance

Case 5: Wife

IF7: "I notice that I have to accept the fact that 'My children no longer need me'. Overall, it is a happy step down because they become independent."

Case 1: Husband

PM107: "I have completed my responsibility. I wish he could now how to survive in the way he wants. Son should have his own pathway."

According to Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2005), the last stage of grief is acceptance. Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2005) believed that acceptance is a process of experiences, which contains a more stable emotional status to continue adjustments. With acceptance, empty nesters are easier on attending new changes, and with stable energy in experiencing the oscillation process.

2.4.2 Marital Companionship

Case 5: Wife

IF91: "after the departure of two daughters, I chat more with him. He helps me a lot, he is the one authentically being with me."

Badiani & Sousa (2016) pointed out that the intimacy in marital relationship is a protective factor for empty nesters to face the emotional distress. The intimate marital relationship reinforces higher self-esteem and provide energy to explore other meaning of life (Badiani & Sousa, 2016). This study found that the companionship within the marital relationship could provide energy and accompany empty nesters to walk through the process of role adjustment.

2.4.3 Emotional Bond with Children

Case 3: Wife

FF68: "I am in a progress to adjustment...Elder daughter accompanies us to go traveling. Last year we have been to Thailand!"

Case 5: Wife

IF16: Elder daughter is caring. She came back home three times a week. She will also invite me to join their exercises in often'.

Badiani & Sousa (2016) revealed that the emotional bond of parent-child relationship could help the empty nesters to reduce the intensity of suffering from emotional distress and empty nest syndrome. This study found that the emotional bond of parent-child relationship can be

presented in the accompaniment of children, the initiative cares from children and the re-contracting of meeting schedule with children. To keep emotional bond with children could stabilize parents' emotions and reinforce the mechanism of attending life restoration.

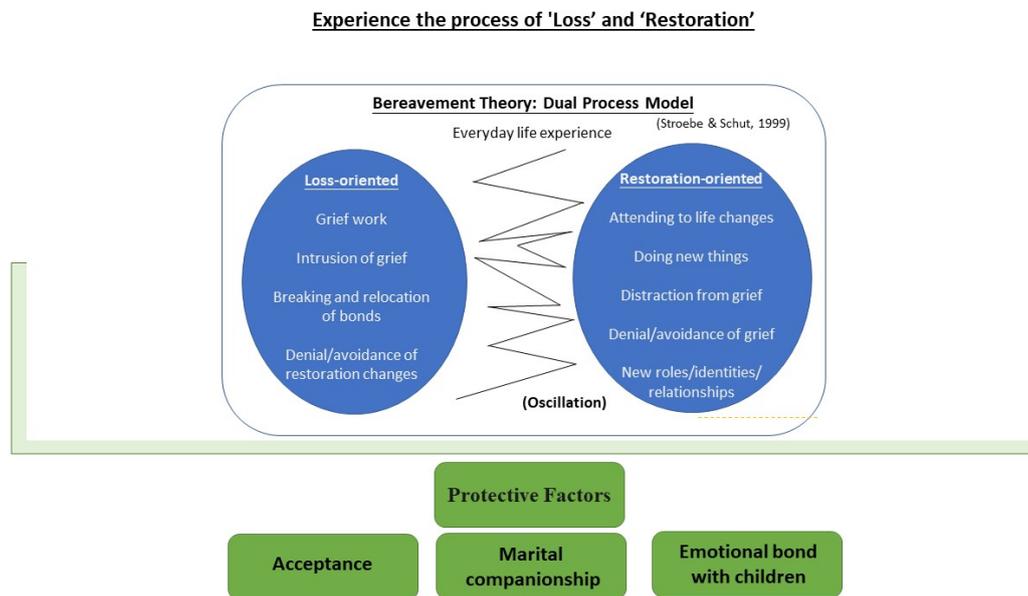


Figure 3. Experience the Process of 'Loss' and 'Restoration'

To conclude, the protective factors act as a supporter of the empty nester's role adjustment (as shown in Figure. 3). Those factors can contain the emotional distress derived from loss-oriented grief; provide energy for empty nesters to restore life in attending new changes; and support the adjustment during oscillation.

Conclusion

It is a paradox for empty nesters to experience both 'Gain' and 'Loss' in role change. They gain from the carefree moments while facing the grief of major parental role loss. Although they may swing between the loss and restoration in life, they are in a progress to move on and searching for the new boundary on parent-child relationship and their new meaning of life. Furthermore, there are some protective factors facilitating them to adapt the role transition. Overall, Empty Nest Stage can be a stage to restore and sublimate the post parental life.

Social Implication

Counselor may assist the empty nesters to review their situation with the perspectives of 'loss-oriented', 'restoration-oriented' and 'oscillation', which can help develop acceptances to self and others and facilitate possible changes. Meanwhile, counselor can facilitate patient to ventilate the related emotional distress towards the loss. Facilitate patient to attend new changes through expectation management on the new parent-child relationship and re-purposing life.

Besides, this study found three protective factors that may reinforce the restoration mechanism in the role change adjustment process (i.e., Acceptance, Marital Companionship and Emotional Bond with Children). Elderly Centre can strengthen the protective factors in the direct services for empty nesters. For instances, to promote the sense of acceptance through mindfulness activities, life review programs and educational talks; to strengthen the marital relationship

through creating couple programs and facilitate their experiences on marital companionship; and to provide community education in arising social awareness towards the needs of emotional bond with children. We may also use of social media to promote the ideas of protective factors in the elderly's online platforms.

The core restoration experience of empty nesters are the expansion of various levels of relationships (i.e., in self, in relationships with others and in life). Elderly Centre can assist empty nester in the restoration process. For instance, to hold programs related to self-exploration, marital relationship building, peer support groups and education on the intergenerational support issue. We may also promote the concept of successful aging in community, which encourage elders to live purposively, keep certain of social relationships and equip with more energy to encounter with changes during aging.

Finally, empty nesters may shift part of roles to the carer of family members with physical illnesses. We may promote a carer-friendly environment in community. Enhance the carer support networks and the elderly long term care services to lessen caring burden. We may also provide education on preparing forthcoming loss. For instance, we may have education on the topics of loss of health, loss of spouse and advanced care planning.

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